

May offers Corbyn “national unity” Brexit agreement talks

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3 April 2019

Prime Minister Theresa May emerged from a fractious seven-hour cabinet meeting of her Conservative Party with an unprecedented offer to collaborate with Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn to secure an agreement on Brexit they could jointly recommend to parliament. If agreed, this would then be put to the European Union.

May faced the threat of 20 cabinet members supporting a no-confidence motion against her government if she agreed to a “soft Brexit,” i.e., maintaining access to the Single European Market and a customs union, combined with a letter signed by half the Parliamentary Tory Party urging a no-deal exit.

Yet she eventually secured Cabinet agreement for an appeal to Corbyn for “national unity to deliver the national interest.”

May said she would use any agreement reached to seek, at an emergency summit of the EU on Friday April 10, an extension to Article 50 enabling withdrawal from the EU beyond the current April 12 date. This was reportedly agreed by Cabinet only after Brexiteer Michael Gove shifted some colleagues from an initial 14-10 votes against. May stressed, however, that any delay should extend no longer than to May 22, so as to avoid the UK having to take part in elections to the European parliament. She said that “we need to be clear what such an extension is for: to ensure we leave in a timely and orderly way.”

Any negotiations with Corbyn would be about future relations with the EU post-Brexit, based on the precondition of accepting the Withdrawal Agreement she has negotiated with the EU’s 27 member states and which could not be “swiftly renegotiated.”

If no joint agreement that “both could put to the house” is possible, May would offer up another round of votes in parliament on various options agreed on

with Corbyn. This time, the votes, currently scheduled for next Monday, would not be merely “indicative.” The government would agree to accept as binding whatever proposed arrangement secured a majority and put it to the EU, providing that Labour did the same.

May risks alienating a large swathe of her party, given that any discussion would be on a softer Brexit than her own deal, which has already proven unacceptable to a core of 30 Tory “hard-Brexiteers,” who call themselves the “Spartans,” and the 10 Democratic Unionist Party MPs on which she has relied for a majority.

That she is prepared to take such a risk—of permanently splitting the Tories—confirms the gravity of the political crisis of rule facing British imperialism. May warned explicitly that the Brexit “impasse” and constant delays were “doing damage to our politics.”

That she would consider an arrangement with Corbyn as a way forward is a political indictment of the Labour leader’s role during months in which the Tory Party has been tearing itself apart.

Corbyn responded to May’s appeal within less than an hour, telling the Press Association he was “very happy” to “meet the prime minister.” He continued: “We recognise that she has made a move, I recognise my responsibility to represent the people that supported Labour in the last election and the people who didn’t support Labour but nevertheless want certainty and security for their own future, and that’s the basis on which we will meet her and we will have those discussions.”

Rather than seeking to mobilise the millions of workers who embraced his call for an end to the pro-business austerity regimes of Blair, Brown, Cameron and May, he has appeased Labour’s right wing, adopted its policies, and allowed his supporters to be

witch-hunted out of the party. He and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell have spent months pledging to uphold the “national interest” cited by May in talks with big business and the City of London.

Collusion with May is the logical outcome of this political betrayal. Last week, deputy Labour leader Tom Watson told the Blairite think tank Prospect that he was ready to take part in a government of national unity with pro-Remain Tories. Corbyn’s spokesman described such a national government as an “establishment stitch-up” designed “to deny a proper voice for the majority of voters in this country.” Days later he will be huddled in private discussions with the prime minister.

Asked whether he would now not move a vote of no-confidence in May, Corbyn replied that he would hold this “in reserve.”

There is no guarantee that this latest manoeuvre will succeed. May has forever lost the support of some hard-Brexit Tory MPs, who will be seeking ways to ensure their preferred option of a no-deal exit from the EU. Potential leadership challenger Boris Johnson said it was “very disappointing that the Cabinet has decided to entrust the final handling of Brexit to Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party,” and that he would never agree to a customs union with the EU.

Corbyn is in no better position to guarantee Labour’s unanimous agreement. Leading Blairite MP Yvette Cooper tabled a bill yesterday seeking to prevent any possibility of a no-deal exit and seek a much longer extension of Article 50. Cooper is working with former Tory minister Sir Oliver Letwin and a cross-party group of MPs and wants a one-line bill passed through the House of Commons today so it can be put to the House of Lords before the EU summit.

Fellow Blairites such as Hilary Benn are seeking to combine any alternative Brexit plan voted for on Monday with agreeing to a confirmatory “second referendum.” This would put any deal agreed up against the alternative of remaining a member of the EU.

If things go wrong, the EU has made clear that a no-deal Brexit is being planned for. French President Emmanuel Macron, meeting with Irish Premier Leo Varadkar, said only a “credible” plan supported by a parliamentary majority agreed by April 10 would prevent this. “The EU cannot forever be the hostage of

a political crisis in the UK,” he said.

However events now unfold, the claim that Corbyn’s election to the leadership of the Labour Party offered a way forward for the working class has been shredded. His role since taking office has been to suppress the class struggle and politically neuter the working class.

His monomaniacal focus over the past week on steering a path between the pro-Remain and pro-Brexit factions within his own party has been his apprenticeship for the much bigger job of preventing the rupture within ruling circles from destabilising British imperialism and provoking a revolutionary social and political offensive by the working class.

The only way forward for workers and young people is to break with Labour, build the Socialist Equality Party and take up the perspective of the class struggle based on a socialist programme. The answer to the endless imposition of austerity, militarism and authoritarian measures by all factions in the Brexit conflict is neither a new arrangement with the EU nor continued membership, but the forging of a unified movement of the British and European working class for the United Socialist States of Europe.



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