

Stop the War Coalition marks two decades policing anti-war sentiment

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The Stop the War Coalition (STWC) marked its 20th anniversary this month. At a rally held in the aftermath of the US/UK troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, the STWC's leading personnel engaged in mutual backslapping and self-congratulation. Epitomised by the address of one former chair of the STWC, Andrew Murray, the theme of the event was, "We were right"—a phrase he repeated more than a dozen times.

This was all based on the STWC's opposing wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere for the past two decades. But the STWC's real role has been how they took leadership of a mass movement against war—beginning in response to the post 9/11 US-led war on Afghanistan and leading in 2003 to the largest protest event in history, the February 15 demonstrations opposing war against Iraq—only to politically destroy it.

The featured speaker at the rally was former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, who in 2003 spoke at the end of a march in London that mobilised well over one million people. And it is Corbyn, also a former STWC chair, who personifies the political bankruptcy of the forces making up the STWC and explains why the semi-official anti-war movement it heads barely exists any longer.

It is not necessary to cite at length from every speech delivered to the 20th anniversary rally. From the opening remark by current STWC chairperson Shelley Asquith that "We've massively shifted popular public opinion. One of our former chairs even almost went on to become prime minister," all roads eventually led to Corbyn. But one remark should be cited from Murray, a lifelong Stalinist, union functionary and one of Corbyn's main advisers, whose boastful tirade included the telling observation, "Frankly world politics would be much better if Stop the War Coalition rather than Labour and Tory governments had been directing the foreign policy of this country..."

This is not rhetoric on Murray's part. It is a job application, offered once again to the movers and shakers within the political establishment.

The STWC began as an alliance of pseudo-left tendencies, Stalinists, pacifists, a few "left" Labourites and trade union bureaucrats, and religious groups including the Sunni Muslim Association of Britain. But its leading political figures came from the Socialist Workers Party (SWP)—Lindsey German, John Rees and Chris Nineham—and Murray from the Communist Party of Britain. German, Rees and Nineham later split from the SWP to form the Counterfire group in 2010.

From its inception, and with the most devastating political impact in 2003, the STWC functioned as a mechanism for capturing anti-war sentiment and bringing it under the political tutelage of the trade union bureaucracy and a handful of Labourites, such as Corbyn and his mentor, the late Tony Benn, who professed opposition to war but remained loyal to the Labour Party no matter what.

Prior to Iraq, there was a real possibility of opposition to war becoming the starting point of a political movement of the working class against Tony Blair's Labour government. But the leaders of the STWC focused hostility exclusively on Blair as an individual, evidenced in tens of thousands of posters branding him "Blair." Even the Liberal Democrats

were held up as anti-war allies, together with the French and German governments and the United Nations—collectively advanced as an alternative to the alliance of Blair with the US administration of George Bush Jr.

The end result of the STWC opposing any possibility of the working class intervening independently and against the bourgeois parties was that the war went ahead, disillusionment set in, and opposition petered out.

For having so successfully politically eviscerated the anti-war movement, the STWC was over time given semi-official status and substantial trade union backing. From this new and eminently "respectable" vantage point, the STWC again and again made clear that its policy of "mass pressure" to force the government of the day to listen to the "will of the people" was a call directed towards British imperialism, not against it.

In 2007, the STWC used the departure of Blair as Labour leader to make a direct appeal to his replacement and partner in crime Gordon Brown to "Pursue a foreign policy independent of the administration of the United States of America."

The STWC acknowledged, "Brown has been at the Prime Minister's right hand throughout the decisions on Iraq and Afghanistan," before adding, "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."

Under the Conservatives, the STWC did not waver in its policy of advancing a foreign policy that was anti-American rather than anti-imperialist.

Public opposition to militarism forced the Conservative government of David Cameron to hold a parliamentary vote on August 30, 2013, the failure of which prevented Britain from participating in planned US airstrikes against Syria. An article on Counterfire's website stated, "Parliament has finally—under the weight of long-term pressure—come close to reflecting public opinion."

The STWC called a rally the following day at which German proclaimed, "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. This week we made that possible."

Tariq Ali, the former leader of the Pabloite International Marxist Group, 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."

But it was Corbyn's winning leadership of the Labour Party in 2015 that finally offered the STWC possible access to the corridors of power. Hence his being given pride of place at the anniversary rally.

Corbyn's only reference to his own period as Labour leader on that occasion was an anecdote about being asked by a journalist, "I assume you have already left the Stop the War Coalition?... I said absolutely no. Why should I? He said because it would cloud your judgement. I said it will inform my judgement to build a world of peace, not of war!"

The impression given is of resolute defiance and a commitment to

implementing the anti-war agenda of the STWC come what may. The reality was very different. On becoming Labour leader, Corbyn quit as chairman of the STWC and was quietly replaced by Murray, who was seconded as an adviser to the new Labour leader by Unite the Union.

This initial back-peddling inaugurated an extended political rout on Corbyn's professed opposition to war, beginning on December 2, 2015, when he granted a free vote to Labour MPs on supporting UK bombing raids in Syria, allowing Cameron to overturn the 2013 vote against air strikes with the backing of 66 Labour MPs.

Corbyn capitulated to the Blairites at every turn, with not even token criticism from the STWC. This amnesty included silence on Corbyn's efforts to shield Blair himself. Corbyn said in May 2016 that Blair should face war crimes charges, but he said nothing when the Chilcot Report published July 6 that year provided the basis for such a prosecution. The *Financial Times* praised Corbyn's "restraint", noting the absence of "an electrifying Commons performance" and observing with satisfaction that the "B-word"—Blair—"did not pass his lips". Later that year, on November 30, Corbyn did not even bother to show up for the parliamentary vote on a motion to "investigate" whether Blair was guilty of misleading parliament in pursuit of British involvement in the Iraq War.

Andrew Murray offered a blanket justification for STWC's refusal to condemn Corbyn: "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."

Against all evidence, a Corbyn-led government was advanced as the best hope for peace. An article written by John Rees on November 4, 2017, "Labour Badly Needs to Adopt Corbyn's View of War and Peace," gave an extended presentation of the STWC's alternative foreign policy for British imperialism.

He denounced the "Zombie foreign policy" dominating "the ministries of the Western powers," "Out-of-date Cold War structures," and "post-Cold War failures and defeats" that "have left an exhausted but malignant security and defence establishment losing public support."

Corbyn, he continued, brings "a unique, at least in the establishment, set of views and values to this debate," 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 urged British imperialism to adopt Corbyn's policy. "NATO is a creature of the Cold War," he wrote, and "fraying at the edges... All this at a time when the US, the dominant state in the NATO alliance, has a President [Donald Trump] who had to be coerced by his own political establishment into abandoning his campaign trail hostility to NATO..."

"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."

Britain, said Rees, should respond by abandoning the "special relationship," which leaves the UK "under-labouring for the US's pivot to the Pacific". Labour, i.e., the Blairite warmongers, should therefore "Adopt Corbynism."

In pursuit of this chimera the STWC organised an extended series of public meetings—the "Why We Need An Anti-War Government Tour"—featuring six Labour MPs as speakers, including four members of Corbyn's shadow cabinet.

However, rather than Labour adopt Corbynism, Corbyn adapted himself totally to Blairism. Under his leadership Labour fought two general elections, in 2017 and 2019, on manifestos committed to NATO membership, the renewal of the Trident nuclear missile system—estimated to cost around £200 billion—and guaranteeing to spend at least 2 percent of GDP on defence.

When Tory Prime Minister Theresa May assented to British air strikes on Syria on April 13, 2018, German offered another foreign policy critique, warning, "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." During two parliamentary debates lobbied by the STWC, on April 16 and 17, the Blairites solidarized with May. Fully 55 Labour MPs abstained on Corbyn's doomed motion calling for a parliamentary vote on future military action.

Corbyn left the Labour Party as he found it, as an imperialist party of war led by the Blairites. That was his real mission—to subdue the popular demand for change that led to his election and maintain the grip of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy over the working class. The thanks he extended at the STWC anniversary rally to the "gang of four, Chris, John, Lindsey and Andrew" was for their invaluable help in accomplishing this.

The STWC's response to the ignominious pull-out of US and allied forces from Afghanistan was an August 15 appeal for "politicians of all parties to learn the lessons of the failed wars of intervention and turn to international cooperation as the means of resolving disputes and tackling problems of poverty and underdevelopment," coupled with yet another letter writing campaign targeting MPs. But German's frustration was evident in her article published that same day, explaining how, "I find the response to this by the western governments and their supporters absolutely appalling. The cynicism with which they absolve themselves of all responsibility and continue to justify their original actions is quite shocking *and they refuse to entertain other opinions—such as those put by anti war campaigners 20 years ago—which have been proved correct.*" [emphasis added]

Clearly nothing has changed regarding the political orientation of the STWC since Corbyn's tenure as Labour leader ended in abject failure in April 2020. They are still offering their services as advisors to the bourgeoisie, but feel their own "long march through the institutions" has passed its high-water mark with Corbyn and that they are reduced to celebrating past glories.

On this at least the STWC's leadership will be able to boast, "We were right."

The forces such as the Labour and trade union "lefts" they advanced as opponents of war are a politically discredited and declining force. The parties and organisations to which they are wedded are nakedly pro-war. The upper middle-class layer that provided social support for the STWC's pacifist political agenda in large measure abandoned opposition to war after Iraq. Along with the pseudo-left groups and their membership, they discovered the supposedly progressive credentials of various Islamist movements cultivated by the imperialist powers as proxy forces and advanced as democratic allies in the wars in Libya and Syria.

The war danger grows more acute by the day, and targets ever more openly China and Russia. Anti-war sentiment remains widespread in the working class, but vanishingly few believe it will ever be led by the likes of Corbyn or that pacifist appeals to the better nature of the imperialist powers will be listened to.

The conditions are emerging for the building of a new anti-war movement, rooted in the working class, international in scope, and dedicated to the struggle to bring an end to the capitalist system and the building of a socialist world. Those coming forward in this struggle, especially among the younger generation, will look on the STWC as an essential political lesson in what not to do and how not to stop wars.



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