

John McDonnell leads support of UK Labour ‘left’ for NATO’s war against Russia

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John McDonnell, former Labour shadow chancellor under Jeremy Corbyn and long-time head of the Socialist Campaign Group (SCG) of Labour MPs, has become one of the foremost supporters of NATO’s war against Russia in Ukraine.

A former backer of the Militant tendency—now split into the Socialist Party and the UK section of the International Marxist Tendency—and championed by the pseudo-left as a leading figure in Labour’s supposed left-wing transformation under Corbyn, McDonnell’s actions have exposed the myth of a socialist wing within the Labour Party.

On the day of the Russian invasion, McDonnell tweeted his plan to attend a demonstration organised by the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign, where he would speak alongside the pro-NATO stooge Paul Mason.

In April 2022, he commented in response to Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer’s attack on the Stop the War Coalition (STWC) and any affiliated Labour MPs, “In the discussion of the war in Ukraine, nobody in the Labour Party I am aware of has asserted there has been any moral equivalence between Russia & NATO...”

“A commitment to NATO, has been Labour policy democratically determined by party conference & accepted by every Labour leader for inclusion in every Labour Manifesto, including by Jeremy Corbyn, since NATO’s inception.”

Since then he has involved himself more and more deeply in a network of nominally left-wing groups supporting NATO’s war effort, including *Sotsialnyi Rukh (Social Movement)* in Ukraine.

An apologia for imperialist war

On February 21 this year, McDonnell gave an account of his actions titled, “The Ukrainian Question for Socialists”. His arguments combine every lie and distortion used to justify support for the imperialist ambitions of the United States and its allies.

His approach is deliberately superficial, giving no explanation of the origins of the war and doing his best to hide them.

Russia’s invasion is presented as the inevitable action of an “imperial power”, entirely cut off from its geopolitical context. McDonnell barely mentions either NATO or the United States, despite their shipment of billions of dollars of military aid, including advanced weaponry, extensive training of Ukrainian soldiers, deployment of special forces on the ground and implementation of sweeping economic sanctions.

These actions prove that the war in Ukraine is a de facto war between NATO and Russia. It is a continuation and escalation of the 30 years of uninterrupted war waged by the US to assert its global hegemony following the dissolution of the Soviet Union—most notably the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and proxy wars in Syria and Libya.

As these operations floundered in the Middle East and northern Africa,

NATO turned its attention to Ukraine as a staging ground for aggression against Russia.

The US and the European powers backed the 2014 Maidan coup against the Russian-friendly government of Viktor Yanukovich, spearheaded by fascist groups like Svoboda and the Right Sector—many of which are now organised in the Ukrainian military.

The imperialist powers then sponsored Ukraine’s war against the breakaway regions in the East of the country, with especially close family, cultural and historical ties to Russia.

Extensively training and equipping Ukraine’s armed forces, NATO worked to integrate the country into its structures, while the US openly endorsed its plans to retake Crimea, annexed by Russia in 2014 as a non-negotiable condition of its national security.

All of this is falsified by McDonnell, who champions how “Ukrainian socialists, anarchists and anti-fascists” and “independent trade unions” aided “the toppling of the corrupt Russian-backed presidency of Yanukovich” while also opposing “the growth of fascist groups.”

He invokes the illegal invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan and the bombing of Syria and Libya by the US and its allies—and his own show of opposition to Britain’s involvement made while never breaking with the warmongering Labour Party—to brand Russia’s invasion of Ukraine more of the same.

“With such a consistent track record of opposing illegal wars launched by imperial powers, it is completely understandable why I have opposed and condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine and why I have supported arming Ukrainians fighting the invasion of their country,” he writes.

This is a cynically misleading comparison. The Putin government’s decision to invade Ukraine is a profoundly reactionary attempt to secure the position of Russia’s oligarchy vis a vis the imperialists at the cost of hundreds of thousands of Russian and Ukrainian workers’ lives. But it is not the action of an “imperialist power”. Putin’s disastrously misconceived intent was to blunt the impact of US aggression by winning a position from which to secure a deal with Washington.

By contrast, the genuinely imperialist aims of the US and NATO are to inflict a crushing and destabilising defeat on Russia, creating the conditions to topple its government, if possible split up the country, and instal a puppet regime, giving the ruling classes of the imperialist powers unfettered access to its resources and geostrategic territory. There is no limit to the number of Russians and Ukrainians they would see dead to achieve this goal.

It is not, as McDonnell claims, Ukraine’s “self-determination” being fought for, against its “subjugation... by an imperialist aggressor.” The country is being swung like a club and its population used as cannon fodder against Russia by its imperialist master, the United States.

McDonnell waves away these facts to set up the false dichotomy: support the Ukrainian or the Russian government. He writes, “Ukrainians were faced with the realistic prospect of the subjugation of their country

by an imperialist aggressor...

“My Ukrainian socialist and trade unionist comrades, who believed in nothing more than internationalism, solidarity and peace, joined the territorial force to halt the aggressor.

“For those who question their decision, I simply ask the question what else could they do?”

There is not a trace of socialism in these words. The essential task of socialists in a war is to refuse to line up behind one or another national ruling class, to forge links between the working classes being set to slaughter one another and mobilise them against their governments.

Helping the Zelensky regime “win” the war will not help to “ensure that a peace is created based upon trade union rights, workers’ control and public ownership,” in McDonnell’s fatuous words. It will strengthen the most ferociously anti-Russian, right-wing elements of the state and the armed forces, embolden NATO and either drive the Russian Federation of 140 million people to collapse and imperialist enslavement or the Russian government to escalate to a nuclear war—if NATO does not do so first.

When McDonnell speaks of Ukrainians’ “right to defend themselves”, he means the right of the Zelensky government to wage NATO’s war down to the last Ukrainian. Moreover, he says this war should be fuelled by the supply of NATO weapons: “I have supported the provision of arms to Ukrainians to maintain their defence of their country.”

The devastating consequences of this position are buried under saccharine phrases. Weapons, McDonnell generously admits, “are certain to be used.” But “this is a defensive war and the arms argued for are for defence.” Elsewhere, “For them this is a defensive war that if successful could force a negotiated settlement.” And further, “the Ukrainians need the weapons to defend themselves against renewed attack, if only to secure the breathing space for talks to start.”

NATO is backing Ukraine on the proviso that there must be no negotiated settlement, only a strategic defeat for Russia. The only thing each new shipment of arms has ensured is a future delivery of even more destructive weapons. Just how deceptive McDonnell’s words are was highlighted by a statement published by the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign on February 16, signed by McDonnell along with fellow Labour MPs Nadia Whittome, Clive Lewis, Rachael Maskell, Lloyd Russell-Moyle and Ian Lavery, and leaders of the GMB, ASLEF, PCS and NUM trade unions.

Going even further than the Tory government, they call for “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”.

The Putin government has repeatedly stated that it views the war in Ukraine as existential and has refused to rule out a nuclear first strike. NATO, up to its neck in the conflict, cannot be seen to lose and is led by the US which likewise is actively contemplating a “pre-emptive” (first strike) nuclear attack. McDonnell and Co are not just pro-imperialist, but pro-imperialist to the point of courting nuclear war.

McDonnell, Corbynism and the official anti-war movement

McDonnell’s unalloyed embrace of NATO’s war is a devastating political exposure of those who championed his and Corbyn’s tenure at the head of the Labour Party or looked to them to provide the focal point of an anti-war movement.

McDonnell was invited to speak at the Stop the War Coalition’s first major rally on the war in Ukraine on March 2, 2022—just four days after attending Paul Mason’s pro-war rally. He ultimately refused to appear, as did the Socialist Campaign Group’s Diane Abbott, after Starmer issued an

ultimatum against it, with McDonnell stating:

“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.”

He added, “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.”

Starmer spared the STWC’s blushes. McDonnell would have used the platform given to him to make the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign’s pitch for NATO military support.

For most of the intervening year, the STWC has observed a gentlemanly silence over McDonnell’s positions. It finally felt forced to respond with the release of his “The Ukrainian Question for Socialists,” publishing a piece by Stop the War’s vice-president, the Stalinist Andrew Murray, “Don’t back the Tories on Ukraine”.

