

Brexit crisis poses disintegration of United Kingdom

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The Leave vote in the Brexit referendum has immediately called the survival of the United Kingdom into question.

The outcome of the June 23 vote on UK membership of the European Union (EU) has seen tensions rise between the Westminster government and the devolved government in Scotland.

While across Britain, the Leave camp won by 52 percent to 48 percent, in Scotland 62 percent voted to Remain against only 38 who preferred Leave. Notably, while in England, the Leave vote was concentrated in rural areas and poorer regions outside the major cities, in Scotland every region, including the most impoverished, voted to Remain.

The contrast in results has allowed the SNP to claim a mandate to ensure continued Scottish membership of the EU and to again seek independence from the UK. Within hours, Scottish First Minister and SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon said that the “option of another [independence] referendum must be on the table, and it is on the table.”

Sturgeon continued, “[W]hen the Article 50 process [of the EU’s Lisbon Treaty] is triggered in three months’ time, the UK will be on a two-year path to the UK exit door. If the [Scottish] parliament judges that a second referendum is the best or only way to protect our place in Europe it must have the option to hold one within that timescale.”

Sturgeon replaced Alex Salmond as SNP leader in the aftermath of the defeated 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. Despite all the pseudo-left groups rallying to support the SNP and its independence referendum, the 2014 vote was lost by 10 percent.

For years, the SNP had based its perspective of separation from UK on the financial and oil interests concentrated in Aberdeen and Edinburgh. That is why,

while proclaiming the need for Scottish “sovereignty” to be returned, it insisted that Scotland must remain within the EU as a means through which it sought to strengthen relations with the transnational corporations. The crisis within the eurozone upset these plans.

In 2014, out of a total of £76 billion Scottish exports, fully £48.5 billion, or two-thirds, went to the UK, while the EU was the leading international destination, attracting £11.6 billion of exports—42 percent of the total outside the UK. Moreover, with North Sea oil production in free fall, the Scottish economy is far more dependent on fiscal support from London, while tax revenues are collapsing.

From the standpoint of the Scottish bourgeoisie, then, having established more levers of power through devolution and the failed 2014 independence vote, the last thing they want is more political instability.

Sturgeon campaigned prominently for a Remain vote throughout the UK, taking part, like Scottish Conservative rival Ruth Davidson, in TV debates against the Leave camp. Days before the Brexit vote, Sturgeon also issued a joint statement with former Labour First Ministers, Jack McConnell and Henry McLeish, in favour of Remain in an “unprecedented display of unity” to “make the difference in keeping the UK in the European Union.”

Hitherto Sturgeon has been very careful not to commit definitively to a second independence vote until such time as it could confidently be won without disrupting trade, investment and tax revenues. But the Brexit vote has destroyed many sets of best laid plans. As well as placing a new independence vote in play, Sturgeon and her party have also floated back of the envelope proposals to take advantage of the Brexit calamity. Every one of them deepens conflicts with London and threatens to pull the UK apart.

Last Sunday, speaking on the BBC, Sturgeon suggested the Scottish parliament could block the Brexit decision. It was “hard to believe” that “a legislative consent motion” would not be required from the Scottish parliament before the UK could split from the EU, she said.

The basis of Sturgeon’s assertion is the devolution agreement whereby EU law, which is incorporated into Scottish law, also stipulates that changes involving devolution arrangements must have the consent of the Scottish parliament. With all the Holyrood parties strongly pro-EU, this consent would not be forthcoming.

The SNP has mooted the possibility of Scotland retaining some form of EU membership without breaking entirely from the UK. Because both Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU, it is argued that the EU borders could be re-drawn without forcing Scotland and Northern Ireland out. But this arrangement currently only applies to Greenland and the Faroe Islands, both of which are part of Denmark but not in the EU, both of which are isolated North Atlantic islands with tiny populations entirely dependent on the fishing industry. Applying the same solution to the complex historical edifice of the UK raises all the same conflicts as a new independence referendum for Scotland and the likely border referendum in Ireland.

The SNP has also started sounding out the EU and its member states to explore whether Scotland could retain EU membership. The Scottish government is seeking a meeting with European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker and intends to host a meeting of European consul generals. Sturgeon is also expected to meet Guy Verhofstaft, former Belgian prime minister and president of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, which includes 70 of 751 members of the European parliament.

Manfred Weber, who heads the European People’s Party, is sympathetic. Weber, a close ally of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, said “on a Scottish level: to go the other way, it is up to them. Europe is open to new member states, that is totally clear.”

Weber’s remarks raise the possibility of the EU, led by Germany, easing Scottish EU membership as a means of further punishing London for Brexit through accelerating the dismemberment of the UK.

The SNP has begun a discussion with Labour’s London Mayor Sadiq Khan. Sturgeon reported a conversation with Khan in which they established “clear common cause between us.” What this is remains to be seen, but with major banks already promising to relocate to Paris and Frankfurt to remain in the EU, and with share prices collapsing, London is clearly facing major financial services job losses.

Promoting the Edinburgh-based financial services industry as a British-based, English speaking alternative within the EU might mitigate the damage to the City of London while allowing Edinburgh to compete with France and Germany. Tory MP and member of Westminster’s Treasury Committee, Mark Garnier, a former banker, spelled out this thinking: “I would be trying to build a financial services hub that would be the natural successor to London by leaving the union of the United Kingdom and staying within the European Union.”

But for workers across Britain, any combination of the options above brings with it an inevitable sharp intensification of the assault on living standards, mass job losses, regional fragmentation and privatisation of vital services. Animated by nationalism and regionalism, and falsely presenting EU membership as a means of offsetting the social consequences of Brexit, all of these proposals serve only to tie workers to one or another section of a capitalist class.



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