

Corbyn, Brexit and the struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe

Chris Marsden
17 December 2018

UK Prime Minister Theresa May's failure to reach a deal over Brexit and the deepening paralysis of her government unfolds under conditions of a European and global crisis of capitalism, marked above all by the resurgence of the class struggle.

This finds its most significant expression in the Yellow Vest protests against French President Emmanuel Macron's pro-market labour reforms and austerity measures. With Britain's ruling elite wracked by fundamental divisions over economic and foreign policy direction, centred on Britain's relations with Europe and the United States, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn is playing the central role in preventing any independent response by the working class to the deepest crisis of capitalist rule since the 1930s.

Corbyn and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell have cast themselves as a force for national stability, denouncing the inability of May and the Conservatives to "end the chaos." Their appeal is not to the working class, but to the City of London—pitching a future Labour government as a safe pair of hands that will safeguard British access to the vital European Union's (EU) Single European Market.

The unravelling of Prime Minister Theresa May's government has worsened after her appeal to the EU summit in Brussels to save "our deal" with concessions on the Northern Ireland "backstop" fell on deaf ears. May was forced to cancel a vote planned for last Tuesday on her proposed Brexit deal with the EU, knowing it would be heavily defeated by a rebellion of around 100 Conservative MPs and the vote of 10 Democratic Unionist Party MPs. Yet barely two days after she survived a no-confidence vote in her ruling Tory Party, with a third of its MPs voting to remove her, EU leaders issued a statement insisting that the withdrawal agreement "is not open for renegotiation."

This prompted talk of a permanent split in the Tory Party, with former cabinet minister Nicky Morgan telling the BBC, "I think there's an inevitability that some of these people—the hardest Brexiters—are going to walk."

Under these conditions, newspapers in the UK and internationally asked why the Labour Party and Corbyn have

been unable to seize advantage of the crisis facing the government. Most commentary focused on his calculations of how best to ensure the success of a no-confidence motion—given that pro-Remain Blairite MPs, the Scottish National Party and Liberal Democrats want one only because it is likely to fail and pave the way for a second "People's Vote" referendum.

There are clearly tactical considerations over when Corbyn will finally move a no-confidence motion. But his overarching concern is that Labour comes to power under conditions where it can safeguard the interests of British imperialism and not provoke an upsurge in the class struggle by workers and youth encouraged by his rhetorical promises to end austerity.

Corbyn has now been party leader for three years, having been popularly elected twice due to widespread hatred of the Blairites and their pro-business, pro-war agenda. But rather than give a lead to this leftward shift among workers and youth, he has folded before every programmatic demand of his Blairite opponents and opposed all moves to expel them while seeking to dampen down the class struggle and instructing Labour councils to impose the cuts demanded by the Tories.

This has left the Blairites free to conspire with the Tories, including discussions on forming some form of national unity government, with Philip Collins urging May last week in Rupert Murdoch's *Times* to "Reach across the floor of the House... after talking to some of the people involved, I think there is a deal to be done." The *Sunday Times* reported that May's deputy, David Lidington, held talks Thursday with Blairite Labour MPs Chuka Umunna, Chris Leslie, Ben Bradshaw, Chris Bryant, Angela Smith, and Stephen Doughty, on a proposed second referendum.

Corbyn's every public pronouncement on Brexit is framed as a pledge to Britain's ruling elite that a Labour government would represent the national interest. "We are working with MPs and parties across the House of Commons" to "prevent any possibility of a no deal outcome," he told the *Guardian*. "[I]f under the current rules

we cannot get an election, all options must be on the table,” including “the option of campaigning for a public vote to break the deadlock.”

McDonnell told BBC Radio 4’s *Today* programme that Labour was still ready to work with the government on alternatives to prevent a no-deal Brexit: “The easiest thing for the opposition to do in these circumstances is to warm your hands as the Conservatives self-immolate, but you can’t do that, not when the issues are so big about the future of our country.”

Corbyn has worked to ensure that discussion on Brexit remain confined to a conflict between rival bourgeois factions who are bitterly hostile to the working class and who disagree only over how best to position the UK in a deepening trade war—either with the EU or with the US. This can only mean ever more savage attacks on jobs, wages and social conditions. Only this week, the Trades Union Congress released a report that the average UK worker now earns a third less than in 2008, before the global crash—equivalent to £11,800 in real earnings.

It is the imposition of such austerity by all of Europe’s governments that has provoked a growing wave of strikes and anti-austerity protests—in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and in Hungary against the “slave law” allowing employers to demand two extra hours on the workday. Corbyn has not said a word in support of these workers. Instead, last week he appeared as speaker at the Congress of the Party of European Socialists in Lisbon, Portugal and, as he did recently with Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras, allied himself with those “left” parties imposing austerity.

Corbyn described his meeting in Portugal as “a special privilege” because this was supposedly “where a socialist led government, bringing together parties and movements across the left and Labour movement, is successfully turning the tide of austerity and rejecting the neoliberal orthodoxies of recent decades...” Prime Minister “António Costa’s government has defied expectations and shown there is a better way.”

Costa’s government has decimated Portugal’s public services, plunging workers into abject poverty. With tourism one of the few growth industries, part-time work now makes up 22 percent of youth employment even after 200,000 have fled the country, while fully two thirds of all workers are on short term contracts. This has led to an eruption of strikes, with close to 50 strike warnings submitted for this month, mostly by civil servants. These would join dozens of separate strikes including ongoing action by rail workers, dockers, supermarket staff and others, with a planned Yellow Vest protest on December 21.

In the 2016 Brexit referendum, the Socialist Equality Party

refused to support either right-wing camp, opposing both Leave and Remain. We called for an active boycott to prepare the way “for the development of an independent political struggle of the British working class against these forces. Such a movement must develop as part of a continent-wide counteroffensive by the working class, which will expose the referendum as only an episode in the deepening existential crisis of the British and European bourgeoisie.” This appraisal has proved correct.

The pseudo-left tendencies in contrast all lined up behind one or another faction of the bourgeoisie—as advocates of a “Left Leave” vote as with the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party or, like Left Unity, Socialist Resistance and the Alliance for Workers Liberty, as promoters of the EU. All stand exposed as allies of governments and opposition parties dedicated to the destruction of living standards, the abrogation of democratic rights and the cultivation and promotion of far-right forces as a bludgeon against the working class.

The struggle that has begun in France must now become the starting point for a European-wide counter-offensive by the working class. This means opposing all attempts to divide the working class along national lines. Defeating the attacks of corporations and governments in any country is only possible in unity with workers in every country, leading to the taking of power to implement socialist measures to bring an end to oppression, poverty, mass unemployment, militarism and war. The answer to Brexit and the economically and politically disastrous consequences of the national fracturing of the continent is the struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe led by the International Committee of the Fourth International.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact