

Unionists aim to break Northern Ireland protocol of Brexit agreement

Steve James
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Northern Ireland's right-wing unionist parties and hardline Tory Brexiteers, with the support of loyalist paramilitary groups, are intent on breaking the Northern Ireland Protocol component of Britain's European Union (EU) withdrawal agreement.

The protocol is a ramshackle and fragile compromise devised to avoid any return to a "hard border" between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It became necessary because Northern Ireland, which remains part of the UK, has left the EU. But neither the UK, the EU or the Irish government want to be seen to reimpose politically and economically ruinous border checks on the island of Ireland.

A "hard border" risks fatally undermining the 1998 Good Friday, or Belfast, Agreement, which brought Northern Ireland's decades-long "Troubles" to an end. Over the years since the agreement established the power-sharing arrangement between the pro-British Unionist and Irish Republican parties, led by Sinn Féin, in the Northern Ireland Assembly in Stormont, the border has been transformed. The heavily militarised frontier has become near invisible, crossed thousands of times each day without impediment, reflecting the high level of integration of the economy and working population across the island.

The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the largest unionist party, under leader and First Minister Arlene Foster, supported and campaigned for a hard Brexit and propped up Theresa May's Conservative government in return for cash and concessions. Boris Johnson attended the DUP conference of 2018, denouncing May's "backstop" compromise with the EU, which Johnson said turned Northern Ireland into a "semi-colony of the EU."

After the 2019 UK general election returned Johnson as prime minister with an increased majority, he had no need to rely on the DUP, who were unceremoniously dumped. In October 2019, Johnson made an agreement with Irish Taoiseach Leo Varadkar behind the back of his unionist allies, to allow the minimal Brexit deal, including the protocol, a variant on May's backstop, to be struck.

The protocol displaces external EU customs checks on trade from the North/South border into the Irish Sea, with ports in Northern Ireland and the UK functioning as the EU's external trade boundary. Johnson and Varadkar ignored the Northern Ireland Assembly, only allowing Stormont the opportunity to reverse the protocol after four years. Even this would be dependent on a simple majority, rather than the cross-community vote that would have guaranteed a DUP veto. Unionists lost their absolute

majority in the assembly in 2017.

Immediately on introduction, January 1 this year, the new arrangements required complex, time-consuming and expensive checks on commerce, particularly goods vehicles, between Britain and Northern Ireland. Moreover, the checks are now the norm, rather than merely teething troubles, and impact many aspects of the Northern economy, threatening thousands of businesses and jobs.

Late January, the vaccine wars between the UK and EU prompted by the coronavirus pandemic, centred on a conflict over which contracts took precedence, saw Brussels invoke the protocol's Article 16 allowing either party to bar trade in the face of "serious economic, societal or environmental difficulties that are liable to persist." The EU briefly blocked vaccine exports from the continent to Northern Ireland, enraging the British and Irish governments and underscoring Northern Ireland's vulnerability under the new arrangements.

The unionist parties were apoplectic. Ian Paisley Jr., DUP member of parliament for North Antrim, wailed at British government minister Michael Gove in Westminster, "What did we do, to members of the benches over there, to be screwed over by this protocol?"

In a letter, late last month, to Johnson, leaders of the DUP, the pro-Remain (in the EU) Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), and the Traditional Unionist Voice warned, "Our unified and unalterable position is that the protocol is incapable of being reformed and must be repudiated and superseded by arrangements which fully respect Northern Ireland's position as a constituent and integral part of the United Kingdom."

The unionists warned Johnson that his government would face a legal challenge unless he took "immediate action to settle a new arrangement ... consistent with the Act of Union 1800, the Northern Ireland Act of 1998 and the Belfast Agreement".

That the 1800 Act of Union, still in force in Northern Ireland, should be invoked reveals the extent to which the contradictions between the modern world economy and the outmoded nation-state system are tearing at the foundations of even the most longstanding political arrangements.

The Act of Union was the British government's response to the 1798 United Irishmen rebellion, inspired by the American and French revolutions, led by Wolfe Tone. The rebellion, seeking civil, political, and religious liberty and an end to the British domination of Ireland, suffered from poor organisation and the

absence of promised support from revolutionary France. It was brutally put down by British forces.

