

UK: Corbyn issues mealy-mouthed personal protest as Labour Party lines up behind Syria war drive

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On Friday, Labour leader Corbyn issued a pro-forma statement opposing the unilateral and illegal bombing of Syria by the United States. He did so nearly 10 hours after the US sent 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles into the Syrian government airbase, and hours after the Conservatives issued their backing of the attack.

Corbyn's oppositional statement only served to underscore the domination of the pro-war right within the party. Several hours before Corbyn declared his position on the bombing, Labour's Deputy Leader Tom Watson had already given a statement to the *Birmingham Mail* fully endorsing the bombing. This was immediately reported by the national media and taken by them to be Labour's real position on the bombing.

Watson was followed up by a host of other pro-war Labour MPs, who combined enthusiastic support for the bombing with mocking reference to Corbyn's ongoing silence.

Labour MP Michael Dugher said, "Stop criticising Corbyn's slow response. It takes time for Seamas [sic] to run the draft statement by the Kremlin, Stop the War + the Morning Star." "Seamas" refers to Corbyn's spin-doctor, the Stalinist former *Guardian* columnist Seumas Milne, and the *Morning Star* to the daily newspaper of the Communist Party of Britain.

It was reported later Friday that Corbyn's Shadow Defence Secretary Nia Griffith—who issued no statement on the bombing—had been shown Corbyn's statement and had opposed it.

In his statement, John Woodcock MP tweeted: "It is disappointing that the UK government sat on its hands until the US acted. 24 hours ago, Theresa May was insisting no one was contemplating a military response."

Woodcock signed a statement later Friday along with 25 other Blairite Labour MPs, claiming, without citing a shred of evidence, that the Idlib attack was, "undeniably committed by the Syrian regime." Further action must be taken against the Assad regime under the guise of

humanitarian concerns, it read.

The statement cited the UN's Responsibility to Protect Civilians agreement, declaring, "[I]t is time for that to be recognised." After praising the US air strikes, the Labourites said they "should only be the start of a wider and coherent strategy ... in which an internationally-led no-fly zone should be set up in Idlib province as soon as possible to prevent further civilian deaths." It concludes, "Inaction has consequences ... and we cannot allow the slaughter to continue, and that is why we support immediate action to prevent further atrocities."

In its comments on Labour's response, "US airstrikes on Syria leave Labour hopelessly divided," the *New Statesman* notes: "Labour sources estimate that most MPs and at least half of the shadow cabinet back the strikes."

The picture painted is of Corbyn facing the brickbats and under a state of siege by the pro-war majority of the party he nominally leads. However, the analogy breaks down because Corbyn has repeatedly thrown open the castle gates in surrender to his Blairite opponents.

Within weeks of being elected leader in September 2015, Corbyn granted a free vote to Labour MPs in support of UK bombing raids on Syria. In the December 2015 parliamentary debate on authorising UK's bombing on Syria, which overturned a 2013 vote against air strikes, Corbyn allowed Shadow Foreign Secretary Hilary Benn the right of reply to the government. Benn spoke in support of bombing, leading 66 Labour MPs in doing so, handing then Prime Minister David Cameron the convincing majority he needed to begin air strikes within hours.

Benn was allowed to keep his position in the shadow cabinet, only to resign a few months later as a signal for coordinated mass resignations and the launch of an attempted coup to remove Corbyn following a no-confidence vote by 177 Labour MPs—more than two-thirds of the parliamentary party.

Though defeated, the right-wingers have been allowed to

continue their domination of the party, with Watson retaining his position even though he had personally guaranteed Cameron his support for air strikes in advance of the parliamentary vote!

Corbyn also refused to oppose Labour MPs as they lined up overwhelmingly to vote for the government's renewal of the £200 billion Trident nuclear weapons programme.

So pro-war is Labour that no less than three of the four shadow defence secretaries Corbyn has nominated since 2015, including the incumbent Griffith, are in opposition to him.

His ability to posture as an opponent of the right depends entirely on the snow job performed on his behalf by Britain's pseudo-left and Stalinist organisations.

The Stop the War Coalition (STWC) dutifully reproduced without critical comment Corbyn's Syria statement on its web site, despite the fact that it was weaker in terms of opposing US air strikes than that issued by Scottish National Party leader Alex Salmond and even the former leader of the far-right UK Independence Party and Trump supporter, Nigel Farage!

Corbyn never questioned the official account of the Trump administration and the Conservative government, asserting the Syrian government's responsibility for the gas attack, despite the lies about Iraq's non-existent "weapons of mass destruction" utilised to invade Iraq in 2003. He declared, "Tuesday's horrific chemical attack was a war crime which requires urgent independent UN investigation and those responsible must be held to account."

This is despite the fact that the US government, along with Russia and the United Nations, supervised the destruction of Syria's stockpile of banned chemical weapons in 2013-2014. US intelligence agencies have since repeatedly certified that Syria's chemical weapons stocks were destroyed.

This was carried out as part of an agreement brokered with Russian President Vladimir Putin following the thwarting of an attempt by the Obama administration to topple Syrian President Bashar Al Assad involving a weeks-long propaganda campaign asserting that his government authored an August 21 sarin gas attack on Gouta, east of Damascus, that killed 1,000 people. The US has never presented any evidence linking Assad's forces to the atrocity and investigative journalist Seymour Hersh revealed that the US deliberately ignored intelligence that al-Nusra was capable of manufacturing poison gas, including sarin, in bulk.

On April 5, immediately after the incident in north-western Idlib province, an area largely controlled by the Syrian affiliate of Al Qaeda, in which a reported 86 people were allegedly killed by poison gas, Corbyn told ITN News,

"What's happened is appalling, illegal and wrong. I want Syria to join the Chemical Weapons Convention, which was set up in 1925."

In fact, Syria signed the 1925 agreement Corbyn refers to—usually called the Geneva Protocol—in 1968, with the reservation that it did not recognise the state of Israel. Israel has never signed the Geneva Protocol to this day. In 2014, Syria also signed the Chemical Weapons Convention, an international agreement outlawing the production, stockpiling and use of chemical weapons.

Corbyn concluded by politely urging the British government of Theresa May to "urge restraint on the Trump administration and throw its weight behind peace negotiations and a comprehensive political settlement."

Speaking Sunday on Sky News, Corbyn's main ally, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, refused to oppose Watson's support of US bombing, stating, "I respect that view. I don't condemn him, I respect it."

Corbyn and his supporters will do nothing in opposition to the predatory warmongering of British imperialism. Indeed the pathetic character of his "rebellion" over Syria was highlighted when he followed this up by speaking to Gibraltar's chief minister, Fabian Picardo, who told the media Saturday that the Labour leader "restated" his "commitment" to "British sovereignty of Gibraltar." For this at least, Corbyn received the backing of the Tory supporting *Sun* and *Express* newspapers.

This followed the threat by senior representatives of the British political and military elite to go to war with Spain to maintain, post-Brexit, British possession of Gibraltar, located in the Iberian peninsula.

If anyone still needs to be convinced, last week's events confirm once again that it is not possible to oppose war through the Labour Party, or by supporting Corbyn's leadership of it. There is no crime of imperialism this party of state will not support, or against which Corbyn will mobilise his many supporters.



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