

Britain's TUC cancels annual protest outside Tory conference to support war drive

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Today was supposed to be the annual national protest organised by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) outside the Conservative Party conference. This year's event in Blackpool was to be focussed on the cost-of-living crisis.

Last Wednesday, 10 days before the protest was to take place, the TUC pulled the plug. A statement announcing its decision to “postpone” the event explained, “Over the coming fortnight we will be mobilising trade unionists in support of the [International Trade Union Confederation] day of solidarity with Ukraine on 15 March. And we will support the mobilisations in London and around the UK for the UN Antiracism Day on 19-20 March—particularly as this government refuses to welcome enough refugees from Ukraine into the UK.”

Nothing could say more about which side of the barricades the trade unions stand on in the class struggle. They have demobilised opposition to the Tory government under conditions in which it enjoys the effective coalition support of Sir Keir Starmer's Labour Party. Starmer has declared Labour “the party of NATO” in a spirit of wartime unity with Johnson. The trade unions have shown themselves willing managers of the home front.

Workers face an unprecedented collapse of their living standards. The Centre for Economic and Business Research is forecasting the worst cut in personal income since records began in 1955, more than £2,500 per person on average. The Resolution Foundation predicts that the poorest families will see their cost-of-living rise by 10 percent between now and autumn.

The unions never intended to oppose this assault. Workers have suffered a massive fall in real-terms wages thanks to the trade unions' suppression of industrial action and an unbroken series of betrayals of every strike they were unable to strangle at birth.

The economic war with Russia and explosion of militarism across Europe means a drastic escalation of

this war on the working class. Calls are going out in the ruling class for “pain” and “sacrifice” and the rolling back of social spending to free up funds for the armed forces. A doubling or more of defence spending is being demanded, paid for by slashing spending on the National Health Service, education and welfare.

Resistance in the working class will meet a brutal response. Refuse workers in Coventry have been fighting a prolonged scabbing operation mounted by the labour controlled Local Authority. On Thursday, ferry company P&O sacked 800 workers and sent in private security goons to force them off ships to be replaced by a scab workforce. Striking London Underground workers have already been branded traitors to the anti-Russia effort.

After cancelling its “cost-of-living” protest to show “solidarity” with NATO's proxy Ukraine, the TUC has reorganised a demonstration for June 18. This avoids the political embarrassment of opposing the Tories when Starmer and company are proclaiming their unswerving patriotism.

This line-up with the Tory government takes place under the cover of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)'s “day of solidarity with Ukraine” and today's UN Antiracism Day, which the TUC links with the Ukrainian refugee crisis.

The ITUC and ETUC did nothing on its day of solidarity, March 15, other than issue statements and hold a couple of small anti-Russia protests in Australia. Their sole concern was to proclaim support for sanctions against Russia, with the ETUC pledging to maintain “pressure” on the European Union and ITUC General Secretary Sharan Burrow declaring, “The imposition of sanctions by governments which support democracy and the rule of law is both inevitable and justified.”

Professed humanitarian concerns are window dressing for a policy of support for the EU and NATO powers,

whose predatory ambitions towards Russia, endless provocations and limitless arms shipments have fuelled the Ukraine war. Nothing said by these organisations could not be said by Prime Minister Boris Johnson, or the leader of any of the European imperialist powers.

There is no mention made by the TUC of the criminal role played in the crisis by NATO or of any independent role for the working class other than being dragooned behind the Tory/Labour pro-war alliance. Unison mobilised its members to block tankers it believed to be carrying Russian oil and gas. This is the first time in its rotten history the union has conducted a form of illegal action since the passage of the anti-trade union laws decades ago, but accompanied by a begging letter from one Labour MP for the Tory government to allow this!

The Ukrainian refugee question is now routinely utilised by various “progressive” political scoundrels to comment mournfully on the war without saying anything critical of the imperialist powers and their responsibility for the conflict.

The real route to solidarity with Ukrainian workers lies in class struggle against government austerity and war programmes the world over, waged by the international, including the Russian, working class. This is precisely what the corporatist trade unions, committed to defending company profits and state interests, are dedicated to suppressing.

Year after year the pseudo-left and Stalinist groups portray the unions as the natural leadership of the working class, rallying round its annual Tory party demonstration and pronouncing it the beginning of another mythical “resurgence” of union-backed struggle. Faced with this staggering refutation of their perspective, they fall into line with the TUC’s betrayal without a murmur.

The Socialist Party touted the protest as a potential “pole of attraction to all those workers looking for a lead as the real value of their pay packets is slashed,” but has said nothing. The *Morning Star* boosted a rear-guard action in Blackpool by local trade union councils and branches of the Green Party and Extinction Rebellion. The Socialist Workers Party goes all-in, urging its members to throw themselves into today’s UN Anti-racism day march.

These organisations are wholly-owned subsidiaries of the union bureaucracy, functioning as its PR departments boosting its tattered reputation and justifying every betrayal.

This finds its sharpest expression with the People’s Assembly, a charnel house for the pseudo-left groups and

the Stalinist Communist Party, which once organised protests of hundreds of thousands. It responded to the postponement by calling for people to attend the “next wave” of its own cost-of-living protests on April 2. Optimistic phrasing, given the first “wave” on March 5 struggled to mobilise more than a few hundred people across the country.

Workers were already being made to bear the costs of the ruling class’s “herd immunity” response to the pandemic, sacrificing their health and income to sustain the profits of the super-rich. The trade unions played a crucial part in facilitating this policy. The TUC now intends a redoubled government-business-union attack on working-class livelihoods, waged in the name of a national effort to stop the Russian menace.

Writing on the eve of the Second World War, the leader of the Fourth International Leon Trotsky wrote in 1938, “In time of war or revolution, when the bourgeoisie is plunged into exceptional difficulties, trade union leaders usually become bourgeois ministers.”

He declared it “criminal... to tolerate subordination of the revolutionary mass movement to the control of openly reactionary or disguised conservative (‘progressive’) bureaucratic cliques” and called on the most advanced workers, if necessary, not to flinch “in the face of a direct break with the conservative apparatus of the trade unions.”

A lot of water has passed under the bridge since then. The unions today are hollowed-out, corporatist prison houses for their members. What is necessary is to develop an insurgency by the working class against the union bureaucracy through building rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions. The working class must wage class war against the corporations and the government at home, not imperialist war with the working class abroad. Such a struggle demands the building of a new leadership, the Socialist Equality Party.



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