

The political implications of the Corbyn/May Brexit talks

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The talks on an alternative Brexit deal between UK Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn decisively refute all claims that his election as leader of the Labour Party offered a way forward for working people.

British imperialism is in the midst of the greatest crisis it has faced in the post-war period. The Tory government is staggering on the brink of collapse. Political and social tensions are at breaking point. And the response of the ruling class is to look to Corbyn for political salvation.

On Tuesday, he responded by immediately abandoning his demand for a general election and agreed to May's desperate appeal for "national unity to deliver the national interest." He would assume his "responsibility to represent the people that supported Labour in the last election and the people who didn't support Labour."

For more than three years, Corbyn has insisted to the thousands of workers and young people who joined the Labour Party in response to his election victory that they must not demand the driving out of the Blairite right wing and implement socialist policies because party unity was essential to defeat the Tories. Now "party unity" has been replaced by "national unity" as he pledges to "reserve" any no confidence motion in the government until a definitive failure to secure a Brexit deal with the European Union.

Corbyn's rise to the party leadership in 2015 was due to a groundswell of social and political opposition in the working class after decades in which Tory, New Labour and Tory/Liberal Democrat governments carried out a massive transfer of social wealth to big business. It was an attempt to fight back by workers and young people, which escalated to the point where, in 2017—when May tried to shore up her position by

calling a snap general election—the Tories were reduced to a minority government after the biggest swing to Labour since Clement Attlee in 1945.

Rather than press home this advantage, Corbyn shifted from appeasing the party's right wing piecemeal to a rout. The 2018 Labour conference saw him oppose demands for the mandatory reselection of MPs, as he allowed his own closest supporters to be witch-hunted and expelled and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell toured the City of London to pledge Labour's loyalty.

Today, Blairite Tom Watson might as well be party leader rather than Corbyn's deputy. When Watson told *Prospect* magazine he was ready to take part in a government of national unity with pro-Remain Tories, Corbyn's office denounced plans for an "establishment stitch-up." Three days later, Corbyn assumed his part in an actual stitch-up aimed at preventing a general election that Tory MP Johnny Mercer said would see his party "wiped out."

The last thing Corbyn would contemplate is to come to power as a result of a movement of the working class he might not be able to control. He wants only to serve British imperialism and continue the efforts to suppress the class struggle that have characterised his leadership. May's overture is confirmation that the ruling class has Corbyn's real measure as an essential ally against the working class.

These are strategic experiences for the working class in Britain, Europe and internationally. Corbyn has been held up as a model to be emulated by pseudo-left formations the world over. But before Corbyn, the same service was provided for Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, the "Left Bloc" in Portugal and Bernie Sanders in the US—always with the same disastrous impact.

From the outset, the Socialist Equality Party warned: “Corbyn represents the last desperate effort to resuscitate a policy that has failed time and time again and has played a crucial role for the bourgeoisie in stemming a revolutionary development in the working class—the policy of attempting to push Labour to the left.”

We drew particular attention to how, when Syriza came to power in January 2015 as a result of its pledges to oppose EU-backed austerity measures, “this was hailed by pseudo-left organizations everywhere as a transformative event that would change the trajectory of European politics. Instead, Syriza spent months pleading with the EU for paltry concessions on the terms for imposing EU austerity measures before repudiating the landslide vote against further austerity in the July [2015] referendum and agreeing to impose even harsher spending cuts than its predecessors.”

The claims of the pseudo-left are in tatters. This week, the Socialist Party writes of “a screaming silence from the trade union leaders,” who have “failed to articulate the desperate situation in working class communities,” and “the faint, hardly audible, voice of Jeremy Corbyn”—without even mentioning his talks with May. The Socialist Workers Party describes the talks as “a trap for Labour” and “a cover for delivering the bosses’ interests.” “The missing element is an independent working class intervention into the crisis. That is why the government has not collapsed,” they conclude, without ever criticising Corbyn.

The impasse over Brexit is rooted in a global eruption of inter-imperialist antagonisms provoked by the bitter competition between rival powers for control of the world’s markets. Under Donald Trump, the US has turned sharply towards protectionism, trade war and stepped up threats of war. Europe’s major powers respond by seeking to reinforce the EU as a protectionist trade bloc with its own military capability—even as the antagonisms between them threaten its break-up.

Everywhere the growth of national tensions finds political expression in a lurch to the right by all the major parties and imperialist governments. To remain globally competitive means an endless assault on the jobs, wages and conditions of the working class, which in turn demands authoritarian forms of rule. In Europe, this has spurred the growth of far-right and fascistic

movements that exploit popular hostility to the EU’s austerity policies and benefit from the scapegoating of migrants and refugees. They are already in government in Italy, Hungary, Austria and Poland and are major opposition parties in France, Germany and the Netherlands—promoted by the media and the state apparatus as a shock force against the working class.

Continued support for Corbyn and Labour facilitates this dangerous development. The election of Trump, the rise of Marine Le Pen in France and the Alternative for Germany entering the Bundestag were all made possible by the venal role played by the official “left” parties and trade unions and their pseudo-left apologists.

The conditions are now emerging for the working class to mount a counter-offensive. The political exposure of Corbyn and the pseudo-left takes place under conditions of an escalating wave of strikes and protests internationally, after decades of suppression of the class struggle by the old social democratic and Stalinist parties and the trade unions.

The “Yellow Vest” protesters in France have been joined by a national teachers strike. A strike wave is ongoing in Portugal and Hungary, and there are mass protests against the far right in Italy. Strikes in the US are at their highest level since 1986. Mass strikes and protests have erupted in Algeria and Sudan, threatening the downfall of their governments.

Workers in Britain must base themselves consciously on this emerging movement of global class struggle. For this, a new programme and leadership are required. The answer to Brexit and the nationalist fracturing of the continent is a unified movement of the British and European working class for the United Socialist States of Europe. The SEP and our sister parties in France and Germany dedicate ourselves to building sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International throughout Europe to lead this strategic political turn.



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