

UK trade unions prepare corporatist partnership with a Labour government

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21 October 2022

Amid a revolutionary crisis of class rule in the UK, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) is devoting its energies to securing a Labour government under Sir Keir Starmer and a corporatist partnership between the unions, the government and big business.

Its annual conference this week was a discussion on how to rescue British imperialism by putting in place a government which, in Starmer's words, would give the economy the "stability it needs". Conservative government Prime Minister Liz Truss resigned Thursday afternoon after just 45 days in office, making her the shortest-serving premier in British history. She stepped down just hours after Starmer addressed the TUC in a set-piece concluding speech.

The conference in Brighton was the last with Frances O'Grady as TUC leader. She will leave office at the end of the year and enter the House of Lords on the Labour benches as a faithful servant of the political elite. Under O'Grady's term of office (2013-2022) and her predecessor Sir Brendan Barber (2003-2012), workers have suffered historic declines in their pay, terms and conditions. Ahead of her speech the TUC calculated that the average worker has lost a total of £24,000 in real terms since 2008. They are set to lose another £4,000 during the next three years.

O'Grady, the figurehead of the union bureaucracy, took home £167,229 in total remuneration in 2021.

Despite the left rhetoric of a few, including RMT leader Mick Lynch and CWU leader Dave Ward, the conference committed itself to nothing under conditions of the worst cost-of-living crisis since World War Two.

The assembled bureaucrats would only go so far as passing a deliberately vague motion that "requires the trade union movement to organise coordinated industrial action." No action was called. Instead, the

motion called for "a working group of unions in the public and private sectors to plan and coordinate action on pay and jobs." The TUC would "agree an autumn 2022 programme of 'town hall' meetings and rallies across the country and link up with community organisations to build collectivism, solidarity, and mobilisation."

The TUC is bitterly hostile to any serious escalation of Britain's strike wave, which would cut across its desired outcome of a Starmer government working together with the union bureaucracy to suppress the class struggle.

Starmer was given pride of place at the conference to advertise this partnership to the ruling class. He echoed the message of Lord Kitchener's World War One call for army recruits, "your country needs you," hawking the services of the union leaders in attendance with decades of experience policing the working class.

Calling for a general election, he said a Labour government would repeal anti-trade union laws and bring the union bureaucracy into the heart of government in a corporatist alliance with big business. As his model, Starmer cited O'Grady working with Boris Johnson's government to carry out a £410 billion bailout of big business during the pandemic, then to orchestrate a mass return to work in unsafe conditions.

O'Grady, said Starmer, "led the employers and the Government to the furlough scheme—a tripartite deal for those troubled times, a true collective agreement for the nation... And my Labour Party supported it every step of the way."

The Labour leader made his agenda crystal clear: "I'm not just pro-business, I want to partner with business to drive Britain forward... And I will say the same about trade unions to the CBI [Confederation of British Industry]."

In government, Labour would “set up a new Industrial Strategy Council” delivering “a real partnership between Government, business and unions. This is how we can give Britain the stability it needs for higher investment.”

Starmer explained how he required the unions to turn the screws on a working class already bled dry by austerity and falling wages. Immediately after announcing the Industrial Strategy Council, he said, “But when we talk about economic stability, I want to be frank. The damage the Tories have done to our finances and public services means things are going to be really tough.”

He warned, “Now and during my Labour Government. We cannot take any risks with the public finances. We have to restore economic stability, be the party of sound money. You have all seen the damage that can be done from fiscal irresponsibility when you lose control of the economy, as the Tories have done.”

In the national interest, Labour and the unions had to “create a modern industrial strategy together”. Labour “will strengthen the role of trade unions in our society.” This would benefit big business since “These things are not a barrier to growth or higher productivity. They go hand in hand with it.”

Starmer has opposed every strike workers have taken since becoming party leader, banning Labour shadow cabinet members from attending picket lines. He told the TUC that he would not “apologise for approaching questions on industrial action as a potential Labour government.” If this is his stance now, what attacks on the working class will Labour unleash once in government under this man of the state?

No-one in attendance at the TUC conference had any issue with this enemy of the working class. The assembled bureaucracy rose to give Starmer a standing ovation. O’Grady said, “I look forward to working with the party and the whole movement to help win a Labour government at the next election.”

The TUC embraced Sir Keir because his speech reflected a discussion in ruling circles that the trade union bureaucracy ought to be brought into closer alliance with the state. This would be done not only to strengthen the policing operation against the working class, but to help advance British imperialism’s war drive against Russia.

The TUC passed a motion calling on the “General

Council to convene a major national initiative involving sympathetic manufacturers, unions, professional bodies and industrial area administrations to establish a national commission for manufacturing to oversee a revival in all sectors and plan a rejuvenation of production and skills development.”

This rejuvenation would help to reverse the “run-down of UK defence manufacturing”. The motion demands “immediate increases in defence spending”. It insists that “defence contracts to be placed in the UK where possible and shipbuilding orders to be placed with UK yards.” Therefore, “there is welcome potential for manufacturing orders under the [anti-China] Aukus agreement [between Britain, the US and Australia].

Declaring its support for Britain’s role in supplying billions of pounds to fund Ukraine for NATO’s proxy war against Russia, the motion states, “Congress further recognises that defence manufacturing cuts have hindered the UK’s ability to aid the Ukrainian people under brutal assault from Putin’s regime.” It denounces the previous TUC “policy carried in 2017 in favour of diversifying away from defence manufacturing” as “no longer fit for purpose.”

Starmer picked up the thread in his closing speech, calling for “real independence from tyrants like Putin, who weaponise fossil fuel exports and threaten our security.”

The TUC conference offers workers a stark warning. It confirms that as the crisis of British imperialism and the assault on living standards deepens, the trade union bureaucracy is moving in lockstep with Starmer’s rightward careening Labour Party.



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