

Britain: Stop the War Coalition's humble appeal to Labour's "new Prime Minister"

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Cometh the hour, cometh the man.

With public hostility to the Labour government threatening it with electoral meltdown on May 3, who can save it from a well of deep-felt anger that is primarily the result of Britain's participation in the ongoing war against Iraq?

Step forward the Stop the War Coalition. The group, in the name of its president Tony Benn, chair Andrew Murray and convenor Lindsey German, has launched a campaign claiming that—with Prime Minister Tony Blair about to step down—war in Iraq and hostilities against Iran can be opposed by a humble appeal to his successor for a change in foreign policy.

The appeal centres on a petition in the form of a "Declaration to the new Prime Minister" stating,

We urge you on behalf of millions of British voters to:

- 1. Withdraw British troops from Iraq no later than October 2007.*
- 2. Declare that this country will not participate in any attack against Iran.*
- 3. Pursue a foreign policy independent of the administration of the United States of America.*

The call for an independent foreign policy is designed so as not to distinguish the views of the millions opposed not only to the Iraq adventure, but any imperialist and militarist foreign policy, from those whose major complaint against Blair is that he has damaged the global influence and interests of British imperialism. This latter group encompasses sections of the civil service and foreign policy establishment and even the military, and includes those amongst whom the coalition is especially interested in winning influence—the Labour Party's declining left rump and the trade union bureaucracy.

The Stop the War Coalition has no small difficulty in selling the idea that Chancellor Gordon Brown, who

without a major upset is likely to succeed Blair, will break from policies that he has fully supported.

In an attempt to do so, Murray and German have drafted a letter to all affiliated groups, which acknowledges that "Brown has been at the Prime Minister's right hand throughout the decisions on Iraq and Afghanistan. Nevertheless, it is our conviction that mass pressure, combined with electoral self-interest, can force the British government to break from George Bush's wars."

They then urge a united effort to ensure that their Open Letter to the new prime minister is "endorsed by as many Labour MPs, Labour councillors, constituency and branch officials, and officials in affiliated [to the Labour Party] trade unions as possible."

Naturally, to be endorsed by so many Labourites all criticism of the party, which voted in favour of war alongside Blair and Brown, must be avoided. Iraq and Afghanistan are "Bush's wars" and the order of the day is the adoption of an "independent"—i.e., unspecified other than it being British—foreign policy.

When it comes to formulating an appeal to Labour Party MPs and lesser apparatchiks, there is no room for even the mild rebuke of Blair and Brown. They are asked only to "endorse" the declaration, while being told that its presentation will be made only "after the conclusion of the leadership election."

Such reassurances are aimed at making clear that the coalition is not interfering in the leadership contest, even to the extent of calling for a vote for those that pass themselves off as left candidates opposed to the continued occupation of Iraq—John McDonnell and Michael Meacher. The coalition leadership must calculate that neither has any substantial support in the party and the trade unions hierarchy and that their appeal must avoid any hint of genuine opposition to a

Labour government.

It is for this same reason that this letter is also signed by Benn, the 82-year-old former MP and elder-statesman of the Labour left—a man whose loyalty to the party is his overriding principle.

The Stop the War Coalition is led politically by an alliance of the Socialist Workers Party, in the person of German, and what remains of the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain, in the person of Murray, who is also a leading trade union functionary. In 2003, these forces found themselves in the leadership of a mass antiwar movement precisely because the war was being waged by a Labour government and allowed to go ahead by a trade union bureaucracy that refused to mobilise against it.

The SWP in particular played a politically criminal role in preventing antiwar sentiment from becoming the starting point of a political movement of the working class against Labour. They insisted that there was no possibility of the struggle against war being conducted on the basis of socialism. It must formulate demands that could be supported by everyone, including the coalitions other major affiliates, the pacifist Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the Muslim Association of Britain, a small group of Arab Islamists that portrayed the Iraq war in religious terms.

Above all, the SWP gave pride of place to any Labourite who would still register a protest against war, provided that they were not called on to politically oppose the government or break with it. Every official placard was a denunciation of “Bliar” and not his government.

Since 2003, the Stop the War Coalition has continued to plough the same furrow, disillusioning tens of thousands of working people and youth in the process. Like the Grand Old Duke of York, they have marched them up to the top of the hill, again and again and again—insisting against all evidence to the contrary that “mass pressure” and “electoral self-interest” will force the government to listen to the will of the people.

This appeal to the Labourites worried about their electoral fortunes now reveals its fundamental purpose. It is an attempt to preserve and restore the political grip of Labour and the trade unions over the working class at a time of crisis that is on the brink of becoming terminal. It marks out the STWC, the SWP and its front party Respect as the last line of defence of the

bureaucracy and resolute opponents of any expression of independent political action by the working class.



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