UK: Labour’s manifesto amended to stress commitment to militarism and war

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Tuesday saw the official launch of the Labour Party’s manifesto for the June 8 snap General Election. The manifesto contained a number of highly significant amendments from the draft version leaked just days earlier.

The draft, produced by the team around Labour’s nominally left leader Jeremy Corbyn, was subject to ratification by the party’s top officials on May 11. It sought to marry a watery commitment to certain social reforms and a slight relaxation in the Conservatives’ austerity agenda with a raft of measures demanded by the Blairite right wing. In particular, it committed Labour to the £200 billion renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons system, and to supporting NATO, and included a declaration that Corbyn would be prepared to launch a nuclear attack—albeit while being “extremely cautious” about it.

Stressing these commitments was Corbyn’s effort to placate the incessant campaign waged by the media on behalf of Britain’s ruling elite. With the backing of leading military figures, newspapers lined up to back the Conservative Party in insisting that Corbyn was unfit to be prime minister and represented a threat to national security.

On becoming leader of the Tory party and prime minister following last June’s resignation of David Cameron, Theresa May said in parliament that she would not hesitate to authorise a nuclear strike killing hundreds of thousands of people.

Following May’s calling of the general election, Defence Secretary Michael Fallon declared that the government was also prepared to launch a nuclear first strike against unnamed countries.

However, the concessions contained in Labour’s draft manifesto have since been revealed as only a staging post for Corbyn in what his shadow foreign secretary, Emily Thornberry, described as a “journey” towards accepting NATO and nuclear war.

The qualification on the use of the armed forces contained in the draft version, “That’s why we will never send them into harm’s way unless all other options have been exhausted,” is removed in the final manifesto.

Under the section on nuclear weapons and their use, the draft’s statement that “Labour supports the renewal of the Trident submarine system” remains. What follows, “But any prime minister should be extremely cautious about ordering the use of weapons of mass destruction which would result in the indiscriminate killing of millions of innocent civilians,” is removed.

Corbyn is prepared to say and do whatever is asked of him. In his set-piece speech to the Royal Institute of International Affairs last Friday, he had stated, “I am often asked if as prime minister I would order the use of nuclear weapons. It’s an extraordinary question when you think about it—would you order the indiscriminate killing of millions of people? Would you risk such extensive contamination of the planet that no life could exist across large parts of the world?”

It is now clear that Corbyn signed off on a manifesto promise to do precisely that before mounting the Chatham House rostrum.

The draft manifesto said Labour would “end support for aggressive wars of intervention.” This also had to be amended so that the final version reads only that Labour will oppose “*unilateral* aggressive wars of intervention” (emphasis added) so as to reassure all concerned of the party’s support for future wars of aggression under the imprimatur of NATO and the United Nations.

In addition, the draft manifesto included no statement on Labour’s attitude to the “freedom of movement of

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labour” in Europe following the UK’s exit from the European Union. The published manifesto pledges, “Freedom of movement will end when we leave the European Union.”

The draft stated in relation to Israel’s numerous war crimes against the Palestinians, “The expansion of Israeli settlements on the Palestinian West Bank is not only wrong and illegal, but represents a threat to the very viability of the hopes of securing a successful outcome of the peace process.”

Condemnation of Israel is removed in the final version, with a new section insisting “all sides must avoid taking action that would make peace harder to achieve. That means both an end to the blockade, occupation and settlements, and an end to rocket and terror attacks.”

Nothing Corbyn says is worth a damn. At the launch of the manifesto, he pledged that Labour would end the brutal Tory policy of a freeze on working-age welfare benefits. “Clearly we are not going to freeze benefits. That is very clear,” he proclaimed. One hour later, he was in full reverse, baldly stating, “We’ve not made any commitment on that.” By the end of the day, Thornberry was stating, “I don’t think we can reverse it entirely. We shouldn’t be promising things we can’t afford.”

Corbyn is often portrayed by his advocates as a man of principle—a good man fallen among thieves. His every action since being elected leader in September 2015 confirms that his only “principle” is unswerving loyalty to the Labour bureaucracy.

Corbyn’s infinite malleability is not a personal characteristic, but is an essential feature of the Labour “left” in providing the necessary progressive window dressing to sell what is a capitalist party of big business, militarism and war to the working class.

The role of Corbyn’s ardent defenders in the various pseudo-left groups is to conceal this political reality. Commenting on Labour’s leaked draft manifesto, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) welcomed a “shift to the left” while noting “some very worrying concessions to the right.”

“Corbyn’s left-wing manifesto points to an alternative for Labour that could help it beat the Tories,” it concluded. “Giving in to the right can only make it weaker.”

Four days later, with the launching of the amended manifesto, the SWP essentially rewrote its earlier article as if no more concessions to the right had been granted. Only a glancing reference is made regarding the pro-militarist axis of the manifesto, with the SWP writing by way of an apology, “The right pressured Corbyn to compromise over nuclear weapons last year. So the manifesto has no call to get rid of Trident or to leave the NATO alliance—despite Corbyn’s longstanding opposition to them.”

The SWP concludes by urging, “Labour has to go all out on its radical promises to beat the Tories on 8 June. Labour’s right want to hold it back.”

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