

British Trades Union Congress backs NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine

Thomas Scripps
18 September 2023

Britain's trade union bureaucracy overwhelmingly backed a motion at the Trades Union Congress (TUC) annual meeting last week declaring support for the imperialist war against Russia in Ukraine.

In its final form, the motion put forward by the ASLEF train drivers' union and GMB union, titled "Solidarity with Ukraine", committed the Congress to supporting "Ukrainian unions' calls for financial and practical aid from the UK to Ukraine", and "The immediate withdrawal of Russian forces from all Ukrainian territories occupied since 2014"—including Crimea and the eastern Donbas regions.

This is a total endorsement of the war policies of the United States, Britain, and the other European powers. They have spent billions shipping weapons with which they expect Kiev to fight down to the last Ukrainian in a conflict designed to shatter the Russian government, force regime change, and open the entire region to imperialist carve-up and exploitation. The original version of the text explicitly backed sending arms.

NATO is not mentioned in the motion, let alone criticised, and "the UK Government" only once in reference to its delay and denial of sanctuary to Ukrainian refugees.

The vote builds on the decision taken at last year's TUC Congress to "support affiliates' campaigns for immediate increases in defence spending in the UK" since "Congress ... recognises that defence manufacturing cuts have hindered the UK's ability to aid the Ukrainian people under brutal assault from Putin's regime. Congress believes that the world is becoming less safe and the policy carried in 2017 in favour of diversifying away from defence manufacturing is no longer fit for purpose."

The 2022 motion, also put forward by the GMB, was narrowly passed. But the vote last week endorsing NATO's war policy was decisive. Only one delegate spoke against in the debate according to the *Morning Star's* report—the Fire Brigades Union (FBU)'s Jamie Newell—and only the FBU and Bakers, Food and Allied Workers' Union, both small, voted against. The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT), the University and College Union (UCU) and the

National Education Union abstained.

All other unions plus the TUC general council led by General Secretary Paul Nowak backed the motion. President of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) Mark Serwotka used his final appearance at a TUC Congress before retiring to deliver the closing speech in favour.

By lining up behind British imperialism and militarism, the trade union bureaucracy made clear that all the talk at the TUC Congress about opposing anti-strike laws and staging powerful collective strike action to secure a new deal for workers was a fraud.

Pursuing the war against Russia in Ukraine—which commentators and leading military figures predict will go on for years, which continues to escalate, and which is placing severe strains on the military production capacity of the US and European powers—will require massive increases in military spending. It also heralds fierce economic and military competition between a world dividing into rival blocks.

This is a recipe for deep cuts to social spending, wage "restraint" and the disciplining of the working class, which the trade union bureaucracy will not oppose because they support the war policy underlying these measures.

The TUC's war vote is also an indictment of the purported anti-war position of the British pseudo-left.

The Socialist Workers Party, the Socialist Party and Socialist Appeal all claim opposition to NATO's involvement in the war in Ukraine. At the same time, they falsely maintain that Russia is an imperialist power—drawing an equivalence between its actions on the world stage and those of the United States and its European allies. Most critically, they base their opposition on the trade union bureaucracy, turning their formal position on the war into a giant zero in real terms.

Responding to events last week, the SWP concluded an article titled, "TUC backs war and clears the way for more arms spending" with the line, "Trade unionists must keep up the arguments against imperialism East and West." Another article in *Socialist Worker*, "TUC conference delegate says

unions have shifted, but not nearly far enough”, noted lamely of an individual the SWP has promoted for years, “sadly ... it was left to Mark Serwotka of the PCS to make the most bellicose pro-imperialist speech”.

The Socialist Party had nothing to say.

Socialist Appeal, in the article, “Solidarity with Ukraine, or support for NATO imperialism?”, counselled, “The duty of the labour movement in Britain is not to tail end the British ruling class, but rather to offer principled working-class opposition.”

The other half of what the pseudo-left misleadingly calls “the labour movement” is the Labour Party, whose “left” representatives are portrayed as a rallying point for opposition to its patently right-wing, pro-war leaders.

But much of what passes for the Labour left, the Socialist Campaign Group (SCG), was busy endorsing the TUC vote. Jeremy Corbyn’s shadow chancellor John McDonnell, as a leading figure in the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign closely associated with Paul Mason, was practically a co-sponsor of the motion. Ian Lavery (Chair of the Labour Party under Corbyn) and Nadia Whittome MP sent videos in support.

The ferocity of their support for the war was ably demonstrated by Andrew Fisher, a longtime ally of McDonnell’s and former Labour director of policy under Corbyn, in an opinion piece for the *i* newspaper, “Stop the War has exposed how hollow it now is. It should disband.” The Stop the War Coalition had opposed the GMB motion, commenting, “If Congress adopts this motion it will be taking a position supportive of the Tory govt’s war policy in Ukraine.”

Fisher declares “Nato’s role is a secondary one” in the war in Ukraine and cites Dr. Yuliya Yurchenko’s argument that Ukraine is “fighting Russia, our historic imperial oppressor. We’ve been politically, economically, culturally and linguistically dominated and colonised for a very long time. I think some people still get their vision clouded by a one-dimensional opposition to US imperialism alone. But the US is not the aggressor in this situation.”

He writes of the STWC’s “warped minds” and “withered remnants”, “They should show some humility and disband.”

Fisher’s screed is entirely of a piece with Labour leader Sir Keir’s Starmer’s authoritarian attack on Stop the War early in the NATO Russia war, when he accused the organisation of giving “succour to authoritarian leaders” and “providing a smokescreen” so the Kremlin “can go on beating up and jailing those brave individuals that dare to stand up to its despotism”.

In the same article, Starmer paraphrased the criticism of “kneejerk anti-imperialism” put into circulation by pro-imperialist pseudo-left thinkers like Gilbert Achcar to denounce “The kneejerk reflex, ‘Britain, Canada, the United

States, France—wrong”’. Now a section of Corbynite left is signalling its agreement. McDonnell posted Fisher’s article to his Twitter/X feed.

Although the most public target of the warmongers in the UK, Stop the War has no political answer to them, advocating the same orientation to the trade unions and the Labour left. Its comment on the TUC Congress limply appeals, “It’s vital the trade union movement sees sense”, while a response to Fisher’s article says of the SCG: “twelve members of the group—at least half its active membership – signed a Stop the War letter on the conflict only to be forced to withdraw their signatures under threat of losing the whip.

“The silence of Left MPs on the war is an enforced silence, imposed by the same tactics that Starmer has used to crush dissent throughout the Labour Party.”

This is a pretty sorry defence: “in fact, half of the two-dozen strong nominal left group backed us initially but are too cowardly to do so now.” Corbyn remains silent without even the excuse of holding on to a seat as a Labour MP having been booted out of the parliamentary party by Starmer.

The Socialist Equality Party and International Youth and Students for Social Equality have insisted that opposition to the NATO-Russia war cannot be based on the trade unions or the Labour “left”. A struggle must be taken up to mobilise the international working class in a global anti-war movement against the imperialist ambitions of the NATO powers, the bankrupt nationalism of the Putin regime and their supporters in the union bureaucracy.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)