

The Brexit crisis and the struggle for the unity and political independence of the working class

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Britain's Supreme Court will begin its hearing Tuesday into whether Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson's proroguing of parliament is unlawful.

Opposition MPs have lined up to accuse Johnson of lying to the queen and demanded a recall of parliament. Speaker of the House of Commons John Bercow, who is supposed to be impartial, has said that "the limitations of the existing rule book" will not stop him from preventing Johnson breaking or avoiding a law prohibiting a no-deal Brexit on October 31. The measure was passed by pro-European Union MPs last week.

There have even been threats to imprison Johnson, who has made clear that he will defy the law, will not seek an extension of the Brexit deadline and will mount a legal challenge.

The authoritarian turn represented by Johnson's prorogation is the most advanced expression of the breakdown of the traditional mechanisms of parliamentary rule. Initially this has been met with a turn to the courts and appeals to the queen, but under conditions of fierce conflict within the ruling elite, things will inevitably go further.

Immense pressure is being placed on the working class to "choose a side" in this internecine conflict. All political life has been framed in terms of "pro" or "anti" Brexit. Each faction claims that theirs is the only route out of an impending economic catastrophe—either through ever closer alignment with the Trump administration's "America First" global offensive or within the protective shelter of a European trade bloc.

But the social catastrophe facing the British working class did not begin with the 2016 referendum on membership of the EU. Rather, Brexit was the result of

the deepening crisis of British and world capitalism, which escalated sharply following the banking collapse of 2008. While trillions were transferred to the financial elite, social spending and wages were slashed in a new "age of austerity."

Wage growth has been driven to historic lows, accompanied by the rise of zero-hours and temporary and part-time contracts. Social inequality has reached levels previously unseen in the post-World War II period, with Britain the most unequal country in Europe. The average FTSE100 CEO receives 145 times the pay of the average worker, up from 47 times in 1998. The wealthiest 10 percent have 290 times more in total assets than those at the bottom.

This is the essential political context of the Brexit crisis. Millions of workers are struggling to survive while the super-rich continue to gorge themselves. Democratic forms of rule cannot be maintained under the immense pressure of social antagonisms created by this situation.

Whatever their differences on EU membership, both factions within British imperialism are united on a continued offensive against the working class in order to remain "globally competitive." Both are clear that this entails stepped-up militarism, either as an unconditional ally of US imperialism or by balancing between the US and a rapidly rearming Europe.

Johnson's plan for Brexit is to transform the UK into "Singapore on the Thames," including huge tax cuts for the wealthy and the corporations and the setting up of "free ports" to enable the hyper-exploitation of large sections of the workforce. Former Conservative government chancellor Nigel Lawson summed it up as the drive to "finish the Thatcher revolution."

The government knows that its agenda will meet with social opposition. Its post-Brexit plan, Operation Yellowhammer, will mobilise 50,000 troops backed by 10,000 riot police, ready to be deployed in 24 hours to deal with “public disorder.” Legislation to handle national emergencies will, according to the *Sunday Times*, enable “curfews, bans on travel, confiscation of property and, most drastic, the deployment of the armed forces to quell rioting.”

But the Remain section of the ruling class is no less reactionary. On September 5, the *Financial Times*, the leading voice of the pro-EU elite, made clear its view that there will be no retreat from “the Thatcherite revolution of the 1980s,” which, “while often brutal, led to a necessary shift in the balance of power between labour and capital...” The Labour, Liberal Democrat, Scottish National and Tory MPs who make up the pro-Remain alliance carried out austerity before the Brexit crisis and will continue to do so if it is resolved in their favour, relying on the force of the state.

Their championing of “Parliamentary sovereignty” rests not on a popular mandate but on court officials. Meanwhile, Remain MPs are using the proroguing of parliament to engage in backroom discussions on the formation of an unelected government of national unity, headed by arch Thatcherite Ken Clarke who began the privatisation of the National Health Service.

Both of these strategies rely on preventing any political intervention by the working class in defence of its independent interests. The key role is played by Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who has spent four years suppressing the class struggle in collaboration with the trade union bureaucracy.

He is now at the centre of efforts to exclude the working class from the biggest crisis of the British ruling class since the 1930s, refusing to demand a general election and instead offering himself as the head of a “caretaker” government that would need the support of all the pro-Remain parties and Tory rebels.

The *Daily Mirror* has revealed that shadow ministers have drawn up plans for this government to sit for six months in order to hold a second referendum on EU membership, prior to any general election. Even this would be agreed only if Corbyn promised to do nothing that would impinge on the austerity agenda of big business. The impact would be to exacerbate the dangerous pro- and anti-Brexit divisions rather than

unite workers in a struggle against their class enemy.

In its 2016 and 2018 Congress resolutions, the Socialist Equality Party insisted on the historically determined bankruptcy of the Labour Party and the reactionary character of the EU referendum and its two alternative pro-capitalist factions. The SEP explained that the only way forward was through an independent struggle for socialism, which must be based on a socialist and internationalist response to the global crisis of capitalism.

This appraisal has been confirmed. Escalating attacks on the working class and the turn to dictatorial forms of rule are universal phenomena.

France spent two years under a state of emergency, whose draconian provisions have now been integrated into the law of the French state and used for the past year to brutalize Yellow Vest and migrant protesters.

Fascist deputies sit in the German parliament, collaborating with the grand coalition government to pursue militarist, xenophobic and anti-democratic policies while working hand-in-glove with the state security services.

President Donald Trump is seeking to build an extra-constitutional fascist movement in the US, while, with the support of the Democrats, constructing a vast network of camps, border walls, armed guards and militia in an assault on migrants that will ultimately be turned against the American-born working class as well.

Against this universal threat, a new political offensive of the working class must be organised. The objective basis for this has begun to develop in an upsurge of the class struggle around the world—from the US autoworkers and mass protests in Puerto Rico to the Yellow Vests in France, the mass demonstrations in Hong Kong and mass protests in Algeria, Sudan and other countries. If it is to succeed, this burgeoning movement must be given a political perspective. In Britain, this is the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party for the United Socialist States of Europe against the EU and all of its constituent governments.



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