

European Union summit seeks to avert British exit from the EU

Simon Whelan and Robert Stevens
19 December 2015

On Thursday evening, British Prime Minister David Cameron and his European counterparts held more than three hours of talks at the European Union (EU) summit in Brussels, over his proposed renegotiation of the terms of Britain's EU membership.

The UK media focused on Cameron having been rebuffed, heightening the crisis that his government faces over Europe.

The *Times*, owned by Rupert Murdoch, described the Prime Minister as “scrambling to avoid humiliation.”

In similar vein, mindful of London's relationship with Europe on behalf of the US, former Conservative Prime Minister John Major warned Cameron as the talks began against “splendid isolation,” adding “flirting with leaving at a moment when the whole world is coming together seems to me to be very dangerous and against our long-term interests.”

However, the talks also illustrate the ongoing crisis and fracturing of the EU itself, which Cameron is seeking to exploit.

In order to appease the “euro-sceptic” wing of his party, including many of its MPs, Cameron has pledged he would renegotiate the terms of Britain's EU membership and hold an “in-out” referendum on the issue by the end of 2017.

In a letter sent to European Council President Donald Tusk last month, Cameron outlined four demands he wants as part of a “reformed” EU. These are protection of the single market for Britain and other non-euro currency countries, boosting competitiveness by setting a target for the reduction of the “burden” of so-called “red tape”, exempting the UK from a commitment to “ever-closer union” while bolstering the powers of national parliaments and restricting EU migrants' access to in-work benefits, such as tax credits.

Leading up to the negotiations, Cameron called for

restricting welfare rights for migrants in Britain, stating, “People coming to Britain from the EU must live here and contribute for four years before they qualify for in-work benefits or social housing.”

On the eve of negotiations, European Council President Donald Tusk said some of Cameron's demands were “unacceptable”, with which Francois Hollande, the French President concurred. Angela Merkel, the German chancellor stated, “I will conduct this debate on the German side in the spirit that we would like to preserve Great Britain as a member, without however restricting the basic freedoms—non-discrimination, freedom of movement”.

Cameron's demands would require treaty changes. For this reason, they are opposed by the major EU powers and also eastern European members whose citizens are the main target of the discriminatory measures.

At the summit, Hollande said, “There can be adjustments, there can be accommodation but European principles, rules and agreements must be respected.” Merkel said, “I stated very clearly that we are ready to compromise but always on the basis that we safeguard the core European principles which include non-discrimination and freedom of movement.”

The “Visegrad Group” within the EU, comprising Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia, the countries with the most citizens working in the UK, issued a joint statement objecting to the British proposals. It said, “The Visegrad Group countries consider the freedom of movement one of the fundamental values of the European Union, proposals regarding this area remain the most sensitive issue for us. In this respect, we will not support any solutions which would be discriminatory or limit free

movement.” Such claims regarding the “principles” of “freedom of movement” should be treated with contempt.

Even as they tucked into their dinners and spoke of the defence of “basic freedoms”, the EU’s leaders had spent the earlier part of the day discussing the enforcing of fences and border controls within the formerly passport free Schengen zone to repel refugees and force them into neighbouring states and plans to seal off the EU’s external borders entirely. The reality is that with these measures, the EU has already abolished the “freedom of movement”, enshrined in its constitution.

While Cameron is walking a tightrope by mooting a possible “Brexit” (British exit from the EU), there is widespread concern among the major EU powers over such an outcome. In addition, the United States, the UK’s main international ally, is opposed to a British withdrawal, as is China, whose President Xi Jinping was recently feted for a week in Britain.

That is why, although his proposals were rejected, at least in their current form, this does not mean that Cameron could not still be offered some face-saving formula.

The European Council issued a two sentence statement saying, “Following today’s substantive and constructive debate, the members of the European Council agreed to work closely together to find mutually satisfactory solutions in all the four areas” at the next meeting of the European Council in February.

Cameron said he had located a “pathway to a deal,” with his EU counterparts during the talks. “There was enormous support in the room for finding changes to keep the UK in the EU...”

The *Guardian* noted that in his address to the EU heads, Cameron stressed, “he was willing to shelve his specific proposal as long as any alternative effectively addressed UK voters’ concerns about migration.”

Any alternatives coming out of the negotiations, set to be completed by February, will be reactionary. The *Guardian* reported, “The three alternative solutions remain a shorter ban on access to benefits, an emergency brake that allows the UK to put a halt to EU migration if the flows become excessive and a ban on both UK and EU citizens receiving benefits until they have made social security contributions for a fixed period.”

Unlike the structure of welfare provision prevailing among other EU states, which operate on an insurance-based pay-in first system, the UK’s is based on universal access, without first having to pay in. Both Cameron’s demand for the EU to back his proposal to end the right of migrants to access benefits, and the suggested alternative of restricting anyone who has not “paid in enough”, opens the floodgates for ending universal welfare provision, which is the ultimate goal of Britain’s ruling elite.

None of this is anathema to the EU, whose member states have imposed hundreds of billions of euros in austerity measures over the past seven years. In Greece, unprecedented levels of unemployment and poverty are the result of the EU’s policies. Millions of Greeks are now routinely denied access to public health care.

The other demands of the British, to remove “red tape” and all regulations on the operations of big business already find a ready audience among EU leaders keen to fulfil every whim of the financial elite.

At the summits’ final press conference Friday evening Cameron said, “we are a step closer to agreement on the significant and far-reaching reforms I have proposed” and strongly hinted that a UK referendum on EU membership could be held as early as next summer. He said, “I believe 2016 will be the year we achieve something really vital, fundamentally changing the UK’s relationship with the EU and finally addressing the concerns of the British people about our membership, adding, “Then it will be for the British people to decide whether we remain or leave”. He concluded, “I believe if we can get these reforms right—and I believe that we can—I firmly believe that for our economic security and increasingly for our national security, the best future for Britain is in a reformed European Union.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact