

UK Labour Party paves way for Syria intervention

Robert Stevens, Chris Marsden
19 October 2015

Prime Minister David Cameron said he would call for a vote on military action in Syria only if he had a “consensus” in parliament. In response, the Labour Party shadow cabinet has signalled its backing.

Cameron’s cautious formulation was due to the fact that in August 2013, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government was defeated in parliament on the issue of air strikes in Syria when the Labour Party, under then-leader Ed Miliband, voted “no” alongside other opposition parties and Tory rebels.

Labour felt obliged to register its protest due to overwhelming public opposition to war in Syria, as well as concerns within the military that the UK had no plan for victory.

In the aftermath of that vote, Labour did everything it could to make amends—voting for air strikes limited to Iraq in September last year with only 24 MPs voting against. Nevertheless, with a slim majority in parliament and having suffered a 30-MP rebellion in 2013, the Conservatives need the backing of an estimated 35 Labour MPs to be sure of success.

Cameron already had every reason to be confident, given reports that 50 Labour MPs would back action. But this could have been politically challenged, given that Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader of the Labour Party by a landslide in September on the basis of his declared anti-austerity and anti-war policies. He said then that he could not think of “any circumstances” under which he would support the deployment of British troops.

However, instead of fighting for his position, Corbyn has relinquished all political initiative to the pro-war forces in the Parliamentary Labour Party. He appointed a majority of pro-war, right-wing MPs to his shadow cabinet, including Hilary Benn as shadow foreign secretary and Maria Eagle as shadow secretary of state

for defence.

At Labour’s September conference, a debate on whether to bomb Syria was relegated to 20 minutes on the final day. Delegates passed a non-binding motion opposing UK bombing missions in Syria unless backed by the United Nations, but given that Russia and the US are both bombing Syria the lack of a UN resolution is no longer considered an insurmountable obstacle. In addition, the Labour Party conference motion supported setting up so-called “safe havens,” maintained by no-fly zones and troops under a UN Chapter 7 resolution permitting military action.

As soon as the conference was over, Corbyn and his shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, made clear that Labour MPs would be given a “free vote on the basis of conscience” to authorize military action against Syria when it was moved by the Tories.

Even this was not enough to placate the party’s right wing.

On October 11, a joint statement was published in the *Observer* by leading Conservative Andrew Mitchell and Labour MP Jo Cox headlined, “British forces could help achieve an ethical solution in Syria.” The letter urged military action to “bring an end to the world’s greatest humanitarian crisis.” Cox announced the launch of an all-party parliamentary group that would insist Britain be prepared to enforce a no-fly zone inside Syria even if Russia or China vetoed a UN resolution. She was backed in her decision to work openly with the Tories by Benn.

Two days later, a selection of senior figures in the shadow cabinet met with Corbyn, including Benn, Eagle and Shadow Lord Chancellor Lord Falconer. A statement by the group “clarifying” Labour’s position on Syria drawn up by Benn and approved by Corbyn was published in the *Guardian*. It states that Labour

could back war without UN authorisation.

The letter reads: “[I]t should now be possible to get agreement on a UN Security Council Chapter VII resolution given that four of the five permanent members—the USA, France, Britain and Russia—are already taking military action against ISIL/Daesh in Iraq or Syria or in both countries.”

However, it continues, given that “we know that any resolution may be vetoed... in those circumstances we would need to look at the position again.”

Labour MP Cox responded that Corbyn was “brave and bold” and doing “the right thing.”

None of this is any different from the “ethical foreign policy” advanced by the Labour government under Tony Blair to justify British military involvement in numerous wars, including Afghanistan and Iraq. Moreover, the demand for “safe havens” not only provides the basis for a carve-up of Syria, but also threatens direct military conflict with Russia, which is supporting the Assad government. Benn states bluntly that Russia’s intervention “changes the situation on the ground,” making “the need for action to end the Syrian civil war much more pressing.”

Events have again refuted the claim by Britain’s myriad pseudo-left groups that Corbyn’s election as leader marks the beginning of a political renaissance of the Labour Party. As Left Unity put it: “The People’s victory,” i.e., Corbyn’s election as party leader, meant that, “Everything is possible.”

The political character of the Labour Party is not changed by the replacement of a leader, or even by an influx of new members. It is determined by its programme and its history of defending the interests of British imperialism stretching back over more than a century.

Corbyn may still vote against military action based upon what his “conscience” dictates. But Labour’s right wing has been handed victory without a fight—all in the name of “party unity” and the “new politics” of “collective leadership.” It is now estimated that Cameron could win the support of as many as 100 Labour MPs (out of 232) by framing military intervention as a humanitarian mission.

This past weekend, Corbyn was nominated as vice president of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, but the Labour Party will support the retention of a nuclear capability. Corbyn last week secured a vote

within the Labour Party to oppose the government’s “charter of fiscal responsibility” that would effectively write austerity into law, but Labour local authorities up and down the country will continue to impose every cut demanded by the Tories.

A genuine anti-war movement must be based upon the mobilisation of the British and international working class against the ruling class and the capitalist system, which is the root cause of war. Corbyn’s role is to prevent the growing hostility to austerity, militarism and war—the very sentiment expressed in his election—from leading to the necessary political rebellion against the Labour Party and the building of a new and genuinely socialist party of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact