

The political dead end of Britain's Stop the War Coalition: For a socialist anti-war movement, not opportunist manoeuvres

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On the evening of February 10, Britain's Stop the War Coalition (STWC) held an online rally, "No war in Ukraine: Stop NATO expansion." This became the occasion for a vicious attack by Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer on the organisation and its central figure, Jeremy Corbyn.

In an interview with the *Times*, "Keir Starmer the Nato hawk goes on the offensive", the Labour leader said that it was "very difficult to find a dividing point" between the Conservative government and Labour over the US-led war drive against Russia centred on Ukraine. He condemned his predecessor Corbyn as being "wrong on Nato."

The *Times* praised Starmer, but said he was wrong to claim that Labour has "always been the party of NATO" because it was previously led by Corbyn. "Sir Keir says the party has abandoned his predecessor's approach. That commitment must stick."

Starmer responded in an opinion piece in the *Guardian* newspaper proclaiming Labour's "unshakable" commitment to NATO, while denouncing "the likes of the Stop the War coalition" as being "at best... naïve; at worst they actively give succour to authoritarian leaders who directly threaten democracies."

Referring to the post-war 1945 Labour government, Starmer wrote that "the generation of [Labour leader Clement] Attlee and his foreign secretary, the formidable trade union leader Ernest Bevin, were the midwives of Nato.... they knew that the best way to preserve peace is to show that you are prepared to stand up to aggression."

He blustered that "to condemn Nato is to condemn the guarantee of democracy and security it brings, and which our allies in eastern and central Europe are relying on, as the sabre-rattling from Moscow grows ever louder... There is no equivalence between a defensive alliance [by which Starmer meant NATO] that has never provoked conflict and those who would inflict the appalling cost of war on to others."

Moscow would see any anti-war demonstration in the UK as an example of "naivety and weakness" by "virtue signallers in the west providing a smokescreen so it can go on beating up and jailing those brave individuals who dare to stand up to its despotism on the streets of Russia."

The *World Socialist Web Site* denounced Starmer, who was "using the STWC as a stalking horse to attack all those opposed to war as 'the enemy within'". This signalled "Labour's willingness to play the leading role in a ruthless suppression of any opposition in the working class to NATO's war plans." It made clear that Labour will back the Conservative government's "warmongering against Russia to the hilt, whether as a loyal opposition, a partner in a government of national unity, or by forming its own government."

STWC offers workers no alternative

It would be a grave political mistake, however, for workers and young people to allow disgust towards Starmer and opposition to US-led military aggression to blunt a serious examination of the policies pursued by the STWC, and by Corbyn.

As the Socialist Equality Party stressed in its initial comment, Starmer's actions "are a devastating indictment of Corbyn and Labour's 'left' rump. What is to show for their five years in charge of the party? His refusal to fight the Blairites has left behind a party even further to the right than it was under Tony Blair, unconditionally united with the Tories on all its major policies, including fomenting a war with nuclear-armed Russia and describing anti-war protestors as agents of foreign despots."

The STWC does not offer workers a genuine means for opposing the enormous and escalating danger of war against Russia—a development that threatens all of humanity with disaster. As was confirmed by their response to Starmer's attack last Thursday, the STWC has no difficulty denouncing his anti-communist diatribe, nor in exposing the fiction of NATO acting as a "defensive alliance" given the active pursuit of war by NATO powers in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria, and its deliberately provoking the current conflict with Russia through the expansion of NATO to its borders and constant military manoeuvres.

But their answer is an appeal for British imperialism, including the Conservative government and Starmer's Labour Party, to project a foreign policy that breaks free of Washington and aligns the UK within a European political and military block with a supposedly more pragmatic attitude to Russia—when the truth is that the European powers' differences with America are secondary to their ongoing participation in the war drive against Russia.

