

Johnson plans for a no deal exit from the European Union

By Robert Stevens
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The Conservative government of Boris Johnson announced over the weekend that it is “working on the assumption” that it will leave the European Union (EU) without a trade and customs deal on October 31.

In the *Sunday Times*, Michael Gove wrote, “No deal is now a very real prospect.” One of the central Tory figures in heading the Leave campaign in the 2016 EU referendum, Gove is now charged with coordinating Brexit across all government departments in Johnson’s Cabinet announced last week.

Denouncing the Withdrawal Agreement the EU reached with Johnson’s predecessor, Theresa May, which she failed to get through parliament, Gove wrote, “You can’t just reheat the dish that’s been sent back and expect that will make it more palatable.” The EU may agree to a new deal with Johnson, he said, “but we must operate on the assumption that they will not.”

Chancellor Sajid Javid announced in the pro-Brexit *Sunday Telegraph* that there would be “significant extra funding” for 500 new Border Force officers and new infrastructure around ports.

These moves followed a statement Friday by a spokesman for Johnson, insisting: “The withdrawal agreement has been rejected three times by the House of Commons. It’s not going to pass... That means reopening the withdrawal agreement and securing the abolition of the backstop.”

The backstop, opposed by the Tories’ hard Brexit wing, refers to the proposed measures agreed between May, the EU and Irish government intended to prevent the return of a hard border between the Republic and Northern Ireland post-Brexit.

Dominic Cummings, Johnson’s senior adviser, and the main Vote Leave campaign strategist in the referendum, told Downing Street advisers Friday that

Johnson said Brexit had to be carried out “by any means necessary.”

Johnson claimed that he has “absolutely” ruled out a general election prior to the Brexit deadline date of October 31—though this is far from assured. The *Sunday Times* noted that Johnson has established a “war cabinet” of six members that will meet from today to “plot the nation’s course.” This cabinet consists only of Brexiteers who will back a no deal outcome: Johnson, Gove, Javid, Foreign secretary Dominic Raab, Brexit Secretary Steve Barclay and the Attorney General Geoffrey Cox.

Michel Barnier, the EU’s chief negotiator, said May’s deal was the “the best and only agreement possible.” Johnson’s demand to withdraw the backstop “is of course unacceptable and not within the mandate of the European Council.” He warned that no deal Brexit “will never be the EU’s choice,” but “we all have to be ready for all scenarios.” Germany’s Europe Minister, Michael Roth, said, “Boris, the election campaign is over. Calm yourself down... What do not help are new provocations.”

Summing up the growing conflicts, *Financial Times* columnist Wolfgang Münchau said the EU now “must prepare for the shock of a no-deal Brexit.”

The central concern of the EU is to preserve the unity of the bloc, as trade war with the United States escalates amid developing global recession. The *Financial Times* commented, “The brinkmanship, if anything, has stiffened resolve in European capitals.”

It cited a “senior EU official EU” who said angrily, “Will member states want to reward a Trumpist in No 10?... Is that the sort of politics that they think should be seen to be successful? Do you reward those who go rogue?”

The official warned that the EU has “a hierarchy of

interest... The first is self-preservation, the continued existence and development of the union. The second is an orderly withdrawal. If there is a conflict between one and two, we give priority to number one. Leaders are resigned to the fact that Britain may leave without a deal.”

Britain hurtles towards a no-deal exit under conditions in which one study last week said that the economy may already be in a recession, with forecasts of a 10 percent collapse in the value of the pound and an increase in inflation to above 4 percent. These reports are devastating, but they underestimate the situation facing the working class. Brexit was an advanced expression of the deepening descent of world capitalism into bitter trade war and protectionism. Johnson’s perspective is based on uniting British and US imperialism for a trade war against Europe. The Remain faction favours Britain and Europe forging an alliance against the US or at least straddling the growing divide between the two rivals.

Johnson heads an unstable government of Thatcherites committed to a war agenda against the working class. But nothing they are planning could be contemplated without the role played by Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. His every action since being elected has been to demobilise the working class, preventing it from intervening independently in a political crisis within ruling circles without precedent in peacetime. The Tories are now on their third leader in the nearly four years since Corbyn took office, but they still cling to power thanks to him.

As Leader of the Opposition, Corbyn has it in his gift to call a no confidence vote in Johnson—who only has a working majority of three MPs—at a time of his choosing. Corbyn says that he will only move a no-confidence motion when this is “optimal.” What does this mean?

Corbyn is occupied with assembling a parliamentary majority—including dissenting Tories—for an alternative perspective serving that faction of the British bourgeoisie who want a deal with the EU that preserves access to the Single Market and Customs Union. On Sunday, in an interview with *Sky News*, he complained: “What we proposed was actually a very credible deal. A bespoke customs union with the EU and the trade arrangements would have achieved those things. It didn’t go through parliament, that was the problem.”

For a genuine workers’ leader, the only point in calling a no-confidence vote would be to make clear the implacable opposition of his party to the government and to expose the refusal of its other “critics” to any fight to bring it down. It would be bound up with a fight to mobilise the working class against this hated government on an alternative perspective representing their class interests. But Corbyn fears a movement from below just as much as do the Tories and is absolutely opposed to bringing down the government.

It was revealed last week that May’s former Remain supporting Chancellor Philip Hammond, who stepped down as Johnson became prime minister has held “private talks” with Corbyn’s Brexit Secretary, the Blairite Sir Keir Starmer. The *Guardian* reported, “On Saturday night Starmer confirmed that Johnson’s arrival in No 10 had spurred more cross-party discussions at high levels involving senior Tories sacked by Johnson, or who chose to resign, as opponents of no deal prepared a cross-party counter-offensive against his new hard-Brexit cabinet and government.”

The only viable response for the working class, as fought for by the Socialist Equality Party, is to oppose both factions of the ruling class, Leave and Remain, Tory and Labour, and fight for the United Socialist States of Europe in unity with workers across the continent and internationally.

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