

UK pseudo-left's political myth-making over Sharon Graham's election as Unite union general secretary

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The election of Sharon Graham as Unite the union's General Secretary has been met with an unprecedented level of euphoria by the Britain's two main pseudo-left groups, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party (SP).

Both the SWP and SP hailed the outcome as a victory for the rank-and-file even though the evidence clearly shows she received no such endorsement. They ran triumphalist headlines which belong to a parallel universe, with the SWP stating, "Boost for left as Sharon Graham wins general secretary election" and the SP, "Sharon Graham's stunning victory opens new opportunity to resist bosses and Tories offensive and challenge Starmer's New Labour".

Graham the self-appointed "Workers Candidate" is, like her rivals, a creature of the trade union bureaucracy and drew her support overwhelmingly from its apparatchiks and the small periphery under their influence. Her only identification with the left has been provided by the imprimatur of the SWP and SP.

Graham became the new leader of Unite with the backing of under 4 percent of its 1.2 million membership. She received 46,696 votes, giving her a 37.7 percent majority of the votes cast, beating the other nominal candidate of the "left" Steve Turner into second place with 41,833 votes (33.8 percent). Gerard Coyne, the right-wing candidate, finished last with 35,334 votes (28.5 percent). Coyne's vote represented a major decline on 2017, when he came within 6,000 votes of defeating the now outgoing general secretary, Len McCluskey and polled 56,544 votes.

All three candidates collectively secured the backing of barely more than 10 percent of Unite's total membership. This is an historic low in a continuous decline in participation from 12.2 percent in 2017, 15.2 percent in 2013 and 15.8 percent in 2010.

The scenario presented by the SWP and SP that the election of Graham will serve as a catalyst for a fight against the bosses and the government is political deceit. It requires that they whitewash the role Graham has played in the

betrayals of major struggles against fire and rehire in her role as an executive member of Unite and head of Organisation and Leverage.

The low turnout in the vote to determine the leader of the UK's second largest trade union can only be explained from the standpoint of the bitter experience workers have suffered at the hands of the trade unions, which sacrifice their most basic interests in their role as junior partners of the corporations imposing new and more brutal levels of exploitation.

This has been an extended process brought to a head by the global pandemic.

Unite covers swathes of workers in sectors which have borne the brunt of workplace fatalities and infection such as transport, including the buses and taxis, and mass outbreaks in the food processing plants in which employers have ranked among the most criminally negligent. But neither the election manifesto of Graham, supported by the SWP and SP, nor that of Turner, backed by the official United Left—including the Communist Party of Britain and the Corbynite Labour left—even referenced the scale of social suffering imposed by the Johnson government's "herd immunity" agenda that has already claimed over 155,000 lives.

They share with Coyne a tacit understanding that the handling of the pandemic must be left in the hands of the British ruling elite and its prioritisation of profit over lives. The only demand placed on the government from any of the candidates following the abandonment of all mitigation measures from July 19 came from Turner, who called for the rules on self-isolation—after notification from the track and trace app to be loosened—to exclude workers in manufacturing so as to prevent Britain PLC from falling behind its overseas rivals.

The claim that Graham's victory is a boost for the left is belied by her openly declared hostility to any political position expressing the slightest degree of opposition to

capitalism.

Utilising the rout of Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters by the Blairite right, the product of the political cowardice of what passes for the Labour “left”, Graham now calls for an end to Unite’s meddling in Labour’s internal affairs. Portrayed as a move “back to the workplace”, where real victories can be won and as a rank-and-file rebellion by the pseudo-left, Graham’s real appeal was to the bureaucracy, including offering Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer free rein after years in which McCluskey associated himself with the Corbynite “left”.

The *New Statesman* noted that “While primarily running as a reformer, Graham was also something of a unity candidate...” Though not associated with McCluskey, she “enjoyed the support of a significant portion of Unite’s Executive Council (unlike Coyne)” and took votes “from both Coyne and Turner,” who was “McCluskey’s anointed successor”.

Starmer himself tweeted, “Congratulations to @UniteSharon on her election as general secretary of Unite—the first ever woman to hold that role. I’m looking forward to working together to improve the lives of working people across the country.”

Graham’s “back to the workplace” is based upon an explicitly corporatist agenda based on deepening the integration of the union into the structures of corporate management. The two main disputes against fire and rehire she lays claim to having secured a successful outcome are at British Airways (BA) and more recently at Go North West (GNW) buses as part of her “100% track record of success”. Both ended in filthy betrayals in which fire and rehire contracts were withdrawn only because Unite agreed concessions, including job losses, that made such threats redundant.

The “leverage” weapon she frequently cites as the most effective tool in bringing to book “bad bosses” is based on Unite building alliances within the political establishment by proving itself to be indispensable in policing opposition among its own members. The latest sellout of a major struggle against fire and rehire occurred in August at the coffee giant Jacobs Douwe Egberts (JDE) in which Unite rammed through a concession’s agreement cutting annual wages by up to £9,000 while the union kept the fire and rehire ultimatum on the table to force workers into acceptance.

The SWP article claiming that Graham’s victory was a move in the direction of supporting “rank and file initiative from below” consisted of just two interviews, one of which, Helen McFarlane, is an executive council member for Scotland of Unite!

The level of political dishonesty is boundless, with

McFarlane stating, “This is a new opportunity for people committed to win socialist policies, getting together with new energy.”

The SWP declare, “There has to be change. There needs, for example, to be a real fight against fire and rehire. Up until now most notably at the JDE coffee plant in Oxfordshire, Unite has dressed up defeats as victories”—defeats Graham shares full responsibility for and lying claims of victory she has spread most consistently, and with the backing of the SWP.

In return for their pro-Graham propaganda, the SWP, SP et al hope to secure a lucrative place for themselves within the corporatist set up she wishes to establish—based on industry wide “bargaining” involving “our Reps, Officers, Organisers and Staff” and with “budgets for each Sector and resources delivered to the frontline via networks of Shop Stewards—the Combines.”

A more accurate depiction of the significance of Graham’s election was provided by a politically supportive editorial in the *Guardian*. Its message to the corporate boardrooms was, “Don’t Panic”.

“Some employers might worry that all this heralds a new age of union militancy, with Unite spearheading a campaign of shock-and-awe tactics. But the union movement is in poor health... The balance of power between employers and labour shapes pay and conditions, and decides who in society bears the greatest risks. Most accept that workers lost out to capital because of a lack, rather than a surfeit, of bargaining power... Union membership has fallen by almost half since the 1970s, and at the same time the number of people in work has risen by about a fifth.”

Graham’s claims to empower workers is not aimed at altering this balance of forces between capital and labour. She is a careerist representative of the trade union bureaucracy responsible for the betrayals that left the working class unable to combat the more than three decades long offensive against jobs, wages, working and social conditions that have given rise to today’s staggering levels of social inequality. The political soap bubble of the “Workers Candidate” will not withstand its first contact with the harsh reality of the class struggle. This will confirm the SWP and SP’s position as servile courtiers of the union bureaucracy.



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