

Trades Union Congress offers Iran war partnership with Starmer government

Tony Robson
10 April 2026

The Trades Union Congress (TUC) in Britain has offered a partnership with the Starmer government under the pretext of mitigating the economic fallout of the illegal US-Israeli war against Iran.

It did so in a March 23 press release, “Iran conflict: TUC calls for emergency taskforce to protect UK from economic shock.”

The TUC’s concerns are for the profit margins of Britain’s major corporations, combined with concern over the radicalising impact on workers of the toll on jobs and living standards. Such fears are magnified by the deepening revulsion at this criminal venture to secure control of oil resources and domination of the Middle East, with the threat of wider war.

For this reason, there is no reference in the 1,500-word statement to anti-war sentiment. The TUC, representing 5.3 million workers and 47 affiliated unions, has not organised a single protest against the Iran war, seeking to stymie opposition among their members just as they did during the Gaza genocide.

The TUC does not utter a word against the devastation inflicted on Iran—at least 1,400 civilians killed, with schools, hospitals and universities flattened. Nor has it condemned Trump’s threat to obliterate the civilisation of over 93 million people, which still hangs over Iran following a two-week extension of the deadline.

The denial of any independent voice for the working class, distinct from the corporate and financial elite, runs throughout.

TUC General Secretary Paul Nowak declares, “Unions stand ready to roll up our sleeves and act in the national interest.” Invoking the “national interest” means shoring up the Starmer government, suppressing criticism of its involvement in the war and insisting on workers making the necessary sacrifices.

The war has intensified the cost-of-living crisis. Fuel prices have surged, with petrol rising by around 25p to 157p per litre and diesel by nearly 50p to over 190p. Household energy bills are forecast to increase by £160 this year, while

oil-dependent users face more than doubled costs. Food inflation is expected to reach at least 9 percent. Borrowing costs are also rising, with mortgage rates jumping sharply and thousands of products withdrawn.

Nowak’s sole critical reference to the war is to declare that “British workers shouldn’t pay for Trump’s war with their jobs.” But it will be Starmer and Britain’s bosses, not Trump, who will impose job cuts.

Despite tensions, the Labour government has provided critical support to the Trump administration: opening RAF bases for US B-52 missions, deploying the destroyer HMS *Dragon*, and expanding Royal Air Force operations alongside Gulf monarchies acting as forward bases. But from the outset, the TUC has used the language of “de-escalation” to maintain the fiction that the Labour government’s role is defensive. Its March 2 statement—issued two days into the assault—granted that the US and Israel had “flouted” international law only to malign Iran as equally guilty for retaliatory strikes.

The COVID model – “partnership” in social murder

The TUC invokes the COVID pandemic response as a model for “social partnership” in the context of the war on Iran. Nowak states: “The lessons from the pandemic are clear. When unions, employers and government came together, we were able to move at speed to protect jobs, keep businesses afloat and give families security through an incredibly uncertain time. With the UK and global economy now facing huge shocks from the conflict in Iran we need that same approach again.”

The claim that the pandemic response aligned the interests of workers and employers under a benevolent government is a gross distortion, concealing the politically criminal role of the union bureaucracy. It rewrites history over how social murder was sanctioned by the trade unions in the interests of

profit, exposing the British ruling class's disregard for public health and workplace safety.

Following a catastrophic delay that cost thousands of lives, the March 2020 lockdown was combined with a £350 billion bailout for big business. At its peak, the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme furloughed a third of the workforce at 80 percent pay as temporary relief. Meanwhile, millions designated as essential workers—including National Health Service (NHS) staff, transport workers, teachers and postal workers—and tens of thousands at Amazon and other warehouse workers were forced to remain on the job as workplaces became major vectors for the virus. Even minimal protections went unenforced by the Health and Safety Executive. Resistance emerged only through unofficial wildcat stoppages by teachers, postal workers and other sectors against a regime enforced by the union apparatus.

Nowak is extolling a model that has left over 252,000 dead—disproportionately workers and the most vulnerable—and over 2 million permanently disabled from Long COVID.

Reviving rhetoric of the “national interest” is rendered more obscene, given how the corporate and financial elite emerged richer from the pandemic. According to Oxfam, UK billionaire wealth rose by £11 billion in 2025—around £30.3 million daily—with average gains of £231 million per billionaire. Fifty-six billionaires now hold more wealth than 27 million people—39 percent of the population.

Just as they did during the pandemic, the union apparatus is preparing to suppress strikes, enforce wage restraint and collaborate in austerity under the guise of “protecting the economy”. Vague references to supporting “sectors and businesses most at risk” and urging employers to “protect jobs” mask plans to channel public funds into corporate handouts while workers are handed minimal relief.

This is corporatism: the integration of trade unions into the state as instruments for enforcing capital's interests. Under conditions of war, it must assume an openly authoritarian character. Industrial action will be denounced as unpatriotic, dissent as aiding the enemy, and democratic rights—already under attack in relation to pro-Palestinian protests—further eviscerated.

The TUC also maintains silence over rearmament funded by cuts to public spending and the NHS. The 0.2 percent increase from next year in military spending already amounts to £13.4 billion annually and is a small downpayment on the target of 5 percent of GDP.

This underlies the union leaders' hostility to resident doctors' pay restoration demands. Health Secretary Wes Streeting stated, during the fifteenth round of strike action by 50,000 doctors in England this week, that a ban on further

strikes could not be ruled out. This revives measures akin to the Minimum Services (Levels) Act brought in by the Conservatives to outlaw strike action by 5.5 million public sector workers, which the incoming Starmer government repealed.

Such a draconian move is made necessary by the inability of the trade union bureaucracy to contain anger at its enforcement of below inflation pay settlements across 1.4 million NHS workers with the Starmer government. In a *Guardian* hit piece against resident doctors published ahead of the six-day strike, “senior” unnamed figures from other health service unions were cited complaining this was making it a “tougher sell” for them with a below inflation offer of 3.3 percent this year for nurses, paramedics and other NHS staff.

Build an independent movement of the working class

The union bureaucracy is aligning ever more openly with a ruling class waging war abroad and class war at home. The alternative lies in building rank-and-file committees in workplaces and communities, democratically controlled and independent of the union apparatus. Such committees must organise opposition to war and austerity, coordinate industrial action, and link struggles across sectors and borders.

Above all, this movement must be guided by an international socialist perspective. The drive to war is rooted in capitalism, which subordinates social need to profit and the competing interests of nation-states. It cannot be opposed on a national basis or through appeals to pro-capitalist governments.

Workers in Britain share common interests with workers in Iran, the United States and internationally. They confront the same offensive: war, austerity and the erosion of democratic rights.

The decisive task is the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), to provide the organisational and political framework to break the stranglehold of the union bureaucracy and mobilise the independent strength of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact