

UK Labour: A party of militarism and nuclear war

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The Labour Party conference last week ended amid bitter denunciations of newly elected party leader Jeremy Corbyn for having said that if he were prime minister he would not use Britain's nuclear weapons.

Corbyn is a lifelong member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and was until his election as Labour leader chair of the Stop the War Coalition. But as with all his policy prescriptions, he was more than ready to compromise with his militarist opponents within Labour in the name of securing "party unity".

Last Sunday, the conference arrangements committee met to determine which motions would be debated, including one on scrapping the Trident submarine nuclear missile system. However, in a ballot of delegates, only 7 percent wanted Trident to be discussed. More significant still was that the trade unions voted massively against, with only 0.16 percent backing the move.

Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey said that delegates had decided to discuss more "pressing matters", while portraying the cancellation of Trident as a threat to jobs—a statement made by someone who has spent his entire career betraying one struggle in defence of jobs after another. (There are in fact only 550 jobs directly related to Trident, and an estimated 8,000-11,000 in the armed forces and related industries. Its replacement is expected to come in at £35-40 billion—translating to a minimum of £3 million per job and a maximum of £5 million.)

A debate on whether to bomb Syria was relegated to the final day of the conference and allotted just 20 minutes. Delegates passed a non-binding motion drawn up by Unite opposing UK bombing missions in Syria unless backed by the United Nations. More significant than this conditional opposition is Labour's support for setting up safe havens in Syria by the UN, maintained

by no-fly zones and troops under a Chapter 7 resolution permitting military action. This gives carte blanche for a military carve-up of Syria. Moreover, Corbyn's Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell made clear that Labour MPs will be given a free vote to authorize military action against Syria when it is moved by the Tories, all but ensuring its passing.

Corbyn could only use his leader's speech on Tuesday to state that he had a "mandate" to personally oppose renewing Trident. On Wednesday, when asked on BBC Radio 4's "Today" programme if he would ever personally approve a nuclear strike, he replied, "No."

The Trident system consists of four Vanguard-class submarines carrying nuclear warheads, with one on patrol at all times. According to media reports this week, on taking office, the prime minister signs a sealed "letter of last resort" placed in a safe in each submarine, with instructions to follow if the UK has been devastated by a nuclear strike. Prime ministers can personally authorise nuclear strikes if the UK is still a functioning state. If it is no longer a functioning state—defined as a situation in which BBC Radio 4 can no longer be heard—the commander of the submarine on patrol must act on the instructions contained in the sealed letter.

Corbyn's statement that he would not authorise a nuclear strike met an outraged response at the conference, with seven members of his shadow cabinet including Foreign Secretary Hilary Benn, Defence Secretary Maria Eagle, Home Secretary Andy Burnham, Business Secretary Angela Eagle, Justice Secretary Lord Falconer and Health Secretary Heidi Alexander, lining up to insist that a Labour prime minister must be prepared to push the nuclear button.

A more vociferous response came from the trade

unions, with Sir Paul Kenny of the GMB telling the media that the existence of “brutal regimes” meant that any leader of the UK would have to be prepared “to think the unthinkable” about using Trident. It “may be right” that Corbyn couldn’t be prime minister if his views didn’t change. “He’s got a choice to make in terms of whether he followed the defence policy of the country, or felt that he should resign.”

Channel 4’s Gary Gibbon cited Kenny and other senior union figures who “said they are convinced that Jeremy Corbyn will not lead Labour into the general election.” “He’ll go in 2017 or 2018 I would guess,” one said. “He won’t have to be told.” *Guardian* columnist Polly Toynbee was just as outraged, writing that Corbyn’s “Christ-like position” had “nuked the whole party peace process” and “nuked his chances of becoming PM.”

Corbyn responded in his usual placatory fashion, telling the media that he hoped to do his “persuasive best” to convince his shadow cabinet to back him on Trident, but it would not be a “disaster” if he failed. He would “live with it somehow.”

From the outset he has insisted that the Labour Party and the trade unions are the central vehicle for opposing austerity and war, and that this struggle can be waged within the confines of parliament. The claim that the Labour Party and the trade unions can be pushed to the left is just as much an article of faith for a host of pseudo-left groups, with *Counterfire* writing that, in the fight against war in Syria, “Jeremy Corbyn is going to need all the help he can get.” It added, “We need to re-invigorate local anti-war groups and start new groups where none exist,” they add before insisting, “While organising locally, the ultimate focus will be on parliament.”

All such claims have been discredited by these events.

Labour’s conference was preceded by threats from an anonymous serving general that in the event of the election of a Corbyn government senior generals would mutiny in order to defeat any plan to scrap Trident or make defence cuts, by “whatever means possible, fair or foul.” It ended with declarations that his position on opposing a nuclear strike rules him out of ever forming a government. In the process, Corbyn has assumed the role of left-talking figurehead for a right wing militarist party—one that has twice dragged the working class into

a world war—and for union organisations that will stop at nothing in demonstrating their loyalty to British imperialism, up to and including the nuclear annihilation of the planet.

The struggle against austerity and war can only be waged in a political rebellion against the Labour Party and the trade unions. The war danger arises not as a result of the existence of “oppressive regimes,” but due to the efforts of the United States and its allies such as Britain to seize control of the world’s markets and strategic resources in the Middle East and elsewhere. This drives them into ever more dangerous conflict with the Russian and Chinese ruling elites, as demonstrated so graphically by the insistence that a British prime minister must be prepared to wage nuclear war. Opposing war therefore means opposing capitalism and fighting for socialism. It demands the independent political mobilisation of the working class in the UK and internationally to take political power.



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