

Labour leads effort to vote down Johnson's Brexit deal

Chris Marsden
19 October 2019

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson returned from Brussels with the terms agreed for Britain to leave the European Union (EU), portraying the choice before parliament today as his deal or no-deal.

He could do so with some authority, given the statement by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker ruling out any extension beyond the existing October 31 deadline.

This has caused dismay among pro-Remain MPs, who passed the Benn Act mandating Johnson to seek a three-month extension if Parliament voted against Johnson's deal or in the event no deal was the outcome.

Yesterday the press reported an intervention by German Chancellor Angela Merkel. She reportedly made clear to EU leaders meeting in private session Thursday that, whereas the EU was duty bound to publicly uphold its own agreement with Johnson, it must also make clear that a delay was possible.

Merkel told EU leaders shortly before the summit unanimously backed the deal struck with Johnson that a Brexit extension would be unavoidable if it was voted down at today's "Super Saturday" session of Parliament. After the carrot came the stick. Merkel said the EU now had a clearer idea of the kind of future relationship the UK was seeking. Under Johnson's predecessor Theresa May, "it wasn't clear what the future relationship should look like, whether there would be a membership in the single market or not." It was now clear that the UK would be a "third country" outside of the EU's economic system—reinforcing her earlier description of Britain as "a competitor."

However, yesterday at the summit Merkel was contradicted, first by Luxembourg Prime Minister Xavier Bettel, who said "there's no choice between Brexit and no Brexit, it's a choice between deal or no deal on the table" and then, with greater import, by French President Emmanuel Macron.

At a post-summit press conference, Macron declared, "So that we can turn to the future I believe that we shall stick to the deadline of October 31... I believe it is now time to put an end to these negotiations and work on the future relationship and put an end to what is currently ongoing."

The contradictory signals from Europe reflect concerns that the uncertainty over Brexit is destabilising the EU both economically and politically. It signals to right-wing Eurosceptic parties and governments that they can strike a hard-bargain with Germany and France over their budgets and other issues.

The summit was unable, for example, to make much progress on financial issues and delayed decisions until December, while there was bitter fighting over whether or not to offer accession talks to Albania and North Macedonia. Macron held out against, despite what one EU diplomat said was "an attempt by Germany and others to draft a new position", with France's position being described by Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte as "an historic error."

Continued membership of a deeply divided EU is especially problematic as, unless both Johnson and his main US ally are thrown out of office, London will be allied to a Trump administration that has a declared intention of breaking up the EU and which has already imposed punitive tariffs in an escalating trade war. Yesterday Trump imposed \$7.5 billion (€6.7bn) in tariffs on EU goods.

The position of the pro-Remain parties and MPs has never looked so bleak. They are left seeking to either delay or overturn the 2016 Brexit referendum without any clear message from the EU suggesting this would be welcomed.

This does not mean Johnson will get a majority for his deal. Conflicting reports all put the result on a knife edge—a likely single-figure margin determined by 57

undeclared MPs. Success or failure will be decided by whether any Tory Eurosceptics in the European Research Group and its 29 most hard-line “Spartans” join the Democratic Unionist Party in voting against the deal, how many of the 21-plus expelled pro-Remain Tories return to the fold—and in particular how many pro-Brexit Labour MPs are willing to vote with Johnson.

The vote is so narrow that the pro-Remain parties, including the Liberal Democrats, have decided not to attach a demand for a second referendum on Brexit to a vote for or against Johnson’s deal. The main prize they seek is the support of up to 15 sacked Tory MPs for a “People’s Vote” that would only be forthcoming if Johnson is defeated Saturday.

The media is awash with reports of which unhappy MP on either side of the Brexit divide will vote which way. But almost all agree that the vote is likely to be decided on the Labour benches. Over 10 and as many as 15 are expected to back the deal.

Labour MP John Mann said there would be “more Labour MPs” voting with the government “than British media have been speculating this morning.” Others named as likely to do so include Corbyn loyalist Ronnie Campbell, the suspended Kelvin Hopkins, alongside Blairites Caroline Flint, Jim Fitzpatrick, Kevin Barron, Rosie Cooper, Ian Austin, John Woodcock, Frank Field and Stephen Kinnock. Mann, Flint, Fitzpatrick, Barron and Cooper all voted for May’s deal.

Initially, Corbyn said that he would not whip against MPs voting with the government, preferring “the powers of persuasion.” But as in all things, his position will not stand.

Once again, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell is leading the efforts to make sure that the demands of the pro-Remain Blairites hold sway. Asked what would happen to Labour MPs who supported the deal, McDonnell said, “This is a three-line whip and the chief whip, in the normal way, will determine the consequences for anyone who doesn’t vote for it ... I’m not the chief whip thank goodness; I’ve got enough on my plate.”

McDonnell stressed, “No MP, as far as I’m concerned, who has the true interest of their constituents at heart can allow that [a vote for Johnson’s deal] to happen.”

Jon Lansman, the founder of the pro-Corbyn pressure group Momentum, was less opaque, insisting: “Labour MPs cannot and must not vote for it. If they do, the NEC [National Executive Committee] will have no choice but to replace them with a new, socialist Labour candidate at the next election.”

McDonnell is now the leading voice on Labour’s Brexit policy, not Corbyn. There has been widespread speculation of his leading a move against Corbyn, evidenced by his role in sidelining core advisers such as Karie Murphy and working openly with Blairite advocates of holding a second Brexit referendum prior to any general election. The depth of such a split is hard to determine, given that Corbyn will adapt himself to almost anything his opponents demand of him—with his apologists explaining how he had “no alternative” given his “isolation.”

Yesterday, McDonnell revealed to the *Evening Standard* that he would be “the star speaker at tomorrow’s ‘Final Say’ march through London.” The newspaper is edited by the former pro-Remain Conservative chancellor of the exchequer, George Osborne.

He will share the platform at the “People’s Vote” campaign event with Shadow Brexit Secretary, Keir Starmer, Shadow Foreign Secretary, Emily Thornberry, Blairite MPs Hilary Benn and Jess Phillips, Tories Lord Heseltine and Dominic Grieve, the Liberal Democrat leader Jo Swinson—who has described Corbyn as “unfit” to be prime minister—the Scottish National Party’s Ian Blackford, leader of the Independent Group for Change, Anna Soubry and Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan.

McDonnell declared for a second referendum, stating, “I’m proud to stand with hundreds of thousands of people in demanding that they, not wealthy, privileged and out-of-touch hard-right Tory MPs, have the final say on what is an even worse deal than Theresa May’s.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact