

French president, British prime minister meet to discuss Brexit crisis

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British Prime Minister Theresa May traveled to Paris on Thursday, the day after her meeting in Berlin with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, to meet with French President François Hollande to discuss the British exit from the European Union (EU).

Prior to the meeting, press reports suggested that Hollande would take a harsher line than Merkel, demanding that Britain rapidly launch Article 50 negotiations with the EU to exit the union and agree to free movement of persons across Europe to retain free access to EU markets. In the event, Hollande shifted towards a more accommodating position, giving Britain more time to negotiate the exit and reaffirming Britain's role as a key military ally of France.

Speaking of British negotiations of the Brexit with the EU, Hollande said, "There cannot be a discussion, a pre-negotiation before the negotiations. But the negotiation can be prepared. But I repeat, the sooner the better, for the common interest of Europe and of the United Kingdom, and of our respective economies."

Hollande's comments contradicted comments he had issued previously, on a visit to Dublin, where he declared that the UK should announce its decision to leave the EU "as quickly as possible." However, he also said at that time that he had "the same approach" as Merkel to the issue.

Nonetheless, Hollande continued to insist that London could not limit free movement of EU citizens to Britain while retaining free access to EU markets, calling this "the most crucial point" in upcoming talks. "There cannot be free movement of goods, capital, and services if there is not free movement of persons," he declared, stressing that London had to choose between "staying in the common market while agreeing to free movement [of people] or having another status."

May reiterated her position, however, that the Brexit

vote was a "very clear" signal of the legitimacy of limiting the ability of EU citizens to move to Britain, stressing that her government intended to honor that aspect of the vote. She also stressed that London did not intend to invoke Article 50 before the end of the year, in order to give Britain the time to prepare its negotiating positions with the EU.

Hollande's pose of concern for the rights of EU immigrants to Britain was an act of rank hypocrisy. What was driving his harsher line in talks with May is not concern for immigrant rights, which they both attacked with plans to maintain the anti-immigrant Le Touquet accord restraining immigrants seeking to travel to Britain from France at Calais. Rather, it is the escalating financial and strategic tensions undermining European capitalism and, in particular, the crisis of the French political establishment.

Both Hollande and May reaffirmed the 2003 Le Touquet accords governing border controls in the English Channel-North Sea region. They oblige France to block immigrants trying to travel through France to Britain, resulting in the formation of horrific refugee camps in Calais and Grande-Synthe in northern France, where French police routinely attack and clash with desperate migrants trying to reach Britain.

Hollande ignored calls by forces, including former right-wing prime minister Alain Juppé, to respond to the Brexit vote by repudiating the accords, allowing migrants to travel on to Britain.

Hollande's somewhat more aggressive line against Britain reflects bitter divisions and rivalries among the major imperialist powers in Europe. In France, which is now virtually as deindustrialized and controlled by a handful of massive banks as Britain, sections of the ruling elite aim to profit financially from the Brexit crisis. As French financiers hope to lure foreign banks

fleeing the City of London after the Brexit vote to Paris, and to thus develop Paris as a financial rival of London, a bitter struggle over the division of spoils from the financial plundering of Europe is ongoing.

Another concern of Hollande is to limit the rise of anti-EU forces in French politics, by pretending that the EU is defending democratic rights and immigrants against anti-EU forces. His main target in this is the neo-fascist National Front (FN). It has exploited the deep discrediting of Hollande's Socialist Party (PS) government and of the EU, due to their relentless imposition of unpopular austerity policies on the working class, to make nationalist appeals closely related to those of the British far-right forces that called for a Brexit.

Hollande's attempt to posture as a defender of democratic rights, all the while maintaining the Le Touquet accords, will have little impact on a situation marked by rising working class opposition to austerity and deepening divisions inside the EU.

A recent Pew Research Center poll found that 61 percent of French people have an "unfavorable" view of the EU, compared to 48 percent in Britain. The poll found that France is second only to Greece, which has been devastated by six years of EU-led austerity policies imposed by successive Greek governments, in anti-EU sentiment.

Escalating tensions between France and Germany are further undermining support for the EU in France. "The EU was sold to the French people as a 'partnership' of equals with Germany," Professor Brigitte Granville of Queen Mary University told the anti-EU *Daily Telegraph*. "But it has been very clear since 2010 that this is not the case. Everybody could see that Germany decided everything in Greece."

What is coming to the fore everywhere is the inability of the bourgeoisie to unify Europe on a capitalist basis, and the escalating drive towards conflict and war.

Indeed, another key element of the Hollande-May talks was the Franco-British military alliance. This alliance—historically directed against Germany in two world wars in the 20th century—was reaffirmed in a series of accords in 2010 in which France and Britain agreed to pool resources to maintain nuclear missiles and aircraft carriers. This soon led to a bitter division inside Europe, when Germany abstained from the war of aggression launched by France, Britain and the

United States against Libya in 2011.

Hollande and May reaffirmed the importance of the Franco-British alliance, and particularly the nuclear component, shortly after May declared publicly in answer to a question at the British parliament that she would be willing to kill hundreds of thousands of people with nuclear weapons. This issue is also at the center of anti-democratic moves inside the Labour Party to oust the party's leader, Jeremy Corbyn, who has at various points criticized Britain's Trident nuclear missile program and indicated his opposition to using nuclear weapons.

Hollande aligned himself on the most aggressive elements, praising "defense cooperation that has been reinforced in recent years and which is centered on the most important subject, nuclear deterrence. A few days ago, a debate in the House of Commons again confirmed the United Kingdom's engagement in support of nuclear deterrence, which will build new relations between our two countries."



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