

# Corbyn offers verbal opposition, Labour’s “left” rump backs Starmer’s Ukraine war aims

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Debate in Britain’s Parliament on March 3 was given over to discussion of the Labour government’s plans for a military/political response to US President Donald Trump’s unilateral opening of negotiations with Russia on ending the war in Ukraine.

Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer was reporting back from the summit the previous day of European Union leaders, plus Canada, where he pledged to create a “coalition of the willing”, led by himself and President Macron of France, to defend Ukraine that would put UK “boots on the ground and planes in the air” following any future peace deal.

Starmer was confident of a friendly response from the Opposition benches, speaking of how “our country spoke with one voice” and was leading “from the front.” A veritable love-in followed, led by Conservative Party leader Kemi Badenoch, with “dissent” from the Liberal Democrats and Scottish National Party only over Starmer’s continued efforts to “bridge” the gulf between the “unreliable ally” in Washington and Europe, rather than siding unambiguously with the UK’s “democratic partners”.

It was under these circumstances that Labour MP Richard Burdon and later Jeremy Corbyn, who now sits as an Independent, spoke as the supposed voice of opposition to Starmer’s warmongering. They may as well have not bothered.

Burdon welcomed “the growing push from numerous countries for a peace deal between Russia and Ukraine,” before expressing his alarm over “deploying British troops on the ground in Ukraine and British military planes in the skies over Ukraine.”

Warning that this “would risk our country coming into a direct military conflict with a nuclear-armed Russia”, with consequences that “really do not bear thinking about,” his only proposed course of action was to ask whether Starmer would “commit to ensuring a vote in the House of Commons before any such deployment, in keeping with the important principles of our parliamentary democracy?”

Corbyn’s comments were more insipid still, speaking of a “ghastly conflict” before asking Starmer, “Under what circumstances does he envisage British troops being deployed in Ukraine, under what circumstances does he envisage them taking part in fighting activity against a belligerent, and will he guarantee that any such decision will come to the House before it is taken?”

Starmer had little difficulty in replying that, should the need arise, he would ensure there was a parliamentary vote—given that this would leave the decision to MPs who had just spent the entire afternoon proclaiming their support for his proposals.

**Corbyn’s continued advice to the warmonger Starmer**

Corbyn’s polite question to Starmer has nothing to do with the restrictions imposed by parliamentary protocol. That same day, *Tribune* magazine, now owned by *Jacobin*, contained an article by Corbyn, “Guns Before Butter” where he made an appeal in the same style.

Alluding to Tony Blair without naming him, Corbyn advised Starmer to “take a moment to pause, reflect and ask himself what happened the last time a Labour Prime Minister appointed himself the messiah of the free world.”

On the third anniversary of the Ukraine war, Parliament too should “take a moment to reflect on the hundreds of thousands of lives that have been lost” and heed his call for an end to the conflict: “Think of the kind of society we could build if politicians had the slightest interest in building a world of peace.”

Corbyn’s sermonising has one aim only: not to persuade the Labour government or Parliament of the error of their ways, but to allow Corbyn to pose as an advocate for peace while continuing the refusal to mobilise against the warmongers that characterised his time as leader of the Labour Party between 2015 and 2020 and since his expulsion by Starmer in 2024.

In the 2024 general election, Corbyn stood as an Independent in his Islington North seat and supported a handful of other candidates who stood against Labour in protest at its backing for Israel’s genocide in Gaza. Everywhere else he called for a Labour vote. After a convincing win in his old seat, he formed a parliamentary bloc with four other successful Independents pledging once again to support Labour when it did anything “positive”.

Corbyn has repeatedly refused entreaties from various pseudo-left groups to take the leadership of a new party to Labour’s left, making clear that he has no intention of mobilising opposition to Starmer and the Blairites no matter what crimes they commit: Not over the Gaza genocide, and certainly not over plans to send British troops to Ukraine that risk war with Russia.

On March 5, Corbyn wrote an opinion column for the *Metro*, “Keir Starmer says there’s no money—I don’t believe him”.

He noted his “expressed concern” over “the prospect of British troops in Ukraine” and insisted “Keir Starmer must tell us what impact this increase in military spending will have on budgets for housing, education, healthcare and beyond.”

“Early signs are not good,” he suggested, amid reports of the biggest cuts in welfare benefits and social expenditure in post-war British history.

In response to a catalogue of Labour’s crimes, Corbyn then reiterated his election pledge “that I would congratulate the government when it made positive changes to people’s lives, but call it out where it fell short.”

On the positive side, he cited his “welcome” for the “Renters’ Reform Bill, which ended no-fault evictions”, which was slightly offset by “the government’s continued refusal to implement rent controls,” its

“expansion of private healthcare”, scapegoating of refugees, and, though Corbyn says nothing to this effect, its support for genocide and war.

He ended with the pathetic statement, “Millions of people in this country voted for Keir Starmer because he promised change. They are still waiting.”

### **The rout of the Socialist Campaign Group over war in Ukraine**

It is Corbyn that is still “waiting” on Starmer. In the long history of ineffectual leaders of the Labour “left”—whose rhetoric never led to any action against the party’s right-wing—Corbyn is the leader of the pack. But he is also the last of a dying breed.

When he became leader of the Labour Party, Corbyn won the backing of around half a million workers and young people who flocked to the party because they wanted to fight the right-wing and the Tory government. What they got was a retreat by Corbyn and his allies on every issue for which they had won popular support, opposing war above all.

By the time Starmer took back leadership of the party, the nominally “anti-war” Labour “left” organised within the Socialist Campaign Group (SCG) was made up of around 11 MP’s who signed a Stop The War Coalition (STWC) statement opposing NATO’s eastward expansion and calling for a negotiated settlement in Ukraine.

All withdrew their endorsement after Starmer threatened to remove the party whip from them on February 24, 2022, with Corbyn’s former Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell and former Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott also withdrawing from attending a planned “No to War in Ukraine” rally.

McDonnell was already playing a double game, supporting pro-Ukraine rallies, and would likely have delivered a speech to that effect had he attended. Once he and Abbott pledged their support for Starmer and NATO, he emerged as the most prominent advocate for increased arms supplies to Ukraine.

Only a small minority of the 26 members of the SCG would support Corbyn. McDonnell’s position would carry the day with the rest.

### **John McDonnell advocates the Labour “left” policy for British imperialism**

McDonnell issued his own “Advice to Keir Starmer” on March 5, in the pages of the fanatically pro-war *Guardian*, summed up in the headline “Stop the fawning over Trump. Then help plan for a better world without him”.

His “advice” was framed in the same language used by Starmer: “We need a ‘coalition of the willing’ capable of bringing together those in Europe and the global south. Britain should facilitate that.”

Trump’s “America First” policy meant he “had no qualms in supporting, dealing with and sometimes installing authoritarian regimes such as Vladimir Putin’s across the globe”, just as the US had for decades. “What has surprised European political leaders and commentators is that this is the first time a US president has done so on European soil since Franklin D Roosevelt carved up Europe with Stalin at Yalta in 1945 and that, unlike then, now there is no Churchill figure even to be invited to sit in the chair for the post-conference-deal photograph,” he continued.

The “special relationship” with the US was “fictional” and efforts to maintain it should be abandoned. Seeking to “avoid direct diplomatic

conflict with the US” was still necessary for the purpose of “buying time,” but “That time needs to be used wisely.”

Europe’s leaders must first “prevent a peace being imposed by Trump and Putin against the wishes of Ukraine.” In the longer term, “it is clear that Trump’s behaviour since re-election... is forcing on to the political agenda across Europe and the global south a discussion of what alternatives there are to a politics and economics dominated by the whims of US presidents and the aggressive self-interest of China.”

According to McDonnell, for British and European imperialism the challenge is now to meet the triple threat from the US, Russia and China. To do so there must be “a much greater and more longer-sighted ‘coalition of the willing’ capable of bringing together” both Europe and “the global south”. This could be ensured by abandoning plans to “cut British overseas aid”, which was undermining the UK’s “soft power”.

Addressing Starmer directly, he suggested that bringing about a world “reordered without the malign influences of Trump and China” would really “be a place in history worth having.”

McDonnell dresses up plans to forge a European military axis independent from the US in fake progressive clothing. And it is not so far removed from the position of the Stop the War Coalition in which Corbyn still plays the leading role despite tactical differences. Though the STWC backs a Trump deal with Putin, its long-term goal, as argued by co-convenor the Stalinist Andrew Murray in the February 13 *Morning Star*, is to then “start to think” about a “new European security architecture”.

The Labour “left”, to the extent it is still possible to speak of one, doesn’t advance an anti-imperialist and socialist opposition to war, but proposes a foreign policy for British imperialism including “soft power” strategies, oriented to Europe against the United States and avoiding too-savage cuts to social spending that could provoke mass opposition in the working class.

There are sections of the ruling class prepared to entertain this perspective for their own political ends.

### **The Blairites look for a left cover**

No less a figure than John McTernan, Tony Blair’s former Director of Political Operations, wrote on March 10, in the Tory party house organ the *Telegraph*, of the danger that a party to the left of Labour could emerge that “could finally shatter British politics.”

Boasting that he had been “in the frontline” of the fight in the 1980s against the Militant Tendency and then against Corbyn when he became Labour leader in 2015, McTernan proposes that Labour now faces “a different challenge—how to make friends with the Left” in order to save itself from being wiped out “in its heartland.”

To maintain support among workers and young people, Labour’s right-wing leaders need their “left” apologists wherever they can be found—within the party, or by securing the support of the Greens, Scottish and Welsh nationalists, and Liberal Democrats.

The only issue to be decided was what level of “compromise” was necessary to buy such loyalty, on spending cuts for example, or even to provide them with more convincing excuses to support stepped up militarism.

“The skill in political storytelling is in selling the purpose of a choice,” he writes. “Labour need to take its destiny in its own hands by creating an electoral ‘coalition of the willing’ to match the military version Starmer is trying to create: “if a journey of a thousand miles starts with one pace, the building of this new electoral coalition starts with Labour understanding it has friends to its Left.”

McTernan has not been suddenly overcome by warm and fuzzy feelings

towards Corbyn. That will not happen. But what he makes clear is that the amorphous and unprincipled petty-bourgeois milieu in which Corbyn lives, and to which he lends political expression, represents no genuine opposition or threat to the Starmer government.

No matter how many times Corbyn professes his desire for “peace”, there is no possibility of realising this goal without setting out to break the stranglehold of the Labour Party, the trade union bureaucracy, and their myriad hangers-on in the pseudo-left and Stalinist groups.

#### **A genuine, socialist opposition to war**

Writing just over a year ago on the role played by Corbyn and Stop the War over Gaza, now extended to Ukraine, the Socialist Equality Party cited Leon Trotsky’s comment:

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”.

We argued of the STWC’s call for an “all-inclusive security architecture”, that “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.”

What was and is necessary is:

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.



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