

John McDonnell and Diane Abbott pull out of Stop the War Coalition rally

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The Stop the War Coalition held a “No to war in Ukraine” rally in London’s Conway Hall Wednesday evening. In an act of supreme political cowardice, neither former shadow chancellor John McDonnell nor former shadow home secretary Diane Abbott, leading figures of the Labour “left”, took their seats next to former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn.

The event took place amid an ongoing witch-hunt of anti-NATO opposition organised by current Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, who has greeted the Ukraine war with the declaration that his is “the party of NATO”.

Last Thursday, Starmer threatened to withdraw the party whip from 11 Labour MPs, a rump of the Socialist Campaign Group, including Abbott and McDonnell, if they did not withdraw their support from an STWC open letter. The letter opposed NATO’s eastward expansion and the UK’s pouring “oil on the fire” in Ukraine, calling for a “negotiated settlement” recognising “the right of the Ukrainian people to self-determination” while addressing “Russia’s security concerns.”

Starmer claimed all 11 scalps within the first hour, as every one of them rushed to remove their signature. He pushed his advantage the next day, effectively shutting down the party’s youth movement, Young Labour, for tweets supporting Stop the War and criticising Labour’s “backing Nato aggression”.

Last Saturday, McDonnell spoke at a pro-Ukraine demonstration in London with the ferociously pro-NATO warmonger Paul Mason. On Tuesday, Abbott told *Politics Live*, “Nobody wants to attack NATO.” Asked if Starmer’s threat to withdraw the whip applied to her she replied, “I am a loyal supporter of Keir Starmer, and it will never come to that.”

Abbott and McDonnell pressed their faces further

into the dirt on Wednesday. Throughout the morning, the media was full of speculation about whether McDonnell, listed on the STWC’s advertising as a panellist, would attend the Conway Hall rally.

On Monday, Starmer had told the Parliamentary Labour Party that there was “no place” for anyone drawing “false equivalence between the actions of Russia and the actions of NATO.” One Labour source told the *Huffington Post* that if McDonnell attended the STWC event, “he’ll lose the whip. Any Labour MPs who speak at anything that is anti-Nato from now on are likely to be out.”

LabourList reported that the threat of expulsions was “still a live issue: behind the scenes, a number of Labour MPs have been urging Starmer to go further. With the chances of Jeremy Corbyn returning to the parliamentary party looking close to zero now, some are determined that as many Corbynites as possible are also ousted.”

McDonnell was as eager as Abbott to prove his loyalty, issuing a statement that afternoon. Referring to “the speculation about my attendance at tonight’s Stop the War meeting and reports of threats if I do,” he said, “My response is that people are dying on the streets of Ukrainian cities. This is not the time to be distracted by political arguments here. Now is the time to unite and do all we can to assist the people of Ukraine desperately seeking asylum and to do all we can to bring about peace.

“Nothing is more important at this time. Nothing should distract us from that. So I won’t feed into that distraction by going tonight.”

Suggesting Labour Party members be given “clarity over the Labour Party’s attitude to attending demonstrations organised by Stop the War,” he concluded, “My final comment is that, in the wider

context of securing a socialist Labour government, and possibly inspired by my team Liverpool at Wembley at the weekend, I do believe it's important for socialists to stay on the pitch for as long as it takes."

Abbott made the same decision, though she is such an inconsequential figure that the first time anyone knew she had been planning on attending the event was when she told the *Guardian* late Wednesday evening she no longer was.

McDonnell's statement is an insult to anyone who ever followed him. There is no effort "to assist the people of Ukraine" being organised by the Labour Party to "distract" from. What McDonnell proposes to avoid a "political argument" over is a relentless campaign of anti-Russian militarism and invective unleashed by the world's imperialist powers in an effort to use the invasion of Ukraine they provoked to engineer regime change in Moscow.

To move from a war crisis threatening the world's working class with catastrophe to a tortured football analogy is politically revolting. McDonnell is not "staying on the pitch" to wait for a "socialist Labour government". His "pitch" is a party of imperialist warmongers and he will remain a well-paid flunkey of that party no matter what crimes it commits.

What "socialist" could possibly want to remain a member of an out-and-out Thatcherite party of war? It is a political cesspit.

Stop the War pressed on with their rally, with Corbyn, convenor and vice chair of STWC Lindsey German and Chris Nineham, leading Pabloite Tariq Ali, general secretary of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament Kate Hudson, National Education Union joint general secretary Kevin Courtney (in a personal capacity) and Sinn Féin MP Chris Hazzard in attendance. But its entire political perspective is in ruins. Hostile to an anti-war movement based on the working class and the struggle for socialism, the STWC makes appeals to the British ruling class to adopt a different, less militarist, foreign policy—for which the Labour "left" were identified as parliamentary champions.

This bankrupt perspective was summed up in the organisation's refusal to criticise Corbyn's countless retreats before the right-wing, pro-war majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party during his time as leader. McDonnell and Abbott, Corbyn's closest allies,

entrusted with the most senior positions in his shadow cabinet, are only continuing his record of political prostration.

At Stop the War's 20th anniversary meeting last year, former chair Andrew Murray, one of Corbyn's advisers, 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."

The end result of Corbyn's STWC-approved capitulations is that the Labour Party is firmly in the hands of Starmer, more right-wing than ever, and not even one of its MPs will turn up to STWC events or sign their open letters. None will any longer utter a word of criticism of NATO and all will collaborate with Starmer's crackdown.

Neither Stop the War nor Corbyn have made criticisms of Abbott, McDonnell or any of the other SCG MPs. Were Corbyn still sitting as a Labour MP—he had the whip withdrawn over the anti-Semitism witch-hunt—there is every likelihood he would have done the same as his followers.

A mass anti-war movement must be built. It is being given sharp lessons in who its friends and enemies are. The fight against war must be based on a struggle to organise the international working class and waged in absolute opposition McDonnell, Abbott, Corbyn and all the other faux-left enablers of British imperialism.



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