

Fraught talks between Britain and European Union agree Sunday deadline for Brexit deal

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After the failure of negotiations this week over the UK's post-Brexit trading relationship with the European Union (EU), a meeting between Prime Minister Boris Johnson and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen was unable to break the deadlock.

Johnson travelled to Brussels Wednesday for a dinner meeting with von der Leyen at the EU headquarters, but flew back to London that same evening after only being able to agree a new deadline to reach a deal by Sunday evening. No joint statement was issued following the summit.

In coded language to describe the fraught meeting, von der Leyen spoke of “a lively and interesting discussion” with Johnson. “We are willing to grant access to the single market to our British friends—it is the largest single market in the world. But the conditions have to be fair... for our workers and for our companies, and this fine balance of fairness has not been achieved so far.”

A Downing Street statement said that “very large gaps remain between the two sides and it is still unclear whether these can be bridged”.

Talks got underway again Thursday in Brussels between the two sides.

The main areas of disagreement are over trade issues and ensuring a level playing field (LPF). Brussels is demanding that the UK accept an “evolution mechanism”, or “ratchet clause”, which would ensure that if the EU raised its labour and social standards and environmental standards the UK would have to reciprocate and not be able to retain a competitive edge.

The EU also insists on enforceable restrictions on state aid to make sure the UK cannot hand out subsidies to firms giving them an unfair advantage. This is required by Brussels as any trade deal is premised on

Britain having tariff-free access to the bloc's single market—with 450 million consumers and 22.5 million small and medium-sized enterprises.

Another EU demand resisted by London is that it be legally enforced that Brussels can take rapid unilateral measures to protect its market—including imposing tariffs on UK goods—if Britain is deemed not to be adhering regulatory commitments.

Other areas of disagreement including fishing quotas remain unresolved.

As the resumed talks began the EU upped the ante, and rolled out a set of emergency plans it said were required, in order in the event of a no-deal Brexit, to ensure that airlines could continue to fly normal routes between the EU and UK and hauliers could continue to cross the English Channel after Britain leaves the single market on January 1.

These measures would be reliant on the Johnson government accepting and maintaining regulations equivalent to EU law. Another proposal outlined by Brussels as a contingency for no deal being reached is a regulation allowing EU and UK fishing vessels a one year grace period accessing each other's waters. EU boats catch fish worth €650 million annually in UK waters.

Von der Leyen said as the EU published its response, “Our responsibility is to be prepared for all eventualities, including not having a deal in place.”

Downing Street has not accepted the EU contingency plans at this stage, with Johnson's spokesman saying it would look very closely at the details” and that negotiators were “continuing to work to see if the two sides could bridge the remaining gaps”. On the fishing proposals, Downing Street reiterated the position Johnson outlined before his meeting with von der Leyen that “once we leave the end of the transition

period, we will take back control of our waters. We would never accept arrangements and access to UK fishing waters which are incompatible with our status as an independent coastal state.”

Even before the EU published its contingency plans London had already begun retaliating, with the Department for Transport pushing through an emergency relaxation of rules around EU lorry drivers’ working hours, “involved in the transport of: Food and other essential goods from ports within Great Britain”, in order to keep freight moving from today until December 30. The measures include allowing the increase of the fortnightly driving limit from 90 hours to 99 hours. This is being put in place as the government’s “Yellowhammer” Brexit planning documents predict chaos and miles of queues at UK ports, threatening supplies of food and medical supplies.

Johnson’s hard-line negotiating stance is in part dictated by the fact that he heads a ferociously pro-Brexit party. Any further regulation being proposed by Brussels in the event of a no deal outcome is anathema to MPs who act on behalf of the most rapacious sections of the British ruling elite, committed to transforming the UK into an unregulated “Singapore-on-Thames”. They see breaking from what remains of the EU regulatory framework and any worker and environmental protections as critical to UK firms being globally competitive.

Dozens of Conservative MPs are members of the Eurosceptic European Research Group (ERG). Speaking to the *Daily Mail* Thursday, David Jones of the ERG said, “The EU’s proposals confirm that they have still not come to terms with the fact that we are no longer a member state. They are proposing arrangements that benefit them more than they do us, but are still demanding that we adhere to their level playing field. They are demanding our fish while offering nothing of substance in return. This is outrageous conduct—almost blackmail—and our government should have nothing to do with it.”

Johnson’s government has already signed several free trade deals with other countries. Yesterday it completed a deal with Singapore worth £17.6 billion, the second largest it has signed in the Asia-Pacific region after the agreement struck with Japan in October. It is the UK’s first deal with a member of the

Association of Southeast Asian Nations, a 10-country bloc with a 650 million population.

The UK formally left the EU in January and entered into a transition period supposedly to conclude with a trade deal coming into operation after December 31. Many UK observers believe that talks will go to the wire. Columnist James Forsyth wrote in the right-wing *Spectator* yesterday, “The talks are currently in a state of suspended animation. After nine months, the sticking points are the same three issues: the so-called level playing field, fish and governance... The two sides now admit that the only real deadline is the end of the transition period on 31 December.”

As any agreed deal must be ratified by the European Parliament and Westminster, both sides have pencilled in emergency sessions for the end of December. The pro-Brexit *Sun* reported Thursday, “Government officials have drawn up contingency timetables in case they need to pass the necessary legislation at breakneck speed over the Christmas week. They even checked when Parliament last sat on Christmas Day as part of their contingency planning—and found it would be the first time since 1656.” It added, “MPs could even ratify the deal on New Year’s Eve—a day before any new trade deal would take effect.”

Johnson can count on the support of the Labour Party in passing any deal reached with Brussels. On Wednesday Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, who was a leader of the Remain in the EU faction of the ruling elite in the 2016 Brexit referendum stated, “The prime minister asked me how I’ll vote on a deal that he hasn’t even secured. I’ll say this: if there is a deal, then my party will vote in the national interest—not on party lines, as he is doing.”

The Times reported that “The Labour leader’s spokesman later clarified that no-deal was ‘not in the national interest’”.



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