

Three quarters of Labour MPs back renewal of UK nuclear missile system

Robert Stevens
20 July 2016

Britain's Parliament voted by a massive majority Monday evening to support the renewal of the UK's Trident nuclear weapons system.

The 472 to 117 vote in favour of the Conservative government motion approves the manufacture of four replacement submarines at a current estimated cost of £31 billion. However, this is just the initial cost. The final cost, including the maintenance of the system, could reach £205 billion, according to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). To put this into perspective, the entire annual cost of the National Health Service budget for 2015/16 is £116 billion.

The vote on Trident was originally put in place by former Prime Minister David Cameron, prior to June's referendum on UK membership of the European Union (EU). Cameron supported remaining in the EU and wanted the vote held after an expected victory for the Remain camp in the referendum. This was seen by Cameron as a way to tackle divisions in a Tory party split down the middle over EU membership and as a means of avoiding any controversy with Labour, which supported Remain, during the referendum. With the vote to leave the EU, Cameron was forced to step down, to be replaced by Theresa May after an aborted leadership contest.

Just one Conservative, Crispin Blunt, voted against renewal, with 322 of his party's MP's backing renewal. Blunt, the chair of Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, stated that he could not back renewal as the cost was "colossal," "when factoring in 32-year in-service life."

The government's figures estimated a total renewal cost of £179 billion, he said, adding, "We have capped defence expenditure at 2 percent of GDP. The cost of this programme comes at the expense of the rest of the defence programme."

Tory and opposition Labour MPs took it in turns to support the use of nuclear weapons, with many stating Trident had to be retained in order to confront Russia.

Prime Minister Theresa May declared, "In the past two years, there has been a disturbing increase in both Russian rhetoric about the use of nuclear weapons and the frequency of snap nuclear exercises."

Asked by an MP of the Scottish National Party if she was "personally prepared to authorise a nuclear strike that can kill a hundred thousand innocent men, women and children," May replied. "Yes ... the whole point of a deterrent is that our enemies need to know that we would be prepared to use it, unlike some suggestions that we could have a deterrent but not actually be willing to use it, which seem to come from the Labour Party frontbench."

May was referring to the position of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who has said he would not authorise a nuclear strike.

Corbyn told MPs, to heckling from Labour's backbenches, "I make it clear today, I would not take a decision that kills millions of innocent people."

May did not have to rely on Tory MPs to oppose Corbyn. Pro-war Labourites actively plotting his removal queued up to denounce him.

Corbyn refused to whip the vote on Trident, meaning that they had a "free vote." This allowed fully three-quarters of the parliamentary party to back the government, as 140 Labour MPs supported the motion with just 47 against. Also, de facto siding with the government were the 40 Labourites who stayed away from the Commons or who abstained in the vote. Among these were Emily Thornberry, Corbyn's shadow foreign secretary, who is conducting a review into Labour defence policy. Also abstaining was Clive Lewis, Labour's shadow defence secretary.

Supporting Trident were Owen Smith and Angela Eagle, the two Labour MPs challenging Corbyn for Labour leadership. Smith and Eagle stood down from Corbyn's Shadow Cabinet in a failed attempt to force him to resign. Even among those who remained, three, Andy Burnham, Rosie Winterton and Deputy Leader Tom Watson, voted with the government.

Labour MP John Woodcock said he hoped May would "be reassured that whatever she is about to hear from our front benchers, it remains steadfastly Labour party policy to renew the deterrent while other countries have the capacity to threaten the United Kingdom and that many of my colleagues will do the right thing for the long-term security of our nation and vote to complete the programme that we ourselves started in government."

Referring to the coup against Corbyn, he stated that workers in the defence industry "are now being ignored by the party leader, who clings to an idea of Labour party democracy to save his own skin, and that is not right."

Toby Perkins, who resigned as shadow armed forces minister, ridiculed Corbyn, stating, "As a 13-year-old I certainly made some of the arguments we heard from our front bench a few moments ago."

Underscoring Labour's intimate links to the defence and intelligence operations of the British state and its role in the ongoing US-led preparations for war against Russia, he told Parliament, "In the past nine months, I have visited NATO with two previous shadow secretaries of state for defence. We met representatives from Estonia, Latvia, Poland and several other NATO allies."

Ruth Smeeth, who resigned from the shadow cabinet and is playing a leading role in the coup targeting Corbyn, gave a succinct statement about Labour's historic role in defence of the British capitalist state:

"From Major Attlee's support for Churchill in our country's darkest hour to the founding of NATO under Ernest Bevin, our party has always stood up first and foremost for the security of our nation—we do now, and we always will."

Jamie Reed, who resigned from the shadow cabinet last September before Corbyn had even finished his leadership victory speech, said in the debate he supported "every word of the motion before us in the name of the prime minister, because the truth is that the

preservation of our national security does not wear the colours of any political party."

Prior to the 2015 general election, a poll conducted by CND found that 75 percent of Labour's parliamentary candidates opposed renewing Trident. This underscores the extent of the move to the right by the party, which, in line with the dictates of the ruling class, has abandoned any such pose of pacifism.

Once again, the view of the Parliamentary Labour Party is in blatant opposition to that of most rank-and-file Labour members, who overwhelmingly support Corbyn. A poll of members earlier this year found that 40 percent opposed Trident renewal, with just 29 in favour.

Concluding his speech, Reed said of Corbyn, "A policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament is a bar to being elected."

May referred to the Green Party MP Caroline Lucas and "some Labour Members" who "seem to be the first to defend the country's enemies and the last to accept these [nuclear weapons] capabilities when we need them."

Workers should recall how these politically loaded and ominous statements, essentially a charge of treason, align with those of senior figures in the UK's military, who have already threatened a mutiny against Corbyn if he ever takes office.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact