

Britain's Stop the War Coalition: Tying the working class to the pro-war Labour Party

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The UK's participation in the US-led bombing of Syria has been met with widespread opposition among workers and young people.

Many did not believe Prime Minister Theresa May's assertion that the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad carried out a chemical weapons attack on Douma April 7. A majority rejected the claims of May, US President Donald Trump and France's Emmanuel Macron that they had acted out of "humanitarian concern."

Since 2003, when the Labour government of Tony Blair dragged Britain into an illegal war based on the lies of "weapons of mass destruction," anti-war sentiment has resisted all efforts by the ruling class to move away from the "Iraq syndrome."

There has been no popular support for military operations by the UK, in Iraq, Libya or Syria and there is real concern at the whipping up of tensions with Russia. This public opposition to militarism forced the Conservative government of David Cameron to hold a parliamentary vote in August 2013, the failure of which prevented Britain from participating in planned airstrikes against Syria.

The role of the Stop the War Coalition (STWC) in the run up to the air strikes against Syria was to politically demobilise popular anti-war sentiment. The coalition directed all public protests by workers and youth to making futile appeals to parliament and—above all—backing Jeremy Corbyn's personal protests against war made as leader of the pro-war Labour Party.

The STWC has been promoted as the semi-official leadership of the anti-war movement since 2003. Corbyn was its chairman until winning leadership of the Labour Party in 2015. All its protests since April 7 were conceived of as adjuncts to the main action that was to take place in parliament under Corbyn's leadership.

The STWC issued just one statement prior to the April 14 missile attacks, on April 9, condemning "the bombing attacks on the people of Douma in Syria, including alleged chemical attacks" and "all outside military intervention including that of Russia and Iran."

Only after this prominent profession of opposition to Russia and Iran did the statement, "equally... condemn that of our own government and its allies" and call for "a ceasefire on all sides and a political settlement..."

The statement's only concrete proposal was to urge supporters, "Write to your MP to ask them to oppose further military action in Syria," with a petition attached to that effect.

On the day following the attack, May was denounced for having "deliberately avoided consulting parliament" and only then for risking "dramatically widening the war."

STWC offers alternative foreign policy strategy for British imperialism

Outlining what was meant, two days later, STWC convenor Lindsey German predicted that this "proxy war" is "drawing to a close, even though the agonies of the people of Douma, suffering bombing as well as the alleged chemical attack, have continued. Everyone now agrees that it will do so with Assad still in power and with the Russians and Iranians in a strong position."

"Western imperialism," she concluded, "has no clear strategy except more lashing out with little purpose—which is the net effect of this latest attack. The unintended consequence of the war in Iraq has been the strengthening of Iran. The failed strategy of regime change in Syria has also strengthened Iran. So now Iran will move to centre stage."

"And Russia?" she asks. "...the tensions between the powers are worse than at any time since the Cold War, and we have nuclear powers involved in clashes in a cockpit of war."

German speaks in a manner indistinguishable from a foreign policy analyst in a bourgeois think-tank. Her organisation's support for Corbyn and Labour is based not on mobilising against the warmongering of the ruling class, but reinforcing his efforts to formulate a new foreign policy for British imperialism—one that recognises the need to distance the UK from the US and to rely more on "soft-power" and negotiated alliances with the European powers.

In an article written on November 4 last year, "Labour Badly Needs to Adopt Corbyn's View of War and Peace," the STWC's John Rees complains of a "Zombie foreign policy" dominating "the ministries of the Western powers," "Out-of-date Cold War structures," "post-Cold War failures and defeats" that "have left an exhausted but malignant security and defence establishment losing public support."

Corbyn offers a way out of this quagmire for the imperialists. He brings "a unique, at least in the establishment, set of views and values to this debate" that is thwarted because "Labour policy is the exact opposite of its leader's: It is pro-Trident, pro-NATO, and in favour of spending 2 percent of GDP on defence—a NATO requirement that very few NATO countries, including Germany, actually bother to meet."

Rees draws on an inexhaustible supply of political complacency to argue for British imperialism to take advantage of a new constellation of forces worldwide.

"NATO is a creature of the Cold War," he says. But there is little or no "credible threat of Russian invasion," while, "The danger of a nuclear exchange with Russia is lower than at any time since it acquired such weapons in the 1950s."

The NATO alliance is, moreover, "fraying at the edges... All this at a time when the US, the dominant state in the Nato alliance, has a President [Trump] who had to be coerced by his own political establishment into abandoning his campaign trail hostility to Nato."

Time then to abandon the "special relationship," which leaves the UK "under-labouring for the US's pivot to the Pacific."

"The truth is this: Western imperial architecture is outdated, its wars have ended in defeat, its allies are untrustworthy, and its leading state is

losing the economic race to China.” It is therefore time for Labour to “Adopt Corbynism.”

This statement was the basis for a series of STWC public meetings running since January, the “Why We Need An Anti-War Government Tour.”

These were used to support Corbyn’s efforts to convince his Blairite opponents to accept the need for a fresh political turn and to end the civil war in the Labour Party alluded to by Rees.

Among the announced speakers at these meetings were no less than six Labour MPs, including four members of Corbyn’s shadow cabinet and a trade union representative on the party’s National Executive Committee. Also speaking was Mark Serwotka, General Secretary of the civil service union, PCS.

The STWC fully endorses Corbyn’s refusal to wage any struggle against his party’s right-wing, who are not interested in his calls for a new and civilised mission-statement for British imperialism. A whole section of the STWC website, Tony Blair Watch, is dedicated to archiving articles denouncing the imperialist warmonger—the last being from October 2015. Nothing is written against his present-day acolytes in the Labour Party, or the fact that Blair remains a member despite agitating against a Corbyn-led Labour government!

In the two parliamentary debates lobbied by the STWC, on April 16 and 17, Corbyn was almost alone in speaking against the bombing of Syria as the right-wing of the party solidarized with May. And 55 Labour MPs abstained on his placatory motion calling for a parliamentary vote on future military action.

This illustrates the reality of any Corbyn-led Labour government. Even were he to continue to personally oppose war—and this is by no means certain given his record of capitulation—he heads a party whose MPs would, in large numbers, back future military action by British imperialism and ensure that it went ahead.

How the STWC neutered the mass anti-war movement

The Stop the War Coalition’s role in neutering opposition to the bombing of Syria flows from the bankrupt politics of the pseudo-left and Stalinist groups who set it up in 2003.

Prior to the Iraq conflict, the STWC was able to mobilise a demonstration of over one million people. But its key political leadership, the Socialist Workers Party and Communist Party of Britain, enabled Blair to wage war—with the collusion of the trade union bureaucracy—by preventing anti-war sentiment from becoming the starting point of a political movement of the working class against the government.

The SWP insisted that all demands, including the exclusive focus on “Blair” Blair, must be acceptable to anyone opposed to war, particularly by STWC affiliates, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the Muslim Association of Britain. Above all, confidence must be placed in a handful of Liberal Democrats and Labour MPs, such as Corbyn, alongside the French and German governments and the United Nations to act as a counter to the war aims of London and Washington.

Having politically eviscerated the anti-war movement, the STWC was given semi-official status as, time and again, it has insisted “mass pressure” and “electoral self-interest” will force various governments to listen to the will of the people.

The STWC today would like everyone to believe that its orientation to the Labour Party is due to its new left leadership. But in 2007, the STWC used the imminent departure of Blair to issue a humble appeal to Gordon Brown to “Pursue a foreign policy independent of the administration of the United States of America”—the same demand it makes today.

“Brown has been at the Prime Minister’s right hand throughout the decisions on Iraq and Afghanistan. Nevertheless, it is our conviction that mass pressure, combined with electoral self-interest, can force the British government to break from George Bush’s wars,” it wrote.

