

Factional warfare hots up after collapse of May's European Union Brexit deal

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The pro-Remain wing of Britain's ruling elite were convinced that their moment of triumph had come with the rejection Tuesday of Prime Minister Theresa May's deal for leaving the European Union (EU) and the failure Wednesday of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's vote of no confidence on the Conservative government.

Led by the Blairite wing of the Labour Party, they calculated that the decks would now be cleared for them to campaign for a second "People's Vote" to overturn the 2016 referendum result in favour of leaving the EU.

But no such clear-cut scenario for exiting the Brexit crisis exists. Instead the factional warfare that May sought to manage in her own party in the hope of securing at least a "soft Brexit"—maintaining tariff-free access to Europe's markets—has erupted with renewed force. In addition, divisions within the Labour Party over Brexit itself and the advisability of unequivocally backing a second referendum, which Corbyn also tried to manage with his policy of studied ambiguity, have also been brought to centre stage.

The campaign for a "People's Vote" stepped up a gear, with Tony Blair himself demanding that Corbyn enter crisis talks with May and abandon his precondition of her ruling out a "no-deal" Brexit—something she is unable to do without completely alienating her "Brexititeer" wing and Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party, which she relies on the support of its 10 MPs for a majority in Parliament. Corbyn's positioning Labour for a possible fresh vote of no-confidence—after May's "Plan B" deal is presented to Parliament Monday—and his proposal to then seek a vote on his own Brexit proposals is considered a dangerous waste of time that should be spent arguing for a second referendum to follow a vote on May's alternative Brexit proposals on January 29.

However, within 24 hours the still deeply divided, febrile political landscape in the UK was made apparent. Thursday evening, the main pro-Remain newspaper, the *Guardian*, led with a front-page warning: "Corbyn faces threat of revolt if he seeks new referendum."

"A string of junior shadow ministers have told the *Guardian* they are strongly opposed to the idea of a second referendum, which they fear would expose Labour to a vicious backlash in leave-voting constituencies," it wrote.

An unnamed shadow minister was quoted as saying, "This concept of blocking Brexit is wrong and would break a link with millions of our traditional voters who expect us to keep our word."

Backbench MPs, "who have been canvassing opinion," were cited claiming that there are just as many Labour MPs opposed to a second referendum as supporting it.

Insisting that Corbyn must continue campaigning for a general election, *Guardian* columnist Owen Jones, a darling of the Remain campaign who supported efforts by the Blairites to remove Corbyn, warned, "If Labour imposed a three-line whip in support of a referendum, shadow cabinet members representing leave constituencies have told me they will resign. If a referendum becomes the only option left, then Labour will have to campaign for remain, and make a great fist of it. But don't have any illusions. The campaign will be even more bitter and vicious than the last; the culture war that has enveloped the country will get worse; millions of leave voters will be angered and even more disillusioned than before; and under a slogan of 'tell them again,' leave may well win once more."

Jones is only confirming that the hesitancy of Corbyn and his Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell to nail

their colours firmly to Remain at this stage articulates concerns for the political stability of Britain that the ruling class would do well to heed, rather than attack him for. A bourgeois politician, Corbyn's overarching concern is to police political and social discontent so as not to ignite a mass movement of the working class against the most crisis-ridden government in decades.

In an op-ed piece in the *Financial Times* by McDonnell Friday, he cited the present political stalemate as "one that could provoke even greater disillusionment with our system ..."

This, he said, is why "Labour will return to Parliament to promote the compromise we believe is not only in the best interests of our economy but is also capable of securing sufficient support both here and in Brussels."

Central importance is assigned by Labour to securing tariff-free trade with Europe: "Labour is proposing a deal that involves membership of a customs union, with a say in future trade deals, a close and collaborative relationship with the single market and the protection of consumer, environmental and employment rights."

Remainers barely acknowledge this, but May's deal was so decisively rejected because 118 Tory MPs who back a hard Brexit joined opposition MPs in the lobbies. The leaders of the hard Brexit wing are now positioning themselves to move against May in the near future, or at the very least to assume leadership of the party after she promised to step down prior to a general election.

Environment Secretary Michael Gove closed the debate on the no-confidence motion in the Tories with an attack on Corbyn that was understood as a leadership oration. On Friday, former foreign secretary Boris Johnson gave a public speech meant to relaunch his own leadership bid in which he outlined the anti-working-class agenda of the Brexiteers.

Johnson spoke at the headquarters of the JCB construction equipment conglomerate, owned by billionaire Tory peer and Leave supporter Anthony Bamford. He made a few populist attacks on corporations who have "held wages down" over the last decade. However, this framed his demand that it was necessary to cut immigration numbers to end "access to unlimited pools of labour from other countries."

Johnson outlined that Brexit required the UK to massively increase its productivity levels that can only

come about through ramping up the exploitation of the working class. He called for a flat level of tax that would be a bonanza for the super-rich at the expense of the working class. "We must ... create the most favourable tax environment with no new taxes and no increases in rates and no one rich or poor to pay more than 50 percent of their income in tax," he said.

To "create the most dynamic economy possible," the UK needed a series of "free ports"—a form of free trade zone—in designated areas of a country around seaports, riverports and airports where goods are exempt for any tariffs and taxes: "There are now 135 countries in the world that have such free ports with all their power to attract the growth of all kind and it is absurd that Britain will be forbidden by this deal from doing the same."

The European bourgeoisie understand that the failure of May's agreement means she is numbered among the walking dead, leaving the way open for a second referendum. Senior figures such as European Council President Donald Tusk, chief EU negotiator Michel Barnier, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron have all made statements sympathetic to the UK remaining in the EU and suggesting a possible second referendum.

On Friday, the *Guardian* cited unnamed EU diplomats stating that May's deal had no support in Parliament and would not be revived. An ambassador said, "The reality is there is no longer any interlocutor [in the UK] for Europe. It is not at present the prime minister. We have to wait until one emerges."

Another diplomat said, "[I]f it [UK parliament] passes a simple bill to delay article 50 [enacting Brexit], then that means no deal is off the table, and Europe, I am sure, will respond not flexibly, but super flexibly."



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