

Greetings from the ICFI to the SEP (Australia) 2022 Congress

# Upsurge in class struggle in UK and internationally: A harbinger of decisive revolutionary conflict

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*These remarks were delivered by Chris Marsden to the Sixth National Congress of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia), held from September 24 to 27, 2022. Marsden is the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (UK), the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.*

Greetings comrades from all in the British section to this crucial congress, discussing the tasks of our world party in the fifth stage in the history of the Fourth International and a new period of revolutionary struggle by the world working class.

On the day of the queen's funeral, I wrote an article seeking to draw a final balance sheet of two weeks of deliberately mind-numbing, soul-destroying coverage of her death.

British workers, more so even than her other "subjects" in Australia, were subjected to the domestic propaganda equivalent of a "shock and awe" military offensive.

The message was clear—respect your betters, acknowledge that national identity trumps the petty divisions between the fabulously rich elite and the mass of working people struggling to survive. Look how powerful we are, our traditions and, yes, also our armed forces.

Rally round the flag was the central instruction acted on by the trade union bureaucracy, by shutting down the ongoing rail, post and telecoms strikes throughout September.

Drawing an analogy with the spectacular gathering of royal personages at the funeral of Edward VII in 1910, I noted that four years later the world was plunged into war. And that at war's end, most of the previously assembled royals had been swept away by a continent-wide revolutionary movement of the working class.

I predicted the same fate for the presidents and prime ministers that govern the major imperialist powers, explaining:

"The crisis gripping world imperialism is more starkly presented than it was in 1910. This is no Belle Époque. An economic nightmare is unfolding that is plunging millions into destitution. A policy of war is not being repudiated but pursued ruthlessly by the ruling elite. In the NATO-led war against Russia in Ukraine, a catastrophe is unfolding in Europe that would dwarf even the horrors of 1914—one that threatens humanity with nuclear annihilation.

"But this crisis is also creating the conditions for an eruption of a socialist and revolutionary struggle of the European and international working class—one that must not end a world war, as did October 1917, but prevent one from taking place through the overthrow of capitalism."

Two days later, Putin delivered his speech announcing the mobilisation of 300,000 reservists and identifying the war in Ukraine as a war with the NATO powers whose goal was the dismemberment of Russia.

As this week's WSWs editorial board statement reported, his most significant statement was made in direct response to "high-ranking representatives of the leading NATO countries on the possibility and admissibility of using weapons of mass destruction—nuclear weapons—against Russia." He said, "In the event of a threat to the territorial integrity of our country and to defend Russia and our people, we will certainly make use of all weapon systems available to us. This is not a bluff."

Yet the ruling class insists that it was a bluff and that nothing must deter the NATO powers from their chosen mission—even if this does mean a nuclear exchange.

Politics is moving at an extraordinary pace on every front—driven by a constantly escalating economic crisis that provokes the bourgeoisie to wage war abroad and class war at home.

Above all, we are witnessing in every country an initial upsurge in the class struggle that is the harbinger of a decisive revolutionary conflict between the international working class and the imperialist powers.

Comrade North recently observed that a revolutionary situation doesn't announce itself with a mass movement of the working class. That is in fact the last act in an unfolding historical drama.

This is how we have understood the situation in the UK.

The past months have seen a "summer of discontent"—the largest outbreak of strike action in close to four decades since the 1984–85 miners' strike.

Comrades will have read our appraisal of how the trade unions have attempted to divide and stifle this movement—sitting on strike demands that would bring millions into struggle against the Tory government. But we also understand the limits of such efforts.

The strike wave is the product of a cost-of-living crisis worse than at any time since the Hungry Thirties.

Workers have suffered decades of wage suppression imposed by the trade unions, while a succession of Thatcherite governments, Labour and Tory, funnelled social wealth to the financial oligarchy and the corporations.

In the last two decades, we saw the 2008 crash and immense corporate bailout, which was then surpassed at the height of the pandemic. This is being clawed out of workers' backs, along with the immediate cost of the war in Ukraine, the impact of sanctions on fuel and food prices, and plans to ramp up military spending to three percent of GDP to wage war on Russia and China.

In the next period the situation will become more explosive.

The war in Ukraine is an epochal event, shaping politics in ways that workers do not yet understand. But they have just had a wake-up call that

will change everything.

Boris Johnson's downfall and his replacement by Liz Truss was carried out in a palace coup because Britain and America's ruling elite lost confidence in the ability of such a divisive and discredited figure to wage war on the working class at home and war against Russia that threatens to spiral into World War III.

"The British bourgeoisie is in the throes of a political crisis rooted in a global capitalist breakdown, a still raging pandemic, a worldwide inflationary spiral, trade war, the eruption of war and, above all, the resurgence of the class struggle," we explained.

On Truss, we wrote that her elevation to the position of prime minister heralds a decisive conflict between the Conservative government and the British working class.

"...Behind this monstrous personality, a government with no popular mandate to rule is seeking to impose a political agenda dictated by the financial oligarchy that threatens millions with destitution, dictatorial rule, the eruption of world war and nuclear destruction.

"Truss takes office amid a devastating cost-of-living crisis, with rampant inflation and soaring fuel costs leading to a strike wave encompassing rail, post and telecom workers that threatens to explode into action involving millions more.

