

Bernie Sanders at RMT rally in London: Hawking the myth of a trade union revival

Laura Tiernan
6 September 2022

US Senator Bernie Sanders was the featured speaker at a rally held August 31 by the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) at London's Congress House—headquarters of the Trades Union Congress. Billed as an event to “Save Public Transport” from Conservative government cuts, its purpose was to channel a growing wave of working class struggle behind the trade union bureaucracy and the Labour Party.

Sanders' visit to the UK reveals the critical importance the American ruling class attributes to this task as it prosecutes war against Russia amid a global wave of class struggle. During his visit the US senator met RMT officials and Labour MPs who have joined forces to launch Enough is Enough, a campaign group fronted by RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch.

In 1938, amid an insurrectionary strike movement in the US that encompassed mass sit-downs and factory occupations, Leon Trotsky observed, “In periods of acute class struggle, the leading bodies of the trade unions aim to become masters of the mass movement in order to render it harmless... In time of war or revolution, when the bourgeoisie is plunged into exceptional difficulties, trade union leaders usually become bourgeois ministers.”

The RMT's rally confirms Trotsky's warnings. A mass radicalisation of the working class is underway, amid the greatest collapse of living standards since the 1930s, a pandemic that has claimed more than 200,000 lives, and an escalating war against Russia by NATO-led forces on mainland Europe. The RMT has assumed the leading role in corraling working class opposition behind the Labour Party at a time of “exceptional difficulties” for the bourgeoisie.

The hero's welcome for Sanders by the RMT is part of these efforts. RMT President Alex Gordon, a leading member of the Communist Party of Britain (aligned to the *Morning Star*), delivered a glowing introduction to Sanders as he arrived on stage, airbrushing his decades-long defence of American imperialism at home and abroad.

The US Senator for Vermont has twice sought the Democratic Party's nomination to run for US president, espousing populist denunciations of “the billionaire class” before throwing his support behind warmongers Hillary Clinton (2016) and Joe Biden (2020).

Notwithstanding his promotion as a “socialist” by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other pseudo-left outfits, Sanders is a defender of US imperialism's wars of aggression, including NATO's proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. He is a fervent economic nationalist who advocates trade war with China and anti-immigrant measures to “defend American jobs”. A member of the United States Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, he is a vocal proponent of US sanctions against Russia.

A trusted state asset of the most powerful ruling class in the world, Sanders' visit to the UK was warmly welcomed by Lynch who told PA news agency ahead of the rally, “It's great that the senator's come over, he reached out to us – coming here to express his solidarity for workers in the UK but also around the world, and in his own country, the USA.”

Lynch spoke of Sanders' contribution to the administration of US President Joe Biden, “I think Sanders moved the debate in the American democratic primaries. He's made Biden bring forward a very brave pro-union agenda and many people on the union side are pleased with some of the measures that President Biden has brought in, and Bernie Sanders is responsible for that.”

This “brave pro-union agenda” is laid out in the White House's “Task Force on Worker Organizing and Empowerment.” It contains 70 recommendations formulated by congressional and senate Democrats—representatives of Wall Street and the Pentagon—to strengthen the pro-corporate trade unions as critical instruments for suppressing the class struggle. It is the reason why Biden, a lifelong defender of corporate America, boasts that he is “the most pro-union president in US history”.

His political concerns were spelled out in an extended interview with *Guardian* columnist Owen Jones, headlined, “‘People are tired of being ignored while the rich get richer’: Bernie Sanders on anger and hope in the US and UK” and published on the eve of his guest appearance at TUC House. Sanders explained to Jones “why unions on both sides of the Atlantic must reassert their power”.

Jones writes, “The de facto leader of the US left has swung his considerable political heft behind a new campaign –Enough is Enough” and “has a new mission: to deploy his political weight behind efforts to unite the struggles of the US and British labour movements”.

When Jones and Sanders speak of “the labour movement” they are not referring to the working class but to the labour bureaucracy. The “political weight” Jones' refers to is that exerted by the Democratic Party and Labour Party against a developing upsurge of the working class.

Sanders' visit was preceded by the intervention of *Jacobin* magazine, the unofficial voice of the DSA with long-standing ties to the Democratic Party. *Jacobin* ran an extended interview with Lynch on July 30, “Mick Lynch Is Tired of Workers Getting Screwed”. It was conducted by Ronan Burtenshaw, appointed editor of Britain's *Tribune* magazine by *Jacobin* in 2018, after it bought the cash-strapped publication. Bhaskar Sunkara, its new publisher, a leading figure in the DSA, sought *Tribune's* resurrection as a vehicle to support Jeremy Corbyn's then leadership of the Labour Party.

Burtenshaw's interview profiled Lynch's rising popularity in the wake of national rail strikes seen by workers as the beginning of a fight back. Lynch has become (temporarily it must be said) that rare figure: a trade union official with popular standing in the working class. Just as Corbyn's rise in 2015 was seized on by the DSA to bolster its own opportunist orientation to the Democratic Party, Lynch's popularity is seized on by the DSA and Sanders to boost the “progressive” and “transformative” credentials of the corporate trade unions in America, where no trade union leader enjoys similar levels of popular support.

Tribune helped found Enough is Enough to leverage the RMT's standing into a broader “social movement”, consciously directed against the development of a genuine socialist movement of the working class.

Sanders too makes no secret of his objective, openly shilling for Biden's campaign to win union recognition at Amazon and elsewhere. He tells Jones, "What the president recognised is that there was, and is, a movement of working people, of young people, who are sick and tired of the status quo".

The US president fears the growth of anti-capitalist sentiment among workers and is trying to resurrect the collapsing influence of the AFL-CIO whose nakedly pro-corporate policies have produced a mass exodus of members so that representation in the workforce fell from an already low 20.1 percent in 1983 to less than 11 percent today.

Jones explains, "Today, little more than one in 10 US workers are unionised". Yet "while polling in the UK has shown that most working-age Britons back the current wave of strikes... that hasn't translated into most joining a union." Union membership in Britain has collapsed from 13 million in 1979 to 6.66 million in 2020 (23.7 percent of the workforce), and among young workers is just 6.3 percent.

Sanders is spearheading the Biden administration's efforts to reverse this situation, telling Jones about rallies in Chicago, Philadelphia and Boston that united "younger progressives... fighting for economic and racial justice" with "progressive" trade unions. He tells Jones, "It's absolutely imperative we bring them together – and we are trying to do that."

Lynch makes clear that such "progressive" trade unions will use their influence to throttle workers' struggles, telling *Jacobin*: "People across the country are feeling the pinch and I think that's why we're getting so much support. We don't want to extend that metaphor too far into martyrdom, because we want to get a deal for our people. We want to get in, take action, negotiate, get a deal, and get out with a clean break."

Britain's pseudo-left backs Sanders' mission

The US senator's mission found a receptive audience at Wednesday's rally among Britain's Corbynite left, Stalinists, academics, trade union functionaries and members of various pseudo-left groups. They applauded wildly the line-up of Labour MPs and trade union bureaucrats, their cheers reaching a crescendo with the appearance of Lynch and Sanders. It was an audience, overwhelmingly, of social and political forces devoted to controlling and suppressing rising discontent in the working class.

Gordon spoke for them all, declaring he was "absolutely delighted" to welcome Labour MP John McDonnell. As shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer under Corbyn, McDonnell led a "tea and biscuits" charm offensive among City of London financiers while blocking any fight to drive the right-wing from the party. The crowd cheered union officials engaged in suppressing industrial action across rail, buses and the London Underground. This included Mick Whelan from train drivers' union ASLEF, Mel Taylor from the white-collar train union TSSA, and Onay Kasab from Unite, a member of the pseudo-left Socialist Party delegated to attend in place of General Secretary Sharon Graham.

Lynch insisted, "What we've got in front of us here is a defensive dispute". "They've got their tanks on our lawn right now", he said, pointing to the government's assault on the National Health Service, public education, social care, and the £4 billion cuts at national rail and £2 billion at Transport for London (TfL).

London's transport cuts are being imposed by Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan. Yet the RMT provided a political amnesty to Khan and failed to explain why they had not organised a single combined day of action against this onslaught. The RMT has called just two further days of strike action on the railways this month, with ASLEF and TSSA announcing one 24-hour strike each, all on separate days.

Lynch even claimed the unions' limited action had already succeeded in pushing back cuts! Responding to Khan's funding deal with the Conservatives struck just 24-hours earlier, which included a pledge to slash pension costs, Lynch stated, "They've not announced service closures as yet. They've not announced curtailment." Pressure from unions meant TfL would "roll back" cuts to bus routes, he claimed. "We'll see what happens in the next few weeks but it's a lesson to us. It's a lesson to the trade union movement. It's organised labour that is going to move these politicians in our direction."

The entire rally sought to confine the emerging mass movement of workers to protest politics, including useless appeals to a Conservative government intent on crushing the working class. Lynch declared, "The people are now ready for action, industrial action, collective action, social action. They want to get on the streets. They want the message to be delivered to whoever's sitting in Westminster, 'We demand change, and we demand whoever's in there that they deliver it on our behalf'."

He continued, "The trade unions have got to be a physical presence in those communities. The communities that we've lost to our ideas over the last 20-30 years. The people that have given up on the labour movement... Whatever it takes, the unions have got to be there. We cannot leave it to the professional political class to get that job done."

Lynch is warning that workers' hostility to the Labour Party means the trade unions must act as the primary bulwark, the forces on the ground, against the growth of the class struggle and socialism.

Those wishing to understand the historical role of the trade unions and the fundamental reasons for their present degeneration should read, "Why are trade unions hostile to socialism?"

Sanders told the audience, "What is going on today in the UK is no different than what is going on in the United States of America. Same bloody thing."

A promoter of left populism, his speech combined his now familiar condemnations of "billionaire greed" with empty moral appeals to the state. Echoing Corbyn's own class-amorphous slogan, "For the many, not the few", Sanders told the rally, "We have got to get our priorities right and that means creating an economy and a government that works for all, not just the few."

The government which Sanders helped create is the Democratic Party administration of Joe Biden. He explained, "in America now, we are trying to grow the trade union movement. We're trying to combine trade unionists with the progressive movement to create an economic and political force of real power. And I'm happy to tell you, we are making real success. We have more strong progressives in the US House of Representatives than we have had in a very, very long time."

These "strong progressives"—Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, etc—are the left flank of Biden's efforts to resurrect the trade unions. Ocasio-Cortez's tweet on Labor Day, "This is your friendly reminder to support unions", follows her approval (along with Sanders and other DSA members) of £40 billion to fund the US-led proxy war against Russia. Their advocacy of trade unions has nothing to do with defending the working class. It is the response of imperialism to police the class struggle in a period of revolution and war.

Sanders concluded, "What you are doing is being noticed in the United States and around the world." He speaks for a ruling class haunted by the global character of the class struggle and which fears that Britain's strike wave will act as a contagion, giving strength to an already developing mood of struggle and resistance among workers in America and throughout the world. This is the domino effect they all fear.

In the campaign of Mack Trucks worker and US socialist Will Lehman for president of the United Auto Workers union (UAW), the enormous revolutionary potential of the working class finds conscious expression. Lehman's campaign is resonating with workers in the US and around the world with its call for rank-and-file control, the abolition of the trade

union bureaucracy, and his forthright struggle for a socialist solution based on the international working class.

The RMT's rally was dedicated to blocking such a development. It issued a call to the threadbare ranks of Britain's pseudo-left to mobilise behind its project to bolster the unions, and they answered. "I know there's a lot of very experienced, intelligent people in this room who've got a lot to bring to the campaign", Alex Gordon declared in closing the meeting, "and we're going to need that knowledge, that enthusiasm, and that solidarity. If we could bottle it, we would, but we're going to need that in the years to come."



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact