

Solidarity

& Workers' Liberty



For social ownership of the banks and industry

Trump leaves White House TRUMPISM IS STILL A THREAT



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Covid & inequality: a vicious circle

Inequality worsens the pandemic, the pandemic worsens inequality.

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Fruits of Brexit start to ripen

Tories plan to scrap Working Time Directive and other EU standards.

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Activists work to regroup the internationalist left in Labour.

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Why respect the virus rules?

Even faulty common rules are better than individual guesswork.

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Stop Tory plan to scrap Working Time Directive!

“ Editorial

What Brexit means is demonstrated clearly by fresh Tory plans to assault workers' rights.

The government fought hard for the right to diverge from EU standards for a reason: and workers' rights are among its first targets.

The Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is putting together plans to scrap the 48-hour week “working time directive”; cut rest break entitlements; cut holiday pay entitlements by excluding overtime pay from how they're calculated; and end the requirement for employers to keep proper records on working hours.

Labour movement leaders, both unions and Labour Party, have denounced these plans. Maybe the Tories will retreat for now. Despite employer complaints' about over-regulation, most of the big employers aren't clamouring for immediate changes. They have learned to live with the mild EU standards.

The more the labour movement show itself willing to fight, the more likely a quick retreat.

“Unions will resist attack on workers' rights”, declared the *Morning Star*. But unless the government folds pretty much immediately, the risk is that the changes will go through fast with limited protest, while union leaders hope for EU measures to retaliate against the UK's divergence. Our movement's leaders have a long record of presenting EU structures and rules as more a bulwark for workers' rights than they are – and then failing to fight Brexit and its open door to scrapping those rules.

Business Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng has claimed the UK “has one of the best workers' rights records in the world”. But Tony Blair was nearer the truth. He called Britain's “the most restrictive union laws in the Western world”. Britain also has worse sick-pay rights than any of the EU27 bar Malta.

Right now we have to defend the EU-derived regulations Kwarteng and his comrades are attacking, and then

improve them seriously. They are no sort of gold-standard either. They represent some very basic minimum workers' rights – a minimum the Tories want to push down further.

The labour movement should demand not just maintenance of EU standards, but a levelling up of workers' rights to the best across Europe – so we have the same working-hours rights as workers in Finland, and the same right to strike as workers in France.

More broadly, this is a reminder that Brexit is not “done”. It is set to become what the *Financial Times* called a “negotiation without end”.

The Tories' class-war agenda is not limited to Brexit-connected issues, of course; but it is closely intertwined with Brexit. We must expose this reality and mobilise opposition to every aspect of the Tories' plans – on workers' rights, environmental standards, migrants' rights and more besides. □



Upcoming meetings

Workers' Liberty meetings are open to all, held online over zoom.

Monday 25 January, 6-7pm: Workers' Liberty students – A briefing on “The Hostile Environment”

Tuesday 26 January, 7:30-9pm: The Rise of the anti-vax movement and Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories

Wednesday 27 January, 4-6pm: Tubeworker Bulletin public meeting – What kind of unions do we need? How can we build them?

Wednesday 27 January, 5:30-7pm: Free Osime Brown – by Labour Campaign for Free Movement

Thursday 28 January, 6-7:30pm: Momentum Internationalists forum – The EHRC Report and Labour

Saturday 30 January, 12:30-2:30pm: Labour Movement Solidarity with Hong Kong UK

Monday 1 February, 6-7pm: The labour movement and the left in French politics – Workers' parties series

Monday 1 February, 6-7pm: Workers' Liberty students – Labour under Starmer

Plus

Thursdays, 8-9pm: Marx's “Grundrisse”, study group

Wednesdays (fortnightly) 7-8.30 pm: “The retreat from class” by Ellen Meiksins Wood, reading group

Our calendars of events: browse or subscribe! □

All online

For full and updated details, zoom links, more meetings and resources, visit workersliberty.org/events

“ Anti-racist resources

We have compiled various anti-racist resources to learn about anti-racist movements, and arm yourself with ideas to beat back racism: readings and pamphlets, video and audio.

See workersliberty.org/anti-racist-resources □

British Gas out again from 20 Jan

By Ollie Moore

At a public online rally on 18 January for the British Gas Engineers striking against “fire-and-rehire” attacks on their pay and conditions (see page 24), Paul Vowles, a British Gas striker from the West Midlands, said he was “bursting with pride” at the action he and his workmates have taken so far.

He criticised British Gas bosses for “hiding behind the pandemic” in order to force through cuts. He also highlighted the effectiveness of the social media campaign in support of the dispute, especially messages of support from strikers’ families which emphasise the impact the proposed new contracts will have on workers’ family life.

Vowles stressed the importance of continual communication amongst workers, and between members and reps, to strengthen solidarity and build momentum in the dispute.

Striker Ciara O’Neill said British Gas workers were striking on behalf of all workers who might face “fire and rehire” attacks, and that the aim was to “stamp the practice out”. O’Neill said current workers had a responsibility to leave good terms and conditions for future generations of workers. She explained the impact the new contracts would have on her, saying she would be forced to rely on relatives for childcare due to the increased working hours.

Solidarity

Danny Faith, a GMB rep at British Airways, discussed BA workers’ own struggle against “fire and rehire”, and Shona Thompson, a Glasgow council worker and a leader of the victorious 2018 women workers’ strike for equal pay, brought solidarity greetings. GMB officials Justin Bowden, the union’s lead officer for the gas sector, and Gary Smith, himself a former gas worker, also spoke. Opening the rally, GMB President Barbara Plant connected the strike to the union’s history and its roots in the 1889 Beckton gas workers’ strike for an eight-hour day, led by Will Thorne and supported by Eleanor Marx.

Messages of support were heard from TV celebrity Judge Rinder, ex-footballer Neville Southall, the band Primal Scream, singer Billy Bragg, and the comedian Frankie Boyle.

Labour Party leader and deputy leader Keir Starmer and Angela Rayner addressed the rally, pledging the full support of the Labour Party and committing that Labour will outlaw “fire and rehire” when next in government. Starmer said that strikers “could easily have felt powerless” in the face of bosses’ attacks, but instead had “stood up, taken action, and built their power as a collective.” He pledged his “full solidarity” to the strikers and “all workers resisting ‘fire and rehire’.” Left-wing Labour MP Nadia Whittome also spoke, and former Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Welsh First Minister Mark Drakeford sent video messages of support. Labour leaders’ support for the strike provides an opening for rank-and-file Labour Party activists to pur-



sue the issue of strike solidarity throughout the party, and fight for active support for all workers in struggle to be the default stance for Labour.

Although the breadth of support was evident, there were some important differences in tone, emphasis, and content between some speakers. Some, like Brown and Drakeford, emphasised the need for a “social partnership” approach between unions and employers – an ultimately inoperable model, given the irreconcilably opposed interests between workers and bosses. Several speakers posed the aim of the strike as being solely to resist the “fire and rehire” threat, and indicated that some changes to terms and conditions might be acceptable, as long as they were “negotiated fairly.”

Forcing British Gas bosses to withdraw their “fire and rehire” threat would undoubtedly be a huge concession, and a testament to the strength and determination of British Gas workers’ action, as well as a win that could stop the wider bosses’ “fire and rehire” offensive in its tracks. But should that victory be secured, British Gas will almost certainly continue to pursue the changes they want to make. Staying mobilised and being prepared for further action will still be necessary until British Gas bosses abandon their plans to impose – by whatever means – detrimental changes to workers’ conditions.

In the rally, several speakers stressed the importance of the GMB’s strike fund, set up to ensure “no worker is forced to choose between going on strike and financial hardship.” The fund doubled its £10,000 target within a few days of being set up, and at the time of writing stands at £23,322, aiming for a new target of £25,000. □

• Strike fund: bit.ly/gmb-bg

Brutality as beautiful?



Antidoto

By Jim Denham

The *Morning Star* aspires to being a left-wing alternative to mainstream tabloids. Thus the paper includes sports pages, arts reviews, a crossword, a gardening column, and even a cookery spot ("The Commie Chef").

The paper's boxing coverage is by one John Wight, a failed Hollywood screenwriter and well-known figure on the Scottish left. The title of his book *This Boxing Game: A Journey in Beautiful Brutality* gives a strong clue as to how he regards the "sport".

A recent Wight column in the *Morning Star* ("Boxing as violence") purports to examine what he calls the "contradiction that many writers and public intellectuals have pondered with varying degrees of success through the years": that boxing "sits at odds with pre-eminent Enlightenment values rooted in a revulsion of violence – or at least violence other than that sanctioned by the state..."

Sadly, Wight's "examination" comes down to romanticism and cod-psychology. He quotes the writer Joyce Carol Oates' claim that "spectators at boxing matches relive the murderous infancy of the race." Oates, says Wight is describing something that is "part and parcel of our species being... a necessary exercise in channelling this unheralded aspect of our nature and providing it with an outlet..."

True, Wight acknowledges: "Violence in boxing is not, as it is in other contact sports, a by-product. It is the very aim and objective from the opening bell to the last." But it is "controlled, prescribed and takes place according to a codified body of rules", so in fact "the sport offers a welcome if temporary respite from our lived experience in society at large, underpinned by free market mania, wherein foul play is a necessary correlative of capitalist accumulation."

As evidence of boxing's "revolutionary character", Wight hails "Cuba's amateur heavyweight star Teofilo Stevenson... glorifying the ideals of the Cuban Revolution." Stevenson turned down an offer to go pro and fight Muhammad Ali. Mention of Ali, of course, gives Wight the opportunity to claim that "the rise of black champions such as... Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and latterly Ali... allowed the victims of racial injustice and oppression the thrill of seeing themselves represented as more than equal to those keeping them down." Well, that's one way of looking at it: Ali's final years and tragic death from Parkinson's could be seen as telling a different story.

But no matter, Wight's enthusiasm will brook no denial, as he branches out into film criticism: Stallone's *Rocky* series is the "most notable" screen depiction of boxing but in *Fight Club* "the search for meaning and the de-

sire to transcend the increasingly narrow parameters of existence under late-stage capitalism is wonderfully depicted."

Wight ignores Scorsese's *Raging Bull* – maybe because it doesn't paint quite such a romanticised picture.

Wight's "examination" has by now become a eulogy and he closes by quoting the "magisterial" book *Boxing: A Cultural History* by Kasia Boddy: "Throughout its long and eventful history as a sport, boxing has remained unfailingly eloquent. At the beginning of the 21st century our appetite for its stories remains undiminished". Wight concludes: "No serious person could disagree."

