

TUC Congress on message with Starmer's right-wing Labour government

Thomas Scripps
10 September 2024

The Trades Union Congress (TUC) annual congress began this Monday with a pledge of partnership with the Labour government delivered by General Secretary Paul Nowak and President Matt Wrack.

Nowak began by revelling in the fall of the Conservative government and saying, “It feels good to be meeting here in Brighton, for the first time in 15 years, under a Labour government with a 174-seat majority.”

It had been a “tough 14 years for the people we represent”, years of “austerity” and a “relentless squeeze on wages”. The trade union bureaucracy played a vital role in this process by repeatedly sabotaging workers’ struggles against wage freezes or sub-inflation pay rises. But Nowak claimed that the unions had “stood firm, defending working people.”

Now they were reaping the rewards of “Helping Labour to rebuild”—that is, joining with now Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer in his shedding of any remotely left-wing associations from the period of Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership. Offering only the smallest of caveats that “we won’t always agree with the new government on every issue,” Nowak continued, “But we know Keir Starmer and this government have the interests of working people at heart in a way that the Conservatives never did, and never will.”

The rest of the speech followed almost word-for-word the right-wing pitch of “fiscal responsibility” and militarism made by Starmer. “No government,” said Nowak, echoing the Labour leader’s repeated refrain, “can put right 14 years of Tory chaos overnight.”

The TUC leader even adopted Starmer’s ploy of presenting Labour as the party of national renewal fighting the danger of the far-right. “We will work with the government to face down those on the right who wish to sow division and discord in our communities.”

Reform UK leader Nigel Farage came in for personal criticism.

Nowak of course politely ignored the fact that Labour has aped Tory talking points on immigration, pledged a crackdown on asylum seekers and done everything possible to avoid clashing with Farage during and since the election.

Nowak raised Farage purely as a segue into his next theme: supporting the Labour Party’s war agenda.

The far-right were “not patriots” and Farage was, worst of all, a “Putin apologist”. Describing his Polish grandfather’s role in the Second World War “in the fight against fascism”, Nowak drew a direct comparison with contemporary Russia. He explained, “In May, I found myself in southern Poland, boarding an overnight train to Kyiv to meet our sister unions,” where he saw the impacts of “Russian rockets” and “Russian shelling”. This was said in support of NATO’s war effort against Russia being fought with Ukrainian lives for the interests of the imperialist powers.

Nowak’s brief reference to the genocide in Gaza, which he of course did not describe in those terms, was made with the same pro-imperialist agenda in mind, calling for “peace, the return of hostages, an immediate ceasefire and respect for international law in Gaza... And a future built on a two-state solution, a safe and secure Israel, and a safe, secure and free Palestine as well.” Nothing which Labour does not claim to agree with or which would unduly rock the boat of the government’s continued de facto support for Israel’s war.

It was left to President Matt Wrack, former leader of the Fire Brigades Union, to directly answer those opposed to the Starmer government. “We already hear some saying there is no difference between politicians. That is a mistake as serious as complacency.” With Labour in government, “We have a huge opportunity... Let’s use that opportunity to build in new areas and to win improvements.”

His advice to Starmer, offered in “a friendly way”, was simply, “You must offer hope.”

This set the tone for the congress, in which various union leaders welcomed the new Labour government and made a show of encouraging it to enact a transformative pro-worker agenda—when its intentions are the opposite.

Paddy Lillis, general secretary of USDAW, described Labour’s election as “the start of a historic opportunity for real change, change that will truly transform workers’ lives.” General Secretary of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union Mick Lynch appealed, “Labour has to find a

better, fairer way to fix our economy, our NHS [National Health Service], our infrastructure and our communities.”

The most prominent disagreement was over Labour’s means testing of the winter fuel allowance, with Unite’s general secretary Sharon Graham striking one of her occasional poses of militancy that goes absolutely nowhere, calling for a wealth tax. But she was sure to couple this with the insistence, “It’s clear that Britain is better under a Labour government,” cautioning only that “change must mean change. Tinkering around the edges is not enough.”

On Tuesday, Starmer spelled out to the TUC delegates what this friendly partnership would mean for the working class. “I have to level with you... It will be hard.” The way forward had not “become any easier.”

Blaming the previous Tory government’s actions for his own policy choices he continued, “the bill for this performance is now in. And I’m afraid if we don’t take action, it’s a cheque that will bounce. Britain left with a social black hole and a financial one. £22bn this year alone.”

Demanding “compromise”, Starmer intoned, “This government will not risk its mandate for economic stability, under any circumstances. And with tough decisions on the horizon—pay will inevitably be shaped by that.”

Workers should ask themselves, if this is what is said *in public* then what is being planned behind the scenes?

The real name for the “partnership” and “working together” spoken about by Labour and the union leaders is corporatism: a collaboration between the government, the corporations and the union bureaucracy to ensure the smoothest-possible process of making profits—at workers’ expense.

All of which is justified with false claims that a “pro-business and pro-worker” policy is possible, in Starmer’s words, because “there is a mood of change in the business world, a growing understanding of the importance of good work and the shared self-interest that comes from treating the workforce with respect and dignity.” What genuine workers’ leader would allow him to prattle on like this?

The trade union leaders take him at his word, however, with the only task apparently being to ensure Labour’s “new deal for working people” be “delivered in full” (Nowak), “that these pledges are delivered in full and without delay” (Wrack), so that Labour “delivers its mandate for change”.

Labour’s only mandate is for big business. Its supposed “new deal” is a fraud. Already in May the *Financial Times* revealed that “behind the scenes, shadow ministers have been discussing how to tone down some of the pledges to ease employer misgivings... One business leader said that after several meetings with the party, they were now ‘pretty relaxed’ about its plans.”

A suggested ban on zero-hours contracts has become a ban

only of “exploitative zero-hour contracts”. Moreover the “right to have a contract which reflects the number of hours” worked will only follow a 12-week reference period. Chancellor Rachel Reeves has told business leaders they will still be able to use these contracts “for example, to meet holiday demand, Christmas demand, summer holidays demand or to offer overtime. We’re not going to prohibit those things.”

Promises over ending fire-and-rehire are dissolved into a vague “reform” of the “inadequate statutory code”. Flexible working, ill-defined, is likewise to be introduced with the get-out clause “as far as is reasonable”.

As for Labour’s repealing some of the Tory’s anti-strike legislation, the reason this is being implemented is the same reason pre-2016 anti-strike laws are being maintained—to better control the workforce. Whereas the Thatcher-era laws have provided unions with a useful legal excuse not to trespass the boundaries of “responsible” industrial action, the more recent legislation has raised tensions between workers and the corporations and government to the point that workers’ militancy is hard to contain.

Labour’s Business Secretary Jonathon Reynolds explained of the Strike Act that it “has not worked—unbelievably the UK has lost more days due to strike action than France, costing the taxpayer billions of pounds, and these divisive laws haven’t resolved a single strike since they were introduced.” In Labour’s opinion, this is a job best performed by the union bureaucracy.

Workers should be warned: Labour and the TUC are finalising a strategy for the suppression of the class struggle. This is not, as Starmer claims, to create a world of “Business and unions, the private and public sector, united by a common cause to rebuild our public services and grow our economy in a new way.” It is to clear the way for the government’s continued policies of austerity, in service to the banks, corporations, and British imperialism’s plans for war abroad.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact