

Corbyn, the Stop the War Coalition and the way forward in the fight against the genocide in Gaza

Chris Marsden
29 December 2023

Millions of workers and young people have protested in the UK and internationally, outraged by the slaughter carried out by Israel in Gaza with the explicit aim of ethnically cleansing the Palestinians. Their anger is directed not only against Netanyahu's fascist government, but their backers in Britain's parliament and paymasters in the United States.

But Britain's Stop the War Coalition (STWC) and its political leader Jeremy Corbyn have sought to limit all protests to placing pressure on the Conservative government, and its de facto allies in the Labour Party, to shift from their naked support for Israel and instead demand a ceasefire.

Week after week, the Israeli war machine grinds on and the mountain of Palestinian corpses grows while governments have either made their appeals for "pauses" or ceasefires in the United Nations, or abstained like the UK—all knowing that the US-Israel axis will ensure the genocide continues unabated.

In the mouths of everyone from President Macron in France to the despotic rulers of various Arab regimes, calls for a ceasefire are a transparent cover for their active collusion with Israel in its efforts to ethnically cleanse Gaza, to be followed by the West Bank and Israel itself. Yet the more bankrupt this perspective has proved, the more Stop the War insists that success will come by just getting more people onto the streets.

December 9 saw the seventh national march demanding a ceasefire since October 7 and the last scheduled to take place until January 13 next year. The lead-up to that march saw the campaign for Britain to demand a ceasefire go down to a catastrophic defeat. On November 15, the first UK vote of any kind was held on Israel's genocidal assault, on a Scottish National Party's (SNP) ceasefire amendment to the King's Speech.

In the weeks before this vote, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer became a hate figure for millions because of his justification of war crimes by citing Israel's "right to self defence". Facing a backlash, more than two dozen Labour councillors quit, while thousands wrote condemning the party's position and demonstrations took place outside MP's constituency offices.

On November 11, 800,000 marched in London demanding a ceasefire in the biggest protest in the UK since the 2003 march against the Iraq War. Despite this, and after five weeks of mass murder, Starmer did not budge an inch—just four days later whipping his MPs to oppose the ceasefire amendment. The SNP's motion met with a resounding No, with 293 against and just 125 in favour. A large portion of the Tory Party's 350 MPs were not even required to cast a vote to ensure its defeat.

Close to three quarters (142) of Labour MPs followed Starmer's order to abstain. Only 56 voted for a ceasefire. As the WSWs wrote, "Not one of the Labour MPs who broke with Starmer's orders in this vote has any intention of breaking with the Labour Party or waging any fight against its pro-genocide majority. Few were thinking about saving anything other than their chances of re-election."

In the vote's aftermath, eight members of Labour's frontbench resigned

or were sacked and the party machine rumbled on. Most who did resign professed their continued loyalty to Starmer, with Labour Friends of Israel member Jess Phillips's "Dear Keir" resignation letter noting her "heavy heart", pride in "your Labour Party" and pledge to "do everything I can to deliver a Labour government..." Most of these scoundrels will be back on board in due course.

More revolting still was the refusal of a single nominally "left" MP to break from the party, after weeks of near blanket refusal to even criticise Starmer by name for his criminal collusion with genocide.

Stop the War works with Corbyn to insist on yet more "pressure" on MPs

On November 24, an "operational pause" began in Gaza to facilitate a prisoner exchange, accurately described by the WSWs as providing time for Israel "to reload its weapons for the next stage in its ethnic cleansing" of the enclave.

That weekend a much-reduced march took place in London, estimated by the STWC to number 300,000. Yet on December 2, Stop the War met to discuss the supposedly tremendous success of their campaign.

The first speaker, the Stalinist Andrew Murray, felt obliged to respond to growing dissatisfaction with what he summarised as "marches from A to B" that don't achieve anything. The marches, he insisted, had actually secured the "resignation of semi-fascist home secretary", Suella Braverman, and "the biggest rebellion against the Starmer leadership", proving "we are on the right route."

The task, he insisted, was to continue putting pressure on the Labour Party by threatening to refuse to vote for its MPs at the next general election! Anxious not to raise any difficulties for the meeting's featured speaker, Jeremy Corbyn, by making any direct criticism of Labour's genocidal warmongers, Murray said British imperialism "has a face and names. But I don't want to embarrass any of the excellent comrades on the platform, so I will put the matter positively... It is a great shame, a political tragedy, that Jeremy Corbyn is not still leader of the labour Party today."

Those without Corbyn's "moral clarity", provided with anonymity by Murray, would "be nailed to the pillar of political infamy, those who cannot decide whether they are for a ceasefire or against it, whether they are for a ceasefire or for the war continuing, those politicians need just one simple message, 'No ceasefire, no vote'."

This, said Murray, would enable the anti-war movement to "impose peace and justice on the government of our country."

Corbyn, when he spoke, also maintained silence on Starmer's Labour Party. After boasting of the 125 MPs who voted for a ceasefire, he continued, "Large numbers of others didn't." In the "parallel universe" of parliament, "politicians are calculating 'Well... if I halfway go to a partial ceasefire, maybe those people who support Palestine will think I'm alright, but I don't want to go all the way with them because I don't agree with them anyway.' There's some completely ludicrous conversations going on that I overhear."

When asked by a reporter whether such politicians will ever be forced to listen, Corbyn replied, "Yes they'll be forced to listen because had we called that vote a week earlier we wouldn't have got the 125 that we did, voting for a permanent ceasefire. We'd have got much less. Those who were encouraged by the strength of activities in their own constituencies. Tens of thousands of emails were sent to each MP demanding that and they've carried on doing so."

Corbyn said this almost nine weeks after the beginning of Israel's onslaught, with thousands dead and Gaza reduced to rubble. The death toll on November 16 when the vote on a ceasefire was taken was around 12,000, which equates to 214 dead bodies for every Labour MP's vote. With over 21,000 now confirmed dead and thousands more buried under rubble, the blood price for every Labour MP's ceasefire vote is over 500 dead Palestinians and rising.

Yet in an election that will likely take place in May next year—with Labour standing on an identical programme to the Tories and openly backing genocide—the Stop the War Coalition offers its backing for a Labour government if a few more of its MPs make a meaningless call for a ceasefire while Israel continues its military operation. By May the death toll could be in the hundreds of thousands, with Israel pledged to wage war for months to come and winter and disease widely expected to claim more lives than its bombs.

On December 9, around 100,000 protested in London, where they were told by Stop the War convenor Lindsay German of the pseudo-left group Counterfire, "Come the election Palestine is on the ballot paper and if there is no vote for a ceasefire, there will be no vote for the politicians that refuse to do it." Corbyn and just two Labour MPs, Apsana Begum and John McDonnell, said nothing critical of Labour.

STWC and the Labour left's betrayal of the anti-war movement

The Stop the War Coalition promotes Corbyn and a handful of Labour "lefts", and trade union leaders such as Mick Lynch of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union, as the supposed leaders of an anti-war movement because its pseudo-left and Stalinist leadership shares with them an unswerving loyalty to the entire labour bureaucracy. Groups such as Counterfire and the Socialist Workers Party from which it split in 2010 operate outside the Labour Party, but only with the limited aim of "pressurising" the trade unions and Labour's "left" to adopt a more "radical" agenda.

It is not merely their continued advocacy of a vote for Labour against the Tories, which they will certainly maintain despite their threats over a ceasefire. Above all, they never pose the need for workers to break free of the trade union apparatus on which the Labour Party depends to police the class struggle and impose its war policies. They may on occasion rail against Starmer, but Starmer makes clear that his right-wing programme for government will be imposed through a corporatist system of official collusion between government, employers and the unions.

The STWC must laud the anti-war credentials of Corbyn and his dwindling band of supporters all the more urgently given that the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress are so openly pro-war and their grip

on workers has been massively eroded. Holding up "Corbynism" as an anti-war tendency is therefore essential if the STWC are to hold out the prospect of forcing Labour to make a turn on Gaza.

However, it is Corbyn's record that most perfectly embodies the political bankruptcy of the STWC's anti-war strategy. He was popularly elected Labour leader in 2015 in large part because of his anti-war and anti-imperialist record, especially regarding the 2003 Iraq War but also his defence of the Palestinians. He assumed leadership of the Labour Party while occupying the position of chair of the Stop the War Coalition and Murray himself became an advisor to the new leader. But with millions of workers backing him and hundreds of thousands joining the party to defeat a right-wing plan to depose him in 2016, Corbyn presided over an extended rout, ending with his replacement in 2020 by Starmer.

Capitulating on every issue of principle, Corbyn's most grotesque betrayal, and there are many, was when, after quitting as chair of the STWC on becoming Labour leader, he swiftly abandoned his opposition to NATO and the nuclear deterrent, committed to NATO military spending targets and gave a free vote to Labour MPs on military action against Syria.

The witch-hunt of anti-Zionist protesters opposing the Gaza genocide as antisemites was prefigured by the vile campaign against Corbyn and his supporters in the Labour Party. But it was Corbyn who facilitated this witch-hunt by refusing to oppose it and even presiding over the expulsion of some of his closest allies. This did not prevent his expulsion from the Parliamentary Labour Party in 2020 for suggesting a political motive for this slander campaign led by his Blairite opponents.

In response to this capitulation, at a meeting to mark the 20th anniversary of the STWC in 2021, Murray cautioned against making waves by being too harsh in criticising Labour because, "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."

One year later this amnesty for Corbyn and his allies led to eleven members of the Socialist Campaign Group, including John McDonnell and Diane Abbott, withdrawing backing for an STWC open letter calling for a ceasefire in Ukraine—within an hour of Starmer warning that criticism of NATO would result in expulsion from the party. McDonnell himself went on to become a prominent supporter of the Ukrainian government leading NATO's proxy war.

At the beginning of this year, for the first time in the organisation's history, not a single Labour MP attended Stop the War's national conference. Murray again provided the necessary apologetics, stressing that 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, 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."

If the likes of McDonnell now feel they can combine their prostration before Starmer and warmongering in Ukraine with mounting STWC platforms on Gaza, alongside Corbyn, this is only because they trust its continued commitment to "think about everything we say, and how we protest" so that the Labour "lefts" can continue to avoid clashing with Starmer.

An alternative foreign policy for British imperialism

The second basic issue that must be understood regarding the Stop the

War Coalition is that its alliance with the rump of the Labour “left” is part and parcel of its advocacy of a pro-capitalist strategy, fought for in conscious political opposition to socialism and a perspective based on the independent political mobilisation of the working class.

The central leadership of the STWC since it was founded in 2010 consists of Counterfire and the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain. They act as a hub for various other pseudo-left tendencies, pacifists and Stalinists around the near defunct Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, a few “left” Labourites and trade union bureaucrats, and religious groups including the Sunni Muslim Association of Britain. The war on Gaza has involved a prominent role for the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, whose pseudo-left leadership is totally loyal to the Labour Party.

From its inception, Stop the War has combined its efforts to capture anti-war sentiment and bring it under the political tutelage of the trade union bureaucracy and a handful of Labourites such as Corbyn, with appeals to Labour and anyone else they think might listen to join them in advocating a British foreign policy that takes its distance from US imperialism. Alliances with supposedly less militaristic global powers, initially Europe and more recently the “Global South”, championed by “progressive voices” at home, are the way Stop the War actually proposes to stop wars.

In the lead-up to the second Gulf War in 2003, the Liberal Democrats were held up as anti-war allies, alongside the French and German governments and the United Nations—all advanced as an alternative to the alliance of Tony Blair with the US administration of George Bush Jr, to disastrous effect.

Following Iraq, the STWC was adopted and promoted by a broad swathe of Labour and trade union “lefts” as a safe and trustworthy vehicle for making token protests against unpopular wars in Libya, Syria and elsewhere that committed nobody to anything, other than urging British imperialism to rethink its “special relationship” with the US.

As has been detailed on the *World Socialist Web Site*: “In 2007, the STWC used the departure of Blair as Labour leader to make a direct appeal to his replacement and partner in crime Gordon Brown to ‘Pursue a foreign policy independent of the administration of the United States of America.’

“The STWC acknowledged, ‘Brown has been at the Prime Minister’s right hand throughout the decisions on Iraq and Afghanistan,’ before adding, ‘Nevertheless, it is our conviction that mass pressure, combined with electoral self-interest, can force the British government to break from George Bush’s wars.’”

Public opposition to militarism forced the Conservative government of David Cameron to hold a parliamentary vote on August 30, 2013, which went against Britain taking part in planned US airstrikes against Syria. Lindsey German boasted in response, “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. This week we made that possible.”

When Corbyn became party leader in 2015, the STWC again spelled out that they were advocating an alternative foreign policy for a Labour government to pursue, with no challenge made to the capitalist system driving Britain’s imperialist interests. An article by John Rees on November 4, 2017, “Labour Badly Needs to Adopt Corbyn’s View of War and Peace,” denounced “Out-of-date Cold War structures,” with the US as “the dominant state in the NATO alliance.” With the US “losing the economic race to China,” Britain should abandon a “special relationship” leaving the UK “under-labouring for the US’s pivot to the Pacific” and “Adopt Corbynism.”

The STWC’s response to the ignominious pull-out of US and allied forces from Afghanistan in 2021 was an August 15 appeal for “politicians of all parties to learn the lessons of the failed wars of intervention and turn to international cooperation as the means of resolving disputes and

tackling problems of poverty and underdevelopment.”

The same demand was advanced in the run-up to the proxy NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, in a January 21, 2022, statement, calling 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.”

One month later, war began in Ukraine with every one of the major European powers backing the US and NATO and no trace of the mythical “all-inclusive security architecture” in sight. But should such a move ever be made by the European powers this would not be a move against war but would represent a commitment by the European imperialists to wage war on their own terms and in furtherance of their own predatory interests.

The bankrupt perspective of a peaceful “multi-polar” capitalism

No fundamental change in the STWC’s line followed from these events, other than laying additional stress on the “restraining” hand supposedly offered by the rising economic powers, led above all by China.

At a rally against the Ukraine war in February 2023, Murray declared, “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.”

It is this line that is now most dominant in Stop the War’s perspective for ending the genocide in Gaza. Its website reproduced a December 18 article from the Stalinist *Morning Star*, one of a series by Jenny Clegg boosting the capitalist regime in Beijing with absurd titles such as “How will China build a modern socialist state by 2049” and accepting that the Xi regime’s goal is “socialist modernisation with Chinese characteristics”.

Clegg, a Senior Lecturer in International Studies at the University of Central Lancashire, urges support for China’s five-point peace proposal on Israel-Palestine launched at the United Nations Security Council on November 30. The trite nonsense in question, urging a ceasefire and a political settlement after “the long delay in realising the dream of an independent state of Palestine and the failure to redress the historical injustice suffered by the Palestinian people”, was put forward in a body in which the US has veto powers and has blocked countless similar resolutions over decades.

Clegg complains, “The initiative has been entirely passed over in the West,” whereas China “underlined its significance by sending Foreign Minister Wang Yi to chair the session and deliver the proposal,” before asking pathetically, “Given that the UN, EU, US, Britain, China and Russia all claim to support a two-state solution, how hard can it be to get an agreement?”

Clegg and the STWC are among the many advocates for a “multi-polar world” in which the United States and European powers are gradually eclipsed by their competitors, always led by China. The fate of the Palestinians is therefore entrusted to the success of China in replacing the European Union as the Middle East’s “main trading partner, or in Israel’s case, the second largest trading partner,” and to various regional powers “looking east to the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation,” with Egypt, Qatar and Saudi Arabia becoming “dialogue partners in 2021, followed by UAE, Bahrain and Kuwait in 2022.”

This is portrayed as “Not so much a power struggle between China and

the US, what is taking place is the rise of the Middle East itself,” with China’s role one of “Consensus-building for peace.”

The multi-polar perspective is spelled out as: “This then is not about expelling the US from the Middle East but restricting its options: ending the region’s subjection to US power is not so much about severing links but rather looking both West and East towards China to steer towards a green, digitised transition.”

The main problem with all such scenarios is that they assume the US will respond to such a challenge to its global hegemony by rolling over and accepting its natural demotion. Reality proves the opposite. Even if one were to accept that China’s role in world affairs is entirely altruistic, rather than designed to expand the commercial and political clout of its bourgeoisie while trying to avoid direct conflict with Washington, the US response to an economic challenge from China that it cannot overcome by economic means alone drives its turn to a military solution.

The Biden administration’s plan is for the genocide in Gaza to be followed by military action against Iran and its allies, in what Israel’s defence minister Yoav Gallant has described as a “multi-front war” across “seven theatres: Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Judea and Samaria [the West Bank], Iraq, Yemen and Iran”. The US is behind this drive, which it calculates will consolidate its grip over the oil-rich Middle East and strengthen its hand in an ongoing conflict with both China and Russia.

Stop the War knows this, publishing an article from Counterfire on December 21 “The Red Sea is now the second front in the Gaza War.” But the only answer to this grave danger offered by John Rees, after asking “whether the Gaza War will engulf the entire Middle East”, is to hope for a US defeat through a combination of Houthi attacks on Saudi oil fields, Iran supporting “a more offensive strategy by both the Houthis and Hezbollah”, “the Iraqi resistance, under a pro-Iranian Iraqi government... carrying out a sustained campaign of attacks on US bases both in Iraq and Syria,” and the US “bleeding credibility with everyone but its most servile allies, as successive UN votes have demonstrated.”

Such a ragged programme cannot stop the global escalation of war and turns attention away from the oppositional movement in the international working class which can. Only in the penultimate paragraph is “popular revulsion at what Israel is doing with US encouragement” raised as a factor in the crisis of US imperialism. This testifies to how Stop the War conceives of the Gaza protests solely from the standpoint encouraging the main political actors in the STWC’s view—Washington’s various capitalist rivals—to trim America’s sails and somehow secure a multi-polar world.

“Left” criticism versus revolutionary opposition

Writing in 1927, on “The Struggle for Peace and the Anglo-Russian Committee,” Leon Trotsky painted a scathingly accurate picture of the role the political “left” plays on behalf of imperialism that perfectly captures that of Corbyn and Stop the War over Gaza:

The “left” criticizes the government within such limits as do not interfere with its role as exploiter and robber. The “left” gives expression to the dissatisfaction of the masses within these limits, so as to restrain them from revolutionary action.

In case the dissatisfaction of the masses breaks through to the outside, the “left” seeks to dominate the movement in order to strangle it. Were the “left” not to criticize, not to expose, not to attack the bourgeoisie, it would be unable to serve it “in its own way”.

If it is admitted that the “left” is a ballast, then it is admitted that it is the useful, appropriate, necessary, succoring ballast without which the ship of British imperialism would long ago have gone down.

[*Trotsky's Writings on Britain: Volume 2*, p. 210, New Park Publications 1974]

The “left” is identified as occupying a position *within* imperialist politics, rather than a genuine *opposition* to imperialism, and part of a broader spectrum that includes their fervent critics on the right. Regarding the denunciations of Corbyn et al by the Blairites and the Tory media, Trotsky adds:

To be sure, the [Tory] diehards are fulminating against the “left”. But this is done to keep the fear of God in it, so that it will not overstep the bounds prescribed for it, so that no unnecessary expense be incurred for their ‘ballast’. The diehards are just as necessary an ingredient in the imperialist mechanism as the “left”. [ibid]

There is no basis for opposing the genocide in Gaza outside of a political struggle against the governments and nominal opposition parties such as Labour backing Israel, and the trade union bureaucracies that have done nothing to defend the Palestinians or oppose their persecutors. This includes in the front rank the naked warmongers in Washington and London, but also the war’s many other facilitators such as imperialist France and Spain and the Arab regimes hiding their guilt behind ceasefire calls.

Ending mass murder and ethnic cleansing in Gaza and the opposing the expanding war waged by the NATO imperialist powers and their proxies in the Middle East and Ukraine, ultimately targeting China, demands the development of a global movement of the working class against the capitalist class and its repressive state apparatus.

The millions who have taken part week after week in mass protests in defence of the Palestinians must turn consciously and systematically to the factories and workplaces, arguing for working class action, including strikes and boycotts of arms companies, docks and airports, to prevent the shipment of any items to Israel with a military use.

The demand must be raised for a political general strike, linking the struggle against war to the defeat of the savage austerity imposed by governments internationally to pay for it, and against the destruction of basic democratic rights by a ruling class determined to crush all opposition to its crimes.

The development of a mass socialist anti-war movement requires new organisations, a new perspective and the building of a political leadership aiming for the conquest of power by the working class, the overthrow of capitalism and imperialism, and the establishment of socialism on a world scale. The International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Party provide this new axis of struggle for workers and young people in Britain and throughout the world.



To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact