

Political warfare erupts in Britain over plans for European Army

Chris Marsden
27 November 2000

The decision by the Blair Labour government to commit 12,500 British troops, 18 ships and 72 combat aircraft to a new 60,000-strong European Union Rapid Reaction Force by 2003 has become the focus for a sustained attack of unprecedented ferocity by right-wing Conservative forces.

Conservative Party leader William Hague rejected out-of-hand government assurances that no European army was in the offing and Tory foreign affairs spokesman Francis Maude warned that a "political" rather than a "military enterprise" threatened to pitch the EU into conflict with the US. On November 22, former Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher used the occasion of the tenth anniversary of her loss of office to denounce Labour's "plans to create a new European army" as a measure to "divide and destroy" NATO to satisfy Prime Minister Blair's "political vanity".

The *Daily Telegraph*, the *Mail* and other pro-Tory organs have all joined in the attack--but the leading player by far is the *Sun* newspaper, Britain's largest circulation tabloid which is published by Rupert Murdoch's News International.

Blair, meeting with President Putin in Moscow, seemed stunned by the intensity of the press reaction to the announcement. He countered by attacking the "anti-European media" as "fundamentally dishonest" and stating that, "The idea that Britain should retreat to the margins of the EU, the key strategic alliance on our doorstep, is absolute and utter madness for our country." He fired off a letter to *The Sun* published on November 22 stating that, "contrary to the nonsense written yesterday, this initiative has been specifically welcomed by the United States and NATO."

The *Sun*'s counterblast was brutal. An array of former leading military figures were solicited to denounce the creation of a Euro-corps that reads like a Who's Who of the major campaigns of the past two decades. These included General Sir Peter de la Billiere (Commander of British forces during the Gulf War); two former heads of the parachute regiment; Admiral Sir Sandy Woodward (leader of the Falklands Task Force); Sir Michael Armitage (retired Air Chief Marshal) and Field Marshal Lord Carver (former Chief of the Defence Staff).

The *Sun* commissioned an interview with Thatcher, run in the same edition, and published an editorial entitled, "Who shall we trust?" The editorial stated bluntly, "If we have to choose between Maggie Thatcher and Tony Blair, it's no contest... Baroness Thatcher is the woman who, with her great ally Ronald Reagan, won the Cold War".

In conclusion they wrote, "We know who we'd trust to defend

this country's interests. Over the past few years, Britain has been betrayed. It is time to say: No more. Britain belongs to the people, not the politicians."

How does one account for the open political warfare now being waged against the Blair government?

Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon made the troop commitment at a meeting of EU defence ministers last Monday at which France and Germany pledged similar numbers. The Rapid Reaction Force will be capable of being deployed up to 4,200 km (2,400 miles) from Europe, commanded by General Rainer Schuwirth of Germany, with Britain's General Graham Messervy-Whiting second-in-command.

Hoon insisted that the agreement reached specified that there was no intention to create a "European Army" and the agreement also gives the US-dominated NATO "first preference" over whether it wants to lead any military engagement. But the decision to create an independent European military capability is inherently a major challenge to American military hegemony.

France and Britain signed the St Malo declaration on defence cooperation two years ago, but moves towards achieving a rapid reaction capability have escalated since the war against Serbia. There, as in Bosnia in 1995, Europe was again reminded of America's overwhelming military superiority and its own dependence on the US for intelligence-gathering and other vital military needs.

The Clinton administration has been supportive of the planned venture because it wants Europe to shoulder a greater part of the financial burden of policing the world. What they did not want is for Europe's ambitions to seriously undermine the role of NATO as the West's military umbrella organisation. Clinton therefore encouraged the British government to take part in the discussions on creating a Rapid Reaction Force as their man on the inside, with Blair arguing that the force remain tied to NATO's command structures. But whatever Blair and Clinton's intention, the logic of developments points to the European powers seeking to end their reliance on the US in the military arena. Thus critics of the move were able to point to the statement by EU President Romano Prodi last February that said, "If you don't want to call it a European army, don't call it a European army. You can call it Margaret, you call it Mary Ann, you can call it any name."

The Conservatives are fiercely anti-European and would automatically oppose any measure that oriented Britain towards the EU. But profound political changes internationally have made

the past week one of the most crisis-ridden the Blair government has yet faced.

The present offensive by right-wing forces within Britain coincides with the still disputed US Presidential election. The Tories and the media have drawn succour from what they expect to be a change in regime in America represented by a Bush Presidency. Murdoch, in particular, has been at the forefront of the efforts to secure the White House for George W Bush by unconstitutional means. The *World Socialist Web Site* has written for example on the role played by Murdoch-owned Fox TV in seeking to bounce the election result by prematurely announcing that Bush had won the key state of Florida.

The prospect of a Republican administration has further charged the claims and counter-claims about Washington's backing for an independent European defence capability. While Blair cited the endorsement for the Euro-force by leading figures including President Clinton, the *Sun* countered with criticisms by Republican politicians from the Reagan administration up until the present day.

These included former US Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and Richard Perle, a former US Assistant Defence Secretary and possibly Bush's Defense Secretary who said, "This is a French plan to advance its towering conceit". Last month's comment by George W Bush's Presidential running mate Dick Cheney was also cited, when he said, "What we care about, and care about a lot, is NATO, and ensuring that nothing is created within Europe which could undermine it."

The *Sun*'s November 24 editorial contains the following sinister and threatening remarks:

"Blair is wrong to claim that everyone in America supports the Euro army. The Sun has many more friends across the Atlantic than Blair and we know what they think.

"Those Blair quotes belong to Clinton's lame duck administration which is on its last legs. We put our trust in men like Richard Perle, who may become Defense Secretary if George W. Bush becomes President. We believe in men like Weinberger, who was close to George Bush senior when he ran the CIA. Don't tell us everyone in the States is on your side, Mr Blair. They ain't.

"And nor is everyone in uniform on this side of the Atlantic. We know. The squaddies and their bosses are close friends with The Sun."

Two conclusions must be drawn from the character of the present offensive by the Tory right and its media mouthpieces.

Firstly, Blair's efforts to deny any conflict between Europe's strivings to become a military power and the strategic interests of US imperialism do not hold water. That so many high-ranking Republicans are willing to directly intervene in a political controversy in Britain is an initial indication that a Bush administration would signal an escalation in the simmering antagonisms between Europe and America, that have thus far been confined to the sphere of trade relations. The Tories know this very well and are seeking to break Britain decisively from Europe and align it firmly behind the US in the old post-war "special relationship". In the next period the full import of the political conflict that has erupted in Britain—reflecting as it does a growing belligerence within sections of the US ruling class—will be felt

throughout Europe and the World.

Secondly, the Republicans have waged a dirty campaign of intimidation, lies and electoral fraud to get the result of the election overturned and pave the way for an economic and political offensive against working people. The *Sun*, the *Mail*, the *Telegraph* and others clearly believe that the same type of political shift is both necessary and possible in Britain.

The Republicans in the US are the political soul mates of the Conservative Party. Both share a core of fascistic elements and military types who are becoming rapidly disillusioned with the prospect of advancing their interests on the basis of democratic rule.

Murdoch is the archetypal representative of those who were the main beneficiaries of the economic deregulation during the 1980s. The *Sun* was the flagship of the Thatcher era of economic deregulation, privatisation, union-busting and welfare cut-backs.

In 1997, the *Sun* endorsed the election of Blair because the Tories had become so widely hated and were, moreover, deeply divided over the question of Europe to the point of paralysis. A New Labour government offered the possibility of continuing to pursue structural reform of the British economy, welfare provision and tax system to the benefit of business interests, while maintaining a degree of social cohesion by exploiting the traditional support of the working class for Labour. In recent months, however, a deep dissatisfaction with Blair has become evident. As far as the more right-wing layers within the ruling class are concerned, Labour lacks the necessary will to take on the working class—because it tries to secure some form of broad consensus for policies that are so socially divisive they can only be implemented by repressive means. Murdoch's resort to populist anti-government, nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric, coupled with direct appeals to the military, show that a significant section of Britain's ruling class is actively contemplating a turn to such means in order to secure its interests.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact