

The UK military, Jeremy Corbyn and the threat of dictatorship

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The public declaration of opposition to Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the Labour Party, by the head of the UK's armed forces is a milestone in the disintegration of British democracy.

Chief of the Defence Staff Sir Nicholas Houghton, asked by the BBC's Andrew Marr about Corbyn's statement that he would never authorise the use of nuclear weapons, replied, "Well, it would worry me if that thought was translated into power." Houghton had earlier told the media that the UK was "letting down" its allies by not participating in bombing missions in Syria.

Corbyn's office sent a letter to Defence Secretary Michael Fallon stating, "It is essential in a democracy that the military remains politically neutral at all times. By publicly taking sides in current political arguments, Sir Nicholas Houghton has clearly breached that constitutional principle."

Rather than censure Houghton, the government rushed to support him, with a spokeswoman for Prime Minister David Cameron stating that "as the principal military adviser to the Government," it was "reasonable" for Houghton "to talk about how we maintain the credibility of one of the most important tools in our armoury."

The defence of Houghton was echoed by leading figures in the Labour Party, with Shadow Defence Secretary Maria Eagle and Lord West, the former sea lord, saying they would resign if Corbyn's opposition to renewing Britain's Trident nuclear weapons system became party policy. Lord Hutton of Furness, the former Labour defence secretary, wrote to Rupert Murdoch's *Times* to insist, "The chief of the defence staff must not be gagged or bullied into silence."

Houghton knew that he would be asked about Corbyn's position and went on the BBC with the

express purpose of making his public attack. This is not the first time such statements have been made.

In September, the *Sunday Times* carried comments from a "senior serving general" that in the event of Corbyn becoming prime minister, there would be "the very real prospect" of "a mutiny." Elements within the military would be prepared to use "whatever means possible, fair or foul," the officer declared.

He went on to say: "*You would see a major break in convention with senior generals directly and publicly challenging Corbyn over vital important policy decisions such as Trident, pulling out of NATO and any plans to emasculate and shrink the size of the armed forces.*" [Emphasis added].

Houghton's statements show that this course of action is already being followed.

Amid numerous articles supporting or apologising for Houghton, some within the media have been forced to discuss openly whether his statements signal a serious danger of mutiny within the armed forces. Of particular note was Monday's *Guardian* editorial, which stated: "There has not been a military coup, and barely a military mutiny of any consequence, in this country's modern democratic history. That is why the remarks about Jeremy Corbyn by the chief of the defence staff, General Sir Nicholas Houghton, must be a cause of concern."

The *Guardian* lists various incidents where the military decided to "pick and choose which orders to obey," including the case of "the former NATO commander Sir Walter Walker," who, in the 1970s following the 1972 and 1974 miners' strikes, led a fascistic movement directed against the Labour government of Harold Wilson and dedicated to preparing to smash a possible general strike.

The newspaper's warning, directed to the ruling elite,

is that illusions in democracy that are vital to the preservation of capitalism are being undermined by overt political interference by the military.

“Such events,” the editorial concludes, “feed speculation that the ‘establishment’ would always launch a Spanish-style pronunciamiento to prevent a leftwing government from carrying out its mandate. Whether they intended it or not, General Houghton and the unnamed general who recently threatened mutiny if Labour tried to ‘downgrade the military’ fan those flames again.”

There is in fact no possibility of success for Corbyn’s stated goal of bringing to power a Labour government that would oppose austerity and militarism. The response of the bulk of the Labour leadership to Houghton’s statements further demonstrates the utterly right-wing, anti-working class character of this long-time party of British imperialism.

Since he became party leader in September, Corbyn has come under sustained attack by the Tory Party, the parliamentary Labour Party, including his own shadow cabinet, the media, and now the head of the armed forces. Nothing that Corbyn has done to placate his opponents, including making clear that there will be a free vote on both the renewal of the Trident nuclear “deterrent” and Syrian intervention, has led to any let-up in the chorus of demands that he be removed.

The public declarations of Houghton and the anonymous threats of a mutiny must be taken as warnings of the growing dangers faced by working people. What the *Guardian* describes as “speculation” is the reality of political and social relations under capitalism.

The “impartiality” of the armed forces that Corbyn insists must be preserved has always been a fiction. They are the “special bodies of armed men” identified by Friedrich Engels as the essential instrument for preserving the rule of capital—not only against external threats, but against the internal threat posed by any serious social and political opposition that emerges in the working class.

Under today’s conditions, this fiction can no longer be maintained.

For decades, all the major powers have waged an unending series of wars of colonial conquest—in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and now Syria. Beginning with the putsch organised by Washington in

Ukraine, NATO has been placed on a collision course with Russia, while in the East the US is attempting to forge a military alliance including Japan and Australia against China.

This explosion of imperialist violence demands a frontal assault on democratic rights in the form of a raft of “anti-terror” legislation undermining civil liberties and the intense surveillance of virtually every man, woman and child in the world. In every major capitalist country, the power and political influence of the military grow by leaps and bounds.

These developments are driven by a systemic crisis of the profit system, which has only deepened since the crash of 2008, and the determination of a global financial oligarchy to utilise the crisis to further its self-enrichment. To this end, governments everywhere, whatever their formal designation, are charged by their paymasters with imposing ever more savage attacks on the jobs, living standards and social rights of the working class.

As social opposition grows, so do the preparations for dictatorial measures by military and intelligence figures, without any significant opposition from elected officials or the media.

The turn to austerity, militarism and war is incompatible with the preservation of democracy. The working class can answer the threat of dictatorship only through the building of a new socialist and internationalist leadership dedicated to the struggle for political power.



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