

UK: May staggers on as more than a third of Tory MPs oppose her

By Robert Stevens
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Prime Minister Theresa May survived a vote of no confidence by her own Conservative Party Wednesday evening. In a vote of the 317 MPs, May won with the support of 200, with 117 voting against.

The large vote against her by her hard-Brexit wing, combined with the loss of support from the 10 Democratic Unionist Party MPs, confirms that May is numbered among the walking dead. Arch critic of her proposed Brexit deal with the European Union, Jacob Rees-Mogg, told the press, “163 Conservative MPs are on the payroll—ministers, PPSs, vice chairmen of the party, trade envoys, and therefore of the non-payroll of the back benchers, the prime minister lost really very heavily.”

May was told that 48 MPs had written letters demanding a no confidence vote after returning from a lightening round of diplomacy Tuesday night, desperately trying to obtain further concessions from European leaders following her decision not to hold a vote in parliament—that she would have lost—on her proposed deal over the terms for exiting the EU.

Winning the no confidence vote means she cannot face another for a year, but does not resolve the crisis of rule in Britain. Seeking to exert maximum pressure, May said Wednesday morning outside 10 Downing Street that if she were to be defeated any new Tory leader would not realistically be in place until late January at the earliest, and that they would be forced to extend Article 50—the legislation authorising withdrawal—and delay Brexit until after the scheduled exit date of March 29, 2019. Even so, she was forced to promise a meeting of the 1922 Committee of backbench MPs, just before they cast their votes, that she would stand down as Tory leader before the next general election, set for 2022.

One Tory MP, George Freeman, tweeted that May

“has listened, heard & respects the will of the Party that once she has delivered an orderly Brexit, she will step aside for the election of a new Leader...”

EU leaders meeting May on Tuesday offered her very little, but made clear that they saw no advantage in her downfall. They calculate that without May, any chance of the UK exiting in a soft-Brexit and maintaining some access to Europe’s markets would be threatened. If a Brexiteer took over Tory party leadership, there would be a high likelihood of the UK crashing out with no deal, and a heightened threat of economic turmoil and social unrest.

May will hold further talks with EU leaders at today’s EU summit in Brussels, aimed at obtaining, as she said after the vote, “legal and political assurances that will assuage the concerns that members of Parliament have” on the Northern Ireland backstop that will keep the province in the EU Customs Union if there is no long-term trade deal agreed between Britain and Brussels. Securing some legal codicil making clear that the arrangement is temporary is her only chance of winning the backing of the DUP and maintaining a government majority.

Fear of a hard-Brexit in the dominant sections of the British and European ruling elite is one of the few weapons May can still deploy—though this is becoming increasingly ineffective given that few believe her deal will not fall in parliament. Her other weapon wielded incessantly is that “The only people whose interests would be served” by turmoil in the Tory party “would be Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell.”

Such fears notwithstanding, the Labour leader and his shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, continued to reject calls to put a no confidence vote before parliament—leaving it to the Brexiteers to take the political high-ground. Corbyn’s many apologists claim

that he is biding his time so that such a move will be successful and open up at least the possibility of a general election. But the Tories' own no confidence motion shows the damage that even an unsuccessful motion would have done to the government. And it is this that Corbyn wants to avoid, seeking to convince the ruling class that Labour can govern without arousing a militant movement in the working class demanding the end to austerity he has promised. Last week, McDonnell wrote to a leading civil service official declaring, "In view of the current instability in government as a result of which an election could come at any time, I believe it behoves us to make suitable preparations now to ensure that there is a smooth transfer of power, obviously depending on the outcome of that election."

This has left Corbyn's Blairite opponents as the other political force able to set the agenda. They have gone on the offensive once again, despite lacking any popular support within the party—demanding above all that Corbyn openly embrace the demand for a second referendum to overturn Brexit and abandon the "pipe dream" of a general election. Writing in the pro-Remain *Guardian* last Friday, Blairite columnist Jonathan Freedland wrote of Corbyn's Brexit policy, that "the era of 'constructive ambiguity' [on Brexit] has to end next week ... that fudge is past its sell-by date. We are at the moment of decision now."

At Prime Minister's Questions Tuesday afternoon, one would barely have known that May even faced a vote of confidence threatening her premiership in a matter of hours, so timid was Corbyn. Following the vote, Corbyn was equally careful to say and do nothing to alert workers of the gravity of the situation. Stating that "she pulled the vote on her botched Brexit deal this week and is trying to avoid bringing it back to parliament," he demanded nothing except that May "must now bring her dismal deal back to the House of Commons next week so parliament can [vote on it and] take back control."

What was required was a Brexit "deal that works for the country and puts jobs and the economy first."

While Corbyn is seeking to keep everything within the confines of the institutions of the capitalist state, the hard-Brexit wing of the Tories are reportedly preparing their next moves against May to push through their pro-austerity agenda for Brexit. *Telegraph* senior

political correspondent Steven Swinford tweeted after the vote that "Eurosceptics [are] already thinking about the 'nuclear option'—a non-binding motion of no confidence against their own PM, removing her with backing of Labour, SNP [Scottish National Party] & Lib Dems. They're not giving up."

The political crisis in Britain deepens amid an upsurge of anger in the working class, with strikes and anti-austerity protests across Europe and internationally.

For the last five weeks, hundreds of thousands of "Yellow Vest" protesters have mounted demonstrations against the hated government of French President Emmanuel Macron. Corbyn's greatest fear is the spread of this movement to the UK. Throughout this entire process—resulting in Macron being forced to make a national televised address promising concessions amid brutal repression on the streets of Paris—Corbyn has not uttered a word regarding the world historic events unfolding across the Channel.

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