

Britain's pseudo-left and the party of war

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The brutal 18-month ongoing Saudi war against Yemen was endorsed by the British parliament last Wednesday, with the vital backing of Labour Party MPs. The war, waged with the full backing of the United States, has resulted in the deaths of an estimated 10,200 Yemenis, the great majority of them civilians.

Last Wednesday, Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry put a feeble motion before Parliament, on behalf of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, calling only for a “full independent UN-led investigation,” into “alleged violations of international humanitarian law in the conflict in Yemen.” It concluded that the government should “suspend its support for the Saudi Arabia-led coalition forces in Yemen until it has been determined whether they have been responsible for any such violations.”

The motion was defeated by 283 votes to 193. A majority of the ruling Conservatives voted against the motion, but its defeat was secured by 102 Labour MPs who either abstained or made themselves absent from the chamber. The motion was defeated by just 90 votes, meaning that if the 102 Labourites—almost half of Labour's MPs—had voted with Corbyn, the motion would have passed.

The vote gave a green light to Saudi Arabia's indiscriminate bombardment of the civilian population of the Middle East's poorest country, as they attempt to defeat Houthi rebels based in the north of the country. On Sunday, just days after Parliament's vote, an air strike in the Red Sea port city of Al Hudaydah killed over 60 people in two detention centres.

Peter Osborne, the associate editor of the right-wing *Spectator* magazine, wrote of the vote's significance on the web site of the *Middle East Eye*. Corbyn prompted the debate, he wrote, as “Britain has been complicit with mass murder as our Saudi allies have bombarded Yemen from the air, slaughtering thousands of innocent people as well as helping fuel a humanitarian

calamity.”

He described as “disloyalty on an epic scale” the failure of the Labour MPs to “support a three-line whip on British policy towards the Yemen.”

“The Yemen vote demonstrates something that has been apparent ever since the vote on 18 March 2003 to support the invasion of Iraq: the party of war holds a majority in the Commons,” Osborne concluded. The party of war “comprises virtually all of the Conservative Party and the Blairite wing of Labour,” he stated.

He went on to note that the pro-war vote included most of the leading personnel involved in the recent coup attempt seeking to remove Corbyn as Labour leader:

“Some 172 supported the motion of no confidence [which began the June coup] in Corbyn's leadership. By coincidence or not, exactly the same number of MPs have supported Britain's calamitous overseas wars.” Among the MPs who opposed Corbyn's Yemen motion are Stephen Kinnock, Liz Kendall, Ann Clywd, Angela Eagle, Tristram Hunt, Margaret Hodge, John Spellar, Gloria de Piero, Fiona MacTaggart, Barry Sheerman, Luciana Berger, Lucy Powell and Mike Gapes. Another is Keith Vaz, “who was born in Aden and makes a big deal of his Yemeni antecedents.”

What does this reveal politically?

Corbyn stood for the position of party leader and won election twice on a slate of opposing austerity and war, with a massive popular vote among hundreds of thousands opposed to the party's warmongering under Tony Blair and his successors.

But Corbyn's election has not changed Labour's pro-war agenda one iota. Rather, in the year since his first election, he has done everything possible to placate the party's right wing. In his first shadow cabinet, he gave leading Blairites senior positions including making Hilary Benn his shadow foreign secretary. He then

allowed a free vote in parliament on whether to back air strikes against Syria in December of last year. Some 66 Labour MPs backed the Conservative government, leading to British warplanes carrying out air strikes just hours later.

In his latest shadow cabinet, Corbyn named Nia Griffith as his new shadow defence minister after his previous appointment, Clive Lewis, a supposed “left”, used the party conference following Corbyn’s re-election on September 24 to declare that he would support the renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons programme and a NATO-led war against Russia.

Griffith too wasted no time in declaring her support for Trident and in committing Labour to NATO’s military confrontation with Russia. Just hours before the vote on Corbyn’s Yemen motion, she was asked by *Sky News* if she supported NATO’s Article 5—obliging Britain to militarily defend another NATO member if it is attacked—and if she specifically supported military action against Russia. Griffith replied, “We are one of the four battalions out there now in Eastern Europe and it’s important we make clear in the Labour Party we are seriously committed to NATO and the NATO preparations. ... It is very important that we make it clear to the Russians that we have that capability and we are prepared to use it.”

Asked what she thought of Corbyn holding a different position, she said, “One of Jeremy’s strengths is that does reach out to people and he does try to make sure he brings in a broad range of opinion.”

What this means in practice is that Corbyn “reaches out” to MPs with blood on their hands and allows them complete freedom to carry on with their politically criminal acts—while his own appointees are equally free to solidarise themselves with the war drive of British imperialism. Griffith refused to support the Yemen motion.

Corbyn’s rank political cowardice was demonstrated again as he neutered his own motion on Yemen by abandoning his previous demand to suspend arms sales to Saudi Arabia. In the first 12 months of Saudi Arabia’s bombing of Yemen, the UK made £3.3 billion in arms sales to Riyadh. Presenting the motion, Thornberry was keen to stress that “Saudi Arabia will remain a valued strategic, security and economic ally”.

It is striking that Osborne is more honest in his account of what happened than the Socialist Workers

Party (SWP), perhaps the largest of Britain’s pseudo-left organisations. Osborne states that Corbyn “bent over backwards to make sure that the Yemen vote was uncontroversial” by dropping the demand for an end to arms sales. For the SWP, however, Corbyn only “appears to have compromised” with the right wing. The main issue from the Yemen vote, they declare, was that the “rebellion showed most Labour MPs would still rather support British-backed wars in defence of ‘British interests’ than support their own anti-war leader.”

This mealy-mouthed apologia for Corbyn is nothing less than a defence of the political stranglehold of Labour over the working class. The SWP’s overarching aim is to ensure that workers and youth are blinded to the fact that Labour can only continue its mission of supporting war and defending British imperialism because Corbyn refuses to mobilise his own supporters to drive the warmongers out of the party. And without such a struggle, all of Corbyn’s professed personal opinions—his supposed “moral clarity”—and even the occasional protest by a section of Labour MPs at this or that example of imperialist banditry, changes absolutely nothing. The “party of war”—whether owing formal allegiance to Conservative Campaign Headquarters or to Labour Central—carries the day.



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