

Starmer and Sunak flaunt militarist credentials in opening debate of UK's "war election"

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The first live televised debate of the UK general election campaign was held Tuesday evening in Salford, England. Hosted by ITV, the debate confirmed that there are no essential differences between the two main parties of the ruling elite, Conservatives and Labour.

Introducing the event, moderator Julie Etchingham had at least noted that it was an election borne of crisis, stating, "Tonight's debate is set against the toughest of backdrops. Since we last went to the polls [2019] we've had a pandemic, Putin's invasion of Ukraine and a cost of living crisis which is still hitting families hard. Huge geopolitical threats loom large..."

Sunak in fact called the election on the issue of national security and war. Yet, after Etchingham's opening statement, the war between NATO and Russia, which has raged for more than two years in Ukraine, in the middle of Europe, was not mentioned again.

ITV allowed one question from its carefully selected audience—and only in the second half of the one hour debate—raising the fundamental issue of Israel's genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza. And this was immediately airbrushed by Etchingham.

The audience member had asked, "What should happen next to stop these awful scenes in Gaza?" But in asking Sunak and Starmer to respond, Etchingham referred to "the Hamas terrorist atrocities of 7 October and then what unfolded after."

There was no "debate" to be had over Gaza, with Sunak beginning by stating, "I am pleased Keir Starmer supported, alongside me, Israel's right to defend itself in the face of the atrocious attack they suffered."

Starmer's own first thought was for the Israeli hostages. "It's a very grave situation. Firstly we need to get the hostages out; they have been held for a very long time. I dread to think what the state that they are in."

Only then did he add, "We desperately need humanitarian aid into Gaza, it is catastrophic." This from same man who—until being forced to recalibrate his position in the face of mass hostility—was on record that Israel "has the right" to cut off power and water supplies from Gaza, measures which are war crimes.

Starmer also called for a ceasefire, after refusing to back one for months—even whipping his MPs to oppose one in a parliamentary vote in November. But after seven months of slaughter these calls are now nearly universal. And they mean the same coming out of Starmer's mouth as they do from US President "Genocide Joe" Biden. Behind the talk of ceasefire, the US and Britain continue to arm Israel, which knows that all such talk is a cover for allowing them to continue the killing.

Starmer has spent the last four years expunging from Labour any connection to the anti-nuclear war positions of his nominally left predecessor Jeremy Corbyn, to the point where he now boasts that Labour is the "party of NATO," the "party of national security" and is fielding a record 14 candidates with a military background in this election.

With the focal point of the election centred on which party can best take the reins under conditions of war on multiple fronts, Sunak said, "I don't think the Labour Party can be trusted to keep this country as safe as the Conservatives. The world is a more dangerous and uncertain place since the end of the Cold War... I've made the decision to invest more in our defence, taking it up to 2.5 percent of GDP, the Labour Party have not matched that."

To this Starmer became extremely agitated, shaking his head and saying the accusation was "shocking, shocking... this is shocking" and "desperate."

Only the day before Starmer and Shadow Defence

Secretary John Healey committed Labour to spending 2.5 percent of GDP on the military, with Healey stating Labour “will spend 2.5 percent of GDP on defence to deal with the increasing threats.” Starmer reminded reporters that the last government to reach this figure was the Brown Labour government in 2010, and complained that 14 years later the Tories have failed to reach that level.

The Labour leader said he could be trusted on national security since, before entering politics, he was the Director of Public Prosecutions for the Crown Prosecution Service and “acting on national security,” while Sunak was making a fortune in the hedge fund industry. “To now say that somehow national security is safer in his hands is insulting and childish,” Starmer said.

War abroad on multiple fronts means an escalation of the class struggle at home. The debate offered a glimpse of the hostile government the working class faces in the highly likely event of a Labour win.

During a section of the debate which covered the 18-month-long dispute by England’s 50,000 National Health Service junior doctors, Sunak stated that all other strikes by health workers had been ended—all of them with sell-out deals enforced by the trade unions. But the junior doctors “are demanding a 35 percent pay rise and I don’t want to raise your taxes to pay for that.”

Tweedledum Starmer responded, “We wouldn’t pay the 35 percent. We’ve already said that to the doctors. We can’t afford it... and there are many things that now can’t be afforded, so we’re not going to pay that.” Referencing Labour’s intimate relations with the union bureaucracy, he added, “We have to end these strikes. The grown-up way to do that is to get in the room and negotiate with the doctors and come to a settlement.”

One of Starmer’s most politically grotesque statements came with an attack on Sunak from the right, denouncing him as “the most liberal prime minister we’ve ever had on immigration.”

Both the main parties of the ruling class are involved in a joint enterprise to hide from workers the acute dangers they face. In a *World Socialist Web Site* perspective on the central issues posed by the election, Socialist Equality Party’s National Secretary Chris Marsden commented:

Neither Washington nor the British ruling class can tolerate a government unable to rule effectively and bereft of all legitimacy to stay in office a moment longer. Sunak was therefore forced to go to the country, even if this meant

almost certain defeat for his government.

Media commentary makes clear that Sir Keir Starmer’s Labour Party is now seen as a reliable and more effective instrument for waging war overseas, imposing the austerity measures to pay for war and repressing the opposition in the working class this will provoke. His government will not bring a change in Tory policy, but its continuation, while leveraging the services of the trade union apparatus.

The statement continued:

The working class in Britain, Europe and the world faces immense dangers.

The NATO-Russia war in Ukraine has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives already, yet all talk is of allowing Russian territory to be bombed with NATO weapons and even deploying NATO troops in large numbers directly to Ukraine. In the Middle East, support for Israel’s offensive against the Palestinians is openly discussed as an antechamber for a broader offensive against Iran, all while provocations against China are mounted at every conceivable opportunity...

The Socialist Equality Party will stand candidates in this general election in a campaign dedicated to the development of a mass political movement of workers and young people against the genocide in Gaza, the war in Ukraine and the plans for war against Iran and China.

We reject any support for the Labour Party or any of its candidates. Those calling for support for candidates backing a ceasefire while staying loyal to the Labour Party are simply facilitating a political shift within capitalist rule. Labour is dead to the working class and must be replaced.



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