Bread and Butter Is Not Enough

Trade unions are grappling with an era of rearmament and climate breakdown. Amid these crises, a renewed labour internationalism is needed.

9 Dec 2025 • Rebekah Diski

1 Introduction

2 Guns, Not Butter

3 Trade Unionism on a Burning Planet

4 Rediscovering Internationalism

Introduction

In recent years, the anaemic growth of many advanced economies alongside spectacular Chinese development has seen states (re)discover a taste for industrial strategy. This shift has taken a decisively militaristic turn. Annual US military spending will exceed $1 trillion for the first time, alongside billions in military assistance to a genocidal regime in Israel. In the EU and the UK, where self-imposed fiscal austerity obstructs adequate public investment in health, housing and climate mitigation, billions can be found for attack submarines, fighter jets and nuclear warheads — all with their own astronomical environmental cost.

Most trade unions representing workers in military industries have accepted official assessments of heightening insecurity and welcomed the vision of revitalised shipyards and job-creating drone hubs. This optimism is misplaced: economic renewal delivered by a largely privatised military-industrial complex is doubtful. Moreover, the resort to economic nationalism, intensified resource extraction and heightened militarism is palpably at odds with any clear-eyed definition of global security. States are rearming and doubling down on fossil fuels in an attempt to claim space within the debris of the old international order. So far, resistance in the Global North has been either too easily marginalised by repression — as in the case of direct action groups swiftly criminalised for protest — or too muted — as in the largely rhetorical stands of UK and US unions against genocide and global heating; unions in Belgium, Italy and across the Mediterranean have been more proactive.

There is a tendency on both left and right to assume that trade unions are inherently progressive actors, poised to stall the machinery of capital in the interests of the working class. In fact, their capacity and willingness to play a

transformative role is contingent on various factors, including their political orientation, membership and the wider political economic and legislative context. Different unions have played alternately radical and reactionary roles in a chequered history: they have won tangible victories for working-class life and inspired international solidarity; at other times, they have supported the imperialist and nationalist endeavours that deepen divisions among workers across and within borders. Today, amid declining membership and hostile political environments, many unions confine their role to the "bread and butter" issues of members' pay, terms and conditions. This has seen them adopt positions, notably on militarism and climate breakdown, that appear incompatible with international peace and a habitable planet.

The labour movement is of course not homogenous, and these positions are contested in both inter- and intra-union organising, drawing on traditions of internationalism and "social movement" unionism. These efforts offer an opening to reconceptualise unions as social actors beyond the workplace, to reconstitute them as powerful organs of a heterogeneous working class and as participants in the politics of planetary and collective safety we need to help navigate the twin transitions out of imperialist hegemony and fossil capitalism.

Guns, Not Butter

Keir Starmer has vowed to make Britain an "armour-clad nation", promising an army that is "ten times more lethal" by 2035. This was a grim echo of Kamala Harris' 2024 presidential campaign, during which she boasted that the US had the most lethal fighting force in the world; not best, not most effective, but *lethal* — the salient metric is body count. As in Europe, Starmer justifies his military largesse by invoking a new era of insecurity inaugurated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In reality, while Russian imperialism has devastated that country, "assessments of Russian military strategy give no indication of a direct threat to EU and NATO member states." Domestically, leaders also talk up the prospects of new jobs and reindustrialised communities as a "defence dividend", but here too the case is overstated.

Sharon Graham, General Secretary of Unite, the UK's second-largest union, has celebrated the increased investment and demanded Starmer honour his earlier promise to "translate defence spending into British growth, British jobs, British skills, British innovation" (echoing Gordon Brown's formulation of "British jobs

for British workers"). Graham has made the military industry a strategic priority, admitting to spending much of her time with defence companies and being "very vocal about the fact that we need to spend more money on defence" as long as that means "buy[ing] British" — for example choosing Typhoon fighter jets assembled in Lancashire over American F-35s. She also argued that the military uplift should not come at the expense of other spending commitments, from social welfare to international aid. She is likely to be disappointed on both counts (indeed, the aid cuts have already been announced).

The UK military industry enjoys extraordinary state support, largely in the form of government subsidies for Research and Development (R&D); the government buys back the resulting products and services as the industry's largest and most faithful customer. The profits flow directly to private contractors, many of them owned by the same asset management firms. The economic contribution of the military industrial base — lauded by successive governments and unions alike — is therefore a product of state sponsorship. This support certainly sustains employment around key sites, but the rich seams of jobs implied by a defence dividend are overblown. Recent research shows that military spending creates significantly fewer jobs than equivalent investment in health, education or environmental protection. Employment in the military sector has more than halved since 1980, a trend that is likely to continue due to the capital-intensive and automated nature of production. The UK's military industry and strategy are also deeply imbricated with those of the US: British job creation is subordinate to the "special relationship", underpinned by steadfast commitments to follow the US into catastrophic military interventions, to service it with a network of UK bases and to buy its materiel.

The hope that governments will increase military *and* social spending is even more forlorn. The trade-offs have already been made. In the UK, the Labour leadership has already cut international aid and — although many of the government's planned cuts to disability support were successfully resisted — future welfare cuts are all but guaranteed. In the US, the "One Big Beautiful Bill Act" bolstered border and military spending while cutting Medicaid and food benefits for the poorest Americans as well as support for renewable energy. Exceptions to fiscal austerity at the EU level, and even to Germany's

constitutionally enshrined debt brake, have been made for rearmament while plans to decarbonise and repair social infrastructure are put aside.

Trade Unionism on a Burning Planet

Nostalgia animates the relationships of traditional industrial unions to both the military and fossil fuel industries as guarantors of the types of jobs that were once the backbone of the labour movement. There are reasons to be nostalgic: the movement's strength was accompanied by falling inequality, which sunk to its lowest point in 1979 when union membership peaked at thirteen million in the UK, over half the working population. With the advent of neoliberalism and its noxious cocktail of deregulation, privatisation and demolition of trade union power, inequality climbed back up while union membership fell to twenty-two per cent, where it hovers today (in the US it is just ten per cent). Unable to reverse these trends, unions have guarded the remnants of the energy and manufacturing industries even as — in the case of military and fossil fuels — this hitches workers' fates to the endurance of activities that make the world profoundly less safe.

If there is a chance to cling to decent blue-collar jobs, to retain skills and support local economies, should they not grab it with both hands, no matter the impact on workers elsewhere? Some will argue that unions are national organisations accountable to their members, who are themselves exposed to the vagaries of a contemporary capitalism that seeks to lower their pay, erode their benefits, surveil them at work and control them with algorithms. This is true, but it belies a more emancipatory potential through which unions can meet the crises of the day.

Union members today work disproportionately in the public and service sectors and have much to lose from an economy that puts warfare before welfare. In much of the labour movement's debates over the conjunctural crises of capitalism, however, it is the idealised industrial worker that takes precedence. While countless headlines and interviews with union leaders have documented the loss of thousands of jobs from the mishandled deindustrialisation of the Port Talbot steelworks and the Grangemouth oil refinery, the much larger losses associated with public sector austerity have received less attention, even from the unions that have larger memberships in the latter. Remarkably, GMB General Secretary Gary Smith has not publicly commented on a report from his

own union that found 600,000 local authority job cuts since 2012; cuts that affect not just those workers but the wider working class who rely on their services.

Unions have been slow to adapt to the changing composition of the economy and the workforce, the fleet-footedness of global capital and the challenges of organising increasingly atomised and precarious workers. Independent unions like the International Workers of Great Britain (IWGB) and California's Childcare Providers Union (CCPU) have attempted to reach these groups, but for the most part the traditional infrastructure of organised labour remains defensive. Given the decades-long corporate and state-sponsored attack on labour, this can appear reasonable, but it may not be sufficient to meet the threats of the current conjuncture. Economic stagnation, the domination of asset-manager capitalism, automation, militarism, and climate and ecological breakdown demand novel responses that go far beyond unions' reflex to preserve what they already have.

The transition to a low-carbon economy is a case in point. In radical corners of the international labour and climate movements, the concept of a "just transition" has become a vessel for economic and social transformation covering climate reparations, Indigenous rights, land reform and more. For most labour federations and policymakers, however, it means protecting workers in carbon-intensive industries from policies that might cost them their jobs. At the national level, unions representing those workers remain sceptical. Richard Trumka, former president of the American Federation of Labour and Congress of Industrial Organisations (AFL-CIO) spoke for many when he described the just transition as "an invitation to a fancy funeral."

In the UK, the GMB, as well as being "unashamedly pro-defence," supports airport expansion, fracking and further oil and gas exploration, setting the immediate economic concerns of carbon-intensive industries against the general interest. Unite is more equivocal but also supports the preferred solutions of the oil and gas industry, like carbon capture and storage, which presumes the continued use of fossil fuels long into the future. This reflects the partnership model in which unions prefer collaborative over adversarial approaches to industrial relations: union officials are more likely to align with employers' assessments of what is best for the business and, by extension, employees. This explains Gary Smith's exclamation that "oil and gas is not the enemy."

As critics within the labour and climate movement have observed, the partnership model forecloses the kind of "proactive, participatory and transparent union planning" that could protect long-term job security, the climate and "the common interest of the working class." Allying with multinational companies does not protect workers, even on its own terms. These strategies attribute job losses to climate policy without reversing the wider economic forces at work: oil and gas jobs have declined because of dwindling North Sea reserves and market volatility; aviation jobs have been lost to automation and overcapacity; British steel is uncompetitive due to high energy prices and global overproduction. To this we can now add AI, entrusted by the British government with nothing short of "national renewal" but more likely to eat away at jobs, devour precious energy and further empower US tech giants.

While these trends are particularly pronounced in the UK, where the state is perennially averse to public investment in civilian sectors, other industrialised economies are exposed. Some workers may benefit from onshored jobs, but their quality and security are far from guaranteed. Even these diminished rewards are only possible under the rubric of economic nationalism: in the context of global deceleration, one nation's growth is another's decline, with states vying for capital investment and increasingly scarce resources to stimulate activity in national economies. This was manifest in "Bidenomics" and is more naked still in Trump's tariffs, both animated by the desire to kneecap China and confine developing economies to the role of supplying raw materials in the international division of labour. This, recently exacerbated by the rearmament frenzy, inevitably undermines the international cooperation required to address the climate and ecological crises, risks war and feeds an ascendant far-right.

Rediscovering Internationalism

Trade unions are pulled in three directions: as arbiters of the wage-labour relationship, they face the market; as workers' organisations, they defend the collective interests of the class against employers; and as actors constrained within a social framework, they are oriented towards improving wider society. Their history is shaped by what Richard Hyman calls this "triple tension at the heart of union identity and purpose". [1] In the English-speaking world, this

tension has most often been resolved in favour of the market, concerned primarily with collective bargaining for pay and conditions.

The rallying cry of "workers of the world, unite!" resonates throughout the labour movement, but historically its bureaucracies have been instrumental in producing difference. [2] Marx was an early critic of trade union nationalism, identifying anti-Irish prejudice as "the secret of the impotence of the English working class." As Irish labourers were ultimately absorbed into the category of "white", unions erected racialised barriers against Jewish immigrants and later those from Britain's disintegrating empire, while also resolutely defending their male membership from the competition of cheaper women's labour. [3]

By the First World War, nation trumped class and trade unions joined the war effort with enthusiasm, greatly strengthening their membership in the boom of wartime production. The radical Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was the only American union to oppose the war, for which many of its cadres were imprisoned during the first "red scare." In the speech that got him arrested, Eugene V. Debs, founding member of the IWW and five-time socialist presidential candidate, proclaimed, "I am opposed to every war but one; I am for the war with heart and soul, and that is the world-wide war of social revolution."

At its most expansive, the labour movement was instrumental in securing broad political and social gains like the eight-hour working day, the weekend and welfare provision. These concessions were won from state and capital when both were threatened by geopolitical and economic forces, notably the rise of the Soviet Union. Despite virulent anti-communism in society and the labour movement itself, a radical streak persisted, and Communist parties briefly played a significant role in the early twentieth century, notably organising miners in the Jim Crow South and in the strikes and anti-war struggles of Glasgow's Red Clydeside.

After the Second World War, the official organs of American and British labour bolstered imperialist projects, with the Trades Union Congress (TUC) working against the anti-colonialism of unions in Britain's empire, and the AFL-CIO cheerleading US interventions in Latin America and Vietnam. These bureaucracies have progressed, making strides in equalities law at home and avowing international solidarity, though generally stopping short of material support. There were outliers: the position of William Winpisinger, leader of the

International Association of Machinists (IAM) in the 1970s, offers a glimpse of a radical alternative to co-option into the military-industrial complex. Not wanting his members "to depend forever on world terror in order to survive as an economic unit", Winpisinger supported converting the arms industry to more peaceful production. This was also the established position of the Transport and General Workers Union in the UK (TGWU, merged with Amicus in 2007 to form Unite), which proposed socially useful jobs as an alternative to those based on Cold War nuclear proliferation. These attempts to influence government policy ultimately failed, but the vision echoes today in calls to redirect military jobs and skills towards green infrastructure.

The cleavage between the bread-and-butter issues of pay and conditions and community struggles against war oppression and ecological collapse remains stark. Unions have consistently isolated their members' interests *at work* from their broader interests as social beings. For twenty months, the main unions representing military workers in the US and the UK ignored a call from Palestinian trade unionists to block the manufacture and export of arms raining down on Gaza. Sharon Graham, of Unite, reprimanded those who protested outside arms factories that "the 'first claim' on our priorities is always the protection and advancement of our members' interests at work" and repudiated internal efforts to "undermine the defence industry or demand the disbandment of NATO."

Internationalism, though long ailing, is not dead. Dockworkers across Europe have refused to handle material en route to Israel, sometimes backed by union bureaucracies as in the case of the French CGT. Grassroots unions in Italy have called three general strikes, the largest of which drew hundreds of thousands of workers into the streets to protest the government's support of Israel and its "war economy." In the UK, some public sector and smaller unions have developed strong anti-war and internationalist identities and have called for a just transition away from fossil fuelled and military industry. Workers themselves are resisting from within: pushed by members in aerospace and shipbuilding, a Unite policy conference resolved to support those refusing "to build, handle or transport weapons destined for Israel." The TUC narrowly passed a motion to support "wages not weapons," reversing an earlier policy to campaign for more military spending (Unite, GMB and Prospect voted against). In July 2024, seven US unions called for an end to military assistance to Israel. These moves are not sufficient, but they provide crucial space to

organise against the headlong thrust into the abyss offered by mainstream politics.

If the labour movement seems ill-equipped to resolve today's intersecting crises, there are also clearly no just solutions without it. Unions remain representative institutions that can play a crucial role in building support for the radical politics this moment requires. Workers have the structural power to disrupt a system that consumes labour and nature as raw materials for untrammelled growth. That system does not care if work is physically exhausting, mind-numbing, underpaid, intolerably hot or hard to find. It does not care if it fuels wars, razes forests, dries rivers or, ultimately, degrades the planet beyond habitability, as long as it continues to augment capital. It is adept at carving new and inventive divisions that stifle the forms of solidarity needed to unite against it.

Organising workers across those divisions would require revitalised and democratised union infrastructure; it would mean prioritising political education and reframing what workers can do within a trade union, what counts as work and who does it. The traditional quest for class consciousness would need to evolve to accommodate the range of modalities through which class is lived, to borrow from Stuart Hall. [4] Such a consciousness would not revolve around an essential worker — previously idealised as white, male and industrial — but would find commonalities in the distinct experiences and identities of those exploited through various forms of work and non-work.

Un- and under-paid care workers, long integral to capital accumulation, are at the forefront of a crisis of care characterised by chronic underinvestment, rent-seeking, appalling working conditions and an increasingly sick population. Intermittent, un- and under-employment is likely to become more prevalent as capital innovates to squeeze profit out of a decelerating global economy — not by productively investing but by further transforming housing, nature, public services, data and other essentials into assets from which rent is extracted. Unions cannot answer these forces by throwing in their lot with the corporations that employ their most privileged employees; indeed, their continued relevance depends on their reorienting towards the wider society in which all workers live.

Millions are making these connections within the recently reinvigorated movements for racial, trans, climate — and especially — Palestinian justice.

Some unions have recognised that the confluence of these struggles with the industrial power of organised labour could be metamorphic. This recalls the "social-movement unionism" that flourished in Brazil and South Africa and was briefly proffered elsewhere as a compelling response to the dislocating forces of globalisation. [5] Internally, this approach sees unions using their economic leverage in the interests of wider communities, such as the California nurses who incorporated patient rights into their collective bargaining programme in the 1990s. Present initiatives like Bargaining for the Common Good use union negotiations to raise wide-ranging demands, from schools cutting ties with law enforcement to ending fossil fuel subsidies.

From its inception, social-movement unionism also sought to coordinate workers and movements across national borders. In its most ambitious form, it could potentially reverse the global race to the bottom, disrupting transnational capital to win universal goods such as shorter working hours, debt cancellation and an equitable trade system.

To this, we would now add the immediate phase-out of fossil fuels and a just transition away from military production as strategic goals, redirecting investment and labour into activity that both protects affected workers and repairs the damage to communities on the frontlines of war and climate crisis. This will only be possible if unions connect the dots between these apparently polarised constituencies through political struggles inside and outside the workplace. The question is whether unions can reframe their relationship with the fossil fuel and military industries in devising their own programme to secure a liveable future for workers and the planet they inhabit. There are formidable barriers to such a project, but the existential threats to labour and nature warrant a formidable response. Bread and butter is not enough.

---

1. Richard Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*, Sage, 2001.
2. David Roediger and Elizabeth Esch, *The Production of Difference: Race and the Management of Labor in US History*, Oxford University Press: 2014.
3. Satnam Virdee, *Race, Class and the Racialized Other*, Palgrave Macmillan: 2014.
4. Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, Palgrave Macmillan: [1978] 2013.
5. Kim Moody, "Towards an International Social-Movement Unionism," *New Left Review*, October 1997, vol. 225, pp. 52–72.