

European Union declares little chance of Brexit deal by Thursday summit

Robert Stevens
15 October 2019

Despite talk of a possible Brexit deal emerging between British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative government and the European Union (EU), no deal had been reached after three days of "intensive" talks.

Talks began after Johnson and Irish Taoiseach Leo Varadkar met last Thursday and concluded there was a "pathway to a deal" that could overcome the border issues in Ireland post-Brexit. However, on Sunday, the EU said that the new proposals from Johnson on replacing the Irish "backstop"—to prevent the return of a post-Brexit hard border with Northern Ireland—were unsatisfactory.

The UK proposes a plan that would effectively mean setting up customs checks on both sides of the border and tracking the destination of all goods entering Northern Ireland, applying differential treatment depending on their end destination. This would leave Northern Ireland in the UK's customs zone, which is demanded by the Tory's hard-Brexit wing and its Democratic Unionist Party coalition partners.

The EU rejected the proposals as too "complex" overall, with EU chief negotiator Michel Barnier telling EU diplomats that there was "no precedent" for such a dual customs system to coexist in one territory.

In the latest talks the EU has secured concessions from London, with Barnier saying that Johnson had dropped a demand that the Northern Ireland Assembly have an up-front power of veto before any new arrangements for Northern Ireland come into force. However, UK negotiators were still demanding that Northern Ireland have the power to leave any agreed customs arrangements at a future date.

The stage is set for a showdown between the UK and EU leaders who meet for a two-day summit Thursday. If no deal is reached this week, Britain is set to exit the

EU on October 31 without one. The Summit concludes Friday—with Johnson faced with having to write a letter to the EU to request a delay to Brexit for three months if he has no deal, according to the Benn Act passed by cross-party MPs opposed to a no-deal Brexit last month.

The government has maintained that although Johnson "will obey the law"—and according to a legal submission revealed in a Scottish court last week Johnson said he will sign the letter—the UK will still leave on October 31 without a deal if necessary.

Johnson has called an emergency session of parliament Saturday—the first Saturday sitting since the Falklands/Malvinas war in 1982. It is understood he will ask parliament to back a deal if he succeeds in agreeing one, or to support a no-deal exit at the end of this month.

There is rising speculation that Johnson may be able to win support for a deal if he secures one, thanks to the possible backing of all Tory MPs and at least 10 pro-Brexit Labour MPs. But parliament will not support a no-deal Brexit.

Such are the political variables that the Saturday session may also be called off, as putting a deal before parliament to be debated for that date requires that it be tabled by Wednesday. Yesterday, Downing Street refused to confirm whether Parliament would sit Saturday if Johnson failed to reach an agreement with the EU, and the EU is already talking of the need for an extension.

A significant section of the Tory's hard-Brexit wing in the party's European Research Group (ERG) refused to back the agreement reached with the EU by Johnson's predecessor Theresa May, due to the inclusion of the Northern Ireland backstop. But there is a growing likelihood that about 30 of even the most

hard-line ERG rebels will endorse any deal Johnson secures with the EU.

ERG leader Jacob Rees-Mogg, after describing elements of May's deal similar to some proposals of Johnson's as "completely cretinous," told Sky News Sunday, "We'll have to find out in a day or two whether I'll have to eat my words or not, time will tell."

Yesterday, another ERG rebel, Lee Rowley, who voted against May's deal three times, said he would now back Johnson and "get Brexit done."

Several Labour MPs have indicated they are prepared to conditionally back a deal agreed by Johnson.

After the fall of Tory prime ministers David Cameron and May, Johnson was able to come to office at the head of the most right-wing government since the Second World War, thanks to Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's political suppression of working-class opposition over the last four years.

On Monday, even though Johnson heads a government with a minority of minus 45 and has yet to win a vote in parliament after four months, the queen read out his legislative plans for the upcoming year. So dysfunctional is his government that Johnson will be the first prime minister in 95 years unable to pass a Queen's Speech when it is voted on after several days of debate. But Downing Street said Monday that he will not resign if the speech is voted down by MPs.

The *Financial Times* noted, "since he does not have a House of Commons majority, the prime minister cannot expect to enact any of his proposals during this parliament." Therefore, what the queen read out was not a legislative agenda, but the Tory's manifesto for an upcoming general election that Corbyn has so far refused to bring about by moving a no-confidence motion.

The speech reiterated that the "Government's priority has always been to secure the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union on 31 October ... and to work towards a new partnership with the European Union, based on free trade and friendly cooperation."

This was just the preamble for the main content of a speech centred on vicious law-and-order and anti-immigrant measures. The speech included plans for the recruitment of an extra 20,000 police officers, with £750 million allocated for this to 2021. Changes to

extradition legislation will allow police to arrest those deemed criminals as soon as an Interpol Red Notice is issued, rather than having to apply for a warrant. The Tories will abolish automatic halfway release for the most serious offenders given fixed-term sentences. Adults serving four years or more will not be eligible for release until the two-thirds point.

A Foreign National Offenders Bill will be introduced that will increase "the maximum penalty for foreign national offenders who return to the UK in breach of a deportation order." The government's briefing on the bill further demonised "foreigners," warning, "Foreign nationals who abuse our hospitality by committing crimes in the UK should be in no doubt of our determination to deport them."

It went on to brag, "The Government has removed almost 50,000 foreign national offenders since the start of the financial year 2010-11." Just in the last financial year, "We removed 5,322 foreign national offenders ... of whom 3,633 were EEA [European Economic Area] foreign national offenders."

The Queens Speech reiterated that the government will end "the free movement of EU citizens under UK law" post-Brexit, with an Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill. It describes the "main benefits" of this as "paving the way for a new [Australian-style] points-based immigration system." Once in place, this will ensure "that we can set new rules on access to benefits and social security co-ordination that are in the national interest."

Billions in extra funding will be made available for British imperialism's war machine, with Johnson's introduction to the speech declaring, "As we leave the European Union, we will continue to play a leading role in global affairs, promoting our values and defending our interests. In doing so, we will honour our enduring NATO commitment to spend 2 percent of GDP on defence."



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact