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UK: Labour left breaks with Jeremy Corbyn over sending weapons to Ukraine

Monday 27 February 2023, by [HELM Toby](#) (Date first published: 26 February 2023).

John McDonnell among former shadow cabinet members contradicting pacifist message

Senior Labour MPs on the left of the party are putting themselves at odds with former leader Jeremy Corbyn over the war in Ukraine by calling on the [Ministry of Defence](#) to do more to arm Kyiv against the Russians.

This weekend the MP for Norwich South, Clive Lewis, a former territorial army officer and shadow defence secretary under Corbyn, questioned why the MoD was [selling used Apache helicopters on the open market](#) rather than giving them to the Ukrainians “in their hour of need”.

“Given that we have provided export licences for weapons to regimes with poor human rights records, do we not have an obligation to provide [Ukraine](#) with the military equipment it needs to defend its democracy?” Lewis asked.

His intervention comes days after [John McDonnell](#), former shadow chancellor and a close political ally of Corbyn, also wrote in support of arming Ukraine, arguing that while he respected the pacifist position, he felt it would not deliver peace but rather risk defeat for Kyiv by Vladimir Putin’s forces.

“What is certain is that a refusal to provide the weapons the Ukrainians need ... means that the chances of the Russian invasion succeeding are significantly increased,” McDonnell wrote in [an article on Labour Hub website](#), marking a year since the Russian invasion.

Corbyn, by contrast, has urged western countries to stop arming Ukraine, insisting that providing weapons will only prolong the conflict. “Pouring arms in isn’t going to bring about a solution; it’s only going to prolong and exaggerate this war,” Corbyn said in an interview with a Beirut-based TV channel last August. “We might be in for years and years of war in Ukraine.”

He added: “What I find disappointing is that hardly any of the world’s leaders use the word peace; they always use the language of more war, and more bellicose war.

“This war is disastrous for the people of Ukraine, for the people of Russia, and for the safety and security of the whole world, and therefore there has to be much more effort put into peace.”

Earlier this month, on a surprise visit to the UK, Ukraine’s president, [Volodymyr Zelenskiy, made an emotional appeal](#) to for Ukraine to be supplied with fighter jets, forcing Rishi Sunak to order a defence ministry review into whether the request could be met.

Lewis’s move comes after the UK Defence Equipment Sales Authority placed an advert online for an undisclosed number of Apache AH1 helicopters, which it says are able to “operate in all weathers, day or night” and are designed to carry a mix of weapons.

However, a spokesperson for the MOD said Lewis's call was based on "out-of-date" information. "We are not selling any Apache helicopters. In fact, we are upgrading 50 Mk1 aircraft as part of the AH-64E programme and the rest of the fleet remain in service with the Army."

Lewis is a backer of the UK-based Ukraine Solidarity Campaign, which seeks to organise and provide information in support of the Ukrainian labour movement.

Another key advocate is the [Labour](#) MP for Nottingham East, Nadia Whittome.

[She recently wrote](#): "To support arming Ukraine isn't to oppose the idea of peace talks. The question is what position Ukraine would enter them from. It's right to avoid escalation into a direct conflict between Moscow and Nato. However, arming the resistance is a way to allow Ukraine to negotiate from a position of strength, not surrender."

On Saturday night the MoD said the advert for Apache helicopters had been removed.

Whittome and McDonnell will join Nobel prize-winning human rights defender, Oleksandra Matviychuk, at a [Solidarity with Ukraine](#) conference hosted by Conflict and Civicness Research Group at the London School of Economics on 11 March.

Toby Helm

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P.S.

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