

US aligns with European Union against the UK on Northern Ireland Protocol

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23 May 2022

The Biden administration has come out strongly against Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government in the deepening row between the UK and European Union over the Northern Ireland Protocol.

The protocol governs post-Brexit trade. It was ostensibly designed to prevent the return of a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, a European Union (EU) member state. However, it did so by effectively creating an EU border in the Irish Sea, which is anathema to the north's unionist parties and, especially on account of its substantial bureaucratic obstacles to trade, to the majority of the UK Conservative Party.

The Irish nationalist Sinn Féin for the first time secured the most votes of any party in the May 5 Northern Ireland Assembly elections, while the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) suffered heavy losses. The DUP responded by continuing to block the power sharing executive from meeting, by refusing to support the election of a new speaker. The Johnson government has used this to threaten a unilateral rewriting of the protocol, including by targeting the role of the European Court of Justice in overseeing disputes and restoring Westminster's power to decide VAT sales tax rates. Last week Foreign Secretary Liz Truss proposed a bill to these ends, without releasing its contents, that could be adopted as early as next month.

This has raised genuine fears among many workers that the constitutional arrangements that ended 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland, embodied in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, could unravel—bringing a return to sectarian conflict led above all by the hardline Unionists.

For British imperialism, the Tory/Unionist response not only threatens trade war with the EU but open conflict with the Biden administration. The US, which presided over the 1998 agreements, holds a dominant position in the Republic's economy which it uses as a staging ground for accessing the Single European Market and as a tax

shelter for its major corporations. But the threat to US operations in Europe is now meeting up with concern that the UK is endangering the coalition Washington has assembled to pursue military hostilities against Russia.

A delegation of US politicians this weekend began a tour of Europe and the UK, which continued Monday in Dublin and now moves on to Belfast. It is led by Richard E. Neal, the Democrat chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee. On Friday Congressman Brendan Boyle announced that a statement had been agreed with members of the European Parliament declaring that “renegotiating the protocol is not an option.” Speaking from west County Kerry in Ireland Sunday, Neal told RTÉ, “President Biden, Speaker Pelosi and I have made our position known that nothing can jeopardise the Good Friday Agreement.”

He referred to Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's tweets Thursday repeating the warning by Biden that there would be no chance of Congress supporting a US/UK free trade pact if the Good Friday Agreement is undermined. She wrote, “As I have stated in my conversations with the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and Members of the House of Commons, if the United Kingdom chooses to undermine the Good Friday Accords, the Congress cannot and will not support a bilateral free trade agreement with the United Kingdom.”

In some ways more damaging still for Johnson, who has positioned himself as the number-one military ally of the US, Derek Chollet, the senior adviser to Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, told the BBC that “a big fight between the UK and the EU” was “the last thing” Washington wanted. Speaking after meetings in Downing Street Friday, he said Russian President Vladimir Putin would “use any opportunity he can to show that our alliance is fraying... We want to see this issue resolved and we want to see the temperature lowered and no unilateral acts.”

It is a measure of the crisis gripping the Johnson

government that the threats from the US met with an overtly hostile response. After what were described as “frank” talks with the US delegation at her country retreat of Chevening on Saturday, Truss tweeted that the UK is “defending the Good Friday Agreement” and warned that she would not let the “situation drag on.”

Former Brexit minister Lord Frost, who negotiated the protocol, told BBC Radio 4 that Pelosi’s intervention was “ignorant” because “It is the protocol itself that’s undermining [the Good Friday Agreement] and people who can’t see that really shouldn’t be commenting on the situation in Northern Ireland.”

In the *Daily Telegraph*, Conor Burns, a Northern Ireland minister and Johnson’s special Brexit envoy to the US, said, “We seek an ambitious [free trade agreement] with the US. But there can be no connection between that and doing the right thing for Northern Ireland. None.”

One reason for the UK’s intransigent pose is that many Tories have already given up on any prospect of a US trade deal, despite this being placed at the centre of the argument for a post-Brexit economic policy that would compensate for lost European trade. The *New York Times* commented that “it is no longer clear how much leverage” Pelosi’s threat has in the UK. “The White House has signalled that striking a deal with Britain is not high on its list of priorities, anyway.”

Such is the international isolation and emphasised weakness of British imperialism post-Brexit that the Tories are extraordinarily reliant on the Unionists, with all the dangers this entails. On Friday, DUP leader Sir Jeffrey Donaldson warned, “You cannot have power-sharing without consensus in Northern Ireland”, describing Pelosi’s “contributions” as “entirely unhelpful” and repeating “a mantra that frankly is hopelessly out of date.” DUP Economy Minister Gordon Lyons described Neal as a supporter of Irish unification who had worked closely with Friends of Sinn Féin. Traditional Unionist Voice party representative Stephen Cooper denounced “the interference of foreign figures” and said that the Stormont parties should treat the “belligerent meddling” of Irish premier Micheál Martin “with the contempt it deserves”.

This right-wing political bloc is facing off against an emerging alliance led by the US and encompassing the European imperialist powers, the Republic of Ireland, Sinn Féin and the pro-EU Alliance Party in the north, as well as Britain’s Labour Party and the Scottish National Party (SNP).

Underscoring the prospect of the break-up of the UK,

SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon met with Sinn Féin’s deputy leader Michelle O’Neill Saturday at her official Edinburgh residence. Sturgeon linked separatism to Brexit, telling the media that Scotland and Northern Ireland “both voted against Brexit,” bringing “to the fore” a “system of government that’s been at play in the UK for some time now” that is “not serving all of our interests.”

The struggle over the protocol has become the focus of extraordinary inter-imperialist and national tensions, in which the essential concerns of the working class find no genuine expression. For workers the only outcome of such conflicts in ruling circles, whatever democratic rhetoric is utilised, will be an escalation of already crushing levels of austerity as all sides seek competitive advantage at their expense while the availability of essential goods is jeopardised and prices go through the roof. Meanwhile all sides will continue with the war drive against Russia, even as they employ sectarianism and nationalism to divide and politically demobilise the working class.

Faced with a deepening economic and social catastrophe and the headlong descent of the imperialist powers into a planet-threatening war, the working class must reject all siren appeals to line up behind opposed blocs of capitalist parties and states. The democratic and social aspirations of workers and youth in Northern Ireland, Catholic and Protestant, can only be realised through a politically conscious struggle for a united and socialist Ireland. But this fight must be linked with the emerging struggles of British workers against the hated and crisis-ridden Johnson government, and those of the entire European working class against their own exploiters—against trade and military war and for the United Socialist States of Europe.



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