

# Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham beats the drum for UK Labour's arms spending

**Tony Robson**  
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Sharon Graham, the general secretary of Unite, has taken pole position within the trade union bureaucracy in advocating for the Labour government's militarist agenda.

Graham welcomed Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer's February 25 announcement in Parliament of an increase in military spending from 2.3 percent to 2.5 percent of GDP by 2027 through diverting £6 billion from overseas aid. This was rushed through before Starmer's visit to the White House to reassure President Donald Trump of Britain's continued role as a junior partner of US imperialism.

Starmer's hike was greeted with an unprecedented show of unanimity with the Conservatives, with the caveat that it was only a down payment. Rather than alerting the working class to the dangers posed by the nationalist war frenzy gripping the British ruling class, Graham joined in.

"Whilst we welcome the increase in defence spending to 2.5 percent and the PM's promise around investment, growth, jobs and skills, this needs to be matched with action," she insisted. "There is an immediate decision to be made on the replacement of aging RAF [Royal Air Force] fighter jets with British made Typhoons. This decision needs to be made [sic] in the UK's favour.

"Any thought of wooing Donald Trump by selling our defence jobs abroad and replacing the RAF fleet with US made F35s will be resisted and would be an act of self-harm."

Graham's remarks were delivered on February 26 at a Unite lobby of Parliament to demand the government purchase Typhoon fighter jets and sign a contract for a new medium-lift army and RAF helicopter that is to be produced by Leonardo in Yeovil, in order to "back Britain".

Graham's statement mirrors Trump's economic nationalism and militarism. Unite's US counterparts such as United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain are fully lined up behind Trump's tariff measures, pitting workers against each other in a trade war at the expense of jobs and living standards.

Graham's claim that support for the arms industry is based on "national security" and the defence of "manufacturing jobs" is a lie. Unite, one of the largest trade unions in the UK and Ireland—with over a million members—has colluded with the Labour government since it came into office last July to ram through mass job losses in key industries.

The suppression of industrial action at Tata Steel in Port Talbot, South Wales followed the veto of a strike mandate and paved the way for 2,800 job losses.

At the Vauxhall van plant in Luton facing closure in April with the direct loss of 1,200 jobs, Unite blocked any action with Vauxhall workers at Ellesmere Port from day one. The livelihoods of workers in these sectors are deemed expendable in pursuit of the corporate bottom line, so long as Unite are partners in the redundancy programme.

Unite on March 8 issued another statement, couched as an appeal to the government to "rethink" its cuts to overseas aid—but only to double down on the demand for additional military expenditure: "Unite has welcomed the increase in defence spending and supports a further increase to three percent as soon as possible."

The Labour government knows it will encounter mass opposition within the working class over its rearmament program being funded through an assault social spending and the National Health Service, surpassing anything under the Tories. Chancellor Rachel Reeves has earmarked £6 billion worth of cuts to welfare benefits in the upcoming Spring Statement, with the disabled and sick vilified as a scourge on society.

Starmer is turning to his bureaucratic partners in the trade unions to suppress the class struggle in the name of "national unity". The government has already handed over the keys of Royal Mail to the oligarch Daniel Kretinsky and is working with Dave Ward of the Communication Workers Union to block opposition from postal workers to the takeover and dismantling of the mail service.

The position of Graham is not the exception, especially

among trade union leaders directly connected to the industrial military complex such as the GMB. The 2022 annual meeting of the Trades Union Congress saw a GMB motion backed by Unite “that supports affiliated campaigns for immediate increases in defence spending in the UK”. The GMB hailed contracts for the building of a new range of nuclear submarines through the AUKUS military pact against China.

Invocations of “national security” and the prioritisation of defence jobs are meant to delegitimise opposition to war. This has found its most grotesque expression in Graham’s hostility to any industrial action by Unite members to halt British arms supplies to Israel during its genocidal war against the Palestinians in Gaza.

Graham suspended Unite’s affiliation to the Stop the War Coalition (STWC) in February citing protests outside BAE Systems sites which produces arms components sold to Israel. BAE Systems produces 15 percent of the parts for the F35 Lockheed Martin stealth combat aircraft that have rained down death on Gaza.

The defence by Starmer of the genocidal methods employed by Israel against the Palestinians as acts of “self-defence” has not stood in the way of Graham continuing to hand over £1.7 million of her members’ dues to the Labour Party between October 2023 and September 2024, as the *Skwawkbox* website points out.

A WSWS article last April explained that Unite was bitterly hostile to any action by workers that would cut across its long-established corporatist relations—alongside the GMB and Prospect unions—with BAE Systems. Through the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering, the three unions enjoy full-time convenors paid for by the company and are part of the Corporate Consultative Committee, working together on shared interests regarding “ethical issues”, “financial performance” and “political issues.”

Based on reports by *Skwawkbox*, the article also reviewed the methods used by Graham to witch-hunt union members calling for industrial action to boycott arms supplies, and her defiance of policies adopted by the membership at conference such as support for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel. This included banning union executive members from marching under Unite banners at national Gaza protests.

An email from Graham denounced actions “that actively work against our members and their jobs” by “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 these are irrelevant.”

It is worth noting that while Graham has opposed any industrial action to stop the genocide in Gaza, the opposite is true in regard to NATO’s proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. She personally backed unofficial action at British ports to block the unloading of oil and gas from Russian tankers.

The emergence of Graham as an advocate for a wartime economy and partner of the Starmer government is an indictment of the pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party. They hailed the election of this seasoned union bureaucrat as general secretary in August 2021 as a game changer in a supposed rejuvenation of the trade unions, in opposition to the development of a rank-and-file movement against the union bureaucracy.

Graham’s brand of non-political trade unionism was always aimed squarely at securing corporatist relations with the employers and the government. Her playbook has been to ensure that strikes within critical branches of industry do not break out of locally sanctioned action, based on a “leverage” campaign to win a seat at the corporate table by selling out wage demands and agreeing cuts to jobs, terms and conditions.

The fight against austerity and war means the working class mobilising its strength as part of a unified socialist struggle of workers across Europe and internationally, against the rule of the financial oligarchy and to put an end to social inequality and war. This perspective can be fought for through the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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