

European Union issues hard-line Brexit negotiating strategy

By Robert Stevens
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The weekend was dominated by acrimonious exchanges between the European Union (EU) and the British government over the upcoming negotiations over its exit from the EU.

On Saturday, the European Council unanimously approved a hardline set of guidelines. The 27-member body reportedly took just one minute to discuss the document and less than 15 minutes to approve it.

The document warns that Britain cannot have separate discussions with individual EU states over the terms of Brexit, “so as not to undercut the position of the Union.”

It declares, “A non-member of the Union that does not live up to the same obligations as a member cannot have the same rights and enjoy the same benefits as a member.”

On this basis, the guidelines make clear that there can be no ‘cherry picking’ by the UK of the “indivisible” four core single market freedoms—the free movement of goods, capital, services, and people. The official position of the Conservative government of Prime Minister Theresa May is for a Brexit to preserve access to “elements of a single market,” with accepting, on behalf of big business—at least during the transitional period after the UK exits—the free movement of people.

The EU’s guidelines list three issues of priority: the residency rights of EU and UK citizens post-Brexit, agreeing what the UK must pay to the EU as part of its “divorce” settlement and avoiding the creation of a “hard” border between the Irish Republic—which is an EU member—and Northern Ireland.

Agreement on the EU’s strategy came just days after German Chancellor Angela Merkel insisted on a tough line against the UK, insisting that it “cannot and will not have the same or even more rights as a member of the European Union. All 27 member states and the

European institutions agree on this.”

Merkel’s statement followed a telephone call between her and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker last Wednesday, following Juncker’s dinner talks with May in Downing Street. Rejecting the claims of May’s government that an EU-UK agreement on trade can be achieved within a two-year deadline, with the first phase settled within weeks, Juncker brought to Downing Street a hard-copy of the full EU-Canada trade agreement, which runs to 2,255 pages, and took eight years to negotiate.

The *Financial Times* reported, “Attendees at the dinner told colleagues Mrs. May’s expectations were ‘completely unreal’ and that Mr Juncker was left ‘speechless’ at some UK expectations.”

According to reports, May told Juncker that Britain would only make a Brexit divorce payment if it was tied to a full trade deal agreed before 2019. The EU has long insisted that discussions on a future trade relationship between it and the UK can only take place after the divorce payment, and other terms of exit are agreed.

The *Sunday Times* reported that the Juncker/May meeting went “very badly.” It said EU leaders view May as “living in a different galaxy” over Brexit. The newspaper cited a source who said, “Based on the meeting, no deal is much more likely than finding agreement.”

May’s response to the European Council agreement was to insist that her negotiating position remained unchanged. On Saturday, she spoke to the pro-Brexit *Daily Telegraph* while campaigning in Scotland. The newspaper asked the prime minister, “The Brexit deal that appears to be on offer from Brussels at the moment looks pretty bad. Will you allow yourself to be bullied by Brussels?”

May responded, “First of all I would point out we don’t have a Brexit deal on the table from Brussels. We have their negotiating guidelines; we have our negotiating guidelines...”

On Sunday morning, May continued to oppose the EU’s position on the BBC’s Andrew Marr Show. Stating, “I am not living in a different galaxy,” she asserted that the EU response shows that “there are going to be times when these negotiations are going to be tough.” A Tory victory in the election was therefore critical, as “you need strong and stable leadership... to get the best deal.”

Above all, her interview underscored that the Brexit agenda of the Tories is centred on an escalation of the relentless austerity, imposed by successive Labour and Conservative governments, since the 2008 global financial crash and bailout of the banks.

In her first television interview since announcing the snap general election nearly two weeks ago, she defended the cutting of £2,500 in welfare benefits from the poorest working families.

Marr pointed out that public sector workers had “now had seven years of below inflation pay increases, a really tough freeze on their pay,” asking, “That can’t go on, can it, in the next few years?”

He noted that nurses have seen a 14 percent pay cut since 2010 and according to the Royal College of Nurses, “lots of ordinary nurses by the end of the week have to use food banks because they can’t afford to pay for food.”

May responded by insisting that what was important was “growth in the economy.” Under conditions in which, due to widespread grinding poverty, food bank usage in the UK stands at record levels with 1.2 million parcels distributed last year, May declared with undisguised contempt, “There are many complex reasons why people go to food banks.”

May also refused to commit to not ending the “triple lock” for state pension payments. Under the triple lock, the state pension increases in line with wages, inflation or by 2.5 percent, whichever is highest.

May’s comments follow the publication of a review of state pensions by former CBI Director-General John Cridland. He recommended that the triple lock be withdrawn in the next parliament, with those retiring after April 2016 having their pension increases linked to earnings only. The report estimates that scrapping

the triple lock will save almost £3 billion per year by 2028.

May also supported the National Audit Office estimates of £3 billion of cuts to school funding by 2020, stating only that the government is committed to “fair funding” for schools. The reality is that more than 90 percent of schools across England will see funding cuts. Cuts in London schools amount to £600 million. Pupils in other major cities, including Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and Nottingham, will receive less funding per head under the new system.

Significantly, with the entire election campaign so far being framed around the war agenda of the government—which backed recent US bombing in Syria and Afghanistan and warmongering against North Korea and Russia—May refused to accept that Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn had been correct in opposing the illegal 2003 war against Iraq. May said what “Jeremy Corbyn has shown is that he is not prepared to stand up for the defence of this country.”

In relation to future military action, May said, “If we look ahead there will be tough decisions to be taken. I think it is important that we... have a prime minister that’s willing to defend this country, to stand up for the defence of this country. Jeremy Corbyn has shown he’s not willing to do that.”

The struggle over whether the UK exits the EU on the basis of a “hard” or “soft” Brexit will determine the increasingly divergent economic and trade relations between the major imperialist powers. What May’s interview with Marr demonstrated is that, whatever is cooked up in the Brexit negotiations between Britain, Brussels, Germany and France, the fate of working people will be an escalating march towards worsening austerity and a drive to war.

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