

The Stop the War Coalition and the collapse of the official anti-war movement

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On Saturday, the Stop the War Coalition (STWC) is holding a demonstration in London demanding “Peace talks now—Stop the War in Ukraine”. Its main slogans are “No to the Russian invasion”, “No to NATO” and “No to nuclear war”. But the event will be another milestone in the collapse of the official anti-war movement and underscore the urgent need for a new political perspective.

At a Stop the War national conference this January, vice-chair Andrew Murray noted that the organisation had led the “vast demonstration 20 years ago against the Iraq war,” mobilising a million or more people. Today the Stop the War Coalition is a shadow of its former self and the anti-war movement has been totally demobilised thanks to the policies it has pursued for more than two decades.

At the rally in 2003, the STWC, behind a heavy focus on denouncing Tony Blair as an individual, advanced the claim that a coalition of the Labour left, the trade union bureaucracy, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens could persuade the Labour government to adopt a more peaceful foreign policy, modelled on the supposedly more progressive powers, France and Germany.

This was not an anti-imperialist strategy, but rather one levelled only against the United States and appealing directly to a section of the ruling class which felt Britain was paying too high a price for too little gain from US-led wars.

The alternative proposed ever since was spelt out explicitly at the start of last year, amid the build-up to the war in Ukraine. In a January 21, 2022 statement, the organisation called for “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.”

Over the last two decades, Stop the War has repeatedly appealed to successive UK governments to adopt this stance. The high point of its campaign should have been the election of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the Labour Party, directly from his position as head of the coalition. But far from fighting for a more pacifist foreign policy, Corbyn abased himself in his grovelling before the Blairite right-wing; standing down from his position as Stop the War chair; allowing a free vote on the bombing of Syria; and abandoning opposition to NATO membership and the Trident nuclear weapons system.

The disaster produced by this perspective is now all but complete. Its twin pillars have been destroyed. Both the Labour and trade union left and the European powers have lined up to an unprecedented degree behind NATO’s war on Russia.

STWC was forced to advertise its Saturday demonstration with the observation, “Keir Starmer’s diktat a year ago prevented Labour MPs criticising NATO, effectively silencing all opposition in the PLP to

the war in Ukraine. A year later, that silence is still deafening.”

For the first time in the organisation’s history, not a single Labour MP attended Stop the War’s national conference last month.

Current chair, the Stalinist Andrew Murray, explained it away by claiming this was not because “no Labour MP agrees with Stop the War’s position on [the Ukraine war] but because the leader of the Labour Party [Keir Starmer], revealing himself every day as more of an authoritarian imperialist, has made it clear that any Labour MP would sacrifice the whip and their seat in Parliament if they associate with the anti-war movement—something even Tony Blair did not do.”

This is a disgusting apologia. Anyone who puts keeping the Labour whip ahead of opposing a conflict spiralling towards a third world war is a political scoundrel who will never stand against any policy advanced by either Starmer or his de facto war allies in the Conservative government.

Corbyn has been expelled from the Parliamentary Labour Party and told by Starmer that he will never stand as a Labour MP again. But Corbyn has been just as silent as just 11 of his former allies in what remains of the Socialist Campaign Group (SCG) of Labour MPs, who all abandoned their support for the STWC within an hour of Starmer threatening them with expulsion for signing a February 18, 2022, Stop the War statement.

His last tweet on the war came in November last year and read, “I condemn the Russian invasion, the war against Ukraine and the illegal occupation. Today, I asked the Foreign Secretary what role the UN can play in bringing about a process of peace to prevent any further loss of life.”

Now waging a deluded and degrading campaign to win the right to stand as a Labour MP in the next election, Corbyn appears to have pushed his connection with Stop the War even further into the background and is not listed as a speaker at Saturday’s event. To promote this man as an anti-war leader is a deception and political crime.

A significant number of Labour lefts are not just cowed by Starmer, but actively supporting the NATO war. Chief among these is Corbyn’s former shadow chancellor, John McDonnell.

Writing for *Labour Hub* February 21, McDonnell insists that Ukraine must be given weapons, brushing off how “others have argued that sending more arms risks escalating the war,” since “the arms argued for are for defence” against “the realistic prospect of [Ukraine’s] subjugation... by an imperialist aggressor,” meaning Russia.

He lent his signature to a statement by the pro-NATO Ukraine Solidarity Campaign released last week which declares, “A democratic, lasting peace for the peoples of Ukraine and Russia

requires the defeat of Russia's brutal imperialism" and demands "the gifting to Ukraine of all the surplus UK military equipment due to be replaced, especially the 79 Challenger tanks, 170 Scimitar reconnaissance vehicles, all Warrior infantry fighting vehicles, Typhoon fighter aircraft".

