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Brexit vote intensifies conflicts within European Union

By Alex Lantier

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As news that Britain had voted to exit the European Union triggered a global financial panic, it became clear that the Brexit vote will have vast and unforeseen consequences throughout Europe and beyond. The process of European integration launched just after World War II, intended to build political institutions that would make a new world war impossible, is unraveling.

Europe is now preparing for years of bitter negotiations over the legal and financial conditions of Britain's withdrawal from the EU and its treaties. With trillions of euros in trade and financial contracts at stake—and intra-EU tensions sharpened over many years by the Greek debt crisis, the Middle East refugee crisis, and US-sponsored wars in the Middle East and Ukraine—divisions within the EU are set to intensify. Top officials made somber and pessimistic comments about the prospects for Europe and the world in the wake of the Brexit vote.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel delivered a brief statement in Berlin, taking no questions. She called Brexit “a break in Europe's history,” reflecting “fundamental doubts about the current direction of European integration” and challenging the ability of European countries to assert “our economic, social, ecological and foreign policy interests.”

Merkel bluntly warned that there was no guarantee that the explosive contradictions reemerging between the major European powers would not again erupt into war: “Even if it is hard to

imagine now,” she said, “we should remember, especially in these hours, that the idea of the European Union is an idea of peace. After centuries of terrible bloodshed, the founders of the European Union found a joint path towards reconciliation and peace, culminating in the treaties of Rome signed almost sixty years ago. That is and continues to be anything but a given in the future.”

Against this specter of a new war in Europe, Merkel had little to propose besides vain hopes that the EU could present its hated policies of austerity, war and police repression in a more favorable light to its remaining citizens. “We therefore have to ensure that citizens get a concrete sense of how the European Union contributes to improving their own personal lives,” she said.

In fact, a key factor in the Brexit crisis is the reality that masses of voters in Britain, as across Europe, have concluded that the EU is a socially regressive institution hostile to their interests. A tool of European capitalism, it is, moreover, irrevocably torn by the competing interests of European states.

Merkel did not attempt to hide rising intra-EU tensions. Even as she called for unity, the German chancellor, whose government only two years ago repudiated the policy of military restraint pursued by Germany after World War II, said she would defend first and foremost Berlin's interests. “The German government will pay special attention to the interests of German citizens and the German economy in that process,” she declared.

On Monday, Merkel will host French President François Hollande and Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, who are meeting today in Paris, for a one-day meeting to prepare an extraordinary two-day EU summit. Even as EU officials attempt to construct a negotiating framework, however, tensions are already erupting between different European countries.

Spanish officials reacted by proposing to take back the Rock of Gibraltar, a British possession at the tip of the Iberian peninsula situated between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, which was captured by British and Dutch forces in 1704. Spain's acting foreign minister, José Manuel García-Margallo, told Onda Cero radio, “I hope the formula of co-sovereignty—to be clear, the Spanish flag on the rock—is much closer than before.”

British officials flatly rejected proposals to share sovereignty over Gibraltar with Spain.

Above all, Brexit is stoking tensions between the two largest remaining EU economies, Germany and France. Yesterday, Hollande demanded “profound change” in the EU, focusing on strengthening European military and police powers and generating more economic growth.

While Hollande's comments broadly echoed those of EU officials, who have called for expanding the EU's repressive powers and its ability to wage foreign wars, his remarks on growth were a barely veiled criticism of Germany, in line with longstanding French calls for a looser monetary policy. These demands have faced determined and ever more overt opposition in Berlin since the eruption of the Greek debt crisis, shortly after the 2008 Wall Street crash.

“The calculation of the [French] head of state is that Angela Merkel, who blocked this, will now have to give way,” an anonymous French presidential staffer told *Les Echos* .

There is no indication, however, that Berlin and Paris will be able to resolve the escalating conflicts within the euro zone. As stock markets collapsed globally, former US Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan appeared on the financial news channel CNBC to declare that, due to the intractable political conflicts unleashed by the crisis, it would prove to be more serious than the financial crashes of 1987 and 2008.

“This is the worst period I recall since I've been in public service,” Greenspan said. “There's nothing like it, including the crisis—remember October 19, 1987, when the Dow went down by a record amount, 23 percent? That I thought was the bottom of all potential problems. This has a corrosive effect that will not go away.”

Greenspan indicated that he considered both a Greek exit from the EU and Scottish secession from Britain to be likely. However, he reserved his sharpest warnings for the increasingly bitter divisions within the euro zone, declaring that “the euro is a very serious problem in that the southern part of the euro zone is being funded by the northern part and the European Central Bank.”

What has emerged is the breakdown of the EU and the impossibility of overcoming contradictions deeply lodged in the historical and economic development of Europe on a capitalist basis. Far from uniting Europe, the relentless assault on workers' social and democratic rights and the escalating military interventions that have proceeded since the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 have discredited the EU and undermined the relations established during the Cold War era.

The greatest danger, however, lies in the suppression of the independent interests of the working class, the only social force that can overcome the deepening crisis and drive to war. Opposition to the EU in Britain was organized not from the left, from the standpoint of the independent political interests of the working class, but from the right—by extreme nationalist elements within the Conservative Party in alliance with the far-right, anti-immigrant UK Independence Party, who attracted around them reactionary petty-bourgeois, pseudo-left elements such as George Galloway.

The European allies of these forces predictably praised the Brexit and called for a further breakup of the EU along nationalist lines.

Marine Le Pen, the leader of France's neo-fascist National Front (FN), attended a congress of far-right parties in Vienna Friday that hailed the Brexit vote. Le Pen, who has associated her campaign for next year's French presidential election with a demand for a referendum on a French exit from the EU, said: “Like a lot of French people, I'm very happy that the British people held on and made the right choice. What we thought was impossible yesterday has now become possible.”

Dutch far-right politician Geert Wilders, also at the Vienna meeting, welcomed the Brexit vote as “historic,” adding: “Now it’s our turn. I think the Dutch people must now be given the chance to have their say in a referendum.”

The rising tensions within the EU confront Washington with serious problems. The NATO military alliance encompassing all of the major European powers is central to the global imperialist policy of the United States. US President Barack Obama aggressively campaigned against Brexit, traveling to Britain to threaten that the UK would be relegated to “the back of the queue” in its relations with the US if it exited the EU. With NATO now facing increasing internal conflicts, or even possibly outright dissolution, Obama took a more conciliatory stance yesterday.

“The people of the United Kingdom have spoken, and we respect their decision,” he said. “The special relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom is enduring,” he added, “and the United Kingdom’s membership in NATO remains a vital cornerstone of US foreign, security and economic policy.”