

UK: May's Brexit deal rejected by parliament again

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UK Prime Minister Theresa May lost another vote Tuesday evening on her proposed European Union (EU) Withdrawal Agreement, with MPs voting against it by 391 votes to 242—a majority of 149.

With just 16 days to go before the UK is scheduled to leave the EU, no deal has been agreed on trading relations after Brexit.

This was the second crushing defeat for May in what has been termed a “meaningful vote” by MPs. In January, her deal was thrown out by a majority of 230, with 432 MPs against in the biggest vote against a sitting prime minister in history.

Tuesday's vote was the fourth worst defeat ever suffered by a sitting government. Voting against May this time were 75 “hard-Brexit” Tory MPs and the 10 Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) MPs upon which the Tories depend for a majority.

May promised MPs after January's defeat she would seek to win concessions from the EU. A sizable section of the Tory party, up to a third of its MPs, organised in the European Research Group (ERG), are opposed to the section of May's agreement that includes a “backstop” for Northern Ireland to ensure tariff-free trade with the Republic of Ireland, an EU member state. The “backstop” keeps the UK aligned to EU customs rules, with a minimum of regulatory differences between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK.

In the intervening weeks, May secured no significant concessions from the EU. On Monday, hours ahead of the vote, she announced a breakthrough in last minute talks in Strasbourg with European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker. The pro-May, pro-soft Brexit (keeping access to the Single European Market) *Daily Mail* ran a front-page photo of EU Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier kissing May as proof of “a breakthrough Brexit deal... sealed with a kiss.”

However, the Withdrawal Agreement text remained unaltered. All that was agreed was a unilateral statement from the UK government which defined the backstop in tortured language as a “joint interpretative instrument”. The backstop was not intended on the part of the UK or EU to be permanent, it said. May also brought back a joint political statement asserting that the UK and EU would work to implement a new trading relationship by 2020, hopefully making the backstop unnecessary.

Prior to the vote, May's Attorney General Geoffrey Cox told parliament that, though May's assurances reduced “the risk that the United Kingdom could be indefinitely and involuntarily detained,” the legal risk of being tied to the EU after Brexit “remains unchanged.” If a post-Brexit trade agreement could not be reached between the UK and EU, the UK would have “no internationally lawful means” of leaving the backstop without EU agreement.

Lawyers employed by the Tories hard Brexit European Research Group (ERG) MPs declared that the new assurances, “do not materially change the position the UK would find itself in if it were to ratify the withdrawal agreement.” The DUP said it still rejected the deal as “sufficient progress has not been achieved at this time.”

Parliament's main chamber was only half full as MPs showed their contempt for the prime minister as she opened yesterday's debate. The verdict of the *Financial Times* was that May had “lost control of Brexit after her revamped exit deal was overwhelmingly rejected by 149 votes... leaving her authority in shreds.”

Following her defeat, May confirmed that further votes will be held on Brexit today and tomorrow. There is to be a non-whipped “free vote” this evening on

whether or not the UK should exit the EU in a “no deal” Brexit. May had to concede this, given that a large section of anti-EU Tories would have rebelled against her anyway. Leading Brexiteer Boris Johnson said in the debate that May’s “deal has now reached the end of the road.” No deal was the “the only safe route out” of the EU, he added.

MPs across all parties are expected to heavily reject a “no deal” Brexit. Therefore, another vote will be held on Thursday to allow MPs to seek an extension to the formal Article 50 exit process from the EU.

The dominant Remain wing of the ruling elite views such a delay as a step towards its overall goal of a second EU membership referendum aimed at reversing the 2016 Leave result. However, there is at present no majority in Parliament in favour of a second referendum, with many Labour MPs in seats that heavily supported Brexit likely to defy the party whip if party leader Jeremy Corbyn imposes one.

The eight pro-Remain Labour MPs who recently left the party to form the Independent Group in Parliament see their main function as preventing the Brexit crisis ending in a Labour election victory under Corbyn, and instead are working across the political divide to ensure that the UK stays in the EU.

Corbyn has done everything possible to police the political crisis facing British imperialism and to enable a solution in the “national interest”. May’s “deal is clearly dead” and “no-deal must be taken off the table,” he insisted after the vote. He called on the “house to come together” to prevent May from “threatening us all with the danger of no-deal, knowing full well the damage this will do to the British economy.”

Corbyn said Labour would again put forward proposals for a “negotiated customs union, access to the markets and the protection of rights.”

Making no mention of a second referendum, he timidly suggested that “maybe it’s time for a general election” so “the people can choose who their government should be.”

The stalemate in parliament gives expression to the extraordinarily weakened position of British imperialism on the global stage. Speaking to *Sky News*, pro-EU Tory Dominic Grieve warned that the crisis facing the British ruling class would only deepen for years to come. Opposing a no-deal Brexit he said, “What is going to happen is that the moment we are out

is the debate is going to resume in an equally debilitating form but with the UK really weakened in its international standing, no longer in the EU, a supplicant in terms of negotiation for the future [EU] relationship, and with a deeply divided parliament, and in my case the Conservatives deeply divided, but the Labour Party is equally divided, and unable to come to an agreement and we should avoid that.”

The failure of the EU to offer May anything significant represents a tightening of the thumbscrews by European powers. This was confirmed in a letter from Juncker to European Council President Donald Tusk, clarifying that if the UK was still in the EU in late May, it would be obliged to take part in the EU elections scheduled for May 23. Spokesmen for Tusk and Jean-Claude Juncker issued a statement declaring, “On the EU side we have done all that is possible to reach an agreement... Given the additional assurances provided by the EU in December, January and yesterday, it is difficult to see what more we can do. If there is a solution to the current impasse it can only be found in London.”

Brexit is a manifestation of the ongoing breakup of the EU under conditions of a growing trade war and escalating inter-imperialist conflicts. There is no outcome that can rescue British imperialism from its further descent into a global maelstrom.

The author recommends:

The Brexit crisis and the struggle for socialism
[29 January 2019]



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