

# Britain's trade unions demand stepped-up sanctions against Russia: beating the drum for World War III

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The trade unions are leading a war stampede by Britain, the United States and NATO against Russia. Unite and Unison, Britain's two largest unions, have organised boycotts this past week by dockyard workers against the unloading of Russian oil and gas from foreign-flagged ships.

On Saturday, dockers who are members of Unite refused to unload Russian oil from a German-flagged oil tanker moored at Birkenhead Docks near Stanlow Oil Refinery in Cheshire. Their action was trumpeted by the British press, "Angry dock workers in the UK are refusing to unload Russian oil due to Ukraine invasion" (*The Sun*), "Brit dockers refuse to unload Russian oil tanker in show of solidarity with Ukraine" (*The Mirror*) and "You can stick your oil, Vlad" (*Sunday People*).

Unison, Britain's largest union, had already announced its members would refuse to unload Russian liquified natural gas (LNG) from two oil tankers due to dock at Kent. The *Boris Vilkitskiy* and the *Fedor Litke* were reportedly operating under the flag of Cyprus and carried enough LNG to last Britain 12 days.

The boycott of the *Saltcod* was portrayed as grassroots action, with the *Mirror* claiming workers had taken "matters into their own hands." Nothing could be further from the truth.

Unite and Unison are manipulating dockworkers' genuine revulsion at Russia's invasion of Ukraine to further the economic, military and strategic aims of British imperialism. It is necessary for workers to maintain their critical faculties. Unite and Unison feign outrage over the plight of Ukrainian civilians, demanding an economic blockade against Russia, but have never once demanded similar measures to oppose far greater crimes by British and US imperialism against Serbia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya and Yemen which have claimed millions of lives. The cargo boycott is a top-down operation led by trade union officials beholden to corporate Britain and the state.

It was Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham who told Indian shipping operator Essar that her members would, "under no circumstances unload any Russian oil regardless of the nationality of the vessel which delivers it." She tweeted, "Essar may believe that it is justifiable to transport Russian oil under a flag of convenience but Unite does not. Unite urges the transport secretary @grantshapps to close this loophole immediately."

Just two days earlier, the Johnson government had announced a second barrage of economic sanctions against Russia, including a ban on the entry of Russian flagged, registered, owned or chartered vessels to British ports. But this did not go far enough for Unite. Graham now denounced the government for "dragging its feet on sanctions", insisting that all foreign-flagged ships be banned from docking with Russian goods.

Unite, which routinely uses the threat of anti-strike laws to sabotage and suppress industrial action by workers, moved in this instance with lightning speed. The boycott—amounting to a work ban—was imposed unilaterally without even a single consultative ballot! Ballot-free industrial

action is only legal if it helps boost NATO war aims.

Matt Lay, Unison's head of energy, told the *Manchester Evening News* regarding the *Boris Vilkitskiy* and the *Fedor Litke*, "These tankers appear to have gone away for now, but the cargo could be back on other ships within days. Even ships with a clear Russian connection are causing confusion and could slip through the net to reach a UK port... The Government should act right away if these sanctions are to be fit for purpose."

He told Murdoch's *Sun*, "The workers at the National Grid terminal don't want to touch the cargo given the tragedy unfolding in Ukraine," adding, "These staff are determined to show their support for the Ukrainian people and uphold the sanctions imposed against Russia."

The unions' Russian cargo boycotts are not motivated in the slightest by concern for the Ukrainian people. Graham, Lay and their fellow executives are acting in concert with the Labour Party, the Johnson government and NATO against Russia. This was made clear in a letter from Labour MP Louise Haigh to Transport Secretary Grant Shapps on March 6. Haigh's "Dear Grant" letter, retweeted by Unite, called for "protection for trade unionists standing up to Vladimir Putin's regime" and was framed as a friendly appeal to the Tories that they should not use anti-strike laws against "principled British workers" who are "standing up for British values."

Any pretence of an independent policy was obliterated by Haigh, who declared, "We stand united with the government and our NATO and European allies in condemnation of his heinous violation of international law."

Shapps is a rabid Thatcherite who is currently presiding over £400 million worth of cuts against London transport workers. He denounced striking tube workers last week as "ungrateful" amid a vicious witch-hunt of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union as "Putin's stooges" and denunciations of striking tube workers as "the enemy underground." It is not known whether Ms Haigh, MP for Sheffield Heeley, sought similar assurances from Shapps regarding tube workers' right to strike.

## International campaign

Britain's trade unions are not alone in their support for the war aims of their "own" imperialist nation. In the Netherlands, Niek Stam, of dockworkers' union FNV Havens, declared his union was preparing similar Russian cargo bans, "There is blood on this oil, blood on this coal and blood on the gas." The spilling of Iraqi, Afghan and Libyan blood elicited no similar demands for sanctions, work bans or boycotts against

the US or Britain.

The trade unions in all NATO allied countries are spearheading demands for action against Russia. A statement by the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) on March 3, cited Unite Assistant General Secretary Steve Turner boasting, "Unite proactively sought UK-wide action from government to ban Russian vessels from docking in our ports." The ITF stated that "UK-style bans" are now being taken up by affiliated unions across Europe, Canada and Australia.

In Canada, International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) President Rob Ashton wrote to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on February 28, calling on the federal government to "step up and cease all maritime trade with Russia and its allies."

Ashton's letter gave full voice to the war fever gripping the wealthy executives who staff today's trade unions, and the corporatist alliance they have forged with their ruling class. Ashton began his letter by congratulating Trudeau's government "for all that it has done for the Ukrainian people so far", before demanding a complete ban on Russian owned, flagged or chartered vessels from entering Canadian ports "except in the case of a marine safety incident, [but] *even with this we urge caution*" [emphasis added]. With this last clause, the ILWU tramples on the Law of the Sea that mandates "all masters of a ship to help anyone in danger at sea" irrespective of their nationality.

Ashton concludes by demanding of Trudeau that he halt all Canadian commodity exports to Russia. All of this the ILWU offers in a spirit of "solidarity with workers of every nation"!

In Australia, Paddy Crumlin, national secretary of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) and long-time president of the ITF, wrote to Liberal Party Prime Minister Scott Morrison March 3 demanding "pressure upon Russia's economic, social, and strategic interests across the Asia Pacific region." Crumlin explained to Morrison, "wars are fought using the sacrifice of working women and men and their families on both sides of any dispute. We know that Ukrainian workers and Russian workers alike will be bear the brunt of the violence and unrest that will follow this invasion for many years to come." But this is the very outcome sought by US and NATO war planners. Three days later, Morrison delivered his own contribution to World War III, a speech portraying an "arc of autocracy" stretching from Russia to China, announcing construction of a £10 billion nuclear submarine base in Port Kembla, Newcastle or Brisbane.

In the United States, the ILWU's Coast Longshore Division announced March 3 that its members would "not load or unload any Russian cargo coming into or going out of all 29 U.S. West Coast ports."

ILWU International President Willie Adams declared, "With this action in solidarity with the people of Ukraine, we send a strong message that we unequivocally condemn the Russian invasion." The ILWU's boycotts augment a battery of sanctions imposed by the Biden Administration aimed at collapsing the Russian economy as a prelude to regime change and US satrapy. There is no record of the ILWU having boycotted Halliburton, Raytheon, Lockheed Martin or any of the other US companies that raked in billions from the pulverisation of Iraq.

## Clausewitz and Lenin

There are major questions confronting dockworkers internationally: What are the implications of the bans on Russian shipping? Why are the unions lining up with the Johnson government, the Biden administration and other capitalist governments to demand even tougher sanctions? Whose interests does this serve? What exactly is the working class being lined up for?

On Saturday, Russia's foreign ministry spokeswoman, Maria

Zakharova, warned, "The sanctions hysteria in which London plays one of the leading, if not the main, roles, leaves us no choice but to take proportionately tough retaliatory measures. London has made a final choice of open confrontation with Russia." President Vladimir Putin said the sanctions imposed on Russia were "akin to a declaration of war but thank God it has not come to that."

NATO powers are ramping-up military and economic measures against Russia, hour-by-hour, that have no precedent outside of World War. On March 1, French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire declared the European Union was preparing to unleash all-out economic and financial war against Russia. Former Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, now deputy head of Russia's Security Council, replied on Twitter, "Watch your tongue, gentlemen! And don't forget that in human history, economic wars quite often turned into real ones."

Putin and Medvedev are representatives of the capitalist oligarchy which emerged from the Stalinist bureaucracy's dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. They are bitter opponents of Marxism. Putin's February 21 speech recognising the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk attacked Lenin for protecting the rights of national minorities within the framework of a voluntary Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) created in 1922.

Putin, a former Stalinist KGB official, denounced the Bolsheviks for "chopping the country into pieces", saying that "Russia was robbed" and warning "We are ready to show you what real de-communisation means for Ukraine." Putin's invasion, based on the reactionary Tsarist and Stalinist traditions of Great Russian nationalism, is a disaster for the Ukrainian and Russian working class that plays directly into the hands of NATO war planners.

But Medvedev's remark, "Economic war leads to shooting war", is true. It is an allusion to military theorist Carl von Clausewitz's famous dictum that "war is a continuation of politics by other means." Lenin made a careful review of Clausewitz's military writings in 1915, while in exile in Berne as part of his fight against the wave of social patriotism that destroyed the socialist movement at the outbreak of World War I. Lenin rejected all subjective explanations for war, which were inevitably couched in moralistic terms. Kautsky, Plekhanov and other renegades from Marxism supported the war, employing chauvinist phrases such as "Defence of the Fatherland" to obscure the imperialist aims of the contending powers. Lenin wrote:

"With reference to wars, the main thesis of dialectics, which has been so shamelessly distorted by Plekhanov to please the bourgeoisie, is that *'war is simply the continuation of politics by other [i.e., violent] means'*. Such is the formula of Clausewitz, one of the greatest writers on the history of war, whose thinking was stimulated by Hegel. And it was always the standpoint of Marx and Engels, who regarded any war as the *continuation* of the politics of the powers concerned—and the *various classes* within these countries—in a definite period."

More than a century later, this advice from Lenin, Marx, Engels (and Clausewitz) should be taken to heart by every class-conscious worker. The nature of any war is determined by the class character of the regime waging it and of "the objective position of the ruling classes in all belligerent countries" (Lenin) in their relation to world economy and world politics. From this standpoint, the invasion of Ukraine by capitalist oligarchs in Moscow must be opposed. But this must be conducted within the framework of the struggle by the international working class against imperialist war.

The US, Britain and other NATO powers are implementing war plans prepared over decades. They are extending their wars for oil in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya into the Caucasus, Russia and Central Asia. The same inter-imperialist struggle for territory, markets and resources that produced two world wars last century is threatening humanity with a third.

The international working class has immense power in this

situation—half a million dockworkers can bring world trade to its knees. It must make decisions about how and in whose class interests to use that power.



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