

Draft EU Brexit agreement deepens divisions over Northern Ireland

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The UK Conservative government has treated the European Commission's (EC's) draft agreement for Britain's exit from the European Union (EU) as a declaration of political warfare.

By outlining a scenario for a customs union between Northern Ireland and the EU, the commission has detonated a political bomb—making clear that it will not accept Prime Minister Theresa May's proposed “ambitious managed divergence” as the basis for any transition agreement. In doing so the European powers have underscored just how deep are the inter-imperialist antagonisms that gave rise to Brexit.

The EU document was immediately denounced by May in the House of Commons. If implemented, the measures would “undermine the UK common market, and threaten the constitutional integrity of the UK by creating a customs and regulatory border down the Irish sea,” she said. “No UK prime minister could ever agree to it.”

Responding to May, in advance of a meeting with her yesterday, EC President Donald Tusk insisted that the document would be backed by all 27 countries in the EU. He warned, “One of the possible negative consequences of this kind of Brexit,” one without Britain agreeing to sign up to the existing provisions of the Single Market and Customs Union, “is a hard border on the island of Ireland.” Explaining the draft, Tusk said, “The EU wants to prevent this scenario and, if no other solution is found, the proposal [is] to establish a common regulatory area comprising the Union and the UK in respect of Northern Ireland.”

That these tensions should hinge on the Northern Ireland border, whose existence cost thousands of lives last century, underscores how dangerous the situation has become. Ireland was partitioned by Britain in 1921-1922, with a politically independent, Catholic-dominated Irish state in the South barricaded off from British-controlled Protestant Ulster in the North. Between 1968 and 1998,

Irish republicans fought to expel British forces from the North in a guerrilla war that cost more than 3,500 lives.

The war was ended by the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, which incorporated republicans into the government of the Northern state in a power-sharing executive, based on sectarian divisions, alongside pro-British unionists.

It was only then that the border, once marked by army checkpoints and fortresses, patrolled by British Army helicopters and fought over by snipers and army death squads, became open. Each year there are now 110 million entirely unimpeded crossings by car, coach, and train, on foot, and by commercial vehicles small and large.

However, Brexit objectively calls into question the Good Friday Agreement, based as it was on agreements between two EU members, Britain and Ireland.

The EC's 119-page draft document was undoubtedly put together in the knowledge that it would be entirely unacceptable to Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the hard Brexit faction calling the shots in the Tory Party. The draft overturned the fictions of the agreement of last December between the EU and the British government to allow further talks on the terms of future trading relations to begin.

December's pact included commitments on Britain's payments to the EU and on the rights of British and EU citizens post-Brexit. But it also included mutually contradictory positions on Northern Ireland.

Paragraph 49 stated that in the “absence of agreed solutions, the United Kingdom will maintain full alignment with those rules of the (EU) Internal Market and the Customs Union. ...”

But paragraph 50 stated that, in “all circumstances, the United Kingdom will continue to ensure the same unfettered access for Northern Ireland's businesses to the whole of the United Kingdom internal market.”

It was stressed by the Tories that there would be no

border on the island of Ireland or down the Irish Sea.

In other words, Northern Ireland would be aligned with the EU, the Irish Republic and the UK—despite the fact that the UK is leaving the EU. The fudged wording was cooked up to placate the DUP, which holds the balance of power in Westminster and is currently propping up the May government with its 10 MPs.

In December, the EU was willing to go along with the ambiguous formulations providing that this would be underscored by Britain's acceptance, during any transition, of the framework of existing EU trading conditions and related legislative framework.

Since then, in response to the hard-Brexit wing of her party, May came up with the concept of “ambitious managed divergence” in future relations with the EU. What this means emerged following a “war cabinet” or “away-day” at the prime minister's country residence. Basically, the British government aims to take control of rules and regulations in all areas of commerce, agreeing to maintain regulations in alignment with those of the EU only where it suited the interests of key sectors of British capitalism.

These will clearly include the car industry, financial services and other lucrative areas of the economy heavily dependent on unfettered access to the EU single market. However, the Tories were adamant that regulations would be vetoed whenever they contradicted UK interests. The EU has repeatedly insisted that any such “cherry-picking” approach to EU rules by Britain is entirely unacceptable to its European rivals.

It then emerged that British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, one of the leaders of the pro-Brexit faction in the British government, wrote to May calling for new border controls in Northern Ireland, something that all sides have previously repeatedly rejected. According to a letter leaked to *Sky News*, Johnson wrote that “it is wrong to see the task as maintaining ‘no border’.” The government should instead “stop this border becoming significantly harder.”

Johnson went on radio to explain his grasp of the matter. “There's no border between Islington, Camden and Westminster, but when I was mayor of London we anaesthetically and invisibly took hundreds of millions of pounds from people travelling between those two boroughs without any need for border checks.” His truly moronic comparison of the London congestion charge with the re-imposition of a hated and economically devastating border on Ireland is an indicator of the British government's deepening disorientation.

The European powers' draft, put together in consultation with the Irish government, is, therefore, an aggressive response to the increasingly reckless British manoeuvrings. Its stated intention, as a fallback should no other agreement be reached, is to “create a common regulatory area on the island of Ireland in order to safeguard North South cooperation, the all-island economy, and protect the 1998 [Good Friday] Agreement.”

The EU draft publication provoked a further wave of attacks on Brexit from leading elements within the Remain factions of the British ruling class.

Following Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's policy shift towards support for a customs union with the EU, former Tory Prime Minister John Major attacked the entire Brexit project and warned of its impact on the Good Friday Agreement. Former Labour Northern Ireland Secretary, Peter, now Lord Hain, proposed an amendment to the Brexit bill now going through the House of Lords to force the government to uphold a frictionless Irish border. The Scottish government and Welsh executive put forward bills demanding greater repatriated powers in the event of Brexit.

The deepening crisis poses real dangers for the working class. Both Brexit and the response to it from the European powers show that all factions of the ruling class are willing to fight for their interests by stoking potentially explosive tensions in Ireland.

The only progressive alternative is for the working class across Ireland, Britain and Europe to reject all national divisions and to advance its own independent solution to the archaic division of the world through the struggle for workers' governments across the continent and the United Socialist States of Europe.



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