

The Guardian’s brief for the trade unions: They are “good for capitalism”

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The *Guardian* published an editorial on August 28 titled bluntly, “The Guardian view on trade unions: good for capitalism”. Written as a defence of Labour Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer against the most unhinged sections of the right-wing media and Conservative Party, it makes clear how the more level-headed sections of the ruling class view the union bureaucracy.

The article was published one day after Starmer explained that his immediate priority was to find £22 billion worth of spending cuts in Labour’s October budget, extending a period of austerity reaching back to 2010. Labour’s continuation of Tory austerity comes with a marked shift in approach, however, towards bringing trade union leaders in from the cold to work as corporate partners with government and big business.

Whatever tropes are rolled out by the *Daily Telegraph* and others about Starmer caving in to “union barons” and “militant strikers”, Labour’s partnership with the union bureaucracy is linked inseparably to Starmer’s plans to implement a “painful” budget on working people.

This was underscored by Trades Union Congress General Secretary Paul Nowak’s interview with Radio 4 the same week, in which he described Starmer’s austerity speech as “a serious message from a serious prime minister that his government is committed to putting right what went wrong over 14 years.”

The *Guardian* tries to grease the wheels of this operation by rapidly dismissing Chancellor Rachel Reeves’ insistence that there will be “no blank cheques” and presenting Labour’s “reset” of industrial relations—including the settlements negotiated in the outstanding bitter disputes from the strike wave of 2022-3 by junior doctors and train drivers—as workers finally receiving their fair share.

In both cases, the leaders of the BMA junior doctors committee and ASLEF have recommended pay settlements only marginally improved from those offered by the Sunak government. Their main purpose is to entrench the long-term decline in real-terms wages. Labour offered chump change, and the union bureaucracy rolled over at the first time of asking.

Even this will be extracted through harsher working conditions based on a partnership with the government to secure “cost efficiencies”, “workplace reform” and further privatisation in the National Health Service and Labour’s revamped version of the Conservatives’ Great British Railways.

The feigned sympathy for the dire situation facing nurses and teachers is all the more galling, given they have been offered just 5.5 percent this year. Yet the *Guardian* talks about the “shortage of doctors and teachers” and bemoans the “pay slashed in real terms under austerity.” Reading the editorial, which chooses not to “adjudicate each and every one of the pay claims,” one could be mistaken for believing a major redistribution of wealth is being enacted.

The suggestion that the Labour government is committed to public health and education is a fraud. What have been labelled “reforms” in these sectors by Starmer and his cabal of right-wing ministers has nothing to do with the word’s historic meaning, long usurped by its pro-market invocation under Blair and his successors. “Reform” in their mouths means upending the last vestiges of social gains won by the working class.

Using the same language, the *Guardian* argues against its anti-union opponents that if they “aren’t perturbed” by the social crisis, they should at least accept that shortage [of doctors and teachers] is a market signal that these jobs and their terms and

conditions are not up to standard.”

That the various pay deals referenced are yet to be accepted by the membership is not noted by the newspaper, which apparently takes the union leaders’ recommendations as the final word.

This makes a mockery of the lame attempt to portray the trade unions as the most democratic organisations in society: “Those ‘union barons’ are elected and accountable to their members, in a way that no FTSE chief executive is really beholden to employees, suppliers or shareholders. And their members are ordinary workers... who, over the past four decades, have been stripped of many of their essential rights to organise and demonstrate.”

The truth is union leaders have been willing accomplices in using anti-strike laws to discipline the working class. This is why they have endorsed Labour’s pledge of only a partial repeal of these laws, stopping at 2006, describing it as “transformational.” This leaves untouched the battery of legislation introduced under Thatcher and maintained by the Blair Labour government which helped to bring industrial action to its lowest levels in history.

One of the most important features of the 2022/23 strike wave was the way the bureaucratic apparatus was tightened to suppress workers’ militancy, with strike mandates vetoed, action isolated where it could not be prevented, and even the immediate demands of a cost-of-living pay increase betrayed to enforce sellout deals.

The false presentation of the trade union leaders as the representatives of workers is then abandoned in the final paragraph, and what the *Guardian* considers its coup de grâce.

Turning to what the newspaper informs its readers is “no less an authority than the International Monetary Fund [IMF],” the editors write that “Union weakness has also weakened capitalism.” The point is made with a passing reference to a report on the aftermath of the 2008-9 financial crash, “arguing that a big reason for the crash was that workers were being driven to borrow more,” and answering with a call for a “restoration of the lower income group’s bargaining power.”

Of course, this obscure report is a smokescreen and the real reason for citing as an ally the world’s chief enforcer of austerity, privatisation and inequality—most associated with “shock therapy” measures around the world—is plain.

The editorial concludes, “Sharon Graham and Mick Lynch are good for capitalism—the IMF says so.” Here you have it: the two most prominent union figures, Graham of Unite and Lynch of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT), frequently presented as “militant” leaders, are considered by the *Guardian* respectable pillars of the capitalist establishment, and its efforts to keep the leading institution of finance capital afloat.

Although only hinted at, the paper’s main concern, and Labour’s, is to make it as easy as possible for the union bureaucracy to police workers and create a strike-free environment for the government’s right-wing agenda, at home and abroad. Given energy bill price rises, the paper writes, “pressure to do something about public sector pay would only have built. As Ms Reeves rightly observed, there was ‘a cost to not settling’.”

Among other objectives, the corporatist set-up between the Starmer government and the trade unions endorsed by the *Guardian* is intended to defuse the class struggle while the government deepens its support for the genocide in Gaza and possible regional war in the Middle East and the NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

The embrace of the trade unions as an “essential part of a modern [capitalist] economy” by the degraded voice of British liberalism confirms the experiences of workers around the country. Every time they seek to launch a major struggle they are faced with sabotage at the hands of union bureaucracy.

Breaking the grip on society of a corporate and financial oligarchy which is sucking the life out of democracy, ruling over an unprecedented level of social inequality and driving humanity towards catastrophic war requires the building of genuine democratic organs of working-class struggle against the nationally based and pro-capitalist union bureaucracy in the international fight for socialism. This is the task being taken up by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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