

Brexit deal threatens survival of May government

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The draft agreement struck between the European Union (EU) and Prime Minister Theresa May's negotiating team has been denounced on all sides. May's fate depends most immediately on the size of a rebellion by the hard-Brexit wing of her party. But based on anything other than the most optimistic assessment, there is little likelihood of her proposal passing in parliament—threatening her future and that of the Conservative government.

May was only able to get Cabinet approval for her proposed agreement on the terms of British withdrawal from the EU after a five-hour meeting Wednesday and she did not allow a formal vote. High-profile resignations followed—of Brexit Secretary Dominic Raab and Work and Pensions Secretary Esther McVey.

May has responded by insisting that there is no alternative path to Brexit, that there must be a “backstop” agreeable to Brussels to ensure tariff-free access to the Single European Market and to prevent a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. She has urged hard-Brexiteers not to vote her deal down and risk either a second referendum or a snap general election that could bring Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party to office. Even if she is successful in dividing opponents within her own government and party, she would still require the support of a section of the Labour Party in parliament to get the deal through.

The influential leader of the Tory's anti-EU European Research Group, Jacob Rees Mogg, has put in a letter of no confidence in May to the chair of the party's 1922 Committee, Sir Graham Brady. Two other Brexiteers, Sheryll Murray and Henry Smith, followed suit. Triggering a leadership contest would necessitate 48 MPs handing in letters and Mogg intimated that they were “not there yet,” but could be within weeks. This expressed much less confidence than the numbers that were predicted last month, indicating that some Brexiteers have

listened to the demands of business that European trade must be preserved and suggesting May might survive a challenge.

In any eventuality, with May opposed by all the opposition parties, her coalition partners in the Democratic Unionist Party and dozens of Tory MPs, the crisis over Brexit can only deepen. *Financial Times* columnist Martin Wolf warned that the impasse was historic, as “Britain cannot at present resolve its relationship with the continent ... Comparisons with the 1956 Suez crisis do not get close to the mark. This is a far more significant mess than that.”

The unofficial leader of the Remain camp, Tony Blair, declared, “This deal isn't a compromise, it's a capitulation.” The Remain faction complain that the deal on offer is much worse than the terms of current EU membership in that, while guaranteeing continued access to the Single Market, the UK loses membership rights. Opposing the deal therefore united him with former Tory foreign secretary Boris Johnson in an “unholy alliance ... We agree this is a pointless Brexit in name only which is not the best of a bad job but the worst of both worlds.”

On Thursday morning, Labour issued a statement via Jon Trickett, its shadow Cabinet Office minister, that the “government is falling apart before our eyes” and that the prime minister “has no authority left and is clearly incapable of delivering a Brexit deal that commands even the support of her cabinet—let alone parliament and the people of our country.” Yet despite Corbyn's previous call that a general election would be the only way to resolve the Brexit crisis, he made no explicit call for one.

This is clearly bound up with efforts by the Corbynites to placate the Blairite faction of the party, who are opposed to a general election, fearing it will encourage a movement of the working class against the decades of neo-liberalism and austerity. They are instead demanding a “People's Vote” second referendum to reverse Brexit

entirely.

Labour, together with other opposition parties, has focused on calling for the promised “meaningful vote” on the deal to include the right to make amendments that would supposedly provide the “exact same benefits” as EU membership. EU officials responded by insisting that the draft deal is “the best we can do.”

May’s predecessor, David Cameron, called the 2016 Brexit referendum as a means of satiating his party’s Eurosceptic wing, while strengthening the UK’s bargaining position with other EU powers, Germany above all. Faced with the disastrous implication of having lost—largely as a result of a protest vote expressing widespread social and political alienation—the ruling elite was thrust into bitter factional conflict over how best to defend Britain’s global interests.

The pro-Brexit factions pinned their hopes on using the election of Donald Trump to piggy-back on US demands for unrestricted access to European markets combined with the right to negotiate independent trade deals internationally. May sought the same end goal but was brought face to face with the reality of Britain’s weak position and the full implications of the growing antagonisms between the US and Europe.

Rather than folding under US pressure, Germany and France have taken a hard line against the UK to preserve the unity of the EU while seeking to strengthen their hand against Washington. The week leading up to the Brexit text announcement was dominated by official commemorations of the centenary of the end of World War I, leading up to the meeting in Paris of 70 world leaders. Such is May’s isolation that she could not contemplate attending and stayed to mark the occasion in London. More significant still, hostile relations erupted between the US, France and Germany over President Emmanuel Macron’s declaration that Europe needed its own army—not only to combat the threat from Russia and China—but in recognition that the US was no longer a reliable ally.

As he landed in Paris, Trump fired off a tweet stating that “President Macron of France has just suggested that Europe build its own military in order to protect itself from the US, China and Russia. Very insulting, but perhaps Europe should first pay its fair share of NATO, which the US subsidizes greatly!”

On Tuesday, he tweeted, “Emmanuel Macron suggests building its own army to protect Europe against the US, China and Russia. But it was Germany in World Wars One & Two—How did that work out for France? They

were starting to learn German in Paris before the U.S. came along.”

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who said nothing against Macron’s proposal to honour Marshal Petain, the wartime leader of the Nazi collaborationist Vichy regime, solidarized herself with his call for an independent European military capability. She told the European Parliament in Strasbourg Tuesday of her “vision to establish a real European army one day,” insisting, “The times when we could rely on others are over.”

Under these circumstances, May was forced to accept a bad deal, rather than the calamitous consequences of a no deal exit. But this has only changed the battlefield in which the raging conflict within the ruling elite is fought.

In calling for an active boycott of the 2016 Brexit referendum, the Socialist Equality Party insisted that the working class has no interest in supporting either of the two right-wing bourgeois factions. Brexit has proved to be an economic disaster, and a focus of xenophobic nationalism and plans for trade war waged at the expense of workers’ jobs, wages and essential services. This cannot be opposed by support for EU membership, where member governments are pursuing the same agenda of escalating militarism, anti-migrant measures and savage austerity and fuelling the emergence of fascistic movements across the continent, above all in France and Germany.

The working class must advance its own internationalist programme to unify the struggles of workers throughout Europe in defence of living standards and democratic rights. The alternative for workers to the Europe of the transnational corporations is the struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe.



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