

UK Labour right wing tries to silence opposition to war

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The right wing of the Labour Party has stepped up its campaign to outlaw opposition to war, after 66 MPs joined with the Conservative government to vote in favour of the UK bombing in Syria.

Last week's parliamentary vote was accompanied by a slander campaign, led by Prime Minister David Cameron, denouncing Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and those opposed to war as "terrorist sympathisers" and a threat to national security. This is despite the fact that Corbyn effectively guaranteed Cameron the majority he needed for military action when he caved in to demands for a free vote on war.

Corbyn presented his capitulation to his right-wing opponents as proof that Labour was a broad church, able to accommodate "differences of opinion within the party." In reality, it meant that a pro-war minority won the day, against the opposition of the overwhelming majority of Labour members—75 percent of whom had registered their opposition to military intervention in Syria.

Led by Shadow Foreign Secretary Hilary Benn, Labour MPs had conspired with the government against their leader and party, with the *Sunday Times* reporting that "senior members of the shadow cabinet" had been in discussions with Tory ministers to build support for war.

Corbyn's surrender to the pro-war lobby has not sated the right wing. On the contrary, the result of the Oldham by-election in northwest England, the day following the vote, has only intensified their ire. Most of the media, egged on by the Labour right, had claimed that Labour was poised to lose the election to the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in a backlash by the "white working class" against Corbyn's left-wing agenda. Instead, Labour's vote increased by 7 percent on May 2015, while UKIP trailed in second place on 23 percent. The Tory vote halved to 9.3 percent, and the Liberal Democrats (who also voted for war) lost their deposit.

The by-election result is only a pale reflection of the real state of political and class relations, given that Labour ran a deliberately low-key campaign so as not to further

antagonise the right. It underscores the extraordinary isolation of the pro-war, pro-austerity parties.

In response, the right has responded with a hysterical disinformation campaign.

Former shadow education secretary Tristram Hunt has led demands that Corbyn pull out of speaking at a fundraising event called by the Stop the War Coalition (STWC), describing it as a "disreputable" organisation. Hunt cited "ugly comments" made about Benn by the STWC. This was in reference to protests called by students at Leeds University describing him as Hilary "Bomber" Benn, in reference to the Royal Air Force Marshal, Sir Arthur "Bomber" Harris, who conducted the infamous firebombings of German cities at the end of World War Two.

Hunt is particularly incensed by calls for Benn and others to be removed from their constituency seats over their support for war. In the Orwellian language of the Labour right, any calls for MPs to be held politically accountable for their actions is tantamount to "bullying" and "intimidation."

Coming from MPs who have repeatedly supported neo-colonial wars of intervention by British imperialism against oppressed nations from Afghanistan to Syria, such claims are hypocritical in the extreme. They are made more so by Hunt's claim that the STWC's decision to hold a picket of the Labour Party HQ during the Oldham by-election campaign to protest over Syria was aimed at "preventing the election of a Labour Member of Parliament." This comes from the representative of a faction that made no secret of its desire that Labour lose in Oldham in order to strengthen their own position.

In the last days, deputy Labour leader Tom Watson had to retract his demand for Labour members engaged in a picket of a pro-war MP's constituency office to be expelled from the party.

Labour sources had reported that anti-war protesters had marched to the house of Stella Creasy, MP for Walthamstow, and made threats against her after she voted for war against Syria. This was revealed to be lies. A vigil

had been held outside Creasy's constituency office. This fact, together with misleading photographs, was used to launch a media campaign that the MP was being subjected to threats. In the end, Creasy came forward to explain that the described events had never taken place.

Other pro-war MPs have claimed they have been subject to abuse, including death threats, based on little more than a single e-mail or Facebook comment.

The veracity of these allegations cannot be established. But at the weekend, it was revealed that Tory MP Lucy Allan had doctored an e-mail from a constituent to make it read like a death threat.

Allan had published the real e-mail from a voter describing her as an "empty shell of a human being" for backing war in Syria. But she was forced to admit that she had added the words "unless you die" to the end, after the sender, Adam Watling, challenged her on social media.

Allan withdrew the posting, claiming that she had added the words from another e-mail as an "illustration" of the abuse she had suffered from anti-war protesters. "My Facebook is my Facebook and I can write on it what I want," she insisted. "What I did was selective editing and I am allowed to do this."

The resort to such deceit on the part of the pro-war lobby is inseparably bound up with the criminal nature of the Syrian venture. Within hours of parliament authorising UK involvement, the government all but admitted that its claims of "limited" engagement and a "peace" agreement in Syria were fiction.

Cameron said that UK military action would be "complex", "difficult" and would "take time", while Defence Secretary Michael Fallon said it could last "at least three years."

Arch war-monger Tony Blair laid bare the real objectives. "The precise means of commitment [in Syria] can be the subject of expert military advice," he wrote on his Tony Blair Faith Foundation website.

"It will include, first and foremost, stepping up the military action against ISIS as the USA, UK and France and many others are now doing. *It might include heavier arming of the opposition we support and telling the Assad regime that continued use of barrel bombs against civilians will result in direct military action to disable those attacks;* establishing an enclave where the opposition and people can be kept safe and protected by airpower; and more direct on the ground assistance to those fighting ISIS" (emphasis added).

Blair's threat of military action against the Syrian regime was made just days before US forces carried out a deadly bomb attack on government forces in Deir al-Zour.

He continued, "We have to put our best military minds on

the task of constructing the force capability, drawn from willing nations and people, which can go and fight on the ground where the extremists are engaged in actual violence....

"And, crucially, those who are going to do the fighting have to be willing combatants. *This is especially so if they will include, as they should, the soldiers of Western nations*" (emphasis added).

Blair's statements make clear that the British bourgeoisie has determined a policy that threatens to set in motion a third world war involving nuclear powers. It knows that this path will inevitably generate mass opposition—hence its efforts to silence anti-war sentiment.

These are the political forces that Corbyn's surrender has given their head.

In a now typical mealy-mouthed response, Corbyn rejected calls for his withdrawal from the STWC event, arguing against attempts to "portray campaigning, lobbying and protest as somehow beyond the pale."

But while claiming these are the "heart of democracy," he refuses to take any measures against those attempting to suppress these democratic rights within his own party. Instead, according to reports, the Momentum group set up to support Corbyn is to draw up a "code of conduct" to prevent "hard-left groups" influencing Labour's political direction.

Under the new rules, Momentum supporters will not be allowed to vote or take part in meetings about the Labour Party unless they are party members. What this means in practice is that the group will police the party against efforts to remove right-wing MPs from their seats.

Momentum has stated it "strongly disapproves" of de-selection threats, while Corbyn has rejected such calls. The *Guardian* reports that the Labour leader is to make clear that Benn "hold[s] the government to account on Syria in line with the thinking of the Labour party."



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