

Solidarity

& Workers' Liberty



For social ownership of the banks and industry

STRIKE TOGETHER 15-16 MARCH



» **Speed up strikes now!**
» **Restore NHS**
» **Defeat anti-strike laws**

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Strike together on 15-16 March!



Wednesday 1 February was probably the best day so far for numerous and lively picket lines in this strike wave, which can be dated maybe from June 2022 (mainline rail) or even March 2022 (Tube).

It was certainly the best day so far for big and lively street demonstrations, mainly organised by the National Education Union (NEU), but with contingents from the PCS (civil service) and UCU (university academic staff).

The unions could do similar on a much bigger scale on 15-16 March, around Budget day on 15 March.

The NEU already has plans. PCS announced just as we went to press on 7 Feb that it will strike on 15 March. So (we hear) may RMT on the Tube. UCU is striking on 16 March. CWU will probably have a new ballot mandate, and could use it for Royal Mail strikes those days.

The leaders of the major rail union RMT are signalling that they are considering further strikes on mainline rail, and 15-16 March would be good days.

The Fire Brigades Union now has a ballot mandate for strikes; the junior doctors (BMA) may have one from 20 February; and PCS in Revenue and

Customs (HMRC) may have from 27 February.

A good turnout on 15-16 March can shake the Tory government (which is, or stands behind, the employer in most of these disputes). It will go beyond that to budge the Tories only if they fear that without concessions they will face more of the same.

To win, unions need both to coordinate as much as possible, and to set high-tempo schedules for strikes for after 15-16 March as well as before.

We need realism, not airy optimism. It's not all upwards and onwards. Our reports this week show hesitations and difficulties in the RCN, on the rail, in the CWU, in the NEU as regards action in later March, and even among Abellio busworkers.

The predictable problems with "marathon not sprint" tactics can maybe be illustrated by pursuing the analogy. Almost everyone can manage a 50 metre sprint. And keep going for some metres longer if it's urgent: we never win a strike without convincing the bosses that we have enough in reserve to give them stronger action than they've already withstood if they stay stubborn. With wheelchairs we can even bring along our workmates with arthritis or such (or whatever is analogous for strikes).

But on a marathon, anyone who hasn't practised and built up to it will tend to get slower and slower as they



attempt it, however slow they set their pace at the start. Especially so if they run under directions from above, which tell them to run some metres, then wait to hear when to run the next few, and so on, while never discussing or gaining control over the whole strategy. Hardly anyone can run a marathon pushing a wheelchair.

Even a practised marathon runner will hesitate to run more after completing the 42.2 km. A sort of 42.2 km (or many-km, anyway) marker is coming up. Many of the long-running disputes now on are about pay settlements from April 2022, yet April 2023 is approaching. To strike for back pay to cover the real-wage cut you've *already had* over

2022-3 risks coming to seem like trying to push water uphill. The NEU, which gave much of the life to 1 February, has a limit set to its "marathon" by the school summer holidays and to some degree by the big exam period starting mid-May.

Neither settling for minimal (or sometimes zero) concessions now, nor an indefinite dribble of "run a few more metres now" directives, can be an answer. The unions need to break out of those false alternatives with a shift to honest rank-and-file discussion and democratic control of strategy, and a sharp uptick in tempo, for which 15-16 March can be a centrepiece. □

How capitalism is a class society



By Martin Thomas

The FTSE 100 index of the share prices of top companies has just reached an all-time high, 16% up on October 2022.

Those top companies paid out about £83 billion in dividends in 2022, and £50.3 bn in share buybacks.

MoneyWeek [expects](#) "FTSE 100 ordinary dividend payments to keep setting new records in 2023".

To get an idea of scale here, the journalist Philip Inman [calculates](#) that a 10.1% pay rise across the public sector would cost the government £8.5 billion (if we factor in the government recouping some of the rise through income tax and VAT on workers' spending).

Supporters of capitalism accuse socialists who advocate equality of "envy" and of wanting to level down to "universal mediocrity". To try to crop the "tall poppies", they say, will slow progress for all.

Frederick Engels conceded that "the elimination of all social and political inequality" was indeed "a most dubious expression". "As between... one place and another", for example, "living conditions will always evince a certain inequality".

Exploitation

Socialists indict, and will get rid of, not all inequality but class exploitation, the system where one large category of people gets rich at the expense of and by squeezing and lording it over another.

Kate Pickett's and Richard Wilkinson's [The Inner Level](#) suggests that the main social driver of mental ill-health is

inequality rather than the general living standard (above a certain minimum).

Their study is on contemporary societies, i.e. societies of gross class inequalities. There is no reason to suppose that, if those gross class inequalities are eliminated, we feeling "envious" of you having better weather where you live (if I do) will have drastic effects.

Karl Marx emphasised that the idea of class and class struggle was not original to him. He got it from bourgeois historians. Most precapitalist societies categorised by "estate" and "rank". France before the Revolution of 1789-93, for example, had the monarchy, the First Estate (clergy), the Second Estate (nobility), and the Third Estate (everyone else, from paupers through wage-workers, smallholders, and craftspeople to factory-owners and merchants).

To make sense of the Revo-

lution and its sequels, historians had to categorise the large groups in society with shared interests and drives by their parts in economic life.

In capitalist society, argued Marx, there is a large group, shaped not by some legal badge but by the flow of economic life, who own productive wealth and derive income from property, i.e. directly or indirectly from the surplus-value which those who own the means of production can draw from squeezing wage-workers.

These days, he would add in those who draw multi-million "salaries" as managers. (In fact pretty much all of those will have set aside large stashes of wealth and will draw income on top of their "salaries" from "investing" that wealth.)

Another large group of us own no wealth apart from household hardware, so draw no or negligible income from

property, and subsist by selling all we have to sell, our capacity to labour.

There are complications ("class" usually categorises children, for example, by reference to their household even though the children themselves neither own factories nor do wage-work), intermediate groups, and many grey areas, but analysis shows that these two classes develop collective interests and drives, and in opposition to each other. A thousand studies show a high correlation between the basic economic definition of class and access to leisure and culture, personal autonomy, sense of "entitlement", etc.

Capitalism constantly regenerates that class divide, and in its current phase is sharpening it. Socialism will abolish it by making productive wealth social property under democratic control. □

NHS bosses are feeling the pressure

By Katy Dollar

Tens of thousands of nurses (RCN) and ambulance service staff (Unite and GMB) walked out on Monday 6 February in a pay dispute, in the first coordinated day of health strikes in this strike wave. Nurses and ambulance workers have previously been striking separately since late last year.

Nurses will also walk out on Tuesday 7 Feb, Unison ambulance staff on Friday 10th, and physiotherapists on Thursday 9th, making the week "probably the most disruptive in NHS history" according to Medical Director Stephen Powis. NHS bosses are putting pressure on the government to reopen pay negotiations.

The first coordination between the RCN and the TUC unions in health offered hope for further coordination going forward, including with Unison and the non-health unions. NEU has announced strikes on 15-16 March, the civil service union PCS will strike on 15 March, and UCU has set a strike for 16 March.

However, RCN, Unison and a number of small unions called off strikes that were planned in Wales following ministers' offer of 3% more on top of the 4.75% already given to staff below the grade of doctors. Unite has gone ahead with planned strikes in Wales but is a small union in health, unlikely to carry the dispute alone. Industrial action had already been suspended in Scotland after the government there offered staff more.

NHS England bosses, Unison and RCN have all been briefing the press that an equivalent offer in England could end the health strikes. Activists



in the health unions should push back against leadership attempts to end the strikes so far from the union's demands.

Postal workers will no longer strike on 16 February after a legal challenge from Royal Mail, the Communication Workers Union (CWU) says. About 115,000 workers were due to walk out from 12:30 GMT on 16 February, until 12:30 on 17 February in an ongoing battle over pay and conditions. The CWU leadership announced late on 6 Feb that they would not fight a legal challenge to the action.

Cancelled

The CWU has cancelled the strike action on 16-17 February and will "focus the whole union on winning the re-

ballot" necessary under existing Tory anti-union law and due to close on 16 Feb. The CWU also said it would enter negotiations with Royal Mail Group this week and, if the bosses don't budge, "significantly step up the programme of strike action".

Another legal challenge to the CWU pulling them out of strike action further drags out the dispute and is a reminder to the whole movement of the corrosive effect of the anti-union laws on our ability to deliver effective disputes.

Workers at an Amazon warehouse in Coventry struck on 28 January over pay, the first time Amazon has faced official industrial action in the UK, following wildcat strikes last summer.

The company played down the strike,

saying only a "tiny proportion" of the firm's UK workforce was involved. It insisted that operations at the site were continuing as usual and that there was "zero impact" on customers.

Though the strike involved a small proportion of the national workforce the dispute represents a very important step forward in organising in hitherto unorganised sector. The GMB won a ballot and built the dispute through and after the ballot period, bringing out roughly half of the 200 workers on the night shift.

If this can be replicated in other warehouses across the country, huge gains in union organisation and Amazon workers' power can be made. □

Strikes

9-10, 14-16, 21-23, Feb, 27 Feb-2 Mar, 16-17 and 20-22 Mar: Higher Education workers at 150 universities (UCU) strike. Unison HE members at 12 universities will strike on various days in Feb

9 Feb: NHS physiotherapists (CSP) strike
12 Feb: Rail for London Infrastructure workers (RMT) strike
13-17 Feb: Workers at University of Sheffield International College (UCU) strike

14 Feb: Teachers in Wales (NEU) strike
15-16 Feb: Teachers on the Isle of Man (NASUWT) strike

20 Feb: Ambulance workers (GMB) strike
28 Feb: Teachers in the Northern, North West, and Yorkshire and Humber regions (NEU) strike

Various days in Feb-Mar, including national all-out strikes on 28 Feb and 1 Mar: Teachers in Scotland (EIS) have further rolling strikes, involving 22 strike days

1 Mar: Teachers in the East Midlands, West Midlands, and Eastern regions (NEU) strike

2 Mar: Teachers in London, South East, and South West regions (NEU) strike

6 Mar: Ambulance workers (GMB) strike
13 Mar-20 Apr: 20 further days of rolling strikes by teachers in Scotland (EIS)

15 Mar: Civil service (PCS) strike
15-16 Mar: Teachers in England and Wales (NEU) strike

20 Mar: Ambulance workers (GMB) strike
Mar: possible 72-hour strike by junior doctors (BMA)

Until 3 Apr: Discontinuous strikes by workers at drinks

manufacturer Diageo's plant in Leven, Scotland (Unite). □

Ballots

Until 16 Feb: Royal Mail postal workers (CWU) re-ballot for action over pay and conditions

Until 20 Feb: Junior doctors (BMA) ballot for action over pay

Until 21 Feb: Transport for London workers (RMT) ballot for action over pay and conditions. (I.e. workers employed centrally by TfL, not employees of London Underground Ltd. or other TfL subsidiaries.)

Until 27 Feb: HMRC workers (PCS) re-ballot for action over pay and conditions

Until 7 Mar: UK Power Networks workers in London, the South East, and East (Unite) ballot for action over pay □



Upcoming meetings

Workers' Liberty meetings are open to all, and unless otherwise stated those below are online over zoom. We have many local (in-person) meetings, see [online](https://workersliberty.org/events).

