

Britain's ruling elite back call for conscription and vast increase in war budget

Robert Stevens
28 January 2024

Britain's media has been flooded with statements backing the call by British Army chief General Sir Patrick Sanders for the government to prepare to "mobilise the nation" for war, increase regular army numbers to 120,000 within three years and create a "citizen army" of up to 500,000. Many statements explicitly include support for conscription.

The headlines accompanying these calls are a sign of the times: "Could World War 3 happen?" and "Will I be drafted for WW3 in the UK?" in *The Sun*; "Are you ready to fight in World War 3?" in the *Daily Express*; "World War 3: 5 chilling signs UK and US are heading for all out conflict amid global unrest" in the *Daily Mirror*.

All these articles assume that a major conflict between the NATO powers and Russia and China is inevitable, raising the prospect of nuclear war, and that the necessary sacrifices by the working class must be made. This is the fate of, in Sanders' words, the "pre-war generation" now that the post-war "peace dividend" is over.

Events in the last days confirm that British imperialism is in the maelstrom of a developing third world war. On January 22, British Royal Air Force Typhoon jets carried out—under the guise of protecting the Red Sea global trade artery—further airstrikes with Paveway IV missiles against Houthi targets in Yemen. These followed the first strikes in Yemen, carried out alongside US military forces, on January 11.

Tensions escalated on Friday with Houthi forces striking the Marlin Luanda oil tanker as it transited the Red Sea. The blaze from the strikes was put out by Indian, US and French navy vessels with no fatalities reported.

Houthi Brigadier General Yahya Saree claimed the Marlin Luanda was a "British" tanker and that it was attacked in support "of the oppressed Palestinian people" and in response "to the American-British aggression against our country." The ship is owned by Singaporean-based French multinational oil and commodities trader

Trafigura and was sailing under the flag of the Marshall Islands on its way to Singapore. Management of the ship is contracted out to UK-based Oceonix Services Ltd.

On Sunday, the UK Ministry of Defence showed footage of its main Type 45 destroyer warship in the region, HMS Diamond, shooting down a drone.

Confirming planning for nuclear war, the *Telegraph* reported Saturday, citing Pentagon documents, that a "nuclear mission" would happen at RAF Lakenheath in Suffolk "imminently." Last September it was reported that the previous March the US Congress had received a 2024 budgetary request for \$50 million (£39.5 million) from the US Air Force for a "surety dormitory" at RAF Lakenheath—a term in US military parlance referring to nuclear weapons.

According to the newspaper, unredacted procurement contracts "show how the Pentagon has ordered new equipment for the base, including ballistic shields designed to protect military personnel from attacks on 'high value assets'."

The newspaper added that 15 years after the removal of US nuclear missiles from UK soil, "Lakenheath is expected to house B61-12 gravity bombs, which have a variable yield of up to 50 kilotons—more than three times the power of the atomic weapon dropped on Hiroshima in 1945."

US military figures were among those backing Sanders' call to massively expand the Armed Forces. Carlos Del Toro, the US navy secretary, said in a briefing after a speech at the Royal United Services Institute (Rusi) in London, "I think it is important for the United Kingdom to reassess where they are today given the threats that exist today."

Britain would decide the strength of its army, "But I would argue, quite frankly, that given the near-term economic threats to the United Kingdom and the United States that investments in their navy are significantly

important.”

Sanders, backed by Britain’s former NATO commander General Sir Richard Sherriff, intends to ensure that an increase in military spending—way beyond the current just above two percent of GDP and a target of 2.5 percent—is made a key issue in a general election to be held later this year.

Defence Secretary Grant Shapps has said that military spending must reach three percent of GDP, but Sanders, Sheriff, the US top brass and a slew of Tory and Labour politicians are demanding spending on war that massively outstrips Shapps’ goal.

A frenzied campaign is underway in the media to denounce successive governments for trying to do imperialism “on the cheap.”

The *Telegraph* wrote earlier this month that “Calls to send the £3bn HMS Queen Elizabeth to the [Middle East] region” were “set to be spurned” because RFA [Royal Fleet Auxiliary] Fort Victoria, the only Solid Support Ship capable of providing “the amount of ammunition, aircraft, spare equipment and food required for a full deployment, is unable to sail owing to a lack of sailors.”

In a *Daily Mail* op-ed, influential media figure Andrew Neil complained, “Politicians on the Left and the Right were too quick to pocket the proceeds of the peace dividend, oblivious to new threats that were rising, from Russia to Iran to China and North Korea... Britain has made a big deal of being part of the American-led attacks on Houthi installations. But our Typhoon fighter jets have had to endure a 3,000-mile round trip from Cyprus on their bombing raids, requiring in-air refuelling there and back.”

He noted that the Royal Navy’s “two state-of-the-art aircraft carriers, the Queen Elizabeth II and the Prince of Wales, built at a combined cost of £8 billion and carrying F35s, the world’s most sophisticated warplane, both lie idle in dock in Portsmouth. Apparently we don’t have enough protective ships to put around them to deploy them to where they are needed. So our RAF pilots have to fly 3,000 miles instead.”

He added, “We now spend over £50 billion a year on defence yet remain severely limited on what military power we can deploy when it is needed.... Even HMS Diamond depends entirely on the US Navy for supplies.”

Cuts to the British Army, he noted, meant it “is no longer big enough to field even a 25,000-strong armoured division... The US military increasingly thinks we lack the scale to be useful allies in war zones.”

Conservative MP Tobias Ellwood, former head of the

Defence Select Committee, praised Sanders on LBC Radio, saying “What’s coming over the horizon should shock us.” The army is “half the size of what it should be,” he said, calling for an immediate doubling of the size of the military budget from two percent of GDP to four percent.

The *Guardian* editorialised that Sanders was stepping down as Army chief in six months and “knows that this is an election year. He wants the political parties to hear him.”

Noting that the military “has to compete for resources with hospitals, care services, local government, schools and the green agenda, to name but a few,” it said, “None of this is an outright argument against some of what Gen Sanders is calling for. The international dangers are indeed mounting. Russia is a genuine threat, particularly to Poland and the Baltic and Nordic states. Deployable military numbers really matter.”

While Tory Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has no fundamental differences with Sanders over the need to increase military spending, he has not at this stage backed the calls for conscription.

But on Saturday Boris Johnson, who Sunak replaced as prime minister following the short-lived Liz Truss premiership, referred to himself in a video which began with an army salute, “Lance Corporal Johnson reporting for duty.” He wrote in his column for the *Daily Mail*, “The best way to prevent a war is to prepare for it... That is why General Sanders is right in his essential point, that we must tackle the current problems in the Armed Forces, and especially of under-recruitment.”

Anything that these rabid forces demand will be more than matched by the other main tool of British imperialism, the Labour Party.

Shadow Defence Secretary John Healey, following his latest trip to Estonia to visit UK NATO regiment troops, tweeted Friday, “Over 14 years the Conservatives have hollowed out our Armed Forces. Labour will conduct a Strategic Defence Review in our first year to assess fully the state of our Armed Forces, the threats against us and the capabilities needed to defend the UK.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact