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By Robert Stevens
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Johnson's real Brexit agenda is trade war, militarism and class war

The UK left the European Union (EU) Friday night, amid small celebrations, of which the largest in the capital's Parliament Square was addressed by Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage.

Epitomising the extreme right-wing forces being galvanised around Brexit, the “Great British Brexit Celebration Meet-up” in Glasgow's George Square was hosted by Alistair McConnell--a former member of Farage's previous vehicle, the UK Independence Party. McConnell is a Holocaust denier who was previously funded by the Protestant Orange Order.

An hour before the official 11pm exit, Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson issued a three and a half minute video declaring the dawn of a “new era” and “potentially a moment of real national renewal and change.”



Prime Minister Boris Johnson signed the Withdrawal Agreement for the UK to leave the EU on January 31st. [Credit: U.K. Prime Minister]

Leaving the UK meant “We have taken back the tools of self-government. Now is the time to use those tools to unleash the full potential of this brilliant country and to make better the lives of everyone in every corner of our United Kingdom.”

The reality could not be more different. Johnson is on a collision course with Europe that threatens to end in outright trade war and economic dislocation. He has aligned his government with the US and its heightening militarist agenda. And far from an era of prosperity, his government is committed to an assault on the living standards of the working class that will lead to an eruption in the class struggle.

A measure of the reactionary character of his government’s political agenda is that the first example Johnson gave of “taking back control” and “getting Brexit done” he mentioned was “controlling immigration”. He later listed “our armed forces” as among “this country’s incredible assets...”

Johnson has set a deadline of December 31 to reach a trade agreement between the UK and EU. Within hours of a video declaring a future of “friendly cooperation, between the EU and an energetic Britain,” the media reported that London would insist in negotiations beginning in March that there be “no more concessions” in a “new offensive” against Brussels.

There would be no “high alignment” with the EU on labour legislation and trade rules. Speaking to *Sky News*, Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said, “the issue of alignment” is “not even in the negotiating room.” Such an arrangement would “defeat the point of Brexit,” he added.

Farage welcomed Johnson’s approach as it was in Britain’s “national interest” to be “a competitor on their [the EU’s] doorstep.”

Johnson will make a speech today in London to business leaders and diplomats outlining the UK’s position, with the *Financial Times* reporting that he “is expected to say... that the UK will not align with any EU rules or allow the [European Court of Justice] to oversee trade relations with the UK.”

The EU is also in no mood for compromise, with European commission President Ursula von der Leyen declaring they hoped to reach a deal based on the “best possible relationship with the United Kingdom,” before warning, “but it will never be as good as membership. Our experience has taught us that strength does not lie in splendid isolation,

but in our unique union. It is clear Europe will defend its interests in a determined manner.”

The UK would not be able to cherry-pick in the upcoming negotiations because, “Only those who acknowledge rules of the internal market can benefit from the common market.”

In a further retaliatory move, former European Council President Donald Tusk said the EU would show “empathy” if Scotland became independent from the UK and applied to join.

This would mean the break-up of the UK and constitutional crisis on a massive scale. As Britain left the EU, Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said that were Scotland to be independent, it would seek full EU membership. Last week, for the first time since the 2014 referendum on independence (which had a 55-45 percentage in favour of remaining), a poll found a slim majority in favour of leaving. This was largely thanks to the ruling Scottish National Party securing a majority for support, in Scotland, for remaining in the EU in the 2016 Brexit referendum.

Johnson’s preparations for trade war with the EU are accompanied by his government’s commitment to stepped up militarism. In the weeks leading to Brexit he pledged **unswerving support** for Trump in his war threats against Iran. UK Royal Navy warships were sent to the Straits of Hormuz to escort and protect oil tankers and plans were enacted by Downing Street to ready the deployment of fighter jets, drones and other military assets.

The trade war and military offensive will be paid for by the working class.

Significantly, a section of Johnson’s Brexit night video referenced “creating **freeports**” as critical to the UK’s “recaptured sovereignty.” Free ports, better known as Free Trade Zones or Special Economic Zones, allow corporations to benefit from zero taxation levels and the super-exploitation of the working class.

Johnson plans the creation of around 10 free ports initially. Their necessity was debated on in parliament as recently as October 2018, with Tory MP Simon Clarke declaring they “must be able to offer lower levels of taxation and less burdensome regulations than exist outside, cut down on customs documentation, offer secure perimeter areas and therefore lower insurance costs and avoid Value Added Tax (VAT).”

A previous attempt to establish freeports in the UK by the Thatcher government in the 1980s had failed “mostly due to the regulatory constraints placed on them by the EU.”

In a revealing statement as to how the Tories envisage the UK acting as an attractive location for global investment—at the expense of the EU—Clarke declared of existing free ports in the EU itself, “In summary, we should not aim to establish the type of insipid freeport that one finds across the European continent. Instead, we should aspire to construct supercharged freeports like those found in China, the US and the Middle East.”

The Tories under Johnson’s predecessor, Theresa May, in a desperate attempt to placate growing anger, industrial action and strike votes in various important sectors, claimed that they would end austerity after workers had made “sacrifices” for a decade. Johnson repeated this pledge throughout the general election campaign.

This rhetoric and all such nonsense about the Tories becoming the “party of the working class” didn’t even last until Brexit day.

Last week, all cabinet ministers were instructed to identify cuts of at least 5 percent to their Whitehall department budgets. The *Financial Times* reported that “A letter jointly signed by the prime minister and chancellor Sajid Javid tells ministers that budgets remain extremely tight, even after a decade of austerity in public services.”

Departments were instructed “to name 10 projects that could be scrapped in this autumn’s comprehensive spending review led by the Treasury.”

Ministers would be required “to go through every line of departmental budgets assessing value for money...” and present “radical options” to cut spending.

The savings would “free up money to invest in our priorities.”

The central priorities of the Johnson government are more handouts for the super-rich and increasing military spending. Last September, Johnson announced an initial above-inflation defence spending increase of £2.2 billion.

The European powers, led by Germany and France, will respond to the challenge from Britain, and above all from the United States, by stepping up their own militarist rearmament programme and austerity measures against the working class.

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