

UK: Unite leader Sharon Graham wins chorus of approval from the corporate media

Tony Robson
10 December 2021

Unite the union marked the first 100 days of Sharon Graham as general secretary on December 3 with a series of press briefings claiming that since her election on August 25 she has been relentlessly “winning for workers” in pay agreements in over 40 disputes. The pay deals cover workers in road haulage, warehouse and distribution, public transport, and manufacturing.

References to “push back” promote the impression that Unite has shifted under Graham to mount a militant counteroffensive against employers who have exploited the pandemic to attack pay terms, and conditions. Graham has made cameo performances on picket lines to paint the picture of a union leader standing shoulder to shoulder with workers in struggle and providing direct leadership.

Unite is the largest private sector union in the UK with a 1.4 million membership. If this presentation had any element of truth the Johnson government would by now be confronting an unprecedented strike wave with Graham the subject of a corporate media witch-hunt.

The exact opposite is the case. The disputes unit established by Graham after her election has worked to ensure that such a strike movement did not develop, despite the overwhelming mandates for action by tens of thousands of workers in key sections of the economy. Unite has cited that 32 of the 43 pay agreements reached involved disputes that led to votes for strike action or actual strike action. The overarching narrative of Graham is that the threat of strike action alone was supposedly sufficient to win significant concessions, thereby justifying the partnership she has forged with the corporate oligarchy against a general fightback by the working class.

The above inflation pay deals in several instances among HGV drivers has been in exchange for suppressing any strike activity in the road haulage sector in which the government has increased the working day to 11 hours and lorry drivers face major health and safety issues with the lack of roadside facilities.

In public transport which has been a particular inflection point of growing resistance of workers to sweatshop conditions and low pay, the role of Unite has been to suspend strike action across Britain in favour of below inflation pay deals. Where it has proved incapable of preventing strike action, Unite has ensured it remained isolated and ended based on sellout agreements.

It is the sabotage of this first wave of renewed militancy which lies behind the chorus of approval Graham has received from the *Mirror*, *Independent*, *Guardian* and even London’s *Evening*

Standard. The content of Unite press briefings have been faithfully recycled.

The lengths to which the corporate media has gone to build up the credibility of Unite and Graham is without precedent. The *Evening Standard* carried blown up quotes from Graham regarding her “winning for workers”, while the *Guardian* claimed she has “spearheaded a shock-and-awe campaign against the corporate sector.”

Far from Graham mounting a challenge to the corporate oligarchy she is recognised as an asset in preventing the development of what the British ruling class fears most. Two years into the pandemic class relations have reached breaking point. The prioritisation of profits over lives has produced a death toll reaching almost 170,000 with the removal of mitigation measures preparing a more deadly surge of the pandemic. The build-up of pay disputes follows on from pay freezes since the start of the pandemic and the further erosion of living standards through inflation, with working people aware of the wealth which has been piled up at the opposite pole of society.

The role of Unite has been to divide workers all down the line. In road haulage at DHL, the largest logistics firm in the world, Unite has trumpeted above inflation pay deals for HGV drivers at two Sainsburys depots with a disparity in the agreements of 6.2 percent and 14 percent. In both cases workers had voted for strike action which was suspended to prevent the disputes from providing a focus for opposition among its 41,000 workforce.

Unite has blocked national strike action arising from more than 20 disputes at the largest private bus operator in the UK, Stagecoach. Overwhelming strike mandates were overturned in favour of pay settlements which in most cases led to below inflation deals and undermined the fight for parity pay. On Arriva Bus UK the pay settlements have been as low as 3 percent.

In its attempt to spin the pay settlements by focusing on those reached with HGV drivers, Unite has unintentionally drawn attention to the widening gulf in pay with bus drivers. The union has stated that the average pay increase negotiated for bus drivers is £1,600 compared to £6,000 for road transport, warehouse, and the logistics sector.

The Unite press briefings include the headline figures of 43 pay deals exceeding £25 million covering 12,000 workers—meant to prove that the union has conducted a significant transfer of wealth to workers.

However, this is readily disproven by the breakdown of the

disputes provided by Unite in the statement “Sharon Graham’s first 100 days” of “Key WINS for workers” since August, some 25 agreements.

Only last month Graham stated that pay agreements would need to be at least 6 percent to keep up with the current rate of inflation. But a quarter of the union’s own cherry-picked list are still below the rate of inflation—including the examples of 6 percent for over 300 tram workers on Greater Manchester’s Metrolink and 150 workers at the Alpha plastics factory in Wigan—both stretched over two years.

