

British Prime Minister May meets French President Macron for Brexit talks

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4 August 2018

British Prime Minister Theresa May interrupted her vacation to meet French President Emmanuel Macron yesterday at his vacation spot at the Brégançon fort on France's Mediterranean coast. They reportedly started a two-hour working meeting at 5:30 p.m. and concluded without either side making any statement or announcement to the press.

It was widely reported, however, that May's visit was an attempt to convince Macron to back the "soft Brexit" plan she presented last month at her country residence at Chequers. The plan prompted a revolt inside May's Conservative party that nearly brought down her government. In the lead-up to the Brégançon meeting, there were several reports that the Macron administration is the main obstacle on the European Union (EU) side to the adoption of the Chequers plan.

A senior Whitehall source told the *Guardian*: "The Germans are actually quite clear that they want to do a deal. May's discussions with Merkel have been constructive. The Dutch have also been helpful. It's the French that regularly pour cold water on everything that the British want. There's no other nation anywhere near as disobliging. So this meeting is very important."

Another British cabinet member said, "The French just say no to everything and, by a mile, are the most difficult ones, so if May can make progress with him that would have a disproportionately positive effect on negotiations."

One can surmise that the decision of Macron and May not to issue any statement on their meeting was taken to avoid undermining EU Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier, who is negotiating Brexit terms directly with London in the name of all 27 remaining EU countries, including France. Indeed, several reports in the British press hailed Macron's decision to agree to a meeting with May as a rebuff to Barnier that effectively sidelined him.

With Brexit looming in March 2019, however, there are growing signs that business circles on both sides of the English Channel are increasingly concerned at the risk of a "no-deal" or "hard" Brexit in which the EU and Britain fail

to reach an agreement on their terms of trade before Brexit suspends the existing free-trade deals. This would threaten to effectively suspend trade between Britain and the EU, affecting hundreds of billions of euros of exports of goods and services between Europe's largest economies.

Bank of England Governor Mark Carney told the BBC that the danger of a no-deal Brexit was "uncomfortably high" and "highly undesirable."

Amid growing speculation of post-Brexit food import shortages in Britain and a fear-mongering campaign in the press over the need for military deployments amid a post-Brexit "national emergency," Carney told the BBC's Today show that the Bank of England was handing out more cash to the banks: "We have made sure that banks have the capital, the liquidity that they need and we have the contingency plans in place. ... There is a very broad range of potential outcomes to these Brexit negotiations and we are entering a crucial phase."

In France, a wave of press reports pointed to the growing dangers to French and European exports. In an article titled "Brexit will cost French businesses 4 billion euros per year," *Le Figaro* cited a study by consultants Oliver Wyman and Clifford Chance that a "hard Brexit" would hit Germany, the Netherlands and France the hardest within the EU. France stands to lose €4 billion of its €38 billion in exports to Britain, it reported, and EU small businesses risk being particularly hard-hit by any sudden reimposition of complex import duties after a "hard Brexit."

There are also fears in ruling circles that amid growing strikes and social anger at the Macron administration in France, French farmers could lose up to 5 percent of their revenues due to Britain's exit from the funding for the EU's Common Agricultural Policy. The French Agriculture Ministry has issued a statement declaring, "Such a drastic, massive and blind reduction simply cannot be considered ... France cannot accept any reduction in direct revenues for farmers." Commenting on Carney's warnings, French financial magazine *La Tribune* cited sources at the Elysée presidential palace saying that Macron intended to reach a

deal with May at the Brégançon meeting: “Emmanuel Macron and Theresa May will discuss Friday the obstacles that must be overcome to finalize The United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union and the future relations between the two entities, without formally negotiating.”

The official silence on the Macron-May meeting is of a piece with the entire Brexit campaign, a political maneuver launched by more right-wing sections of the British ruling elite in an attempt to reorganize their relations with the EU amid growing political and geostrategic tensions between the major powers. The supporters of a “soft Brexit” or of an attempt to violate the Brexit referendum result and keep Britain in the EU are not, however, any more progressive. They are carrying out reckless negotiations, with millions of jobs on the line, behind the backs of the workers in Britain and across Europe.

While the pro-Brexit wing allies more closely with the reactionary Trump administration in Washington, the pro-“soft Brexit” position is advanced by factions of the British and European bourgeoisie seeking to build up the EU as an independent militarist power, amid growing tensions between Washington and Berlin.

This vindicates the position of the Socialist Equality Party (Britain), which called for the mobilization of the working class in struggle for an active boycott of the Brexit referendum. The only way forward in the escalating crisis of the EU is the fight to unify struggles across Europe, on both sides of the English Channel, in struggle against both the British ruling class and the EU.

The calculations of the EU ruling elite were laid out in a column on Thursday in *Le Figaro* by Barnier. He wrote, “In the current geopolitical context, we are interested not only in strengthening the EU’s role in the world but also in cooperating with the UK as a close partner. How will we develop a close partnership? Above all, we need an ordered British exit. We are already in agreement with 80 percent of the exit accord.”

Brexit is not intended to undermine the operations of British or European intelligence agencies, which are to continue their mass spying on the population, Barnier insisted. He wrote that there would continue to be “fruitful exchange of intelligence and information so that our police forces continue to work together.” He said that DNA profiles, fingerprints and comprehensive flight passenger lists would continue to be exchanged between European and British police agencies after Brexit.

Barnier pointed to multiple remaining disagreements, however, including EU farm programs and British military bases in Cyprus and Gibraltar. The most important issue remaining to be resolved, however, was Ireland, according to

Barnier. He wrote, “We must ensure that Brexit does not create a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland and that the Good Friday agreement that brought peace and stability in Northern Ireland is maintained.”

The EU is, moreover, still determined to discourage further departures from the EU by imposing some type of trade cutoff on Britain after Brexit. The last obstacle to what Barnier called an “EU-British partnership ... of unprecedented scope and ambition” was Britain’s opposition to free movement of “people and services.” He wrote, “Let’s be honest: the UK has decided to leave the common market, it can no longer be as close to the rest of the EU from an economic standpoint.”

Other forces within the French political establishment clearly differ with Barnier and call for a more conciliatory line towards Britain. Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, the head of the far-right Arise France party who is a political ally of neofascist leader Marine Le Pen, penned a column in the *Huffington Post* to attack Macron’s Brexit policy.

“France has a trade surplus with Britain, many jobs depend on this trade,” he wrote. “On 29 March 2019 at 11p.m. on the nose, Brexit will go into effect and Britain will leave the European Union, whatever deal has been reached or even if a deal has not been reached. French media are not paying attention to the situation in recent days in Britain.”

Pointing to UK-French military ties, joint Franco-British repression of immigrants crossing the English Channel, and French participation in the Hinckley Point nuclear reactor, he added, “The Franco-British relation is one of the most important ties we have with another country. Our mutual interests are enormous, both in military and commercial terms.” He mocked May, whose policy “towards Macron is limited to adopting a budget policy aimed at attracting bankers from the City of London to Paris and praying very hard that this will take place.”

None of the reactionary factions in this debate speak for the interests of workers. Amid growing strike action from rail workers, teachers, airline workers and energy workers on both sides of the Channel, the key task is to build a socialist and internationalist political movement of the working class in struggle against European capitalism, in both its pro- and anti-Brexit wings.



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