"She is notorious for her warmongering against Russia. This reached a crescendo in August, when she was asked whether she would activate Britain's Trident nuclear weapons, even though "it would mean global annihilation." Truss replied without any emotion, "I'm ready to do that."

As soon as the official mourning ended, Truss moved into action:

First, she promised an escalated offensive against Russia, in which "the precise nature of UK military support in 2023 will be determined based on the needs of the Armed Forces of Ukraine."

Then we had this week's mini-budget, an immediate £43 billion giveaway for the corporations and the top one percent entailing an additional £72 billion in public borrowing.

This means a massively escalated offensive against the working class.

Chancellor Kwesi Kwarteng declared: "Other European countries have minimum service levels to stop militant trade unions closing down transport networks during strikes. So we will do the same. And we will go further. We will legislate to require unions to put pay offers to a member vote, to ensure strikes can only be called once negotiations have genuinely broken down."

To believe that the trade unions can continue to indefinitely hold back the working class under such conditions is sceptical in the extreme.

In our recent analysis of the lessons of the Summer of Discontent, we wrote:

"At the start of this summer, trade unions were confronted with an explosive political situation. Class grievances suppressed for decades in which the trade unions have kept strikes to historic lows threatened to explode....

"The trade unions faced this upsurge as organisations deeply discredited by decades of sell-outs, viewed by many members as an arm of management in the workplace or as an irrelevance for the large majority of workers who are non-unionised. Last year was the lowest on record for union membership in Britain, accounting for just 23.1 percent of the workforce overall, only 12.8 percent in the private sector, 11.6 percent among those aged 20–24 and just 2.4 percent of 16–19-year-olds. The TUC has acknowledged that 'the vast majority' of young people 'hadn't heard the words 'trade union' and couldn't provide a definition.'"

The trade unions were forced to put on their best left face to convince workers to trust them. And they had some initial success by boosting Unite general secretary Sharon Graham and particularly RMT general secretary Mick Lynch as proof of a resurgent, fighting trade unionism. But this is thin gruel indeed.

The same can be said of the Labour Party's discrediting. Since 2015, the

SEP has had to wage a constant struggle against the illusions cultivated in Jeremy Corbyn and the equally mythical prospect of a left renewal of the Labour Party. We can say, without in any way suggesting that the necessary struggle against Corbyn and his apologists is finished, that we now live in a post-Corbyn political world.

No one any longer looks to Labour to provide a left alternative. Sir Keir Starmer and his Blairite cronies are despised and hated by millions for openly opposing strikes, offering no answer to the social crisis and being indistinguishable from the Tories.

As Trotsky insisted, "The orientation of the masses is determined first by the objective conditions of decaying capitalism, and second, by the treacherous politics of the old workers' organizations. Of these factors, the first, of course, is the decisive one: the laws of history are stronger than the bureaucratic apparatus.... As time goes on, their desperate efforts to hold back the wheel of history will demonstrate more clearly to the masses that the crisis of the proletarian leadership, having become the crisis in mankind's culture, can be resolved only by the Fourth International."

This situation also impacts on the pseudo-left groups, which are in a state of acute crisis, especially over their continued orientation to the Corbynites and a handful of trade union "lefts." The Stop the War Coalition effectively collapsed after the Labour "lefts" that backed it withdrew support within an hour of Starmer threatening to remove the party whip. They will likewise all be damned by their apologies for the trade unions.

On every major question facing workers, we are in an unprecedentedly favourable position to establish our leadership.

The extraordinary struggle we have waged on the COVID pandemic will become ever more important. The *Guardian* yesterday reported Professor Tim Spector, warning, "With cases already rising, it looks like we are in for a bad October and it's likely to be worse than the last wave."

He and other scientists cited waning immunity from vaccinations and previous infections, increased mixing indoors, a decline in testing, the return of children to school and students to university, and new variants that are growing fast.

There of course remain illusions in the trade union lefts that we must combat. But sell-out after sell-out, rotten deal after rotten deal, strengthens our position in urging the construction of rank-and-file committees, to coordinate action and build towards a general strike that so many workers have declared support for.

Comrade Will Lehman's campaign in the UAW shows the attractive power of the demand that workers wrest control from the bureaucracy. As Victor Hugo said, there is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come.

Our tactical demands provide an axis for the struggle ahead. The SEP has called on workers to develop a unified industrial and political struggle against all the capitalist parties, Tory and Labour, combining the fight for rank-and-file committees and the organisation of a general strike with the demand for an immediate general election that will break through their conspiracy to maintain the domination of society by the oligarchy.

Fundamentally, we are the only tendency that can genuinely appeal to anti-war sentiment, especially among younger workers—which will grow markedly in the next period. It is the mobilisation of a mass struggle of the international working class against world war, waged as a global fight for socialism, which is the central task placed by history before the revolutionary party.

Our turn to the working class must centre on the building of a new international movement against war.

Our fundamental responsibility in these tumultuous times will be to ground the workers that we turn to and recruit in the vast political legacy of our movement—the near century of political struggle embodied in Trotskyism and contained in the *World Socialist Web Site*. That is how we

will train the cadre that will act as the bedrock of the life-and-death battles now on the agenda.



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