

Labour will seek to block Brexit bill

Julie Hyland
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As parliament begins its debate today on the second reading of the so-called Great Repeal bill, incorporating European Union (EU) legislation into British law, the Labour Party officially announced it will vote against.

The bill is the first step in legally removing the UK from the EU—scheduled for March 2019, following the Leave vote in last year’s referendum. Described as the largest legislative venture undertaken in British history, it incorporates statutes and regulations that had been adopted by the UK through its membership of the EU and its predecessor, the European Economic Community.

More fundamentally, the bill provides for “Henry VIII clauses”, dating back to the 16th century, enabling ministers and civil servants to decide which aspects of EU legislation and regulation can be kept, amended or discarded without recourse to parliament.

This massive increase in executive powers is justified on the grounds that it is necessary to “provide for a smooth and orderly exit” from the EU.

In a statement, a Labour Party spokesman said that “as democrats we cannot vote for a bill that unamended would let government ministers grab powers from parliament to slash people’s rights at work and reduce protection for consumers and the environment.”

Labour does not currently have the numbers to block the legislation. Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May has a working majority of 13, resting on the support of the Democratic Unionist Party in Northern Ireland. Despite criticisms, no Tory MPs are expected to rebel against May in Monday’s vote, although that could change when it reaches committee stage.

Labour’s denunciations of an executive “power-grab” cannot be taken at face value, especially when its real political purpose is to align the party as the main defender of the anti-democratic EU.

Its statement claims that it “fully respects the democratic decision to leave the European Union,” and

“backs a jobs-first Brexit with *full tariff-free access to the European single market.*” (emphasis added).

It is the last part of the sentence that is the most significant.

Last June, Labour backed a Remain vote, despite party leader Jeremy Corbyn being a vocal critic of the EU throughout his 30 years on the backbenches. After the referendum, he voted with May to begin negotiations on Britain’s withdrawal from the Single Market and the Customs Union.

But this is opposed by the majority of the bourgeoisie, banks and big business. In addition to Brexit threatening corporate interests, the powers-that-be are alarmed at its consequences for the global standing of British imperialism. There are fears that it will lead to its diminishing and side-lining—especially against Paris and Berlin—under conditions of growing trade war and militarism.

In line with these concerns, May has accepted a transitional period, of up to two years following Brexit, to attempt measures that will replicate the UK’s existing relations with the EU.

May’s efforts, however, to fudge over bitter differences in the Tory Party on Brexit are regarded by many as unstable and unsatisfactory. Labour is now being refashioned as the main political vehicle to secure a de facto overturning of the referendum result.

Publicly, the Labour Party states that it accepts the Leave vote. But last week, Labour’s Brexit spokesman Keir Starmer announced Labour would support an extended period of transition after March 2019 in which Britain would continue to participate in the Single Market and Customs Union for “as long as needed.”

This has the support of most of the Labour Party apparatus—from the Blairite right-wing to the trade unions—who opposed withdrawal. Deputy leader Tom Watson said that it meant Labour was the party of “soft Brexit.”

This is the real content of Labour's opposition to the Great Repeal Bill. It wants to make sure that the final version does not rule out continued participation in the EU.

Dennis MacShane, former Minister of Europe for Labour, said Labour's move meant May will have to "decide whether to back the extreme anti-Europeans in her cabinet or follow the ultra-left-wing Jeremy Corbyn who is now appearing as a moderate, pro-business politician trying to delay Brexit as long as possible."

His description of Corbyn as a stalwart of the political establishment underlines the real service the former "left" backbencher is providing to the powers-that-be. Corbyn's supposed reluctance to wholeheartedly endorse the EU played a major role in last year's attempted leadership coup by the Blairite right, with the support of the military-security apparatus. Now he has given his benediction to their demands, dressing up support for the EU as part of an anti-austerity programme—as if the big business bloc was not the main instrument for imposing social devastation across the continent, especially in Greece.

This has emboldened his nominal opponents in the Parliamentary Labour Party who are building relations with anti-Brexit Tories and calling for a reversal of the referendum result.

While tense official negotiations took place last week over Brexit terms in Brussels, Tony Blair met with European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker behind the scenes. No details were released of their discussion but Blair has led demands for a second referendum.

On Tuesday, Blair's former policy adviser Lord Adonis, said Labour would end up backing another referendum, which he described as a "first referendum on the exit terms."

Leading Blairite Chuka Umunna has joined forces with Tory MP Anna Soubry in an all-party parliamentary group. Involving MPs from the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru, it demands the government seek to keep the UK in the Customs Union.

On Tuesday, the Labour Campaign for the Single Market was launched. Led by Labour MPs Heidi Alexander and Alison McGovern, it calls for the UK to remain "in the European Single Market and Customs Union," and aims to build support for a motion to the

Labour Party conference in two weeks to make this official policy.

Its leading personnel comprise those involved in the two attempted putsches against Corbyn's leadership. McGovern quit Labour's front benches after Corbyn was elected first in September 2015, and Alexander resigned the shadow cabinet in June 2016, days after the referendum, in a staged revolt by the Parliamentary Labour Party.

Advisory group members include Naushabah Khan, Leighton Andrews and Adam Harrison, who have all previously demanded Corbyn stand down or be replaced. Also on the board is Simon Darvill, who led the official Remain campaign in the referendum and Fiona Millar (partner of Blair's spin doctor, Alastair Campbell).

In Prime Minister's Question Time Wednesday, Corbyn avoided any mention of the government's leaked plans to restrict immigration on a supposed "Briton's First" basis. He has said that Labour will also look to limit freedom of movement.



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