Sunday 12 February, 11am: Workers and Trade Unions for Climate Solidarity: Tackling climate change in a neoliberal world

Sunday 12 February, 2pm: Socialist feminist reading group – The Social Basis of the Woman Question by Alexandra Kollontai, Effra Social, 89 Effra Road, London, SW2 1DF

Wednesday 15 February, 7.45pm: Workers' unions fighting back – strike waves in British history, New Cross Learning, 285-287 New Cross Road, London, SE14 6AS

Saturday 18 February 11am: Southampton AWL – The strike wave, how can it win?, The Art House, 178 Above Bar Street, Southampton, SO14 7DW

Wednesday 22 February, 7pm: James Connolly – Socialist, Nationalist and Internationalist, Marchmont Street Community Centre, Marchmont Street, London, WC1N 1AB

For our calendars of events, updated details, zoom links, more meetings and resources, see workersliberty.org/events or scan QR code □



The Morning Star's Jewish problem



Antidoto

By Jim Denham

It's happened too often to be written off as a momentary slip: the *Morning Star* and its political masters at the Communist Party of Britain (CPB) have a Jewish problem.

The paper has consistently claimed that allegations of antisemitism within Labour have been overwhelmingly "manifestly untrue and malicious" and the work of "not only British and Israeli state actors but an unscrupulous assembly of reactionary forces of all kinds" (quotes from a *Morning Star* article by Nick Wright, 22 October 2020).

When the Equality and Human Rights Commission published its highly critical report into antisemitism within Labour, MS editor Ben Chacko (31 October-1 November 2020) wrote: "An honest response to the EHRC report would include an acceptance that many party members [ie those accused of antisemitism] have been treated appallingly ... on the basis of vague or anonymous accusations ... There are certainly grounds to see [the EHRC report] as disproportionate..."

The only admission of fault the paper has ever made on the subject of Jews and antisemitism was in June 2018, following the publication of an article headlined "Rising antisemitism cannot be tackled without addressing Israel's crimes".

The article said "mainstream Jewish communities everywhere... appear unwilling to accept the connection between developing international antisemitism (or anti-Israel sentiment) and Israel's decades-long... acts of barbarism".

It continued: "No amount of protestations about the symptoms of rising antisemitism or anti Israel sentiment in Britain and elsewhere will end the problem until its root cause – Israel's criminal behaviour – is dealt with."

Letter

Only when two longstanding Communist Party members, Phil Katz and Mary Davis, wrote a letter of protest, did the paper seem to realise it had made a mistake – running a too-explicit and clear-cut statement of what it really believes. The article was taken down from the paper's website and an apology printed.

Now Mary Davis has felt obliged to protest again – this time over the paper's dismissive coverage of the report

by Rebecca Tuck KC into antisemitism in the National Union of Students.

Davis' letter is worth quoting in full: *Are we to conclude, once again, that antisemitism is a mere figment of Jewish febrile imagination? Your report into anti-semitism in the NUS (M Star January 13) invites this assumption.*

Despite the fact that the Tuck report found that Jewish students faced a "hostile atmosphere" in the NUS, and that the NUS has accepted the findings of the investigation, your report concentrated solely on the Palestine Solidarity Campaign's dismissal of the enquiry.

I hope that our paper does not agree with PSC director Ben Jamal's view that the investigation was driven by the unseen hand of the Jews in the form of the Union of Jewish Students.

Surely socialists and communists would seek to distance themselves from such an anti-semitic trope?

Maybe not since your report says nothing about the inquiry itself, seeing it as a diversion from solidarity with the Palestinian cause.

Some people might say that it's at least to the paper's credit that the letter appeared (on 27 January – Holocaust Memorial Day) but I rather doubt that it would have published such a letter were it not from a leading CPB member.

More to the point is the question of why articles that downplay antisemitism, and/or dismiss it as a device used by the right wing against the left, appear again and again in the daily paper of "Peace and Socialism".

Out-and-out, blatant, antisemitism like the June 2018 article, is not that common in the *Morning Star* (though there have been other instances): what is frequent is denial that antisemitism is a problem of any significance within the labour movement, attacks on the motives of those raising the issue and repeated disparaging references to "Zionists" that effectively insult and brush off any Jewish person who identifies in any way (however critically) with Israel.

Sadly, I suspect that Mary Davis will have more cause to protest in the future. □



For socialists to understand and confront left antisemitism from primitive or Stalinist roots to the "anti-imperialism of fools". 265 pages, £9.99 □ bit.ly/shop-wl

"Delilah" and domestic violence



Eric Lee

By Eric Lee

The Ed Sullivan Show was a weekly television programme which was watched by millions. It helped define popular culture for decades to come by introducing groups like the Beatles to an American audience.

In 1967, the Rolling Stones were due to be guests on the show. They wanted to play their hit song "Let's Spend the Night Together". This offended Sullivan's sense of decency, and he reportedly told Mick Jagger and his band that the lyrics were unacceptable. "Either the song goes, or you go," is what he said. The band changed the lyrics to "Let's Spend Some Time Together" and were allowed to perform the song.

A year later, a young Welsh singer named Tom Jones

got his moment on Sullivan's show. The song he sang was called "Delilah". "Delilah" tells the story of a man who stalks his ex-girlfriend, watching her with another man who spends the night. In the morning, the song records, "I crossed the street to her house and she opened the door. She stood there laughing. I felt the knife in my hand and she laughed no more."

As misogynist lyrics go, that really can't be topped. "Delilah" is a song about a jealous man butchering a defenceless woman with a knife.

Unlike the Rolling Stones song a year earlier, the censors had no problem with the lyrics of this song.

For reasons I cannot understand, "Delilah" has become in recent years the unofficial anthem of Welsh Rugby, and is traditionally sung by male choirs at matches. But this has understandably provoked controversy.

In 2014, a former leader of Plaid Cymru called for fans to

stop singing the song. He said that the song trivialises "the idea of murdering a woman". Two years later, Welsh Labour MP Chris Bryant asked that "Delilah" not be sung by rugby fans, correctly pointing out that the lyrics glorify violence towards women.

Problematic

Tom Jones – who did not write the song – felt compelled to defend it a half century after he first recorded it. Those singing the song, he said, are not "really thinking about it ... If it's going to be taken literally, I think it takes the fun out of it." He told *The Guardian* that "Delilah" is "not a political statement." The woman in the song, he explained, was unfaithful to her man and he "just loses it ... It's something that happens in life."

Last week, the Welsh Rugby Union (WRU) finally put a stop to the singing of "Delilah" at matches. A spokesman for Principality Stadium was quoted as saying that the song

was "problematic". Meanwhile, Tom Giffard, the Welsh Tory shadow sport minister called the decision to ban the song "wrongheaded" and "virtue signalling".

Demanding reforms in Welsh Rugby, Giffard denounced the WRU for banning "a much loved Tom Jones song."

Hardly a day goes by when we don't read about domestic violence and the murder of women. And with all that, Tory politicians can still talk about banning "Delilah" as "virtue signalling" rather than as a long-overdue and necessary action.

It is incredible that even now, singers like Jones can defend the song as being about some poor bloke who "just loses it" – rather than being what it actually is, a song about domestic violence from the point of view of the perpetrator. It is a song about power, toxic masculinity and violence.

Saying that the song describes "something that happens in life" doesn't excuse

the song's lyrics. Tom Jones wouldn't record a song from the point of view of a serial killer, or a child abuser, though those things happen too. Audiences at rugby matches probably won't be singing songs from the viewpoint of Fred and Rose West or the Yorkshire Ripper. But the imagined butchering of a woman who dared to laugh in the face of a man – that's alright, because, you know, we can all "lose it".

There is something really sick and depraved about a society in which people take pleasure in singing together about these things. Men need to speak out against domestic violence and not be cowed by accusations of being "woke". On the left, and in the unions, we should show zero tolerance for domestic violence and a society that tolerates such things, in life and in song. □

• Eric Lee is the founder editor of Labour Start, writing here in a personal opinion column

Police beatings and child marriage in India



By Katy Dollar

Hundreds of women are protesting in the north-eastern Indian state of Assam after their male relatives were arrested as part of a crackdown on child marriage. State police have arrested more than 2,400 people since Friday. Arrests were of husbands of alleged child brides as well as those who officiated, largely clerics.

Opposition leaders have called the drive a "farce", alleging it disproportionately targets Muslims.

As many as 650 million women in the world today were married as children. About a third of them were

married before the age of 15. In India, which is the country with the most registered child brides, UN estimates suggest that 1.5 million girls get married each year before they turn 18. About 16% of girls in the age group of 15-19 are married at present. According to the 2011 census, 44% of women in Assam were married before the age of 18.

Increase

India's parliament is considering a bill that could increase the minimum age of marriage for women to 21 years (from 19). But among Muslims – who mostly get married under the Muslim personal law – girls can get married once they attain puberty. The BJP has been pushing for a uniform civil code.

Himanta Biswa Sarma, of the BJP and the state's top elected official, said: "I have asked the Assam police to act with a spirit of zero tolerance against the unpardonable and heinous crime on women."

Since the arrests, women relatives of the arrested men have been protesting outside police stations. Many are the alleged victims of child marriage who say the arrested men are the primary breadwinners of their families and the crackdown has left them and their children destitute. On Saturday, police in Dhubri district beat protesters and used tear gas to disperse them, the Times of India newspaper reported.

If the state were mainly concerned for the victims of child marriage, leaving

them to raise children in poverty and tear-gassing them when they protested would be an odd way to show it. It seems this is in fact another attempt to divide Muslims and Hindus and attack poor Muslim communities.

That doesn't mean we should defend the "rights" of religious communities to child marriage. Child marriage is driven by poverty, poor education opportunities for women and girls, and patriarchal views about them. Empowering women, particularly from poor, religious, and rural backgrounds, is the best "crackdown". Benefits, education including sex education, and universal healthcare could reduce child marriage in India considerably. □



Activist Agenda

The Free Our Unions campaign is running a drive to push unions into calling a national demonstration against the Tories' planned new anti-strike law. So far the RMT rail union has initiated two lively (but at-short-notice and small) weekday evening protests in London. In 1971, when the Tories first introduced anti-strike legislation, the TUC called the biggest street protest for many decades, hundreds of thousands strong, very soon after the legislation was brought to Parliament, and seven months before it got its Royal Assent. That protest and others fed into mass strikes (in July 1972) to neutralise the law once passed, and into Labour repealing the law quickly when it returned to office in 1974. It is harder to start mass strikes now. It is not necessarily harder to organise big street demonstrations, as the People's Assembly march of 2015 or the big anti-Brexit marches showed. Check out the motion and petition on the Free Our Unions website: freeourunions.org. □

• Texts for motions on many issues, and details of other campaigns, at workersliberty.org/agenda

Free the Hong Kong 47!

By Ralph Peters

On Monday 6 February, the landmark trial began in Hong Kong of 47 leading members of the 2019-20 democracy movement on charges of subversion. Most of the defendants have already been in prison awaiting trial for almost two years. Five have been threatened with life imprisonment.

The Hong Kong 47 (HK47) include almost every leading public figure who has been prominent in calling for democratic and workers' rights in HK.

Veteran socialist Leung Kwok-Hung ("Long Hair") of Hong Kong's League of Social Democrats is among them, and trade union leaders Carol Ng and Winnie Yu.

Carol had earlier been a trade union activist in the UK during Unite's 2011 strike against BA. She had returned to Hong Kong, organised the Flight Attendants' Union there, helped establish the independent trade union confederation, the HKCTU, and stood in elections as a Labour Party candidate.

