

# 22 British trade union heads oppose prosecution of Stop the War Coalition leaders, but make no call to mobilise against Starmer government

**Tony Robson**  
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The statement issued July 15 by 22 trade union general secretaries opposing the charges against officers of the Stop the War Coalition (STWC) is purely for the record.

Signatories include Paul Nowak (Trades Union Congress), Christina McAnea (Unison), Daniel Kebede (NEU), Matt Wrack (NASUWT), Dave Ward (CWU), Sharon Graham (Unite), Eddie Dempsey (RMT), and Mick Whelan (ASLEF). They condemn the Metropolitan Police's decision to charge prominent trade unionists and anti-war activists following a demonstration in central London on January 18 this year.

The statement reads: "We believe these charges are an attack on our right to protest. The right to protest is fundamental to trade unions and the wider movement. The freedoms to organise, of assembly and of speech matter; we must defend them."

Absolutely true! But the union leaders' declaration contains no call to arms to defend the core democratic rights now under state attack. No mobilisation is proposed of the millions of workers these leaders officially represent. The TUC is made up of 48 affiliated unions covering around 5.5 million workers.

The letter calls call for charges to be dropped against former National Education Union Executive member Alex Kenny, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) General Secretary Sophie Bolt, Palestine Solidarity Campaign director Ben Jamal, and Stop the War Coalition vice-chair Chris Nineham. But nothing was said during the six months when it was just Jamal and Nineham who faced prosecution for Public Order offences. It was only after charges were brought against Kenny.

The statement says nothing about the political activity of the other three defendants and speaks of Kenny only in

his capacity as "chief steward for the NEU national strike demonstration in March 2023" and "leading role in many demonstrations organised in the TUC region covering London and the south-east."

The trade union leaders' statement followed an Open Letter issued July 13 and signed by hundreds of public figures, artists, and campaigners—including singer Charlotte Church—against the Labour government's proscription of Palestine Action as a terrorist organisation on July 4.

That Open Letter condemned the proscription as a "major assault on our freedoms" and a dangerous escalation in the criminalisation of direct action. It states: "Peaceful protest tactics which damage property or disrupt 'business-as-usual' in order to call attention to the crimes of the powerful have a long and proud history. They are more urgent than ever in response to Israel's genocide against the Palestinian people."

In an accompanying statement, Church said, "I sign this letter because history shows us that when people stand up to injustice, those in power often reach for the same old playbook: label dissent as dangerous, criminalise protest, and try to silence movements for change by branding them as extremists or terrorists."

Not a single national trade union was publicly cited as supporting this appeal in the *Guardian*. It only referenced Glasgow Trades Union Council "as collectively backing the letter", which asked pointedly, "As the UK government is attacking our civil liberties, we must ask ourselves if not now, then when?"

The statement by Britain's trade union officialdom does not even include the words "Labour" or "Keir Starmer", or mention opposition to the genocide of the Palestinians.

It merely expresses “deep concern” over the charging of the demonstrators at the January 18 Stop the War protest and states that “we must defend” the rights of protest. This is in order to avoid any real confrontation with Starmer’s government of genocide defenders and warmongers mounting the clampdown on free speech.

Starmer depends for political support on winning the confidence of big business, the military, and the state by demonstrating that Labour can enforce domestic “order” against the working class and popular sentiment against war, centred at present on stopping the imperialist-backed mass murder of Palestinians.

While millions have demonstrated to defend the Palestinians, only a handful of trade union leaders have appeared on platforms. It has been left to groups such as the Socialist Workers Party to bring a few banners to give the illusion of broader trade union support.

On the burning issue of stopping British arms supplies to Israel, the trade union bureaucracy has delivered a collective rebuff to the Palestinian unions’ October 16, 2023 appeal 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.”

Unite leader Sharon Graham, promoted by the pseudo-left groups as heading a reform wing of the bureaucracy, has denounced union members demanding a boycott of arms sales to Israel, including BAE components used in the F-35 fighter jets massacring civilians in Gaza. Unite has defied policies adopted at conference such as support for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel.

Others presented as a “friends of the Palestinians,” such as the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union bureaucracy, have been given a free pass thanks to 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 from day one by claiming this was for “humanitarian” purposes.

The police crackdown on January 18 saw 77 people arrested, with widespread reports of police violence, including the kettling of children, pregnant women, and elderly demonstrators. Former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and ex-shadow chancellor John McDonnell were later interviewed by police under caution.

The Public Order Act 1986 Section 12 and 14 allow for demonstrations to be banned or broken up on the pretext of “nuisance,” with arrests made pre-emptively.

In the most significant industrial action since the

Starmer government came to office last July—the seven-month strike action by 400 Birmingham bin workers defending their jobs and opposing pay cuts of up to a quarter of the wages—Section 14 was used to break up picket lines. Unite and the other trade unions have not lifted a finger to mobilise against this dangerous precedent or the subsequent High Court injunction. A performative “mega-picket” in May and another planned for July 25 have been used to cover for this capitulation.

Since July’s Stop the War demo, dozens of people have been arrested for declaring support for Palestine Action. As the Socialist Equality Party explained, “[I]f non-violent sabotage by individual protesters is designated terrorist, then what of strikes by seafarers and waterside workers, or factory and logistics workers who boycott the supply of weapons and other equipment to the Israeli war machine, as has been done by French, Greek and Italian dockers?”

What is needed is not a pro-forma letter of “concern” by union officials, but the independent mobilisation of the working class. The wages and jobs of millions of workers in transport, the postal services, education, local councils and the National Health Service are already under attack in order to fund the rapid military rearmament that is supported by trade union bureaucracy.

Their collective strength could halt the Labour government’s authoritarian drive in its tracks. But this means breaking free of the dead hand of a union bureaucracy that is loyal to Labour and terrified of mass working-class resistance.

The fight to defend the right to protest, freedom of speech and association, and to end Britain’s complicity in Israel’s genocide must be taken up by rank-and-file workers through the formation of independent committees to boycott production and transportation of British arms to Israel. United Nations officials, legal experts and civil rights groups have sounded the alarm over the “chilling effects” of the Starmer government’s police-state measures against core democratic rights, but only the working class organised and politically mobilised can defeat the lurch to dictatorial forms of rule.



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