

## SEP (UK) 2022 Congress Resolution

# Build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees in Britain! For a global counteroffensive of the working class!

17 November 2022

*This resolution was adopted at the Sixth National Congress of the Socialist Equality Party (UK), held from October 22 to October 25, 2022. Read the full report on the Congress here.*

1. The Socialist Equality Party (UK) endorses the resolution adopted by the seventh national congress of the SEP (US) and resolves to actively and systematically build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), the democratic organ of international working-class struggle in the 21st century.

2. The IWA-RFC was founded at the initiative of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) on May Day 2021. In its founding statement, the ICFI resolved that the IWA-RFC would fight “to develop a global counter offensive of the working class” in response to decades of social counterrevolution, imperialist war, the spread of the deadly coronavirus pandemic, and the growing danger of fascism and dictatorship. The statement outlined the IWA-RFC’s historic task: to unite all sections of the international working class, coordinate its struggles on a world scale, and direct the tremendous social power of the modern world proletariat against the corporations and the capitalist system.

3. Across the world, the emergence of a movement of the international working class against social inequality and the rising cost of living confirms the historic necessity of building the IWA-RFC. The decades-long suppression of the class struggle is over, and the decade of socialist revolution has begun. Triggered by rising living costs and scarcities exacerbated by NATO’s war against Russia in Ukraine, the emerging world movement is seeking historical retribution for decades of austerity, unemployment and attacks on wages and living standards. Adding to the explosive mood in the working class is deep social anger over the ruling class response to the coronavirus pandemic, which has killed over 20 million people so far.

5. In Britain, where the ruling class is orchestrating with NATO a war between nuclear powers, ramping up military spending, and forcing the working class to foot the bill through rising energy costs and inflation, ever broader sections of the working class are entering struggle. The corporatist trade unions are at the forefront of the imperialist war drive. The trade union bureaucracy has worked to isolate and suppress growing demands for unified industrial action and to head-off a political reckoning between working class and the Tory government. In May, Unite and Unison led calls for shipping sanctions against Russia, while the TUC is demanding “immediate increases in defence spending”. The eruption of wildcat strikes on North Sea oil rigs, at Amazon, chemicals giant INEOS, oil refineries in Scotland and England and elsewhere signal a new stage of struggle. The working class is entering, ever more openly, into rebellion against the trade union bureaucracy, which functions as a police force for the corporations and the state.

## The fight for rank-and-file committees

6. In its statement announcing the formation of the IWA-RFC, the ICFI wrote, “For the working class to fight back, a path must be created to coordinate its struggles in different factories, industries and countries in opposition to the ruling class and the corporatist unions.” The task of the SEP (UK) is to *actively and systematically intervene* in this movement, to build rank-and-file committees that forge this path by breaking the domination of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy over the working class.

7. Rank-and-file committees must create conditions for the development of genuine workers’ democracy, facilitating free discussion among workers, coordinating information-sharing outside the censors of the corporate union apparatus, and planning common action among the broadest sections of the working class to achieve what workers need, not what the companies demand. As Leon Trotsky wrote in the founding document of the Fourth International, the aim is “to create in all possible instances independent militant organizations corresponding more closely to the tasks of mass struggle against bourgeois society; and, if necessary, not flinching even in the face of a direct break with the conservative apparatus of the trade unions.”

8. While the IWA-RFC is not a replacement for the revolutionary party, it is not merely an instrument of conventional trade union struggles. Its aim is to facilitate the development of a movement out of the control of the corporate-state apparatus presided over by the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and unleash the tremendous social power of the British working class. Trotsky wrote in *The Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay*, the party must “mobilize the masses, not only against the bourgeoisie, but also against the totalitarian regime within the trade unions themselves and against the leaders enforcing this regime.” Smashing the grip of the pro-corporate trade union apparatus will require nothing less than a rebellion that transfers power to the workers themselves.

9. As an initiative of the party, the IWA-RFC is the organizational form through which such a movement can develop. To unite the working class, rank-and-file committees must encompass workers of various political views who are prepared to fight together to advance the class struggle. The development of an insurrectionary movement against the Labour and trade union bureaucracy will necessarily raise historical and political questions. The SEP must strive to introduce the lessons of the historical experiences of the international working class into these struggles in order to raise the political and cultural level of the class as a whole and create conditions for the development of socialist consciousness.

## The decade of socialist revolution has begun

10. The SEP’s fight to build the IWA-RFC comes amid a global

upsurge of the working class. In 2018-19, a series of mass protests broke out across the world against inequality and decades of austerity. In Ecuador, Lebanon, Iraq, France, Sudan, Chile and dozens more countries, a series of mass protests erupted, larger and more global than even the Arab Spring demonstrations of 2011. The onset of the pandemic in early 2020 brought this movement temporarily to a halt.

11. In 2022, new protests, driven by the cost of living and the devastating impact of the pandemic, have broken out on an even broader scale. The demonstrations and strikes, which involve tens of millions of people in both developing countries and the centres of world imperialism, are the culmination of 20 years of growing working class discontent.

12. "There are times in history when large numbers of people protest about the way things are, demanding change," write the authors of a recent study called *World Protests: A Study of Key Protest Issues in the 21st Century*. "It happened in 1830-1848, in 1917-1924, in the 1960s, and it is happening again today." This movement is increasingly international and guided by a desire for radical political change. According to the *World Protests* authors, not only has "the number of demonstrations increased steadily since 2006," but "protests have become more political due to disappointments with malfunctioning democracies, frustration with politicians, and a lack of trust in governments."

13. This movement reflects the revolutionary power of an international working class that is stronger numerically, more interconnected and more urban than ever before. From 1980 to 2020, the development of the world's productive forces increased the size of the working class by 2 billion people. A majority of the world's population now lives in cities for the first time in world history, and this figure rises by the millions each week. Breath-taking technological advances have transformed the economy and open new horizons for the development of political consciousness and human culture. From 2000 to 2020, nearly 5 billion people accessed the internet.

14. The protests have either bypassed the trade unions or developed in rebellion against them. The national trade unions have universally suffered declining membership and a collapse in legitimacy. The percentage of workers who belong to trade unions fell from 36 percent in 1990 to 18 percent in 2016. The trade unions everywhere forced through the ruling class's deadly COVID policies, facilitating death on a mass scale. The bureaucracy now confronts an eruption of opposition from below.

#### **The political awakening of the working class**

15. In Britain, a rapidly growing wave of strikes, the largest in decades, is under way. The growth of working class opposition in one of the centres of imperialism is of vital strategic importance for the class struggle across Europe and all over the world. It exposes the myriad theories peddled by middle class radicals, ex-Stalinists and postmodernist academics about the supposed "end of the working class" as a revolutionary social force.

16. The emergence of this movement is part of an objective process. In the world of globalized production, the class struggle is international in form as well as content, and British workers are an integral part of a global movement. In Britain and internationally, rising inflation and price hikes for food, fuel, energy bills and other essentials, have driven new sections of workers into struggle. Strikes have taken place across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, as well as among workers of all ages and races and across various levels of pay and skill animated by rising economic and social desperation as millions go deeper into debt. The Bank of England's decision to raise interest rates is aimed at suppressing workers' wage demands. Higher interest rates will drive up unemployment and unleash mortgage "carnage" with families threatened with default. Higher borrowing rates will force a further wave of attacks on pay and conditions. The pound's collapse to its lowest level in 37 years against the US dollar will exacerbate the cost-of-living crisis,

unleashing ever more explosive social struggles.

17. Workers in Britain have also passed through critical experiences in the class struggle since the start of the pandemic. The malign response of the ruling class to the pandemic and its reckless indifference to human life has produced a sea change in the consciousness of the working class. Millions experienced the parasitic and criminal nature of capitalism and the fundamental truth that workers are the sole creators of wealth without whom society cannot function. These deeply felt class sentiments, suppressed at the start of the pandemic, are erupting to the surface. The role of the SEP has not been that of a passive observer commenting on these struggles from afar, but of an active participant, fighting to cut a path for workers to break through the isolation imposed on them by the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, and to unite with the growing world movement of the working class through the building of the IWA-RFC.

18. The SEP has fought to mobilize opposition among workers to the profit-driven policies pursued by capitalism in the pandemic. In Britain, the SEP intervened among transport workers, teachers, NHS, Royal Mail and warehouse and logistics workers who came forward to oppose the Johnson government's homicidal "herd immunity" strategy. March 2020 saw unofficial walkouts by postal workers over COVID safety, strike votes by sixth-form college lecturers and London Underground drivers, and petitions by doctors on PPE supplies, and by hundreds of thousands of parents demanding the closure of schools to prevent the spread of the deadly virus.

20. The demands for a safe workplace and public health measures to suppress the virus placed the working class on a collision course with the labour and trade union bureaucracy. The SEP acted decisively to provide the political and organisational means for the working class to fight back and assert its independent class interests. The formation of the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee and the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee in September 2020, and the expansion of NHS Fightback, was the conscious expression of a developing rebellion of the working class against the trade unions' explicit prioritisation of corporate profits over lives.

21. On April 4, 2020, amid a growing death toll from COVID-19 among London bus drivers, the SEP intervened against Unite the union's open collusion with the bus operators. The WSWs denounced letters jointly signed by Unite, the bus companies and Mayor of London Sadiq Khan announcing that PPE face masks were "not recommended", declaring the virus was "low risk" and stating their commitment to "industrial harmony", i.e., the suppression of strikes. The article was widely shared among drivers and the SEP and WSWs became a pole of attraction for workers looking to fight back. Established by drivers at Cricklewood and other garages, the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee opposed Unite's collusion with the bus companies and TfL in concealing COVID infections and deaths and demanded safety measures to protect drivers from infection. The committee's work expanded to involve bus workers across London, including the recently formed committee at Merton garage in south London.

22. At Cricklewood garage the committee sounded the alarm over a cluster of COVID-19 infections in early January 2021 being concealed by Metroline bus company and Unite. David O'Sullivan, a driver at the garage and a founding member of the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee, was sacked for blowing the whistle on this cover-up and for asserting his rights to a safe workplace under Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act. O'Sullivan's sacking by Metroline, with the support of Unite which submitted trumped-up evidence against him, exposed the unions' role in transforming workplaces into mass incubators for COVID-19. While O'Sullivan was dismissed for "gross misconduct", the companies and TfL got away with murder over the preventable deaths of more than 76 bus workers. The campaign for O'Sullivan's reinstatement has won the sympathy and support of thousands of bus

drivers and key workers across the UK and internationally.

23. Hundreds of thousands of teachers, school staff and parents also came into struggle against the government's refusal to shutdown unsafe schools, a major factor in forcing Prime Minister Boris Johnson to announce the first lockdown on March 23, 2020. However, the government worked systematically to overturn the public health measures it had reluctantly introduced. It relied on the education unions to do so. The reopening of schools in September 2020 led to a sharp rise in infections and deaths, fuelling a second wave of the pandemic over the winter months that killed more than 56,735 people. On January 3, 400,000 teachers attended an online meeting of the National Education Union (NEU) demanding action to protect lives. The NEU, which had insisted that "schools must stay open", was forced to advise teachers to issue section 44 letters refusing to work in unsafe environments, whilst insisting, "This is emphatically not a strike!" Tens of thousands of teachers refused to turn up to work January 4, forcing the Johnson government to announce an immediate national lockdown. The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee gave conscious expression to this incipient rebellion, issuing statements addressed to educators and parents and organising public meetings to oppose the education unions' criminal policies. It opposed Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer's declaration that schools must remain open "no ifs, no buts", exposing the conspiracy of Labour and the unions to beat back teachers' opposition and force students into unsafe public schools as necessary step in forcing parents to return to work.

24. The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (UK) was developed in close collaboration with rank-and-file committees in the United States, Germany, Australia and Canada. The committees forged links with scientists and public health experts, establishing the necessity for a strategy of COVID eradication against the Johnson government's policy of "letting the virus rip" and the token mitigation measures advocated by sections of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy to justify the full reopening of schools. In September 2021, the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee backed the call by parent Lisa Diaz for a school strike against the compulsory return to in-person teaching. The IWA-RFC mobilised worldwide support among parents and educators for a series of one-day school strikes in October in direct defiance of the unions, revealing the potential for globally coordinated action by workers to end the pandemic.

#### **The emerging confrontation between the working class and the bureaucracy**

25. The TUC and its affiliated unions have not succeeded in defeating the class struggle, only in further exposing themselves. The collision between the workers and the pro-corporate unions has become more direct. Workers have repeatedly rejected sell-out pay deals from the unions and demonstrated their determination to fight through unanimous strike votes. Faced with a growing strike wave during this year's "summer of discontent", the TUC and its affiliated unions worked to prevent a general strike, seeking to defend profits, prevent the Johnson government from being brought down, and to facilitate Britain's lead role in NATO's war against Russia. Pay rates for workers fell by a record 7 percent RPI in the year to April-June 2022, after the longest period of wage suppression since the Napoleonic Wars. Take home pay was slashed by £20,000 between 2008 and 2021.

26. In Britain, the birthplace of the trade unions, union membership has collapsed from 13 million in 1979 to just 6.5 million today. Workers have voted with their feet against the corporatist integration of these organisations with management, Tory and Labour governments and the state. Just 12.8 percent of private sector employees are unionised, and 50.1 percent in the public sector, mainly in education, health, and the civil service. Among young workers, only 19.8 percent of union members are aged 25-34, and just 4.3 percent are aged 16-24.

27. Faced with the collapse of union membership among some of the most exploited sections of the working class, representatives of the affluent pseudo-left have sought to build small and supposedly independent unions among platform workers in the gig economy and outsourcing sector. These include the United Voices of the World and Independent Workers Union of Great Britain. Operating within the orbit of the TUC and the Labour Party, they are independent in name only. They promote middle class identity politics, claiming that the exploitation of migrant workers is the product of race not class. This divisive politics must be opposed through the unification of all sections of the working class in the fight for social equality, against the state and its loyal defenders in the Labour Party and TUC.

28. The emerging conflict between the working class and the Labour and trade union bureaucracy has revolutionary implications. That is why Labour "lefts" and some trade union leaders such as the RMT's Mick Lynch, launched Enough is Enough to promote the myth of a "rebirth" of the unions and to corral the emerging mass movement of workers back behind the Labour Party. Similar considerations lay behind the promotion by the pseudo left tendencies of Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham as leading a "return to the shop floor", with Graham declaring that Unite "does what it says on the trade union tin". It has allowed her to proclaim below inflation pay deals as victories, leaving a wave of disgust and anger in her wake. A head-on confrontation between the working class and the bureaucratic apparatus is inevitable.

29. The incoming Truss and Sunak governments have unveiled a class war offensive, including legislation to ban strikes outright in industries deemed essential. During this summer's rail strikes workers were denounced as "Putin's stooges" and "the enemy underground" – a reference to Margaret Thatcher's designation of the miners as "the enemy within" that she was able to crush through state violence due to the TUC and Labour Party isolating their year-long strike. The rail unions' response to the Tory's naked class war policies has been to appeal to the government to come together in the "national interest" and reach a negotiated settlement. In September, the unions seized on the death of Queen Elizabeth II to cancel strikes and try and bury mounting class anger beneath a deluge of nationalist and militarist propaganda. But the class struggle is returning with renewed force.

30. What is emerging in Britain is not merely an episodic reaction by workers to a downturn, but a social explosion produced by decades of social counterrevolution. Beginning with the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 and the defeat of the miners' strike in 1984-85, the past four decades have witnessed the vicious suppression of the class struggle. But over those four decades, the condition of British capitalism has also undergone a vast change. Today, Britain resembles a failed state. The material basis for the post-war "welfare state" and its promise of care from "cradle to the grave" has been eviscerated as Britain sought to offset its global decline through a social counter-revolution against the working class, transforming the economy into a plaything for the super-rich.

31. The objective conditions which allowed the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy to dominate the working class have disappeared, and with that the ideological influence of reformism and anti-communism has been drastically eroded. Britain's transformation from a bastion of reformism in the post-war period to a country ravaged by poverty, hunger and mass death in the pandemic is producing a political reorientation of the working class, with immense possibilities for the growth of Marxism. As the SEP (US) wrote in its 2010 program, "The change in objective conditions will lead American workers to change their minds." The same holds for Britain.

32. Objective conditions are ripe for the revolutionary political awakening of the British working class as part of the growing movement of the global working class. The explosive crisis of the US political system, manifested in Trump's fascist coup attempt of January 6, 2021, is

only the sharpest expression of the collapse of capitalist democracy in every country. In Britain, the architecture for a police state is being erected, with laws introduced that effectively end the right to protest. Meanwhile, the British government has imprisoned WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange for exposing the war crimes of imperialism and has approved his extradition to the US where he faces 175 years in prison under the Espionage Act, rubberstamped by the highest levels of the British judiciary and by the Parliamentary Labour Party. It confirms that the solution to the crisis of British society will not come through the sclerotic Westminster system, but by building a mass working class movement against it. Whether this movement achieves its revolutionary potential depends on the activity of the SEP.

#### **The tasks of the SEP**

33. This situation places immense responsibilities on the party and its cadre. A powerful movement in the working class is underway. If it is not to be disrupted and betrayed by the trade union bureaucracy, this movement must find the organizational and political means through which it can articulate itself as an independent force and as part of a world movement. Only the SEP can provide these means. The development of the IWA-RFC is a central task of the SEP in the coming period.

34. The party must forge this path by promoting and popularizing the network of international rank-and-file committees, drawing in ever broader layers of workers and young people. The party must identify critical workplaces, neighbourhoods and schools in which it will fight for influence. Its branches and members must systematically, consciously and creatively fight to build rank-and-file committees as leadership bodies for democratic discussion and common action, as well as schools for making the experiences of different struggles the common property of the class as a whole. The party must strive to unite workers of all races, national backgrounds, ages and skill sets, ruthlessly opposing all efforts to divide workers through racism, identity politics and anti-immigrant chauvinism.

35. In developing the semi-insurgent movement of workers against the apparatus of the trade union bureaucracy the IWA-RFC must also orient to the majority of workers who stand outside these moribund organisations. Young workers especially have only known a working life of precarious employment, low wages and zero hours contracts. The party must develop its work in the warehouse and logistics industry with large concentrations of workers, operated by vast transnational corporations in the system of global supply chains. This year's wildcat action by Amazon workers highlights the importance of developing International Amazon Workers Voice (IAWV) with our comrades internationally.

36. A vital element of the work of the IWA-RFC in 2022 is the historic campaign in the US by Mack Truck worker and socialist William Lehman for UAW president in the November election. Lehman's intervention gives a powerful lead to the IWA-RFC throughout the world. It has shown how a principled struggle can and must be conducted among workers in the trade unions. Lehman's campaign is not aimed at the "reform" of the UAW by changing its leadership, but at mobilizing the broadest section of autoworkers in a mass movement to abolish the bureaucracy, transfer power to the rank-and-file, and return its resources to the workers. The response to Will's campaign is testimony to the reawakening of the American working class and has exposed the lies peddled by the bureaucracy and their pseudo-left apologists that the ICFI is "sectarian" and "anti-union". We are the most active fighters in the class struggle, among both unionised and non-unionised workers.

37. In developing the work of the IWA-RFC, the role of the *World Socialist Web Site* as the essential scaffolding for the political education and organisation of the working class is immense. The WSWS has played the central role in the development of rank-and-file committees in Britain and internationally, including via industrial coverage, interviews, political analysis, polemics and statements addressing the concerns of workers and providing leadership in struggle. The role of the WSWS as the repository

of Marxism and of the struggle of the world Trotskyist movement since 1923 to defend and develop the strategy of world socialist revolution, will inspire and sustain the struggles of the IWA-RFC throughout the world.

38. Through their interventions in every section of the working class, the members of the SEP will fight to establish the SEP's right to leadership in the working class by systematically developing contacts and political relationships with workers, training the best and most serious workers as socialists and recruiting them to the party.



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