Unite’s General Secretary Sharon Graham denounces industrial and political action against Israel’s Gaza genocide

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The general secretary of Unite, Sharon Graham, is mounting a witch-hunt against those demanding an end to the supply of British arms to Israel used to prosecute the genocide in Gaza.

Details of the bureaucratic clampdown were published by *Skwawkbox* on March 27 under the headline, “Graham tells staff/organisers Unite will always put arms jobs before fighting Gaza genocide”.

Skwawkbox cites from a letter sent by Graham to union officials under the heading “Palestine.” It aims to silence criticism of the leadership of the second largest union in the UK, with over a million members and representing workers in key sections of the arms industry.

In an obscene attempt to claim the moral high ground, Graham declares that “most abhorrent is the attempted weaponisation of the conflict and the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians and collective punishment of the people of Gaza.”

According to Graham and the union executive, anything other than token gestures against the genocidal war is impermissible, above all advocating for industrial and political action by the working class.

“Unite, through the General Secretary and the Chair of the Union and the Executive Council, was the first major union to publicly and unambiguously call for a permanent ceasefire in Gaza,” Graham declares. “We have been unequivocal that the deliberate killing of civilians, hostage-taking and collective punishment are war crimes and should be identified as such.”

Graham boasts that “Unite has also donated £50,000 to Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders specifically to help the many victims of this horrific conflict. Most recently the General Secretary has written to the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU) offering our solidarity after the horrific bombing of their Gaza headquarters which, alongside providing services to workers, was also functioning as a kindergarten and bakery.”

In October last year the *World Socialist Web Site* exposed the silence of British trade union leaders following the urgent appeal made by the Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions insisting that ending the “genocidal situation” in Gaza and restraining Israel’s “war machine” meant cutting off the supply of arms by the US, Britain and other imperialist powers.

Graham and other nominal “lefts” such as Mick Lynch of the Rail, Maritime and Transport Union, Dave Ward of the Communication Workers Union and the entire Trades Union Congress (TUC) did nothing. In relation to the Unite leaders’ complicity, the WSWS noted out the strategic role played by BAE Systems, “which provides up to 15 percent of the parts to F35 Lockheed Martin stealth combat aircraft raining death on Gaza.”

Unite is hostile to any action by workers that would upset the lucrative relations it has established, along with the GMB and Prospect unions, with one of the largest arms companies in the world. A “3 minute read” published last September by the Financial Reporting Council, “BAE Systems – building trust with organised labour,” boasts that from a total group workforce of 82,500, among its UK workforce of 33,800 “BAE Systems has not faced industrial action in the UK in the last 15 years”.

The three unions work through the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering unions with “full time convenors paid for by BAE Systems”. They are part of the pro-company Corporate Consultative Committee, based on shared interests regarding “ethical issues”, “financial performance” and “political issues”. The note stresses, “Confidentiality is essential, and so far the record has been good.”

To preserve this relationship with the arms manufacturers, Graham’s letter denounces unofficial protests across the UK to blockade arms manufacturers’ supplies to Israel, including at BAE Systems. These have been mobilised through the group “Workers for a Free Palestine,” while other protests by “Palestine Action” have focussed on shutting down the UK operations of Elbit Systems, one of Israel’s three largest defence companies.

The letter states, “We cannot and will not endorse any organisation which decides unilaterally and without any discussion (let alone agreement) with the workers themselves, to support the targeting of our members’ workplaces or their jobs… No outside body, no matter what their political position, will be allowed to dictate terms to our Union and our members.”

Graham cites as “a core principle of Unite” that “the ‘first claim’ on our priorities is always the protection and advancement of our members’ interests at work.” She cites as actions “that actively work against our members and their jobs… groups that look to build networks inside trade unions to undermine the defence industry or demand the disbandment of NATO and AUKUS [the Australian, British and US military alliance against China]. Whatever anyone may think personally about those objectives is irrelevant. We are a trade union with thousands of members employed in the defence industry.”

The *Skwawkbox* article in reply provides numerous examples of how Graham is in fact “defying policy adopted by the Unite membership,” citing one “insider” stating, “Unite’s official position, democratically reached repeatedly at conference and confirmed again just last summer, is that it supports Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against

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Israel. We didn't add 'except where it might affect defence jobs'. We've also voted for the end of trade agreements with Israel."

