# Brexit crisis intensifies after Johnson government tears up agreement with Brussels

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Britain and the European Union (EU) failed to reach any agreement in emergency talks Thursday, as Boris Johnson's Conservative government pressed ahead with plans to rewrite and effectively nullify the Brexit treaty reached with Brussels less than a year ago.

On Wednesday, the Tories published their "Internal Market Bill," which the government states will "protect jobs and trade" in the UK at the conclusion of this year's transition towards leaving the EU. The legislation, to be put before parliament next week, will "enable the UK government to provide financial assistance to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland with new powers to spend taxpayers' money previously administered by the EU."

Deliberately ramping up divisions with the EU, it negates clauses in the "Northern Ireland protocol" enshrined in the Withdrawal Agreement Bill parliament passed last December following Johnson's victory in the General Election. This was only agreed after three years of tortured negotiations that resulted in the fall of Johnson's predecessor, Theresa May, seeking to prevent hard trade border on the island of Ireland. A compromise was reached by keeping Northern Ireland close to the EU customs union at the same time as being in the UK's customs territory.

Johnson's new bill would grant government ministers powers to intervene on matters relating to export declarations on goods shipped from Northern Ireland to Great Britain and to negate the application of EU state-aid rules in Northern Ireland.

Johnson's actions are in breach of international law and this is explicitly recognised in the text of the legislation. It boasts that the powers in the bill "have effect notwithstanding any relevant international or domestic law with which they may be incompatible or inconsistent." Therefore "Regulations … [of the bill] are not to be regarded as unlawful on the grounds of any incompatibility or inconsistency with relevant international or domestic law."

The flagrant breach of the treaty led to the resignation of Jonathan Jones, the head of the government's legal department, Tuesday. On Wednesday, ahead of the talks with the EU, Northern Ireland Secretary Brandon Lewis, when asked in Parliament about the legality of changing a binding international treaty, replied "Yes, this does break international law in a specific and limited way."

Tensions escalated further as the talks began, after the EU warned that if Johnson persisted with the legislation it might take the UK to court.

Two sets of talks Thursday failed to reach a consensus. Cabinet Office Minister and arch Brexiteer Michael Gove held emergency talks with European Commission's Maroš Šef?ovi?, while David Frost, the UK's chief negotiator, met his EU counterpart Michel Barnier.

Gove stated that Sefcovic "requested that the UK withdraw its Internal Market legislation. I explained… that we could not and would not do that and instead I stressed the vital importance of reaching agreement through the joint committee on these important questions."

The EU has given the UK three weeks to withdraw the legislation. The European Commission responded in its statement, "Violating the terms of the Withdrawal Agreement would break international law, undermine trust and put at risk the ongoing future relationship negotiations."

The Tory government claims the measures are required to protect the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, which ended three decades of civil conflict in Northern Ireland. The EU did not "accept the argument" that the UK Internal Market Bill was needed to protect the Good Friday Agreement. "In fact, it is of the view that it does the opposite," the EC statement stressed.

Sefcovic, said the EC "reminded the UK government that the withdrawal agreement contains a number of mechanisms and legal remedies to address violations of

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the legal obligations contained in the text—which the European Union will not be shy in using."

The talks between Frost and Barnier on trade—after seven previous rounds that have gone nowhere—ended with officials on both sides saying that next to no progress had been made.

Pressure is mounting to secure an agreement, with pro-Remain forces within Britain's political establishment and even some Tories who support Brexit warning of the danger of Johnson's "brinksmanship."

Three former prime ministers, Tories Sir John Major and Theresa May and Labour's Gordon Brown, issued warnings on the danger of the UK being unable to strike future deals and being ostracised as a nation that refuses to abide by international treaties. Brown declared Friday that to break the treaty would be a "a huge act of self-harm" and would see Britain plunged into "battle with Europe for years ahead."

The *Financial Times* editorialised Wednesday in a piece headlined, "The UK's reputation for rule of law is in jeopardy," that "Tories who have voiced private concern may have to side with the opposition [in Parliament] to strike out the key passage in the legislation."

Such statements hailing the UK's supposed adherence to the rule of international law excise from history the filthy record of British imperialism, including the illegal invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. But they attest to the enormous concerns in ruling circles over the mounting tensions being exacerbated by Brexit that threaten Britain's global position.

Johnson has a majority of 80 and a staunchly pro-Brexit base of MPs, and his position is not imperilled by a threatened rebellion over the legislation among his backbenchers next week. It is understood that only up to 30 backbench Tories may be ready to vote against the government. An amendment to the Bill has been tabled by Tory former minister Sir Bob Neill, backed by May's former deputy prime minister Damian Green. It aims to put a brake on provisions overriding the withdrawal agreement by requiring a separate Commons vote to approve the date on which they would take effect.

However, given the mounting crisis developing over Brexit under conditions where his government is widely despised due to its overseeing the preventable deaths of tens of thousands during the COVID-19 pandemic, Johnson made a plea Friday evening for Tory MPs to back him.

If a no-deal Brexit is the outcome, this will inflame social and political tensions within Britain, as food and medicine shortages would follow as well as manufacturing production being hit.

But were the Johnson government to cobble together a compromise deal with the EU, this would not bring an end to the crisis wracking the British and European bourgeoise.

The central issue for the working class is that Brexit epitomises the malignant growth of inter-imperialist antagonisms that are plunging the world into a brutal trade war and exacerbating the threat of military conflict.

The different factions of the ruling elite disagree violently over whether Britain is best placed within this global conflict outside the EU trade bloc and acting as a centre for global speculation and a deregulated cheap labour platform, in a diplomatic and military alliance with the US, or to maintain an alliance that accounts for over 40 percent of UK trade.

These divisions will persist. But in or out of the EU, and with or without a trade deal between the UK and EU, the working class faces a ferocious attack on its jobs, wages and living standards. As the Socialist Equality Party has explained, the Brexit and pro-EU wings of the Tory party are insistent that whatever their disagreements, nothing can stand in the way of completing the "Thatcher Revolution" through an intensified onslaught against the working class: one that will be waged based on the dire social and economic conditions already created by the pandemic.

Workers have no dog in the fight among the warring factions of the British ruling elite or with the capitalist politicians of the EU. What is posed is the necessity for the working class to intervene on its own independent programme, based on the perspective of the United Socialist States of Europe.

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