

UK Labour conference ends with attacks on Corbyn over nuclear weapons and Syria

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The first Labour Party conference under new leader Jeremy Corbyn ended Wednesday with Corbyn's attempt to portray a united party in tatters.

The last day was dominated by attacks on Corbyn by the right wing of the party following a statement by Corbyn to the BBC that if he became prime minister, he would not use Britain's Trident nuclear weapons in any circumstances. The debate showed that Corbyn, who was elected by a landslide on a platform of opposition to austerity and war, holds the leadership post but is not in control of the party. Rather, thanks to his own bankrupt politics, he is hostage to right-wing supporters of former Labour leaders and unindicted war criminals Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.

Since his election, Corbyn has insisted he can lead the party in an anti-austerity and anti-war direction while maintaining unity with the supporters of Blair and Brown, who make up a large majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party. It has taken just the four days of the Labour conference for this claim to be shot to pieces, in relation both to the retention and use of Trident and Labour support for air strikes on Syria.

Corbyn told BBC Radio's "Today" programme, "I am opposed to the use of nuclear weapons. I am opposed to the holding of nuclear weapons. I want to see a nuclear-free world. I believe it is possible." Asked if he would ever press a button firing a nuclear weapon, he replied, "No."

He was immediately assailed for the statement, with Shadow Defence Secretary Maria Eagle, appointed by Corbyn only days ago, saying his words were "not helpful." She added, "I'm surprised he answered the question in the way that he did."

Lord Falconer, a leading Blairite whom Corbyn appointed shadow justice secretary, said, "There's no point having a nuclear deterrent unless you're prepared

in extreme circumstances to use it."

The most forthright attack came from within the trade unions. The recently knighted Sir Paul Kenny, leader of Britain's third largest trade union, the GMB, said he disagreed with Corbyn over the use of nuclear weapons and warned that if Corbyn refused to support Trident while Labour was still committed to the programme, he would have to consider resigning.

In response to these attacks, Corbyn insisted that if he could "persuade the whole of the Labour Party to come round to my point of view, I would be very, very happy indeed."

Asked what would happen if the party disagreed with his position, Corbyn, as on every other controversy over policy he has confronted, replied, "If I can't, we'll live with it somehow."

Following a debate on Syria that was allotted all of 20 minutes, delegates passed a motion to oppose air strikes on Syria—unless, that is, they were approved by a United Nations resolution. The motion, put forward by the Unite trade union, was worded as evasively as possible in order to allow the parliamentary party room to support war at a later date. Air strikes could be supported with a UN resolution, provided that a plan for humanitarian assistance for any refugees who might be displaced by the action was in place, that assurances were given that any bombing would be directed exclusively at military targets associated with ISIS, and that military action was part of diplomatic efforts between the powers involved to end the Syrian conflict.

It is already clear that a significant section of Labour MPs, including many shadow cabinet members, will vote with the ruling Conservatives for bombing in Syria when an expected motion from the government comes before parliament as early as this month.

At this stage, Corbyn has not called for, as demanded

by Labour's right wing, a free vote in parliament on air strikes, though he has not ruled it out. However, his closest associate, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, has moved to prevent any conflict with the right wing, stating that he believes a free vote should be held.

Speaking at a fringe meeting, McDonnell said that since many MPs opposed Corbyn on a bombing campaign in Syria, the party's parliamentary fraction would have to "agree that we can't agree." Handing the initiative to the warmongers among Labour MPs, he stated, "When you are sending people to potential loss of life, I think it is a conscience decision. It is a moral decision. On Syria, my view is it should be a free vote on the basis of conscience."

Given this statement, and the fact that Russia has begun bombing Islamic State positions in Syria, as well as Corbyn's declared support for US President Barack Obama's Middle East policies, it cannot be excluded that, if not Corbyn himself, many of his supporters will also endorse Royal Air Force bombing in Syria.

Even though Corbyn was elected leader with the votes of hundreds of thousands of Labour members and supporters, at conference his opponents were allowed to proceed as if it was business as usual. Their arrogance was summed up by Shadow Defence Secretary Eagle's comment that it was unacceptable for the elected leader of the party to have stated his position, one held for over 30 years, opposing the UK nuclear weapons system.

Corbyn had originally wanted to hold a debate at conference on scrapping the Trident missiles. However, the debate was ditched after Corbyn was told that the UK's three biggest unions, including Labour's biggest donors, Unison and the GMB, had made clear their opposition to such a discussion.

Tom Watson, Labour's deputy leader, said at the start of the conference, after Corbyn suggested that MPs might be allowed a free vote in parliament on the replacement of Trident with another nuclear missile system, that he thought this would be the outcome.

Following this, on Monday, Hilary Benn, chosen by Corbyn as shadow foreign secretary, informed delegates that Labour would support military action in Syria—ruling out only the provision of support for deploying UK troops on the ground. Benn, an MP since 1999, was an avid supporter of the illegal war in Iraq and other military adventures carried out by British

imperialism. He has sought to outflank Prime Minister David Cameron, who has shifted to endorsing the US position of a possible transitional regime temporarily led by Bashar al-Assad, from the right. Benn called for Cameron to campaign at the United Nations for an endorsement of military action under a Chapter Seven UN resolution and for the Syrian President to face war crime charges at The Hague.

Putting Corbyn at its head has changed nothing fundamental: Labour remains what it was—a pro-business party of militarism and war.



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