A Trotskyist response to boxing

Sadly, Wight fails to quote from the most important socialist to deal with boxing: James P. Cannon, who in 1951 wrote two essays (*Murder in the Garden* and *A Dead Man's Decision*) inspired by the death of Georgie Flores, killed in the ring at Madison Square Garden. Cannon angrily denounced the "precautions" proposed after Flores' death:

"It is a commentary on the times and the social environment out of which the boxing business rises like a poisonous flower from a dunghill, that nobody came forward with the simple demand to outlaw prize fighting, as it was outlawed in most of the states of this country up to the turn of the century. Cock-fighting is illegal; it is considered inhumane to put a couple of roosters into the pit and incite them to spur each other until one keels over. It is also against the law to put bulldogs into a pit to fight for a side bet. But our civilisation... has not yet advanced to the point where law and public opinion forbid men, who have nothing against each other, to fight for money and the amusement of paying spectators."

James P. Cannon wouldn't get quoted in the *Morning Star*: he was a Trotskyist. □



Our audio!

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- Pamphlets, publications beyond *Solidarity*
- Public meetings
- Fighting racism: pamphlets and more
- Solidarność: The workers' movement and the re-birth of Poland in 1980-81
- Environmental pamphlet and meetings

See workersliberty.org/audio for all episodes, and for information on using podcasts. All recent episodes can be found through most podcast providers: search "Workers' Liberty" or "Solidarity & More". □

Lipstick and the far right



Women's Fightback

By Katy Dollar

Portuguese social media is filled with images of men and women wearing red lipstick, after the leader of populist far-right party Chega insulted Marisa Matias for her "very red lips." Matias is the Left Bloc candidate in Portugal's 21 January presidential election, and a current MEP.

Chega's presidential candidate, André Ventura, who opposes the Portuguese lockdown and organised demonstrations supported by neo-Nazi groups, went on to accuse Matias of "not doing very well in terms of image, performance", adding that she painted her lips "as if it were a joke."

Matias responded to the sexist provocation, posting a photograph of herself with red lips, using the hashtag [#vermelhoembelelem](#) ("redinbelelem"):

"The insult that man made to women says nothing about women but says everything about that man," commented Matias.

Several politicians, artists and other well-known figures posted images of themselves wearing red lipstick using the hashtag [#vermelhoembelelem](#), including Socialist candidate Ana Gomes, who posted a video of herself applying red lipstick, inside a car, on Twitter.

Current President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, from the centre-right Social Democratic Party (PSD), who took office in 2016, is expected to win a second term on 21 January. Portugal, like neighbouring Spain, has recently seen electoral growth for the populist far-right. According to opinion polls, Ventura, who got a parliamentary seat

in 2019, could get up to 11% of the vote. The electoral gains have emboldened the far right.

In January 2020, a black woman and her daughter were assaulted because they didn't have a bus ticket. In February, two Brazilian women were attacked by the police outside a Cape-Verdean club, and in the same month, the Porto football player Moussa Marega, born in Mali, abandoned a game after fans shouted racial slurs. In July, black actor, Bruno Candé, was murdered after a man shot him four times in what European Network Against Racism has described as "an explicitly racially motivated crime".

The crisis could fuel a further growth of reactionary politics. Opposing the far right is a priority for the left. □



Activist agenda

Safe and Equal is campaigning for full isolation pay for all, and particularly for careworkers. It calls on supporters to lobby councils about careworkers. The first stage is to email councillors with a [model letter](#).

Second stage: put a question to the health and social care scrutiny committee. Inform [Safe and Equal](#) about the reply you get.

A new leaflet is coming out soon: consider door-to-door leafleting. Email [Safe and Equal](#) if you want to join its next open organising meeting 6pm, Wednesday 27 January.

Free Our Unions is [agitating](#) for the Labour *left*, in its emerging criticism of Keir Starmer, to stick to *Labour Party conference policy* of a positive right to strike and the repeal of the Thatcher-era anti-union laws as well as of new Tory restrictions. Labour's 2019 manifesto was vague on that, and Laura Pidcock, former shadow Secretary of State for Employment Rights and now secretary of the People's Assembly, is still being vague.

The Uyghur Solidarity Campaign is supporting an amendment in Parliament that would stop the UK making or maintaining trade deals with states that the High Court determines has committed genocide. There is [evidence](#) that Chinese policy against the Uyghurs amounts to genocide. USC also warns: "we cannot place trust or reliance in the British courts... to defend human rights".

Neurodivergent Labour has submitted evidence to the Ministry of Justice, and is publicising the key demands contained in the [submission](#). □

- All campaign info plus model-motion texts at [workersliberty.org/agenda](#)

Corbyn project launches

Jeremy Corbyn's "[Project for Peace and Justice](#)" had 7,000 log in for its launch rally online on Sunday 17 January.

Sadly, the proposals on the four areas chosen – Green New Deal, Economic Security, International Justice, Democratic Society – extended only to a promise to have experts devise new policies, plus calls to sign petitions, help local food banks, and favour "peace and diplomacy" rather than "conflict and inequality". Jeremy Corbyn also plugged the *Morning Star*.

There was little mention of working-class action (beyond a general appeal from chair Christine Blower to support trade unions) and little of socialism.

John McDonnell, Manuel Cortes, Matt Wrack, and Ian Hodson were among several talking-heads providing video clips at the start to back the project. □

Carbon Capture and Storage? Not yet a help



Environment

By Zack Muddle

A debate has been smouldering on about what role, if any, “Carbon Capture and Storage” (CCS) technologies should play in ecological transition.

CCS denotes chains of technology for capturing carbon from the chimneys of factories and power plants. The chimney is fitted with solvent filters, which much of the CO₂ dissolves into – CCS’s coal industry proponents claim up to 90%. For storage, the solvent is then pumped to somewhere where it is heated up, forcing the CO₂ out again, where it is stored, perhaps underground. A small amount may be used for fizzy drinks, in greenhouses for plants, and for making plastics.

CCS does not refer to carbon sequestration from the atmosphere as a whole: through afforestation, peat restoration, rewilding, and the like.

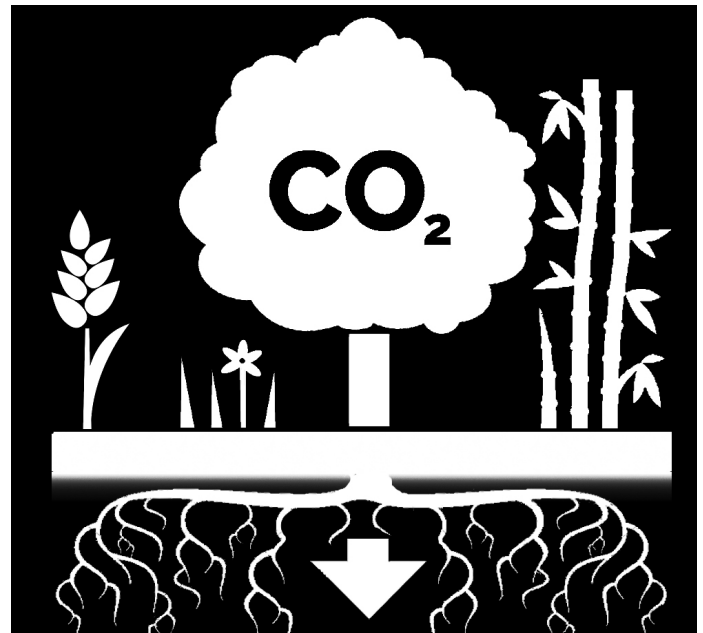
In November, as part of an extremely limited “ten point plan for a green industrial revolution”, Boris Johnson committed to an extra £200 million towards CCS, bringing it up to £1 billion total. This plan would aim to create four facilities by 2030.

Environmentalists have generally been sceptical about CCS. On 11 January, a [report](#) was published which was heavily critical of its role in UK government climate plans. It found that global operational CCS *capacity* is currently about 0.1% of annual global emissions from fossil fuels. The UK currently has *no* operational CCS, yet the UK CCC’s model for net zero by 2050 relies on the UK capacity reaching four times the current *global* total by that date. It rightly condemns the government for “placing reliance over the next decade on this technology that has a track record of over-promising and under-delivering.”

The picture gets worse. There are just 26 operational CCS plants globally. 81% of the carbon that they manage to capture is used for “Enhanced Oil Recovery” (EOR). EOR is an energy-intensive process which squeezes more crude oil from an oil field than would be otherwise possible, using high pressure CO₂ and water. Planned deployment of CCS likewise remains dominated by EOR.

Like fracking, this process can poison water tables and soil. Its higher energy use than conventional extraction requires even more fossil fuels. And much of the liquid hydrocarbon is then, of course, burned, releasing yet more greenhouse gasses. The cycle of doom goes on.

One common criticism of CCS is the risk of [leakage](#). Carbon dioxide can be stored underground beneath an impervious layer of rock, trapped in porous rock, perhaps



dissolved in subterranean brine. Leaks can and will, to greater or lesser degrees, happen. This may then seem like kicking some of the problem down the road; or even worse, creating a time bomb for future generations.

In itself, that risk would not be a good reason to avoid CCS. Even if CO₂ did leak, in the worst case scenario, no more carbon would end up released than was injected and, *everything else being equal*, would have ended up in the atmosphere anyway. It won’t all leak out, and leaks won’t happen simultaneously around the world. And re-releasing later is always likely to be better than releasing now.

Arguments such as this are used by proponents of CCS, such as those who, on 16 January, [“dismissed”](#) the report published earlier that week. These proponents did not, in fact, respond to the report’s claims and arguments.

The core problem is that *everything else is not equal*. CCS’s captured carbon is mostly used to suck more liquid carbon from the ground. That aside, it is a speculative technology which is primarily used by governments and corporations to justify continuing to emit carbon dioxide.

But if most environmentalists are correct that CCS is touted as a future technological solution to a current political failure, they also make a mirror mistake. They let current political failures make problems of possible future technological aids. An irrational political and economic order, where green technologies are used as a license to emit greenhouse gasses, is not inevitable. The CCS advocates might well be correct – in a different society.

A democratic and rational society, a workers’ government, taking power in the next few years, would surely throw resources into some CCS research and deployment. Not as an alternative to preventing carbon emissions in the first place. Rather, as one minor component to reduce the emissions while trying to “decarbonise” as fast as possible.

But for now we must declare inadequate any environmental programme in which it plays a major part. □

Why respect the virus rules?

By Angela Driver

Readers report arguments with workmates and neighbours over the virus restrictions. How should we respond?

"I'm young and fit, and my friends are all young and fit too. Why should we not socialise a little, when the chances of serious hurt from us getting the virus are so small?"

The virus has mutated, and is up to 70% more contagious than it was. Hundreds of people are dying of Covid every day in the UK.

There are chains of transmission. Most young people will not be seriously affected by Covid, but some will be. And even people who have the virus without symptoms can spread it. One young person who has the virus without realising it can give it to another young person while socialising.

Then the second person goes to a shop and passes on the virus to a shop worker who has a vulnerable family member. The shop worker's family member may, in turn, get the virus... and die.

That is only one way that two young people socialising could lead to deaths which are not apparent to the young people involved, and of people whom they don't even know.

"If I thought the government knew what it was doing, I might follow the rules. But it doesn't, so I don't"

The government has been unnecessarily inconsistent, unclear, and hesitant in how it has handled the pandemic, and the advice it has given.

Even the most conscientious scientists have changed their advice on the virus over the last year. It is a new disease. Evidence about it emerges piecemeal. If evidence and advice about it didn't change over time, then it would surely be wrong!

This apparent inconsistency may also reduce people's faith in advice given. There is a widespread distrust of "authority" and "experts", exacerbated by social media and conspiracy theories.

But covid-distancing rules work for us only if we all follow them. Think of road markings, traffic lights, etc. We may not trust the governments and local authorities who design them. Still, everyone observing them saves lives; each individual following their own amateur traffic rules

would cost lives.

If everyone observes an imperfect set of rules, it can work. If each individual follows their own rule, even if some individuals' rules are better than the ones set by the government, then that won't.

Science is fallible, but better science than individual guesswork. Scientists are now unequivocally advising strict covid-distancing and lockdown measures to reduce the number of covid-related deaths.

"I can't afford to self-isolate. I might lose my job. Or I would lose my hours in my zero-hours job"

The government has failed to provide adequate financial support for people who should self-isolate due to Covid. Employers have pushed workers to return to work when they should be self-isolating.

Workers' Liberty has been supporting the [Safe and Equal campaign](#) to win full isolation pay. Trade-union action has won it in some places. Employers can be pushed on such issues even when workers are not unionised. You don't need to be unionised to use "Section 44", refusal to work in an unsafe area.

If you should self-isolate, and can't afford it, then get together with your workmates – whose health, and whose families' health, will be threatened by you going to work – and press your boss. Contact a trade union, or a campaign like Safe and Equal. Ask friends for help.

The media have encouraged resentment between generations, and many older people were socially isolated even before lockdown. This is just another way our class is divided. But it is a civic duty to take measures to reduce the spread of what is for some a deadly disease. We must be guided by scientific advice.

"Looks to me like the vaccine has been rushed. I'd rather wait and see than get vaccinated any time soon"

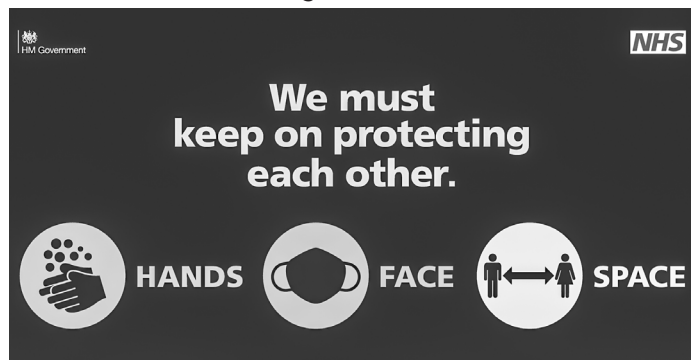
Vaccines have been developed with impressive speed, thanks to an unprecedented international effort by scientists and clinicians, combined with new technology, and freely available funding.

Typically any new medication undergoes several phases of trials: 1, 2, 3. There is often a gap of a year between phases while additional funding is obtained. This time, funding has been prompt enough to avoid delay between phases.

The speed demonstrates that we can overcome many barriers to development of health-care technology when ordinary *capitalist economic* rules are suspended. Not that *scientific* rules have been suspended.

Past studies have found most adverse effect from vaccinations become apparent within two months. The vaccinations that have been approved for use in the UK have been tested over a greater time period than that.

Getting vaccinated probably makes you less likely to infect others, as well as less likely to suffer bad symptoms yourself. You owe it to your family, your housemates, your workmates, as well as to yourself, to take the vaccine if you have the chance. □



Clampdown forces HK union to disband

By Pete Radcliff

On 15 January 2021 the Hong Kong Civil Service Bureau (CSB), undoubtedly acting under the instruction of Chief Executive Carrie Lam and her Chinese Communist Party masters, issued a circular to all government departments

All 180,000 workers in these departments will be required to take an oath of loyalty to the government and its "basic law". If they take that oath and are later seen to be acting "disloyally", they can face immediate disciplinary action. Monitoring of their activities might also feed into their prosecution under the National Security Law.

Many civil service workers, including Michael Ngan, chair of the 3,000 strong New Civil Servants Union, have been prominently involved in the democracy movement. The union was formed about a year ago to defend the workers both economically as well as from political victimisation.

Not surprisingly, they are reluctant to take the "Oath of Loyalty" now demanded of them. But they face a terrible dilemma. Do they stay openly truthful to their beliefs in democratic reform and wait to be sacked? Do they allow themselves to be sacked immediately by not signing the oath?

Do they face their union being unable to defend members who will not or cannot deny their involvement in political protests?

Sadly, the union leaders have decided they have no choice other than to dissolve their union. They feared that no-one would come forward to run the union in the light of the initial organisers being driven out of employment.

The PCS, the main civil service workers' union in Britain, passed a motion two months in solidarity with the new union. It is considering what solidarity it can give now. The trade union movement internationally needs to give direct financial and other support to Hong Kong workers' unions so that they do not suffer similar setbacks. □

Fire service bosses scrap safe-working deal

By Riccardo la Torre

Fire service employers have terminated an agreement with the FBU that allowed firefighters to safely assist our communities during the pandemic.

Since March firefighters have volunteered to drive ambulances and assist paramedics, help with patient transfer, deliver packages to vulnerable people, train care home workers to use PPE, and move the bodies of the deceased. In 2020 we drove about 80,000 ambulances, delivered 100,000 packages, moved 2,000 dead bodies and worked with a thousand care homes.

The FBU made an agreement with the employers and the fire chiefs to govern how this kind of non-contractual work could be done safely, and it's been renewed and added to several times.

On the body for collective bargaining in the fire service, the National Joint Council, the FBU is the only organisation which represents and negotiates for employees, due to our high density. To facilitate a smooth solution we temporarily accepted that the National Fire Chiefs Council could be represented in the discussions.

The agreement we concluded said that firefighters should only assent to legitimate requests for non-contractual work, that they must not be to the detriment of core statutory duties, and that they must be safe.

Part of the national best practice we negotiated was agreement that firefighters detaching from ordinary duties to work in a health or care setting must take a PCR test and get the all-clear – or self-isolate – before returning to ordinary work. This worked not only to prevent transmission of the virus into fire stations, but also in the other

direction.

Some chiefs said this was not sustainable. Others began to repeat this message – nonsensically, since we know the system worked well in most areas. The union insisted that without agreed, suitable safety measures the work could not be done.

A review period was agreed, to explore possible alternatives to PCR tests. Over Christmas FBU officers worked almost non-stop to develop and expand the list of alternatives. The employers, working hand-in-glove with the chiefs, rejected every single one.

Last week the the union came back with even more options, preparing to continue negotiations. Then suddenly there was a press release and circular from the employers terminating the agreement and blaming the FBU, even though it was they who walked away.

The employers and the chiefs are prioritising their anti-worker agenda above public safety. Sitting comfortably at home, they are seeking to throw our members and with us the wider public unnecessarily into harm's way.

FBU members are rightly angry and will be meeting locally and nationally this week to discuss our response. The union at every level is prepared to fight for firefighter and public safety.

Solidarity is essential. Everyone can start by promoting the FBU's newly launched safety campaign on social media, sending messages, photos and videos of support, and lobbying councillors, fire authority members and mayors to help reverse this attack. □

• Abridged. More at bit.ly/safe-fbu. Riccardo la Torre is a National Officer of the Fire Brigades Union

Momentum Internationalists sets out its plans

By Michael Elms

In his recent [speech to the Fabian Society](#), Keir Starmer used the word “internationalism” a lot. But the substance of what he said – or didn’t say – made clear that he plans to stoke nationalism as an election gimmick, and bolster an international order that is responsible for appalling crimes around the world. A real internationalist alternative is needed.

For socialists, internationalism is the beginning of wisdom. If we believe that the important division in society is between exploiters and exploited, then it follows that British workers have more interests in common with Algerian or Vietnamese workers than they do with British bosses. To defeat our shared enemies – bosses and exploiters all over the world – we have to overcome the things that divide us along national lines.

Brexit is a fine example of this imperative. The Leave vote was inspired by decades of rhetoric demanding harsher treatment for foreigners, in the UK and abroad. But as the Tories’ recently-published post-Brexit plans to rip up workers’ protections make clear, Brexit will bring harsher treatment for all workers in Britain. The end of freedom of movement and the stripping-away of rights from foreign-born workers is a thin end of the wedge: it makes it easier for employers to undermine the rights of all workers.

Starmer made his speech on “internationalism” a few days after declaring (to Andrew Marr, and contrary to Labour’s conference policy) that if in government he would not attempt to rescue the freedom of movement rights scrapped by Brexit. Just before that Marr interview he had made his clownishly flag-mad “Covid address”, gloating patriotically about how Britain would get the vaccine before other countries.

In his latest remarks he said nothing about migrant rights, but described Labour as “proudly patriotic”. Starmer is signalling that, like the pro-Brexit “left” clustered around the *Morning Star* and *Tribune* (which pushed the “progressive patriotism” pitch of Starmer’s rival Rebecca Long-Bailey), he thinks that Labour can and should use anti-migrant sentiment as a tool to manipulate voters.

What was positively “internationalist” in Starmer’s speech was his championing of the institutions of the international capitalist order. The theme of the Trump era has been trashing these institutions: pulling out of the Paris Climate Agreement, doing down NATO, cursing the UN, raising trade tariffs in spite of G7 resolutions. Trump and his right wing co-thinkers in power in Eastern Europe, Turkey and elsewhere represent an alternative to the old US-led international capitalist order – a worse alternative. But trying to get back to pre-Trump (or pre-2008) “normality” by returning to the embrace of these international



capitalist institutions is only a recipe for continued barbarism on a global scale.

NATO is a military cartel that contains and strengthens some of the world’s most appalling war criminals. Most recently, NATO has given tacit backing to Turkey’s campaigns of ethnic cleansing against Armenians and Kurds. The G7 and G8 conferences are designed to uphold an unjust world economic order. Starmer lauds Biden as an “internationalist”, a symbol of the kind of international co-operation he wants to see. But during Biden’s last spell in government, the US gave diplomatic and economic support to Saudi Arabia’s war against Yemen.

In recent years, against both Blair-style “NATO internationalism” and Neanderthal-nationalist anti-migrant agitation, a louder and louder socialist internationalist voice has been heard from the Labour Party’s grass roots. In 2019, motions for the abolition of all migrant detention centres, and for defending and extending free movement rights won a majority at Labour’s conference. Majorities in both the Labour and the Momentum ranks called for the party to take an unambiguous stance against Brexit.

The control of Corbyn’s leadership by *Morning Star*-line figures like Andrew Murray and Seumas Milne allowed Keir Starmer to capture some of that genuine internationalist constituency. Many socialists (Starmer voters among them) have been demoralised by the party’s clear rightward lurch this year. Some have drifted out of activity in recent months.

We need to rally and re-organise the socialist, internationalist current of the Labour Party grassroots, and make it a compact force which can then ally with different constellations of other groups as issues emerge. The force that was so recently able to re-write conference policy needs to be stirred back into life. Momentum Internationalists, Young Labour Internationalists and our co-thinkers are on a renewed drive to do that, on the basis of a shared programme of internationalism, democracy, and class struggle. □

• MI’s 28 January meeting on Labour, antisemitism, and the EHRC: bit.ly/mi-ehrc • YLI’s 22 January meeting on the US after the Capitol storming: bit.ly/yli-22j • MI blog: bit.ly/mo-int • Sign up for newsletter: bit.ly/mi-nl

USA: unfinished business

By Barrie Hardy

White supremacists' threats of violent disruption on 17 January proved empty, but we still don't know what they can do to pressure the incoming Biden administration. In many respects this struggle is unfinished business from the American Civil War.

In the aftermath of that conflict insurrectionists escaped punishment, in the name of "national reconciliation", and went on to re-establish white racist regimes in the southern states lasting a century.

Trump angered the Republican establishment when he intervened in the Georgia Senate run-offs by rubbing Republican officials who managed the elections there. Why were there Senate run-offs in Georgia?

Those run-offs were enacted at the end of the old Jim Crow regime in response to the civil rights movement in the 1960s. The idea was that in a three-way first-round contest between two white candidates and a black candidate the election would go into a second round where the "white vote" could coalesce around the single remaining white candidate.

The vote this month went differently because of the demographic changes in some southern states, with growing cosmopolitan cities.

The USA still deals with the legacy of slavery. In many ways the Trump movement is a product of imagined loss of white status. Some of its motivation is similar to the reason why southern whites took up arms for the Confederacy. Most southern whites then did not own slaves, but felt their position in the racial caste hierarchy was threatened by the Northern abolitionists.

During the civil war many atrocities were committed against black troops, hated by the Confederates for daring to take up arms. Often they were murdered if they fell into rebel hands. At Fort Pillow in Tennessee, 300 African American soldiers were massacred after they'd surrendered.

Confederate commander Nathan Bedford Forrest bore overall responsibility for this, but was not brought to justice afterwards.

Instead he became instrumental in the founding of the Ku Klux Klan.

The organisers of the rebellion escaped punishment. Only Confederate President Jefferson Davis served jail time – a measly two years. The leniency was justified by a hope that not making rebel leaders "martyrs" would prevent a violent backlash. The hope proved false. Ex-Confederates waged a successful terrorist campaign against the federal government, culminating in the triumph of the Jim Crow system.

Andrew Johnson, who took over as President when Lincoln was assassinated, opposed giving African Americans civil rights and allowed many southern states to introduce segregationist "black codes". Congress, however, passed Amendment 15 to the US constitution, giving voting rights to all male adults regardless of race.

Ulysses S Grant, President in 1868, did much to combat the terrorist war the Klan and others conducted in the former confederacy by sending federal troops south to counter them. That was the period of "reconstruction", until 1877, when African Americans exercised the vote and were involved in the governments of southern states.

Then the contested election of 1876 was "resolved" by a deal whereby federal troops were withdrawn from the south and white supremacist rule (though not the slave-owning mode of production) was restored for most of the next century.

Federal troops were then deployed against the emerging labour movement in the North.

The lesson to learn is that white supremacists must be made to pay for their crimes. That's why, despite Stephen Wood's arguments ([letter, Solidarity 572](#)), I argue that we should not want the incoming Biden government to let bygones be bygones. Trump and others attacking democratic rights should be prosecuted to the utmost.

Trump and co will try to make themselves out to be martyrs. Many sadly deluded followers trapped in a parallel universe where lies are truth will fall for the con. Yet putting Trump on trial for his countless crimes can open the eyes of some, and criminal sanctions act as a deterrent. Failure to prosecute only emboldens the far right.

Coupled with this must be demands to purge the police and military of those connected with white supremacist and neo-nazi groups.

Socialists cannot of course rely on Biden and the American establishment to take such far-reaching measures or indiscriminately support heavier policing. They need to build up independent organisations and campaign on various fronts.

The list of tasks is long. Voting rights strengthened, voter suppression ended. Legal obstacles to trade-union organisation lifted, trade union membership expanded. Economic relief measures to meet the needs of working class communities devastated by the Covid epidemic. Socialists must stand at the forefront of the struggle for racial justice.

Nevertheless, we cannot be blasé about the attack on the Capitol by a terrorist gang who threatened to lynch elected representatives. Reports are emerging that these attackers were aided in various ways by some Republican legislators, that panic buttons were ripped out of some of the offices. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez [says](#) she "feared for her life" and "didn't feel safe around other members of Congress" because they might tip off rioters to where she was.

Congress staffers knew how to deal with the emergency because they had learnt the drill from their schooldays as a precaution against school shooters. It's doubtful they expected to need it in the workplace.

Those workers won't be wanting their attackers to get off with a Presidential pardon. They will want the instigators of the assault on their workplace to be brought to book. □

Trumpism will endure

By Sam Farber

Essentially, Trumpism is a conservative authoritarian response to the Democratic Party's continual neglect of the legitimate grievances of large sectors of the white voters who ended up supporting Trump.

By doing so, these white voters hoped that he would reverse the socioeconomic and political decay resulting from neoliberal policies that the Democrats themselves established under Clinton and Obama and will most likely continue under Biden.

Abandoned to the fate of deindustrialisation and structural unemployment, white America continues to suffer from the ills of despair sunk in the widespread consumption of opioids and rising rates of suicide.

It is true that the economy of the United States continues making material strides in fields including high technology, communications, medical science, and entertainment. But in overall terms, this material progress is not as large or evenly distributed as that of previous historical periods. As Northwestern University economist Robert J. Gordon argued in two influential papers published in 2000 and 2018, since the early seventies, the American economy has been experiencing a continuous decline in the rate of increase of productivity, except for a temporary revival from 1996 to 2006...

Attacks

The decline of the rate of growth of productivity has had a negative effect on the rate of profit, which has contributed to the capitalists' efforts to extract greater production from workers and other attacks on workers' demands. It may also be a key reason why between 1980 and 2020, the US real GDP-per-person growth has averaged less than 3 percent a year and has been slowing down regularly.

The capitalist attack on workers' demands has increased the uneven and skewed distribution of wealth and strengthened the capitalist opposition to the taxation required for a substantial improvement in the access to services like education and health care. Education for the majority of the people has continued to deteriorate, and notwithstanding advances in medical science, so has health care.

Along with the entirely inadequate response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and to the destruction of the environment by the decision-makers, Republican and Democrat, these are all powerful expressions of capitalist decay. They reveal the systemic inability of a social system to assure its long-term survival, to provide a meaningful alternative and solution to the ecological, economic, and social crises that considerably increase the likelihood of pandemics, and to enact an effective and egalitarian public health response to those pandemics.

Abandoned to the fate of deindustrialisation and structural unemployment, white America continues to suffer

from the ills of despair sunk in the widespread consumption of opioids and rising rates of suicide. African Americans continue being victimised by police brutality and a highly unstable labour and housing market that has increased the precariousness of its recently expanding middle class, while the black majority continues to be poor as a black minority rises into the managerial and executive ranks. In the last decade, student debt has become an increasing burden for college students who like their noncollege peers do not expect to live as well as their parents' generation.

The increasing number of young people who have to work at McDonald's and their retail equivalents are not exactly encouraged to feel optimistic about their futures when they are plagued not only by low wages, but are expected to be available for sudden changes in work schedules that wreak havoc over their lives, especially if they have young children.

These are the concrete expressions of the long-standing rise of inequality in the United States, the country with the most unequal distribution of both personal wealth and income among the G7 economies.

Material prosperity has been indispensable to the maintenance of social cohesion and peace in a highly individualistic American society where historically the solidarity based on class and community ties has been comparatively weak.

As this prosperity recedes, the great question remains: What social forces will emerge to struggle for a progressive democratic and socialist alternative from below to right-wing reaction, whether Trumpian or not? □

• Excerpted from the *Jacobin* website: bit.ly/sam-fa

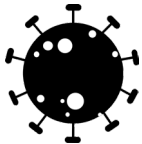
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 - Tubeworker/Off The Rails, videos by the producers of the bulletins □

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Inequality worsened The pandemic worsened



Covid-19

By Sacha Ismail

New reports from academic researchers and think-tanks have vividly illustrated the connections between the Covid-19 pandemic and social inequality, and made the case – explicitly or by implication – for radical measures in response.

A range of social inequalities have worsened the impact of Covid-19, and Covid in turn has worsened those inequalities.

None of these reports comes from or even really mentions the labour movement, which surely says something too. Socialists must fight for our movement to shake itself up, to become a megaphone for social protest and campaigning.

The Marmot review

February 2020 saw the publication of *The Marmot Review 10 Years On*, produced by a team led by Michael Marmot, director of UCL's Institute of Health Equity. That report revisited the relationship between health and social inequality. Now the Marmot team have produced a second follow-up report, *Build Back Fairer*, on the impact of the pandemic.

The February 2020 review summed up the decade of "austerity". Improvements in life expectancy in England stalled, something which had not happened since at least 1900. The "social gradient" of life expectancy – the more deprived an area, the shorter life expectancy – became steeper, with inequalities of life expectancy increasing both between and within regions.

Among women in the most deprived 10% of areas, life expectancy fell between 2010 and 2018.

The amount of time people spend in poor health also increased, with that gradient between more- and less-deprived areas steepening too.

10 Years On was not a political polemic, but it placed the blame squarely at the door of government policy, particularly the sustained decimation of public services and the welfare state. It also highlighted increased inequality and the expansion of "poor quality" work, i.e. the numbers working in poor conditions, with little security and



for low pay.

Now, as the new review summarises mildly but damningly, the Tories' "mismanagement during the pandemic, and the unequal way the pandemic has struck, is of a piece with what happened in England in the decade from 2010... Since then, with the Covid-19 pandemic, the world has changed dramatically. But in England the changes have been entirely consistent with its existing state when the pandemic hit... England's comparatively poor management of the pandemic was of a piece with England's health improvement falling behind that of other rich countries [in that decade]."

The impact of the pandemic has been shaped by social inequality. England has the highest excess mortality rate from Covid-19 in Europe (Scotland is narrowly in third place, behind Spain). This is very much a matter of "social determinants": Covid-19 deaths have been concentrated in more deprived areas and regions, among those in overcrowded housing, among key, manual, low-paid and precarious workers, and among BAME people. And those categories overlap.

