

# Labour's Heathrow airport expansion and the climate crisis

Thomas Scripps  
30 January 2025

Part of the Labour government's Thatcherite, deregulating "growth" plan is to give the go ahead to a third runway at Heathrow airport, expand Luton airport and build an "emergency" runway at Gatwick airport.

Aside from increased noise pollution—Heathrow already impacts more than three times as many people as any other European airport—concerns about air quality and the shifting of investment yet again to London and the South East, the decision rubbishes UK climate commitments.

Last year was the hottest in recorded history, with the planet on course to smash through the 1.5 degree, 2 degree and possibly even 3 degrees Celsius heating thresholds. The known consequences include countless more deaths due to environmental disasters, disease and hunger, the uprooting of millions around the world, and trillions of dollars in damages to homes and communities.

What is required just to stabilise this global catastrophe—simply limiting heating to 1.5 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial average—is simple to state in numerical terms. According to the United Nations, greenhouse gas emissions must be cut by 45 percent compared with projections based on current policies by 2030 and the planet must be "net zero" for greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

The term "net zero" is problematic, disguising reliance on a number of highly questionable carbon capture and storage policies and technologies. It is enough for the purposes of this article to describe the targets set out above as an absolute minimum level of action. Under these conditions, Labour's airport expansion plans are an act of act of appalling environmental and social vandalism.

According to the airports' own evaluations, the plans will increase passenger numbers at Heathrow, Gatwick and Luton to 243 million a year in 2050—100 million more than in 2018—taking total UK passenger numbers to 392 million.

This would be a 34 percent increase on 2018. The UK's Climate Change Committee (CCC) has said passenger numbers should increase by no more than 25 percent over 2018 levels (which would be possible within current airport capacity) if the government is to meet its own 2050 climate targets.

The CCC, a relatively tame government advisory body, is very clear. There can be "no net capacity expansion at UK airports" if the aviation sector is to contribute as planned to carbon reduction targets. In total, more than 20 airports across the UK have plans for expansion.

The government's suggestion that the impact can be sustainably offset by the use of biofuels is a lie.

In the first place, this technology does not exist at scale. According to the International Air Traffic Association, global demand will require the construction of thousands of new facilities at a cost of \$128 billion a year for the next three decades. None of the five sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) production facilities planned for the UK have even begun to be built.

In 2023, the CCC criticised the Conservative government for its aviation plans which "rel[ie]d heavily on nascent technologies". This government's own mandate on the subject requires just 2 percent of total jet fuel to be provided by SAF this year, rising to 10 percent in 2030 and 22 percent in 2040—though the industry has provided no clear route to meeting these targets.

SAFs themselves are not totally carbon neutral, in the best case reducing emissions relative to standard jet fuel by 80 percent.

Even before this week's expansion plans, analysis by Carbon Brief noted that the emissions reductions implied by mandating 22 percent SAF in 2040 would be almost totally eliminated by increases in air travel—falling by just 0.8 percent.

SAFs also require enormous tracts of land. A 2023 report by the Institution of Mechanical Engineers

estimated that meeting the UK's aviation fuel demands through SAFs alone would require fully half of its agricultural land, though the reality is that this demand would be imposed on poorer regions of the world. One study suggested that expected aviation demand in 2050 would require 300 million acres of cropland if met entirely by SAFs—the size of India, or 20 percent of land currently used for crops.

This would conflict sharply with biodiversity targets, not to mention food production. If biofuel crops replace carbon-rich forests, then SAFs' overall reduction of emissions versus regular jet fuel would be significantly reduced.

The Labour government, like all capitalist governments, is pushing for profits at the expense of the planet and the people on it.

Announcing the runway expansion and other projects, Chancellor Rachel Reeves' snide reference to developers being able to “stop worrying about the bats and the news” was aimed at setting up a claimed popular prosperity against supposedly inconsequential environmental concerns.

The reality, as reported by the New Economics Foundation, is that “despite a rapid increase in passengers between 2015 and 2019, the amount of jobs in the air transport sector has declined since 2007, and the sector is one of the poorest job creators per pound of revenue, with wages lower than they were in 2006. Despite growth in productivity, the sector has seen the biggest post-financial crisis wage decline of any sector”.

By contrast, the consequences of global heating are real and fall heavily on the most vulnerable: globally and within the richer countries.

Aviation contributes significantly to this process. It accounts for 8 percent of UK emissions and 2.5 percent of global emissions—roughly the same as the world's fifth largest carbon emitting country, Japan. The industry drives global heating more than this figure suggests—given the effect of non-carbon emissions like water vapour and nitrous oxides in the atmosphere—likely accounting for between 4-7 percent of average temperature rises.

The vast bulk of this impact is caused by a small section of society. In the UK, just 15 percent of the population take 70 percent of the flights; 10 percent take roughly half the flights; 1 percent account for a fifth of flights—a rich group of frequent flyers.

Accounting also for the even greater inefficiency of flying first, premium or business class, one major study estimates that just 1 percent of the population globally

accounts for 50 percent of all aviation emissions: just a part of their gargantuan carbon footprints, twice as large collectively as those of the bottom 50 percent of the world's population.

Private jets alone account for 4 percent of aviation emissions—a small percentage but representing a massive carbon footprint per person given the tiny number of people taking such flights—while just under a fifth are from freight flights run by major corporations.

It is the rich and the corporations who will take the lion's share of the benefits from Labour's and all airport expansions, while the poorest around the world pay the costs.

Aviation underscores the revolutionary nature of the challenge posed by climate change. Between 1995, the year of the first COP Summit, and 2024 the number of trips made by air passengers more than tripled from 1.3 billion to 4.1 billion.

The opportunity for international travel represented by these figures is an enormous cultural boon and connects millions of families with relatives living abroad. But it must be provided on an equal basis internationally and as part of a globally sustainable industry and infrastructure, operating within rational limits for emissions and resource use.

It is not possible either to construct this infrastructure or to ensure its fair use in a society perverted by a market economy, inequality and the hunger for profit; it requires a democratically planned, socialist system. Only on this basis can overland and oversea transport be massively expanded, along with the free and holiday time to make use of it, and new, ecologically efficient technologies developed at the speed required.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**