

Unite uses Barnsley May Day and 1926 General Strike centenary to proclaim “rebirth of the trade unions”

Robert Stevens
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On Saturday, Unite the Union, in collaboration with the local union bureaucracy in Barnsley, South Yorkshire, hosted a “Celebrate the Centenary” May Day rally centred on a commemoration of the 1926 General Strike.

It was a desultory affair. A few hundred assembled unions bureaucrats and a periphery of much older workers doffed their caps to the 1926 strike—the sole general strike called by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in its now 158 years long existence—as well as the 1984-85 national miners’ strike. But the main purpose of the day was to portray Unite’s General Secretary Sharon Graham as leading a “rebirth” of fighting trade unionism.

Graham was in attendance along with a few Unite representatives from the 15-month Birmingham bin workers’ strike. This strike was hailed as the latest in the claimed litany of stunning successes carried out under “Sharon’s” leadership.

In reality there was no large delegations of Birmingham bin workers or of workers involved in any other struggle because such claims of victory are bogus. As the WSWs has reported, Unite is seeking an end to the Birmingham strike based on a one-off payment of £16,000 that covers just two years of the pay lost by strikers and paves the way for a cull of jobs and an overhaul of terms and conditions.

On top of this, Unite announced on May Day that all further action by First Bus workers in another South Yorkshire town, Doncaster, was suspended (including a May 6 stoppage) to put a deal which the union have not publicly disclosed. A listed speaker from the bus dispute was absent on the day.

This left the mainly bureaucrats, led by Graham, and

members of pseudo-left groups to march alongside a few ex-miners from the 1984-85 strike behind National Union of Mineworkers banners, ending at the NUM headquarters.

But the British mining industry no longer exists, thanks to the betrayal of that strike by the Trades Union Congress, the Labour Party and the leaders of the NUM which refused to challenge them. The marchers are now almost all pensioners, except for those employed at the Mining Museum in nearby Wakefield, and members of UNISON not the NUM, who recently struck over poor pay.

The NUM itself exists as a “union” in name only—listing just 196 members in its December 2024 annual return.

The final Barnsley rally, with Graham as keynote speaker, represented the very forces responsible for the betrayal of 1984-85 and every betrayal thereafter.

Chair Dave Pike, general secretary of the North East Yorkshire & Humber TUC, referred to Graham cutting Unite’s affiliation fee to the Labour Party by 40 percent, commenting, “Rather than handing that money over to the Labour Party like we did in the past, we now spend campaigning on things that matter to our members so I think we should give Sharon a big shout.”

Unite in fact still gives Labour around £1 million annually, and Graham is playing a key role in ending the refuse workers’ strike at a time when Starmer is hated for his attacks on workers and Labour faces being wiped out in its former heartlands such as Birmingham.

Unison regional organiser Rianne Hooley farcically portrayed the dispute at the National Coal Mining Museum as representing the last stand of mineworkers

in Britain. Caphouse Colliery “is the last deep underground mine complex in England,” she said. “So, our members have been fighting for fair pay, but they’ve been fighting to protect the heritage of coal for future generations.”

There is no heritage of coal left to protect. Caphouse Colliery closed in 1985 after exhausting its reserves and is now a museum employing 41 ex-miners, not a pledge for the future.

Hooley nevertheless boasted, “The strike that our members have been part of has made history. Eight months and one week on strike, 250 continuous days. It’s the longest strike Unison’s ever had in Yorkshire and Humberside. And it’s the longest strike in the UK charity sector ever... And unlike the General Strike and the Great Strike [1984-85], our members have won. Third time lucky!”

This grotesque comparison was greeted with a standing ovation and cheering.

Durham Miners Gala President Alan Mardghum, a former miner who participated in the 1985-85 strike, made the only genuine reference to the role played by the trade union bureaucracy and the Labour Party in the defeat of 1984-85, when he denounced “some unscrupulous, self-serving individuals within the trade union movement, within the TUC, within the Labour Party, absolutely disgusting. The way we were treated by people like [Labour leader Neil] Kinnock and [TUC leader Norman] Willis and scum like that, absolutely disgusting.”

However, these were only the most disgusting representatives of the scum that rises to the top of the bureaucracy. The contribution made by Unite’s predecessor, the Transport and General Workers Union, to the miners’ defeat was to call off a 12-day dockers strike, deepening their isolation.

Graham, presented as the leading opponent of Starmer’s government, centred her speech on bolstering illusions that it could change course: “I’ve said to Labour, I’ve said to Labour many, many times, the working class are screaming at you, where the hell are you?”

“I say to Keir Starmer and [Chancellor] Rachel [Reeves], what the hell are we doing? Why are we not changing people’s lives? That’s what you said when you went into government. And they say to me, Sharon, there is no choice. We have no choice. And I say to

them, of course we have a choice. We are the labour movement.”

This is cynicism as an art form.

Declaring that the “The rebirth of the trade union movement has definitely begun,” Graham said, “In Unite, just in the last couple of years ago, we’ve had over 1,600 strikes... 280,000 Unite members have been out on strike. And we’ve paid £70 million in strike pay... And from those strikes, those workers have had £700 million pounds back into their pockets in just one year.”

This was the cue for further rapturous applause and whooping.

No amount of dissembling by the union bureaucracy can conceal the real impact of their sellouts, as the Birmingham bin workers will attest to if the deal goes through. Many of Graham’s deals failed to reverse years of wage decline or to match inflation, thanks to Unite dividing strikes by transport, warehouse and dock workers into isolated disputes—as extensively reported on the WSWS.

The Socialist Equality Party urges workers to attend our public meetings to mark the centenary of the 1926 British General Strike and learn the lessons from that world historic event as the basis for taking forward a successful struggle today.

Tickets are available here.

The SEP spoke to workers and youth at our campaign stall in Barnsley during the event on Saturday. Read out coverage here.



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