



# **BFAWU PARLIAMENTARY GROUP**

**ANNUAL REPORT**

**2024-2025**

## PARLIAMENTARY OVERVIEW

This report covers the period since last year's BFAWU Annual Conference. Just weeks later a General Election was called, which on 4 July produced the predicted landslide defeat of the Conservatives, ending their 14 years of Government as voters opted to punish the party for its legacy of failure. Sir Keir Starmer replaced Rishi Sunak as Prime Minister and Labour achieved a 174-seat majority and a total of 411 seats, despite the party's vote share of one-third (33.7%) being the smallest of any majority Government in British electoral history.

The Tories were reduced to 121 seats and the SNP to nine. In contrast, the Liberal Democrats now have 72 seats, the Greens and Plaid Cymru each have four, while Reform UK have five. Jeremy Corbyn retained his seat as an Independent and now sits alongside four other Independent MPs elected in constituencies where Labour lost support over its response to the Israeli war on Gaza. The Group's Chair, Ian Mearns, did not contest the election, whilst fellow Group member Lloyd Russell-Moyle was prevented from re-contesting the Brighton Kemptown seat. Significantly, of the 650 MPs who were elected, more than half (335) were elected for the first time.

MPs returned to Parliament on 9 July, and the State Opening on 17 July saw the King's Speech set out the initial legislative programme of the new Labour Government. On 23 July, seven Labour MPs – Group members Apsana Begum, Richard Burgon, Ian Byrne, Imran Hussain, Rebecca Long Bailey, John McDonnell and Zarah Sultana – voted for an amendment calling for the two-child benefit cap to be scrapped and lost the Labour Whip, being suspended from the Parliamentary Labour Party for at least six months. At the time of writing, McDonnell, Begum and Sultana remain suspended. The Starmer Government did not enjoy a honeymoon period, and the summer's far-right-incited riots highlighted the grave political dangers should Labour fail to deliver on its promise of "change" in the lives of working-class people. The continued failure to suspend all arms sales to Israel in light of the atrocities in Gaza has been condemned, while the decision to means-test the Winter Fuel Payment also drew sustained criticism.

The problems have continued to mount in 2025. Despite a Parliamentary Ombudsman's investigation recommending compensation for the WASPI women, the Government issued a flat refusal, betraying the promises that many Cabinet members made in Opposition. The failure of the promised economic growth to materialise means that, unless Chancellor Rachel Reeves is prepared to relax her self-imposed fiscal rules or consider increasing taxes on the rich, the Government will embark on a second round of austerity cuts to public spending. Unprotected departments will be hit all the harder given that Starmer announced a £13bn increase in defence spending. The decisions to slash the overseas aid budget and announce £5bn of welfare cuts targeted at sick and disabled people demonstrate that the Government wants to balance the books on the back of some of the most vulnerable people in society. We now await the publication of the Spending Review in June, but the press has already been briefed that the Government aims to take an axe to civil service budgets in the name of seeking greater "efficiency". This would inevitably impact on the delivery of frontline services to the public.

Somewhat more positively, the Employment Rights Bill does at least scrap the Tory minimum service levels legislation and most of the Trade Union Act 2016, although pre-2010 anti-union legislation remains in place. Members of the BFAWU Group have tabled a series of amendments in both the Commons and the Lords to strengthen the Bill in key areas, including on trade union recognition, procurement and the need for a single legal definition of “worker”. However, it is clear that unions will need to press for a further tranche of legislation on improving employment and protections once this Bill receives Royal Assent.

Labour’s unpopularity led to a series of damaging electoral defeats at the May local elections – with Nigel Farage’s populist far-right Reform UK party making worrying gains in post-industrial working-class communities.

### **BFAWU PARLIAMENTARY GROUP**

The BFAWU Parliamentary Group has continued to remain active on the union’s behalf, holding regular Group Meetings, drafting letters to Ministers and employers, tabling Written Questions, and intervening at Committees, Oral Questions and in debates wherever possible.

Following the retirement of Ian Mearns, Rebecca Long-Bailey now chairs the Group – which has seen a number of new recruits including Steve Witherden, Brian Leishman, Neil Duncan-Jordan and Lee Baron.

Detailed BFAWU briefings and media releases on a wide range of issues are circulated by Solidarity Consulting to inform MPs and Peers. Support is also provided for submitting written evidence to Select Committees and responses to formal Government consultations.

Key campaigns pursued in the past 12 months and summarised in this report include:

- **Rathbones / Morrisons and private equity**
- **Supermarkets, food pricing and GCA**
- **Employment Rights Bill**
- **FAWN and Right to Food commission**
- **Sex Workers in Newcastle**
- **Potential Hovis/Kingsmill merger and EDM**

# BFAWU CAMPAIGNS

## RATHBONES BAKERIES / MORRISONS

MPs shared the union's concerns about the initial news that the Rathbones site in Wakefield would cease production, jeopardising 400 jobs – as a result of a decision by Morrisons supermarkets (now owned by private equity firm Clayton, Dubilier and Rice). Workers were initially presented with a form of “fire and rehire” whereby some jobs could be retained based on the continuing the limited production of morning goods, but only if the workers accepted reduced pay, terms and conditions.

Jon Trickett tabled EDM 455 on the issue, arguing that “workers should not pay the price for the destructive business model adopted by private equity concerns” and calling “on government both to provide all necessary support to the workers involved and to undertake an urgent investigation into the impact of private equity takeovers and acquisitions on the UK groceries market”. In the end, despite the inaction of Business and Trade Secretary Jonathan Reynolds (who argued that it was not for Government to engage in individual business decisions), the union was able to negotiate on the retention of jobs and decent redundancy terms.

However, the fate of this company, which has operated since 1893, is indicative of the damaging consequences of private-equity ownership of the supermarkets. Both Morrisons and ASDA are now already owned by private equity firms, with other retail giants thought to be future targets. Group Chair Rebecca Long Bailey told a Westminster Hall debate (25 February 2025):

[...]As FoodChain magazine recently put it,

“Under private equity ownership, the strategic focus often shifts towards short-term profitability, which can lead to decisions that are not always aligned with long-term market positioning. For example, cost-cutting measures may involve reducing staff, limiting store refurbishments, and cutting back on product variety.”

There are a couple of examples of major supermarket chains engaging in those practices recently, and many fear that it is just the tip of the iceberg. To that end, I would also be grateful if the Minister considered launching a joint investigation, across the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for Business and Trade and the Competition and Markets Authority, about the impact of private equity acquisitions of UK grocery retailers on the security and sustainability of the UK food supply chain.

John McDonnell also raised his concerns and echoed the call for an inquiry:

[...]If we thought it was bad enough when there were individual supermarkets of sizeable status, we are now in a completely different world. Private equity is sweeping them up, exercising enormous power. I feel that the Government need to get ahead of the game. It is like the residential care sector before private equity took over and leveraged those individual companies. I can remember a number

of them collapsing, and I think we are in exactly the same position here. That is why the call for an inquiry, bringing in all concerned partners, is invaluable.

The Group wrote formally to the Competition and Markets Authority to call for them to investigate, but their response failed to address the fundamental structural issues. Since then, Morrisons announced further jobs losses from closing 52 of its in-store cafes and 17 convenience stores. MPs remain concerned about the further implications of private equity financing of the UK supermarkets on the food manufacturing and retail sectors and will continue to call for action to protect jobs.

## **POSSIBLE MERGER OF HOVIS AND ALLIED BAKERIES**

Members of the BFAWU Parliamentary Group are concerned about press reports that Hovis (also now owned by a private equity company, Endless LLP) has entered into merger talks with the owners of Allied Bakeries (AB Foods). Allied's future has been plunged into doubt after losing a single key contract to supply Tesco, which is further evidence of the power of the supermarkets (see below). There are understandable fears that the merger would also lead to "rationalisation" across the brand, leading to site closures and job losses. Chair Rebecca Long-Bailey has tabled EDM 1242 on "Future of the UK Baking Industry" to raise concern in Parliament about the merger plans:

*That this House notes with concern recent media reports that Associated British Foods, parent company of Allied Bakeries which produces Kingsmill bread, are in talks over a potential merger with Hovis, owned by Endless LLP; further notes that this comes as a response to reports of unsustainable losses in the Allied Bakeries division; is concerned that any merger on this scale may result in restructuring, rationalisation or closures that could affect the job security and livelihoods of thousands of UK workers both directly employed and in the supply chain; is further concerned about the potential implications for competition in the UK bakery sector and possible impact on future UK food security; and therefore calls on the management of both businesses to engage immediately with the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers union and other recognised trade unions across their sites and undertake meaningful consultation prior to the agreement or implementation of any merger proposal.*

If Hovis and Kingsmill consolidate under a single owner, the new company would overtake Warburtons (who currently enjoy the largest market share, with 34% of the wrapped sliced bread market) and represent 44% of the market. To have 75% of the market under the control of just two suppliers represents an unhealthy degree of market concentration, with potential implications for food security. Therefore, even if the merger is agreed by the two businesses, the Competition and Markets Authority could well investigate and object to the merger on public interest grounds. BFAWU Group members will be calling for the CMA to intervene if the union judges that the impact will be detrimental to the industry and the interests of workers and consumers.

## **SUPERMARKETS, FOOD PRICING AND REGULATION**

Since Brexit and the war in Ukraine, food price inflation saw a serious spike (reaching as high as 17.6% in 2022), exacerbating the cost-of-living crisis. Whilst the intense spike has since slackened off, prices remain high in relation to earnings and critics allege that the supermarkets have used the opportunity to increase their profit margins. In May 2025, food price inflation stands at 4.1%, the highest level for over 12 months and the fourth consecutive monthly rise.

BFAWU MPs have long been concerned about the power of the supermarkets in relation to pricing, a situation that also forms the backdrop for the experiences highlighted in the SALT branch's "Burnt Out, Overworked and Underpaid" report. As Rebecca Long-Bailey told the House (25 February 2025)

The UK grocery sector is shaped to a large extent by the huge concentration of power in the hands of the major supermarket retailers, which are competing to achieve the lowest prices and the biggest profit margins on key goods, but there is a limit to suppliers' ability to keep prices down through productivity, automation or cheaper input costs. The story that the hon. Member told was about the pressures faced by farmers, but there is also often a relentless downwards pressure on labour costs, which has led to attacks on the pay and conditions of workers employed across supply chains. This race to the bottom has resulted in a proliferation of low-paid and casualised jobs, and the growing exploitation of agency and migrant workers.

Surveys of food workers conducted by the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union show that in-work poverty has spiralled in recent years, with food workers worrying about feeding themselves and their families. At the same time, staggeringly, the supermarket chains have continued to report huge profits and dividend payouts to their shareholders. We have also seen rocket and feather pricing: because of wholesale cost rises, the price of key items is increased excessively, but when those wholesale costs come down, the price on the shelf does not come down in tandem.

The role of the Groceries Code Adjudicator is therefore an important one. The GCA has helped to tackle some of the most abusive practices, such as unreasonable short-notice terminations of contracts, abusive promotional practices and other failures of compliance with the code. But sadly, as it stands, the GCA cannot intervene to protect suppliers or consumers when it comes to supermarket pricing. This puts the short-term interests of shareholders above the wider public interest.

Given these limitations the BFAWU Group is campaigning for:

- A more powerful and effective supermarket regulator, with the ability to set price floors and ceilings to protect producers and consumers, and which covers primary agricultural producers not just the direct supplier to the retailers;
- The restoration and extension of a sectoral collective bargaining framework for workers employed in the UK food supply chain, to ensure decent pay and job security;
- A statutory right to food should be introduced in UK legislation, to protect consumers and address the root causes of food insecurity.

## **FOOD AND WORK NETWORK / WESTMINSTER COMMISSION**

The Group continues to work with Ian Byrne MP on the Right to Food campaign, and with the Food and Work Network (FAWN) of academics, trade unionists and community practitioners to address the continuing demand for food banks given the high levels of food insecurity in our communities.

Ahead of the Labour Party's Annual Conference last year, FAWN wrote an open letter to Keir Starmer published on the LabourList website, with Bakers Union General Secretary Sarah Woolley joined by Ian Byrne and 25 other union leaders and academic experts in demanding action:

### **We musn't normalise Foodbank Britain**

Dear Prime Minister,

After over 14 years of austerity-driven spending cuts, labour market casualisation and welfare reform, we have been left with catastrophic levels of poverty and food insecurity across our communities. Tragically, there are millions of children across our country who are quite literally going to bed hungry.

The Food Foundation's Food Insecurity Tracker estimated that at the start of this year 15% of UK households were living in food insecurity, equivalent to approximately eight million adults and three million children. For the sixth richest country in the world by GDP this is scandalous.

Charitable food donations are the lifeline that many people rely on to feed them and their children. Meeting the tsunami of need has seen extensive networks of foodbanks emerge across the country. In the last financial year, the Trussell Trust alone distributed 3.12 million emergency food parcels, a 94 percent increase on five years ago.

It is vital that your government ensures people can meet their basic needs and be able to feed themselves without relying on charitable donations. You must take the opportunity to turn back this tide. We simply cannot allow food banks to be seen as a normal part of life in the 21st Century. People are already at breaking point. You must tackle food insecurity and end food bank Britain.

The cost of living crisis exacerbated the pre-existing problems of "in work" poverty and food insecurity. Having to take up multiple, poorly paid, precarious jobs on unpredictable and irregular hours has increasingly driven people to foodbanks in order to feed their families. The situation has been getting progressively worse in the years just before you entered government.

To tackle this blight, we call on the government to fully implement the pledges contained in the New Deal for Working People. To help people eat, keep their homes warm and live fulfilling lives you must strengthen workplace and trade union rights and ensure that workers are able to find decent, secure and properly paid jobs.

Where people are simply unable to work, or limited in the hours they are able to work (including many disabled people, carers, the sick and the elderly) we call for an end to austerity cuts and punitive welfare reforms. Our country needs the government to re-establish a system of genuine social security.

Ultimately, regular daily access to affordable, safe, nutritious food should neither be a charitable act nor a luxury, but a basic right. We therefore also call on your Government to enshrine the Right to Food in UK law at the earliest opportunity, and ensure that the nightmare of food bank Britain becomes a thing of the past.

If Labour is to stand any chance of fighting off the challenge of Reform, it is vital that it restores in full the Winter Fuel Payment for the majority of pensioners, scraps the two-child limit and abandons the planned cuts to disability benefits.

BFAWU and FAWN are now working with Ian Byrne on the planned launch of an independent Westminster Commission on the Right to Food and tackling food insecurity in conjunction with the University of Westminster, with the power to take expert evidence and make recommendations to Government.

## **EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS BILL**

Although the TUC has broadly welcomed the Employment Rights Bill, which represents a modest step forward in terms of repealing post-2010 anti-union legislation, critics have rightly pointed out that it falls substantially short in some key respects of the ambitions originally laid out in the New Deal for Workers green paper that originated under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn.

Although there are some positive steps on issues such as introducing employment rights from day one, union recognition arrangements and access to workplaces, the Bill leaves in place the basic structure of Thatcher-era anti-union laws and, crucially, fails to extend sectoral collective bargaining across the economy. Another key limitation of the Bill is the failure to tackle bogus self-employment and the gig economy by introducing a single legal status of “worker”, with the Government instead consulting on the question with a view to addressing it at some future point. It is feared that the detail of the legislation aimed at tackling zero hours contracts and fire and rehire leave significant loopholes for employers to exploit.

Working with experts from the Institute of Employment Rights (including Lord Hendy) and former trade union solicitor Andy McDonald MP, members of the Group have tabled a series of amendments to the Bill aimed delivering key improvements for workers. However, given the Government’s substantial majority, it is unlikely the necessary amendments will be made. However, the case for tackling issues that fall outside the scope of the Bill at present, such as the single status of workers, means that unions will be campaigning for a Part 2 of the Employment Rights legislation to deliver the changes we need.

Building on BFAWU’s work in the fast food hospitality sector with the McStrike campaign, the EHRC and media have begun to shine a spotlight on the widespread nature of harassment endured by workers, often on zero hours contracts. BFAWU MPs attended the Parliamentary launch of the “End not Defend” campaign of the Workers Policy Project on 15 Jan 2025, hearing directly from hospitality workers and academics researching the sector about the incidence of sexual harassment and the legal changes necessary to improve enforcement. Working with Dawn Butler MP, the campaign tabled Early Day Motion 622 to raise attention to the issues:

*That this House is seriously concerned about the continued incidence of alleged sexual harassment in workplaces across the UK; notes that 700 current or former employees of McDonald's UK alone are bringing legal action against the company alleging they were subject to sexual harassment, alongside other discrimination, homophobia, and racism claims; understands that 90 per cent of the complainants were employed on zero hours contracts, indicating that instances of abuse are more likely to occur given the power imbalances between managers and often young and more vulnerable workers on casualised terms and conditions; supports legislative proposals in the Employment Rights Bill to strengthen legal duties of protection on employers; welcomes the launch by the Workers Policy Project of the End Not Defend Sexual Harassment campaign, to ensure that the issue is also taken seriously within the regulatory framework governing safety in the workplace, and to strengthen workers and trade union rights; and calls for an integrated and properly-resourced approach between the Equalities and Human Rights Commission,*

*Health and Safety Executive and the new Fair Work Agency in order to stamp out sexual harassment at work for good.*

Tackling the use of zero hours contracts has been at the forefront of BFAWU's campaign in the fast food sector, but it is far from clear whether the legislation in this area will have the intended effect. This was picked up more widely in the debates, including by former TUC leaders Lord Barber and Baroness O'Grady, who both cited the example of McDonald's' use of zero hours contracts as a factor in the incidence of sexual harassment of young workers, who fear reporting their abusive managers because they might lose shifts. Sadly, Group MPs remain concerned that the measures in the legislation will not have the intended effect, and will continue to lobby for greater security around guaranteed hours.

Working with Rebecca Long-Bailey in the Commons and Plaid Cymru's Baroness Carmen Smith in the Lords, amendments to the Bill were tabled to transfer enforcement to Health and Safety Executive, with a RIDDOR-like enforcement mechanism to be put in place. At present, Ministers are arguing that enforcement of sexual harassment should continue to fall under the remit of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, but this has limited resources and powers to enforce the expanded duties on employers. Further lobbying on this issue is ongoing, and we will seek to continue pressing for reforms at Report Stage in the Lords.

### **WORKERS IN LAPDANCING CLUBS, NEWCASTLE**

Newcastle MP Mary Glendon joined BFAWU group members in hearing distressing online evidence from members of BFAWU's Sex Workers Union branch working in Newcastle, who reported receiving violent threats from associates of their employer and being denied health and safety improvements such as CCTV in the bars to identify abusers or even basic hygienic working conditions. Sadly owing to their "self-employed" status, the dancers are not covered by protections afforded to workers under the new duties under the Equality Act.

The union has also met with Newcastle Central MP Chi Onwurah on the issue, and written to all Newcastle City Councillors, including those on the Licensing Authority. It appeared that the bar in question had received a tip-off about an inspection of the premises, and made superficial attempts to disguise the squalid conditions in which the dancers have been forced to work. The union continues to work with the dancers who have bravely spoken out and joined the union, despite the threats and abuse they have received.

**TRADE UNION COORDINATING GROUP (TUCG)**

BFAWU is a founder member of the TUCG, which was established in 2008 to coordinate campaigning activities in Parliament and beyond on issues of common concern between member unions. The TUCG now comprises 11 trade unions – BFAWU, Equity, FBU, NAPO, NEU, NUJ, PCS, POA, RMT, UCU and URTU – bringing the total membership of TUCG-affiliated unions to over one million trade unionists. The Chair was held by UCU in 2024 and passed to Equity in 2025.

Key activities this year have included:

- Executive heard from Ellen Clifford of DPAC on the impact of welfare reforms.
- Circulated statements from individual unions on the importance of anti-racism and anti-fascism in relation to the summer's riots.
- Organised support for open letter to PM Keir Starmer asking for action to avoid the normalisation of demand for food banks in British society.
- Held TUC Congress fringe meeting calling for a more ambitious economic strategy, with speakers including John McDonnell.
- Held joint Labour Party Conference fringe event with Labour List and the Institute of Employment Rights on the implementation of the New Deal for Working People.
- Planning written briefing for MPs around the Autumn Budget statement.
- Organised private letter to Keir Starmer protesting against the withdrawal of the whip from the rebel MPs who voted to scrap the two-child limit on Universal Credit.
- Organised private letter to TUC General Secretary Paul Nowak calling for the TUC to commission work on developing more radical alternative economic strategies.
- Held joint online public Zoom rally with Arise, reviewing the Autumn Budget statement with speakers including Richard Burgon.
- Met with Green Party co-leader Carla Denyer to discuss support for union demands, including on the Employment Rights Bill.
- Executive heard from Amanda Walters from the Safe Sick Pay campaign on the need to increase the rate of SSP.
- Held AGM and Parliamentary Reception with Andy McDonald, Ian Lavery, Jo Grady (UCU) and Paul Fleming (Equity) speaking.
- Written to the Prime Minister's 10 Downing Street Trade Union Liaison manager regarding ministerial dialogue with TUCG affiliates.
- Circulated briefings and campaign events on Employment Rights Bill issues.
- Organised TUC Women's Conference fringe with the Institute of Employment Rights on the impact of the Employment Rights Bill on women in the workplace, and how it can be strengthened.
- Supported IER/CTUF event on March 22 on the Employment Rights Bill.
- Executive heard from End Not Defend Sexual Harassment campaign.
- Steps undertaken to plan greater coordination at TUC General Council and Congress.
- Held STUC fringe on the Employment Rights Bill.

The TUCG website can be found at [www.tucg.org.uk](http://www.tucg.org.uk). We are @TUCGInfo on X (Twitter).



**This report was written and compiled by  
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*Solidarity Consulting works in Parliament on a not-for-profit basis for trade unions and third-sector organisations, and acts as the Secretariat to the BFAWU Parliamentary Group, Justice Unions Parliamentary Group (JUPG) and the Trade Union Coordinating Group (TUCG). Working directly with BFAWU Head Office, we advise the union and Parliamentarians of opportunities to raise issues of concern to BFAWU members.*