

# UK: Cross-party moves escalate to prevent Brexit and secure second referendum

Robert Stevens  
31 December 2018

Hostilities continued during parliamentary recess over Britain's scheduled exit from the European Union (EU) at the end of March.

A vote is to be held the week of January 14 on Prime Minister Theresa May's proposed Brexit deal. She refused to hold a vote earlier this month as she knew it would be voted down. In an attempt to placate opposition to the deal from both Remain and Leave factions in her own party, May said she would seek further concessions, particularly on the post-Brexit arrangements regarding the Northern Ireland border with the Republic of Ireland, an EU member.

But May has secured no further concessions ahead of the January vote, with European Council President Donald Tusk stating that there is "no mandate to organise further negotiations" on a deal that took over two years to finalise. The *Financial Times* reported Sunday, "There have been no formal EU-UK Brexit negotiations since the [EU] summit ended in acrimony on December 13, with EU diplomats on holiday over the Christmas and New Year break."

Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn denounced May for delaying a vote until the last minute to bounce parliament into supporting her Brexit deal as the only option to avoiding a chaotic and economically damaging no-deal Brexit. Corbyn, who was an opponent of EU membership for decades, supported Remain in the 2016 referendum. He has made a series of concessions to the party's pro-EU wing ever since, but this has done nothing to placate the Blairites who are seeking a reversal of the 2016 Leave vote through a second referendum, or "People's Vote."

Tensions within Labour escalated again following an op-ed piece Corbyn published in the *Guardian*, as parliament went into the Christmas recess. He reiterated that Labour, if it won a snap general election in the

New Year under his leadership, would honour the 2016 referendum and seek a Brexit based on protecting "jobs", i.e., by securing continuing access to the EU's Single Market and a Customs Union preserving tariff-free trade. He said if Labour won an election, "You'd have to go back and negotiate, and see what the timetable would be."

Asked his view of what Labour under his leadership would advocate in the event of a referendum, Corbyn again refused to call for a Remain vote, stating, "It would be a matter for the party to decide what the policy would be; but my proposal at this moment is that we go forward, trying to get a customs union with the EU, in which we would be able to be proper trading partners."

Corbyn was repeating the policy adopted by the Labour Party at its conference in October, but his intervention provoked an immediate backlash from the Blairites and their allies in the Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party and pro-Remain Tories.

Corbyn's stated aim is to force a general election and only if that fails to consider other options, including a second referendum. But he has refused to move a vote of no confidence in the government, which is the only means of possibly securing a general election—suggesting that he will do so only after the vote on May's deal when the chance of success is most likely. In reality there is no reason to believe that pro-Brexit Tories or the Democratic Unionist Party would support such a no confidence motion.

Corbyn is delaying a vote for two reasons: above all to make clear to the ruling class that he is not threatening political stability and wants to come to power bearing their imprimatur, but also because he knows that a failed no confidence motion will mean bringing an end to the policy of "constructive

ambiguity” on Brexit.

The Blairites have spent most of the last several months seeking to commit Corbyn to a second referendum. Last week Tony Blair’s former Foreign Minister David Miliband denounced Corbyn in a *Guardian* op-ed, saying his position was “not much better” than that of the hard Brexit faction around Tory Boris Johnson. Miliband stated, “Jeremy Corbyn’s *Guardian* interview has rightly caused a furore. He makes clear that his difference with the government lies in tactics not goals, personnel not principles.”

Cross-party backing for a second referendum had to be mobilised, Miliband said as, “It is reported that five [Tory] cabinet members can now see their way to supporting a people’s vote. They need to insist that preparations begin now.”

Blairite *Guardian* commentator Jonathan Freedland warned of the “coming catastrophe” and said there should be no “working out whether this or that move will boost [Labour’s] electoral prospects. None of that matters when a national emergency is looming. The only purpose of politics at this moment is averting it.” It was “unconscionable that Jeremy Corbyn keeps playing his own games, avoiding the formal vote of no confidence in this horror show of a government which, once done, would compel Labour to pursue other ways out of this quagmire.”

Further pressure was heaped on Corbyn this weekend with demands by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) that Article 50—the legislation governing the UK’s exit from the EU—be suspended. The only purpose of a suspension would be to prepare the way for a second referendum. TUC General Secretary Francis O’Grady said of May in a New Year message, “Her Brexit deal doesn’t command a parliamentary majority and that there’s no majority for no deal either.”

The *Observer*, the *Guardian*’s Sunday sister publication, reported that cross-party talks aimed at extending Article 50 “have been under way for several weeks to ensure the 29 March date is put back—probably until July at the latest—if the government does not push for a delay itself. It is also understood that cabinet ministers have discussed the option of a delay with senior backbench MPs in both the main parties and that Downing Street is considering scenarios in which a delay might have to be requested from Brussels.”

Labour’s Shadow Brexit Secretary Sir Keir Starmer warned that the UK would be just nine weeks away from leaving the EU by the time of the January vote in parliament on May’s Brexit deal, and “If the deal is rejected, parliament will need to have a very serious debate about how to protect the economy from a no-deal scenario and at this stage nothing should be ruled out.”

With an unprecedented crisis of rule in the UK, Corbyn’s major concern is to preserve the unity of the Labour Party’s “broad church” on the basis that only a Labour government can rescue British imperialism.

There is not a single issue of political principle in Corbyn’s politics of constant manoeuvre and concessions to the Blairites. The one option this bourgeois politician will never take is to take a stand on political principles reflecting independent interests of the working class.

Corbyn is vehemently opposed to any struggle for socialism based on a common offensive by all European workers against the EU and all its constituent governments, which is the only means of opposing the dangers of austerity, repression and militarism. His preaching of party unity, social peace and a “patriotic” commitment to the national interest disarms workers even as the repressive arms of the state are preparing for social unrest as Brexit approaches. With an eye on the Yellow Vest protests in France, nearly 10,000 soldiers have been placed on standby to be deployed to deal with any contingency, with the suppression of an escalation of industrial action topping the list.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**