UK Labour leader Corbyn endorses Blairite call for second Brexit referendum

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Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn announced Monday evening that he was ready to support a second referendum "to prevent a damaging Tory Brexit being forced on the country."

The move came after months of pressure—intensified since Labour's annual conference last September—from the Blairite wing of the party demanding that the party back remaining in the European Union (EU).

Until now Corbyn has maintained, as per the policy agreed at its conference, that Labour intends to implement a soft-Brexit—maintaining tariff-free access to the Single European Market in the "national interest," following a general election victory over the Tories. Only if that was not feasible would he back other options, including a "People's Vote" second referendum.

The press release stated, "One way or another, we will do everything in our power to prevent No Deal and oppose a damaging Tory Brexit based on Theresa May's overwhelmingly rejected deal. That's why, in line with our conference policy, we are committed to also putting forward or supporting an amendment in favour of a public vote to prevent a damaging Tory Brexit being forced on the country."

Corbyn has put an amendment forward that will be voted on this evening in parliament, setting out Labour's Brexit plan. The failure of this amendment will bring into play, rather than a demand for a general election, support for a second referendum.

While Corbyn's move doesn't fundamentally alter the balance of political forces in the raging conflict in the ruling class over the outcome of Brexit, it confirms again that he will concede every demand made by the Blairites. The Blairites have made abundantly clear that they are opposed to a general election and want the Conservatives to remain in office.

However, even were Labour to table a second referendum vote, there is not at this stage a majority in parliament for such an outcome. Up to 35 Labour MPs would oppose it. Many Labour MPs, including a substantial number in the party's right wing, hold seats in the north of England, which overwhelmingly supported Brexit. Among those on record against a second referendum are at least three shadow cabinet ministers. Moreover, eight shadow ministers were among 17 Labour MPs who either voted against or abstained on an amendment put to parliament last month by Blairite Yvette Cooper that would have authorised extending Article 50 and delaying Brexit.

Corbyn's latest capitulation came just hours ahead of Prime Minister Theresa May's statement in parliament, in which she manoeuvred for more time to amend the deal she has reached with the EU. May is seeking to change parts of the withdrawal agreement relating to the post-Brexit border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to make it palatable to her party's hard-Brexit wing and the Democratic Unionist Party, on which, as the head of a minority government, she relies.

May said that she would give MPs a "meaningful" vote on her deal on March 12. If this is voted down, she will hold another vote the following day on whether MPs support a no-deal Brexit on March 29 (the date the UK is set to leave the EU). Voting against a no-deal Brexit will then trigger another vote on March 14 to request a delay in the Article 50 negotiation process—but only until the end of June at the latest.

May, appealing to her party's hard-Brexit wing in the European Research Group, said, "An extension beyond the end of June would mean the UK taking part in the European Parliament elections. What kind of message would that send to the more than 17 million people who

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voted to leave the EU nearly three years ago now?... And the House should be clear that a short extension—not beyond the end of June—would almost certainly have to be a one-off."

May was presented with no option but to kick the can further down the road, given that her present round of negotiations with the EU has failed, with leading EU figures suggesting a two-year delay in Britain's exit.

This week's events signify that the Blairites have de facto total control over party policy, just over three years after they were annihilated by Corbyn in the leadership contest.

The defection of eight Labour MPs, who were soon joined by three Tories in setting up the pro-EU Independent Group last week, has accelerated this process. Over the weekend, reports were leaked to the pro-Remain press that up to 20 Labour MPs and peers were also considering leaving the party.

When the eight defectors left, to be followed by another anti-Corbyn MP, Ian Austin, the main sentiment of Labour members was that this should be followed by the deselection of the rest of the Blairite MPs.

Instead, Corbyn's response is to once again call for unity with the Blairites. His prostration and that of his shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, left Labour's deputy leader, Tom Watson, free to tell the BBC's "Andrew Marr Show" that Corbyn had to "unite the party and reshuffle the Shadow Cabinet to give greater weight to MPs with social democratic rather than socialist views."

This week, he pledged to convene a group of right-wing MPs "who believe in the party's social democratic tradition to develop policies."

The refusal to fight the Blairites has devastating consequences for Corbyn's supporters, who face an even more ferocious witch hunt based on groundless accusations of anti-Semitism directed against anyone who dares criticise the state of Israel and its repression of the Palestinians.

Watson informed Labour MPs this week that all alleged cases of anti-Semitism in the party are now to be forwarded to his office for "logging and monitoring…"

This was after he accused Corbyn of ignoring 50 cases of anti-Semitism he had personally seen. Corbyn's response was to invite Charles Falconer, former Prime Minister Tony Blair's one-time flatmate, close confidante and a key adviser on 2003's illegal invasion of Iraq, to oversee all allegations of anti-Semitism. A source told the *Daily Mail* that he would be allowed to "see everything and talk to everybody."

Blair himself, who remains a Labour member despite being easily the most hated politician in Britain, hailed his protégés who have split to form the Independent Group. He denounced "the Labour Party's membership" that is "in thrall to a populism of the left."

Making sure to keep up the anti-Semitism slanders, he declared, "The running sore of the past two years has been the row over anti-semitism, with Jewish Labour MPs coming under sustained attack… The fightback is under way within the two main parties and outside of them, where last week several MPs defected to form a new political grouping."

Even this open support for a political grouping outside the Labour Party is accepted by Corbyn, with Blair escaping any form of censure.

These developments expose the lie assiduously promoted by every pseudo-left tendency that Corbyn would refashion Labour as a genuinely socialist party. The exact opposite is the case, with the Blairites asserting their hegemony unchallenged.

These developments are leading to a growing recognition in Labour's ranks that Corbyn is directly responsible for handing the political initiative to the Blairites and facilitating a dangerous regroupment to the right in official politics. This lays the foundation, based on the continued clarification of the working class by the Socialist Equality Party, for a break with Labour to the left among broad layers of workers and youth.

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