The list even includes the example of a 2.75 percent pay rise for 200 cement drivers at Hanson UK and fails to identify that the 10.5 percent for bus drivers at Stagecoach South Wales is also a two-year deal. Over 200 drivers at three depots staged 17 days of strike action to end their status as among the lowest paid in the company. Unite hailed the agreement, which includes productivity strings, which leaves drivers on just £10.50 an hour.

Graham is linked to the claims that she operates a “leverage” policy to strengthen the hand of workers in struggle. The policy is in reality based on corporatist collusion between Unite and the major corporations to suppress the class struggle.

Her orientation to the boardrooms and shareholders was spelled out in an interview with the *Guardian* on December 2, titled, “Unite will use brains as well as brawn to tackle ‘bad employers’”, boss says.”

Graham arrogantly described the 1.4 million membership of Unite as the “muscle”, while the real movers and shakers are her team of specialists most attuned to the interests of big business.

“To deal with companies that play hardball, Graham says she will use ‘leverage’. This, she says, is widely misunderstood to mean extreme industrial tactics such as demonstrations outside the homes of company directors involved in industrial disputes.

“Graham says this is wrong. Having spent 20 years in the union’s organising department, she says this is where ‘brains’ come in. She is building a team of accountants, analysts and economists to produce an X-ray of her corporate opponents, and will then use these detailed analyses—which run to 1,000 pages—to reveal a company’s vulnerabilities.”

None of this has anything to do with waging a fight from the standpoint of the interests of the working class. *The Guardian* lauded the role of Graham and the leverage tactic at Go North West buses in overturning the fire and rehire policy which provoked an 11 week strike earlier this year by 400 drivers in Manchester. Graham was allowed to grandstand, with the article peddling the lie that this was the result of the adverse publicity generated by Unite in which the threat by the Norwegian government to withdraw a lucrative £3.8 billion rail contract from the parent company Go Ahead was decisive.

This is all to provide a cover for Unite’s agreement to implement £1.3 million worth of cuts in return for the company withdrawing the ultimatum. For all the talk about taking on “bad employers”, the leverage policy is consistent with isolating and ending strikes and integrating the union deeper into the structures of corporate management in imposing attacks on jobs, terms and conditions.

It is based upon the policing of militant opposition that Graham

and Unite are seeking endorsement for calls to return to national bargaining arrangements, enshrining the union bureaucracy as an industrial police force on behalf the government and the corporations.

Graham was elected on August 25 with barely 4 percent of members voting for her, confirming the widespread contempt felt by workers to the entire trade union apparatus. The support provided to her by the main pseudo-left groups, the Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP), promoting the line that she was the “Workers Candidate” is the latest chapter in a long and sorry saga. Every one of their claims of a militant turn by a section of the union bureaucracy has only served to prolong an endless series of betrayals by forestalling a rank-and-file rebellion.

Graham represents the fag end of this bankrupt approach. That they are prepared to apply left credentials to an open advocate of business unionism only serves to underscore the pseudo-left’s hostility to the class struggle and any genuine opposition to capitalism.

In this squalid enterprise they are joined by the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain. The *Morning Star*, on December 3 ran the banner headline, “The first 100 days: Unite’s Sharon Graham on a wave of militancy that’s winning for workers on pay.”

The article promotes Graham’s record, quoting her claim, “So we’ve had quite a good start on that, we’ve won 25 of the initial 46 and a lot of the others are coming to conclusion. But we’ve got over 100 disputes now running, so it is the shape of things to come plus!”

This is Graham’s real role, industrial disputes firefighter in chief.

The betrayals by Graham and her pseudo-left apologists are not passing the working class by unnoticed. Workers are entering into struggle and recognising the pro-company nature of Unite. But the mounting disgust and anger felt by workers must be provided with an organisational and political perspective.

A new path of struggle must be opened to wage the fight against the corporations and government through organisations which break down all sectional and national divisions of the working class and unify it as one force in a fight against capitalism. This is the perspective advanced in the International Workers Alliance for Rank and File Committees. Its founding statement explains:

“The IWA-RFC will work to develop the framework for new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale. The working class is ready to fight. But it is shackled by reactionary bureaucratic organizations that suppress every expression of resistance.”

We urge all workers to make contact to discuss how this movement can be built.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact