

Trades Union Congress mounts rescue operation for right-wing Starmer government

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This year's Trades Union Congress (TUC) conference in Brighton September 7–10, was dominated by warnings that Labour's anti-immigrant and pro-business agenda risked handing power to Nigel Farage's far-right Reform UK.

The media presented this performance politics as a shot across the bows of the Starmer government, with the union bureaucracy urging fidelity to the working class. This was echoed by the portrayal by Britain's pseudo-left groups of the trade unions as genuine opponents of Starmer.

Trade union bureaucrats—drawing six-figure salaries and inhabiting a different social stratum from the six million workers they claim to represent—in fact delivered their pro-worker platitudes to try and rescue the Labour government from itself and justify their continued alliance with it.

Their problem was that the government they had helped into office last year as a supposed “friend of workers” has already proven to be a right-wing vehicle for policies of austerity and war. To neutralise mounting working-class opposition from the left, the union bureaucracy therefore attempted to present Starmer's government as the only alternative to the anti-immigrant poison of Farage that could still be pressurised into protecting workers from the onslaught of the employers.

In his keynote address, TUC General Secretary Paul Nowak branded Farage and his co-leader Richard Tice as “right-wing conmen, lining their own pockets” and denounced Conservative MP Robert Jenrick as “an opportunistic xenophobe helping to create a political climate that ends up with far-right thugs laying siege to hotels, and Black and Asian people being threatened and harassed on our streets.”

But not only has the TUC not mobilised its members against the hounding of asylum seekers housed in hotels by neo-Nazi orchestrated protests which the media has portrayed as the “voice of the people.” He speaks while supporting Starmer's government, whose policies are all but indistinguishable from those of Farage. This includes Labour's video boasting of deporting 45,000 asylum seekers and adopting the mantra “Deport first – appeal later,” plus measures announced since Parliament's return of closing hotels, herding refugees into warehouses or barracks, and suspending family reunification for refugees fleeing war zones.

Nowak's condemnation of the most toxic forms of

nationalism was used to champion what he described as “real patriotism.” This involved presenting the reforms the 1945 Labour government was obliged to implement as the product of patriotic fervour, rather than a way of corralling broad-based anti-capitalist sentiment in the working class that erupted after the horrors of fascism and World War II. “As that 1945 generation knew, real patriotism is about building decent homes, and ensuring no one is left behind,” said Nowack. “It's about creating good jobs so people aren't left in poverty and feel pride in their labour.”

Nowak also called for Starmer to abandon the punitive two-child welfare benefit cap first brought in by the Conservatives that is keeping 1.6 million children and 400,000 households in poverty. But he could do nothing less, given that Reform UK is formally committed to abandoning it.

The other major crisis for the union bureaucracy over Labour's lurch to the right is the plan to shelve what remains of its Employment Rights Bill, which Nowak presented as another dividing line with Reform UK. Labour's “New Deal for Working People” had already been watered down before the July 2024 election at the behest of big business, but this does not go far enough for the Confederation of British Industry and British Chambers of Commerce. Ahead of the TUC conference, two figures most closely associated with it were sacked in Starmer's reshuffle: Angela Rayner as deputy prime minister and Justin Madders as minister for employment rights, who is the architect of the legislation. Madders said he was provided no explanation and told a TUC fringe meeting, “Let's not pretend that my departure... and Angela's departure is not something that the business community has been cheering quite loudly for.”

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham posed as Starmer's sharpest critic, telling the BBC, “What I do hope is that they don't intend on now slowing this down, or indeed scrapping some parts of it altogether,” while telling *Politics Joe*, “If a vote was taken today we would be disaffiliating, because I know how angry our members are with Labour.” But she reassured the *Guardian*, “They have one year to get this right because Nigel Farage is on their tail.”

The *Financial Times* citing a senior Labour figure confirming that “Number 10” was trying to “kill” parts of the Bill, and

noting that one business lobbyist welcomed Madders' departure, pointed to new business secretary Peter Kyle's swift call with 100 business leaders as proof he "wasn't wasting any time."

Labour's keynote speech to the TUC was in fact delivered by Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson, the Blairite tipped to replace Rayner as deputy leader, whose meaningless pledge that the Bill would be delivered in full "no ifs, no buts" was taken as good coin by Nowak.

The relationship of the unions with Labour is not determined by protecting workers' rights, but the union bureaucracy's role as the industrial wing of the same apparatus that works in parliament to suppress the class struggle and defend capitalist interests. The Bill's purpose—including defanging some Thatcher-era anti-strike laws—was to prevent any repeat of the 2022–23 strike movement. This confirmed that the greatest threat to workers was not repressive legislation but the union bureaucracy itself, which demobilised millions of workers and imposed below-inflation deals. The reset in industrial relations offered to the trade union bureaucracy under the Starmer government is a tripartite alliance with big business to increase productivity and suppress strike action.

Labour has responded to the first expressions of industrial action with an unprecedented clampdown on workers' rights, which has gone completely unopposed by the union apparatus. The six-month all-out strike action by 400 Birmingham refuse workers has been left isolated as the Starmer government has directed a massive police and strike-breaking operation against their fight to resist pay cuts and the slashing of hundreds of jobs in England's second-largest city, run by a Labour authority.

In the first national strike the Labour government has faced by around 50,000 resident doctors in England for pay restoration in August, Health Secretary Wes Streeting responded by describing frontline National Health Service (NHS) medics as "reckless" and likened the dispute to a "war" with the government they would lose. Streeting, privatiser-in-chief of the NHS, could rely on the leaders of the resident doctors' union, the British Medical Association, to scuttle back into talks and suspend further action. But the isolation of the resident doctors was maintained by all the health unions, including the GMB, Unite and the nurses' union RCN, who have suppressed action by tens of thousands of NHS workers who rejected their own below-inflation pay awards.

The need for the bureaucracy to be provided with a left cover and the role of the pseudo-left in granting one was epitomised by the decision by Nowak to give a pre-conference interview with the *Socialist Worker*, which presented him as a fighter against the far-right under the headline: "Step up the fight against Reform UK says trade union leader."

The TUC's role in policing popular opposition to the Starmer government was expressed in the two resolutions carried in opposition to the Gaza genocide.

The first does not actually mention Palestine Action by name,

only condemning the abuse of anti-terror legislation in a manner that endangers democracy, imperils trade union freedoms, and strengthens the far-right. A second resolution actually calls for the Starmer governments' proscription of Palestine Action to be repealed and a strengthening of protest rights following arrests, including Chris Nineham of the Stop the War Coalition and Palestine Solidarity Campaign leader Ben Jamal.

But the resolutions collectively commit the TUC to nothing. All that is proposed is a letter writing campaign to the prime minister, the home secretary and London mayor to protest "all aspects of this worsening authoritarianism" and an end to the attacks on the right to protest through the use of sections 12 and 14 of the Public Order Act by the Metropolitan Police.

For the last two years the union bureaucracy has done nothing to oppose the Gaza genocide, ensuring the supply of UK weapons to Israel increased under Starmer—including components for F-35 fighter planes which have reigned death on Gaza. And nothing will be changed in this score.

Genuine opposition to the assault on democratic rights, the deepening social crisis, and Labour's complicity in imperialist wars cannot be mounted through the corridors of the TUC and under the leadership of its affiliated trade unions. The urgent task for the working class is to build independent rank-and-file committees capable of mobilising workers across workplaces and communities, uniting these struggles into a conscious fight against the capitalist system itself. Only through the self-organisation of the working class, linking the fight for immediate demands to the broader struggle for socialism, can a path of genuine struggle be opened.



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