

European Council endorses Irish unification in hardline negotiations over Brexit

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The European Council (EC) has set out aggressive terms for forthcoming negotiations over Britain's planned exit from the European Union (EU), of which one of the most explosive is the position it took on Northern Ireland.

Three priority issues were set out before any talks on trade could begin—the residency rights of EU and UK citizens after Brexit, the payment owed by the UK to the EU, and avoiding a “hard” border between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland.

The EC showed unanimity when it agreed within minutes at its summit April 29 that there can be no “cherry picking” by the United Kingdom of the four single market freedoms—the free movement of goods, capital, services, and people.

Berlin's purpose is to weld Europe together in line with the strategic and economic interests of German imperialism. Concessions to London would undermine German domination of the EU and intensify pressures leading to the bloc's disintegration.

In relation to Northern Ireland, the meeting declaration stated, “The European Council acknowledges that the Good Friday Agreement [the 1998 settlement bringing about power-sharing between the Republican and Unionist parties] expressly provides for an agreed mechanism whereby a united Ireland may be brought about through peaceful and democratic means. In this regard, the European Council acknowledges that, in accordance with international law, *the entire territory of such a united Ireland would thus be part of the European Union* .” [Emphasis added]

The EC position on Ireland is a challenge to British imperialism on the territory of its oldest colony and expresses how Brexit is threatening the breakup of both the EU and the British nation state. The EU and

Germany intend to show that they are willing to unleash explosive conflicts with the British ruling elite over the fate a region where, as little as 20 years ago, tens of thousands of British troops were deployed in a dirty war against Irish republicans that cost thousands of lives.

The EC statement followed a venomous spat early in April between Spain and the UK over Gibraltar, when the EU sided unequivocally with Spain over the status of the strategically placed territory seized by Britain in 1704. At the time, Michael Howard, former British Conservative leader, reminded the Spanish government of the Malvinas/Falklands War in 1982 when “another woman Prime Minister sent a taskforce half way across the world to defend the freedom of another small group of British people against another Spanish-speaking country.”

Over the issue of Ireland, another former Tory leader, Iain Duncan Smith, railed against “a deliberate and outrageous attempt to meddle in the affairs of a nation state.”

Duncan Smith added, “They are trying to lean on bits of the UK to create trouble. That is quite unacceptable. They won't have to pick up the pieces of what they are doing.”

The official British response was more measured. A spokesman noted, “It is clear that the majority of the people of Northern Ireland continue strongly to support... Northern Ireland's continuing position within the UK.”

Inclusion of the Northern Ireland border as one of the pre-conditions to talks was a result of intensive lobbying across Europe by the Republic of Ireland's government. Ireland, north and south, faces severe economic disruption because of Brexit, with the South's substantial agricultural trade with the UK

facing the imposition of tariffs.

Most concern is focused on the border, however, which is all but invisible. A “hard” external EU border between Northern Ireland and the Republic could drastically impede cross border commerce, travel and commuting, in addition to threatening disruption to the cross-border utilities and services.

Although all parties and both the Irish and British governments agree there should be no “hard” border, there is no agreement on how, or even whether, this can be ensured under the current constitutional arrangements. One means of avoiding a hard border, therefore, is for Northern Ireland to remain in the EU with some form of ill-defined “special status,” while juridically remaining part of the UK. Another is for Ireland to leave the EU. This is the context of the sudden demands for Irish unification within the EU.

Provision for eventual Irish unity was included in the Good Friday Agreement in order to bring the bourgeois nationalists of Sinn Fein into the British government of Northern Ireland. A referendum can be called should a majority in both North and South appear to be in favour. However, until last year nobody, least of all Sinn Fein or the government of the republic, viewed unification as anything other than a distant prospect.

All this changed with the Brexit vote.

Unlike England and Wales, Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU by 56 to 44 percent, despite the largest party, the hard-right Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), campaigning to leave. The result led to the collapse of the Northern Ireland power-sharing Executive and Assembly through which the DUP and Sinn Fein had jointly ruled for the preceding 10 years. Using the pretext of a long running energy scandal, Sinn Fein’s Martin McGuinness resigned, shortly before his death in March, and the party refused to nominate a successor. The resulting elections saw the pro-British unionist parties lose their overall majority for the first time since Ireland was partitioned in 1921.

Talks to revive power sharing have been going in circles ever since. Sinn Fein is considered to have “parked” the Assembly, preferring a renewed push towards “special status” within the EU and eventual unification. Northern Ireland Secretary of State James Brokenshire has been forced to repeatedly push back the deadline before which a new agreement on reviving the Northern Ireland government must be reached,

while taking over responsibility for state spending, including a new round of education cuts. The latest deadline is June 29, three weeks after the snap June 8 British general election.

Unification has also become a subject for intense discussion among the Irish political establishment. The Irish parliament is due to release a 1,200-page report, entitled “Brexit and the future of Ireland,” next week. This is the first official report in the history of the republic to set out a road to unification.

The report mulls over the economic impact of Brexit to Irish-based capital, considers the constitutional and legal basis for a new referendum, what might be the transitional governing arrangements, whether Northern Ireland should be independent to a degree, for example, as a region of a federal Irish state. The report also explores whether the British government would pick up the bill of current state spending and the public sector deficit.

Among the questions considered is the prospect of terrorism from loyalist supporters of Northern Ireland remaining in the UK. A submission from the Pat Finucane Centre, a human rights group, notes, “Loyalists have always attacked a soft target—the Catholic civilian population. They do not need huge amounts of high-quality modern weaponry to do so.”

The submission goes on to recall the high level of collusion between British military and intelligence forces and loyalist paramilitaries during 30 years of the “Troubles” following the deployment of British troops to Northern Ireland in 1969.



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