

Britain's Socialist Party rolls out the red carpet for Unite's Sharon Graham

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15 September 2021

Sharon Graham, the newly elected general secretary of Unite the union, was presented as the star attraction by the Socialist Party (SP) at its National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) online meeting on Sunday September 12.

The event was promoted as a “virtual lobby” of the annual conference of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), the 12th annual NSSN rally supposedly aimed at forcing the trade union bureaucracy to take up a fight. This political fiction has paved the way for one disaster after another.

With its slogan, “Fight for a pay rise”, the rally advanced no perspective to combat the homicidal policy of the British ruling class through its abandonment of all COVID-19 mitigation measures and the demand to “live with the virus”. But even the claim that the TUC could provide a vehicle for opposing the pay restraint was based on crude historical falsifications. NSSN Chair, Rob Williams had to go back 10 years in order to reference any co-ordinated industrial action by the trade unions—the one-day strike action over public sector pension cuts on November 30, 2011 against the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition. But he was forced to acknowledge that all opposition was then swiftly wound down by the unions and “We’ve spent the past decade paying the price for that.”

Williams’ opening remarks were essentially a restatement of the September 8 editorial statement in the SP’s newspaper, *The Socialist*, which claimed, “A decade ago, TUC Congress became a ‘council of war’, coordinating strike ballots across 29 public sector unions against the attack on pensions by the Tory-led coalition government. That resulted in the historic N30 two million-strong walkout that was effectively a public sector general strike.”

The editorial claimed that “right wing union leaders” had been “Forced into action by members’ pressure... levered by the NSSN and left unions,” before acknowledging that this had ended in a “sell-out” that had “opened up a decade of austerity”.

Now, however, as the editorial’s headline suggested, we have reached a new “pivotal moment for the trade union movement” in which the TUC Congress must become “a decisive meeting to discuss and set out the action that is needed to force back the Tories on pay and cuts, linking up with workers in the private sector in a united struggle to push back against the employers’ onslaught.”

The SP adds as a caveat, “If this isn’t done, those unions which are up for the fight must come together to give a lead for the action that is needed.”

And the occasion for this proclaiming this pivotal moment? The election of Sharon Graham as Unite general secretary. “This year’s TUC Congress, online again due to the pandemic, will provide the first public platform for newly elected Unite general secretary Sharon

Graham. It’s an ideal opportunity for her to send a clear message to both the employers and their crisis-ridden Tory government that their brutal offensive, designed to make workers pay for the Covid crisis, will be met by fierce resistance from the labour and trade union movement.”

The anointing of Graham as the saviour of the trade union movement crowns a politically degraded relationship between the SP and its main rival, the Socialist Workers Party, with this career bureaucrat—the latest and perhaps least convincing in a line of similar figures hailed as the “standard bearer” of a “left fightback.”

The SP et al acted as foot soldiers in her election campaign and constitute a significant proportion of the “volunteer army” Graham attributed her election success to for getting out the vote.

In reality, as the self-appointed “Workers Candidate”, Graham won the election with the backing of barely 4 percent of Unite’s 1.2 million membership and won only because her rivals fared even worse. Despite the “left” packaging provided by the SP and SWP, Graham was unable to generate any enthusiasm outside of a narrow layer of local union representatives, in an election that saw an historically low turnout of just over 10 percent.

Graham was among a list of featured speakers composed exclusively of union general secretaries, deputy general secretaries and national executive members from the Communication Workers Union (CWU), the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers’ Union, the Rail, Maritime and Transport union, the Prison Officers Association (!) and others.

The fraudulent nature of the opposition being presented at the event was summed up by Dave Ward, General Secretary of the CWU, who described how his union was presenting a motion before the TUC for a social movement “fighting for workers and transforming society.” This involved a call for a “New Deal” for workers, which was not defined and consisted essentially of a national rally to be held in spring 2022!

The CWU’s real attitude towards mobilising workers was demonstrated in the bureaucracy’s overturning a 97 percent strike mandate last October at Royal Mail by its 110,000 members against further restructuring. Ward appealed instead to key shareholders, offering to demonstrate how to make the privatised company “a very successful business.” At British Telecom earlier this year, the CWU sabotaged the first national strike action since privatisation. Following a consultative ballot in which 97 percent voted in favour of strike action, the CWU entered into an agreement with management behind the backs of its membership and rubber stamped 13,000 job losses as part of the £1.5 billion cost cutting exercise.

Graham has been plucked from relative obscurity, having been ensconced within the trade union bureaucracy for decades and having

earned her spurs by overseeing backroom deals to sellout workers struggles as head of Organisation and Leverage.

Her mantra of working with “good employers”, while standing up to “bad employers” translates into an appeal for a corporatist partnership between Unite and other unions and the major corporations in which they agree to act as an industrial police force in return for maintaining their lucrative posts.

