“Biden gets it!”: Britain’s trade unions make their corporatist pitch to government and business

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Addressing last week’s annual meeting of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), General Secretary Frances O’Grady claimed to be summarising, “What we’ve learned from the pandemic. What needs to change. And how working people can win a fair deal.”

What she in fact spelled out was the TUC’s appeal to Boris Johnson’s Conservative government, big business and, last and also least, Sir Keir Starmer’s Labour Party, to adopt a corporatist perspective: working with the trade unions to impose the attacks on the working class made necessary by the deepening crisis of British and world capitalism, which has been brought to a tipping point by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Whatever the social statistics cited and the cynical rhetoric employed by O’Grady, the task of the TUC and its affiliated unions is to prevent their members and the broader working class from developing an industrial and political counteroffensive against the super-rich and their political parties, Tory and Labour alike.

Particularly striking was her evoking US President Joe Biden as the model for the approach to the trade unions she wished adopted by Johnson and Starmer.

“President Biden gets it,” said O’Grady. “He’s already started building a new deal for working America. He knows—and we know—that the foundation of a fair economy is decent work, paying the union rate for the job.

“That’s the way to build back a fairer Britain too.”

She framed this appeal as a plan to “level up” for “working people” who required, “the freedom to organise, to bargain, to protest—and yes, to strike when we need to.” But no one aware of the TUC’s actual record during the pandemic and for decades before it will fail to gag at such hypocrisy.

Before addressing the TUC’s role, the attraction of the trade unions to Biden and his Democratic Party administration must be made clear. All readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* should study carefully the articles written on this political shift in the US, particularly because O’Grady has made clear their international significance. Here we need only cite one, examining Biden’s high-profile support for the unionisation drive at Amazon’s Bessemer, Alabama warehouse—a drive that failed because workers had no illusions that the Retail, Wholesale, Department Store Union (RWDSU) would defend them from the company.

On March 3, a WSWS perspective, “Why Biden supports the unionization of the Amazon workforce,” explained the essential political considerations animating Biden’s historically unprecedented decision to put “the entire prestige of the White House behind the vote.”

“Biden’s aggressive intervention on behalf of the unionization campaign at Amazon can only be interpreted as a strategic, and not merely tactical decision by a significant faction of the ruling class. What are the considerations motivating this policy?

“First, the ruling class confronts an unprecedented crisis, which has been enormously intensified by the pandemic… The impact of mass death, combined with the disastrous social and economic situation, is having a profoundly radicalizing impact on the consciousness of workers and youth.

“[Former US President Donald] Trump has responded to this situation with the promotion of fascistic organizations that will be used as a spearhead against working class unrest. The Democrats are attempting to smother social opposition by utilizing the unions.

“Second, the international situation is no less concerning to the ruling class, which is determined to maintain its global hegemonic position through the use of military force. The Biden administration is carrying out an increasingly confrontational policy toward Russia and, in particular, China. The logic of this policy leads to war. In the event of a major ‘great power conflict,’ the pro-capitalist unions will be critical in promoting national chauvinism and suppressing the class struggle. War abroad requires a disciplined ‘labor movement’ at home…

“The strategy Biden is pursuing is known as corporatism—that is, the integration of the government with the corporations and the unions on the basis of a defense of the capitalist system… The corporatist organizations like the AFL-CIO are still called ‘unions,’ but their actual practice and role bear no relationship to the function traditionally associated with the term ‘union.’ They are not workers’ organizations, but instruments of management and the state.”

What Biden “gets” is that the trade unions are allies of the corporations and banks—their industrial police force. In September, he called union executives to the White House, including O’Grady’s equivalent Liz Shuler, the newly installed president of the AFL-CIO. The president warned that if there was a strike movement, “we’d be in real trouble… You guys sometimes underestimate the incredible value you bring to the safety, security and growth of the economy.”

Whether or not the union leaders underestimate their “incredible value” has not lessened their determination to prove themselves essential to the major corporations.

Biden told a joint session of Congress in April, “Twenty million Americans lost their jobs in the pandemic, working- and middle-class Americans. At the same time, roughly 650 billionaires in America saw their net worth increase by more than $1 trillion, in the same exact period.” The unions facilitated this immense transfer of wealth.

In 2020, during the first wave of the pandemic, the US federal Bureau of Labor Statistics officially recognised only eight major work stoppages, the third-lowest level since 1947. But precisely for this reason, there was a major growth of wildcat strikes and other spontaneous forms of opposition within the working class, with over 1,400 unofficial work stoppages.

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Biden is now calling on the trade unions to work even more closely with government and corporate management to prevent an eruption of social and political opposition in the working class.

This is what recommends him to O'Grady.

Like their US counterparts, the TUC and its affiliated unions have spent the pandemic proving their absolute loyalty to the interests of British imperialism and the major corporations.

It was the TUC, supported by the Labour Party, that last March signed off on a £330 billion corporate bailout and £895 billion in quantitative easing, over £1 trillion pounds in total. It was the trade unions who suppressed every attempt to fight back against the employers by their members—in an unbroken series of betrayals of strikes by university workers, postal workers, bus workers, gas and telecom workers. And it is the trade unions who are now directly presiding over the Tory drive to keep the economy and schools open.

O'Grady noted some elements of the immense financial cost extracted from workers thanks to the trade unions' collusion with business, explaining that if pay had continued to grow at the rate seen prior to the 2008 financial crash, the average worker would be £5,900 better off today. TUC documents and speeches noted that employment fell by nearly one million between February and November 2020 (3.4 per cent). While 430,000 jobs were created through to May 2021, overall employee jobs are 550,000 below pre-pandemic levels. Across the economy, just over two jobs have been created for every five lost. Jobs have increased only in public services and business services and administration, while across manufacturing, retail, hospitality and the arts, only one in eight jobs lost has been recovered.

