UK prepares military action against Syria after Corbyn clears the path

Julie Hyland
2 December 2015

Prime Minister David Cameron lost no time in announcing that a vote on air strikes against Syria will take place late Wednesday evening, after Jeremy Corbyn's capitulation to Labour's right wing cleared the path for Britain to join US-led military operations.

Corbyn agreed that Labour MPs will be given a "free vote", enabling an anticipated 50 to 100 of them to side with the Tories, without fear of censure. While the Scottish National Party, and possibly 15 Conservative MPs are expected to vote against, the vote of these Labour MPs—together with those of the Unionist parties and the Liberal Democrats, almost guarantees Cameron a majority.

It comes even as parliament's Foreign Affairs Select Committee voted 4-3 in support of a motion that the prime minister had "not adequately addressed concerns " it had set out earlier.

Yet so abject is Corbyn's surrender to the warmongers that Hilary Benn, Labour's foreign spokesperson and a leading proponent of military intervention, will close the parliamentary debate for the party.

In anticipation of a yes vote, the Ministry of Defence is already planning to double the RAF's fleet of aircraft in Cyprus, with reports that bombing could start within hours of the vote.

Cameron dismissed Corbyn's plea for a delay in the vote so that a two-day debate could be held. The Tory cabinet unanimously backed military action Tuesday morning. The 11-point motion, to be put to the house, presents a litany of justifications—including that Islamic State (IS) poses "a direct threat to the United Kingdom"; that military action has been authorised by the United Nations; and that it is being taken in solidarity with "requests from France, the US and regional allies for UK military assistance."

Military operations are presented as part of a "broader strategy to bring peace and stability to Syria," while the motion rules out deploying "UK troops in ground combat operations".

All this is a pack of lies. What is underway in Syria and the Middle East is not a campaign for "peace" but an escalating conflict that poses the threat of a third world war.

Cameron's case for military operations in Syria—which faithfully repeats the justifications of Washington—does not withstand scrutiny. Britain is to join US efforts to secure its geostrategic domination in the region, as part of its war drive against Russia.

The media openly acknowledges the holes in Cameron's claims, with the *Guardian* advising against support for bombing on this basis, while the *Times*, *Telegraph* and others call for greater "clarity". Labour MP Kier Starmer and Tory backbencher David Davis are among those who have said they cannot vote for war under these circumstances.

Targeted for particular disbelief has been Cameron's estimate that 70,000 "moderate" Syrian opposition fighters can be relied upon as a "ground force" to take territory captured from IS. Several commentators have correctly drawn a parallel between this groundless assertion and Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair's "dodgy dossier" claiming Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction.

As with Iraq, the lies over Syria are essential to the criminal nature of the enterprise underway. And whatever the qualms of the bourgeois critics of Cameron's war strategy, there is a reluctance to see the UK sidelined in the division of the spoils now underway.

Even as Cameron spoke about "peace", Lord Dannatt, the former head of the British Army, told the BBC: "Although it's quite specifically excluded from tomorrow's motion in the House of Commons, and as much as I don't want to see British, American, French boots on the ground, if we are serious about defeating

© World Socialist Web Site

Islamic State, it may have to come to that."

Political responsibility for the fact that the British public is to be dragged, once again, into an unpopular war with catastrophic implications lies entirely with Corbyn and his apologists.

Far from his leadership providing the means to "reclaim" Labour for working people, it is the mechanism through which the right wing intends to overturn the party's failure to support war against Syria in August 2013.

This is despite the fact that a survey of Labour Party members indicated overwhelming opposition to war, with some 75 percent against. The poll was commissioned by Corbyn, supposedly to shore up his case for opposition to war in his shadow cabinet. Instead, just as when the Syriza government in Greece called a referendum in July on austerity only so as to repudiate the result, the membership poll was just the prelude to Corbyn throwing in the towel.

Corbyn, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, and others have claimed that the agreement to allow a "free vote" is an object exercise in democracy. It is nothing of the sort. While the Labour leader was claiming publicly that he was minded to impose a three-line whip, he was in secret talks with the pro-war cabal in his cabinet, agreeing to a free vote in return for a public statement that "party policy" was to oppose bombing.

Even this meaningless exercise was abandoned after the right wing threatened to resign from the Labour front bench.

It is instructive to compare the stance taken by the right to that of Corbyn and his supporters.

Benn claimed that the decision on a free vote was correct because "People of conscience have reached different views about what the right thing to do is. Those views are sincerely held and we should respect them." But Benn, deputy leader Tom Watson and others—far from "respecting" the views of the Labour Party membership—insisted that their own support for war was one for which they were prepared to resign from the party and split it if necessary.

Their behaviour was in stark contrast to Corbyn, who refused to throw them out despite their narrow base of support within the Labour membership. Indeed, their departure would likely have increased Labour's standing in the population. However, Benn and Company could proceed without fear of being challenged, because Corbyn and his allies are determined that issues of principle—including decisions on life and death—can be jettisoned in the interests of "party unity".

There is to be no "free vote" on the Tory side when it comes to war.

The *Times* wrote scathingly on the implications of Corbyn's decision. "Senior Labour officials call this 'the new politics'," it mocked. "It may be new, but it is inimical to parliamentary democracy."

Corbyn "claims to be speaking for voters on an urgent question of national security while in reality he is skirmishing with factions of his own party… There will be an official Labour party position, but no obligation on senior party members to defend it and no risk of being sacked if they choose not to. On a policy level, he is supposed to provide an alternative to the government's agenda, or at least constructive criticism of it. This is his duty as leader of the opposition, but he is offering neither leadership nor opposition."

The Labour right is crowing. In the *Daily Telegraph*, Dan Hodges wrote that "her majesty's official Opposition" had failed in its constitutional duty to "pass collective judgment on whether or not the nation should go to war."

Instead, Corbyn had been pushed into a "humiliating" and "grovelling" climb-down and "has cleared the path" for war. This was good news, Hodges went on, because it shows that "the Corbynite insurgency can and will be directly challenged."

Corbyn's spinelessness is not simply a matter of personal inadequacy or misplaced party loyalty. The Labour leader and his supporters in the pseudo-left groups are acutely aware of how sharp class tensions are. Under conditions of deepening austerity and a sharp turn to militarism, they are determined to do all they can to contain and silence the voice of working people. It is this that accounts for the ability of the Tories to go on the offensive, despite the narrowness of the government's majority.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site