

# The “Progressive Left Anti-War” Movement: Bowing before the Inquisitors on Syria

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*One of the problems for the left is the desperate need of too many of its best and brightest to maintain legitimacy “in the mainstream”. In practice, those who could be advancing radical new agendas or ways of thinking to deal with the catastrophic problems we face end up spending too much time watching their backs, toning down their message and trying to promote their careers.*

Rather than forging broad coalitions with others on the left, they bow before inquisitions – and not only inquisitions initiated from the left itself (bad enough), but inquisitions imposed on them from those with reactionary agendas.

So it has proved with the Stop the War conference in London on Nov 30, which was designed to ward off the pressures for more military “intervention” in Syria.

Two of the biggest-name speakers due to attend, Jeremy Scahill and Owen Jones, both pulled out after a campaign of intimidation from the “humanitarian (sic) interventionists”, led by the Pulse website. The not-so-concealed agenda of the interventionists, even of the fork-tongued variety at Pulse, is a military attack on Syria as a way to ... well, I’m not sure even they know what they would achieve by dropping bombs indiscriminately on Syria. (And if they still believe in precision bombing, they obviously haven’t been following the news of our earlier interventions.)

The supposed justification for this campaign of intimidation was the participation of a nun based in Syria, Mother Agnes. (Actually Pulse simply don’t want a Stop the War conference in any form but they don’t have the honesty to admit that.) Mother Agnes is supposedly a supporter of Bashar Assad, though no one seems to be able to offer any definitive proof. We’re just supposed to rely on Pulse’s word, it seems.

Mother Agnes has now pulled out, in what looks like an effort to save the conference.

Rather than producing clear reasons for why Mother Agnes’ views were beyond the pale and why they could not participate were she present, Scahill and Jones simply ran for cover, fearful that Pulse and the Syria war cheerleaders would be able to exploit the mainstream agenda to make them look bad by association.

Scahill and Jones have not done something principled or progressive here. They are trying to stay “onside” with the corporate media, the main political parties and the Syria war-mongers. In short, they are looking out for their careers.

Not that one can necessarily blame them. But we should be honest about identifying what is going on here. They are looking to keep their credibility within a wider political system that, they otherwise seem to acknowledge, is deeply compromised and corrupt. In this episode, they are not chiefly worrying about countering moves towards an attack or saving Syrian lives, even while they claim this is exactly what their participation is about.

The two excellent pieces below set out the ironies and problems of the decisions taken by Scahill and Jones, and are well worth reading.

[http://johnhilley.blogspot.co.uk/2013/11/nun-speak-none-speak-jones-scahill-and\\_18.html](http://johnhilley.blogspot.co.uk/2013/11/nun-speak-none-speak-jones-scahill-and_18.html)

<http://interventionswatch.wordpress.com/2013/11/16/on-owen-jones-and-the-stop-the-war-coalition/>

#### **UPDATE:**

Some readers have pointed me to sites suggesting that Mother Agnes' role in Syria may be a negative one. I want to make it clear that this post is not about Mother Agnes; it is about the obligation on prominent leftists to behave responsibly in matters that concern life-and-death issues for whole nations.

If there is clear evidence that Mother Agnes is a malign influence in Syria, then the duty was on Scahill and Jones to marshal that evidence and set it out to the conference organisers. If the conference organisers hadn't responded appropriately, then the pair would have been entirely justified in bowing out. But what they did was simply to bolt from the conference after tweeting vaguely about their concerns, undermining the general good the conference is trying to achieve.

What Scahill and Jones implied, intentionally or not, through their actions – by precipitously leaving – was that the case against Mother Agnes was so open and shut the StW conference organisers must have been acting in bad faith, secretly promoting a pro-war agenda by including Mother Agnes. The reality is – and this is the point of my post – that wasn't their reasoning at all: they were covering their arses, under pressure from the war-mongers.

#### **UPDATE 2:**

Helpfully someone has sent me a post just up from Louis Proyect, a Pulse ally, that rather makes my point about Scahill and Jones's behaviour. Proyect claims that Mother Agnes' role "as a liar and a warmonger is so well known" that the conference organisers must have been aware of what they were doing in inviting her. (This, as I point out in my earlier update, is the implication of Scahill and Jones' act of bolting the conference.)

Then Proyect subverts his own argument by explaining how Scahill came to withdraw from the conference. A Syria blogger "tweeted Jeremy Scahill, urging him to look closer at Mother Agnes's record, which he did." The blogger's posts "I am sure helped Scahill make up his mind."

So Scahill and Jones – like many others of us – obviously didn't know much about Mother Agnes. Which brings me back to my repeated point: responsible leftists don't tweet their concerns and then bolt. They engage, explain and try to persuade. If they fail, then they are entitled to act.

<http://louisproyect.org/2013/11/18/a-tale-of-two-conferences/>

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