

War and anti-strike threats dominate UK Conservative Party leadership debate: Demand a general election now!

Robert Stevens
26 July 2022

Monday evening's first debate in the Conservative Party leadership contest between former Chancellor Rishi Sunak and Foreign Secretary Liz Truss was a stark warning to the working class. Whoever wins on September 5 will use the right-wing agenda of outgoing Prime Minister Boris Johnson as a launch pad for something even worse.

The two political criminals outlined competing plans for class war at home and military conflict against Russia and China.

As was expected, both proclaimed the UK's commitment to war against Russia in Ukraine. Truss boasted that "we were the first European country to send weapons to Ukraine, we've put the toughest possible sanctions on Russia," but stopped short of committing UK troops to a direct role in the conflict. Sunak said that "we have put together one of the strongest sets of economic sanctions that the world has ever seen" and "made sure that we supported Ukraine financially with the arms and weapons they needed to defend themselves, and actually that's something that Liz and I worked together on."

But in the lead up to the debate, Sunak and Truss traded blows over who was the most hawkish against China.

Sunak issued an 800-word press release declaring that China and the Chinese Communist Party "represent the largest threat to Britain and the world's security and prosperity this century." He continued, "For too long, politicians in Britain and across the West have rolled out the red carpet and turned a blind eye to China's nefarious activity and ambitions."

He announced plans to close all 30 Confucius Institutes in Britain offering Chinese culture and language programmes and pledged to "Kick the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) out of our universities" by forcing higher education establishments to disclose foreign

funding of more than £50,000 and reviewing research partnerships.

Truss responded that when Sunak headed the Treasury he had sought "closer economic relations" with China, while her Foreign Office has taken "the toughest stance" against China.

Truss, the favourite to win the contest, declared prior to the debate that the free trade zones rolled out by Sunak were not supportive enough of big business. She would launch "investment zones" with lower taxes and reduced planning restrictions for corporations and establish "full fat freeports" by "unshackling pre-existing freeports from excessive Whitehall red tape".

War combined with the further transfer of wealth to the major corporations demand a ramping up of the state offensive against a working class fighting back against the destruction of their jobs and living standards.

The BBC asked the candidates, "There are two more strikes coming this week, two more train strikes. Will you ban strikes on essential public services like the railways?" Both replied instantly, "Yes".

This was a commitment making clear the consequences of Tory plans already in place to bring in minimum service requirements during strikes hitting public services.

Truss has made a clampdown on strikes central to her campaign. The *Financial Times* noted ahead of the debate, "Boris Johnson's government had insisted it would take six to 12 months for parliament to pass the legislation. But Truss pledged to enact the minimum service commitments within 30 days of entering Downing Street."

On Monday, Truss announced that further anti-strike laws would be imposed including raising the minimum proportion of workers required to back a strike ballot for

industrial action to be legal from 40 percent of those eligible to vote to 50 percent. This would apply to all workers not just, as is the case now, for those in “important public services”. Truss plans to increase the minimum notice period for strikes to four weeks, up from two weeks at present. She will end legislation allowing strikes to be held in any period and repeatedly in the six month window after a successful strike ballot. Under the plans, striking members will no longer receive tax-free payments from unions on strike days.

The debate was stark confirmation of the Socialist Equality Party’s analysis that the palace coup that ended with Johnson’s removal as party leader was executed in order to deepen and extend his anti-working class, pro-war agenda under a hopefully more competent and less despised leader. When asked what marks out of 10 they would give Johnson as prime minister, Truss replied “seven”. Sunak, who earlier praised Johnson’s response to the COVID pandemic—which has already led to over 200,000 dead—was more effusive, saying, “when he was great, he was great” and on a number of major issues was “10 out of 10.”

The degraded spectacle of a near billionaire ex-banker and a deranged Margaret Thatcher clone putting forward their credentials for taking over in Downing Street could not pose more clearly the necessity of the working class intervening into political life in its own interests, independent of all factions of the ruling elite.

This debate and those to follow this week and throughout August are a gigantic fraud, designed to perpetuate the illusion of a popular discussion over who becomes the next prime minister.

There could not be a more anti-democratic operation foisted on the population. A few hundred Tory MPs narrowed down, in several rounds of voting, the field of candidates to Sunak and Truss. And it is now down to paid-up Tory party members to decide who will be prime minister. Latest estimates are that only 120,000 of the nastiest, most right-wing and wealthy individuals in a country with a population of 67 million people will choose who will replace Johnson.

Many Tory members would even back Johnson remaining in office, with a petition among members demanding a vote on keeping Johnson as party leader already passing 10,000. According to a report Monday in the *Telegraph*, Johnson told the organiser of the Tory membership petition, Lord Cruddas, a Conservative Party donor and businessman, he “does not want to resign” and “wants to fight the next general election as leader of the

party.” Johnson is already in full campaign mode, last week visiting Ukrainian troops being trained by British Armed Forces in North Yorkshire, posing in army fatigues and throwing a grenade. He plans another trip before September to Ukraine in support of the proxy war against Russia.

This fraud against the population would not be possible were it not for the Labour Party, whose response to a fundamental crisis of rule is a drive to outcompete the Tories to become the favoured party of the ruling class.

Yesterday Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer formally announced Labour as the Tory Party Mark 2, making statements that more than qualified him to be on a third podium in the Sunak/Truss debate.

Starmer did not merely distance himself from the warmed-over reformist nostrums of previous leader Jeremy Corbyn. He declared that Labour in government would “work in partnership with business”, oppose strikes and “not to hark back to our old ideas” about “redistribution and investment.”

For the working class it is immaterial as to whether Sunak, Truss or Starmer is prime minister. All are already working together in a de facto government of national unity, backed fully by the unions, in place since the onset of the pandemic. All will continue the same policies of ramped-up Thatcherism at home while they risk dragging the British population into World War III.

It is to create the conditions for this political conspiracy to be challenged that the SEP has urged workers to demand an immediate general election, forcing an open debate on policies that threaten the livelihoods and lives of millions. We demand an election to develop the industrial and political struggle of the working class against all the big-business parties in Westminster and will make the case for strikes, mass protests and the organisation of a general strike to end austerity, stop war, force the adoption of a zero-COVID policy, and build support for a socialist alternative to capitalism.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact