

Germany's Merkel tells UK government no Brexit concessions—Labour's Corbyn steps up calls for caretaker government

Robert Stevens
22 August 2019

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson met German chancellor Angela Merkel yesterday for talks over Brexit. Today he will meet French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris.

The trip, ahead of this weekend's G7 Summit, is the first that Johnson has made out of the country since taking over from Theresa May as prime minister last month, pledging that the UK would exit the European Union (EU) with or without a deal on October 31.

After demanding the EU rip up the Withdrawal Agreement it signed with May, Johnson this week wrote to European Council President Donald Tusk, insisting the EU abandon the "backstop" measures aimed at ensuring there is no post-Brexit hard border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic.

Johnson is seeking concessions based on convincing EU leaders that Britain crashing out also poses major problems for Europe. But there were no signs Wednesday that he would receive any positive response in Berlin or Paris.

The overarching concern of the European powers is preserving the unity of the EU and its 27 states, including Ireland. The daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, describing Johnson's letter to Tusk as a "targeted provocation," editorialised, "What's more important is that the member states continue to present a united front." This stance should be maintained, even if some countries, including Germany, were hit by a disorderly Brexit, it opined.

Central to the calculations of Germany and France is that Johnson may not last long in power as he confronts a UK parliament in its majority either opposed to a no-deal outcome or to Brexit in any form. Speaking to the BBC's *Newsnight* on Tuesday, Elmar Brok, a Christian Democratic Union (CDU) Member of the European Parliament from Germany and close ally of Merkel, said,

"There is a majority against a no deal, the House of Commons has shown that."

The EU's intransigence can only worsen the bitter political divisions in Britain over Brexit. Johnson knows this and told Sky News Tuesday, "As long as [EU leaders] think that there is a possibility that parliament will block Brexit, they are unlikely to be minded to make the concessions that we need."

At his press conference with Merkel, he pressed his demand for a removal of the Irish backstop. In response, the German chancellor said this was not an option, but that changes to the text of the Withdrawal Deal's accompanying political declaration text could provide a solution, at a later stage, to the backstop problem. Putting maximum pressure on Johnson, she added that "maybe we can find that solution in the next 30 days."

France's Macron fuelled tensions as he prepared for his talks with Johnson by insisting Wednesday evening that if there were a no-deal outcome "That would be Britain's doing, always."

No political outcome to this unprecedented crisis can be excluded, given what is at stake for Britain and the EU under conditions of mounting tensions between the major powers and trading blocs internationally.

The UK's escalating crisis saw renewed calls this week by Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn for dissident Tories and the other opposition parties to accept his proposals for a temporary "caretaker government" under his leadership.

Corbyn put this offer forward last week under pressure from the right-wing, Blairite wing of his party, which represents the main political forces of the pro-EU faction of the ruling elite.

In a speech Tuesday in the town of Corby, Corbyn reiterated that he was prepared to lead such a temporary

government in the interests of the bourgeoisie. As parliament returns from the summer recess, “in September the country is heading into a political and constitutional storm,” he said. “We will do everything necessary to stop a disastrous No Deal for which this government has no mandate.”

Labour “will work together with MPs from across parliament to pull our country back from the brink.” Were his no-confidence vote to succeed, “I would seek to form a time-limited caretaker administration to avert No Deal and call an immediate general election so the people can decide our country’s future.”

He then promised, “And if there is a general election this autumn, Labour will commit to holding a public vote, to give voters the final say with credible options for both sides including the option to remain.”

Corbyn tried to combine his call for unity with every other pro-capitalist party in parliament to avoid a no-deal outcome—in the interests of dominant sections of big business—with rhetoric promising that his policies would transform the lives of working people:

“A general election triggered by the Tory Brexit crisis will be a crossroads for our country. It will be a once-in-a-generation chance for a real change of direction potentially on the scale of 1945.”

This was a reference to Clement Attlee’s post-war Labour government which came to power in a landslide and inaugurated the welfare state, including a mass social housing programme and the National Health Service, and nationalised a swathe of essential industry.

This too was done in order to protect British capitalism and ensure social peace. But by comparison, Corbyn’s promise of social change is entirely bogus.

His appeal to Blairites, the Liberal Democrats—who spent 2010-15 in a pro-austerity government with the Conservatives—and pro-EU dissident Tories itself excludes any radical outcome. Everything Corbyn has done as opposition leader has shown that any Labour government he is part of would be, as his Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell has stated, “the stabilisers of capitalism.” Labour have no intention of waging any political struggle that would damage the interests of the corporations and super-rich.

Moreover, the measures outlined by Corbyn as the basis of an election manifesto are minor in the extreme. He has nothing more radical on offer than a £10 minimum wage, allowing a few trade union bureaucrats to sit in company boardrooms and a hot-air promise to “rebuild British industry with a Green Industrial Revolution.”

Corbyn’s actions since becoming Labour leader nearly four years ago—in suppressing, along with the trade unions, every struggle of the working class—have made possible the present Tory government led by Johnson and other fanatical Thatcherites. As Margaret Thatcher’s former chancellor Nigel Lawson has claimed, with Brexit, they now have “a chance to finish the Thatcher revolution.”

Corbyn’s speech was followed Wednesday evening with an announcement that he had invited leaders of all other political parties and senior cross-party backbenchers to talks on “all tactics available to prevent no-deal.”

Such is the degree to which he has adopted the demands of the Blairites that the *Guardian*, which has led the campaign against Corbyn for four years, is now filled with appeals for his critics to back his proposal. In an editorial aimed at Liberal Democrat leader Jo Swinson, and some Remain-supporting Tories who said they could not accept Corbyn leading a national unity government, the *Guardian* argued, “Jeremy Corbyn plays a part in many of these divides [over Brexit], but he also has to be part of any solution.” His offer to lead a caretaker government “should be taken seriously, not dismissed.”

Blairite columnist Polly Toynbee wrote that while his “equivocations on Brexit continue ... Corbyn may yet be the one to lead the escape from Brexit.” The ruling elite could be assured that “he is not the bogeyman of Tory propaganda; the red demon about to turn Britain into Venezuela ... Nothing in his broadly social-democratic plans has come close to the revolutionary explosion Johnson intends in 10 weeks’ time.”

Corbyn as the head of a caretaker regime would be “his finest hour as the moderate compromiser putting his country first when others refused” and “would send his chances of winning the election soaring up in the polls.”

For all Toynbee’s flannel about a Corbyn election victory, the aim of the Blairites is first to prevent a no-deal Brexit, followed by ousting Corbyn as party leader and then forming a pro-EU government of “national unity.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact