

Britain's Stop the War Coalition holds sparsely attended London rally against Ukraine war

Robert Stevens
26 February 2023

Britain's Stop the War Coalition (STWC) could barely attract 2,000 people to its national demonstration in London on Saturday against the war in Ukraine.

STWC called the rally under the demand, "Peace talks now—Stop the War in Ukraine". Its main slogans were "No to the Russian invasion", "No to NATO" and "No to nuclear war".

A large number of those attending were mainly older people organised around the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain and its *Morning Star* newspaper, and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. A delegation attended from Counterfire, a splinter from the Socialist Workers Party, which includes three STWC leaders, Lindsey German, John Rees and Chris Nineham.

Almost 20 years to the day, the Stop the War Coalition led a demonstration of over a million people in London, as part of global protests against the Iraq war.

However, unlike previous demonstrations over the two decades since, STWC was unable to enlist the support of a single prominent "left" figure in the Labour Party or trade union bureaucracy to speak from the stage, such has been the lurch to the right of these layers. Many of Labour's Socialist Campaign Group (SCG), a rump of around 30 MPs, openly support the shovelling of military weapons by the NATO powers to Kiev to fight the war against Russia to the last Ukrainian soldier.

Among these are former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's shadow chancellor John McDonnell; and other Corbyn supporting Labour MPs; Nadia Whittome; Clive Lewis; Rachael Maskell; Lloyd Russell-Moyle and Ian Lavery. These are supporters of the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign, which has the

backing of four senior union leaders: Gary Smith, GMB General Secretary; Barbara Plant, GMB President; Mick Whelan, ASLEF General Secretary and Chris Kitchen, National Union of Mineworkers General Secretary.

The silence of other leading Corbynites on the war such as SCG secretary Richard Burgon in the face of the rabid warmongering Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer who boasts that Labour is the "party of NATO" is politically criminal.

McDonnell backed a statement by the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign last week which declared, "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".

On the day, the campaign staged a provocative demonstration alongside the STWC demo, chanting, "Arm, arm, arm Ukraine!" and holding up placards including, "Yes to NATO" as it was assembling.

Corbyn was sacked from the Parliamentary Labour Party over two years ago by Starmer, who reiterated this week that he would not be allowed to stand as a Labour candidate in the next general election. The Labour leadership has put Corbyn's supporters on notice that they are next to be booted out, with all supporters of the Stop the War Coalition to be purged.

This is why Corbyn, the deputy president of STWC and by far its most prominent leader, didn't appear on stage at the main Trafalgar Square rally. He instead spoke only to a handful of people in the crowd while it

was assembling at Portland Place. Corbyn then skulked away, not even bothering to march with the protest.

His bullhorn address consisted of pathetic appeals to the British government and NATO powers to organise peace talks, which he stressed were advocated by “the General Secretary of the United Nations, by the vast majority of nations within the UN, by the Pope, by a number of world leaders, particularly Latin American ones such as President Pedro and President Lula”.

He ended his short speech, “If it is possible for the US to contact Russia to say that President Biden is visiting Kiev, then it is obviously possible for them to come together for serious talks to stop the fighting, stop the killing, stop the conflict and bring about peace and justice.”

The abandoning of Stop the War by their leading supporters meant that the only Labour Party representative on the platform was former MP Emma Dent Coad, blocked by Starmer from standing again for parliament, and Claudia Webbe, a sitting MP who has like Corbyn had the party whip withdrawn by Starmer. Alongside these were two trade union bureaucrats—Martin Kavanagh, PCS Deputy President, and Carlos Barros, a Rail, Maritime and Transport union national executive committee member.

The tiny demonstration was acknowledged by Stop The War convenor Lindsey German who said, “It’s not the biggest demonstration we’ve ever had.”

She spoke of “a Tory war in Britain. The Tories are on the offensive over this war”, adding that this was “with Keir Starmer backing to the Tories right along the line.” But German made no mention of the Labour left and STW’s former supporters also rushing to back the war.

German then offered as consolation, “Just remember, we’ve got an international movement here”. She pointed to “50,000 [protesters] in Germany”, and “150 demonstrations across Italy this weekend.”

But having cited the claimed attendance by the Berlin rally’s organisers, she said nothing about their reactionary political perspective. Called by Left Party politician Sahra Wagenknecht and feminist Alice Schwarzer, it put forward opposition to the war on a German nationalist and militarist agenda. Among the speakers at the Berlin rally was retired German general and leading militarist Erich Vad.

There are no fundamental difference between Stop

the War and the organisers of the Berlin rally, with both advocating an independent European foreign policy for their respective imperialist rulers, opposed only to US imperialism. The London demonstration also had Left Party MP Andrej Hunko on its platform, who is aligned with the wing of the party led by Wagenknecht and Oskar Lafontaine.

At its rally against the Iraq war 20 years ago, STWC hailed the opposition of France and Germany to the United States and Britain, insisting that with further pressure they could be a future counterweight to US imperialism. As with the myth that a section of the Labour bureaucracy could be won to an anti-imperialist position, this has been shattered by the clamour of France, Germany et al for war against Russia.

Andrew Murray is the Stalinist joint deputy chair of the STWC and served as Corbyn’s “special advisor” during his time as Labour leader. He listed support for various capitalist states as the basis for building an anti-war movement, declaiming, “When we say peace now we are talking in unison with China, with India, with South Africa, with Lula and Brazil, and with most of humanity saying now is the time to stop this war... Lula has called for negotiations. The Chinese government has advanced a plan for negotiations. We need that ceasefire for those negotiations can start and we can get a peace... We need that peace agreement now. *And our responsibility is to make sure that our government doesn't sabotage it.*”

Murray concluded his speech by politely appealing to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, “I ask those on the left or in the Labour movement, you would not trust [present and former Conservative government Prime Ministers] Sunak and Johnson with your living standards, you would not trust them with your public services, you would not trust them to deal with climate change. Why did you trust them with arms and tanks to fight wars across the world... I appeal to everyone in the Labour movement, do not follow Starmer over a cliff. Stand up for peace now”.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact