

Pseudo-left ditch Gaza and anti-war posturing to back Sharon Graham as Unite General Secretary

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The main pseudo-left groups have declared their support for the re-election of Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham in the ballot running from July 14 to August 11 in the UK's second-largest union, with 1.2 million members in Britain and Ireland.

Faced with a challenge from Unite International Director Simon Dubbins, who emphasises his role as Trade Union Officer for the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, the pseudo-left has lined up with Graham who has been at the centre of the witch-hunt against members organising opposition to the Gaza genocide and supporting boycotts of British arms supplies to Israel. Dubbins himself was placed under investigation by Graham, when she tried to shut down a pro-Palestine fringe he organised at the Labour Party conference in 2023.

Graham has defended the arms industry and collaborated with the Starmer government under the banner of protecting “members’ jobs”, shielding Unite’s longstanding partnership with companies such as BAE Systems that profit directly from Israel’s murderous assault on Gaza. She has also been a full-throated supporter of NATO’s proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. Her backing for ramped up military spending saw her repeatedly denounce the Labour government for failure to fund the UK’s Defence Investment Plan.

Alongside Gary Smith of the GMB, she stands as the trade union leader most closely aligned with the war drive of British imperialism, which is being paid for by the working class at the expense of their living standards and the destruction of vital social gains, including the National Health Service (NHS).

For the pseudo-left groups, including all those playing a leading role in the Stop the War Coalition and the Gaza protests, this is either made a secondary issue or ignored entirely as they tout Graham’s supposed role in reviving trade union militancy presented in entirely uncritical fashion.

People Before Profit (PBP), the electoral coalition in Ireland dominated by the sister organisation of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in the UK, provide the basic template in their article endorsing Graham.

They declare that she had “so far failed to take a leading role on issues such as Palestine, climate change, and the war in Iran,” noting that “Graham’s ‘Jobs First’ approach” has been “particularly evident in her response to the war in Gaza. She has condemned protests outside arms factories linked to producing components used on the F35 which has been sold by the US to Israel and used in the Gaza genocide. Graham has weakened Unite’s relationship with the anti-war movement, claiming that it threatens members’ jobs.”

PBP solemnly declare that “In the context of a genocide, such a

position is indefensible,” before moving seamlessly on to defending the indefensible, writing that “Despite Sharon Graham’s weaknesses, her commitment to workplace organising and industrial struggle is the better option.”

The SWP (UK) wrap their support for Graham in a false flag, writing that the “Unite union leadership election shows need to build rank-and-file alternative.”

A “a stale buffet of choices” is on offer, they state, before praising Graham for having “backed more strikes than the old leadership”. After making Unite’s sanctioning of various isolated disputes, kept within the confines of Graham’s “leverage” strategy aimed at securing a seat at the corporate table, they admit that Graham has “let major industries—from steel to car manufacturing—go to the wall without strikes and makes right wing interventions over war and climate.”

Graham in fact blocked action at Tata Steel and Vauxhall in 2023 so Unite could impose thousands of redundancies in alliance with the employers and the Labour government; and supports expanded North Sea oil and gas drilling and militarism, but none of this is an obstacle to the SWP’s endorsement.

We are then told that “trade union leaders were all weak on Palestine when the genocide began, but Graham went further and condemned protests outside arms factories by Palestine Action and Workers For A Free Palestine.” But this political witch-hunting is dismissed as merely “downplaying of campaigning over political issues”. Her belated description of Gaza as “genocide pure and simple” and stated support for individual Unite members refusing to handle Israeli goods and services are hailed as victories won “under pressure from the rank-and-file”, even as they report the disqualifying caveat that this is conditional on ensuring “members jobs will not be at risk”—the same alibi the bureaucracy has always used to prevent action disrupting Britain’s support for Israel.

The SWP goes on to portray Graham as a left-wing opponent of Labour, claiming, “She has slammed the Labour government over austerity and for trying to ‘out-Reform Reform UK’.”

Naturally the SWP says nothing here about Unite officials’ back-channel discussions with Reform UK advisers over a proposed sellout of the Birmingham bin strike, because they are intent solely on boosting Graham’s oppositional credentials.

Dubbins’ own pledge to “hold Labour to account” and demand investment in public services is a fraud, negated by his continued backing of the party and the government. But Graham and Unite also continued to financially back Labour under Keir Starmer’s leadership

and she is likely to strengthen her backing once Andy Burnham takes over.

Graham's opposition to the Starmer government is overwhelmingly from the right on the key issue of military spending and war. At Unite's February lobby of Parliament demanding a £1 billion contract from the government for Leonardo to build a new range of military helicopters in Britain, she even demanded that "If [Chancellor] Rachel Reeves does not grasp the concept and doesn't care where things are made she should go."

This lines Graham up behind the most belligerent war hawks within the ruling circles who led the campaign to remove Starmer as prime minister for failing to move fast enough on cuts to welfare and public spending to pay for war. His most significant act following Burnham's return to parliament was to commit an additional £15 billion as part of £298 billion in military spending through 2029/30. Burnham has already indicated that will go further still. Graham would work hand in glove with Burnham in his efforts to do so.

She has been angling for Blairite former health secretary, Wes Streeting, to be Burnham's chancellor, ahead of Ed Miliband. Streeting served as an attack dog on NHS workers, particularly resident doctors, and is an arch Zionist. According to Unite insiders, Graham's recent hit piece in *The Times* accusing Miliband of being a "noose around the neck" of jobs for opposing the expansion of oil and gas drilling in the North Sea, was organised together with Streeting's team.

The Socialist Party (SP) is even more brazen in its backing for Graham. This parochial and nationalist outfit, dominated by trade union functionaries, does not even feel obliged to raise Gaza, nor Graham's support for militarism and war. Instead, they assert that "Undoubtedly, under Sharon Graham's leadership, Unite has been prepared to challenge Starmer's Labour government more than most unions. It played a leading role in successfully campaigning against the winter fuel payment cut and, of course, taking on Labour in Birmingham and Westminster over the bin dispute."

The example of the Birmingham bin strike alone blows apart this narrative. The article in *The Socialist* ignores Unite's back-channel discussions with the Starmer government and Birmingham City Council—before Labour lost control in May—as the two coordinated the strikebreaking operation and fire-and-rehire offensive the SP claims that Graham has "taken on".

The SP also remains silent on Graham's proposed "fair settlement" aimed at strangling the struggle, which violates every red line set by the 400 drivers and loaders when they began strike action. After isolating the strike for more than 18 months, Unite is preparing to police an agreement that tears up terms and conditions and sets a precedent for similar attacks across councils nationally. Graham's deal accepts the destruction of 150 safety-critical jobs, a quarter cut in crew sizes and permanent annual pay cuts of up to £8,000 in return for one-off payments of £14,000 to £20,000.

The SP's support for Graham reflects its extensive integration into the union apparatus, including the election of four SP members on the 41-member "Workers Unite/Back to the Workplace" slate to Unite's Executive Council, while they provides political cover for an apparatus enforcing Labour's agenda of austerity and war.

The Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) follows the same course in its article, "Unite elections: A snapshot of the mood in the workplace." Even after noting Graham's slate won the majority in the election to the executive council on a miserable turnout of only 5.9 percent, it declares:

"This swing can only be interpreted as a vote of confidence in Sharon Graham—in spite of all her faults (from her half-baked opposition to Starmer's hated Labour government, to her support for Starmer's militarism)."

Once again, what the RCP dismisses as "faults", or the PBP as "failures", are defining political questions: support for Labour's austerity agenda, militarism, NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine, complicity in the Gaza genocide and Britain's participation in the expanding US-Israeli war.

The article states:

"Graham and her allies might be more up for an industrial fight than the old guard, but their fundamental philosophy is the same. At every turn they are looking for deals, compromises, and accommodations with the bosses and the government."

But this is the RCP's customary empty phrase-mongering. The article nevertheless repeats Graham's distorted account of the pay victories since taking office, concluding that "In effect, by voting for Graham's platform, workers are saying—with scepticism—we support the industrial militancy that has taken place since Graham was elected; we want it to go the whole way'. The Revolutionary Communists fully stand by this sentiment."

What they mean in practice is that the RCP stands fully behind Graham, who they anoint as the albeit imperfect receptacle for the hopes of Unite's members that she will then proceed to dash.

This sums up the politics of the pseudo-left. Their opposition to the Gaza genocide and imperialist war ends where the interests of the trade union bureaucracy begin. There is nothing socialist or internationalist about these tendencies.

The *World Socialist Web Site* supports neither faction of the Unite bureaucracy. Graham and Dubbins both seek to preserve the union apparatus's partnership with a Labour government enforcing austerity, deepening social inequality, scapegoating immigrants and whipping up nationalism in support of imperialist war.

Billions are being diverted into rearmament while workers are told there is no money for wages, jobs or public services. The fight against war is inseparable from the struggle against the capitalist profit system that produces it and the bureaucracy that defends it.

It requires a genuine rank-and-file insurgency, not to tail after Graham and her apparatchiks, to break the grip of the union bureaucracy and return power to the shop floor. Workers must unite across industries and national borders in a common struggle against austerity, exploitation and imperialist war, based on their own needs, not the demands of capitalist profit. This is the socialist and internationalist programme advanced by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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