

British trade unions enrol in Johnson government's war drive

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Eight British trade unions are officially taking part in a “Unions stand with Ukraine Demonstration” in London today, supported by the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine. These are the GMB, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), ASLEF, TSSA, the University and College Union (UCU) and the supposedly more radical Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), Communication Workers Union (CWU) and Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU).

This is a politically filthy event, lending support to the right-wing government of Ukraine as a means of lining up behind the US, Britain and other NATO powers whose proxy war against Russia it is fighting. The demonstration's condemnation of the Russian invasion is not a show of “solidarity with the people of Ukraine” as it claims, but with the imperialist powers trying to perpetuate the bloodshed and using the country as a staging ground for a wider war for regime change in Moscow, with China the next target.

The character of the protest is shown by its organiser, the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign, fronted by pro-NATO warmonger Paul Mason.

In a promotional video for the demonstration Mason insists, “everybody progressive in the world has the duty to side with Ukraine, to give them the arms they need, to give them the money they need...”

Stirring the inflammatory hysteria generated by unfounded government and media propaganda, he accuses the Russian army of “potential genocide.”

There is nothing to distinguish Mason's comments from those of Prime Minister Boris Johnson or US President Joe Biden—they are working to the same agenda. Mason's role in this partnership is to open up a “left” cover for the war drive by mobilising the trade union bureaucracy and presenting it as the voice of working people

Shortly before the Russian invasion, he led a “Labour, Plaid Cymru and trade union delegation” to Ukraine including ASLEF train drivers' union leader Mick Whelan and the head of the essentially defunct National Union of Mineworkers, Chris Kitchen. They met with members of the Territorial Defence Brigade in Kyiv sporting the insignia of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), Stepan Bandera's Nazi-collaborationist organisation during the Second World War.

Once the war had begun, Mason and the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign joined in a witch-hunt of the Stop the War Coalition (STWC) for its criticisms of NATO's eastward expansion. The Corbynite “left” Labour MPs and the trade unions rapidly abandoned their long association with a group now placed beyond the pale. Former Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell led the way, joining Mason on a Ukraine Solidarity Campaign protest on February 26 and

pulling out of a STWC event days later.

Mason has now gained fresh recruits to his campaign for a NATO victory over Russia in the GMB, TSSA, UCU, PCS, BFAWU and CWU. The National Union of Journalists also published details of today's demonstration for “members wishing to attend.”

The right-wing, nationalist character of the protest is clear, whatever weasel words are employed by this or that trade union about their commitment to “peace”. In the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign's video publicising tomorrow's demonstration, speakers declare “*Sláva Ukraini!*” (Glory to Ukraine) and “*Heróyam sláva!*” (Glory to the heroes), slogans associated with the Ukrainian nationalist movement, particularly the OUN, and the contemporary neo-Nazi brigades which form the shock troops of Ukraine's armed forces.

To line up behind the Zelensky government and its fascist allies in the name of working-class solidarity is grotesque.

During the 2014 US-backed coup that overthrew the government of Viktor Yanukovich and established the current pro-NATO setup, far-right forces at the centre of the movement carried out a massacre in Odessa's trade union hall. Since its bloody birth, the Ukrainian regime, together with the US and European Union, has carried out a staggering impoverishment of the mass of the population.

That programme was being accelerated in the run-up to the war. In late 2019 and early 2020, the government attempted to push through a new labour code allowing the termination of contracts without reason, reducing overtime premiums, expanding the use of zero-hours contracts, limiting the number of trade unions allowed representation in each workplace, increasing the number of members required to start a union and allowing managers to refuse to negotiate with unions.

The UN special rapporteur on freedom of peaceful assembly and association commented, “several provisions ... if approved, might be incompatible with Ukraine's obligations under international human rights law and standards.”

When these moves were defeated by popular opposition, the government attempted to achieve the same ends through a series of smaller laws removing labour law protections, allowing employers unlimited use of successive short-term contracts, granting additional grounds for dismissal, scrapping protections for the disabled and young workers, removing working time, rest period, overtime and leave guarantees, and restricting union organising rights.

The British state and the Johnson government was closely involved. Last November, *openDemocracy* reported on a “communication plan” designed to push the “liberalisation” agenda which was drafted by an international development consultancy and bore the seal of the British embassy in Kyiv. The document was supported by the Foreign Office's £150 million UK Aid Direct fund.

