

Unite's motion supporting an arms embargo against Israel will be a dead letter without organised rank-and-file opposition

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The motion passed at Unite's 2025 Policy Conference for a workers' boycott of arms supplies to Israel will not mark a radical shift by Britain's second-largest trade union, with its 1.1 million-strong membership, unless a fight is mounted against its leadership.

Passed overwhelmingly at the July 7-11 conference of around 800 delegates, the resolution has yet to be published. Instead Unite's ruling Executive Council (EC) issued a statement based on a composite of several motions and after "several revisions."

Presented by the union's substantial United Left faction as a new chapter for opponents of the Gaza genocide, it is a cynical manoeuvre by the Unite bureaucracy to salvage its credibility amid growing rank-and-file opposition.

For over 20 months, as Israel's war of annihilation has continued Unite's leadership under General Secretary Sharon Graham has done nothing. Worse, it has actively suppressed efforts by workers to take solidarity action in defence of the Palestinians. Graham's apparatus has witch-hunted members advocating the boycott of arms supplies, blocked implementation of a previously adopted Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) policy, and defended the arms industry on the pretext that action would endanger workers' jobs.

But this attempt to silence opposition to mass murder has become untenable, as Israel's atrocities multiply against women, children, medics, aid workers, and journalists, and the death toll mounts to enforce expulsion through bombardment and starvation.

The EC is forced to acknowledge the widespread anger felt by millions in its statement, condemning Israel's actions as "genocidal," referencing "ethnic cleansing, famine, attacks on civilians, children, hospitals, and aid distribution sites," and citing the International Court of Justice placing Israel on trial and ICC arrest warrants for senior Israeli leader "for crimes against humanity."

Yet staggering hypocrisy runs through the statement, which avoids any direct reference to the UK-based arms firms enabling these war crimes—especially BAE Systems, which provides 15 percent of the components for the F-35 fighter jets

dropping 2,000lb bombs on Gaza. There is no mention of any specific Unite-organised workplaces involved in the manufacture or shipment of weapons.

The statement references the appeal made by Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU) back in October 2023, asking "that workers refuse to deal with military shipments to Israel, especially those transported by logistics companies Maersk and ZIM." But offers no explanation of why this call went unheeded for the past 20 months. Equally the actual appeal for far more all-embracing action—the Palestinian statement insisted, "This urgent, genocidal situation can only be prevented by a mass increase of global solidarity with the people of Palestine that can restrain the Israeli war machine"—is deliberately concealed.

Even now the EC's promise to back "worker-led" boycotts and divestment campaigns absolves it of any responsibility for taking action. The onus is placed entirely on individual workers or isolated groups, while the EC stands at a safe distance offering "support."

The statement stresses instead that "Prior to taking action Unite will engage with members and reps in affected areas. We will not take any action that will put members' jobs at risk without their consent... Unite will give full support to any individual member or section of members, who seek and do not get adequate assurances from their employers that they are not breaching international law..."

These are escape clauses for the bureaucracy. Before anything happens, there must be endless consultations under the threat of job losses by workers who take a principled stand, and the burden falls on them to prove employers' violation of international law while Unite's leadership mounts no struggle against those trading in genocide.

This is a containment exercise, meant to defuse rank-and-file anger while preserving Unite's cosy ties with arms manufacturers and the Labour government.

There can be no other reading of the EC's calls on the Labour government to "end the genocide," apply "sanctions," and recognise a Palestinian state. This is after Unite backed Labour's election campaign even as Starmer defended

genocide under the mantra of “Israel’s right to self-defence.” He entered Downing Street already reviled by millions as a war criminal.

Since taking office, Starmer has ramped up UK arms exports to Israel, approving £126 million in arms sales in just four months from last September—more than the Tories approved in four years between 2020 and 2023. In the High Court, the government opposed a case brought by five human rights groups arguing that the export of BAE parts to F-35 fighter jets made the UK potentially complicit in violations on international law and the Genocide Convention. The government lawyers argued that it was “tenable” to claim no genocide was occurring and the High Court sided with the government in its ruling on June 30 to maintain the exports.

As for EC’s touting of Labour’s pledge to recognise Palestine, this is a dead letter. Former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair, through his Tony Blair Institute, has helped design the future for a post-genocide Gaza—a “Trump Riviera” and “Elon Musk Smart Manufacturing Zone” built on the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. This is what the Starmer government is directly overseeing, not just with its supply of arms but even more critically more than 500 surveillance flights flown by the RAF around Gaza since December 2023 to aid Israel’s war on Gaza.

The violent expulsion of Palestinians is part of a new bloody redivision of the world over critical resources and trade routes by the US, Britain, and the European powers against Russia and China. These wars of conquest demand brutal austerity at home—slashing the welfare state, gutting the NHS and local councils, and destroying democratic rights. This is behind the strike-breaking operation against 400 refuse workers in Birmingham, organised by Deputy Labour Party leader Angela Rayner and Labour council leader John Cotton. Both are Unite members, but were only suspended last week while Graham timidly suggested a possible “rethink” of Unite’s multi-million pound funding of the Labour Party.

Not just Graham, but the entire trade union bureaucracy has done nothing to oppose the Gaza genocide. Instead, they advocate corporatist collaboration with the corporations and the government, including the arms manufacturers. Unite is not alone in banging the drum for hiked up military spending. At the 2022 Trades Union Congress, a GMB motion passed—backed by Unite—supporting immediate increases in UK defence spending, including new contracts for nuclear submarines under the AUKUS military pact, directed against China.

Even if the motion passed at the Unite Policy Conference and the EC’s statement were the most powerfully worded, this would not alter the fundamental problem faced by members of the union. Like their counterparts in every union, these workers confront an unaccountable bureaucracy dedicated to the suppression of the class struggle.

The is underscored by the publication of the EC statement on

the United Left website alongside a speech made during the debate at the Unite Policy Conference by Jim Kelly, chair of Unite’s London and Eastern Region.

Kelly acknowledged that “we had no answer” when approached at national Gaza protests as to why Unite had no national speaker on the platform and that motions passed by the Regional Committee, including implementation of the union’s agreed BDS policy, “were ruled out of order and not debated. We have never been told why.”

Calling for support for the motion, Kelly described this an opportunity for a “reset,” meaning nothing more than “implementation of our agreed policies” while offering no explanation as to why these had been flouted for the best part of two years or why this would not continue going forward. For the pseudo-left and Stalinist forces that make up the “left” in the trade unions, passing resolutions that will supposedly bring the bureaucracy to order is a means of opposing an actual struggle against that bureaucracy, whether openly on the right-wing or left-talkers like Graham.

Urgent action to stop the flow of British arms to Israel and defeat the Starmer government’s complicity in the genocide cannot be entrusted to the Unite bureaucracy, or any section of the official labour movement. Motions passed under pressure from below, stripped of any mechanisms for enforcement, serve only as fig leaves for inaction. A new strategy is needed—one that bases the fight against the Gaza genocide on the industrial and political mobilisation of the international working class.

Workers around the world are entering into struggle against the same ruling class that is arming and funding Israel’s war on Gaza, while imposing austerity, attacks on free speech, and militarisation at home. Only a conscious, organised movement of rank-and-file workers—independent of the trade union bureaucracy and rooted in socialist internationalism—can bring an end to genocide, war and class oppression.



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