McDonnell was joined as a signatory by fellow members of the SCG, Nadia Whittome, Clive Lewis, Rachael Maskell, Lloyd Russell-Moyle and Ian Lavery. Bar Lavery, these MPs joined an internal split from the SCG at the start of last year to forge a closer relationship with Starmer's leadership.

Other signatories included the General Secretary of the GMB union, Gary Smith, ASLEF's General Secretary Mick Whelan, Assistant General Secretary of the Public and Commercial Services union John Moloney, national executive committee members of the National Education Union and "activists" for the University and College Union, Unite and the Royal College of Nursing.

The trade union bureaucracy has almost entirely abandoned the STWC and lent its support to British imperialism's war aims in Ukraine. In April last year, the GMB, rail unions ASLEF and TSSA, the civil servants union PCS, the UCU lecturers union, the Communication Workers Union and Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union all participated in a pro-war, "Unions stand with Ukraine Demonstration", at which chants of "Arm, arm, arm Ukraine!" were raised.

At the Trades Union Congress (TUC) conference last October, a motion drafted by the GMB calling for increased defence spending and a commitment to Britain's nuclear weapons system was passed.

This line up behind the war has left Stop the War's demonstration on Saturday with only one speaker from the Labour Party—former MP Emma Dent Coad, blocked by Starmer from standing again for parliament as a Labour representative—and two isolated trade union bureaucrats—Martin Kavanagh, PCS Deputy President, and Carlos Barros, a Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union national executive committee member.

The assertion that the European powers provide a counterweight to US imperialism was promoted so heavily at the 2003 rally that participants were led to cheer "Vive la France!" Today that call is being taken up by the Ukrainian armed forces in receipt of French AMX-10 RC armoured fighting vehicles, with Leclerc main battle tanks and Mirage fighter jets not ruled out. Germany has already pledged to send heavy Leopard tanks. And the European Union as a whole is preparing to pre-finance weapons and ammunition out of its own budget.

Europe's reluctance to involve itself in the invasion and occupation of Iraq of course never had anything to do with an opposition to war. Their aim was to slam the brakes on US imperialism's efforts to establish itself as the undisputed global hegemon in the "unipolar moment" produced by the end of the USSR and capitalist restoration. They opposed war in the Middle East because they were poorly positioned to advance their own interests in such a war.

Now the same interests in the new circumstances of the Ukraine war have led them to accelerate their own military spending and war plans to secure a share of the oil, gas and essential mineral spoils of the conflict with Russia, and accounts for their desperate attempt to divert massively more advanced social tensions outward.

The European "alternative" will therefore be represented at the STWC rally by Andrej Hunko, a member of the German Left Party aligned with the wing of the party led by Sahra Wagenknecht and Oskar Lafontaine. They make a direct appeal to leading figures in the

military and the far right Alternative for Germany (AfD), with Lafontaine arguing in terms almost identical to the STWC that Germany and other European powers are "the most loyal vassals" of the US—calling for "the liberation of Europe from US military tutelage through an independent European security and defence policy" and "a joint defence alliance between Germany and France."

In 2016, following the US-Europe backed anti-Russian coup in Ukraine, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) set out the fundamental programmatic basis for an anti-war movement today:

- The struggle against war must be based on the working class, the great revolutionary force in society, uniting behind it all progressive elements in the population.
- The new anti-war movement must be anti-capitalist and socialist, since there can be no serious struggle against war except in the fight to end the dictatorship of finance capital and the economic system that is the fundamental cause of militarism and war.
- The new anti-war movement must therefore, of necessity, be completely and unequivocally independent of, and hostile to, all political parties and organizations of the capitalist class.
- The new anti-war movement must, above all, be international, mobilizing the vast power of the working class in a unified global struggle against imperialism.

On December 10 last year, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality held an online rally launching a global campaign to build a movement against the NATO-Russia war on these principles. Its objective basis has already begun to emerge in a wave of strikes and protests internationally, especially in Europe, against the cuts to wages and social services which will be deepened yet further in service to the war.

On Saturday, the ICFI will be holding an international online meeting under the title "The war in Ukraine and how to stop it: an online discussion of socialist anti-war strategy". It will argue that an anti-war strategy "for workers and youth must be based on an understanding of its root causes and consequences: What is the historical background to the war? What are the geopolitical interests driving the US and the NATO powers? What social and political factors shaped the Putin regime's decision to invade Ukraine? What is the relationship between the war and the growth of the class struggle throughout the world?"

We urge workers, students and young people to attend that meeting and contact the Socialist Equality Party and the IYSSE to take their place in this new anti-war offensive.



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