

UK parliament sanctions Syria bombing as Labour right blocks with government

By Julie Hyland
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The UK parliament voted in favour of bombing Syria late Wednesday night. The support provided by 66 Labour MPs, the Democratic Unionists and the Liberal Democrats meant that the government motion was carried by 397 to 223, a majority of 174.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn cleared the path for war when he capitulated to his right wing and agreed to a “free vote” on military action. This ensured that it was Labour that handed Prime Minister David Cameron the majority he sought, reversing the defeat he suffered two years before.

So complete has been Corbyn’s surrender to the pro-war lobby that a cross-party amendment opposing military action was tabled by the Scottish National Party, as Labour declared it had no official position on bombing. This was defeated by 390 votes to 211, a majority of 179.

The pro-war motion tabled by Cameron was modelled on that passed by the Labour Party conference in September. As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote at the time, Labour’s motion gave “carte blanche for the military carve-up of Syria.”

Just weeks after winning the Labour leadership on an anti-austerity, anti-war platform, Corbyn agreed at the party conference to abandon any discussion on Britain’s Trident nuclear programme in the face of trade union opposition to its scrapping. A debate on whether to support the bombing of Syria was allotted just 20 minutes, followed by a non-binding motion opposing UK bombing missions unless backed by the United Nations.

Now, under the pretext of the November 13 terror attacks in Paris, the imperialist powers, with UN support, are deepening their neo-colonial war campaign in the Middle East.

In August 2013, Cameron unsuccessfully sought parliament’s backing for military action aimed at deposing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The motion carried yesterday makes no mention of this goal. It claims

instead that the target of British air strikes is Islamic State (ISIS), and that the bombing is in support of the so-called Vienna “peace process” involving the United States and Russia.

It is not the Paris terror attacks, but Russian military intervention in Syria that has spurred a significant section of the British bourgeoisie to force a parliamentary vote despite significant misgivings. By joining military action, the UK government aims to solidarise itself with the US war drive against Russia. In doing so, it is dragging working people in Britain into the vortex of a potential Third World War involving nuclear powers.

The parliamentary debate was a carnival of reaction. Even before it began, Cameron described those opposing the bombing of Syria as “terrorist sympathisers.” He made this smear in remarks to a meeting of the 1922 Committee of Tory MPs, in which he urged them to vote with the government rather than walk “through the [voting] lobbies with Jeremy Corbyn and a bunch of terrorist sympathisers.”

The Tory leader has repeatedly described Corbyn as a threat to national security and an apologist for terrorism. In the face of this abuse, Corbyn lamely referred to Cameron’s “unfortunate remark” and declared his hope that the prime minister would apologise so as to “improve the atmosphere of this debate.”

Cameron had no intention of doing any such thing and flatly rejected a retraction. In this, as in everything, he was supported by the Labour right wing. After Corbyn’s snivelling appeal to the prime minister to do the right thing, Labour MP John Mann rose to attack Corbyn and demanded that he withdraw his criticisms of those in his party who were voting with the government.

Before the debate, Corbyn had made a play of opposing the Labour right, warning there would be “no hiding place” after the vote for those who supported military action. The reality is that the war-mongers have a place. It

is the Labour Party. And they have no need to hide since Corbyn has effectively thrown a *cordon sanitaire* around them.

In a survey of the party membership, 75 percent registered their opposition to the bombing of Syria. But this is of no consequence to Corbyn, who has repeatedly assured the right wing that they will not face disciplinary action or the possibility of deselection.

In his opening statement, Corbyn could only parrot the claim that IS represented an existential threat to the UK, while complaining that Cameron had failed to make the case for air strikes and had failed to achieve a “consensus” in parliament.

He glorified the Vienna “peace” talks, avoiding any reference to Turkey’s downing of a Russian jet, while holding out the fiction of a “negotiated political and diplomatic endeavour” that would bring peace to Syria.

While warning of the danger of “mission creep” and the “real possibility” that Western boots could be on the ground in the future, he made no mention of the US decision, only the day earlier, to deploy Special Forces in Syria.

In an unprecedented move, Corbyn had agreed to allow Hilary Benn, Labour’s shadow foreign secretary and a leading advocate of military intervention, to close the parliamentary debate for the party.

Benn is openly being touted as a potential replacement for Corbyn in a future palace coup. He used his closing statement to make a pitch for that role, farcically claiming that in bombing Syria, the UK was carrying out a struggle against a “fascist” threat akin to Franco in Spain and Hitler in Germany.

While evoking party “unity” in his remarks, Benn had been tweeting against the Labour leader during the debate. When a spokesperson for the party leader sent a message that air strikes could increase the terror threat against Britain, Benn fired off a riposte rejecting the claim.

Having been given free rein by Corbyn, various Labour right-wingers were first up in the debate to pledge their fealty to the government and war. One after another, leading Blairites, who already have blood on their hands from the Iraq war, spoke in favour of military action.

Yvette Cooper, who came in third in the leadership contest, announced that she would vote with the government despite the fact that the prime minister had not “made the most effective case.” Declaring that he too would back the government, Alan Johnson said it was a “difficult” decision to make and went on to attack “the

self-righteous certitude” of those opposed to war.

Other Labour MPs, such as John Woodcock, used the debate to complain of the “bullying tactics” they faced from constituents threatening to deselect them over their vote for war. He denounced a “sort of angry, intolerant pacifism” as he prepared to authorise the dropping of tonnes of bombs on Syria.

In a simultaneous debate taking place in the House of Lords on UK military intervention, Labour peer Jeffrey Rooker called on Labour to “get rid” of Corbyn. Stating that members of the Tory cabinet would make better prime ministers than his own party leader, Rooker identified ISIS’s “innate intolerance” for the “British way of life” with the “anti-British Trots in the Labour Party” who were “using our tolerance to try and get control” of the party.

Corbyn responded to the complaints from the right by posting a Facebook message during the debate opposing “bullying” and calling for “all of us in the Labour Party” to focus on building the party “in a comradely fashion.”

The bourgeoisie is acutely conscious of growing social and political tensions. Even the *Times* newspaper, which backed bombing, led its front page with polls showing that more than half the population is opposed to military action in Syria—despite the torrent of pro-war propaganda.

The assembled parliamentarians are well aware that their debate is a fraud, based on a tissue of lies. Only the day before, the Foreign Affairs Select Committee voted four to three in favour of a motion that Cameron “had not adequately addressed concerns” about military action. All the more reason that, notwithstanding Corbyn’s pleas and retreats, the bourgeoisie is determined to do all it can to silence opposition to war.

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