

European Union leaders grant May extra time to pass Brexit deal in UK parliament

By Robert Stevens
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The European Union's (EU) 27 member states have agreed a plan allowing a delay of Brexit to May 22. But this is only on condition that UK MPs approve the deal the EU agreed with Prime Minister Theresa May by the previous official exit date of March 29.

May and the EU leaders hope that the threat of a "hard-Brexit" as the only alternative will swing enough MPs behind the proposed "Strasbourg Agreement" between May and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker. If not, the UK will have only until April 12.

Any further extension would involve UK participation in elections to the European parliament—a further incentive to the Conservative Party's hard-Brexit faction and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to come on board.

This only gives two additional weeks towards a new "cliff edge." After that the EU has made clear that essentially only an abandonment of Brexit will prevent the UK crashing out without a deal. There will be no further renegotiation.

May came to the two-day summit just eight days before Britain was due to exit the European trade block under the terms of Article 50—following the June 2016 referendum vote to leave the EU. She arrived after making a televised statement to the nation the previous evening in which she posed as the people's champion against a recalcitrant Parliament.

"You want this stage of the Brexit process to be over and done with. I agree. I am on your side. It is now time for MPs to decide," May said.

May's request was for an extension to June 30. The proposal agreed fixes May 22 as the new Brexit date because that is when EU elections begin. May has so far ruled out any scenario which would mean UK participation in the elections.

All reports and public statements portrayed French

President Emmanuel Macron as taking the hardest line—most notably against Germany. But this was likely a prearranged case of good cop/bad cop. Macron in fact spoke for the entire EU when he warned, "In the case of a negative vote [in the UK parliament], we will go towards no deal—we all know it."

He stressed that the stability and homogeneity of the EU was at stake. "We must respect the will of the British people, but also the European project. European leaders understand and respect the will of the British people, but we defend the interests of our own people... We are ready for Brexit. France didn't choose this, the British people did... The European project must continue and must be stronger."

Europe's ruling circles must do whatever they can to limit the massive social, political and economic damage threatened by Brexit. François Heisbourg, special adviser of the French Fondation de la Recherche Stratégique think tank, said that in France and within the EU it was viewed that "Britain, having dragged itself deep into the cesspool, will now drag us into the cesspool as well."

Tensions over Brexit in UK ruling circles have resulted in a full-blown constitutional crisis.

Last week, Parliament's Speaker, John Bercow, a supporter of remaining in the EU, dredged up an archaic clause dating back to 1604 to prevent May putting her deal to a third vote if it was "substantially the same" as those previously rejected.

It has been suggested that May's deal will now be put to Parliament again on Tuesday, March 26, in a "meaningful vote"—with the government arguing that Bercow's ruling is invalidated by the change of date agreed. But given the continued difficulties May has in getting the DUP and her hard-Brexiters on board, this is by no means certain—especially as there are reports of MPs wanting her to step down. May can now hold a vote in Parliament any time before April 12.

As the summit began, MPs on both sides of the house denounced May's national address. In language evoking an impending civil war, Remain supporting Labour MP Wes Streeting described May's Downing Street address as "incendiary and irresponsible. If any harm comes to any of us [MPs], she will have to accept her share of responsibility."

Labourite Lisa Nandy stated, "Pitting Parliament against the people in the current environment is dangerous and reckless." With MPs speaking of death threats being made against them, Bercow felt obliged to intervene again, saying to MPs, "None of you is a traitor."

A pro-Remain online petition calling on the government to revoke Article 50 reached over two million signatures last night, at one point crashing the government's petition website. This is aimed at galvanising support for Saturday's "People Vote" march in London for a second EU referendum that is expected to be attended by hundreds of thousands of people. But in Parliament at this point there doesn't appear to be a possible majority for a second referendum.

With no solution to the deadlock over Brexit in place, the government announced that extraordinary powers are to be enacted next Monday through its "Operation Yellowhammer" "command and control" contingency plans for a no-deal outcome. The government's Cobra committee, which is only convened under conditions of national emergency, is now empowered to deal with all no-deal preparations, including having 3,500 troops on standby.

With dire implications for the working class and democratic rights, the operation allows sweeping powers embodied in the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, introduced by the Labour government of Tony Blair, to be rolled out. In January, the *Times* revealed that scenarios for martial law were being considered and that "curfews, bans on travel, confiscation of property [and] deployment of the armed forces to quell rioting are among the measures available to ministers".

On Thursday evening, Sky journalist Deborah Haynes, tweeted, "UK military has activated team in a nuclear bunker under the @DefenceHQ [Ministry of Defence] main building to step up preparations for a no-deal Brexit... The crisis management operation—dubbed Operation #REDFOLD... will direct 3,500 personnel who have been put on standby to help government if required if UK leaves EU next Friday without a withdrawal agreement. The REDFOLD mission is military dimension

of cross-Whitehall no-deal contingency preparations, called Operation Yellowhammer."

Under conditions of the greatest crisis of rule in Britain in peacetime, the working class has been reduced to the role of spectator. That a hated government still remains in place despite being in political meltdown is entirely the responsibility of Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn.

Nothing he says or does is aimed at alerting workers to the gravity of the political threat they face, under conditions in which senior military figures have warned that central to the armed forces' remit under Operation Yellowhammer is breaking strikes, particularly in the transport sector.

Corbyn has made no appeal to the working class to intervene independently in this mounting crisis. That would involve rejecting support for any faction of Britain's ruling elite, whose conflict is over how best to pursue trade war policies—inside or out of the EU—at the expense of the working class. It would mean making an appeal for a unified offensive of the European working class against all of Europe's capitalist governments and for socialism.

Instead his sole aim is to convince the ruling class that he is a safe pair of hands in defending the "national interest."

Corbyn walked out of cross-party talks with May on Wednesday evening—due to the presence of Chuka Umunna, the leader of the Blairite breakaway Independent Group. But he then took a private phone call with the prime minister!

His next stop was Brussels, for what he described as "very constructive discussions" with EU Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier and European Commission secretary general Martin Selmayr. These focussed on "Our determination... to prevent a no-deal exit from the European Union next Friday... and looking for alternatives and building a majority in Parliament that can agree on a future constructive economic relationship with the European Union."

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