

Snap UK general election called amid continuing Brexit crisis

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On Tuesday, Prime Minister Theresa May announced her government's intention to hold an early general election. If two-thirds of MPs vote today to accept abrogating the recent provision for fixed five-year terms in office, parliament will end all business on May 2 and a ballot will take place on June 8.

May's surprise decision gives a measure of the escalating crisis of British imperialism in the aftermath of the narrow 51.9 percent vote to leave the European Union in last June's referendum. Since that time, May, who supported the "Remain" camp, has led her party while at the beck and call of the pro-Brexit forces within it based on the constant assertion that "Brexit means Brexit." But her hard-line pose has never successfully concealed, let alone mended, the deep divisions within the ruling class. Instead, she has been pushed into threatening a "hard Brexit," including the UK's exclusion from the Single European Market.

With 44 percent of UK exports bound for Europe and London's position as a finance centre dependent on access to the continent, the other major parties have generally combined demands that a "hard Brexit" be avoided at all costs with a threat to block any negotiated deal that does not maintain access to the single market.

As a result, May is in a much-weakened position in her negotiations with the EU, reflective of the declining global weight of the UK itself.

In her brief statement announcing the snap election, May castigated the Labour Party for threatening "to vote against the deal we reach," the Liberal Democrats for threatening to "grind the business of government to a standstill," the Scottish National Party for its intention to vote against legislation formally repealing Britain's EU membership, and unnamed "unelected members of the House of Lords."

All were denounced for betraying the "national

interest" at "this moment of enormous national significance," with May demanding an end to all dissent in a way that earned her several comparisons with Turkish President Erdogan.

The central conceit of May's speech was that "[t]he country is coming together, but Westminster is not."

This is a lie. In the first instance, divisions in Westminster reflect those within the ruling class that continue to deepen. These, in turn, are an expression of the growing national antagonisms that first gave rise to the Brexit referendum. May hoped to answer her detractors by forging an alliance with President Donald Trump, whose own embrace of Brexit was bound up with his "America First" protectionism and undisguised hostility to the EU as a German-led trade rival to the United States.

This backfired, as Berlin and Paris met Trump's challenge with their own hard-line response. The week leading up to May's announcement saw her foreign secretary, Boris Johnson, humiliated as the European powers rejected US-dictated demands at the G7 summit for additional sanctions against Russia, while Moscow poured scorn on Britain as an irrelevance without an independent position.

Finally, and most importantly, no leading politician, least of all May, can speak honestly about the huge social tensions that gave rise to the unexpected "No" vote in last June's referendum. A significant section of the most exploited and oppressed workers defied all appeals to support EU membership by then-Tory leader David Cameron, Labour's Jeremy Corbyn, the Trades Union Congress, the City of London, then-President Barack Obama and every EU head of state.

May calculates that she can exploit anti-EU sentiment to ensure electoral victory. Her working hypothesis is that the government's slim working majority of 17 will grow to as many as 200 due to a collapse in support for

Labour, as foreseen in opinion polls giving the Tories a staggering lead of as much as 21 percentage points. However, this is a high-risk gamble based on the recognition that the underlying opposition to austerity cuts and social devastation can find no progressive expression.

Corbyn offers no genuine alternative to the Tories. He has spent the past year doing all he can to disappoint the millions who looked to him to reverse Labour's rightward trajectory, handing the initiative to the Blairites, who are now once again discussing his removal or the formation of an alliance with the Liberal Democrats.

Given the extreme instability and combustibility of the situation in Europe and globally, the seven weeks between now and June 8 is, in political terms, a long time. The political landscape on which the current polls are based could be transformed by the time of the snap election.

In its editorial on the election, the *Guardian* baldly declares: "Britain does not need, and its people are not demanding, this general election. There is no crisis in the government. Mrs. May is not losing votes in the Commons. The House of Lords is not defying her. No legislation is at risk. There is no war and no economic crisis. Brexit is two years away. The press are not clamouring for an early election. The government has not run out of ideas. The opposition is not ready."

No war and no crisis?

Domestically, the May government confronts an increasingly restive working class, while it has set itself on a collision course with the Scottish National Party, which is demanding a second independence referendum, and with Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland and the government of the Republic in the south, which have mooted their own vote on Ireland's unification.

Just one month before the planned UK election, France will hold the second round of its presidential election, in which it is expected that Marine Le Pen, leader of the fascist National Front, will likely contest the EU's favoured candidate, Emmanuel Macron of the Socialist Party-splinter group En Marche!, or possibly Jean-Luc Mélenchon of the nominally left "Unsubmissive France." Either outcome would have the impact of politically polarising the whole of Europe, with entirely unpredictable consequences for the UK.

Most important of all, events in Britain are unfolding at a time of a build-up to a possible US war against North Korea and unending anti-Russian propaganda. May's announcement was overshadowed by the outpouring of threats against Pyongyang by Washington, with Vice President Mike Pence declaring that "the era of strategic patience is over."

Publicly, the UK has positioned itself as the most steadfast ally of Trump. But the day before her election announcement, May's office let it be known that she had opposed the statements by US defence chiefs that they are confident they can "utterly destroy" North Korea's nuclear sites. A Number 10 source said, "We've been here before... We are urging restraint on military action." Another senior government source added, "It feels like the Cuban missile crisis all over again. Thirteen days to Armageddon."

Such warnings from the UK will count for little in Washington. But they point to the grave dangers facing the world's people.

The central issue posed in any election is to raise the political consciousness of the working class to the level demanded by the deepening crisis of global capitalism. This means rejecting all attempts to corral workers behind one or another faction of the ruling class in what is presented as a "second referendum" on Brexit, and proceeding instead on the basis of understanding the full import of world events.

It is less than a decade and a half since a government and a prime minister with far greater popular support than May's Tories, Tony Blair's Labour, was politically destroyed as a result of an eruption of mass anti-war sentiment. In this election, the Socialist Equality Party will utilise every opportunity to explain the necessity of constructing the socialist leadership required to defeat the government's undeclared agenda of austerity, militarism and war.

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