

UK Trades Union Congress gears up for pro-business partnership with Labour government

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In likely the last gathering of the British trade unions prior to an expected general election next year, the assembled bureaucrats laid out the red carpet for Sir Keir Starmer's right-wing, pro-war party at this year's Trades Union Congress (TUC) annual meeting.

The four-day event capped a year in which the trade unions have sold out countless strikes, bringing unprecedented levels of national industrial action to almost a complete halt, with only National Health Service doctors still staging substantial actions.

In his speech before delegates, TUC General Secretary Paul Nowak stamped his seal of approval on this record by cheering, "Those Tory ministers who say that strikes don't work. Tell that to the Jacob's workers who won six and a half percent." Inflation in the double figures of course made this a real terms pay cut. The same goes for the "better deals" Nowak claimed for "public sector workers across the UK, in health, in education, in the civil service".

Nowak introduced the task which would now occupy the union bureaucracy: carrying this series of betrayals over into the political arena by pledging to see Starmer elected and to work with him in office in a partnership with the employers against the working class. He declared, "When the time comes, I will tell anyone who asks, 'Vote for working people, vote for change, vote for the party we named for our movement, vote Labour.'"

This is the common policy of all the union leaders. The *Guardian* reported that on Monday evening "The Labour leader gave a laid-back after-dinner speech" at the TUC's annual pre-congress banquet at a four star hotel with the shadow cabinet, "to the assembled general secretaries... and received a standing ovation." One told the newspaper, "We want him to be the next prime minister, of course we were going to stand for him."

Politico reported, "One union official says the private 'family dinner' will see general-secretaries and Starmer gently roast each other, before (says another) 'they all shake

hands.'"

Starmer left it to his deputy, Angela Rayner, to consummate the deal, after first making clear Labour's commitment to "fiscal discipline" during the morning press round.

Asked if Labour in office would commit to retain the state pension "triple lock"—meaning it increases annually in line with inflation, average wage rises, or by 2.5 percent, whichever is highest, Rayner refused, replying, "we will not make unfunded spending commitments." Asked about a wealth tax, she responded that Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves "has already said we've ruled that out... We can't just tax our way out of this situation."

In her speech to the congress, Rayner pledged that Labour would repeal the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act passed this year and the 2016 Trade Union Act because "for too long, unions have had barriers put in the way of your work." She lost no time in making clear that this had nothing to do with supporting workers but supporting the partnership of the union bureaucracy and corporate boardrooms against the working class.

The laws were "damaging industrial relations and worsening disputes". They would threaten what Starmer promised to the TUC and Confederation of British Industry alike last year: a "real partnership between Government, business and unions".

In Rayner's words, "I make no apologies that we will work hand-in-hand with trade unions, as we will work with business to deliver a real partnership based on mutual respect, cooperation and negotiation."

Unions being prevented from organising by a small minority of employers was "neither fair to workers nor productive to our wider economy. And it only frustrates disputes, making it harder to come to a resolution. Good employers know the value of a trade union."

Amid rapturous applause, Rayner got to the point: Labour would "turn the Tories' failure on productivity on its head.

Because a healthier, happier and motivated workforce is good for the bottom line. Make no mistake, this agenda is good for workers, our economy and for business.”

Not one of the assembled bureaucrats giving Rayner a standing ovation was naïve enough to believe that what is “good... for business” makes for a “healthier, happier” workforce. What they long for from a Labour government is a corporatist union-government-employer framework through which they can return strike action to the historic lows achieved in the last decade, and resume their quiet and very comfortable existences.

It has taken them over a year to snuff out the strike wave begun last summer, the largest since the 1980s. Sellout deals have been pushed through against hundreds of thousands of nurses, postal workers, teachers, rail workers and civil servants.

At every turn, the union leaders complained that this would all be a lot easier if not for the pig-headed belligerence of the Tory government making the usual behind-closed-doors betrayal harder to foist on the membership. Forced for much of the last year to place pro-forma caveats on their support for Labour—as Starmer openly paraded his hostility to striking workers and public spending—they felt freed by Rayner’s performance to come out openly.

Unite’s General Secretary Sharon Graham summed it up. Carrying out her now annual stunt of not appearing at the TUC-Labour leadership banquet—while sending several trusted representatives, and in anticipation of a one-on-one with Starmer next week—she dropped the pretence after the congress. An earlier *Times* article accusing Labour of “becoming a Nineties tribute act” was replaced with a short statement that “The country clearly would be better off with a Labour Government. There is no doubt... There can be no back tracking on the agreed workers’ rights. Britain is hurting and Labour needs to be bold.”

Whatever slight criticisms Graham might make, they will be proffered alongside her continued transfer of huge sums of Unite members’ dues money into the coffers of this avowed anti-working-class party. Millions of pounds have been donated to Labour by Unite since Graham took office in August 2021, with over £1 million being donated in the first quarter of this year.

The wholesale embrace of the Labour Party exposed the fraudulent character of the few “fighting” motions passed at the congress. A Communication Workers Union motion calling for “coordinated action” in practice amounted to securing the publication of a collective bargaining strategy within six months. Its real message was “to lobby the Labour Party to adopt the new deal for workers in full on the election of Labour government.”

That this was moved by General Secretary Dave Ward, who can barely show his face in front of his own members after forcing through an historic sellout at Royal Mail, says everything. One postal worker on Facebook spoke for tens of thousands in commenting, “How he’s got the nerve to stand there barking after the total capitulation he oversaw and recommended is beyond me!”

A Fire Brigades Union motion put by its “left” leader Matt Wrack—freshly elected as President of the TUC—declared, “We have no choice but to build mass opposition to the MSLs [Minimum Service Levels] laws, up to and including a strategy of non-compliance and non-cooperation to make them unworkable, including industrial action.” But with the unions having already assigned to Starmer the role of repealing the act, this was only more hot air.

The unions did nothing to fight the legislation as it made its way through Parliament. Even in the midst of ongoing national strikes involving millions of workers, not a single strike was called in opposition to a law which all but illegalises strikes in sectors deemed essential.

Confirming that there is no faction of the bureaucracy more amenable to workers’ interests, supposed “left” union leader Mick Lynch joined the pro-Labour flattery. He told the *PoliticsJoe* news channel that Rayner had made a “good” speech and that “Keir Starmer came here last year and made a similar speech”. He added the RMT would work closely with them “through the life of what will hopefully be a long Labour government”.

Hailed by pseudo-left groups as a champion of the working class, in August Lynch deferred for months industrial action by rail workers to defend their pay and working conditions “until the outcome and determination from the ticket office closures consultation has been provided by the Government”, which he has since admitted is a “sham”.



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