UK trade union leaders back Starmer government's war drive

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The leaders of some of Britain's major trade unions rushed to publicly back the Labour government's Strategic Defence Review (SDR) setting out a blueprint for preparing to fight a nuclear war against Russia in Europe and the Atlantic.

Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer declared that the SDR, unveiled June 2, would move the UK "to warfighting readiness" by creating a "battle-ready, armour-clad nation." It commits to Britain's construction of up to 12 nuclear-powered attack submarines at the Barrow-in-Furness shipyard—one new submarine every 18 months.

A £15 billion "sovereign warhead programme" will facilitate a "historic renewal of our nuclear deterrent," alongside £1.5 billion for the construction of six munitions and energetics factories and the procurement of 7,000 UK-built long-range weapons. These measures are aimed at cementing Britain's role as a key NATO supplier in the war against Russia in Ukraine.

Funding war demands an upsurge in the austerity offensive against the working class not seen since the 1930s. Raising military spending to 3 percent of GDP, an already stated as a goal, means finding an extra £13 billion. But Starmer is presently discussing a 5 percent of GDP military budget with NATO.

This vast military escalation is being dressed up by the trade union bureaucracy in the language of jobs, growth, and regional investment. Union leaders have seized on the SDR to promote nationalism and militarism, invoking "defence jobs" to counter broad anti-war sentiment while suppressing the class struggle against the employers and the Starmer government.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham welcomed the SDR, complaining that military spending was not being increased fast enough and insisting that the government must "buy British":

"Earlier this year the prime minister promised the country that increased defence spending would be used to create UK jobs and skills. New British-built submarines will be a great start, but the government also urgently needs to commit to orders for new UK-built Typhoons and medium lift helicopters. Defence spending on UK manufacturing needs to be increased more quickly. Countries that want to do us harm won't wait and nor can the UK."

Unite, Britain's second largest union, has worked with Starmer to destroy manufacturing jobs at Tata Steel in Port Talbot and enable the closure of the Vauxhall plant in Luton, sacrificing workers' livelihoods on the altar of profitability. But more defence jobs are held up as a goal when this means gutting social programmes and the National Health Service to divert billions into the coffers of arms manufacturers such as BAE Systems and Rolls-Royce.

The GMB, the UK's third largest union, had already welcomed the Labour government's earlier commitment in February to increase defence spending with National Officer Matt Roberts stating, "Every pound of this budget increase should go into actual defence spending and not the HR costs that were included under the Conservatives." This means that the 13 percent of the military budget presently accounted for by pensions will also be replaced by more weapons procurement, etc.

Prospect General Secretary Mike Clancy declared, "As we replace our ageing nuclear deterrent, we must also upgrade the facilities where the weapons are built and maintained. £15bn extra funding will help safeguard jobs and skills in this critical aspect of our national security."

The GMB and Prospect unions have allied with arms industry lobby group ADS and Maria Eagle, Minister of State for Defence Procurement and Industry. The joint report from ADS, the GMB and Prospect, "Securing our Future, Together," was produced as input to the SDR. It urges the UK's integration into global war preparations, calling for international military partnerships,

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procurement reform, and state-backed investment in weapons manufacturing. The arms industry is praised as a source of "good jobs", citing skills shortages and economic uncertainty to justify funnelling public money into the military-industrial complex.

The union bureaucracy's backing for imperialist militarism escalated with NATO's proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. In 2022 the Trades Union Congress (TUC) adopted a motion introduced by the GMB and backed by Unite overturning the TUC's former 2017 policy on defence diversification and replacing it with explicit support for increased military spending. The motion supported "immediate increases in defence spending" and the GMB's "Making It" campaign, and demanded a "30-year pipeline of defence work," including the Astute and Dreadnought submarine programmes at BAE Systems and Rolls-Royce.

Some on the pseudo-left like the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) have issued toothless criticisms, urging union leaders to "break from militarism." They present the warmongering of the bureaucracy as a mistaken policy choice, rather than the essential function of a privileged caste that polices the working class on behalf of the capitalist state and acts as recruiting sergeants for war.

According to the SWP, union leaders can be "pushed to represent the interests of workers," despite being "reluctant to do anything that risks their place at the negotiating table with the bosses."

What does the SWP have to show for the tactic of mass pressure on the union bureaucracy on the urgent issue of the day—Gaza—nineteen months into the genocide, after millions of workers and youth have demonstrated to end the atrocities?

Graham, promoted by the SWP as a reform wing of the bureaucracy, has witch-hunted members of Unite demanding a boycott of arms sales to Israel, including BAE components used in the F-35 fighter jets massacring civilians in Gaza. This has included defying policies adopted at conference such as support for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel. 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."

Those presented as a "left" alternative and the "friends of the Palestinians," such as the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) bureaucracy, have been given a free pass for their empty rhetoric. RMT leader Eddie Dempsey even provided an alibi for the dispatch of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary to provide logistical backup to UK armed forces supporting the siege of Gaza by claiming this was for "humanitarian" purposes.

The Conservative government's statement on the deployment of the task group to the Eastern Mediterranean in October 2023 stated unambiguously, "The military package, which includes P8 aircraft, surveillance assets, two Royal Navy ships—RFA Lyme Bay and RFA Argus—three merlin helicopters and a company of Royal Marines, will be on standby to deliver practical support to Israel and partners in the region, and offer deterrence and assurance."

For 20 months now, the entire trade union bureaucracy in Britain has also delivered a collective rebuff to the Palestinian unions' October 16, 2023 appeal insisting that "This urgent, genocidal situation can only be prevented by a mass increase of global solidarity with the people of Palestine and that can restrain the Israeli war machine."

The fight against austerity and war means waging a political offensive against both the Starmer government and its ally, the trade union bureaucracy. Rank-and-file committees, independent of the union apparatus, must be formed in every workplace, linking workers across industries and borders. These committees must unify the fight against moves to a war economy with the defence of jobs, wages and essential public services.

They must take up the call of the Palestinian trade unions for solidarity, including the organisation of collective action to stop the production and shipment of arms to Israel.

Only through a conscious break with the nationalist and pro-imperialist bureaucracy can the working class take up a socialist and internationalist programme to end genocide, prevent a global conflagration, and secure a future based on peace, equality and human need, not profit and war.

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