

UK trade union leaders issue toothless statements on illegal war against Iran

Tony Robson
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Britain's trade unions have issued pro-forma statements denouncing the war on Iran. But these are intended to foreclose any organised opposition to the war, not prepare it.

A statement has been signed by 18 general secretaries and union leaders, including Unite's Sharon Graham and Unison's Andrea Egan, who both head unions with memberships of over one million. Other signatories include Dave Ward of the Communication Workers Union, Mick Whelan of the ASLEF train drivers union, Eddie Dempsey of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union and Jo Grady of the University and College Union—condemns “an illegal war on Iran.” It adds, “We oppose any attacks on civilians and all unlawful wars,” warning that regional instability and surging oil prices “will hurt working people everywhere.”

But having identified the lawlessness of the war and the costs imposed on workers by the political and corporate criminals responsible, the message delivered by the trade union leaders to the workers they claim to represent can be summed up in two words: “Do nothing.”

They do not call for mass protests, strikes or workplace action against the war, nor do they explicitly name Keir Starmer's Labour government as a guilty accomplice, concluding only, “We oppose any direct or indirect participation by the UK in this conflict and call for an immediate return to diplomacy.”

A statement issued the next day by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) outrageously conflates the illegal US-Israeli war with the defensive actions of Iran—a former colonial country now targeted for the reconquest of its oil resources. The TUC “condemns military actions taken by the US, Israel and Iran that violate the sovereignty of states, kill civilians... and draw neighbouring countries into conflict.”

It calls “on the UK government to do everything it can to deliver these objectives and resist all efforts to drag us further into the conflict,” and echoes “calls for all states and international actors to assume their historic responsibilities to support de-escalation.”

Appeals to the government to work for a diplomatic solution are maintained even as it has made clear its commitment to the US-led war, making UK air bases available for American aircraft and deploying British aircraft to protect US bases, as well moving the destroyer HMS *Dragon* to the region.

Leaks from National Security Council meetings Labour cabinet had more than two weeks' notice of the US-Israeli attack and discussed with Washington how Britain would assist—behind the backs of the population.

The Labour government justifies its role in the illegal war by repeating the lies that Britain is acting in a “defensive” capacity, that Iran posed an imminent security threat to the UK, and that it had to be stopped from developing a nuclear weapon.

The trade union bureaucracy's appeals for diplomacy and de-escalation are a smokescreen to justify their refusal to mobilise their members. This was confirmed by their boycott of the first national anti-war demonstration in London held on March 7—organised by the Palestine Coalition eight days into the all-out assault on Iran.

The sole exception was TSSA General Secretary Maryam Eslamdoust, who addressed the rally stating: “This past week, I joined most other British trade union leaders to oppose this illegal war on Iran. And I will work with them to ensure that the United Kingdom does not become a participant in this war”.

It is a participant in the war, and any suggestion otherwise only repeats Starmer's lies.

The union bureaucracy's alliance with Starmer's Labour Party of war

The trade union bureaucracy is reading from the same script—invocations of international law and appeals to Starmer's Labour Party—used to justify its inaction during the two-and-a-half-year genocide waged against the Palestinians in Gaza.

The Stop the War Coalition and Palestine Solidarity Campaign provided platforms for RMT leader Eddie Dempsey to pose as a “friend of the Palestinians” even as he did nothing to mobilise opposition among maritime and rail workers. He justified the dispatch of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary as part of the military task force supporting Israel's siege of Gaza as a

“humanitarian” mission.

Sharon Graham, leader of Unite, conducted a witch-hunt against members demanding action to halt the supply of British-manufactured weapons and parts to Israel, using claims she was defending manufacturing jobs as a screen for protecting the interests of war profiteers.

Graham and the TUC have meanwhile promoted Britain’s role in NATO’s proxy war against Russia by invoking a “rules-based order” Britain and its allies have torn to shreds in the carve-up of the Middle East.

The TUC uses pacifist motions to deflect anti-war sentiment while supporting militarism in practice. At last year’s conference a resolution was narrowly passed declaring “welfare and wages, not weapons and war” and for the redirection of funding into public services and infrastructure.

This has made no difference to union policy—least of all among sections of the union bureaucracy integrated into the arms industry such as Unite. Graham used a union lobby of the government last month to demand a £1 billion contract be awarded to Italian-owned Leonardo’s for its production site in England for a new military transport helicopter.

Her nationalist, militarist appeal included a call for the sacking of Chancellor Rachel Reeves unless military spending increased, with Graham urging Starmer to fulfil his pledge to raise defence spending to 2.5 percent of GDP by 2027. No such calls have been made demanding Reeves’s head for the austerity imposed on the working class.

Graham greeted the awarding of the contract to Leonardo with demands for billions more for British arms manufacturers, including BAE Systems and Rolls-Royce building Eurofighter Typhoons, and Airbus UK building Skynet military satellites and A400M transport planes.

While Graham promotes “defence jobs”, the billions spent on this rearmament will be stripped from social programmes and the National Health Service. Union calls to “buy British” contribute to race-to-the-bottom economic protectionism and trade war at the expense of workers in every country.

Socialist internationalism versus the pseudo-left

The pseudo-left cheerleaders of the union bureaucracy who claim it can be pressured to oppose war have lauded the two statements on Iran.

The Socialist Party (SP) advised, referring to the May elections, “The trade union leaders could use their authority most effectively against British support for more war by calling their members to come forward as anti-war and anti-austerity candidates in those elections.”

Aside from the question of what would be left of Iran by then, the union bureaucracy has no intention of supporting a

challenge to its partner Labour government—as the SP well knows.

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) hailed the March 1 statement of general secretaries without reservation, presenting it as kick-starting a week of protests nationally. Covering for the lack of any call to action, the SWP pointed to a motion circulated by the MENA Solidarity Network inviting union branches to pass resolutions against the war.

This cited general strikes in Italy and Greece over Gaza as an example of how unions can “disrupt the war machine”. But these actions, initiated outside the leaderships of the main unions and still strictly limited, only underscored the necessity of a rank-and-file movement which breaks totally with the union bureaucracy.

The Revolutionary Communist Party concluded a piece criticising the union leaders’ “squeak of opposition” with the wishful line, “If the trade unions want to maintain any authority and relevancy in the coming struggles, they must rediscover the militant traditions that built them up in the first place, and fight the class war to a finish.”

In fact, a class struggle against war can only be waged by workers in opposition to the apparatus of the trade unions integrated into the state and major corporations. This requires the formation of rank-and-file networks aimed at deploying workers’ collective powers and resources against a ruling class waging wars across the globe and on living standards and democratic rights at home.

Such a movement must reject appeals to the Labour Party—or to its left apologists whose pacifist rhetoric conceals the predatory interests of British imperialism—reject nationalism, and turn instead to its fellow workers in Iran, the US and elsewhere. Above all, it must take up a socialist programme, recognising that the drive to war is rooted in the capitalist system and can be ended only through its overthrow by the international working class.

The urgent task is to translate widespread anti-war sentiment into an organised industrial and political offensive. Each day deepens the cost of imperialist aggression for the Iranian people and the social devastation imposed on workers in this country through austerity and the funnelling of vast resources into rearmament.

We urge workers who agree to contact the Socialist Equality Party and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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