

Brexit threatens to destabilise Ireland on both sides of the border

By Steve James
9 August 2019

Leading US politicians have indicated that no trade deal with the UK will be agreed if Britain's departure from the European Union (EU) undermines the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in Northern Ireland.

Their warnings run counter to the promises by President Donald Trump of a "very substantial" trade deal, worth three to five times the value of current trade between the US and UK, post-Brexit. His promise is the lynchpin of the economic and political strategy being pursued by Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government in order to offset the loss of trade between the UK and the EU and to reinforce Britain's declining world position through deeper integration into the US military apparatus.

In April, House of Representatives speaker, Democrat Nancy Pelosi, told an audience at the London School of Economics, "If there were to be any weakening of the Good Friday accords then there would be no chance whatsoever, a non-starter, for a US-UK trade agreement."

Last month, the head of the Congressional Ways and Means Committee, which oversees all US trade deals, Democrat Richard Neal—who also leads the Friends of Ireland caucus—advised the Irish government of Leo Varadkar on how to respond to British attempts to junk the so-called "backstop."

This refers to the measures agreed by former Prime Minister Theresa May with Brussels, meant to prevent the return of a hard customs border with the Republic of Ireland, an EU member state, post-Brexit. The "backstop"—a limited form of customs union—was rejected as a threat to UK sovereignty and its relations with Northern Ireland by Johnson's "hard Brexit" backers, who are now threatening to leave without a deal if it is not removed from the EU's proposed Withdrawal Agreement.

Neal reassured Dublin that he would have "little enthusiasm" for any trade deal that jeopardised the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), adding that even in the best

circumstances a trade deal with Britain could take up to five years to negotiate.

Rallying behind Dublin is not only politically popular in a country where one in 10 of the population self-identify as being of Irish origin. It reflects concern for the value to US corporations of Ireland as a cheap labour platform and tax haven for US corporations seeking to penetrate the European market.

Founded in 1981, the Friends of Ireland Congressional grouping played a key role in events leading up to the GFA and agreeing terms with Sinn Fein, which received much of its funding from the US. Since the GFA, US investment in the Republic of Ireland has mushroomed, utilising its low corporate tax rates to hide the gargantuan profits made by the US-owned tech sector worldwide. In 2016, the EU took the Irish government to court demanding it collect €13 billion tax owed by Apple to the Irish exchequer.

The Good Friday Agreement was instrumental in creating a stable platform for this flow of wealth from and through Ireland. It brought three decades of civil conflict in Northern Ireland to an end. Signed by the British Labour government of Tony Blair, the Irish government and eight unionist and nationalist parties, the agreement also institutionalised sectarian divisions by linking participation in the devolved "power-sharing" assembly in Stormont to designated representation of parties with hostile communities—pro-British Unionist/Loyalist/Protestant versus Irish Republican/Catholic—who nevertheless worked in tandem to make the north safe and open it up to transnational investment and trade.

The agreement freed the British military for bloody deployments worldwide, as the once heavily militarised border almost disappeared, so that it is now crossed by tens of thousands of people and vehicles daily. Cross border trade is worth billions of euros.

Brexit calls all this into question, not only posing grave economic consequences for the working class throughout Ireland but even a return to sectarian conflict.

The *Irish Times* has suggested that up to 34,000 jobs would be lost in Ireland within a year, while 100,000 could go in the medium term. Many of the jobs are expected to go in agriculture, much of which relies on exports to Britain. In Britain itself as many as 750,000 jobs could be lost, while across Europe 1.2 million are imperilled. Given conditions of deepening world recession, these figures are probably an underestimate.

Of still greater concern is the degree to which Johnson is now ready to encourage sectarian reaction on the part of his Unionist allies. The minority May government elected in 2017 was dependent upon and then partially paralysed by the “Confidence and Supply” agreement it was forced to strike with the 10 Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) MPs—who reject any “backstop” as a threat to Northern Ireland’s place in the UK.

Johnson is even more reliant on the DUP for a majority of just one in Westminster. He has responded by insisting that there can be no agreement with the EU unless the backstop is abandoned.

Johnson met with five main parties represented in the devolved Northern Ireland assembly at Stormont July 31, with an official mission of getting it to function again. Tensions between the DUP and Sinn Fein led to the suspension of the executive in January 2017. But talks inevitably focused on the issue of Brexit.

Even prior to arriving, leading Tories had let it be known that the government was considering a return to direct rule from the UK. Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said senior ministers were looking “very carefully” at whether legislation would be needed for the government to take direct control of Northern Ireland. “The question will be the extent to which it can be done, and that’s something I know [Northern Ireland Secretary] Julian Smith will be looking at very carefully, along with [Cabinet Office Minister] Michael Gove.”

Such statements, Johnson’s reliance on the DUP and his meeting with the party’s leaders for a secretive dinner discussion the previous evening rendered ludicrous his claim of “complete impartiality” made following the Stormont talks. DUP leader Arlene Foster left the meeting declaring that Johnson had “reiterated the fact that he would never be neutral on the union” and was “very, very committed” to a new confidence and supply agreement.

Sinn Fein leader Mary Lou McDonald said after meeting Johnson that “nobody believes” claims of

impartiality from someone she described as the “DUP’s gopher.” It would be “unthinkable, she added, that a no-deal Brexit would not be followed by a poll on Irish reunification: “He can’t say that he hasn’t been told.”

The Good Friday Agreement contains an explicit provision for holding a Northern Ireland border poll “if at any time it appears likely” that “a majority of those voting would express a wish that Northern Ireland should cease to be part of the United Kingdom and form part of a united Ireland.”

The implications of the sectarian tensions being stoked by the British government are potentially grave. Everything depends on the development of an independent political strategy for the working class. All factions of the ruling class, British, Irish, American and European, are bitter enemies of the working class. The essential step forward for workers in Ireland is the development of its own political party, seeking to unite Irish workers, North and South, with their brothers and sisters in Britain, Europe, the US and internationally in the struggle for socialism.

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