NZ Labour leader calls for “troops on the ground” to fight ISIS

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During an official visit to Washington last week, New Zealand Labour Party leader Andrew Little said Labour would support sending elite Special Air Services (SAS) troops to the Middle East to fight ISIS “if the right conditions were met.”

Little was in Washington on a formal visit as parliamentary opposition leader, with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. He met officials from the Pentagon and State Department, as well as representatives on Capitol Hill. The main subjects of discussion were listed as international security and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal, reached in October among 12 countries, including the US and New Zealand.

The discussions took place as the US political establishment escalates the military intervention in Iraq and Syria, while the major European powers are bent on using the recent terrorist attacks in Paris to do likewise. New Zealand Defence Minister Gerry Brownlee revealed last week that US Defence Secretary Ash Carter had written to New Zealand and other countries calling for a “bigger contribution,” possibly including special forces.

In Washington, Little promptly fell into line, executing an apparent about-face over Labour’s previously stated policy on the Middle East and the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The *New Zealand Herald* reported on December 17 that Little declared “it is going to take more than just air strikes” to defeat the Islamic state. He called for “troops on the ground as part of a multinational force, targeting those areas where ISIS has a stronghold and those areas where they have seized oil refineries and those sorts of things to defeat them in those sorts of areas.”

Little said there needed to be a “clear and realistic” objective, as part of a multinational mission “mandated by the United Nations” and an “acceptable” level of risk. In reference to Syria, Little said there had to be a “consensus” between the United States and Russia before any intervention would be effective.

Little’s statement positions Labour to the right of the conservative National Party-led government as Washington’s most reliable ally. Prime Minister John Key announced in February that New Zealand would deploy 140 troops to Iraq for two years to run a mission with Australia training Iraqi troops to fight ISIS. The government has since ruled out committing any more troops in a combat capacity.

In deference to widespread anti-war sentiment, Labour had initially criticised the deployment. Little declared: “Labour’s position is clear: we should not send troops to Iraq. There is no case to do so.” Little’s *volte-face* last week, however, revealed that Labour’s purported “opposition” to National’s disposition of “training” forces was always a complete fraud. “We just didn’t think sending trainers to support the Iraqi Army looked like anywhere near dealing with the issue,” Little told the *Herald*. In other words what was required was a bigger escalation.

In an interview with Radio NZ on Tuesday, Labour’s defence spokesman Phil Goff flatly denied Labour had done a policy “u-turn.” He emphasised that Labour had always maintained that the military trainers alone were likely to be “ineffectual.” Goff declared that New Zealand had “a role to play in the world” and would consider backing a government commitment of troops if Labour’s preconditions were met.

The caveats demanded by Little, including a UN mandate, are completely worthless. They are being employed to try to hoodwink working people, who rightly oppose the war in the Middle East. Under the

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cover of previous UN resolutions, the 1999-2008 Helen Clark-led Labour government sent SAS troops to the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, where they remained almost continuously until 2013. In 2003, the Labour government dispatched a contingent of army engineers to operate alongside British troops in the occupation of Iraq.

Little's call to send the SAS to Iraq, and inevitably Syria, has a definite significance. These elite troops are highly trained killers, who in 2004 received a rare unit citation from the US Bush administration for their "black ops" activities in Afghanistan. In 2011 it was revealed that the SAS had detained prisoners then handed them over to US and Afghan forces who tortured them. Damning evidence was provided that the SAS was complicit in human rights abuses, with successive New Zealand governments covering them up.

Little's statement has been met with complete silence from the network of pro-Labour commentators, including the trade union-funded *Daily Blog*. None has criticised Little because they all, in one way or another, support him. Many have been pressing for some time for an intensification of US-led military interventions in the Middle East.

Prominent columnist Chris Trotter has penned a series of bellicose pro-war articles. In a syndicated column published by Fairfax in July, titled "Western Invasion Force only option against Islamic State," Trotter demanded a massive escalation of the war against ISIS and "the elimination of the murderous regime of President Bashar al-Assad." He approvingly cited General David Richards, former head of Britain's armed forces, who criticised political leaders for failing to let the military "wage war with both hands." Trotter urged the Key government to stop prevaricating and "start clouting" ISIS forces.

New Zealand's pseudo-left organisations are complicit in the drive to war. Echoing similar organisations internationally, Socialist Aotearoa (SA) used a pro-refugee demonstration in Auckland on September 19 to promote the imperialist intervention in Syria. A spokesperson from the group Syrian Solidarity NZ was invited to address the rally to argue for direct military intervention. His speech was warmly applauded by the SA leadership, which has falsely presented the US-backed Islamist "rebels" fighting Assad as the leaders of a "revolution."

The political editor for the *New Zealand Herald*, Audrey Young, noted on December 19 that Little's "adjustment" now opens the way for a "bipartisan approach" by Labour and National to questions of "national security". That would include more "consultation" between Key and Little, along with an invitation to join Key on his next visit to Iraq. Key told the *Herald* that while the current military contribution is "enough," the cabinet would review it early next year, and an SAS mission could be on the agenda with "cross-party support."

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