In welcoming Graham, Williams referred to the strike by Manchester bus drivers against Go North West over fire and rehire as an example of the victories workers had achieved under Unite and her personal leadership role.

Graham needed little encouragement to blow her own trumpet. “I was with these drivers in dispute, we had leverage, we had strike action and we were able to push that employer back... There was a dispute which was going on for weeks, after weeks, after weeks and the confidence these workers had that we could win making sure the union’s resources were pointing with them was critical to them being able to win.”

Graham and her flunkies in the SP are trying to portray a terrible betrayal for which workers have paid a bitter price as a victory. After 11 weeks of indefinite strike, a rotten agreement was imposed on the 400 bus drivers at the Queens Road depot. There was no co-ordination of their fight with thousands of bus workers employed by Go North West’s parent company Go-Ahead or the 80,000 bus workers Unite represents across the UK.

Graham’s “leverage” campaign was based on getting Go Ahead to remove the threat to fire workers and rehire them on inferior terms by Unite giving the company almost everything it wanted, including £1.3 million worth of cuts including job losses and speed-ups. The SP welcomed this outcome and hailed it as a “huge victory”.

In a piece written for the *Guardian* newspaper on September 12, Graham also singled out the role of “leverage” in settling last year’s dispute at British Airways against fire and rehire and “bringing the company back to the negotiating table”. This was based upon a similar sellout agreement rammed through by Unite, which led to the destruction of 4,000 jobs and pay cuts of 15 percent.

Graham told the NSSN rally that her first action as Unite general secretary was to bring together all “our members” involved in 22 current disputes—by which she meant a conference call with 80 local reps. This has nothing to do with co-ordinating any action by workers against the major corporations, but instead applying “leverage” and targeting what she referred to as the “decision makers”. With Go North West and British Airways as the blueprint for “success”, this will involve attempts to establish industry-wide collective agreements enshrining the role of Unite as a partner of the corporations in their cost cutting exercises. The moral outrage of Graham and the union bureaucracy over fire and rehire is highly selective. It ends when the employers agree to co-opt them into their business plans to ramp up exploitation.

Graham’s remarks to the NSSN also made evident that her oft-cited rejection of “Westminster politics” has nothing to do with opposition from the standpoint of the independent interests of the working class.

She made no criticism of Labour or the trade unions for working in a de facto coalition with the Conservative government, the policy of only “constructive criticism” in the “national interest”. Instead, referring to the pandemic in the past tense, she complained that Labour was now back in the “deep freeze” and therefore not in a position to exert any real influence over the policy of the ruling elite.

Nevertheless, while denouncing “parlour games” in Westminster

she signalled that she would still be collaborating with the Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, stating, “My conversations with Keir Starmer will not be about which chairs will be moved around in Labour but the agenda I’ve been given.” In truth Graham has received no genuine mandate by Unite’s members, and there is nothing that sets her agenda apart from the right-wing pro-capitalist policies of Starmer’s Labour Party.

The tub thumping and militant rhetoric could not conceal the air of political desperation which characterised the NSSN’s attempt to present the trade union bureaucracy, or a supposed left faction, as an engine of class struggle. There were repeated references to establishing a “coalition of the willing”, another hark-back to the 2011 pension dispute when a handful of unions including the Public and Commercial Services Union, National Union of Teachers, and University College Union, made a brief feint of opposition before falling back into line. All settled for the government terms, hiking up workers’ contributions towards inferior pensions on retirement.

The claim by NSSN chair Rob Williams that the TUC could be transformed into a “council of war” recalls the slogan of the Communist Party of Great Britain during the 1926 General Strike—“All Power to the (TUC) General Council.” This policy, adopted under the influence of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, meant that the British working class was completely disarmed in the face of the treachery of the TUC, which called off the strike and left the miners to be starved back to work. It led to biggest defeat the working class has suffered to this day, ultimately helping pave the way for the “Hungry Thirties” and the Second World War.

The struggle waged by Leon Trotsky against this politically disorientating line was based on the fundamental principles that a successful socialist revolution demanded the building of a genuine socialist party by breaking the working class from the debilitating influence of the fake lefts of the labour and trade union bureaucracy.

For the SP, which not only claims to be socialist, but Trotskyist, the reprise of the Stalinist position towards the trade union bureaucracy is not the result of a mistaken policy. Compared with the likes of Sharon Graham, the left reformists of the 1920’s appear like revolutionary firebrands. At least they had had a connection with the class struggle and held the allegiance of hundreds of thousands of socialist minded workers.

Almost a century later Graham, Ward, and the entire union bureaucracy represent completely pro-company organisations which have ceased to function in the remotest sense as defensive organisations of the working class, but which provide the pseudo-left groups with comfortable and lucrative berths within their sprawling apparatus. It is this that truly binds together the SP with the trade union bureaucracy and accounts for all its political contortions, apologies, and outright lies.



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