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## *The death of Queen Elizabeth II: A major political crisis for British imperialism*

Queen Elizabeth II has passed away aged 96, after seven decades on the throne as head of the United Kingdom. Her death occurs at a time of acute economic, social and political crisis for British imperialism, including the deepest collapse of living standards since the Great Depression, a NATO proxy war against Russia waged on mainland Europe, and a rising wave of class struggle that threatens to erupt into a general strike.



The Queen during her 2015 visit to HMS Ocean in Devonport at a ceremony to rededicate the ship [Photo by Joel Rouse/ Ministry of Defence/Open Government Licence v3.0]

The ruling class now faces this perfect storm without its popular representative of state on which it has relied to project the myth of national unity and suppress social conflict.

In her role as head of state, the queen officially welcomed and held weekly discussions with an extraordinary total of 15 prime ministers. Her final act of service to the bourgeoisie, just two days before her death, was to appoint Liz Truss as prime minister, bestowing her authority on an illegitimate and despised government tasked with waging war on the working class.

The *Telegraph* acknowledged the importance of the Queen's role, writing, "the Crown can help secure smooth and peaceful handovers of political power... as we have seen only this week. The Queen's final public duty was to oversee a trouble-free transition of executive power that in other countries might have engendered a political and constitutional crisis. How many other nations can seamlessly change their head of state and leader of government in a week without tumult?... the country's stability has owed a great deal to the Queen's presence at its heart."

With her death, the crown falls onto the head of her son, Charles III. At 73, he is the oldest person to ever become king and has no popular support. His accession leaves little with which to conceal the deepening and irreconcilable social and political divisions that are the reality of life in Britain and throughout the world.

Amid the inevitable ritualistic fawning of the British media, the scale of the difficulties facing the ruling elite is acknowledged.

Martin Kettle wrote in the *Guardian*, "Do not underestimate the upheaval in British life that this dynastic moment will trigger. Elizabeth II spent 70 years as a low-key but extremely effective unifying force in a nation that is visibly pulling itself apart. Her passing will remove that force, which her heirs cannot assume they will be able to replicate. In its way, this succession will be one of the biggest tests to face modern Britain."

The *Financial Times* stated, "The kingdom the Queen leaves behind confronts much larger questions than her own institution. Britain has lost its own strength and stay just as it is groping to define its place in the world for the decades ahead. Many other institutions of state appear outdated or tarnished and the survival of the 315-year-old United Kingdom itself is not necessarily assured."

As monarch, Elizabeth played an essential role in preserving social and political stability, especially at times of heightened crisis for British imperialism. She was placed in line to the throne as a result of the abdication of her uncle, Edward VIII in 1936, whose Nazi sympathies and those of his lover Wallis Simpson threatened to discredit the monarchy and provoke social and political conflict.

Her coronation in 1953 took place amid the protracted decline of British imperialism, just three years before the Suez crisis. She helped manage Britain's eclipse by the United States and the retreat from empire as head of the Commonwealth—a civilised veneer behind which Britain was fully prepared to respond with utmost brutality when its vital global interests were threatened. From the savage repression of Kenya's Mau Mau Rebellion when she first took office, the bloody occupation of Northern Ireland, Margaret Thatcher's war for control of the Falklands/Malvinas and numerous criminal wars in the Middle East and North Africa, Britain's Armed Forces have shrouded their crimes in the Union Jack while playing "God Save the Queen".

As deference towards the monarchy faded, she led a political recasting that downplayed the Royal family's fabulous wealth while investing as much dignity as she could muster in the archaic pomp and ceremony employed to lend bourgeois rule an air of timeless permanence and legitimise a system of hereditary privilege. This role as a symbol of national unity was never more important than at times of intensified class struggle.

However, from the 1980s on, the younger royals found it impossible to restrain themselves from public displays of wealth and privilege, as first Diana, then others were feted by the global super-rich and disgraced themselves in the process. In the last years before she died, the queen was forced to endure a bitter public rift with Prince Harry and his wife Meghan, as they sought greener pastures as international celebrities, and then the revelations of Prince Andrew's involvement in billionaire Jeffrey Epstein's sex trafficking operations.

Today, the earnest hope of the ruling class is that Charles' time on the throne is short so that the carefully groomed and prepared Prince William can have a chance to restore a much-reduced monarchy's public standing.

To facilitate this transition, events following the queen's death have been meticulously planned. Operation London Bridge covers 12 days of official mourning, including her state funeral. This will be used once again to buttress the state apparatus and bury the class struggle beneath a torrent of patriotism, nationalist nostalgia and mawkish sentimentality.

Calls for national unity at a time of shared grief are already being used as a weapon against a growing strike wave.

The key role in these plans is being played by the trade unions and the Labour Party. Within an hour of the official announcement of the queen's death, the Communication Workers Union (CWU) and the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) had suspended Friday's postal strike and rail strikes planned for September 15 and 17. RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch fawned, "RMT joins the whole nation in paying its respects to Queen Elizabeth."

On Friday morning it was announced that the annual Trades Union Congress, scheduled to begin Sunday, has been postponed.



Queen Elizabeth II, left, welcomes Liz Truss during an audience at Balmoral, Scotland, where she invited the newly elected leader of the Conservative Party to become prime minister and form a new government, September 6, 2022. [AP Photo/AP, File]

The trade union leaders will be joined in their own Operation London Bridge by the Labour Party leaders, whether nominally right or left.

Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer seized on the queen's death to proclaim Labour's commitment to national unity and class peace, writing, "Above the clashes of politics, she

stood not for what the nation fought over, but what it agreed upon.” He pledged on behalf of his rotten party: “So as our great Elizabethan era comes to an end, we will honour the late Queen's memory by keeping alive the values of public service she embodied.”

Jeremy Corbyn maintained his own record of acting only in the “national interest”, tweeting, “My thoughts are with the Queen’s family as they come to terms with their personal loss, as well as those here and around the world who will mourn her death. I enjoyed discussing our families, gardens and jam-making with her. May she rest in peace.”

Notwithstanding her personal characteristics, however, the ability of the late queen to act as a symbol of national unity depended on the broader ability of the bourgeoisie to prevent social tensions from reaching the point of explosion.

The “Second Elizabethan Age” first proclaimed by Winston Churchill spanned decades following World War II in which capitalism was able to provide rising living standards for the working class and the reformist nostrums of the Labour Party and the trade unions appeared able to at least partially satisfy the demands of workers for a living wage, education, housing, health care and other essentials.

The precipitous decline of the monarchy beginning in the 1990s is only one expression of how all the political instruments of bourgeois rule, above all the trade unions and the Labour Party, now confront workers as the defenders of a system that is plunging them ever deeper into unbearable hardship and threatening their very survival as the war against Russia rages out of control. Whatever the immediate impact of the queen’s death, a decisive conflict between the working class and British imperialism is developing inexorably.

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