The STWC's January 21 statement on Ukraine argues, "Britain should be advancing serious diplomatic proposals to defuse the tension and seek a solution to the crisis rather than ratcheting it up... We believe there needs to be a new all-inclusive security architecture in Europe, not under the hegemony of any one state. We demand that the British government and the Labour Party distance themselves from the policies and priorities of the USA and develop an independent foreign policy."

In response to Starmer's attack, the STWC stressed that their policy was entirely in line with the orientation of France and Germany during the Ukraine crisis, which the main speakers on the platform, Corbyn and Andrew Murray, painted in glowing colours.

Opening the STWC rally, Murray, a lifelong Stalinist, stated that Starmer was "falsifying our position on the conflict surrounding Ukraine, pretending we are supporting aggression... We believe there has to be a settlement, a diplomatic settlement of this which respects the right of the

Ukrainian people to self-determination and at the same time recognises the legitimate security concerns that Russia and the Russian government might have.”

It was for this reason that “our campaign is directed against the policy of the British government” of “trying to talk up a conflict around Ukraine to the greatest extent possible... when other European governments, the French and the Germans, are following a much more sensible policy of looking for a diplomatic solution to the crisis.”

The expansion of NATO was described as “an attempt to maintain and extend US hegemony across Europe,” which must be countered through support for the diplomatic initiatives of the European powers. This should begin with “an attempt to return to the [2014] Minsk agreements” between Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany “to halt the conflict in Donbas.” Going forward, “We need to have an architecture of security in Europe that meets everyone’s needs. Which isn’t the implementation of anyone’s hegemony.”

Corbyn prostrates himself before imperialism

Closing the meeting, Corbyn, as always, was less confrontational towards Starmer, failing to even mention him by name when speaking of “some unfair remarks made today about the Stop the War Coalition.” His message nevertheless echoed Murray’s.

Describing the situation in Ukraine as “increasingly dangerous,” he said, “it’s the US with Britain’s support that is leading the way on this and it is the European countries, particularly France and Germany, who are urging some caution—and indeed the ones that are trying to promote a diplomatic approach to this and some serious talks between Ukraine and Russia.”

Underscoring his political prostration before imperialism, Corbyn described the war danger as arising from the risk of “a mistake... with all this massive military hardware on both sides of the border,” rather than the calculated and deliberate action of the imperialist powers. He stressed his view that the central issue in the US-led war drive, Ukraine’s membership of NATO, was “a decision that will be made at some point in the future.”

All that was at issue was “the idea that there is only a military solution to this issue,” when “There has to be a peaceful solution.”

Murray closed the proceedings by returning to Starmer’s attack, with the most telling statement of the evening, saying that “it has been quite open to him to say the British government should be more like [French President Emmanuel] Macron, more like the German government...”

Opposition to the US is not, of itself, an anti-imperialist strategy. The STWC suggests instead a foreign policy proposal to be adopted by British imperialism, based on an alliance with German and French imperialism.

It should be noted that the sole expression of dissent came from Christine Buchholz, a leading member of the pseudo-left Marx 21, whose anti-war pretensions are refuted by her role within Die Linke (the Left Party) sitting on the parliamentary defence committee for 12 years and regularly visiting German troops overseas.

As a German “left” politician, Buchholz was obliged to note, “The German government is seen as less warmongering than Johnson and Biden. But Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s visit to Joe Biden also made it clear: Germany sees itself as part of the same threat set as the US, as NATO and also Boris Johnson.” Later she added, “The EU is not an alternative either. The EU is not a ‘peace power.’ All the larger EU states are NATO members. EU states have military bases outside Europe, are waging wars outside Europe, are currently arming Ukraine, and much more. And we know about the geopolitical rivalry in which the USA, the West, the EU,

but also China and Russia have their interests in mind and not the good of humanity.”

To this Murray simply placed the caveat on his support for the French and German stance, “even with all the weaknesses identified by Christine”!

Stop the War Coalition proposes a change in UK foreign policy

What determines the STWC’s stance is the political imperative of the petty-bourgeois stratum orbiting around the Labour and trade union bureaucracy to defend the interests of British imperialism. They do so by opposing the UK’s too close alliance with Washington and NATO in favour of its taking part in the formation of a European counterweight, claiming a progressive bourgeois policy is possible, providing the ruling class can be convinced to pursue it.

This has been the STWC’s position since its foundation more than two decades ago. Reviewing that history, the WSWS noted how in 2003 during the run-up to the Iraq war, “the leaders of the STWC focused hostility exclusively on Blair as an individual,” while 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 STWC’s 2003 betrayal, having come to the head of a mass anti-war movement, set it on course for continuous organisational and political decline.

In 2007, it used the departure of Tony Blair as Labour leader to appeal to his successor Gordon Brown to “Pursue a foreign policy independent of the administration of the United States of America.” Again in 2013, at a rally opposing air strikes on Syria, STWC co-convenor Lindsey German said, “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.”

Albeit a minority view, this position has its advocates in the highest echelons of the ruling class, reflecting the tension that erupted over the UK quitting the European Union.

Writing in the *Observer* February 13, Simon Tisdall denounced that “Brexit Britain’s isolated leaders resort to posturing and fist-waving over Ukraine while France’s Macron pursues diplomatic solutions in Moscow... The UK used to act as a transatlantic bridge and interlocutor. Now it’s become a barrier to understanding, doomed to irrelevance.”

Tisdall denounced attacks on Germany’s chancellor Olaf Scholz as “deliberately intended for American consumption” at a time when “a panicking” Biden administration “is drowning in its own hype.”

He concluded: “Trouble is, the US, egged on by Johnson’s tatty Churchill tribute act, rejects outright changes to Europe’s ‘security architecture.’ Is this because Washington and London know what’s best for Europe? No. It’s because the US, projecting its national interests through Nato, and the feckless, lying windbag in Downing Street, cannot bear the thought of an empowered, strategically autonomous Europe successfully managing its own security.”

A less incensed editorial in the newspaper insisted, “A united diplomatic front is the best weapon to persuade Vladimir Putin against invading Ukraine,” to be arrived at through “Coordinated western diplomatic efforts,” which “Emmanuel Macron, France’s president, is best placed” to lead.

This is not a path to peace, but the road to hell. Whatever their qualms regarding the threat of war with Russia and the undermining of their own interests, Paris and Berlin are fully complicit in the US-led war drive. As

Scholz himself tweeted February 13, “Everyone can be absolutely sure that Germany stands side by side with its allies and especially the United States when it comes to Russia and the Ukraine. We are prepared to take all necessary steps together. There is no disagreement in this situation.”

The struggle against war must be based on the working class

The International Committee of the Fourth International yesterday issued the statement, “Oppose the US-NATO drive to war with Russia in Ukraine!” This explains:

The European bourgeoisie, having barely survived the catastrophe of the two world wars, are inclined to greater caution. However, they go along with Washington’s war drive, despite the fact that war over Ukraine could be catastrophic to their own interests, reliant as they are on Russia for natural gas and other resources. They face massive internal crises that propel them along the same disastrous path. Moreover, they know that a direct challenge to the American agenda would bring about devastating retribution. In 2003, Germany and France expressed official reluctance to support the US invasion of Iraq. Washington openly attacked its long-time allies and threatened to reorient its relations in Europe to the Eastern European states, recently admitted to NATO, in opposition to the central countries of “Old Europe.” The European bourgeoisie also fear that resisting the United States will result in exclusion from the spoils to be secured in the potential reorganization of Russia. Duly disciplined, they join in the drive to war.

The struggle against war must be based on the working class, uniting behind it all progressive elements in the population. It must be international in scope, based on a socialist opposition to capitalism, which is the source of all wars, and independent of the parties and organisations of the capitalist class, and therefore must reject the politically bankrupt policies advocated by the largely defunct STWC.

The ICFI statement provides the basis for a new anti-war movement to be built on firm political foundations and the great revolutionary force in society capable of halting the imperialist warmongers and ensuring world peace.



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