

Boris Johnson premiership deepens Brexit crisis and heralds bitter class conflict

By Robert Stevens
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Boris Johnson won the leadership of the ruling Conservative Party Tuesday after decisively defeating Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt by a two to one margin. Johnson will take over as prime minister today from Theresa May, after she resigns following her last Prime Minister's Questions session in parliament.

The pro-Brexit Johnson defeated Jeremy Hunt, a supporter of the Remain campaign in 2016, by 92,153 votes to 46,656. Johnson won 66 percent of the vote of 139,000 Tory members on an 87 percent turnout. Like May, Johnson has not become prime minister based on any popular vote, but via the tiny proportion of the population represented by the aging right-wing Tory membership.

Despite Johnson's boast in his victory speech that he will "deliver Brexit, unite the country and defeat [Labour leader] Jeremy Corbyn," his position is precarious.

The Tories are as deeply divided as ever over Brexit. May was forced to resign last month after failing on three occasions to get her deal with the European Union (EU) maintaining tariff-free access to the Single European Market through parliament, in the face of the combined opposition of the pro-Remain opposition parties and her own hard-Brexit faction and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). In April, the EU has set a new deadline for a deal to be agreed by October 31—just 100 days from now.

Ahead of the leadership announcement, the *Financial Times* declared, "If elected Tory leader...Johnson will call for his party to deliver Brexit and to unite behind him, but few peacetime prime ministers have entered Downing Street facing such a daunting set of political challenges."

Even before Johnson won the election, May's chancellor, Philip Hammond, a Remain supporter,

pledged that he would resign along with May, as he could not support Britain exiting the EU without a deal, which Johnson has threatened to do. Justice Secretary David Gauke stood down, declaring that he could not work with Johnson. Education Minister Anne Milton did the same, expressing "grave concerns about leaving the EU without a deal." According to the *Financial Times*, Hammond "will lead a group of about 30 Tory MPs determined to halt a no-deal exit: a sign of the divided party the new premier will inherit."

Johnson has less room to manoeuvre than even May. He takes over a party with a wafer-thin parliamentary majority, reliant on the votes of the 10 DUP MPs. The Tories' working majority now stands at just three seats and could be reduced if they lose a by-election set for August 1. Johnson could therefore be forced to call a snap election in a matter of weeks.

His threats to exit the EU without a deal are opposed by the dominant sections of big business, who were more clearly represented by Hunt. They will not forget Johnson's response when the issue of continued access to the EU's markets was raised at a diplomatic gathering in 2018, "Fuck business."

Moreover, despite efforts to portray Johnson as a popular figure, he and his political agenda are widely despised outside of the rarefied ranks of the Tory party—especially by the working class.

Media commentators have noted that at least half the population is opposed to Brexit and even among supporters there is concern at the potentially devastating social and economic consequences of a no-deal exit.

Johnson has cemented close ties with US President Trump and his inner circle, including his former adviser, the fascistic Steve Bannon, on the basis that Brexit will weaken the EU as a trade and military rival

to the US. Trump tweeted his approval immediately after Johnson's victory, declaring, "He will be great!"

But this alliance will only stiffen the resolve of the EU in rejecting any further concessions to the UK. In response to the bravado of Johnson and his supporters in the European Research Group led by Jacob Rees-Mogg, the EU refused to budge on its insistence that the deal agreed with Theresa May is the only one on the table.

In addition, even the Scottish Tories have expressed concern that Johnson's hard-Brexit stance will strengthen the Scottish National Party and demands for independence, given the overwhelming support for remaining in the EU north of the border.

Most importantly, Johnson's political agenda is for Brexit to provide the basis for a further massive austerity assault on wages, essential services and labour protections to transform the UK into "Singapore by the Sea." Among the measures he has suggested is the creation of six free ports where businesses will pay little or no tax and raising the 40 percent income tax threshold from £50,000 to £80,000 to benefit the top 12 percent of earners. But far more serious attacks must come.

The media faithfully accepts Johnson's carefully cultivated persona of a bumbling gaffe-prone figure, which serves to conceal his vicious anti-working-class agenda. This is a man who was taped agreeing to supply a friend threatening to beat up a journalist with the intended victim's address, who described black people as "piccaninnies," and approved a *Spectator* editorial accusing "drunken" and "mindless" Liverpool fans of responsibility for the deaths of 96 people at Hillsborough Football Stadium in 1989.

As mayor of London, he was asked by firefighters, "Will you accept responsibility in a criminal court when people die as a result of your cuts?" He replied, "Get stuffed!" The following year, 10 fire stations were closed in the capital and nearly 600 firefighters' jobs lost. These cuts contributed to the 72 lives lost in the Grenfell Tower inferno—blood on Johnson's hands.

Political responsibility for such an individual being able to assume leadership of a despised Tory government—as the third UK prime minister since 2016—must be laid at Jeremy Corbyn's door.

Corbyn has spent almost four years as Labour leader suppressing the demands of his own supporters for the

right-wing to be driven out of the party and for him to take the fight to the Tories. There has been one retreat by Corbyn after another—accepting Trident, NATO membership, allowing a free vote on war in Syria, opposing mandatory reselection of MPs and now accepting the right-wing's slander that the "left" is anti-Semitic and promising to speed up expulsions.

His desire to maintain party unity and convince big business that he could be trusted as prime minister saw his sitting down to Brexit talks with May and abandoning demands for a general election. Even now, after Johnson's election, Corbyn responded to a question from the BBC asking whether Labour will table a vote of no confidence in the new prime minister with the evasive response, "We'll decide when that will be—it'll be an interesting surprise for all you."

The net result of Corbyn's political leadership has been to exclude the working class from intervening in its own interests in the worst crisis the bourgeoisie has faced since the Second World War. But this must and will change. The lurch to the right that characterises both pro- and anti-Brexit factions within the ruling class can only be fought through the building of a new and genuinely socialist and internationalist leadership, the Socialist Equality Party. Against all attempts to divide the working class over Brexit, a unified struggle for socialism must be waged in alliance with workers throughout Europe and internationally.

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