Pro-war record of the Socialist Workers Party and Counterfire on Syria

The STWC portrays itself as an opponent of wars in Libya and Syria. To do so the SWP and its offshoot, Counterfire, which now runs the STWC rump together with the Communist Party of Britain (CPB), would like everyone to forget their support for Western-backed Jihadi forces in both countries.

The SWP portrayed these proxy Western forces as “freedom fighters” of “the revolution.” Writing in the January 7, 2012 *Socialist Worker*, Simon Assaf argued against unfounded “Fears of Western interference... the notion that ordinary Syrians struggling to change their country are the pawns of a ‘Western plot’ is absurd.”

The western-backed Syrian National Council (SNC) and Free Syrian Army (FSA) were described as carrying out military operations to protect civilians from the regime’s security forces. “So far, there are no formal ties between the FSA and the *civilian organisations of the revolution*, such as the Coordinating Committees, the Syrian Revolution General Commission and the Syrian National Council (SNC).” (emphasis added).

When the Cameron government backed away from bombing Syria in 2013, this was hailed as a vindication of the STWC’s call for independence from the US. A rally the next day, August 31, saw German, now a member of Counterfire, declare, “We’ve said for some years that one of our aims as a movement should be to break Britain from following the US in every step of its foreign policy.”

An article on Counterfire’s web site stated, “Parliament has finally—under the weight of long-term pressure—come close to reflecting public opinion.”

Tariq Ali, once a leading member of the Pabloite United Secretariat, said that after living “in this country for 40 years or more... It feels for the first time you are living in an independent country.”

Corbyn becoming Labour leader in 2015 should, according to the STWC, have been the beginning of a political counter-offensive against Britain’s war-drive. Instead, in December, Corbyn granted a free vote to Labour MPs on whether to support of UK bombing raids on Syria allowing the Conservative government of David Cameron to overturn the 2013 vote against air strikes with the backing of 66 Labour MPs.

No criticism was forthcoming from the STWC. As Andrew Murray, the Stalinist co-chair of the STWC with German explained, “We have to think about everything we say, and how we protest—how it’ll not just impact on public opinion, but how it could impact on Jeremy, who is a very staunch friend of Stop the War... We have a lot of money in the bank with each other, as it were.”

These are the events leading up to this month’s relentless promotion of Corbyn, who heads a party of war committed to NATO, Trident nuclear weapons and supports the “right-to-protect” legislation used to justify every “humanitarian” bloodbath waged by the UK in the Middle East and Africa.

Far from acting as the leader of an anti-war movement, Corbyn has never called for a single public protest. Moreover, any struggle against war must necessarily be a political struggle against the government sending armed forces overseas. At no time has Corbyn ever tied opposition to war to a call for the working class to bring down the Conservatives. He was taunted in parliament for failing to move a motion

of no-confidence in the government by Tory Jacob Rees-Mogg.

The domination of the STWC by Counterfire and the CPB has led rival pseudo-left groupings, such as the SWP and the Socialist Party, to distance themselves organisationally from it. But their own orientation is identical in all fundamentals—protests of an essentially pacifist character directed towards the election of a Corbyn government. Whenever reality disproves their political schema of Corbyn’s fighting for Labour’s transformation, then apologies or tactical silence prevail.

Corbyn is the central figure around which a complex of already existing political and social relations between the leadership of the pseudo-left groups and the Labour and trade union bureaucracy has coalesced.

German, Rees, Murray et al, and their peers in the SWP and SP, act as advisors and propagandists to the bureaucracy—often, as with Murray, who is chief of staff for Unite leader Len McCluskey and an adviser to Corbyn, in lucrative positions. Their message to the working class is always to place political trust in the bureaucracy and pressurising it for “reform.”

The building of a genuine anti-war movement can only proceed through a ruthless exposure of the remnants of the STWC, which serves as an obstacle to the necessary independent political struggle by the working class on a socialist perspective against imperialism and the profit system.



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