UK: Corbyn offers Labour's right an olive branch over Trident

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In one of the most bizarre proposals imaginable, Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn has suggested the UK could re-commission Trident nuclear submarines, but without nuclear weapons.

The proposal was raised on the BBC's *Andrew Marr Show* and touted as a compromise between Corbyn's stated opposition to nuclear weapons and the position of the party's right wing and the trade unions. Both have argued that nuclear weapons are not only necessary for national defence, but that Trident must go ahead in order to safeguard jobs.

Unsurprisingly Corby's proposal was given short shrift. Len McCluskey, general secretary of the Unite union, and Sir Paul Kenny, leader of the GMB, are making noises expressing concern for jobs. Last week, Kenny told BBC Radio 4, "If anybody thinks that unions like the GMB are going to go quietly into the night while tens of thousands of our members' jobs are literally swannied away by rhetoric then they've got another shock coming."

But in reality, the union bureaucracy sells the jobs of their members through suppressing or betraying opposition to the major corporations and the Conservative government day-in, day-out. Their real concern is not jobs, but the global position of British imperialism, which depends in turn on the military and political alliance with the United States epitomised by the possession of a US-built nuclear arsenal.

The claim that the UK has an independent "nuclear deterrent" is a myth. Since the 1950s, the UK has depended on the US for its nuclear capability and has also allowed the US to station its own nuclear weapons in the UK. Even the UK-built warheads that depend on US delivery systems are built using US technology.

Corbyn sought to counter such essential imperialist imperatives by offering what his newly-appointed shadow defence secretary, Emily Thornberry, described as the "Japanese option"—so called because Japan has the capacity to produce nuclear weapons, but does not yet deploy them. In the case of the UK, it would simply mean storing nuclear warheads on land and temporarily replacing them with conventional warheads—until it was decided to make a switch. Thornberry herself told the BBC's *Sunday Politics* that "the Japanese have got a capability to build a nuclear bomb," which can then be used "in various delivery forms."

The proposal did nothing to placate Corbyn's opponents. But it served as a further illustration of his political spinelessness and readiness to cede to the right on absolutely any issue.

There is every indication that Corbyn will now allow a free vote on Trident when it is taken up in the spring as is being demanded by McCluskey and others, the same position he took on the question of support for UK bombing operations in Syria in November.

It should be added that the prominence of Thornberry in Labour's defence review is itself an example of Corbyn's constant readiness to capitulate. He originally put the review under the supervision of his political ally Ken Livingstone as co-convenor of the party's policy committee on defence.

Corbyn's capitulation on the question of Trident is primarily motivated not by the strength of his opponents, but by concern over their weakness.

Just five days before his interview with Marr, the *Guardian* published the results of a survey of "Labour secretaries, chairs, other office holders and members from more than 100 of the 632 constituencies in England, Scotland and Wales".

The survey revealed a "surge in members, huge support [for Corbyn] and [a] shift to the left," the *Guardian* reported.

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“Almost every constituency party across the country we contacted reported doubling, trebling, quadrupling or even quintupling membership, and a revival of branches that had been moribund for years and close to folding.”

“Reflecting increased interest among the young, university cities and towns recorded some of the biggest rises,” the report continues. National figures “released to the *Guardian* in a break with party tradition”, showed that membership nationally has almost doubled from 201,293 immediately prior to the May 2014 general election to 388,407 in January this year.

“Both returning members and new ones tend to be mainly left-wing,” the *Guardian* adds, with one branch secretary reporting 90 percent of members being opposed to bombing Syria.

Corbyn’s response to the wide support he enjoys is to subordinate all key issues to the imperative of maintaining the “unity of the party”—unity with a widely despised rump—at all costs.

He described his recent cabinet reshuffle, which kept the pro-war right largely in place, as having made Labour "stronger, more diverse and more coherent." In reality, Shadow Justice Secretary Lord Falconer, Shadow Work and Pensions Secretary Owen Smith and Shadow Education Secretary Lucy Powell have all implied that they might be the latest to resign their posts in protest at any change on Trident. Shadow Attorney General Catherine McKinnell was the fourth Labour MP to quit this month, after the resignation of junior shadow cabinet ministers Jonathan Reynolds, Kevan Jones and Stephen Doughty following the reshuffle.

Corbyn claims “party unity” based on his appeasement of the right “will help make Labour a more effective champion of the people,” which can “build a coalition of electoral support that can beat the Tories in four years’ time.” What he really does is demobilise the working class with false promises of jam tomorrow in the face of a concerted offensive against jobs and living standards and an ever-more dangerous turn to militarism and war.

While he talks of electoral coalitions and victory in 2020, the Tories are proceeding with the dismantling of the National Health Service and announcing plans to bulldoze council estates. Thousands of jobs are being destroyed, and the Trade Union Bill passing through parliament will effectively outlaw strike action.

The same holds true for the advanced war preparations being made by the UK. In the face of these threats Corbyn’s response on Marr’s show was to blithely declare that because the use of nuclear weapons would be “catastrophic to the whole world… I don’t think [Conservative Prime Minister] David Cameron would use it either."

If Corbyn was serious about fighting the attacks on the working class or opposing war, he would take action against those who act as a fifth-column working in de facto coalition with the Conservatives. He wages no such fight because his political loyalty is to the Labour Party and its trade union backers, first, last and always.

Whatever his mildly left rhetoric, Corbyn is wedded to the party on which British imperialism has relied for more than a century to police the working class and preserve its rule. His insistence that it can be “reformed” through gentle persuasion is not political naiveté. It is a conscious effort to prevent the emergence of a politically insurrectionary movement against the labour bureaucracy and the capitalist system it defends.

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