In addition, one in 10 workers have faced the threat of being fired and rehired on inferior terms and one in five workers (3.6 million) are in insecure work. Among key workers, real pay has fallen by between 3.5 and 7.5 percent, with one million children in key worker households living in poverty. One in 12 key workers (788,000 people) did not qualify for statutory sick pay going into the pandemic.

Above all, the price for the subordination of the working class to these rotten organisations has been coined in blood, with nearly 160,000 dead in the UK from COVID.

Prior to the congress, the TUC issued an extended report of its work last year, "Unions building dignity at work," highlighting instances of the unions' collaboration with the Johnson government and the employers, such as an online roundtable with Andrew Bailey, governor of the Bank of England, and Andy Haldane, deputy governor. Based on this record, the TUC complained of the naked ingratitude and hostility displayed by the Tories, with such actions as disbanding the Industrial Strategy Council in January, resistance to "our calls for a tripartite national recovery council" and bringing in "new anti-trade union legislation," forcing "trade union members to fund the Certification Office (CO), which regulates trade unions," fines of £20,000 for a breach of trade union law, and "wide-ranging powers to investigate complaints, even if brought by someone not in the union…"

Dressed up as a call to campaign for a "New Deal" for workers, with such limited demands as a £10 an hour minimum wage, what O'Grady wanted was for Johnson and his Thatcherite cronies to end such needless antagonisms and follow Biden's lead. As she stressed in her conference speech, "Invite unions in with employers. Get us around the table."

She has had some initial success. Prior to the congress, the TUC worked with the *Independent* newspaper to make a public complaint against the Tories blocking trade unions from "sensitive trade talks" for more than a year, "despite unions' offers to sign confidentiality agreements," scrapping existing trade and advisory groups on August 26 last year and creating new ones excluding the trade unions. The TUC noted that, in the US, such consultation with the trade unions is a legal requirement.

Five days later, the *Independent* reported that the required invite had been extended, with O'Grady declaring in her speech to congress, "Better late than never."

Sir Keir Starmer was happy to address the TUC and deliver a speech endorsing the "New Deal for workers" initiative, so insipid are its proposals. But given how unlikely it is that Starmer will ever lead a government, the TUC's central focus is to secure a long-term working arrangement with the Tories.

However successful the TUC's appeal to Johnson is, and however formalised, the trade unions will continue to confront the working class as a hostile force, as an agent of government and the employers.

This fact has profound material roots, something which Britain's pseudo-left groups spend enormous efforts to conceal.

Prior to this year's TUC congress, the Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Party, the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain and others were all busy claiming once again that the trade unions could be pushed to the left by a little rank-and-file pressure. They even claimed that the election of Sharon Graham as general secretary of Unite was proof of a new fighting mood in the trade unions, with the Socialist Party declaring that the TUC Congress "must be 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."

Such claims of an imminent militant turn led by the TUC have been disproved time and again, to devastating effect on workers.

Graham is, like O'Grady, a representative of an ossified bureaucratic clique steeped in betrayals and utterly loyal to the profit system that provides them with a comfortable career and an even more comfortable retirement.

In 2020, according to the Certification Office:

· The average total remuneration of 30 union leaders on more than £100,000 was £150,755.

· O'Grady received £167,229 in total remuneration. Her gross salary alone puts her in the top three per cent of earners across the UK.

· The highest-paid public sector union leader was Tim Roache, the now former general secretary of the GMB. He received £288,000 in total remuneration. In addition, he was in line to receive an £80,000 payment for long service, a £500,000 lump sum, a £60,000 annual pension and a car. If he lives to be 80 his pension will be worth £1.2 million.

· The public sector trade union with the most senior staff on total remuneration more than £100,000 was the Fire Brigades Union with four.

· Eight senior staff at the education unions shared a massive £1,252,709 between them.

· Total trade union assets (from dues, investments and other sources) come to over £2.4 billion pounds. This represents an *increase* in their assets—during the first year of the pandemic—of £177 million.

To claim that such organisations can become instruments of social struggle for the working class, let alone opponents of capitalism, is a lie, and the pseudo-left groups know it. They carry out this deliberate deception as tendencies that are themselves buried in the trade union apparatus at every level, on which they depend directly for their own incomes and indirectly through their acting as apologists and flunkeys for Graham and her ilk.

It is an extraordinary fact that an online pre-TUC conference of the Socialist Party's National Shop Stewards Network attracted an audience of around 300—effectively the group's active membership and periphery. But this small gathering was addressed by four trade union general secretaries: Graham of Unite, Sarah Woolley of the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers' Union, Dave Ward of the Communication Workers Union, and Carmel Gates, of the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance, as well as Joe Simpson, assistant general secretary of the Prison Officers' Association.

The Socialist Equality Party and our comrades internationally are urging

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the formation of rank-and-file committees to give expression to workers' rising hostility to the betrayals of the trade unions and to take forward the struggle against the employers and the government. This work has borne fruit in the formation of dozens of committees among autoworkers, educators, Amazon workers, bus workers and others. Whatever the fond wishes of O'Grady et al, the drive to reopen the economy amid an escalating pandemic and the imposition of speed-ups and savage cuts will provoke a dramatic escalation of the class struggle and a rebellion by the working class that will seal the fate of the politically rotten and moribund trade unions.

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