

Corbyn opens door to Labour backing for British bombing of Syria

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The decision by Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn to allow a free vote on UK participation in bombing missions in Syria is a total capitulation to the right-wing, pro-war forces in his party.

Corbyn has done everything possible to ensure a “yes” vote on Wednesday, given that Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron did not have a majority without the support of Labour MPs and had said he would proceed to a vote only if there was a “consensus.” At least 15 Tory MPs are said to be opposed to the extension of bombing to Syria on the pretext of defeating Islamic State (ISIS).

Now, a supposed “consensus” has been handed on a plate to Cameron by Corbyn. If the Labour leader had imposed a party whip, those voting for bombing would have had to do so in defiance of their party. Instead, Corbyn has given the green light for more Labour MPs—free from censure—to back Cameron’s policy. The Tories are now boasting that up to 100 Labour MPs will vote with them.

In September, Corbyn was elected by a landslide to lead the party based on his declared anti-austerity, anti-war stance. A reported 300,000 people signed up to the party to support him. Yet at every major turn, Corbyn has betrayed his mandate in the name of maintaining unity with the militarist, pro-business, anti-working class cabal that dominates the Parliamentary Labour Party and its local government apparatus.

Of all the ignominious retreats he has made under fire, this is the most fundamental.

Millions of workers and young people oppose military action in Syria, and Labour’s annual conference ruled that the party would not back action in Syria without “clear and unambiguous” United Nations support.

Prior to Monday, Corbyn said that Cameron had not

made the case that the UN supported air strikes, so he was opposed to a free vote that would allow MPs to contradict party policy. He went on television Sunday to declare that “the leader decides,” implying that he was considering a three-line whip instructing MPs to vote against bombing Syria.

He then organised a poll of over 100,000 party members and supporters that showed 75 percent opposed and just 13 percent in favour of air strikes. Corbyn was reported by the *Guardian* as telling his allies that he believed he had sufficient backing from MPs and his grassroots supporters to try and “stop the war.”

Len McCluskey, head of the Unite union, Labour’s biggest financial backer, came out to warn members of the Shadow Cabinet, “Any attempt to force Labour’s leader out through a Westminster Palace coup will be resisted all the way by Unite and, I believe, most party members and affiliated unions.”

This was all for show. Behind the scenes, Corbyn was already in secret discussions with Deputy Leader Tom Watson and Shadow Foreign Secretary Hilary Benn, two of the overwhelming majority of his Shadow Cabinet in favour of air strikes. He agreed to a free vote in return for a non-binding, and therefore meaningless, statement that “party policy” was to oppose bombing.

Corbyn has rolled over before a bloodthirsty and politically discredited rump that enjoys little popular support outside the UK’s big business media. And he did so as he and his right-hand man, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, spoke of “democracy” and allowing MPs to vote “according to their conscience.” McDonnell said a free vote would mean that “people will hold together.”

“Democracy” now means the right to defy your party’s members, defy the wishes of the electorate,

openly collude with the Tories, and threaten legal action to depose an elected leader. “Voting with your conscience” means not having one.

Yesterday’s Shadow Cabinet meeting saw this venal layer in the ascendant, shouting at Corbyn that his position that party policy was to oppose bombing was “absurd.” The meeting of the entire Parliamentary Labour Party in the evening was little different.

Corbyn was left with nothing other than to write a letter to Cameron urging a two-day debate before a vote is taken. Cameron dismissed this demand within hours, saying instead that Wednesday’s debate would be extended by a few hours. Benn has been given the right to close the debate for Labour.

Once again, events have supplied a devastating rebuttal to the claims made by Corbyn that he and his supporters could refashion the Labour Party as an instrument for opposing austerity and war by giving voice to its members and insisting on a “new politics” of democratic debate. This, he claimed, could bring change without threatening Labour’s “broad church.”

Instead, Labour continues to be a party of austerity and war. Its support for Cameron means that the bombs that will rain down on Syria, like the hundreds dropped by the Royal Air Force in Iraq since September 2014, will be Labour’s bombs. Syria will be Labour’s war just as was Iraq in 2003.

Labour’s political and class character can never be changed by installing a new leader. It is determined by the party’s pro-capitalist programme and a history stretching over a century of defending the fundamental interests of British imperialism—not only against foreign capitalist rivals, but against the threat from below posed by the working class.

Corbyn’s mealy-mouthed reformist rhetoric never offered a political alternative to the party’s control by the right wing. Rather, his role has been to prevent the hostility to austerity, militarism and war that brought him to office from assuming the form of a political rebellion against Labour’s despised leadership. Indeed, without his defence of their position in the party, even including them in his Shadow Cabinet, many would have already been deselected by their local parties.

The exposure of Corbyn is at the same time a devastating indictment of Britain’s pseudo-left groups, all of which proclaimed his leadership to be a fundamental turning point in Labour’s fortunes. A

week ago, Left Unity, the party formed just two years ago as a supposed alternative to Labour, declared at its conference it would no longer stand candidates against the party led by Jeremy Corbyn. On Saturday, the Stop the War Coalition held a protest against bombing Syria at which the central message from the organisation’s chair, Andrew Murray, was to urge Labour MPs to “stand behind Jeremy Corbyn.”

All these tendencies are guilty of disarming the working class and paving the way for war.

The struggle against war cannot proceed through the Labour Party and under the leadership of Corbyn. He will not move against the right wing of his party because he shares their pro-capitalist programme. He calls for a change in policy on austerity and war from the ruling class when both are the inevitable products of the capitalist system at this time of acute crisis.

The bourgeoisie needs austerity because maintaining its obscene wealth is dependent on ramping up the exploitation of the working class and destroying the social provisions on which millions depend. War is the product of the drive by the imperialist powers to seize control of oil and other valuable and essential resources on behalf of the super-rich.

What is required is the building of a new mass anti-war movement that seeks to mobilise the working class in Britain and internationally against the capitalist system and for socialism. That requires the building of the Socialist Equality Party to lead this struggle.



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