Murray’s is a “Dear John” letter, appealing to his better nature. It seeks to preserve McDonnell’s reputation as a left-wing figure—and hence excuse Stop the War’s orientation to him and his fellow SCG warmongers—while lightly chiding his embrace of pro-NATO forces.

The article makes several correct points. That the Ukrainian regime “has banned a host of left-wing parties”, “Collective bargaining agreements have been scrapped and the unions’ legal right to veto dismissals has been likewise abolished.” And that “this is a war which our own government is, in effect, fighting” and NATO has a “programme for prolonged war.” The prospect is raised of NATO weapons being “used to drive on to the Crimea and the Donbas, liberating people who, as *The Economist* has acknowledged, ‘do not want to be liberated.’”

Murray nonetheless absurdly accepts as good coin McDonnell’s argument that he is acting out of concern for Ukrainian socialists. “His case boils down to one essential point—Ukrainian socialists and trade unionists want the arms, so they should be given them.” He lends this legitimacy with the comment, “Ukrainian trade unionists and socialists have the right to form a bloc with this authoritarian government if they wish.”

The wayward John is offered the advice, “He would rightly not give Sunak, Johnson or Truss a minute’s credit on any other political issue. To assume that on the Ukraine war their policy somehow aligns with Ukrainian socialists and workers is illogical.”

But Murray does not provide an independent policy for Ukrainian, or any, workers. Rather, he implores McDonnell to recognise the “alternative” which “John only acknowledges in passing. That is peace negotiations. That is the position championed by China, India, Brazil, South Africa – even Saudi Arabia!”

Stop the War is fatally compromised by its political perspective. Opposed to a mobilisation of the working class, it advocates an end to war through a more judicious foreign policy, more “multi-polar”, pro-European and independent of the United States, to be pushed in Parliament by the Labour “left”.

Previously its models were France and Germany, whose hesitations in the past over US-led wars from which they expected little gain were painted as a fundamental policy difference. The line-up of Paris and Berlin with Washington over Ukraine has only forced the STWC to look further afield.

It has no such alternatives when it comes to British capitalist politicians. It should be remembered that until 2015, it was McDonnell who ran as the Socialist Campaign Group’s “left” candidate for Labour leader, in both the 2007 and 2010 leadership election campaigns. Murray notes his “high standing within the movement.” Corbyn only took his place reluctantly

after McDonnell demurred, and ending up elected on a swell of anti-Blairite sentiment and opposition to the crimes of British imperialism.

As McDonnell pointed out last April, this did not stop every Labour manifesto produced under Corbyn’s leadership containing a commitment to NATO—and he could have added the Trident nuclear weapons system.

While Corbyn has attended several Stop the War events since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, not one Labour Party member of the SCG has associated with the STWC or mentioned NATO critically since Starmer’s ultimatum was issued last spring. Half a dozen, with McDonnell in the lead, are actively working to provide a left face for NATO’s war.

Murray is forced to acknowledge in his article that McDonnell’s piece “echoes points made in an open letter he and a few other Labour MPs signed last week [the February 16 Ukraine Solidarity Campaign statement].”

The minimising phrase “a few other Labour MPs” hides the critical fact that there is no left-wing or anti-war faction within the Labour Party whatsoever; no one has challenged or will challenge Starmer’s “party of NATO”. Outside parliament, Momentum—a members’ organisation set up to support Corbyn’s leadership—has not posted on the issue since May 2022. This last word was an interview with academic David Wearing who says of NATO’s military involvement in Ukraine:

“There’s been no groundswell of opposition to this from the left, and rightly so. Ukraine has no option but to defend itself militarily, it has the right to do so, and it has the right to seek the means of self-defence from the only sources credibly able to provide it, namely Russia’s Western adversaries. None of this is complicated and most of us understand it.”

An anti-war movement can only be built in a fight against the pro-imperialist Labour Party, including its misnamed “left” flank. That is the lesson of McDonnell’s comments which Stop the War refuses to acknowledge. It is the basis on which the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality are fighting to mobilise opposition in the working class and among young people.



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