

UK Prime Minister Cameron signals early referendum on EU membership

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Britain looks set for an early referendum on whether to remain in the European Union, after Prime Minister David Cameron and European Council President Donald Tusk agreed Tuesday to a series of proposed changes to UK membership terms.

The proposals will have to be approved by European Union leaders at their next summit on February 18-19, or possibly at a second special summit in March. But with talk of a June 23 date, the possibility of a Brexit brings into sharp focus a deepening crisis of the entire EU.

The terms agreed to for continued UK membership confirm both the reactionary character of the EU and the failure of its stated mission of uniting the continent.

Cameron agreed to hold an in/out referendum on Europe, faced with deep divisions within the Conservative Party and a challenge to its electoral base from the United Kingdom Independence Party.

The demands he placed on the EU were for more powers for parliament to block proposed EU legislation, greater protection for EU member states not in the euro zone, action to boost competitiveness, and a limit on the in-work benefits paid to EU migrants working in Britain. His overall aim was to encourage racism and xenophobia, to exempt the UK from what little remains of the EU's human rights and workplace legislation, and to safeguard the City of London against competition from European rivals, above all Germany.

The agreement of Tusk to these xenophobic and anti-working class measures is a refutation of those within the Labour Party and the supposed liberal media who depict the EU as the guardian of a more progressive social and political agenda. The EU has again proved to be an instrument for the imposition of policies of austerity and social reaction shared by all of its constituent governments. The compromises arrived at

are bound up with a general assertion of national interests within the EU that threaten to tear the continent apart.

Greatest attention has been paid by a noxious UK media to restricting benefits for migrants, with Cameron adopting a sickening pose as a defender of social housing, the National Health Service and the welfare state.

The man who announced that the UK was now in a permanent "age of austerity" is a bare-faced liar who portrays migrants as a danger to the welfare state even as he allows companies like Google to pay virtually no tax. EU migrants account for just 2.5 percent of benefits and 7 percent of tax credits, with both EU and non-EU migrants underrepresented among out-of-work benefits recipients. Between 2001 and 2011, EU migrants made a net positive contribution of £20 billion to the UK, while non-EU migrants made a net contribution of more than £5 billion.

Tusk's proposals in response to Cameron's demands are:

Migration: Phasing in of in-work benefits over four years and an "emergency brake" if there is "pressure" on any EU member state. This would have to be approved by the EU Council. The door is now open to a denial of benefits throughout the EU.

Protection of non-euro currency states: Cameron wanted an explicit statement that the EU has more than one currency, but there is no such recognition. Instead, there is a statement that "not all member states have the euro as their currency." Members of the euro zone will "respect the rights and competences of the non-participating member states," but there will be no "veto" and no treaty change. Non-euro taxpayers will not be liable for shoring up the euro zone.

Sovereignty: Cameron wanted an end to Britain's

obligation to work towards an “ever closer union” and an assertion of UK parliamentary sovereignty. Tusk states that EU members are not bound to accept moves towards “political integration,” but this will proceed. A “red card” system will allow national parliaments making up more than 55 percent of votes on the European Council to veto EU legislation, and the commitment to “ever closer union” will not be used to extend the reach of EU law.

Competitiveness: Tusk states, “The relevant EU institutions and the member states will make all efforts to strengthen the internal market and to adapt it to keep pace with the changing environment.”

Political debate and press coverage in the UK has centred on whether Cameron has done enough to extract the concessions he demanded. Within the Tory Party, the prime minister has been preoccupied with attempting to neutralise his anti-EU opponents. He succeeded in securing the support of Home Secretary Theresa May for continued EU membership, but his main rival, London Mayor Boris Johnson, is still demanding assurances that UK legislation will be passed to ensure the sovereignty of parliament. At least four cabinet members will campaign for a “no” vote.

Labour is firmly behind Cameron in seeking to maintain the UK’s membership in the EU, which made party leader Jeremy Corbyn’s attempts to profit from Cameron’s political distress futile. On Tuesday, Corbyn was left to complain that Cameron’s decision to make a statement on his agreement with Tusk at a Siemens facility in Chippenham was an insult to parliament.

In yesterday’s Prime Minister’s Question Time, Corbyn stressed that Labour wanted the UK to stay in the EU, welcomed the “red card” proposals on non-euro states, and complained that the “emergency brake” on benefits would not address exploitation and low pay.

Cameron replied that he had read the Labour manifesto and many of the issues guiding his renegotiation were in it, including a ban on EU migrants getting benefits for two years. He was praised by Labour’s Caroline Flint for having addressed the issue of EU migrants’ benefits.

Cameron was at odds with the leaders of regional parliaments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland who called for a delay in any planned referendum. He rejected these demands, but the impact of a vote to

leave the EU would no doubt precipitate independence moves in Scotland’s case and pose the renewed threat of the break-up of the UK.

What was striking in the debate was the fact that the actual implications of a Brexit under conditions of a general and escalating crisis of the EU were never addressed.

The threat of a Brexit comes at a time when Europe is being battered by a global economic crisis, after years of austerity measures that have polarised class relations throughout the continent, with EU states at loggerheads over who should be responsible for taking in refugees and borders being re-erected everywhere, with Greece facing possible expulsion from the euro zone and a question mark having been placed over the viability of the Italian economy, with France living under a state of emergency, with EU governments at loggerheads, with the growth of far-right nationalist movements, and with Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel facing a possible political challenge.

Gideon Rachman in the February 1 *Financial Times* pointed to these dangers, warning, “If the UK prime minister does not get a move on, there might not be an EU left to leave.” He went on to declare that “a hostile and freshly aggressive Russia is cheering on the possible collapse of the European project.”

Rachman believes that preventing a Brexit is essential to ensuring the survival of the EU. But a “yes” vote on the terms agreed offers only an alternative route to division and eventual collapse.

Germany has reconciled itself to many of Cameron’s demands only because it is set on creating a “core Europe,” with many East European and southern states left outside of a beefed-up euro area. But an agreement with London to occupy positions on two sides of a consolidated political, economic and even military division of the continent can only be a step on the road to future conflicts.



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