As in every country, the Ukrainian trade unions would have acceded to the government's demands. The same *openDemocracy* article quotes Pavlo Prudnikov, deputy head of Ukraine's Nuclear Power and Industry Workers Union, saying, "we've shifted, to an extent, to a different form of activity: tripartite negotiations on labour reform with government, business and unions."

The war has dramatically accelerated this offensive. A new law passed by the Ukrainian parliament last month, "On the Organising of Employment Relations During Martial Law," removes trade unions' right to resist dismissals; extends the normal working week by 50 percent; allows employers unlimited rights to stipulate the beginning and end times of workdays, to transfer workers between jobs and change their working conditions without consent; relaxes restrictions on involuntary redundancy; allows women to be employed in heavy and underground work; and removes restrictions on overtime, night and weekend work for employees with young children.

One can only imagine the outcry at such legislation were it passed in Russia.

The Ukrainian trade unions have wavered through this assault on the working class, with *openDemocracy* reporting of one union spokesperson, "He explained that, in wartime, trade unions would not oppose the changes, which, he hopes, will be temporary."

The European and International Trades Union congresses, who in December 2019 denounced the Ukrainian government for "sid[ing] decisively with oligarchs and multinational enterprises against its own people," now support anti-Russian sanctions "by governments which support democracy and the rule of law" in support of Ukraine's "democratic state."

The support of Britain's trade unions for Zelensky and NATO's war drive flows from their domestic role as allies of the Johnson government and the employers in sabotaging every struggle waged by the working class.

In the course of the pandemic, a long process of corporatist integration of the trade unions into the structures of company management and the state took finished form. The Trades Union Congress (TUC) joined the Labour Party in supporting a massive handout of cash to the corporations and then policing a return to unsafe workplaces and schools in line with the Tory "herd immunity" agenda.

As lockdowns ended, the trade unions turned to finishing off major industrial disputes they had sat on for months. But even after more than a year of betrayals and sellouts—at British Gas, BT, throughout public transport, in universities, schools and hospitals—strikes have continued to erupt, fuelled by a cost-of-living crisis that threatens working families with ruin.

The onset of war in Ukraine is being used to redouble efforts to suppress the class struggle. That is the real content of today's demonstration. The trade unions' declaration of solidarity with Ukraine equates to a declaration of amnesty for the Johnson government.

On March 3, two weeks after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the TUC issued a boilerplate statement condemning the "illegal invasion of a sovereign nation" and demanding that Russia "respect Ukrainian territorial integrity," then calling "for peace" and for "all governments to reach a negotiated solution through diplomacy."

But the trade unions' real priority is "peace" with the British government, leading to their ever-closer alignment with its plans for war to a NATO victory in Ukraine, in which the unions are offering their services as managers of the home front.

This year's annual TUC national protest outside the Conservative Party conference was cancelled with an announcement that "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."

The reference to refugees is cynical. They are being used as bargaining chips for closer relations with Johnson and the corporations. A March 16 TUC statement on Ukrainian refugees centred on the demand, "The government must meet with business and unions together."

As a down payment on an enforced wartime industrial peace, the trade unions have been busy this month bringing key strikes to a halt, including on the London Underground, London buses, in universities and at London hospitals, so that today's demonstration takes place in a capital transformed into a virtual strike-free zone.

The working class must reject all appeals to back the Tory government and the NATO powers in the war in Ukraine. It is a matter of historical record that NATO's steady encroachment on Russia's border and systematic arming of Ukraine following the 2014 pro-US coup was aimed at deliberately provoking a Russian invasion which could be used as a pretext for a broader offensive against Moscow and Beijing. This desperate and politically reactionary move by the Putin regime on behalf of the Russian oligarchy must be opposed by the working class by its own methods, not by lining up behind a conflict that can end in nuclear war.

There must be a new mass anti-war movement, one based on the international working class that makes its appeal to workers in Ukraine and Russia. There must be no peace for the employers, the Tory warmongers or their accomplices in the Labour Party and the trade unions. Rather, the struggles against austerity and the destruction of pay and conditions being demanded in the name of the war drive must be waged with renewed force through the building of rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions and unifying workers across borders, and a new political leadership, the Socialist Equality Party.



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