

Johnson government pushes UK to the brink of trade war with Europe over Northern Ireland Protocol

Chris Marsden
18 May 2022

Foreign Secretary Liz Truss told parliament yesterday that the UK government would soon introduce a law unilaterally changing the Northern Ireland Protocol governing post-Brexit trade with the European Union (EU).

Responding, the EU warned, “Should the UK decide to move ahead with a bill disapplying constitutive elements of the Protocol as announced today by the UK government, the EU will need to respond with all measures at its disposal.”

Truss’s move was anticipated by Prime Minister Boris Johnson during a Monday visit to Northern Ireland and in an accompanying statement posted in the *Belfast Telegraph*. Johnson, who negotiated the protocol, centred his justification for abandoning it on the claim that he was acting to defend the 1998 Northern Ireland agreement!

The “Good Friday Agreement” brought an end to 30 years of armed conflict between the Irish Republican Army and its political arm Sinn Féin, and the British state forces and their Unionist and loyalist political allies. But it did so by enshrining sectarian divisions, making all aspects of political life conditional on the joint agreement of self-designated representatives of the republican/Catholic and unionist/Protestant communities. What Johnson was in fact stressing is that he was fully behind the Democratic Unionist Party’s (DUP) demand for the junking of the Northern Ireland Protocol.

The May 5 Assembly elections saw Sinn Féin top the poll, with 29 percent of first preference votes, consolidating its hold in Catholic/nationalist areas. The DUP’s vote collapsed in favour of the more hardline Traditional Unionist Voice. But there was also a significant increase in support for the liberal and non “community” aligned Alliance Party. Faced with Sinn Féin’s right to designate the post of First Minister, and a pro-EU party majority in the Assembly, the DUP collapsed it by refusing to nominate a deputy First Minister.

The protocol is designed to avoid the return of a “hard border” between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland post Brexit. But though it displaces external EU

customs checks on trade from the North/South border to ports in Northern Ireland and the UK, it has led to significant problems and costs. Checks on goods from the UK at Northern Irish ports now represent a staggering 20 percent of all checks at the EU’s borders.

Johnson is using the DUP’s stance as a weapon against the EU, insisting that the threat to the Good Friday Agreement has emerged because “One part of the political community in Northern Ireland feels like its aspirations and identity are threatened by the working of the Protocol.” He pledged that “this Government is not neutral on the Union”, adding that he was “heartened to hear that Sir Keir Starmer made clear in a recent interview here that the Labour Party under his leadership would campaign for the Union, should there ever be a border poll.” The Good Friday Agreement agrees provision for a referendum on Irish unification in the event of a major demographic and political shift in the northern six counties.

In parliament, Truss said the government’s intention was to introduce legislation within a matter of weeks to allow goods from Great Britain going into Northern Ireland but not headed onward for Ireland and the EU to go through a “green channel” exempt from customs checks. It would also allow the government to set tax policy for the whole of the UK and provide the option for companies to adopt either EU or UK standards. Such measures would pitch Northern Ireland more firmly into the Brexit project of turning the UK into a low tax, deregulated strategic competitor to the EU.

This is a particular challenge to the Republic of Ireland, which operates as an investment platform for global corporations attracted by its 12.5 percent corporation tax and absence of economic regulations on vast transfers of capital overseas. But for some in the Conservative Party, this is not enough. Writing on *Conservative Home*, arch Brexiteer Andrea Leadsom urged the government to respond to the “existential threat” of the protocol risking “the break-up of the UK” by establishing a “freeport across the whole of

Northern Ireland.”

The response of Sinn Féin is to advance itself as an ally of the European imperialist powers in the conflict with Britain, and as a guarantor of US imperialism’s economic dominance of the Republic and the access of its corporations to the European market. Immediately after the elections, the party’s newspaper *An Phoblacht* said the Good Friday Agreement was now “directly threatened” by the DUP and the Tory government and appealed for the “EU, and the US administration” to “hold firm” and for “the Irish government to step firmly up to the mark”.

Prior to Johnson’s visit, the party’s Stormont leader Michelle O’Neill met with Irish Taoiseach Micheál Martin in Dublin to declare that the protocol “is here to stay.”

The working class north and south of the border, Catholic and Protestant, faces an increasingly desperate situation as the cost of living becomes intolerable. The hike on fuel, food and housing costs is what most immediately concerns workers and their families. Northern Ireland has the lowest median weekly household income in the UK (£439 a week) after housing costs, which have historically been low but are now rising dramatically. In February, the National Institute of Economic and Social Research warned that Northern Ireland could face a surge in extreme poverty of more than 67 percent compared with a UK average of 30 percent.

For Johnson to claim that the actions of his party are motivated by concerns over the cost of living is a sick joke. But supporting the EU’s own trade war agenda is just another road to hell. It would only line workers up once again behind opposed groups of their own exploiters.

Sinn Féin’s near quarter century of power sharing has done nothing to fundamentally redress the social oppression facing Catholic workers—with its West Belfast heartlands suffering the greatest areas of housing need and the highest levels of intergenerational unemployment. Instead, it has worked with the unionists in imposing austerity on both Protestant and Catholic workers in the interests of big business.

Last year, when Sinn Féin topped the poll in the Republic of Ireland general election, the party’s finance spokesperson Pearse Doherty said of the south’s 12.5 percent corporate tax rate, “We are a party that believes there needs to be a competitive edge in relation to taxation in this State and that needs to be continued.” He said of the major corporations, “They know that Sinn Féin isn’t going to go after them.”

Support for any imperialist power or their political proxies is made more dangerous still by the fact that all sides in this conflict are participants in an escalating proxy war by the NATO powers against Russia in Ukraine.

Even amid her rant against the EU over Brexit, Leadsom began by asserting that “Vladimir Putin’s violent and illegal

attack on Ukraine has brought out the best in Europe. From defensive military support to humanitarian aid and the generosity of European citizens, Putin has done more to strengthen NATO’s unity and Europe’s friendship than at any time since the Second World War.”

During his Belfast visit, Johnson visited a Thales UK plant that manufactures the Starstreak high-velocity anti-air missiles and NLAW anti-tank weapons sent by the UK to Ukraine in their thousands, where ITV reported that he “joked ‘watch out everybody’ as he peered through the aiming unit of a lightweight multiple launcher missile system.”

Sinn Féin fully backs this war. It has purged its website of old articles opposing anti-Russia rhetoric, declaring them to be “out of date”, while party President Mary Lou McDonald declares of Ukraine, “Ireland understands the impact of occupation and imperialist aggression...”

The sharp escalation of inter-imperialist antagonisms between the UK and European powers that gave rise to Brexit has found its most grotesque expression in Ireland, where the border between the Republic and the North has no function other than to protect the remaining outpost of Britain’s historic subjugation of Ireland.

But putting an end to Britain’s rule over the north means overcoming the carefully nurtured divisions between Catholic and Protestant workers and adopting a unifying socialist alternative to every imperialist power and their local representatives. The task at hand is not to “defend the protocol” regulating cross border trade, but to end all national divisions throughout Europe and internationally. This means mobilising the working class in a political struggle for a socialist Ireland, a socialist Britain and the United Socialist States of Europe.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)