

EU summit backs Brexit withdrawal declaration

Peter Schwarz

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A special summit of the European Union Sunday adopted the treaty on the withdrawal of Great Britain and a joint political declaration on future relations. The vote was unanimous.

The 585-page Brexit deal agreed between the EU Commission and the Conservative government of Prime Minister Theresa May regulates the payments that London must make to the EU coffers after it leaves on March 29, 2019, (around £39 billion), the future status of EU citizens in the UK and of British citizens in the EU, a “backstop” procedure for resolving the controversial border issue between the British province of Northern Ireland and EU member Republic of Ireland, and the transitional period after Brexit.

According to the treaty, Britain will remain in the European single market until the end of 2020, must obey all its rules, but is no longer allowed to have a say in its decisions. If it is not possible to conclude a free trade agreement during this period, it may be extended for a further two years. In addition, the backstop solution for Ireland stipulates that the UK will remain linked to the EU in a customs union until a solution has been agreed for the inner Irish border.

The 26-page political declaration, which unlike the Brexit treaty has no legal force, outlines future relations in trade, fisheries, travel, security and financial services. It states the intention to build “as close as possible a partnership” with the UK after Brexit and deliberately leaves plenty of room for different interpretations. It is intended to make it easier for May to sell the Brexit agreement in Britain.

That the treaty will overcome the next hurdle, the vote in the British Parliament in December, seems highly unlikely, as the agreement between May and Brussels has aggravated the civil war raging between and within the Tories and all the British parties. May’s

“hard-Brexit” Tory opponents, the Democratic Unionist Party in Northern Ireland, and all the opposition parties, led by the Labour Party, reject the proposed agreement.

The Brexit hardliners accuse May of transforming Britain into “a satellite state,” dependent on Brussels. It is estimated that anywhere up to 80 out of 331 conservative MPs will reject it—but less than 20 rebellions plus the DUP voting against would likely scupper the agreement. At a conference of the DUP in Belfast, former Foreign Minister Boris Johnson called on the government to “junk the backstop.”

DUP leader Arlene Foster, on whose eight votes May depends in Parliament, also rejected the treaty because it led to the creation of a trade border in the Irish Sea and threatened the unity of the United Kingdom. She threatened May with the withdrawal of support from the DUP.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn described the EU’s joint political declaration as “26 pages of waffle.” It was leading into the “blindfold Brexit we all feared... The only certainty contained within these pages is that the transition period will have to be extended or we will end up in the backstop with no exit.”

May and the EU are counting on fear of an unregulated “no deal” Brexit minimising an inner party revolt and securing enough pro-Remain Labourites to back her and secure a majority. If Britain leaves the EU without an agreement, economic chaos is predicted on both sides of the Channel. The scenario ranges from the collapse of air traffic, long traffic jams at the borders, massive collapses in trade and shocks on the stock markets to social unrest. Credit insurer Euler Hermes expects UK exports worth £30 billion and German exports worth €8 billion to be at risk.

On Sunday morning, before the final decision of the

EU summit, May published a “letter to the nation,” asking the British people to support the Brexit Treaty and calling for “renewal and reconciliation.” Brexit supporters and opponents must become one people again, she urged. In the coming two weeks she intends to conduct a massive campaign for the treaty with the support of the business community.

If parliament rejects it, which is likely, several scenarios are possible. They range from another parliamentary vote after a bit more haggling, a second Brexit referendum or new elections, to Brexit without an agreement. But even if, contrary to expectations, May were to succeed in getting the treaty through, this would merely usher in a new stage of the conflict.

The negotiations on a free trade agreement are a snake pit. Many unsolved problems in the Brexit contract have merely been postponed. This applies not only to the Irish border problem, but also to the Gibraltar issue. The Spanish government had threatened to veto the agreement if the 6.5 square kilometre rocky outcrop that Spain ceded to Great Britain in 1713 was included within the provisions as a British controlled entity. Spain insisted that this would cut across bilateral negotiations on The Rock’s future, including Spanish or joint sovereignty. Social Democratic Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez took the opportunity to make his mark as a defender of Spanish national interests in the current Andalusian election campaign.

The 32,000 inhabitants of Gibraltar voted 96 percent in favour of remaining in the EU in the Brexit referendum, but at the same time they want to remain part of Great Britain. Its position as a British enclave has brought unprecedented prosperity to the once completely isolated British military base. Low-taxes, deregulated financial services and a tourism boom have boosted border traffic and the economy of Gibraltar. Around 10,000 Spaniards commute daily to work in the enclave.

Finally, a “compromise” was agreed on, which postpones the problem and which both Sanchez and May celebrated as a victory. Spain will have a right of veto on all matters concerning Gibraltar, which will remain British overseas territory.

One can only understand the Brexit crisis and the violent political conflicts, economic distortions and social conflicts that accompany it within the framework

of the deep crisis of world capitalism. Throughout the world, the ruling class is responding to growing social tensions and rivalries between the major powers by moving politically to the right, fomenting nationalism and strengthening militarism.

The EU is not combating this development but exacerbating national tensions. Since it shifted the burden of the 2008/2009 global financial crisis onto the working class through brutal austerity programmes, the EU is seen by ever broader sections of the working class for what it really is: a tool for the most powerful economic and financial interests. Since social democratic parties, trade unions and pseudo-left organisations such as Syriza support the EU’s austerity policy, right-wing nationalist currents have been able to benefit from the opposition to Brussels.

The EU, with the German and French governments playing the leading role, had hoped for a failure of the Brexit referendum. But when the result was certain, they relied on its deterrent effect to keep the 27 EU member states in line. To prevent other countries from following the British example, they deliberately imposed tough conditions in negotiations with May. This has further poisoned the political climate. Europe is sliding more and more openly into the state of national rivalries that made it a breeding ground for fascism and war in the last century.

Only the independent intervention of the working class can prevent a repetition of such disasters. The growth of class struggle throughout Europe must become the starting point of a socialist movement that opposes both the EU and growing nationalism and fights for a United Socialist States of Europe.



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