The Act of Union abolished Ireland's existing parliament and cemented the rule of the wealthy Protestant Ascendancy, of which today's vastly weakened unionists are the heirs. It created the political framework for Ireland to be forcibly economically retarded over the next century, its nascent industry destroyed and the country reduced to colonial status as a source of agriculture, cheap labour, and cannon fodder for British imperialism.

That the act is still in force today points to the character of the six-county Ulster statelet that emerged from Ireland's partition by Britain in 1921, after the 1916 Easter Rising and the Anglo-Irish war. Ulster, based on the six most Protestant dominated counties, was founded to maintain British control of the island and defend the interests of the Ulster capitalist class, whose then-powerful industry was closely tied to Britain. British imperialism went to war again in 1969, fighting a decades-long "dirty war" against Irish republicans, on behalf of the unionist bourgeoisie, before arriving at the power-sharing Belfast Agreement, designed to create sufficient stability and cross-border connections to attract investment.

Both acts, bookending nearly two centuries of British domination of Ireland, are unraveling, a fact that is dawning belatedly on the unionists.

Other actions to follow include steps to "actively oppose at every opportunity" measures "which undermine Northern Ireland's place in the UK internal market." A petition demanding the removal of "barriers to unfettered trade within the United Kingdom" drew 140,000 signatures and resulted in a Westminster debate. The letter warned that the DUP would withdraw from bodies such as the North-South Ministerial Council, the main body organising cross-border co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

The unionists have been supported by the European Research Group of 50 hardline Tory Brexiteer MPs in Westminster. ERG members all voted for Johnson's withdrawal agreement, but now see the EU decision to invoke Article 16 as a "unique political opportunity." The ERG are calling for Johnson to trigger Article 16 and prepare legislation to "ensure free trade within the UK."

An article in the *Irish Times* by former UUP First Minister, and one of the Belfast Agreement's architects, David Trimble, stressed that, rather than protect the Belfast Agreement, the protocol, with its petty rules "enforced by European Union inspectors who oversee the work of UK officials at Northern Ireland ports" was pulling it apart. Trimble threatened that if the "genuine grievances and resentments caused by the protocol are not addressed politically, then there is real potential for those who have engaged in past violence to take action again into their own hands."

Trimble's euphemism to "past violence" was a reference to the state-infiltrated loyalist paramilitary groups, responsible for hundreds of murders during the "Troubles," which retain a controlling influence in some of the most oppressed working-class Protestant areas. According to the most recent Independent Reporting Commission, set up in 2017, paramilitarism on both sides of Northern Ireland's political and religious divide retains thousands of signed-up members, although only a relatively small

proportion of those were active.

The Loyalist Communities Council (LCC), a legal face for the banned Ulster Volunteer Force, the Ulster Defence Association, and the Red Hand Commandos, has told the Johnson government that its affiliates were temporarily withdrawing their backing for the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in opposition to the Northern Ireland Protocol.

First Minister Foster and her deputy Nigel Dodds played the same card as Trimble. The pair met with the Loyalist Communities Council before its announcement, with Foster describing the fascistic gangs, mostly involved in drug sales and thuggery against each other and working class youth, as part of the "loyalist and unionist community."

Last week, the DUP's Brexit spokesperson, Sammy Wilson, Westminster MP for East Antrim, threatened "guerrilla warfare" against the protocol, "until the big battle opportunity comes." Northern Ireland agriculture minister, the DUP's Gordon Lyons, ordered a halt to the construction of permanent customs-checking posts in Northern Ireland's ports, stopped recruiting customs staff and refused to levy charges on traders bringing goods into Northern Ireland.

The Irish bourgeois parties of Sinn Féin, the Social Democratic and Labour Party, and the Irish government have promoted the business opportunities, exploiting easy access to the EU and Britain, that the Northern Ireland Protocol offers potential investors. Neither side proposes anything to the working class other than vicious austerity and the consequence of the pandemic, equally badly handled North and South.

Loyalism and unionism are much reduced forces today. An entire generation has grown up in Northern Ireland used to free movement across the island, and across Europe. Ireland itself is riven with class divisions and with a large and cosmopolitan working population. Nevertheless, sectarian conflicts threaten to re-emerge until the working class, seeking the dismantling of British imperialism's remaining apparatus in the North and the abolition of capitalist rule across the island, as part of the struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe, comes forward to prevent it.



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