May delays Brexit vote while Corbyn refuses to move no confidence motion

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On the day UK Prime Minister Theresa May called off the vote on her proposed Brexit deal with the European Union (EU), Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn refused to move a motion of no-confidence until she completed a fresh round of negotiations with Brussels.

Amid the threatened collapse of the Conservative government, with 100 Tory MPs opposing May, mainly on its hard-Brexit wing, Corbyn is obsessed with proving his statesmanlike qualities and Labour's bona fides as a government that can be trusted to safeguard the interests of big business. Once again, he has thrown a lifeline to May, while handing the political initiative to the Brexit wing of the Tories and the pro-EU membership Remainers within the Blairite wing of the Labour Party.

May called off today's scheduled vote because she knew her proposed agreement would be heavily defeated. All the main opposition parties were opposed, based on either supporting remaining in the EU or renegotiating permanent access to the Single European market and Customs Union that would, in the end, mean remaining in the EU. To these critics, May stressed that her deal was the only alternative to a hard-Brexit with tariff-free access to Europe's markets closed to the UK immediately. But her fate was more directly threatened by the Tory hard-Brexiteers and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), whose 10 MPs she depends on for a majority.

Both have denounced the "backstop" arrangement designed to avoid the return of a hard-border between Northern Ireland and EU member state, the Republic of Ireland, in the event that the UK leaves the EU without an all-encompassing trade deal. With the EU stipulating that this means Northern Ireland staying in the EU customs union, large parts of the single market and the EU value added tax system, and with no clear procedure on how to end the arrangement, the DUP and the Tory right warn this could potentially split the Northern six counties from the UK.

For three humiliating hours in parliament, May repeatedly made clear that her ambitions were limited to seeking reassurances from the EU that would placate the concerns of the Brexiteers and the DUP—especially "to ensure that the backstop cannot be in place indefinitely". Hers was still the only deal that honoured the Brexit referendum vote to leave, she insisted, while still preventing a hard-Brexit.

On the opposition benches, Corbyn said the government was in "complete chaos" and repeatedly urged May to stand down. But he again faced down calls, backed by the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the Liberal Democrats, to table a vote of no-confidence. Over 50 Blairites—most of whom are opposed to a general election that would bring Corbyn to power—signed a letter demanding a no confidence motion, while a party spokesperson replied, "We will put down a motion of no confidence when we judge it most likely to be successful … When she brings the same deal back to the House of Commons without significant changes," when Labour would have the backing of "others across the House": That is, when Labour would possibly secure the support of pro-Remain Tories and enough Brexiteers to end May's premiership.

Corbyn has again given the Tories time to potentially regroup, rather than fulfil his hope for them to commit political suicide. May continues to use the prospect of electoral defeat as her main weapon, warning her rebels in the *Mail on Sunday*: "We have a leader of the opposition who thinks of nothing but attempting to bring about a general election, no matter what the cost to the country. I believe Jeremy Corbyn getting his

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hands on power is a risk we cannot afford to take." Leading Brexiteer Jacob Rees-Mogg called her out, stating, "This is not governing, it risks putting Jeremy Corbyn into government by failing to deliver Brexit … The prime minister must either govern or quit."

With speculation that the next days will finally see the 48 Tory MPs submitting the necessary letters to trigger a no confidence motion in May, there was discussion of a possible "dream ticket" of top Brexit figure Boris Johnson standing for leader and Remainer Amber Rudd as his deputy.

It is unclear whether May intends to resubmit a revised or "clarified" deal next week, or delay until the New Year. She has only said the final deadline is January 21. But there is every likelihood that her party would remove her before then, or that parliamentary arithmetic shifts sharply enough towards Remain to change everything—including raising the possibility of a general election or a second referendum. In whatever way events unfold, May's days are numbered.

EU leaders, including president of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker and Irish premier, Leo Veradkar, have queued up to insist that no substantive changes will be made to the agreement. Juncker said, "We will not renegotiate the deal that's on the table right now. That is very clear," while his spokesman said "[A]s far as we're concerned the UK is leaving the EU on the 29 March 2019. We are prepared for all scenarios." This was backed up with statements indicating advanced preparations for a no-deal Brexit.

To reinforce the EU's hard-line stance, judges at the European Court of Justice ruled that MPs had the option of unilaterally revoking Article 50, ending withdrawal and maintaining full EU membership. The case was brought by an alliance of Labour Remainers and the SNP. The judges ruled that a letter from the government to the European Council of Europe's leaders would stop Brexit if received any time before the March 29, 2019 deadline. The Blairite Chris Leslie described the ruling as "a game-changing moment" in opening the possibility of a second "People's Vote" referendum after any parliamentary rejection of May's deal.

The only silver lining for May was offered by former European Commission president, Romano Prodi, who said renegotiation was possible given the economic and political consequences of the UK crashing out of the bloc without a deal.

Indicating the scale of the unfolding crisis, the delayed vote caused the pound to fall to its lowest level in 18 months, so that a euro is now worth 90 pence.

The response within Labour on the issue is to exert maximum pressure on Corbyn to commit to a second referendum—with the pro-Corbyn Momentum group now openly allied with the Blairites. Corbyn continues to resist, fearing that moving too quickly would alienate most Labour voters who supported Brexit.

Each side now regularly warns of social and political unrest—if the popular vote for Brexit is thwarted, or if a hard-Brexit leads to economic chaos. Writing in Bloomberg, Therese Raphael warned that the UK could soon see "unrest" similar to the Yellow Vests movement in France. "[W]hat happens if traditional pathways for affecting change no longer work? What happens, say, if the political sphere is so unstable that there is no clear policy vision; if government not only ceases to be responsive but is no longer even coherent? Britain may be about to find out … Someone will begin passing out high-visibility vests or another symbol of defiance. It may not be immediate, but chaos, loss, uncertainty and disruption will breed palpable anger."

All such warnings point to the underlying issue of rising social tensions and class antagonisms produced by the savage austerity measures that all factions of Britain's ruling elite are committed to. Against contending strategies for trade war and militarism, workers in Britain should seek maximum unity with workers in France, Germany, Italy, Greece and throughout Europe—fighting against the austerity measures of their national governments being imposed in collusion with the EU—in a common offensive for a United Socialist States of Europe.

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