UK parliament votes down Prime Minister May's Brexit deal

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MPs voted by a massive majority Tuesday evening against Prime Minister Theresa May's proposed deal with the European Union (EU) on the terms of Britain's exit from the bloc.

May was defeated by a majority of 230, with 432 MPs against the deal and just 202 for in the biggest vote against a sitting prime minister in history.

The vote was held after a five-day debate. Opposing May were 118 rebels from her own Conservative Party (nearly 40 percent of Tory MPs). They joined 248 MPs from the main opposition Labour Party and 35 from the Scottish National Party (SNP). May's defeat would have been even greater had not three Brexit supporting Labour MPs, Ian Austin, Sir Kevin Barron and John Mann, not voted with her. Also voting with May were three Independents—former Labour MP Frank Field, Lady Hermon, and Stephen Lloyd.

Following the historic defeat, May announced that if Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn exercised his right to call a no-confidence vote it would be heard today. Making capital over his previous refusal to do so, she added that consideration would be given to a debate if one of the smaller opposition parties demanded one. If she won a no confidence vote, she would meet with the Tories' "confidence and supply partner" the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), "and senior parliamentarians from across the House to identify what would be required to secure the backing of the House."

Corbyn immediately tabled a vote of no confidence that was backed by the SNP and the leaders of the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the Greens.

May is expected to win the no confidence vote, to be held this evening at 7 p.m., with the DUP stating that it would continue to prop up the Tories and support her government. The pro-Brexit Conservatives in the European Research Group said they would also back her. Both said they would do nothing that would bring Corbyn and Labour to power. Leading Brexiteer and May's former Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, said that he would back May, but insisted that the scale of her Brexit deal defeat meant that she had to return to talks with the EU and demand a deal more amenable to the Brexiteers—including abandoning the "backstop" arrangements keeping Northern Ireland in a customs union.

May had cancelled a vote on her deal in December, on the basis that it was expected to be heavily defeated. She spent the next weeks seeking to gain concessions from the EU, in the hope that she could persuade her hard Brexit opponents to change their minds. But all May was able to present before the vote was a perfunctory exchange of letters with European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and President of the European Council Donald Tusk. The EU leaders offered nothing that could satisfy hard Brexiteers, insisting that a backstop was the only way to prevent a hard-border with the Republic of Ireland until a future free trade agreement is signed between the UK and Brussels.

A letter from Juncker to May promised only to make "this period [when the backstop is in place] as short as possible." This had no impact, with DUP leader Arlene Foster saying the party's 10 MPs would vote against the deal and that "What we want the prime minister to do after today is to go back to the European Union and say that the backstop has to go."

The vote was confirmation of parliament's overall support for a soft-Brexit, with a core of Blairite Labour MPs, the SNP, Liberal Democrats and some Tories all favouring remaining in the EU and wanting a second "People's Vote" referendum to reverse the 2016 result.

In expectation of the proposed deal with the UK

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being rejected by MPs, Juncker cancelled a planned engagement in Strasbourg Wednesday to return to Brussels for emergency talks on Brexit with May. MPs voted last week to ensure that May has only limited time to come up with a "Plan B" that parliament can vote on, meaning May must return to parliament with new proposals by next Monday. May promised to do so and that her deal would be subject to amendments.

The Confederation of British Industry called on May to quickly put forward a new deal. CBI director-general Carolyn Fairbairn said, "Every business will feel no deal is hurtling closer … All MPs need to reflect on the need for compromise and to act at speed to protect the UK's economy."

While the strategy of the EU leaders over the past two years has been to maintain a hard line against the UK in negotiations—in order to ward off any other countries contemplating an exit from the bloc—there are concerns that a no-deal Brexit will provoke serious economic and social turmoil. The EU's official line prior to the vote was that the deal had taken two years to finalise and was the only one on the table. However, on Tuesday afternoon, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas declared, "If it goes wrong tonight, there could be further talks."

Europe's fears were articulated in the starkest terms by Deutsche Bank chief executive, Christian Sewing, who warned that a "disorderly Brexit" would have "dramatic consequences" for the British economy. He predicted, "The UK would fall into a recession for at least two years," with economic output cut by half a percentage point in the remaining EU countries. This was dire, as "the distortions would be too great for trade, financing conditions and investor confidence."

The most striking aspect of yesterday's debate is how the interests of working people have been entirely excluded from official politics—with Corbyn playing the central role in his insistence that parliamentary arithmetic must be respected and restoring "national unity" must be prioritised.

A few hundred pro-EU and pro-Leave protesters demonstrated outside Westminster, but inside the Commons all discussion was on how best to secure a deal with the EU, combining an ability for UK business to sign independent trade deals with tariff-free access to the Single European Market.

The pro-Brexit Tories plans to fashion the UK as Europe's Singapore are overtly based on ramping up the exploitation of the working class. But the Remain faction, including Corbyn, all know that EU membership or even some form of "customs union" is just as firmly rooted in ongoing effort to make the UK competitive against its rivals at the expense of the working class. They offer nothing to the 5,000 Jaguar Land Rover workers, 1,000 Ford workers and thousands of retail staff told they face redundancy this past week.

Austerity is hard-wired into the EU. The Social Europe think-tank issued a report on the day of the vote noting that, after a decade of attacks on workers' living standards and based on the at-risk-of-poverty threshold for the EU as a whole (60 percent of median EU income or €9,760), the "EU-wide poverty rate is 28.2 per cent (equivalent to around 142 million out of a total EU population of around 500 million)."

Last week, a visit by German Chancellor Angela Merkel to Athens provoked clashes between riot police and protesters, including striking teachers—giving expression to how millions of Greeks feel about EU-dictated austerity. The Syriza government of Alexis Tsipras, which Corbyn cites as a model and ally, is now so hated for imposing austerity that it is 10.5 percent behind the conservative New Democracy in opinion polls. The same sentiment animates France's Yellow Vests, the strike wave gripping Poland and labour disputes throughout the continent.

The working class must break free of the straitjacket imposed by Labour and its allies in the trade unions. Rejecting the false choice between Brexit and support for the EU, workers must mobilise in an industrial and political offensive against the government and the employers in alliance with their brothers and sisters throughout Europe facing the same battle and the same enemy, in the fight for a socialist Britain and a socialist Europe.

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