Graham is also alleged to have overseen a series of bureaucratic decrees silencing opposition to the Labour Party's support for the Zionist regime and blocking participation in the pro-Palestinians demonstrations. These include:

• Banning the screening last summer by Unite branches and on union premises of the documentary, "Oh Jeremy Corbyn/The Big Lie", exposing the right-wing witch-hunt and antisemitism smears against the left. This was conducted in collusion with the Campaign Against Anti-Semitism (CCA), with the Zionist lobby group boasting, "Following correspondence with CAA, the Unite union has cancelled the screening of a propaganda film about the anti-Semitic former leader of the Labour Party Jeremy Corbyn."

• Trying to ban a fringe meeting in support of the Palestinians at the Labour Party annual conference in October 2023 and then placing the organiser of the event, Unite's Director for International Affairs Simon Dubbins, under investigation.

• Banning union executive members marching under Unite banners at national Gaza protests.

• Blocking two motions on Palestine brought by the London and Eastern region of the union on March 14 at a Unite executive.

The claim that the opposition by Graham and the union executive to blocking arms production is a defence of workers' jobs is grotesque. In the context of the unfolding genocide against Palestinians in Gaza, the same filthy rationale could have been applied to defending the jobs of those involved in the manufacture of Zyklon B for Hitler's gas chambers.

The position of the Unite leaders on Palestine could not contrast more starkly than with their promotion of the proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, deliberately provoked by Britain, US and other NATO powers, as a fight to defend "national sovereignty" and "human rights". Graham personally sanctioned unofficial action at British ports to block the unloading of oil and gas from Russian tankers.

Such "double standards" are consistent with Unite and the entire union bureaucracy's backing for a violent redivision of the world by the imperialist powers that are all complicit in the Gaza slaughter, escalating war against Russia and targeting China.

The TUC at its 2022 Congress adopted a GMB motion backed by Unite that "supports affiliated campaigns for immediate increases in defence spending in the UK". The GMB hailed as a welcome development contracts for the building of a new range of nuclear submarines through the AUKUS military pact against China.

Both the TUC and Labour Party have committed to ramping up military spending, which means gutting social spending and will inevitably lead to mass job losses and the further decimation of workers' living standards. The demobilisation and sabotage of last year's strike wave of 2 million workers by the union bureaucracy was a downpayment for this militarist agenda and carried out in preparation for a Labour government under Sir Keir Starmer that would wage war in Ukraine and continue to back Israel's genocide.

The relationship between these positions was made explicit by prominent Zionist Lee Harpin, writing in the *Jewish News*, praising Graham for condemning "pro-Palestine activists" and then noting, "Despite early claims that the left-wing leader would seek to move the union away from Labour and disaffiliate, Unite now appears to be opting to become a 'critical friend' of the Starmer led Labour Party."

To defend her rotten politics Graham declares that "Unite members have recently been attacked directly, been spat at and called 'child killers'".

There have been some reports of incidents of overt hostility to defence industry workers, which flow from protests that attract outraged middle-class and semi-anarchist individuals. They have for the most part neither made, nor have any confidence in their ability to secure principled support for a block on military supplies from the workers themselves.

But the chief political responsibility for this must be laid firmly at the door of Graham and her ilk, and the major pseudo-left tendencies that proclaimed her, Lynch, and others as leading a left-wing revival of the trade unions; and who—in the case of Lynch and other RMT leaders—put them on the platforms of the Stop the War Coalition and Palestine Solidarity Campaign to burnish their credentials as "friends of the Palestinians".

The RMT's position on Gaza is in fact identical to that of Unite, with RMT members in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary dispatched to support Britain's armed forces backing the siege of Gaza and Stalinist official Eddie Dempsey portraying this as providing "humanitarian assistance".

The Socialist Equality Party insists, and Graham's letter makes clear, that ending genocide in Gaza means a political fight to mobilise the working class, including arms industry workers, against the trade union and Labour bureaucracy—which Counterfire, the Socialist Workers Party and other pseudo-left groups are desperate to prevent.

A campaign seeking to win the support of armaments workers must insist that financial losses flowing from halting the supply of weapons be absorbed by the arms companies from their ill-gotten gains, with the pay and jobs of workers fully protected.

Such a struggle requires the building of rank-and-file committees against the pro-company trade union apparatus to collectively map out the fight against the profit interests, nationalism and militarism the bureaucracy champions. On this basis a path can be laid for a decisive intervention by the working class, as part of a global socialist anti-war movement directed against its source, capitalism.

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