

Military prepare for post-Brexit civil war in Britain and Northern Ireland

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Junior Defence Minister Tobias Elwood says 50,000 soldiers had to be readied for deployment on Britain's streets in the event of a "no-deal" Brexit.

With Britain's scheduled exit from the European Union (EU) less than 90 days away, his comments, quoted from an anonymous source in Saturday's *Times* newspaper, confirm that the ruling elite is preparing for the potential eruption of a civil war.

The *Times* reported, "Ministers at a no-deal Brexit planning meeting on Thursday [January 3] were told that 30,000 regular troops and 20,000 reserves must be ready to help manage the consequences." Elwood was reported as warning that the troops had to be in place "in case of civil unrest, to assist at Britain's airports and to ensure fuel and medical supplies."

The mobilisation proposed is extraordinary. Fifty thousand soldiers are close to half the current size of the British Army, which currently stands at 81,500 regulars and just over 27,000 reservists. It is more than the force sent by the British government to invade Iraq in 2003 as part of the US-led invasion.

Elwood was clear that this force should be directed above all against the working class. The source reported that he "suggested that fellow ministers should remember what happened in the fuel blockade in 2000 [when troops were used to protect fuel deliveries] and plan for that kind of thing on a mass scale. ..."

Only last month, the government announced that 3,500 troops would be on standby to "support any government department on any contingencies they may need," according to Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson. The 3,500 would be in addition to 5,000 troops continually on standby—nominally to be deployed in the event of a terrorist attack—and would be composed of both regular and reserve forces. Now, it is reported that 10 times that number may be deployed.

Elwood's remarks must be taken as a stark warning. A "no-deal" Brexit is a nightmare scenario for the dominant sections of the British bourgeoisie and would bring about an immediate economic and social catastrophe, threatening trade accounting for 40 percent of the UK total.

However, though the tempo of the coming crisis may alter if a deal is struck with the EU, or Brexit is abandoned, the turn to military repression and authoritarian forms of rule is rooted in class relations dominated by rising social inequality for millions while a tiny minority rake in vast fortunes. Although no mass protests have emerged in Britain comparable to the Yellow Vest movement in France, Britain's rulers look across the Channel in fear and see their own future.

Elwood is no maverick voice to be dismissed. A former captain in the Royal Green Jackets army regiment, he supported Remain and is considered a loyal supporter of Prime Minister Theresa May. His remarks are consistent with other preparations already made public.

Last September, it was reported that the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) had developed plans in the aftermath of the 2011 youth riots that erupted across towns and cities in England for up to 7,000 police personnel to be mobilised at short notice. The police were said to be working on various scenarios that could emerge after Britain leaves the EU on March 29, including widespread chaos as a consequence of supply disruptions.

All major ports for trade to Europe, particularly Dover, but also Hull, Felixstowe, Portsmouth and New Haven, were designated as problem areas, with long queues of lorries potentially building up. This could lead to "unprecedented and overwhelming" disruption to the road network. Shortages of medicines and other

essentials could “feed civil disorder,” while food shortages and prices rises could lead to “widespread protest which could then escalate into disorder.”

The NPCC intended to set up a unit to assess threat levels and considered cancelling all police leave in the weeks before and after Brexit. One source told the *Guardian* that any mass national police mobilisation could last for weeks. This week, the British government intends to use 150 heavy goods lorries in a test of an “HGV holding facility” in an abandoned airfield near Ramsgate in Kent. The lorries will then be released into rush hour and mid-morning traffic to determine how much additional traffic chaos ensues.

Of far graver import is the announcement of preparations for a massive police mobilisation onto the streets of Northern Ireland. As many as 1,000 police officers in Scotland and England are being trained as reinforcements available to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) in the event of a “no-deal” Brexit and the return of a “hard border” with the Republic of Ireland, an EU member state.

The reinforcements were requested by the PSNI under mutual aid arrangements between police forces. They will be placed on “standby” on top of more than 300 additional police officers, new vehicles and equipment requested by the PSNI last year, primarily for operations along the border, post-Brexit. These are expected to be recruited by 2020.

Sales of three disused police stations, heavily fortified during Northern Ireland’s “Troubles,” have been halted. Warrenpoint, Castlederg and Aughnacloy PSNI stations are all located in border areas, although there are currently no plans to re-open them. In December, the British government handed the PSNI an extra £16 million to meet whatever contingencies emerge due to Brexit.

The additional forces, if called for, would be required to patrol the 250 border crossing points between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Although the British and Irish governments and the EU are all committed to avoiding any “hard border,” what might happen in the event of a “no-deal” Brexit is unknown.

Any attempt to create border posts, checkpoints or technical infrastructure away from the border will infuriate the hundreds of thousands of people who cross the near-invisible border every week.

It would serve to enflame the endemic sectarian

tensions on which political life in Northern Ireland is still based. It recently emerged that, over the last three and half years, around 2,000 families reported themselves homeless to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive on account of threats and pressure from the sectarian paramilitary outfits that dominate many working-class areas.

A measure of the scale of PSNI border and riot control operation envisaged can be seen in the fact the only previous occasion on which the PSNI has called for “mutual aid” policing support was during the 2013 G8 summit of world leaders in County Fermanagh.

On that occasion, 8,000 police from Northern Ireland were aided by 3,600 drafted in from Britain, specially trained in water cannon use and riot control. The G8 venue was surrounded by 8 kilometres of steel fencing and roadblocks, while 300 additional police cells were made available in Maghaberry and Magilligan prisons.

It testifies to the ditching of basic democratic norms that has occurred over the last two decades that such a massive troop mobilisation onto the streets of Britain is being discussed behind closed doors, with the population kept in the dark other than through leaks to the Murdoch press. No one in the corporate media opposes putting troops onto Britain’s streets in numbers unprecedented since World War II or plans for the armed repression of legitimate protests and industrial action.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn maintains total silence, just as has since November when the head of the Armed Forces, General Sir Nick Carter, confirmed the existence of “sensible” Brexit contingency plans—“Whether it’s a terrorist attack or whether it’s a tanker-drivers’ dispute, industrial action or whatever else it might be.”



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