

US Democrats warn UK Tories no trade deal if Good Friday Agreement threatened by hard Brexit

By Robert Stevens
18 September 2020

UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab flew to the United States for talks with leading US politicians after a week of bellicose threats from leading Democrats, including presidential election candidate Joe Biden and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

They responded with unconcealed hostility to Prime Minister Boris Johnson's threat to substantially alter, effectively tear up, the Withdrawal Agreement his government agreed with the European Union (EU) less than a year ago. Johnson is seeking to pass legislation, the Internal Market Bill negating clauses in the "Northern Ireland protocol" enshrined in the Withdrawal Agreement Parliament passed last December following the Conservative victory in the General Election.

The Tory government claims the Bill is required to "protect jobs and trade" in Britain at the conclusion of this year's transition towards leaving the EU. But it explicitly nullifies what is known as the "Northern Ireland Protocol," breaking international law in the process. It grants government ministers powers to intervene on matters relating to export declarations on goods shipped from Northern Ireland to Great Britain and to negate the application of EU state-aid rules in Northern Ireland.

Biden warned that Johnson's proposals imperilled the 1998 Good Friday Agreement that ended three decades of civil conflict in Northern Ireland and military occupation by the British Army.

In Washington on Wednesday, Raab was subjected to a humiliating dressing down by top Democrats, who warned that the UK calling into question its EU deal threatens any prospect of a free trade agreement with the US if Biden comes to office.

On Wednesday evening Biden tweeted, "We can't allow the Good Friday Agreement that brought peace to

Northern Ireland to become a casualty of Brexit. Any trade deal between the US and UK must be contingent upon respect for the Agreement and preventing the return of a hard border. Period."

Following her meeting with Raab, Pelosi declared, "If the UK violates its international agreements and Brexit undermines the Good Friday accord, there will be absolutely no chance of UK-US free trade agreement passing the Congress."

Amid a threatened rebellion within the Tory Party over the scuppering of a post-Brexit trade deal with the EU and the implications of the UK breaking international law, Johnson sought to reassure dissidents that his was a necessary negotiating strategy—a counterweight to Brussels threatening the operation of the free market between the UK and Ireland post-Brexit.

A large-scale rebellion by Tory MPs failed to materialise in a vote held Monday evening on the second reading of the Internal Market Bill. With a massive government majority of 80 and a wildly pro-Brexit parliamentary party and base, Johnson easily won the vote—with only around 20 Tory MPs abstaining in the main and a few voting against.

On Wednesday it was announced that after discussions with Tory rebels, Johnson will accept an amendment from Bob Neil MP. In exchange for their support to pass the entire Bill, MPs will be allowed to have a vote in Parliament before such laws, breaking the treaty, are used.

While making such token concessions and reassuring noises, it is not possible for Johnson to simply fall into line with the agenda of Biden and Pelosi given the right-wing, xenophobic party he leads. Former Tory leader and cabinet minister Iain Duncan Smith declared, "We don't need lectures on the Northern Ireland peace

deal from Mr. Biden. If I were him I would worry more about the need for a peace deal in the US to stop the killing and rioting before lecturing other sovereign nations.”

Whatever the parliamentary arithmetic, Johnson is carrying out measures that can only deepen geopolitical fault lines. A hard-Brexit without a trade deal is opposed by his pro-EU opponents on the opposition benches and by the City of London. But potentially the most incendiary element comes from the escalating political and social crisis across the Atlantic.

The centrepiece of Johnson’s Brexit agenda has always been developing even closer relations with the US, with the aim of securing a free trade deal with Washington crowning a strategy of negotiating similar agreements across the world. His every move has been dependent on the backing of Donald Trump, who was the most enthusiastic backer of Brexit based on his “America First” agenda of securing the interests of US corporations globally amid escalating trade war. Trump’s support for Brexit was aimed at delivering a major blow economically against the EU, which he described as a “cartel” dominated by Berlin

Johnson’s rise to the leadership of the Tory Party and his entering Downing Street was precipitated by Trump’s denunciations of former prime minister, Theresa May. In 2018, Trump took to the pages of Rupert Murdoch’s the *Sun* — as he prepared for a visit to the UK—to attack May’s proposal for a “soft Brexit” as a betrayal of the 2017 referendum Leave vote. He said of Johnson, who had just stepped down as foreign secretary, that he would make a “great prime minister.”

Trump reiterated his attack on May the following year amid intensified divisions between the pro- and anti-EU factions of the Tory party that ended in May’s downfall and replacement by Johnson.

With the US presidential elections due in November and polls suggesting a Democratic victory, albeit in a tightening race, Johnson and the Tories face pressure from Biden et al to shift back to the long-term position of US imperialism—of supporting Britain’s EU membership as a firm political, economic and military ally and a counterweight to Germany and France.

This threat is amplified by the substantial influence in the Democratic Party of its Irish lobby, reflecting the 33 million strong Irish-American population. Moreover, the US has developed long established relations with the Republic of Ireland as a significant base for US corporations accessing EU markets, including tech giants

Google and Apple.

Raab relied on Trump to register US support for Johnson’s strategy. After discussions, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Raab held a press conference. Without mentioning the EU, Pompeo declared, “We trust the United Kingdom ... I am confident they’ll get it right.”

Raab was careful to continue blaming the EU for the impasse, declaring, “I think it’s a great opportunity for me to be clear that the threat to the Good Friday Agreement ... as it’s reflected in the Northern Ireland Protocol has come from the EU’s politicization of the issue and to be clear on how that’s happened and why that’s happened.

“Our commitment to the Good Friday Agreement and to avoid any extra infrastructure at the border between the north and the south is absolute,” he added, but “what we cannot have is the EU seeking to erect a regulatory border down the Irish Sea between Northern Ireland and Britain.”

Even Pompeo’s lukewarm backing came with a price-tag attached, with Pompeo demanding that Britain break with the EU’s existing policy of opposing additional US sanctions on Iran—which Pompeo declared would go ahead next week.

Raab’s trip was a telling expression of the dangerously fraught relations between the major imperialist powers. No matter how these conflicts play out, what faces the working class is an even greater onslaught on its living standards as British imperialism seeks competitive advantage to secure market share and access to resources amid mounting trade and military hostilities.

The escalation of the Brexit crisis confirms the correctness of the Socialist Equality Party’s insistence that the working class must oppose both competing factions of the ruling elite and intervene independently seeking to unify its struggles with workers through the continent in the fight for the United Socialist States of Europe.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>