

# Sharon Graham and Simon Dubbins: two bankrupts face off for Unite general secretary

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The election for general secretary of Unite, the UK's second-largest trade union with more than one million members, runs from July 14 to August 11. It is contested by only two candidates: Sharon Graham, the incumbent, who was elected in 2021 with the support of just 4 percent of eligible members (on a 10 percent turnout); and Simon Dubbins, a long-serving bureaucrat who has been Unite's international director since 2008.

Graham and Dubbins both use militant-sounding rhetoric only to maintain the bureaucracy's grip over a restive membership employed across major sectors of the economy, while smothering political opposition to the most right-wing, pro-business Labour government in history.

The campaign to present Graham as a militant union leader employs a self-glorifying web page replete with headings such as "Meet Sharon", "Sharon's Plan" and "Sharon's Wins". Her leadership is presented as beyond challenge, having delivered a "return to the workplace" agenda over the past five years and "winning for workers".

The campaign boasts that Unite under Graham has been involved in 1,800 disputes covering 280,000 workers and secured more than £700 million total wage gains for members.

These soundbites conceal the real record of Graham's leadership, which came to the head of a strike movement only to demobilise it. The growth of strike action involving workers across the UK from when Graham was elected in 2021 formed part of an international resurgence of the class struggle. It was driven by the ruling class's criminal response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which prioritised corporate profits over workers' lives, and by a cost-of-living crisis intensified by soaring energy prices and corporate profiteering escalated by NATO's proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

Graham was among the most enthusiastic cheerleaders within the trade union bureaucracy for that war. Her brand of "non-political" trade unionism has been directed primarily towards resetting corporatist relations with employers, while maintaining relations with the then Conservative

government and later with Keir Starmer's Labour government.

Her playbook has been to ensure that strikes in critical branches of industry do not develop beyond isolated, locally sanctioned action. This rests on "leverage" campaigns aimed at securing a seat at the corporate table, in which she promises to police pay claims before agreeing to cuts in jobs, terms and conditions.

Attempts to portray Graham as standing up to the Labour Party—with declarations of "no more blank cheques" and citing the reduction Unite's political fund contributions—are fraudulent. After five years of headline grabbing threats by Graham to end Unite's funding for Labour, it remains one of the largest union contributors even after its 40 percent reduction of £580,000 announced in March—leaving it bankrolling this right-wing, pro-business entity with £870,000 annually.

Graham's claim to be delivering for workers by turning away from the "Westminster pantomime" have served only to ensure that Labour's lurch to the right under Starmer proceeded without any interference from Unite. This was after backing its path to government based on the promise that the Employment Rights Bill would usher in a new dawn of workers' protections.

This has been refuted by the attack launched by the Starmer government, in alliance with its flagship local authority in Birmingham, against refuse workers at the city's council yards through an unprecedented strikebreaking operation and the adoption of fire-and-rehire against drivers and loaders to eliminate 150 safety critical roles, reduce crews by a quarter and enforce pay cuts of up to £8,000 a year.

Both Graham and Dubbins have nothing to say in their election material about the most significant industrial and political struggle to have taken place under the Starmer government, now in its eighteenth month.

The isolation of the Birmingham strike by the Unite apparatus has been deliberate, aimed at engineering a sellout on what Graham touts as a "fair settlement"—one-off lump-

sum payments of between £14,000 and £20,000 which do not compensate for lost earnings over future years and accepts the new workplace regime eradicating hard-won terms and conditions.

For all Graham's left rhetoric, the Birmingham struggle has been completely isolated by the refusal to mobilise of Unite's one million members and other workers behind them. Instead, attempts to drive through the deal have involved back-door talks between Graham and the Starmer government and even private discussions between Unite officials with advisors to Nigel Farage's far-right Reform UK.

Graham opposes any opposition from the "left" to the Labour government because the bureaucracy she heads is in fundamental agreement over restructuring industry in the name of international competitiveness and support for its warmongering agenda.

In 2025 industrial action at Tata Steel in Port Talbot, South Wales, was suppressed as a strike mandate was vetoed to pave the way for 2,800 job losses. The closure of the Vauxhall van plant in Luton, with the destruction of 1,200 jobs, was carried out after Unite blocked joint action with workers at Ellesmere Port, where production was transferred.

Collusion with the attacks on the working class is bound up with Graham's pro-war positions. At the centre of this has been the witch-hunt against protests targeting UK-based arms manufacturers supplying the Israeli state with the weapons used in the slaughter in Gaza, such as at BAE Systems sites where Unite members are employed.

Graham's opposition to any organised action against increased arms exports to Israel has been justified on the pretext of protecting members' jobs. This is a filthy alibi to delegitimise workers taking action to halt a genocide.

Her "jobs first" mantra for the arms industry is a justification for a programme to repurpose the economy and place it on a war footing, with devastating consequences for the working class as social spending and National Health Service funding are sacrificed. Graham has been most full-throated in demanding billions more in arms spending and criticised Starmer for "dithering" over the announcing of the Defence Investment Plan. Now published, it commits to £298 billion to military spending through 2029/30, raising annual expenditure to almost £80 billion and 2.7 percent of GDP. This is only the first small step of a rearmament drive requiring an estimated additional £25 billion a year to meet NATO's 2035 target.

Along with her counterparts, Graham is supporting the replacement of Starmer with Andy Burnham as prime minister—who has pledged to maintain Labour's fiscal rules, slash welfare and divert resources into rearmament and war.

The embrace by Graham of right-wing positions opposing workers action against the Gaza genocide, support for ramped up arms spending and cosying up to Reform UK has enabled Simon Dubbins to present himself as an alternative.

Dubbins was placed under investigation by Graham for organising a pro-Palestinian fringe meeting at the Labour Party conference in 2023, which she had demanded should not go ahead. He is the Trade Union Liaison Officer on the Palestine Solidarity Committee, tasked with building links within the trade unions. But despite the witch-hunt he does not state in his manifesto anything about ending the collusion of the Unite apparatus with Labour government's support for war crimes, nor does he outline any strategy for workers to organise active boycotts of the Zionist regime in Israel.

Dubbins has criticised Graham for not challenging Reform UK, stating that Unite has a "unique responsibility to heal divisions, win workers back from the false promises of Farage, and ultimately stop a Reform government".

Dubbins' answer is to "hold Labour to account, demand investment and rebuild public services." It is precisely the agenda of austerity by the Labour government and its scapegoating of migrants which has provided the traction for Reform UK, aided by the suppression of the class struggle by the union bureaucracy. The Labour government is currently functioning as the preferred option of the ruling class for implementing this agenda, not as a bulwark against Reform UK.

The *World Socialist Web Site* does not support either faction of the Unite bureaucracy who are both seeking to shore up the partnership with a Labour government enforcing austerity, driving up social inequality, witch-hunting immigrants and nationalism for its warmongering purposes.

A revival of working-class struggle and democracy requires the development of a rank-and-file insurgency to break the grip of the union bureaucracy: to restore power to the shop floor and enable workers to wage unified struggles across sectors, localities and borders on the basis of their needs, not what the profit demands of the capitalist oligarchy dictate. This is the socialist and internationalist programme advanced by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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