Covid-19 deaths are more than twice as high in the most deprived areas as the least. They are almost four times as high among those with "caring, leisure and other service occupations" and "elementary occupations" (so-called "unskilled" manual jobs) as among those with "professional occupations". They are almost six times as high in the local authority with the highest proportion of overcrowded housing (the London borough of Newham) as in that with the lowest.

All BAME groups have experienced higher death rates than white people. Among Pakistani-background men the ratio is 2.5:1; among black Caribbean men 2.8; among Bangladeshi men 3.4; and among black African men 3.8. The figures for women are lower but similar.

Now reverse the angle, to see how the pandemic has shaped and exacerbated inequality. Marmot reviews the impact of the pandemic and lockdowns on a wide range

ns the pandemic. orsens inequality.

of social inequalities.

These include the educational experience of children from different backgrounds; the distribution of job losses among different kinds of workers; the prevalence of shut-down employment among ethnic groups; increases in poverty during 2020; how low-income families feel they are coping financially; the difference in financial impact on home-owners and renters; the incidence of domestic violence; mental health problems; alcohol use; physical exercise; and many others...

Almost across the board the pandemic and its handling have hit the worse-off hardest and increased inequality.

One third of families in the top fifth of incomes saved more than usual during the first two months of the pandemic. Meanwhile lower-income families were more likely to take on additional debt, and 50% of people with savings under £1,000 used them to cover everyday expenses.

Estimated numbers living in poverty were over 400,000 higher in summer 2020 than in 2018-2019 (i.e. after a decade of brutal cuts) and almost 700,000 higher in the winter. 270,000 more people were over 50% below the poverty line.

The proportion of low-income families saying they are "living comfortably" declined from 16% to 1%; "doing alright" from 32% to 7%; "just about getting by" from 38% to 14%. "Finding it quite difficult" increased from 9% to 33%, and "finding it very difficult" from 4% to 43%.

Four million people in 14% of households with children experienced "food insecurity" in the first five months of the pandemic, up from 12% pre-Covid-19. In households with three or more children, it was 16%. At the end of this period food insecurity was nearly 50% more prevalent in black and mixed ethnicity households with children than in white households.

4% of the highest-paid are in sectors shut down during the pandemic; 15% of those in the middle; and 34% of the lowest-paid. Workers under 30 from every ethnic group are significantly more likely than older white people to be in shut-down sectors, and older Pakistani and Bangladeshi workers much more likely.

About 18% of home-owners report "lower-than-usual levels of well-being" on at least four of twelve variables, but more like 23% of private renters and 24% of social renters. The increases since the pandemic are much bigger for renters and particularly private renters.

The most deprived pupils are much less likely than the



least deprived to be only two months or less behind as a result of school closures; but more likely to be three months behind, over twice as likely to be four months behind, four times as likely to be five months behind, and ten times more likely to be six months behind.

This is a crisis hitting the younger generation of the working class and the worst off hardest.

Unemployment among 16-34 year olds, falling fastest of all age groups in the last months of 2019, grew the fastest from the start of the pandemic, accelerating throughout 2020.

Unhappiness and depression have increased significantly, most dramatically among younger people (16-34 year olds) and among women – and particularly young women. More severe "psychological distress" has grown most sharply among 18-24-year-olds, and somewhat less in each ascending age bracket.

Many of the statistics in the Marmot report are also broken down by ethnicity. As it explains, "structural racism means that some ethnic groups are more likely to be exposed to adverse social and economic conditions, in addition to everyday experiences of discrimination". It calls this a "fundamental cause of social injustice".

The Deaton review

A review organised by the (conservative but thoughtful) Institute of Fiscal Studies, chaired by economist Angus Deaton, reinforces the Marmot review's findings. As the Deaton review's "new year's message" puts it:

"Since [our launch a year and a half ago], the world has changed more than any of us could have imagined. And yet Covid-19 seems to have shone a light on many of the

continued page 14

issues we raised pre-pandemic, more vividly than we ever could have. It has cruelly exposed huge variations in how easily we are able to weather threats to livelihoods, to educational progress, to physical and mental health. These disparities have been closely correlated with pre-existing inequalities between groups according to their education, income, location and ethnicity...”

The review finds that between March and July 2020, Covid-related deaths were higher in each “decile” (tenth) of local authority areas on the “index of multiple deprivation”. They were much higher in the top three deciles, at 125, 136 and 143 deaths per 100,000 people, compared to an average of around 70 deaths in the bottom five deciles and 80 in the bottom seven. The difference by decile for Covid-related deaths was significantly larger than for the non-Covid-related.

Again reversing the lens, the IFS review found that the pandemic and lockdown have exacerbated inequalities between the higher- and lower-paid and graduates and non-graduates; between the relatively securely employed and those in various forms of insecure employment or self-employment; between pupils at different kinds of schools and from different backgrounds; between ethnic groups; and between age groups.

Between February and April, the proportion of people doing any paid work fell by 40% among those with no more than GCSE-level qualifications, compared to 20% for those with a degree. By the third quarter of 2020, the proportion of non-graduates doing any paid work was still 17% lower than pre-pandemic, compared to 7% for graduates.

Those with a higher education are significantly less likely to be in a shut-down sector than those with only A-Levels, GCSEs or fewer qualifications. They are much more likely to be able to work from home – 45%, compared to 35% for those with A-Levels and 25% for those with GCSEs or less.

The first lockdown resulted in three quarters of the self-employed reporting less work than usual; the biggest reductions were experienced by those on the lowest incomes, many of whom in reality will be precariously employed wage-workers. The self-employed or notionally self-employed on low incomes had already suffered even worse than more securely employed workers in the years following the financial crisis.

The review found particularly sharp differences between men of different ethnic groups in terms of the proportion working in shut-down sectors. In particular, 34% of Pakistani and 48% of Bangladeshi men work in these sectors. 25% of Pakistani men are self-employed.

Before the pandemic primary school children spent around six hours a day on educational activities, essentially regardless of family income. By May 2020 it was 5.5 hours for children from the best off third of families, 4.5 for the poorest and just over four for the middle third.

65% of parents in the richest third of families reported that their child’s secondary school offered active home learning resources, compared with 53% in the poorest third. Pupils at private primary schools were twice as likely as those state primaries to take part in online lessons every day.

By September 2020, those aged 16-25 were more than



twice as likely as the oldest group of workers to have suffered job losses during the pandemic; a majority of young workers had seen their earnings fall. In contrast, many older people have benefited financially during the pandemic, with most retired people reporting no financial impact and twice as many reporting an improvement as the reverse. (The wider social and psychological impacts of lockdown, and the economic situation of a minority of poorer pensioners, are another question.)

What is to be done?

The picture these figures compose is stark, fitting closely with observed and anecdotal reality yet also highly alarming. It should function as a call to action.

However, many of the inequalities illustrated by the Marmot and Deaton researchers and others concern primarily inequalities within the working population. The genuinely rich, and even more so the capitalist ruling class, are harder to see or invisible due to their small numbers. Crucial to the picture is the fact that since 2008 they have significantly increased their wealth at the expense of the whole working class – but with the poorest hit hardest. They have increased it again during the pandemic.

To implement policies that can seriously make an impact on this social crisis, we must take control of and redistribute a serious chunk of this wealth. Next week I'll assess the policies advocated by Marmot and other recent reports, in the context of what they say about wider wealth inequality. □

• *Build Back Fairer: the Covid-19 Marmot Review*: bit.ly/marmotcovid • The IFS Deaton *Review of Inequalities*: ifs.org.uk/inequality • See also our June 2020 article on Covid-19 and BAME groups: bit.ly/covidbamereport

Featured book

Gramsci's ideas, name, and terminology are widely misused. This book presents and engages with debates around Gramsci's major ideas; disputes the “post-Marxist” readings of Gramsci; discusses the relation between Gramsci's ideas and Trotsky's; and more. Second, expanded edition: 140 pages, £6.

workersliberty.org/publications



Letters

The occasional use of the word “mob” in *Solidarity 577* requires some comment. The first point I want to make is that “mob”, “mob rule” or variants thereof, have almost always been used against the left: strikers, demonstrators such as those involved in unemployed movements, anti-fascist struggles and campaigns such as BLM and so on. We shouldn’t be borrowing the language of the ruling class, however appalled we might be by what we see on the television screen.

I have no desire to go into a detailed history of the term “mob”. It probably gained currency in the French Revolution where it was applied, for example, by various commentators (many of them writing after the event) to those who stormed the Bastille.

That supposedly senseless, directionless, undisciplined “mob” was anything but. They had a very clear goal – to release prisoners from the Bastille and bring down a hated symbol of the old regime. They engaged in quite prolonged negotiations with the commander of the fortress cum prison, who had some sympathies for the aims of the Revolution.

The events that followed were confused. Eventually the Bastille was stormed and the prisoners released (all seven of them!). The Commander and most of the small garrison were killed, and the Bastille was destroyed.

Despite the confusions, this was not “mob rule”. The people who stormed the Bastille were actually well-organised and goal-oriented and this could be said for many of the groups, crowds and factions who participated in the French Revolution. A few years later at the Battle of Valmy (1792) the “rabble” (a variant of “mob”), now organised into an armed militia and bolstered by troops from the French army, displayed great discipline and military expertise and defeated a larger force of Prussian, Austrians and pro-monarchists. So much for the “unruly mob”!

For Washington, the use of the term “mob” hides a welter of complexities behind a convenient label.

The Camden Abu Dis Friendship Association has launched a [petition](#) calling on Britain to supply vaccines to Palestine. □

Within that crowd of people were, I’m sure, many that we would like to win over to our side of the barricade: the unemployed, the disillusioned, those struggling to make ends meet, the former Kentucky coal miner now facing a bleak future and so on.

Not only would we like to win them over. It is a political necessity, we must win them. Obviously, we should do this without making the slightest concession to individuals such as the scum pictured in *Solidarity 577* wearing a “Camp Auschwitz” sweatshirt. To paraphrase Trotsky, those people should be “branded with infamy, if not with a bullet”.

The easy but lazy use of the word “mob” is a distraction, it warps our analysis, it deflects our criticism into journalistic cliché and makes our job, whether in the USA or elsewhere, just that bit harder. □

John Cunningham, Lancashire

Singling out Israel



Letters

The *Solidarity 577* [report](#) on vaccine nationalism was accurate, but there’s a problem. Vaccine nationalism is rife. Countries put their own nationals first, and buy excess stocks before poorer countries can get even meagre supplies. Exceptions are few. In the current climate, the political import of attacking only *Israel’s* vaccine nationalism will be (inadvertently, no doubt) to feed into the ambient demon-Zionist and delegitimise-Israel propaganda. We should beware of the special, jaundice-eyed singling-out of Israel.

It adds a twist that Israel militarily occupies the West Bank and blockades Gaza, though both the Palestinian Authority and Gaza run their own health services. But we should avoid getting into a mode where we attack common misdeeds as practised by Israel, and much more rarely as by other states. □

John Nihill, South London

What makes workplace leaders?

By Stephen Wood

This short review cannot cover all the issues raised by the “Angry Workers” book [Class Power on Zero Hours](#), so I will focus on one central section of the book, about interactions between workplace organising and community links. A longer review is online at [bit.ly/cpzh-rev](#).

The book is the culmination of six years of “getting rooted” in Greenford in West London. It documents in workers’ enquiry style some key jobs the supporters and organisers of the Angry Workers of the World (AWW) have been doing while based in an area of West London that has an extensive history of class struggle, but is not now heavily populated by the organised left. It also seeks to lay down a kind of manifesto or program for others to consider “getting rooted” as well. The editors even included this Trotskyist’s reflection on working in a library out in the “Wild West”. So, while the book draws fairly different conclusions to us, reading about their experiences and their take has value for anyone attempting to organise in their workplace.

The AWW see their work as based on “workers’ self-organisation” without an absolute rule on what this means. Experiences detailed within the book include times that some of the writers were active USDAW and GMB reps, and their attempts to build a smaller, more militant, union using the IWW as the hook in a project to talk to and help workers organise at factories and units across Park Royal.

As well as analysis of their experience, the book has useful chapters on the nature of food production and distribution. In the section on working in a 3D printer factory, there are some further thoughts on automation and useful criticisms of fashionable “fully automated luxury communism” ideas.

AWW has a different view of the mainstream trade union movement from *Solidarity*, but we recognise many of the problems that the AWW have encountered when working in jobs that already have some union organisation. And we share a commitment to workplace activity, which a lot of the Trotskyist left have downrated. Like the AWW, we have a commitment to producing workplace industrial bulletins, and some experience in doing so.

Similarly while they distribute it for free, the *Workers Wild West* newspaper they produce has some common features with other publications of the left.

The book’s longest reflection on work within the mainstream unions are on the GMB in Bakkavor, a large food manufacturer, and on USDAW in Tesco. An activist’s experience as a GMB rep and forklift driver in Bakkavor is measured by the yardstick of how much they were able to inculcate a sense of militancy among the workers and

generate demands on the union to do something on pay, safety, and hours, rather than in terms of responding to the campaigns the union runs, more or less in abstraction from any input by the members.

The AWW comrades in Bakkavor seized an opportunity when a new full-time organiser came in who was more sympathetic to the rank-and-file. At least he wanted to hold new rep elections.

Many of the workers the AWW meet in the workplaces and through their “solidarity network” find themselves stuck between the bosses, pressure from family and community leaders, and inability to get immediate results through their own self activity.

The AWW experience shines a light on how community links, often strictly hierarchical and patriarchal, affect how union “organising models” work. The factories of Greenford and Park Royal are dominated by migrant workers, often working in the same place but with job roles or grades separating them as well as language and culture. Young Romanian guys may be working alongside older Gujarati women, but with little way of communicating between them.

The most vocal people, often best placed to play a leading role as “organic leaders”, are often also the people most likely to want to dampen down militancy or avoid anything that might rock the boat too much. An organising drive is built on shaky ground if it centres round self-declared spokespeople rather than less obvious “worker leaders”.

The experience that allowed the GMB to open up for the AWW people is instructive. AWW take the fact that they were not entirely successful in getting a pay offer rejected, and in countering obvious attempts to rig the vote, as proof of the failure of working in mainstream unions. It is hard to judge from the outside, but that initial defeat could have been the start of more fruitful work. After all the French group Lutte Ouvrière, who have worked especially hard on workplace bulletins, say they can’t assess how a workplace bulletin is going from anything shorter than two years’ consistent experience.

The previously inactive reps, close to management, were self-chosen leaders in the workplace.

Another example not in the book, but from a company AWW also have some experience with, is Alpha LSG, one of the largest suppliers of airline food to Heathrow.

One of the supervisors there is also a Labour councillor and a well known figure in the Punjabi community in West London. He once told me in detail how everyone there is generally happy, and the union has a good relationship with management. He is of course one of the union reps, as well as a supervisor. □

The British far right in 2020

By Luke Hardy

Socialists in Britain had a pretty awful 2020, but it's slightly heartening to note that the far right in the UK had a bad year too.

In some ways things look favourable for them. Millions of voters voted Tory without any particular love for that party in 2019, on the basis that a hard Brexit and Boris Johnson would deliver on jobs, reverse the decline of northern towns, restore national prestige to where it was in the 1950s, or reverse the UK's cultural and ethnic diversity. None of that was ever going to happen.

Meanwhile the socialist left and the trade unions have been mostly on the back foot. But the far right have decided to hitch their wagons to two political dead ends.

One is the anti-lockdown and anti-vax movement. A plebeian far-right mass movement is not going to be built out of an alliance of new-age hippies, tin-foil-hat conspiracists, and arch-Thatcherites who suggest that our parents and grandparents dying is a price worth paying for the good of the economy.

The far-right might have made more on headway appealing for a much more authoritarian lockdown and trying to racialise issues around who gets the vaccine first. The police complain about being unable to deal the number of people wanting to shop their neighbours for often minor or imagined infractions of Covid guidelines. In any case, the far right isn't appealing to that crowd.

Culture war

The far right has also hitched itself to a culture war. That culture war is being led by upper-middle-class, middle-aged *Spectator* and *Telegraph* readers, and often focuses on institutions such people care about.

But opposing post-modernism in universities or diverse casting on TV is not great terrain for radicalising the self-employed ruined by Covid, bankrupted small business people, or squeezed workers.

Anti-migrant or anti-Muslim elements of culture war might help the far right. But on the whole a culture war led by the likes of Laurence Fox, Toby Young, and Claire Fox is unlikely to help build a new street movement.

The far-right protests in London against Black Lives Matter were weak, and saw scuffles between various far-right groups.

Maybe the far right's "brightest" hope is Farage's attempt to refound the Brexit Party as the "Reform Party", aiming to drag the Tories even further to the right on migration and cultural issues.

But so far Farage shows no ambition to act as anything beyond a ginger group for the Tories. His enterprise looks unlikely to interact directly with street fascists or to rally the far right. And even the ginger-group path looks a bit redundant when people like Priti Patel or Jacob Rees Mogg are in the Cabinet.

A number of fascists and far right figures said they joined the Tory Party in 2019 after Johnson became the

leader. How many of them remain and how active they are seems to be a moot point.

Several Tory MPs have been caught meeting with the far right both in Britain and internationally. Daniel Kawczynski was at a international meeting early in 2020 with Matteo Salvini the leader of Italy's far right La Lega party and others similar. Dehenna Davison MP was pictured with activists from the far right, including one who has expressed admiration for Hitler.

The greatest influence of the far right in Britain comes from the financial and political links between the British Tory right and governments influenced by the far right, like Viktor Orban's in Hungary, Putin's in Russia, Modi's in India, Bolsonaro's in Brazil.

Red-Brownism

The "Red-Brown" strand may expand. George Galloway's "Workers Party of Britain" combines social demagoguery, anti-migrant sentiment, class-struggle rhetoric, and nationalism, and still probably sees itself as on the left, even as it was willing to support Farage. Paul Embury, though feted by the right, sees himself as a dissident leftist rather than as a partisan of the right.

Over time such types of Red-Brown politics could harden into an integral part of the far-right ecosystem.

It looks like a revival for the more traditional far right will have to adapt to a more Red-Brown politics – welfarist, pro-nationalisation, with demagoguery against the rich and corporations.

To combat that, the left and labour movement must provide the fighting opposition to this government that the "moderate" Labour leaders fail to give.

There is also an ideological fight. Working-class socialist political consciousness does not come about naturally as a result of life in capitalist society. It requires organisation and education, exposure to political ideas as well as involvement in struggle. □

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Right-winger Coyne declares for Unite election

By Ann Field

This year, 2021, will see an election for the replacement of Len McCluskey as General Secretary of the big cross-sector union Unite. And now union right-winger Gerard Coyne, the runner-up in the last general secretary election, in 2017, has declared his wish to stand.

We don't yet know the detailed schedule. Sadly, jockeying for position, arm-twisting, backroom deals, backstabbing, slanders and the outright lies are already in full flow.

McCluskey's favoured successor is Howard Beckett. In his capacity as head of the union's Legal Department he has squandered vast amounts of members' money on no-hope cases in which the issue at stake was not workers' rights but the "good name" of Unite and its leaders.

Beckett sought the support of the United Left – the Broad Left in Unite, which largely functions as an election machine, and less effectively of late – for his leadership bid. In last summer's hustings Beckett lost to Assistant General Secretary Steve Turner by three votes.

Under United Left rules, anyone who stands in hustings for its endorsement must agree in advance to abide by the outcome. Beckett gave that commitment, but has refused to accept the result, spuriously claiming voting "irregularities".

Beckett's denunciations of the election result were backed by the so-called Progressive United Left Scotland (PULS), which split from the United Left Scottish Region over four years ago. The national United Left has now deemed PULS to have "placed itself outside of" the United Left because of its support for Beckett.

A new organisation, Unite Unity Left, has been launched, in direct competition with the United Left. Its main purpose is to campaign for Beckett's bid to be elected General Secretary.

Beckett's electoral strategy is to shout a lot, presumably in the hope that Unite members will equate such behaviour with passion and principles. But Beckett's record indicates few principles.

The official United Left candidate is Steve Turner. Turner is a blander and less abrasive figure. The basis of his election campaign and his vision for Unite have yet to be announced.

Sharon Graham, head of the Unite Organising Department, has thrown her hat into the ring, and has launched another new group, Workers Unite, as her election vehicle.

It describes itself as having been "set up by a broad base of Unite shops stewards and reps" and as welcoming "all Unite members, shop stewards, reps, officers, staff".

To me it looks more like a creation of Graham's Organising Department staff. In recent months they have been

busy lobbying Unite shop stewards and reps to support Graham's campaign.

Unfairly, Graham has been criticised as the candidate of the right wing. But there is a real problem with Graham's slogans such as "Let's get back to the workplace" and "a union that will move beyond internal Labour Party politics."

In the abstract, they might seem to make sense. In fact, they are code for political retreat and a turn inwards.

In recent years Unite has attempted to extend trade unionism beyond the workplace (e.g. Community branches and community campaigning). And it has intervened in "internal Labour Party politics". It has done so inadequately, and sometimes even counterproductively in the Labour Party.

The remedy is to do community campaigning better, and to intervene more effectively in the Labour Party, not to abandon such areas of work in the guise of a promise to focus on workplace bread-and-butter issues.

Anyway, a *real* right-wing candidate, Gerard Coyne, has announced that he will again be standing for election as General Secretary. In 2017, despite Unite's image as a bedrock of the left, Coyne nearly won. The day the result was announced, Coyne was suspended from his Unite-official job and subsequently sacked for his conduct during the election campaign. An Employment Tribunal threw out his claim for unfair dismissal.

If Coyne's 2017 campaign ever rose higher than a sewer, then certainly not beyond the level of a gutter. "Take back control of our borders" (i.e. keep out foreign workers), "take back your union" (from whom?), and lurid personalised attacks on McCluskey (despite Coyne himself being an overpaid and unelected bureaucrat), were the staple of the demagogic-populist campaign.

An article in the *Times* of 16 January marked the opening shot in Coyne's campaign. It was about multi-million-pound contracts across Britain being given by Unite to a company whose owner is under investigation for alleged bribery and who is "an associate" of Len McCluskey.

McCluskey and Flanagan, the company owner, were in turn linked by the article to former Liverpool mayor Joe Anderson and Derek Hatton (ex-Militant, ex-deputy-leader of Liverpool Council), both under investigation for bribery and witness intimidation.

What is missing from this already crowded field of contenders is a rank-and-file candidate.

But a rule change adopted by the last Unite Rules Change Conference makes a rank-and-file candidate virtually impossible. The change more than tripled the number of branch nominations needed to get on the ballot paper. □

Couriers: push the courts, organise at work

By Michael Elms

An important legal case is in the works. A claim for holiday pay and the minimum wage for couriers working for food delivery app Stuart (the delivery arm of JustEat) is being brought to court by law firm Leigh Day.

In December 2019 a judge found that a courier employed by Stuart was not an “independent” contractor, but a “dependent” contractor, also known in legal jargon as a “limb (b) worker” – the reason being that a courier working for Stuart is obliged to accept a food order if no other worker picks it up. That means that theoretically, all couriers working for Stuart have a claim on backdated holiday pay for the whole period of their work with Stuart; back pay for any shortfall between their pay and the National Minimum Wage; and the right to paid holidays and minimum wage in the future.

If the court upholds this ruling, the consequences for Stuart and for the whole “self-employed” app-based courier business may be major. Precisely for that reason, it seems likely that judges will come under pressure from the ruling class to save Stuart’s bacon. While it’s right that the union is pursuing a win in the courts, ultimately the

only guarantee of success lies in workers’ organisation and action.

Meanwhile workers in Sheffield and South Yorkshire are continuing to organise. Emboldened by the union’s activity and following discussions with newly-unionised workers in Sheffield, groups of food couriers in nearby towns are contacting the union. For the union, spreading co-ordinated action beyond Sheffield is surely a strategic priority.

In Sheffield itself the focus of the union in the first weeks of the year has been on local issues: restaurant managers refusing to let drivers use the bathroom when they pick up food (a breach of a directive from the Health and Safety Executive), and a private car park firm issuing a whole series of unjustified parking tickets outside a much-visited restaurant, stinging low-waged workers for as much as £160.

As well as fighting the tickets individually through appeals, the union plans to start a collective campaign by all drivers against this extortion and abuse. □

- Hannah Thompson is wild-swimming every day in January to raise money for the South Yorkshire Couriers’ Network Strike Fund. Contribute at bit.ly/hannah-f

Requisition Big Pharma!

By Martin Thomas

On 18 January, World Health Organisation chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus [warned](#) of “catastrophic moral failure” on Covid vaccines.

“It’s not right that younger, healthier adults in rich countries are vaccinated before health workers and older people in poorer countries... Right now, we must work together as one global family to prioritise those most at risk of severe diseases and death, in all countries”.

The labour movement should demand emergency public ownership of Big Pharma’s factories, and the speedy wartime-fashion expansion of production lines to get vaccines out across the world.

For now, poorer countries mostly have lower Covid tolls than rich ones, maybe because their populations are younger, maybe because the frail people killed by Covid in rich countries would not have survived those other frailties in poorer countries. The USA cumulatively shows 1200 Covid deaths per million population, Europe and South America both about 900, India about 100, Asia overall about 80, Africa 60.

But the ratios are not fixed. Germany and the Czech

Republic had relatively low tolls in early 2020, and have high tolls now. Since early December South Africa’s proportional toll has risen from one-sixth of Europe’s average to 36% above.

Vaccine nationalism is also short-sighted. Remote islands or countries with ultra-policed borders can keep low virus levels whatever happens in the rest of the world. Most countries can’t.

The new lockdowns – clumsy, costly, and even botched though they be – are “working”. The 7-day moving average of infections in Britain has been declining since 1 January. But, in Britain and elsewhere, improvement in hospitalisation rates and deaths will only come later.

Solidarity campaigns for social measures to make the covid-distancing restrictions effective and reduce their social costs:

- Full isolation pay for all; publicly-provided quarantine accommodation
- Revised risk assessments, under workers’ control, for all workplaces, in light of the greater infectiousness of new virus variants
- Bring social care into the public sector. □

Dissolving Labour's policies

By Ann Field

Winning the next general election is Keir Starmer's declared priority. Of course, it would be good if Labour wins the next election, and even better if the Tories were forced to call an election sooner rather than later. But Starmer's strategy for winning amounts to presenting himself as Mr. Moderate: abstaining in parliamentary votes on the Overseas Operations Bill and the Spycops Bill, in the name of national security; voting for the Tories' Brexit deal in the name of national unity; and failing to support workers who refuse to put their health at risk in unsafe workplaces.

The eight [interim reports](#) produced in December 2020 by the Labour Party National Policy Forum (a body set up in the early Blair years to give detailed policy reports which conference then largely has to accept or reject wholesale) are part of the same pattern.

Bland statements of unambitious "principles" have replaced the radical policies adopted by Party conferences, the imaginative policies of the 2019 election manifesto – and Starmer's own election promises in this year's leadership contest.

The Economy, Business and Trade report, for example, makes no mention of the repeal of all anti-union laws. It does not even propose the abolition of the 2016 Trade Union Act. Instead, it advocates no more than that "the role of trade unions in workplaces and policy making should be strengthened."

The same report likewise no mention of Starmer's leadership campaign pledges to increase income tax on the top 5% of earners and to support common ownership of rail, mail, energy and water. Instead, it envisages an economy "in which everyone has a stake".

Other reports contain well-meaning generalities which have already been contradicted by Starmer's own actions.

Thus, the International report promises that Labour will "champion international workers' rights and equitable trade agreements to closely tie our international and domestic priorities." But this cannot be reconciled with voting for the Tories' Brexit deal – which deprived EU workers, for example, of the right to freedom of movement to the UK.

For reasons left unexplained, some of the reports do not even cover their nominal subject matter. The Housing Local Government and Transport report makes no mention of housing or transport. And the Work, Pensions and Equality report focuses solely on social security. It does not even mention the input by Neurodivergent Labour which was the second most popular of the submissions it was due to consider.

Probably the interim reports will be defended on the grounds that they are interim reports, laying the basis for Labour's manifesto in the 2024 general election, establishing the principles on which that manifesto will be based. Detail has to await further reports.

But starting off with bland statements of principle looks like a mechanism for dissolving policies agreed by conference into those bland generalities, and then replacing them by weaker policies dreamt up by policy wonks on the basis of discussion with focus groups.

The interim reports underline the undemocratic nature of the entire policy-making process which is vested in the National Policy Forum. 80% of the submissions to the Forum came from individual members. Only 2% came from Constituency Labour Parties. And many submissions were just ignored. The rank-and-file of the Labour Party and its affiliated organisation should not be merely "consulted" and invited to send in "submissions". The decisive policy-making body in the Labour Party should be its annual conference. □

Another setback for Labour in Scotland

By Dale Street

Richard Leonard resigned as Scottish Labour Party leader on 14 January, only four months after surviving a vote of no-confidence, and just four months before the next Holyrood (Scottish Parliament) election.

One version of why he resigned is that Labour Party donors, including William Haughey (West of Scotland businessman) and Robert Latham (who donated £100,000 to

Starmer's leadership campaign) threatened to withhold funding unless Leonard stepped down.

Whatever the details, what is clear is that Leonard was forced out in an anti-democratic coup.

Getting rid of Leonard and replacing him with MSP Anas Sarwar, runs the right-wing argument, will reverse Scottish Labour's electoral fortunes.

But Sarwar is the son of a millionaire businessman and sends his children to a private school. Part of his income comes from the family business, which neither pays the National Living Wage nor recognises a trade union. (Although, with another leadership bid imminent, that may now change.)

Sarwar was Scottish Labour deputy leader at the time of the disastrous "Better Together" Labour-Tory alliance at the time of the 2014 referendum. □

• Abridged. More at bit.ly/slp-rl

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Care workers strike 15-17 Jan

By Ollie Moore

Hundreds of people, including workers and supporters, attended a "virtual picket line" and strike rally organised by the United Voices of the World union, in support of striking care workers at the Sage care home in north London, on 15 January. The workers struck from 15-17 January, demanding a pay increase to £12/hour, parity of conditions with NHS staff, including equal sick pay, and union recognition.

UVW had planned a physical, safely-distanced picket line, but received last-minute legal advice that changes to the latest lockdown legislation could be interpreted as outlawing picketing and protest.

Strikers addressing the rally emphasised the importance of the demand for equal sick pay as an essential safety and infection control measure, as well as a workers' right. Workers also spoke to the basic inequality between the ultra-rich owners of the privatised care company which employs them, and the low pay and poor conditions they face. Supporters including Labour MPs John McDonnell and Nadia Whittome also addressed the rally, along with others including a Rolls Royce worker involved in the recent successful strike at the Barnoldswick plant. Speakers pointed out the discrepancy between the "Clap for Carers" ethos, which stresses the social value of care work, and the actual conditions carers face in the workplace. □

• More: bit.ly/uvw-sg

Has picketing been banned?

By Ira Berkovic

In November 2020, Unite pursued a legal challenge over the right to picket during lockdown, after a picket of bus workers was broken up by police. That challenge was successful, clearly establishing the right to picket in lockdown.

Exception 22 of the "Coronavirus: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (All Tiers) (England) Regulations 2020" clearly states that picketing is exempt from lockdown restrictions, provided:

"the gathering is for the purposes of picketing which is carried out in accordance with the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992", and:

"the gathering organiser takes the required precautions in relation to the gathering".

But new guidance from the Crown Prosecution Service now states: "Note that picketing; protests; the Christmas period exception and permitted organised gatherings exceptions in Tier 3 do not apply in Tier 4 areas." The exact legal situation, now that the Tiers system has been superseded by a new national lockdown, is ambiguous. Legal advice sought by the United Voices of the World union suggested physical pickets in the Sage care home workers' strike from 15 January could be in breach of legal restrictions.

Speaking at the virtual rally in support of that strike, Labour MPs John McDonnell and Nadia Whittome pledged to challenge in Parliament any legal restrictions on the right to protest and picket. □

Barnoldswick strikes save jobs

By Gerry Bates

Sustained strikes by Rolls Royce workers at the company's Barnoldswick plant have secured a settlement that will save jobs at the site, which Rolls Royce had planned to cut. Workers voted to accept the company's proposal, following the suspension of their latest strikes, due to run from 4-22 January.

The settlement includes:

- A 10-year manufacturing guarantee for the site
- A guaranteed minimum headcount of 350 workers
- The creation of a "centre of excellence", supporting the development and manufacture of zero-carbon technologies
- A two-year no compulsory redundancies agreement

The provisions in the deal for a transition to zero-carbon, green manufacturing are particularly significant, providing a possible basis for similar agreements elsewhere in the aerospace and manufacturing industry.

Barnoldswick workers began their strikes on 6 November, taking sustained and escalating action, and faced a lockout over Christmas. In November, Ross Quinn, one of the Unite organisers involved in the strike, told *Solidarity*: "This strike is not a protest. It's not about taking tokenistic action to say we don't like what the company is doing, it's about forcing them to change their decision. And the only way we're going to do that is by putting the maximum pressure on the employer."

The Barnoldswick workers' success in securing a settlement that saves jobs at the plant should be an inspiration to other workers facing job cuts and lay-offs. □

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- Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life – Jon Lee Anderson
- Neill of Summerhill: A Permanent Rebel – Jonathan Croall □

Proud to keep the heat and light on



Diary of an engineer

By Emma Rickman

My first job early Monday is to swap a burnt-out heater. The workshop is freezing and L really feels the cold. We put on hi-vis puffer jackets and thick gloves – I'm glad of my bomb-proof boots. M, who cleans bin waste off the tipping apron, is almost invisible behind two snoods and a balaclava.

The switch room is always warm, and we spend a good afternoon in there dismantling a pump soft-start to replace the cooling fans behind heavy copper bus bars. We drink a lot of instant coffee. L spends most of his lunch break on the phone trying to resolve some personal drama, and J checks in with his kids who are doing online lessons.

I help some contractors replace a hydraulic cylinder – S is tired, he's driven from Middlesbrough to start work in Sheffield at 6. He's been getting up at 4:30 for months and has only accrued three days annual leave since September. J tells me later that after five years of working for this company, they offer you one extra day of annual leave.

When we emerge from behind the furnace, it's snowing hard. The view over Sheffield is beautiful. Over the afternoon slush builds up in the roads and freezes over. We waddle like penguins across the yard carrying barrels of grease and road grit. J rewards us with some birthday cake, then sends me home early so I can walk home in reasonable time.

The following day I know how S feels. I get up at 4.30 to walk into work through the snow and just can't seem to get enough coffee. We calibrate oxygen, emissions and pH instruments, do routine checks, greasing and clean blocked lime out of the venturi.

We receive an email about the plant accepting used Covid test-swabs for incineration. We're instructed not to touch the bags of swabs under any circumstances, and to wash down shovelling vehicles with harsh chemicals. The workers who clean up after the bin wagons are sceptical. Their job inevitably means coming into contact with waste.

One afternoon we go to fix a light fitting in the toilet next to the weighbridge. The toilet is one of the tiny cabins the bin drivers use while they're having their wagons weighed in and out. The difference in wagon weight is used to calculate how much waste has been collected and incinerated, and Sheffield council pay Veolia for this

by the tonne.

The toilet is tiny, icy, and filthy. It reminds me of a festival portaloos after a week of continuous use. We fix the light, but that's no improvement. L tells me that A, who cleans the men's toilets elsewhere, is supposed to deal with the drivers' facilities, but obviously he's been avoiding it. Maybe no one notices, or the drivers aren't important enough to worry about.

The maintenance team are angry on the drivers' behalf. J starts a facebook argument with "Some idiot who thinks bin drivers should be out shovelling snow if they can't do collections... They've no idea do they?" We're also worried about NHS friends and family. "Who's going to train to be a nurse now? My mate's missus hasn't had a break all year."

Walking home one evening I'm struck with how warm and secure the plant looks in the dark snow. The days are long, but they're steady and reliable. I feel proud to be helping keep the heating and lights on, and I feel lucky not to be in the chaotic pressure-pot that an ICU must be this January.

If you are working in the health service, respect to you; you deserve a pay rise, a holiday, and proper NHS funding. □

• Emma Rickman is an apprentice engineer at a Combined Heat and Power plant.

Unionisation films



Kino Eye

By John Cunningham

Great news that Google workers are unionising. Despite its long history, the theme of unionisation has not been so well-served by the film industry. Honourable exceptions include the British film *Comrades* (Bill Douglas, 1986), which shows an early attempt at organising a benefit society (an embryo union) at Tolpuddle, Dorset in 1834; *Norma Rae* (Martin Ritt, 1979) set in the Deep South of the USA, where a young woman enlists in a unionisation drive in a textile mill and eventually becomes its inspirational leading force; and *The Killing Floor* (Bill Duke, 1984), a tale of migrant black workers from the south who toil in the terrible conditions of the slaughterhouses of Chicago's stockyards. All are well worth seeing but *Killing Floor* is unavailable on DVD. □

Progress in DWP



John Moloney

Our members continue to fight for safer working, especially in departments where workers continue to be in the physical workplace. We're making some progress in the Department for Work and Pensions, where management have proposed an arrangement that would see 80% of workers working from home, with 20% coming into physical workplaces, hopefully on a rotating basis. That would be a stark reversal of management's position in a department where up to 60% of workers have been working in physical workplaces.

Bosses in DWP though are currently dragging their feet over implementing increased homeworking, saying that they need certain software certificates. We've said that workers should just be sent home; it's management's responsibility to ensure the technology is in place – our members should not have to expose themselves to greater risk in the meantime. There are other ongoing issues in the DWP, including the issue of "conditionality" and sanctions for benefit claimants.

In the court system, we're pushing for all hearings to be virtual as far as possible. The current position there is essentially business as usual, with hearings taking place in person and court staff, from the Ministry of Justice, compelled to come into work. The Group Executive Committee for the Ministry of Justice is discussing what action workers could take to force concessions from management. There are several courts across the country where we may soon move to ballots for industrial action.

The DVLA complex in Swansea continues to be a hot-spot. It's a large complex of numerous buildings, with around 2,000 workers coming into work each day. Management has offered a deal whereby that would be reduced to 1,000, but with weekend working. The local branch has rightly rejected that proposal. We've been supported there by Mark Drakeford, the Labour First Minister of Wales, who has written to the DVLA supporting our demand for staff to be sent home.

On 30 January, I'll speak at an online rally organised by the Labour Movement Solidarity with Hong Kong campaign. Trade unionists and democracy activists are facing intense repression. In particular, we want to make links with civil service workers, whose union has sadly recently disbanded as its members were pressured by the government to take a loyalty oath to uphold the new "National Security Law". Supporting workers' rights to organise independently of the state, and for fundamental democratic rights, is a matter of basic class solidarity. □

• John Moloney is assistant general secretary of the civil service workers' union PCS, personal capacity.

Against "fire and rehire"!



Off the rails

Members of the RMT union in the offshore industry, working for the Vatenfall wind farm company, are facing a "fire and rehire" attack.

They say their employer has threatened to sack workers and re-engage them on worse terms and conditions. The new contracts will involve a number of detrimental changes, including cuts to annual leave. Vatenfall bosses have denied making "fire and rehire" threats.

"Fire and rehire" is all the rage at the moment, as it offers bosses a straightforward and direct way to make cuts and level down conditions. British Gas workers are currently striking against such an attack, and we've also seen strikes by Tower Hamlets council workers, British Airways workers, and Heathrow Airport workers against "fire and rehire" schemes.

Labour leader Keir Starmer used his speech at the TUC Congress in September 2020 to call for "fire and rehire" to be made illegal. Unfortunately, neither he nor the Labour Party as a whole has followed up that call with any concerted campaigning.

We haven't yet had a "fire and rehire" attack in a major rail industry employer, but if the bosses' offensive gathers pace it's surely only a matter of time. A nationally-coordinated campaign between unions, democratically run and centrally involving workers in struggle, against "fire and rehire" could stop that offensive in its tracks.

An online meeting bringing together rank-and-file reps from amongst the currently affected workers would be an excellent start. □

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Solidarity



For a workers' government



BOOST UNIVERSAL CREDIT, DON'T CUT IT!

By Sacha Ismail

The press reports that the Tories are preparing to cut Universal Credit by rescinding the £20 a week (£1040 a year) increase to the standard rate conceded last year. They are trying to cover up this assault and minimise outrage by giving all current claimants a one-off payment of £500.

Chancellor Rishi Sunak held a meeting with Boris Johnson and Work and Pensions Secretary Thérèse Coffey to discuss how to avoid making the increase to UC permanent.

There is an immediate issue that a one-off payment will not help future claimants, including the large numbers likely to lose their jobs after the furlough scheme ends (currently planned for April).

The broader and longer-term problem is that benefits are too low. £20 a week extra is itself highly stingy. Removing it will be disastrous.

The government has also again rejected scrapping or shortening the five-week wait to receive payments, despite the mountain of evidence it is causing dire hardship. The Tory leadership is determined to avoid any move, however minimal, in the direction of conceding that the benefits system should be more generous and supportive.

Nor, of course, is this an isolated policy. It is part of a much broader assault on living standards over the last decade. Tory politicians, including those critical of the UC cut, attempting to claim the government has been generous in supporting people during the pandemic – when in fact it has conceded the bare minimum possible to prevent its system from collapsing – must be challenged sharply.

The labour movement should raise a storm of protest

and force a retreat on the cut to Universal Credit. We should demand changes including extension of the £20 increase to other benefits, abolition of the five-week wait, and a rapid increase of the basic rate to the £260 a week level proposed by the Trades Union Congress. □

British Gas out again on 20 Jan

By Ollie Moore

British Gas workers will strike again on 20, 22, 25, 29 January, and 1 February. Engineers in the GMB union are resisting attempts by Centrica, British Gas's parent company, to sack workers en masse and re-hire them on worse terms and conditions. Workers estimate that the new terms would lead to engineers working up to an additional 156 hours unpaid each year.

Despite insisting the new contracts are a financial necessity, Centrica recorded operating profits of £901 million in 2019, and an adjusted operating profit of £229 million in the six months to 30 June 2020 on the domestic heating side of its business alone, a 27% increase on the previous year's figures.

Centrica bosses say the changes represent "modernisation", and have made appeals to national class unity by denouncing the GMB for striking "at a time that our country needs everyone to pull together."

For more about the strike, see page 3. □