

UK union leaders line up behind Starmer and Labour's agenda of austerity and war

Tony Robson
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The keynote speech by Sir Keir Starmer to the Labour Party conference in Liverpool this week left no doubt that an incoming Labour government would only deepen the Conservative government's imposition of austerity and war.

For months the trade union bureaucracy has sought to smother opposition to the Tories with promises that a Labour government would soon come to the rescue of embattled workers. Nothing Starmer and his right-wing lackeys said has shifted the likes of Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) workers union General Secretary Mick Lynch, Communication Workers Union (CWU) Dave Ward and Unite's Sharon Graham to abandon this lie—not the endorsement of Shadow Chancellor Rachael Reeves by former Bank of England Governor Mark Carney, not Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting saying Labour won't "waste money we don't have" on the National Health Service (NHS), and certainly not the numerous declarations of support for Israel's bloody repression of the Palestinians.

Lynch and Ward instead doubled down on the relentless boosting of Labour they pioneered in their "Enough is Enough" campaign to oppose demands to link the struggles of rail, post, health workers and many others in a general strike to bring down the Tories. Likewise Graham, who once threatened to end Unite's funding and affiliation with Labour if it didn't start representing workers.

What passes for their criticism of Starmer as an individual is framed entirely as friendly advice to the leader of a government they will loyally support. And as far as their members are concerned, the message is that all roads lead to a Starmer government.

Labour's naked pro-capitalist and pro-war agenda, wrapped up in the Union Jack and the invoking of "country first" nationalism, is a blueprint for deeper social spending cuts and a clampdown on strikes and democratic rights.

Lynch at a fringe meeting of the the Trade Union Coordinating Committee was obliged to make some noises about how Labour has been embraced as the favoured party of big business, with corporate attendees outnumbering party delegates and afforded pride of place. But this was only

while repeating the lie that Labour will implement a New Deal ending casualisation and low pay. His bluster was restricted to only those companies at the conference directly associated with outsourcing, stating they should be called out for "super-exploitation" by Starmer and his deputy leader.

"Angela Rayner and Keir Starmer have said it in front of me and everyone else at this top table We're going to have the biggest wave of insourcing in the history of British industry. Well, that's exactly what we need because the outsourcing model is what is degrading our working-class communities."

At another fringe meeting Lynch claimed that Starmer's Labour should not be "backsliding" over pledges to renationalise the national railways—"Labour should be shouting from the rooftops that the era of privatisation is over." He knows full well that the call for Starmer to sound the death knell for privatisation is a pipe dream. Policy and manifesto pledges count for nothing.

The only constituency Labour is accountable to is the City of London. Reeves, who predictably dubbed herself the "Iron Chancellor", ruled out nationalisations in July of the rail, water, postal and energy companies, stating, "To be spending billions of pounds on nationalising things, that just doesn't stack up against our fiscal rules."

Lynch speaks as someone who has driven the national rail dispute waged by 40,000 RMT members since last June into the ground. The first instalment of this came with a sellout deal imposed on 20,000 RMT members at Network Rail in March last year, followed by an agreement to suspend further strikes at the 14 train companies since early September on the pretext of awaiting the outcome of the public consultation over the closure of around 1,000 ticket offices which he himself described as a "sham". The union executive had already signed a dispute resolution agreement in January, which was rejected by the membership because it accepted the entire framework for closing and repurposing ticket offices, inferior terms for new entrants and brutal restructuring.

Ward, for his part, is a hate figure among CWU members thanks to the betrayal he inflicted on the year-long dispute by over 100,000 workers at Royal Mail in July. Barely able to show his face before the membership, he still had the gall to move the motion at conference on what was described as the “flagship” New Deal policy—more window dressing for deepening the pro-company collusion of the union bureaucracy against the working class.

The same “fire and rehire” measures the New Deal is supposed to end are being policed by the CWU in its agreement with Royal Mail. A central feature of what workers have dubbed “the surrender document” is the implementation of a two-tier workforce with new entrants on inferior pay and terms, with long serving postal workers forced out by crippling workloads and management bullying.

Ward’s speech won a standing ovation from the party faithful, who at best know nothing and at worst don’t care about his betrayals. But as soon as the video was posted on the CWU Facebook page it met with instant derision from postal workers, with one dubbing him “Dave Fraud.”

Ward appealed to Starmer to “take a leaf out of the book of Joe Biden and show up at a picket line.” His attempt to spread the US trade union bureaucracy’s lie that Biden is the most “pro-Labor” US president in history is a warning about how Ward and company will function as apologists for every rotten action by a labour government. The White House has used “collective bargaining” with the union apparatus to strangle strikes and to enforce substandard contracts in the oil industry, ports and at major logistics giant, UPS. And when this has failed, the “workers friend” Biden and his “left” apologists such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez did not hesitate in banning a strike by 100,000 railroad workers last year.

Biden’s solitary visit to a picket line was to back the United Auto Workers (UAW) bureaucracy vetoing the 97 percent mandate for strike action by 150,000 workers at the Big Three car manufacturers—GM, Ford and Stellantis. This has kept 80 percent of car workers on the job four weeks into the dispute, pumping out profits while the UAW negotiate behind closed doors how to sellout the fight to reverse decades of attacks. It is this full integration of the unions into the apparatus of the state and corporate management to discipline workers and facilitate Biden’s war against Russia and blood curdling support for Israel that Ward wants to emulate with Starmer.

Graham’s performance was made up of more hackneyed phrases about holding Starmer’s “feet to the fire”. But this has not stood in the way of Graham continuing to bankroll Labour from her members’ dues to the tune of more than £1 million in the first quarter of 2023.

In a speech before conference Graham declared “the big question for the next government is who pays for the crisis? Because it can’t be everyday working men and women who paid for the last.” But since winning office in August 2020, she has made sure that her own members have already paid the price. With a membership of over a million in the private and public sector, Graham has performed the role of chief industrial fire fighter in preventing strikes on the buses, in warehouse and supply chains, local government and the docks from merging into a national action.

Graham cynically urged Labour to be more “bold” and place “its arms” around the working class. This after Labour-run Coventry council last year mounted a £4 million scabbing operation against a strike by its refuse drivers. Graham agreed a “de-escalation” of the dispute through ACAS, which naturally ruled in favour of the council.

The union bureaucracy has presided over the sabotage of the largest strike wave in the UK since the 1980s, with the last remaining national disputes in the NHS and on the rail facing sellouts. This betrayal is now being transferred to the political arena with the attempts by Lynch, Ward, Graham et al to hand the working class over to Starmer as Labour seeks to outflank the Tories in its commitment to austerity and war.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) opposed the propaganda of pseudo-left groups such as Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party that a rebirth of the “British labour movement” was being led by the trade unions and issued the call for the formation of rank-and-file committees to open an independent path of industrial and political struggle. As has been the case with the resurgence of the class struggle internationally, the strivings by the working class to unshackle its tremendous social power has brought it into direct conflict with the bureaucratic agents of capital committed to the suppression of the class struggle and defence of the capitalist profit system.

The SEP initiative has won significant support through the formation of the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee. But this must now be extended throughout the working class, coupled with a political break from Labour and the building of genuine socialist leadership.



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