Winnie Yu was leader of the February 2020 strike of tens of thousands of health workers in the newly created Hospital Authority Employees Alliance (HAEA).

Also on trial are many of the young radical activists like Joshua Wong who

was already in prison when the subversion charges were made.

The Hong Kong 47 have been charged with subversion of the state solely for participating in the democratic primaries of June 2020, with the aim of winning a majority of seats in Hong Kong's parliament, the Legislative Council or LegCo.

One of the demands of the democracy movement had been for LegCo to be elected by universal suffrage. Currently and in 2019, only half of the seats are elected that way, the remainder being elected within special interest groups, leaning heavily towards business and pro-CCP forces.

The democratic primaries were held just as the notorious National Security Law was being imposed on Hong Kong. Nevertheless over 600,000 Hong-kongers still cast their votes. The new radical and generally younger street movement and the more moderate and long established "pan-democratic" politicians both participated.

The young radicals swept the board with an aim that was open and clear to all. If, as at the time seemed inevitable, they were to take the majority of seats, they threatened to stop a budget being approved until their democratic demands such as democratic constitutional change and an inquiry into the police actions were met.

The HK authorities claim that two-thirds of the defendants, including Joshua Wong, will be pleading guilty for various reasons. This does not mean that they believe the charges made against them have any truth to them.

The broad democracy movement included some moderates who never expected to face long prison sentences. It even included one, but only one, of Hong Kong super-rich, media mogul Jimmy Lai, who broke the unity of Hong Kong's billionaires behind the repression.

After two years imprisonment awaiting trial, with the threat of long sentences, some of the 47 have been intimidated into cutting a deal. It is rumoured that three or four may even testify for the prosecution.

However pleas of guilty in political trials in Hong Kong are not always admission of guilt. Denied a jury, with little ability to affect the court judgement by reasoned argument, some frame guilty pleas in a defiant way. In effect saying: "By your rules, I'm guilty but they are not my rules. You are a waste of my time."

At least 16 of the defendants will be pleading not guilty. The trial is expected to last 90 days and should be a spur to protest and solidarity.

As the trial opened on 6 February, Long Hair declared to the court that

"There's no crime to answer. It is not a crime to act against a totalitarian regime." Meanwhile Long Hair's comrades of the League of Social Democrats had been protesting outside the court: they were [pushed away](#) by police.

The Hong Kong authorities had delayed the trial have years in the hope that all dissent would be crushed. It is possible they may have delayed too long.

Strikes in China in the last three months were the highest in many years. Protest activity on the Chinese mainland has been at its highest level in decades. Fear of the overwhelming nature of Xi Jinping's and the Chinese state's power may not be what it was a year ago in Hong Kong.

In the past two months, we have seen strikes there by Carol Ng's former union, the FAU. They were hampered by the UK-owned employer Cathay Pacific using the ban on "illegal assemblies" now operating in Hong Kong.

Labour Movement Solidarity with Hong Kong (LSWHK) will be organising protests during the trial. It will press for the international trade union movement to speak out.

Release imprisoned Hong Kong trade unionists! Release all political prisoners in Hong Kong and China! □

Windfall tax served only to boost fossil-fuel rise



Environment

By Stuart Jordan

Shell made £32.2 billion profit last year, double last year's total. BP made £23 billion. A big chunk of these profits comes from the £60+ billion household energy-bill relief scheme, which has provided insufficient support for the poorest this winter whilst securing vast profits for energy companies.

That £60+ billion has been added to the government's £2.5 trillion debt leading to screaming headlines in the right wing press calling for further cuts to public services and working-class living standards.

From its £32.2 billion Shell paid out just £134 million on "windfall tax" or 0.3%. BP paid £800 million in windfall tax. The government wrote a massive loophole into the "Energy Profits Levy" that allowed Big Oil to claw back 91% of the windfall tax if they could show they are expanding fossil-fuel extraction. No money was available for expanding renewables.

Shell invested £12 billion in tapping new oil and gas wells (compared to just £3.5 billion on renewable projects). The government's pretence at imposing a windfall tax on energy firms has become an elaborate scheme for subsidising fossil-fuel expansion whilst claiming there is no money for the NHS or schools or keeping wages in line with inflation.

Oil and gas corporations and their representatives in government are using Putin's invasion of Ukraine as a convenient excuse to abandon plans to slow fossil-fuel extraction. The Tories claim that fossil-fuel expansion in the North Sea is necessary for UK "energy security". But they also quietly admit that privately owned North Sea fossil fuels will be sold on the global market to the highest bidder and will make no difference to either UK "energy security" or the current cost-of-living crunch.

The only logic that is being followed here that of private capitalists seeking maximum profits, regardless of the consequences now or for thousands of years into the future. BP is quite honest about this, announcing that in search of "increased profitability" they will be "dialling down" investments in new renewable energy and instead further expanding oil and gas extraction.

To grasp the full scale of the crime being committed, it is necessary to remind ourselves of material reality. All human history has taken place in the

unusually stable climatic conditions of the Holocene, a world blessed with predictable seasons and stable coastlines. But the geological record shows times in the deep past when Earth systems have undergone massive changes; pressures that built over vast timescales burst asunder, disrupting the carbon cycle upon which all life depends.

One of the most dramatic increases in atmospheric greenhouse gases occurred 55.5 million years ago as a result of heightened volcanic activity which released 5,000 Gigatonnes of carbon. The Paleocene-Eocene Thermal Maximum resulted in 5-8 degrees of warming and sea levels 70 metres higher than they are today. We are currently releasing carbon into the atmosphere at a ten times the rate of those prehistoric volcanoes.

We have released 1,700 Gigatonnes of carbon since the industrial revolution, almost half of these emissions have been produced in the last 30 years. Each year we add more than the last. The last time CO2 levels were at current levels was around three million years ago, when the climate was 3 degrees Celsius warmer and sea levels were over 10-40 metres higher than they are today.

We probably now have enough knowledge of Earth systems that we could restabilise the climate without any need for great sacrifice. It would require a lot of work in building carbon drawdown infrastructure, restoring ecosystems and revolutionising the world economy, especially the agriculture and energy sectors. None of that work can be organised by capitalism.



None of it can happen so long as the Earth's resources are regarded as private property to be exploited for profit. But equally no worker has an interest in leaving the denialist ruling class in power.

New governing institutions will need to emerge to take Earth's resources into common ownership and organise and coordinate climate restabilisation plans according to the best science. As a first step, the workers' movement should demand Big Energy is taken into common ownership and the work of winding down the fossil fuel industry and rapidly expanding solar, wind, nuclear and geothermal energy begins. □

India's richest man crashes

By Mohan Sen

Until last month India's Gautam Adani was the richest man in Asia; last year he briefly displaced Jeff Bezos as the second richest on earth. In the last fortnight, he has lost almost half his \$120 billion personal wealth, and his corporations about double that.

Just as India's far-right regime responded to last month's BBC documentary reminding the world of Narendra Modi's role in the 2002 Gujarat pogroms by claiming an imperialistic assault on India's sovereignty, the Adani Group called the release of the damaging information driving its turmoil "a calculated attack on India [and] the independence... of Indian institutions". Adani is a close ally of Modi and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), rising in parallel with them over the last three decades.

Hindenburg Research, the US financial firm whose analysis of Adani catalysed the crisis, is a capitalist predator that profits through various mechanisms from the falling share prices of listed companies it attacks. But it is hard to disagree with its rejoinder that the Adani Group "has draped

itself in the Indian flag while systematically looting the nation".

The *Guardian*, among many others, has published a [summary](#) of the claims in the Hindenburg [report](#), released on 24 January. The report accuses Adani of "brazen stock manipulation and accounting scheme fraud", using shell companies to manipulate the price of publicly listed ones by taking large holdings and to launder money onto the listed companies' balance sheets to hide debts and present an image of financial health – startlingly calling this "the largest con in corporate history".

The Adani Group's much-hyped \$2.5 billion share sale has been called off, it is in trouble on multiplying fronts, and the troubles show no sign of abating.

It is also hard to disagree with some of the Group's criticism of Hindenburg's piratical activities – but who is Adani to make such criticisms? The chain of explosions and the maze of contradictions it is illuminating highlights the utterly irrational and anti-social nature of capitalism.

Adani, aged 60, is also from the western state of Gujarat – the early BJP

stronghold where Modi was chief minister from 2001 to 2014, piloting the turbo-charged neoliberalism and violent Hindu sectarianism his regime has unleashed nationally since then. But Adani first soared under the pioneering post-1991 "economic liberalisation" launched by the liberal Indian National Congress.

Congress

Today the Congress party leadership attacks Adani perhaps not because it objects to plutocrats as such, but because he is so close to the BJP. In fairness, it should be said that since the Hindenburg revelations it has organised streets protests against him.

The Adani Group includes firms in sectors including ports (it is the largest private port operator in India), electricity generation and transmission, gas, renewables, mining, airports, food processing and infrastructure.

Whether or not Adani is ideologically a Hindu nationalist, it makes sense he has tied his fortunes to a regime under which he has been enriched so spectacularly: in which a combination of aggressive pro-capitalist economics,

repression and terror, and divisive sectarian ideology has weakened the position of the labour movement and empowered the rich.

Adani's rise has been heavily supported by India's financial institutions, including state-run ones, and it must be the case that, beyond his firms' workforces and customers, the livelihoods, savings and investments of many tens of millions of working Indians are threatened.

Before its crisis, however, the Adani empire was already causing misery and chaos for working and oppressed people across India, and far beyond, leaving a trail of very physical destruction: from tribal communities pushed off their land for mining to a major new coal mine in Australia, to fishermen displaced for an environmentally damaging port in "Communist"-run Kerala.

Faced by the nexus of giant capitalists, a violently repressive government and Hindu nationalism, India's working-class and social movements need solidarity. The UK labour movement should start paying attention. □

• India Labour Solidarity: bit.ly/inlabsol

Rail and Tube disputes at turning point

By Ollie Moore

On Wednesday 18 January, the front page of the *Metro* newspaper previewed the mass coordinated strike planned for 1 February with the headline "one out, all out". The headline was accompanied by a picture of RMT general secretary Mick Lynch.

The picture was, in some ways, an odd choice: only a tiny handful of RMT members (drivers in mainline Train Operating Companies, TOCs, where workers are overwhelmingly organised by another union, Aslef) participated in the 1 February strike. The union's National Executive Committee (NEC) decided to keep the vast bulk of members currently involved in disputes, on TOCs, Network Rail, and London Underground, out of the action. But the use of a picture of Lynch to accompany the headline is illustrative of the totemic position Lynch, and the RMT, have come to occupy in the strike wave.

That position is partially a confection of the media and the impulse in contemporary political discourse to find individual figureheads around which to personalise an issue. But it is also based on something material. Rail workers' strikes presaged the current strike wave, with Tube workers beginning their action in March 2022 and mainline rail workers striking from June. The rail industry has retained higher levels of union density than most other sectors. It is economically strategic: even a one-day rail strike brings a bigger economic hit for the capitalist class than a strike in schools or the civil service or NHS. RMT is generally, and largely justifiably, seen as a better organised, more combative union than the average.

So the fate of rail workers' disputes has a significance not only for those workers themselves, but for the morale and confidence of the strike wave as a whole. Other workers may think, "if the rail workers can't win, what chance do we have?"

At the time of writing, RMT members on Network Rail and TOCs were considering the latest offers from employers, both made in the final two weeks of January. The offer for the TOCs entails a slight increase in the pay settlement, and involves the removal of a previously included clause around the extension of Driver Only Operation. Beyond this, neither offer represents any significant improvement on the ones they superseded, with both continuing to link their (below-inflation) pay elements to a raft of changes to terms and conditions and reductions in staffing levels.

TOC drivers in Aslef, meanwhile, have resumed strikes, most recently on 1 and 3 February. Their separate pay structure and bargaining arrangements mean they are negotiating towards a driver-specific settlement. The latest offer to drivers, made in early January,

was based on a significantly below-inflation pay deal, therefore representing a pay cut. Aslef officials have generally spoken about their dispute as one they expect will be a long haul, and have justified the pattern of sporadic, shorter strikes on that basis.

There appears to be acknowledgement from some Aslef leaders that there is an appetite amongst the membership for an escalation in action, but no willingness to build on this by organising to spread that appetite to the more reluctant members.

Members of Unite and of TSSA (a smaller mostly-clerical union) on the railway have also been involved in strikes. TSSA members at several TOCs, as well as Network Rail, have struck on several occasions. TSSA's conservative culture seems to have won out, however, with its members in Network Rail accepting a below-inflation pay offer in December, thereby taking their union out of the dispute.

Discussion

Within RMT, reps and branches are currently discussing how to respond to the latest offers. Several branches have called for them to be rejected outright, without any referendum, as they are obviously incompatible with the union's demands for above-inflation pay rises and defence of jobs and conditions.

Throughout the dispute, the RMT leadership has pursued a strategy of striking for one or two days at a time, with weeks or months between rounds of action. The strategy was designed, on its own terms, not to "exhaust" members, and to ensure that each round of action remained solid by not extending strikes beyond a level a majority of members were prepared to support. The risk was always that this level of action would not be sufficient to force meaningful concessions from employers, with the effect that members ended up "exhausted" and demoralised anyway by ongoing, albeit infrequent, strikes that cost them money but never reached a tempo sufficient to produce results.

The disputes are now effectively deadlocked. Network Rail is attempting to break that deadlock by simply unilat-

erally imposing its restructure of maintenance work, leading to massive job cuts and changes to working arrangements for those who remain. TOCs may soon follow Network Rail's example. Evidently, Network Rail bosses at least understand the need for escalation. The union has to respond in kind.

There is a similar dynamic of employer escalation in RMT's dispute on London Underground, where the company is imposing job cuts on stations, holding vacancies in engineering and fleet depots, and planning a major restructure of drivers' working conditions. Plans for pension reform have been postponed, but only until 28 February. RMT has taken no network-wide action since 10 November, and has responded only with local action to the imposition of job cuts on stations. The pause in action represents an accommodation to the most conservative elements within the union's membership. The union has chosen to move at the pace of the slowest rather than seeking to build on and spread on the enthusiasm of the groups of members more willing to fight.

A parallel dispute over pay will soon commence on London Underground, as the current pay settlement expires in April. Transport for London has already imposed a below-inflation pay settlement on its own employees, with RMT members there balloting for action to win a better deal.

(Although London Underground Ltd. is a subsidiary of TfL, the two companies are technically separate entities, each with their own employees and arrangements on pay and conditions.)

In both the national rail and Tube disputes, the only chance for victory lies in meeting escalation by employers with a reciprocal escalation in action. That means striking more frequently and for more sustained periods.

If, on the basis of deliberation and discussion amongst reps, a consensus emerges that a majority of members simply cannot be persuaded to take a level of action that might conceivably force concessions, then the disputes are effectively lost. But the evidence does not suggest this is the case.

In both the national and Tube disputes, RMT has recently renewed mandates for action with huge, sometimes increased, majorities. Aslef has also renewed its mandates. Whenever employers' offers have been discussed at branch meetings and reps' assemblies, there have been clear majorities for rejection. Several branches have submitted resolutions calling for an escalation in action in the national dispute, with at least two London Underground branches doing similarly for their dispute.

As the strike wave swells, with continuing action in the NHS, civil service, schools, and universities likely to soon

be joined by strikes by fire fighters, the workers who led the charge can be galvanised and encouraged by those who have since joined them. With 15-16 March likely to be the next days of co-ordinated, or at least synchronised, strikes, RMT and Aslef must name programmes of action leading up to, including, and extending beyond, those dates.

Rail unions must also find ways to fuse their industrial disputes with a political fight for the transformation of the industry, including real social ownership and proper funding. With the government subsidising private train companies to offset their lost revenue on strike days, it is clear that rail workers' fight is not only, as Mick Lynch has occasionally phrased it, an "industrial relations matter", but a political struggle. □



On 1 February, the World Health Organization said that Covid is still "a public health emergency of international concern" (the WHO does not officially declare or un-declare "pandemics"), but the virus and consequent disease are "at an inflection point". High levels of immunity to the virus, resulting from vaccinations or previous infections or both, are curbing its impact. Some [experts](#) think really the "emergency" label should be removed now; some that, since we don't know whether the big Covid surge in China following the end of its so-called "zero-Covid" policy has settled, or may be followed soon by more surges, caution is correct. It remains possible that a new and more dangerous variant of Covid may emerge, as with flu, but at some point we should reserve the word "emergency" for that eventuality, rather than for what's now routine. The underpinnings for a resilient policy for future viruses remain the same:

- a sustained public-health testing-and-surveillance system
- good sick pay for all
- restore NHS funding and repeal privatisation
- requisition private hospitals to augment NHS resources
- bringing social care into the public sector with NHS-level pay and conditions for staff
- specialist public clinics for post-Covid conditions, more research, and recognition of the conditions as a "disability"
- workers' control of workplace safety (especially ventilation)
- requisition Big Pharma, especially its patents and technical know-how, to speed vaccine production and delivery world-wide. □

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1798: Ireland's Year of Liberty

*Who fears to speak of '98?
Who blushes at the name?
When cowards mock the patriot's fate
Who hangs his head for shame?*

- The Memory of the Dead,
John Kells Ingram

By Patrick Murphy

From May to September of 1798 the power of Britain in Ireland was threatened by fierce rebellion. The rising had the character of a forest fire. It was rarely clear where the main centre was. When any significant source of unrest was identified and attacked it appeared that the real danger lay somewhere else.

The Catholic peasants of Wexford, driven to desperation by savage landlordism, created a movement powerful enough to capture and hold Wexford town and many of its outlying areas. At one stage it seemed that the Wexford rebels would link up with their comrades from Carlow and Kilkenny and march on Dublin. In June mainly Protestant Ulster caught the revolutionary fever. Finally in August a fleet of ships carrying over a thousand officers and men from revolutionary France landed with the intention of bolstering the insurrection.

English rule in Ireland did indeed totter in 1798 – but it survived. More than that, the limited independence Ireland had experienced up until then was abolished after the rebellion and replaced by the Act of Union. More than 30,000 Irish, overwhelmingly peasants, were slaughtered in the months of revolt. The immediate political legacy was one of repression, terror and communal division. In the longer term the legacy of 1798 was much more positive and honourable: the emergence of modern democratic politics in Ireland.

The roots of such a powerful upheaval were deep but the catalyst was without doubt the success of the recent revolutions in America (1776) and France (1789). The Irish leaders were drawn, in the main, from the professional educated middle classes and were inspired by the ideas of Tom Paine, Voltaire and Rousseau. Their aim was not only to end English rule but to establish a society based on "the rights of man," the sovereignty of the people, and in the language of this new radicalism, "the greatest happiness of the greatest number".

Given the basic facts of Irish society at the end of the eighteenth century these leaders were of course Protestant. For that reason the age-old movement to allow the Irish people the right to self-rule was transformed and redefined. No longer was it only a movement to avenge the wrongs historically done to the "native" Catholic Irish by "per-

fidious Albion", that is, an essentially backward-looking movement attempting to undo the conquest of Ireland by England. That aspect of Irish nationalism exists still, but since 1798 it has had to compete with a much more dynamic and progressive tradition. 1798 saw the birth of Irish Republicanism and although, like communism and socialism, all sorts of abominations have been committed in its name, the central idea it introduced into Irish politics was consistent democracy.

The famous definition of republican aims provided by Theobald Wolfe Tone has lost none of the radical democratic edge it had then and compares well with the demagoguery and practice of much recent republicanism: to replace the names Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter with the common name Irishman.

As the eighteenth century drew to a close Ireland appeared to have one foot in the new world of emerging capitalism and the other in a particularly repressive and constraining feudalism. Belfast and Dublin were substantial bourgeois centres with a sizeable class of artisans and wage labourers. For all that the bulk of the people were very poor peasants – in parts of the country barely subsisting – and the economy depended on agriculture. Poor harvests, disease and famine were recurring threats.

Power

Political power was in the hands of the English government at Westminster and their representative in Dublin, the Viceroy, but Ireland had its own parliament too. However, the Irish, like the British, had an electoral system restricted to the privileged and riddled with rotten boroughs. This was 30 years before even the middle class gained the franchise in the 1832 Reform Act. A United Irish movement pamphlet painted a graphic picture of the Irish political system:

"17 boroughs have no resident elector; 16 have but one; 90 have 13 electors each; 90 persons return (MPs) for 106 rural boroughs – that is 212 members out of 300; 54 members are returned by five noblemen and four bishops."

In Ireland there was an additional injustice. The franchise for Protestants may have been ludicrously restrictive but there were votes and "elected" members from the richest section of that community. But the continuing existence of the so-called penal laws excluded Catholics from any effective political rights, from the right to stand for parliament to the right to vote. Ireland's three million Catholics were subject to parliament's laws and had to pay heavy taxes despite their penury – but they had no right to political rep-



resentation.

The vast majority of Catholics had much more immediate concerns and little or no access to political ideas of any sort. Their main grievances, crippling tithes and taxes and religious persecution, could only be answered through the conquest of political power, however, and they were sympathetic to forces which offered a way out. Throughout the century peasants had protected their interests or wreaked revenge on their landlords through a series of secret societies like the Ribbonmen and Defenders.

This was a political system which excluded the middle class too and which was designed to protect the interests and maintain the power of the old aristocratic class. The growing anachronism of this system was perhaps most keenly felt in Ulster, where industry and trade were more developed and the land system less oppressive. Ulster had a rural as well as an urban bourgeoisie and was able to nurture the classes of merchants, artisans, farm labourers and industrial workers required by an early industrial society. Economic power was increasingly in the hands of this emerging bourgeoisie while political power remained the preserve of the big landowners. Ulster was experiencing more sharply than the other provinces the contradictions which in France, and later in other European countries, produced social and political revolution. There would be unique problems for revolutionaries in Ireland, though, as winning the support of the people, and above all the peasantry, meant bridging a deep-rooted and poisonous religious divide. The Irish revolutionary movement had to convince the Catholic peasantry that they and the radical Protestants had more than a common enemy in Britain. It needed to convince them that they had a common future in Ireland.

Despite the final outcome the attempt was inspirational, a great democratic moment in the history of a divided people still rich with lessons for those who believe that the unity of Ire-

land's workers is the precondition for that country's democratic unity.

Not quite two years before the United Irish revolt French ships carrying 12,000 troops and the United Irish leader Wolfe Tone arrived unseen and unchallenged just outside Bantry Bay, a large naval base in Cork. This amazing success was outweighed by the fact that they could not land due to the unfavourable winds. After six days of waiting dangerous storms blew up and the attempt to land was abandoned. The fleet returned to France and Ireland had to wait a while longer for her revolution. Historians have speculated fruitlessly ever since about how different the next 200 years might have been had Tone landed. Loyalists have been happy to hum the Lillibulero and thank "the Protestant wind".

From 1797 societies of United Irishmen were established all over Ireland. The movement was secret and complex in structure. Led by a Directory there were committees in every province and substantial organisations in practically every town. This was without doubt a mass movement. Secret minutes passed over to the authorities by an informer revealed that the organisation had nearly 300,000 men under arms, which was five times the numbers of government forces. It was also a movement with important connections to the English Jacobin movement of the time, no small matter in 1797 when two major naval mutinies and a number of smaller disturbances threatened to pave the way for a revolution at the heart of the empire, backed by European invasion.

When the United Irish movement was ready to launch a full-scale revolt, however, the British government was much better prepared and the revolutionaries were in some disarray. Wolfe Tone was in exile in France where he remained throughout the key months, attempting to revive the idea of a supportive French invasion. The leadership in Ireland lay in the hands of people like Thomas Addis Emmet, whose

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brother Robert would lead the first revolt against the Union in 1803, Arthur O'Connor and the radical brother of Lord Leinster, Ireland's largest landowner, "Lord" Edward Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald was a committed advocate of the ideas of Paine and Rousseau who had railed against hereditary power and wealth and resigned his seat in the Irish parliament after an earlier campaign against the government. Dublin Castle was shocked at how well placed and "respectable" many of the revolutionary leaders were. They were nevertheless divided on tactics and riddled with informers. These two fatal factors had the effect first of delaying the rising, second of breaking down its co-ordination and third of keeping the government reasonably well-informed of developments.

In March 1798, on the basis of information from a prominent informer, police broke up a meeting of the Leinster Directory of the United Irishmen, arresting the main leaders. There were some escapes and some absences but others were rounded up soon afterward and the documents captured were probably just as important. As the movement's leaders delayed their planned rising in the hope of a French invasion the government's actions were forcing the issue. Martial law was declared in a number of counties around Dublin and the people were instructed to hand over all weapons before all hell was let loose. A blank cheque was given to the most bloodthirsty army officers to make examples of and torture suspects in public in the hope that this would both unearth weapons and rebels and discourage the peasantry from giving rebellion any support. The brutality unleashed in Kildare, Meath and Wicklow certainly reduced the resources and morale of the underground movement but it also put an end to prevarication. This carefully-built and ambitious political force could either fight or surrender. Bit by bit it chose to fight.

In May the counties surrounding Dublin rose up in a revolt that shook the confidence of the authorities. Just as they thought they had pacified the worst areas towns began to fall, garrisons were captured and odd survivors arrived in Dublin, scaring the powerful and cheering the people with stories of disorder and defeat. In truth the revolt had already failed to go to plan. What should have been a co-ordinated rising at the western borders of the three main counties of Wicklow, Kildare and Meath, stopping the mail coaches so that the counties further west would know the time had come to rise up, was patchy and chaotic. Enough was achieved to ignite the powder keg, however, and it would be five months before Dublin Castle regained control of the area beyond the pale.

By the end of the month the flames had spread south to Wexford. Fired by news of the successes to their north and angered by evidence of massacres

and brutality by the army and police a peasant army led by Father John Murphy took to the roads and attacked the houses of landlords and government supporters. Troops were swept aside and reinforcements from the harbour town of Wexford were, unbelievably, defeated by the mass of untrained peasants armed mainly with pikes. By the beginning of June the two major towns of Enniscorthy and Wexford were in the hands of the rebels.

"That the long dreaded day, when the French revolution would spread to Ireland, had now arrived was all too clear to the gentlefolk of Wexford. They found their own tradespeople, their hatters and tailors, their coachmen and boatmen and shopkeepers, the solid and dependable foundations of the old social order, were their masters in the new." (Thomas Pakenham, *The Year of Liberty*)

June

Then, also in June, the revolution spread to Ulster. The first rising there broke out in Antrim followed within days by a similar outbreak in Down. As in the south it was in the hinterland of the major city that the revolutionary movement struck its first blows. The leader in Ulster was Henry Joy McCracken, a Presbyterian cotton manufacturer and longstanding member of the United Irishmen. Ulster had at one time been the movement's strongest area, shaped and held together by McCracken and Tone. McCracken was socially more radical than most of the other leaders. The revolt he led would certainly be hard. Not only was Ulster more tightly controlled by government forces but the mainly Protestant-led rebellion would need support from the more downtrodden Catholics, who barely trusted their comrades-in-arms and felt they would be treated a good deal more harshly in the event of defeat.

The government began to turn back

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the tide in the summer. Once they had prevented the attempt to surround and attack the capital they consolidated their grip on the surrounding counties with a mixture of offers of amnesty and threats of destruction. That done they began to concentrate on the relief of Wexford, a possible point of invasion, where the rebels held a sizeable number of loyalist prisoners. By the end of June the army had retaken Wexford, ending three weeks of rebel control. The peasant army, much reduced but not crushed, marched to link up with areas to the north still controlled by their comrades. While they succeeded in this these remnants were mopped up by the army in the following weeks. By the end of July the revolt to the south and west of Dublin was a shadow of what it had been. The rising in the north had been defeated in battle and McCracken arrested.

In August 1798 the Irish revolution experienced one final injection of hope. At last the revolution in France came to the aid of the people of Ireland. On August 23 a French force of 1,100 men landed at Killala on the coast of Sligo at the far west of Ireland. Led by a General Humbert they found very little resistance. After a period settling in the town, establishing local contacts and recruiting support they began to extend their territory. They captured the towns of Ballina and Castlebar and from then until the end of the rebellion in September they and their Irish allies were the government in what became known as the Republic of Connaught. Humbert's wider plan, however, was to march toward Dublin to meet up with and encourage the revolutionaries in other counties and link up with a much bigger invasion force due to arrive soon after his. This force would bring with it the leader of the new Ireland, Wolfe Tone.

In different circumstances this plan could have revived the movement. In the conditions which existed it was a false dawn. Humbert travelled far but found only a brave few scattered rebels and a demoralised, leaderless people. He was finally surrounded and captured near a small village called Ballinamuck on the border of County Longford.

The fleet of ships carrying Wolfe Tone was intercepted in early October. Tone was captured and brought to Dublin in

early November. His final act of rebellion was to deny the British the opportunity to give him a public execution. He committed suicide by cutting his throat with a razor in his cell. He took a week to die.

Aftermath

In the immediate aftermath of the rebellion the British government decided to adopt a new and more drastic solution to the Irish question. They concluded that the self-government that had existed until this point had not only been ineffective but had contributed to the revolutionary mood. It would be replaced with an Act of Union which would ensure that Ireland would be governed from the Westminster parliament on the same terms as the rest of the United Kingdom.

Opponents of the United Irish movement cite this as proof of the folly and failure of the revolt. Even in the short term, however, the Act of Union was seen as a defeat mainly for the tiny aristocratic oligarchy which had run the Irish parliament. It was the beginning of the end for the Protestant ascendancy in Ireland, as the following century would show. Most importantly the real legacy of the United movement is not, as James Connolly put it, "their military exploits on land and sea, their hairbreadth escapes and heroic martyrdom", but instead their work as "pioneers of democracy in Ireland".

In the 200 years since the "Year of Liberty" the United Irishmen have suffered a further fate, one familiar to heroic failed revolutionaries. All sorts of movements and people have claimed to stand in their tradition. In nationalist Ireland they have been universally celebrated and commemorated. For socialists, however, what is important about this movement and this moment is what was new and radical at the time, because it hasn't lost its revolutionary edge. The United Irishmen insisted that Ireland's problem was not simply who ruled the country but how it was ruled, and they understood that it was only possible to fight for democracy with a movement built on democracy. Thus the question of the religious divide in their country was an immediate practical one which could not be dodged. They did not overcome that divide, but in the attempt they created the most serious and united challenge so far to the subjugation of the Irish people. □

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The war criminal, the lawyers, and Rishi Sunak

By Tom Harrison

Russian journalists put their lives on the line to expose the corrupt Putin regime. At least 38 have been murdered in Russia since he came to power. Others face physical attacks, arrest and constant intimidation.

One would hope that investigative journalists in Britain can write about Putin and his cronies without suffering negative consequences, given the UK government has imposed several sets of sanctions against oligarchs associated with the Kremlin.

That supposition, however, ignores Britain's lenient libel laws, which disproportionately favour the rich and powerful, as well as amoral law firms who have discovered a magic money tree – Russian oligarchs intent on shutting up those wishing to expose their nefarious activities.

One such high profile case was brought on behalf of Roman Abramovich, who sued Catherine Belton and her

publisher HarperCollins over claims made in her book *Putin's People* that Abramovich "was acting under Kremlin direction" when he bought Chelsea FC. Though no damages were paid in that case, Belton's publishers had to fork out £1.5 million in legal fees, which would be sufficient to deter many others from prying into the doings of Putin's pals.

A more recent and extremely worrying case has come to light, where undoubted war criminal, Yevgeny Prigozhin, boss of the notorious Wagner mercenary organisation, tried to use this country's libel laws to silence a British journalist. What was particularly remarkable here, was that it was done with the full cooperation of the Treasury at the time when Rishi Sunak was Chancellor.

The journalist Prigozhin was out to do over was Eliot Higgins, founder of the investigative journalism website Bellingcat. Prigozhin has been described as the most sanctioned individual on the planet and even at the time his

London lawyers, the tellingly named Discrete Law, started proceedings there was publicly available evidence in abundance that he headed a terrorist organisation.

Nevertheless, his lawyers managed to get around the sanctions by obtaining multiple licences from a department in the Treasury. This enabled them, for example, to go see Prigozhin in St. Petersburg with the Treasury's full knowledge (he couldn't come to London because he was sanctioned).

The case collapsed in March last year as a result of the further invasion of Ukraine, but it left Eliot with a £70,000 legal bill. Whether any Tory ministers, Sunak included, were made aware of the help the Treasury gave Prigozhin we may never know. The official line is that they don't comment on "individual cases." Judging by the way things are going with several of Sunak's own miscreant ministers lately, this is par for the course!

Prigozhin himself is straight out of

central casting when it comes to Russian gangsters. An ex-con who did ten years time for mugging a woman in his youth, he went on to become extremely valuable to Putin when he set up the Wagner group mercenary outfit. His most recent endeavour has been to recruit thousands of cut-throats, thieves, and rapists from amongst the Russian prison population to fight against Ukraine. Those among them who don't like being used as cannon fodder either face a firing squad or get filmed on video having their brains bashed out with a sledgehammer.

Understandably Prigozhin doesn't like nosy journalists prying into his affairs. Three Russian journalists investigating Wagner Group activities in the Central African Republic were murdered in an ambush four years ago. In Britain the chosen method for shutting them up is through the legal system, apparently with the cooperation of the UK government. □

Sylvia without the politics



Theatre
review

By Simon Nelson

Sylvia at the Old Vic has some good qualities. As a musical it is well written and well performed. The songs are catchy, even if sometimes, at such a tempo, the audience will struggle to catch all the words. And despite the odd fluff or somewhat overbearing sound, the cast do very well to keep up with it.

Hip-hop, soul and funk-inspired songs and a largely black cast will evoke inevitable comparisons to *Hamilton*. And some of the casting choices did leave me confused. Almost the entire cast is not made to look like the figures they are playing, different hair etc. The period clothing is relatively sound. But Keir Hardie, who appears very much as a recognisable (white) Keir Hardie, complete with beard, deerstalker, red scarf, and tweed

waistcoat, stands out.

As a musical about the Pankhursts, Emmeline, Christabel, Sylvia and Adela, it would probably hang together. But as a musical about Sylvia Pankhurst from roughly 1903 to 1928 it falls far short.

Artistic licence exists for a reason. A musical is rarely the go-to form for strict biography or political analysis of a historic figure. But *Sylvia* softens the edges so much as to confuse her political ideas, if not get them plain wrong.

The show has gone through a five-year redevelopment, cutting over 30 minutes of material, rewriting songs. I haven't seen the original. Perhaps in its tightness and concise running time, even at still over two hours, the current version has lost some of the nuance of the extended piece. And, for me at least, Beverley Knight as Emmeline is the performer you want more of.

People with knowledge of Sylvia Pankhurst's life will be surprised to see the driving force for why she was a socialist portrayed as seeming

to come from her attraction to and affair with Keir Hardie, as much as her own family's conviction. Her drift to conspicuous socialist action is portrayed at first as a sort of naivety. Her stunts, shouting down Churchill, like the rest of her family's, still generate the headlines, so it is all right.

As the performance progresses, the ideals of Sylvia the socialist, reflected through her relationship with Hardie, are posed as her being the level headed moderate woman while Emmeline and Christabel are dangerous terrorists with militant tactics that only she might be able to stop. We see Lloyd George appealing to Sylvia to get her to calm her mother down, then he will give women the vote. We are shown Clementine Churchill apparently sympathetic to Sylvia while arguing with her husband.

Sylvia's family's split from her produces the best song of the show, with the growing apart of mother and daughter. At that point it made me want more of Emmeline Pankhurst,



played brilliantly by Beverley Knight, who in a cast of strong vocalists, still manages to stand out.

When the East London Federation of Suffragettes is formed, it confusingly brings out the *Workers' Dreadnought* straight away. We are never told about the Workers' Socialist Federation, the Russian Revolution, the Communist Party, or her "left communism". We see she now fraternises with more of the working class and poor, with a brief cameo from George Lansbury, but her political evolution is shown just in leading a delegation of

women workers to Parliament, once speaking of Home Rule, and continuing her pacifism in the face of World War One.

The second half tries to cover a huge time period in which we get no sense of her political activity. We see her relationship with Silvio Corio and a final attempt to reconcile with her mother and sister before her mother's death. In 1928, when the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act is finally passed (by the Tories), giving women votes on equal terms with men, it is portrayed as the culmination of Sylvia's struggle. □

The racism of "Birth of a Nation"

6699 From the Archives

By Eugene Debs

Eugene Debs (1855-1926) was the main public figure of the US Socialist Party in the era when it won over 900,000 votes in the presidential elections of 1912 and 1920. Later socialists, learning from the Bolsheviks and the Russian Revolution, were critical of Debs's limitations, and of course the language he used was the language of his time, but Debs spoke out eloquently against racism. Birth of a Nation has been called "the most influential film in history".

The merits of the spectacular drama *The Birth of a Nation* excite bitter comment whenever it is presented. There is no question that it is a wonderful production, that many of its scenes are tense and thrilling, and that there is much in the play to approve and commend, but if the author's studied purpose was to insult the black race and to revive and intensify the bitter prejudices which grew out of the war, he could not have better succeeded. It would be passing strange if the coloured people did not protest against certain shocking features of the drama as doing them and their race grossest injustice.

If it be absolutely essential to the play to present those harrowing rape scenes, then why not round them out in their historic completeness and show the dissolute sons of the plantation owner ravishing the black daughter before her parents' eyes?

For every white woman raped in the South by a black fiend, a thousand black women have been seduced and outraged by white gentlemen; but no hint of this is given in the series of pictures composing *The Birth of a Nation*.

It is only the black brute that is guilty according to this and all other stories



written about the Negro by Thomas Dixon ^[1], the author, who also calls himself a minister of Christ.

There are four million mulattos in this country, most of whom were born out of wedlock and all of whom have a white father or grandfather, and these white gentlemen are ready to fight at the drop of the hat for "white supremacy" and against "nigger equality."

The pretended reverence for Lincoln in the play does not at all square with the facts of history. Lincoln was hated with a savage hate by the slaveowners of the South and it was this ferocious hate that culminated in his assassination. The reverence now shown him on the stage is a convenient mask behind which the same blind hate may vent itself upon the unoffending Negro.

Let it not be overlooked that all our histories have been written by white men and that Negroes had no hand in them. They simply had to take what was given them, but even at that there is no denying the fact that from the time the Negroes were first stolen from their native land by white slave-traders, whom it would be flattery to call brutes, until the last law disfranchising them in the South was put into effect and the last "Jim Crow" car put into commission to attest their standing as livestock, the whole history of the treatment of the Negro race is one of shameless exploitation and degradation, for which the white race can never atone in time nor eternity.

If the black people today could tell their story about *The Birth of a Nation*, it would be replete with scenes infinitely more cruel and damning than those based upon Dixon's novel and flashed upon the screen to conceal the white man's crimes behind the Negro's mis-

fortune.

The Ku Klux Klan are glorified in these pictures as spotless knights, the personification of chivalry and honor, and the audience applauds madly as they dash to the rescue of some imaginary white victim of a black fiend, but care is taken not to portray any of the outrages perpetrated upon defenseless, unoffending Negroes by these same lawless nightriders.

The pictures showing the scenes about the polling places of election day, under Negro domination, are especially calculated to subject the Negro to ridicule and contempt, and the white audience never fails to attest its appreciation by its sneers and cheers.

It's true such election scenes with their black sluggers and their sodden corruption are disgraceful and revolting, but how much more disgraceful and revolting are they than the election scenes which have occurred in and about Terre Haute during the last few years – scenes in which the sluggers were white, instead of black, and insulted white ladies instead of black wenches; scenes unspeakably low and vile as everyone will admit who bore witness to them? How would it do to make pictures of some of these and travel through the South with them, flashing them upon a screen to show the Negroes in that section what an eminently respectable thing an election is when dominated by white men and by what pure and incorruptible methods the will of the people is expressed in a civilised white community?

If the white race has demonstrated its "superiority" in any one thing, it is in its politics and elections, and if Negroes should be disfranchised, the evident purpose of Dixon's pictures,

because of their disgraceful conduct at the polls, then by the same token white men should also be stripped of the ballot and driven from the polling places.

The cheap commercial statistics exhibited at the close of the play to show the progress made by the Negro race is but a weak attempt to excuse the wanton insults heaped upon that race. Intelligent Negroes will not be deceived. The progress they have made is mainly due to themselves. They owe little to the white race as a whole, save their exploitation and degradation.

Let the coloured people learn how to depend upon themselves, how to do for themselves, and to win their own way in the world. When they cut loose from the grafting politicians that use them as pawns in the political game and reward one of their number with a spittoon cleaning job in recognition of their race, and stand together; when they begin in earnest to educate themselves and to develop their minds and do their own thinking, they will then command the respect of the white race and of the world, but not before. □

• *Terre Haute Post*, 8 Jan 1916. Thanks for the text to Marxist Internet Archive

[1] Thomas Dixon, Jr. (1864-1946) was a white supremacist lawyer, Baptist minister, and writer. His best-selling novel, *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905), was adapted by director D.W. Griffith into the film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), a big budget spectacular that glorified southern white supremacy and demonized post-Civil War Reconstruction. Dixon also wrote several novels vilifying socialism, one of which was made into a film, *Bolshevism on Trial* (1919).



Eugene Debs c. 1912

Salaried GPs? But salaried by whom?

By Alice Hazel

In an interview with the *Times* last month Wes Streeting, Labour's Health spokesperson, said "I'm minded to phase out the whole system of GP partners altogether and to look at salaried GPs working in modern practices alongside a range of other professionals."

Sounds good. A salaried GP service has been a progressive call since the inception of the NHS and has long been the preferred model of the MPU (the Medical Practitioners' Union), now usually known as Doctors in Unite.

But the question remains, salaried to whom? In 2004 APMS contracts were introduced, which allow private organisations such as Centene and Virgin to provide NHS-funded primary care services. Within this model GPs are salaried. But the model is widely discredited, with evidence of poor service provision and several services having to close due to "inadequate" inspection ratings or some form of enforcement action. Currently fewer than 3% of GPs operate under this model.

Wes Streeting has said he has no reservations about further use of the private sector to address waiting lists, a line we heard from Blair. His attitude to privatisation is compounded by a refusal to promise or even demand an increase in the NHS budget, despite the clear evidence that after a decade and more of real terms cuts in funding it is desperately lacking in resources. Without overturning privatisation and increasing NHS funding the talk of a salaried GP service is radical-sounding

but hollow rhetoric.

The MPU calls for £20 billion of increased funding for primary care, a neighbourhood system of public health provision, a new national care, support and independent living service free at the point of use, and a national occupational health service. When I hear Wes Streeting discussing his plans for this type of reform, then I'll back his plans for a salaried GP model.

At the beginning of the NHS, GPs were left as semi-independent contractors in line with proposals drawn up by the British Medical Association (BMA), which at that time was dominated by a conservative layer of GPs. Aneurin Bevan made no secret of the concessions he had made. Weeks before the NHS was launched Bevan put forward an amendment which forbade the introduction of a salaried GP service without a further specific act of parliament.

Since that time the independent system of NHS funded primary care provision has remained. Over 50% of GP surgeries run within a partnership model, effectively as small business owners and employers, contracted by the NHS to provide general medical services in a geographical area, with additional payments for particular services, for example vaccinations and screening services. Within these surgeries salaried and locum GPs are employed, alongside other practice staff.

The MPU says: "General practice is at a tipping point into irreversible decline, fuelled by an ever-increasing workload falling on fewer and fewer shoulders and with a shrinking budget." Last



week, the BMA's GP Committee said it was considering industrial action following NHS England's contract offer for 23/24, which included no uplift in funding, beyond 2.1% agreed in 2019 as part of a five-year deal, despite the huge increases in inflation. As of September 2022, 474 GP surgeries across the UK have closed their doors in the previous nine years and have not been replaced, leaving 1.5 million patients without a family doctor. The main reason cited was partner retirement or the inability to recruit partners. Practice closures hit lower income areas more.

Streeting has been criticised for playing into the agenda of the right-wing press, who attack GPs as part of a broader attack on the NHS. There is

something in that. Headlines from the *Daily Mail* scream about GP salary levels and lack of access to GP services as if one were the cause of the other.

In fact, research carried out since Covid shows that accessibility, number of face-to-face appointments, and income level of area are all closely connected, indicating a systemic workload problem. There is a chronic lack of GPs, and that can only be solved by increased funding, a reduced workload and a system that encourages continuity of care not just number of appointments. A privatised salaried model will certainly not improve it. On average there are 1.2 GPs for 2000 patients, while in privately run APMS NHS services there are 0.6. □

Unison HE: 2023-4 talks start while 2022-3 dispute continues



By Vicki Morris

Around of balloting before Christmas in Unison Higher Education disappointingly failed to deliver a new tranche of branches for the 2022/23 pay action. Only three more branches got over the 50% turnout threshold; these were branches that had taken slightly longer over balloting.

This highlighted that a lot of the problems with delivering a vote for strike were technical: a shortened timescale for balloting as Unison tried to catch up to the UCU timetable; problems with issuing and receiving ballot papers in the post throughout the CWU strikes; balloting around Christmas

time; little support from the centre and regions – these were all legitimate reasons for failure.

However, they cannot mask the fact that our sector of the union is small and underdeveloped, with recent improvements in organising being patchy across the 140 institutions. Many branches were simply never going to get over the line this time.

Nevertheless, when the left-dominated Service Group Executive (SGE) met at the start of February to discuss the results and the next steps, they were still upbeat. The atmosphere at the HE conference which took place the next day was likewise not depressed by the setback.

Several institutions still have live mandates and are taking part in strikes alongside UCU.

Talks have started with the

employers' organisation, the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA), about the 2023/24 pay round.

The employers had imposed the 2022/23 offer of 3% in August (all except University of Wolverhampton which says it won't pay the extra until July 2023).

Unison has not agreed that 2022/23 is settled. Talks on 2023/24 were brought forward from the usual timetable with the hint that there might be something extra for 2022/23 rolled in. In the event, UCEA's offer of 5-8% for 2023/24 failed to satisfy the joint unions, and they issued a statement rejecting the offer.

There was particular consternation that UCEA seemed to be weighting the offer towards higher grades, overwhelmingly represented by UCU, presumably hoping to buy off

UCU members whose union is a lot better organised than Unison and the other unions in the talks.

The joint unions' pay claim for 2023/24 is £4k or RPI +2%, whichever is the higher.

In Unison we had some debate about what to do about the 2022/23 dispute and whether to roll our two years together in balloting terms too. The SGE meets on Thursday 9 February to discuss this, when we should have the potential balloting timelines to help us decide. It makes little sense to delay a round of balloting on 2023/24 till after 2022/23 branches have exhausted their dispute, though it's understandable that the 2022/23 striking branches are keen to show their members that their action isn't all in vain.

In Unison HE, we need to continue to spread the pos-

itive lessons of achieving turnouts and organising lively strikes from the stronger to the weaker branches. There is confidence around the SGE and the activist layers that we can do that. □

• More: bit.ly/uni-he (scroll to the bottom for a list of strikes in February-March. Vicki Morris is a member of the Unison HE Service Group Executive, writing here in a personal capacity)

More online

Airport expansion

4 Feb Bristol protest

bit.ly/bairportexpansion

Two Billion Beats

Sonali Bhattacharyya's play:

bit.ly/2bbrev

Over 20 days of Abellio bus strikes

By Mark Simon

Bus drivers working for Abellio in London have had over 20 days of strikes and continue to be in dispute. Abellio are notorious for being one of the lowest paying bus companies in London.

Forensic accountants from the drivers' union, Unite, showed that the parent company Abellio Transport Holdings BV Netherlands had systematically removed £20 million from the London bus operation over 20 years and had held down wages to reduce staff costs from 65% of sales in 2010 to 50% of sales in 2020.

Unite balloted members three times in 2022. The first two ballots failed to reach the anti-union law turnout threshold. Abellio reps then asked for the support of the Unite Bus Drivers' Combine, established in 2022 to coordinate

and support Unite's industrial strategy in the bus industry. In the third ballot reps demanded a re-negotiation of a two year pay deal that had paid out just 2.1% in April 2022.

Following a detailed plan to get the vote out, the reps supported by organisers turned out between 58% to 90% and a majority for strike action between 97%-100%. During this campaign and the strike over 800 Abellio drivers have joined Unite.

Picket lines have been strong and many agency drivers have refused to cross them and have joined the union. In December, while strikes continued, the company, which had previously refused to re-negotiate the two-year pay deal, made an offer on pay of an 18% rise, a £18 per hour rate for established drivers but not so good for newer drivers, and cutting the overtime to flat rate from time and a half. Members rejected

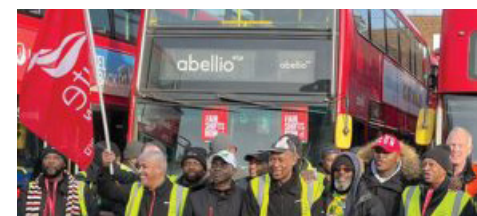
this offer but the company imposed it, with the new rate paid in January.

The company also suspended and then sacked the steward at the Walworth Garage for a minor driving offence that other drivers only got a written warning for. The strikes continued, the reps made it crystal-clear to the company that the strikes would not end until the rep was reinstated.

With an improved offer on the table reps agreed to re-ballot members once the steward's appeal was upheld, and she was reinstated.

There is a stark contrast with the RATP bus company dispute which ended while a steward was still suspended, and so resulted in the sacking of one of the most popular union stewards. Still the Abellio members heavily rejected the slightly improved offer.

In January another offer, slightly improved, was rejected but with a lower



margin and a majority to accept in some garages. Strikes from 1 to 3 Feb were weaker, with an increase in services running. Two further planned strike days were then cancelled in advance of further talks on 7 Feb.

The result of a digital ballot on further action is due back by the end of the week 6-10 Feb. Abellio drivers have won by taking action. Without a strike they would be a lot worse off; but knowing when to end a dispute without winning everything is hard. In the end judging the strength of the strike has to be the key. □

CWU must use new mandate

By Ollie Moore <not Unison>

The Communication Workers Union (CWU) has cancelled a planned further strike in its disputes over jobs, pay, and conditions in Royal Mail. The strike was set for 24 hours, from 12.30 on 16 February, but has been called off following a legal challenge from Royal Mail.

It seems the challenge is based on the fact that, as CWU's current ballot mandate expires on 16 February, a strike stretching across 16-17 Feb-

ruary would be invalid. This is second time in the dispute CWU has cancelled strikes in the face of legal challenges from the employer.

CWU now says it is wholly focused on renewing its ballot mandate, with voting closing on 16 February, and says it will call further strikes "if talks fail".

The union previously committed to pause all industrial action to allow for "intensive negotiations" with Royal Mail. The employer did not reciprocate the union's conciliatory spirit, and has continued to

impose changes to terms and conditions, usually without consultation or negotiation at local level.

There is little to suggest negotiations will be successful without the pressure of further action. Given the CWU's extensive programme of strikes throughout December failed to budge Royal Mail, postal workers must consider how to effectively escalate their action. Options include sustained rolling strikes (e.g., a week on/week off pattern), or an indefinite strike. The union

has rightly stressed that the future of the job as its members currently know it is at stake in this dispute, given Royal Mail's plans to radically restructure working arrangements.

Meanwhile, Royal Mail CEO Simon Thompson is being recalled to a Parliamentary Select Committee after a previous car-crash performance. Thompson's bluster undoubtedly helps galvanise support for the dispute amongst postal workers, and members of the public who watch the proceedings, but victory or de-

feat in the dispute is ultimately likely to be a crude matter of whether the strikes can put more pressure on Royal Mail's finances than its bosses and shareholders are prepared to withstand.

If CWU renews its mandate, as it is likely to do, it can call strikes from 2 March, and could coordinate with strikes by teachers, and likely many other workers, on 15-16 March. □

Unison sinks strike support in conference

By Selim Martin

At London Labour Party conference (28-29 January), the Starmerite leadership let a series of leftish motions go through without opposition. The motion where they decided to fight was one supporting strikes and calling on the whole party, including elected representatives, to do so.

That motion was defeated by just over 1% – 49.4 to 50.6%. It was defeated because Labour's biggest affiliated union, Unison, actively opposed it. I haven't checked the exact figures, but Union's delegation probably represents something like 15% of the conference. If Unison had voted for, it would have passed about 2-1.

Despite the left winning control of Unison's national executive for the first

time in 2021, the separate Labour Link structure remains controlled by the union's right, partly through chicanery. It wasn't just Unison – well over 40% of union votes, including no doubt solidly pro-Labour-leadership shopworkers' union Usdaw, went against the strikes motion.

Illegal

Unison not only voted against, but sent up a speaker to oppose the motion. That speaker lied that the motion advocated illegal solidarity strikes. (Heaven forbid that the labour movement should ever advocate action in defiance of this outrageous legal restriction, or even demand that it be repealed.) She also suggested that it was somehow illegitimate, an offence to trade unions, for a Labour Party body

to advocate Labour members support strikes. (In reality, of course, the principle was: help Starmer, attack the left.)

Unite the Union had to demand a right of reply; no other unions were taken to speak. Unison's action must have majorly helped the right win their 56% against among Constituency Labour Party delegates – though more broadly the right had clearly out-organised the left to win CLP delegates.

The right had the conference under control. The agenda had been shaped to give only 45 minutes for motions debate on the first day (a bit more on the second), with proceedings dominated by numerous speeches from Labour politicians. Although some speeches were better – Lisa Nandy talked about building council housing – most, including Starmer's, were awful. The

speaker list also included Peter Mandelson!

There was lots of bluster about the great work Labour is doing locally, and election victories in e.g. Barnet and Wandsworth; but nothing about the dire funding crisis facing councils, what to do about it, or defeats in Tower Hamlets and Harrow.

The conference took – and passed – a motion supporting migrants' rights and freedom of movement put together and proposed by supporters of the Labour Campaign for Free Movement. That motion explicitly referenced and supported the strong policies passed at national Labour conference in 2019 and 2021.

The right was in control at the conference, but the left was able to make a difference. □

“What we stand for

Today one class, the working class, lives by selling its labour power to another, the capitalist class, which owns the means of production.

Capitalists' control over the economy and their relentless drive to increase their wealth causes poverty, unemployment, blighting of lives by overwork; imperialism, environmental destruction and much else.

The working class must unite to struggle against the accumulated wealth and power of the capitalists, in the workplace and wider society.

The Alliance for Workers' Liberty wants socialist revolution: collective ownership of industry and services, workers' control, and a democracy much fuller than the present system, with elected representatives recallable at any time and an end to bureaucrats' and managers' privileges.

We fight for trade unions and the Labour Party to break with "social partnership" with the bosses, to militantly assert working-class interests.

In workplaces, trade unions, and Labour organisations; among students; in local campaigns; on the left and in wider political alliances we stand for:

- Independent working-class representation in politics
- A workers' government, based on and accountable to the labour movement
- A workers' charter of trade union rights – to organise, strike, picket effectively, and take solidarity action
- Taxing the rich to fund good public services, homes, education and jobs for all
- Workers' control of major industries and finance for a rapid transition to a green society
- A workers' movement that fights all forms of oppression
- Full equality for women, and social provision to free women from domestic labour. Reproductive freedoms and free abortion on demand.
- Full equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people
- Black and white workers' unity against racism
- Open borders
- Global solidarity against global capital – workers everywhere have more in common with each other than with their capitalist or Stalinist rulers
- Democracy at every level of society, from the smallest workplace or community to global social organisation
- Equal rights for all nations, against imperialists and predators big and small
- Maximum left unity in action, and full openness in debate

If you agree with us, take copies of *Solidarity* to sell – and join us! □

• workersliberty.org/join-awl

On the eve of strikes?



Diary of a firefighter

By Adrian Noble

Normally this time of year is the quietest – no grass fires, few barbecues, fewer drunk people passing out with the oven on after a night out. But the energy crisis has put people in some desperate situations, and some are resorting to extremely unsafe ad hoc ways of keeping warm when they can't afford to put the boiler on.

Today, we're sent on a relief to assist fire investigation at a flat in a rather grand street in West London. An older woman lived there, who luckily got herself out before the first crews arrived. She was a bit of a hoarder so there were a lot of things around and it was difficult to see what had caused the fire. The investigation specialist eventually was able to piece together the seat of the fire, an ad hoc wood burner with a

chimney presumably assembled by the resident herself, who couldn't afford to turn on her boiler. It's gutting to see these incidents, which are undoubtedly more common this winter than ever before.

We get back to the news that our strike ballot got over the line and we've smashed the anti-union thresholds – 88% yes on a 73% turnout. It's a huge result, better than I'd hoped. "Game on", says T. "Ball's in their court now."

A couple of weeks ago the London Commissioner made a local offer directly to London, outside the agreed collective bargaining arrangements we have. The offer was 6% this year and 5% next, a tempting offer for lots of people who are keen to avoid strike action, despite the offer being a significant pay cut this year. But more importantly it would mean abandoning the rest of the country in the middle of a national pay dispute and permanently damage our national unity. The FBU London region did the only thing it could and told the commissioner to go through our collective bargaining channels.

P is adamant that this is a sign of the employers' side cracking, with London breaking rank and trying to settle. It's an offer from a position of weakness, not strength, he says. J agrees, emphasising the rumour swirling around that they are really struggling to recruit sufficient scabs to provide fire cover, a situation replicated around the country. Some brigades are offering double pay or even £1,000 a shift. J says that the difficulties they're having puts us in the strongest position he's ever been in on the eve of strike action.

The union has held off announcing strike dates until after a last ditch meeting in the week starting 6 February between the FBU and fire chiefs. Plenty of us believe that given their apparent failure to meet their legal obligation to organise fire cover, the fire chiefs are bricking it and an offer will be made – there are rumours that 20 different brigades have made submissions. Whether that's true, and whether the offer will be a real improvement and enough to avoid strikes, is less than certain. □

Labour trans rights meeting

By Zack Muddle

Around 20 people participated in the online "crisis call" organised by "[Labour for Trans Rights](#)" on 3 Feb. Most Labour MPs [abstained](#) on the Tories anti-trans wielding of Section 35, and Keir Starmer has opposed 16-year-olds legally changing gender.

L4TR is distinct from the (long-dormant) "[Labour Campaign for Trans Rights](#)".

The meeting felt like an inaugural public meeting. We discussed issues

without yet collectively agreeing on concrete plans.

There was disagreement (in emphasis) between those favouring a bureaucratic approach, and those more democratically-orientated.

The former locate many problems in transphobes pushing their agenda in Labour. They want a definition of transphobia adopted, and use that to hold Labour representatives to account. Some suggested not campaigning for anti-trans candidates.

There are committed transphobes in

Labour, and in the highest ranks of our movement. That is a problem. Much anti-trans politics comes, however, from opportunism and timidity, from calculations that going with the Tories' reactionary culture war is best electorally.

The alternative is to boldly challenge transphobia, to fight for trans rights, educating the rest of the party and labour movement. That requires open discussion. We fight for democratic control over our representatives. We seek to vote out bigots, not look to the party machine. □

Orchestra conductors on film



Kino Eye

By John Cunningham

I haven't seen the new film *Tár* (with Cate Blanchett) yet. However, there are many films which feature conductors, this being rich territory for the dramatization of massive egos and conflicts, artistic and otherwise.

Amadeus (Miloš Forman, 1984) is a good example. My choice is *Taking Sides* (2001), an international co-production with István Szabó directing and focusing on the famous German conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler (Stellan Skarsgård) and allegations of his collaboration with the Nazis while Musical Director of the renowned Berlin Philharmonic.

He is interrogated by Major Steve Arnold of the US Army (Harvey Keitel) who has no time for classical music and is a gobby, unashamed lowbrow. The examination of Furtwängler becomes fraught and Arnold and the German come to loath each other while the conductor's many admirers rally to his defence.

Whether or not Furtwängler was a Nazi collaborator is, to this day, a contentious issue, far too complex for such a short review. You have to watch the film, do some background reading, and make up your own mind.

Eventually, he appears before the De-Nazification Commission in 1947 and is cleared. Arnold's voiceover nevertheless expresses some satisfaction that Furtwängler is banned from ever performing in the United States. □

Picking up the pace

A promising shift: we moved beyond our slow start this week, raising £975 to bring us to a total so far of £1,490.

Individual donations from John, Dan, Bryan, and Andrew have been topped up with further support for our Ukraine speaker tour, details of which we hope to finalise very soon. To give socialists and left-wing supporters of Ukrainian self-determination the chance to hear from Ukrainian socialists will, we think, be valuable in educating the left and labour movement about Russia's imperialist war.

In the coming weeks we will be able to announce details of the meetings and events on the tour. All further donations between now and March will help us to hold more and larger events. □

• workersliberty.org/fund

PCS ON STRIKE



John Moloney

15-16 March very likely

All our initial reports are that the 1 February strike was solid. Particularly welcome was the number of picket lines. We think around 500 were in place, with some having over 60 members. Equally good was the number of rallies held in conjunction with the NEU, UCU, and other unions.

There is now an emergency National Executive Committee (NEC) on 7 February to discuss the effectiveness of 1 Feb strike and what next. We know that the NEU have called strike action for 15-16 March, and I think it very likely that the PCS would want to go out on the same days. Certainly, I believe they should.

The question is whether we can take any further all-out action in the meanwhile. If possible, I would like us to take a further one day all-out strike towards the end of February. Of course, that will have to be discussed out.

Notwithstanding that, we will continue our campaign of selective action. We have temporarily increased our subs to boost the strike fund. Whilst, with good reason, many people were nervous that this might lead to a big drop in membership, that does not appear to have happened, or at least not yet. Our membership still remains, in relative terms, at historic highs.

This means the strike fund is being topped up by many hundreds of thousands of pounds per month. Therefore, we have a great deal of flexibility around what further selective action we can take.

Whilst this is a national dispute, in reality it covers a number of employers. The main protagonist is the UK Government but the dispute covers also the Scottish and Welsh Governments as well (and hopefully more organisations in the Culture sector).

There are different political/industrial dynamics for each of these employers and the union has to be particularly sensitive to those.

That is one reason why democratic oversight of the disputes is so important. □

• John Moloney is assistant general secretary of PCS, writing here in a personal capacity

RCN staff row complicates nurses' dispute

By Zelda Spears

Members of the GMB employed by the RCN as union staff are undergoing a consultative ballot over the latest pay offer from the union.

The GMB put in a claim for 12.6%, but the RCN Executive has returned, after negotiations, with an offer far lower than that. Grades F and below (£23k to £48k, not including London weighting) are being offered 5.6%; the higher grades (paid between £60k and £138k, not including London weighting) between 4% and 2%. All grades are also offered an additional £1,200 unconsolidated payment.

The RCN has a lot of staff, many of whom earn significantly more than the average nurse. Pat Cullen, the General Secretary – who is the key decision-maker here – earns upwards of £190k.

The issue of union staff being paid

vastly more than union members isn't confined to the RCN – it's a widespread and insidious problem. It feeds into a culture of entitled union bureaucracies, populated by people who live lives very different to the members they should serve, and who have little or no stake in the outcome of disputes.

The pay offer is not the only source of unhappiness amongst staff. There is considerable unrest internally over the workload arising from the industrial action. The RCN was historically an anti-strike union, and so some staff within the union feel like the work they're expected to do to support the strikes is above and beyond what they signed up for.

It certainly is true that the RCN is making more work for staff than is necessary – or indeed, preferable. The simplest solution is to hand over control of the dispute to members. Take staff off

strike committees and picket lines – these are best run by nurses anyway, not Jim from Accounting.

The RCN GMB branch is consulting its members on two points: do they accept the pay offer? and if, no, would they be prepared to take action? At a recent GMB meeting, a small number of staff from the higher grades made bold speeches stating their intention to vote for action that would disrupt members' strike days. The suggestion is reprehensible.

Union bureaucrats undermining their members' action would be a sorry day for the trade union movement. Until the nurses get the pay rise they're fighting for, RCN staff shouldn't get theirs. Perhaps then they might be more willing to support their members taking action. First of all, though, Pat Cullen and the other overpaid RCN Senior Staff should have their pay cut.

The consultative ballot ends on 10 February. □

Workplace meetings needed to sustain strikes

By Kelly Rogers

At the time of writing, 6 February, Royal College of Nursing (RCN) members in England have been on strike in the first of two consecutive days of action, the fifth since the dispute began. England-wide reports are mostly of picket lines considerably smaller than previously.

This may be a blip – and we know that many members were "striking from home". Perhaps picket lines will have been bigger on the second day of action (7 February, as this paper was going to print).

But the setback not surprising in the context of the RCN approach to the strikes so far. The RCN is new to striking, and has relatively very few workplace reps compared to other unions. A new layer of members has volunteered to sit on strike committees and serve as picket supervisors, but in general the union is still relying heavily on the digital comms it used to win the ballot.

Members are being texted and

emailed and told to strike (or not strike, if they've been derogated) and are by and large in a passive role in the dispute. They have next to no say over the dispute or the strategy going forward. It's unsurprising, then, that they might not feel personally responsible for the strikes.

The dispute may be at a turning point. The first strikes saw members turn out in large numbers, perhaps because of the novelty. Now the key will be whether nursing staff can be convinced to keep striking and keep picketing.

Now is the time for members to organise themselves into workplace meetings to discuss RCN strategy and make plans to influence the leadership going forward. Activists, new and old, should make it their business to walk round their workplaces and build the strikes.

Hospitals are big workplaces and a dispute where activity is controlled or led by RCN staff, rather than the membership, won't have the steam to win. □

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The Tories will be "weak" only if we get stronger

By Sacha Ismail

Keir Starmer's claim at the 25 January Prime Minister's Questions that Rishi Sunak is "hopelessly weak" reflected a favourite Labour leadership theme. The problem with the Tories is supposedly that they are weak, incompetent, and so on. Their policies serve the interests of the rich at the expense of the majority? That is played down, secondary, considered a less vote-catching comment. So a strong Tory government, competently implementing its noxious agenda, would be better?

Starmer claimed that Sunak was "too weak" to deal with Nadhim Zahawi's tax evasion. Such a nonsensical idea fits well with the Labour leadership's failure to say anything about the spiralling wealth of the [super-rich](#) facilitated by the government, or advocate anything radically different from the Tories.

We also get versions of the "weak Tories" line on the left. "Weak and divided Tories shaken by 1 Feb mass strikes" declared *The Socialist* on 2 February. "Striking workers can sense that the Tories are

lashing out from a weak and vulnerable position."

We should note our enemy's weaknesses. But such bluster can also generate a false sense of imminent victory, or at least a warm glow in place of sharp-eyed militancy – preventing us from exploiting them.

The reality is that, despite the chaos and crises, despite deep unpopularity, the Tories are pushing ahead hard against the working class. They are holding the line for their class on public sector pay, refusing to budge so far. New anti-union laws, the Public Order Bill, the Rwanda plan and all the rest are being rushed through. Contrary to *The Socialist*, they are not "paralysed", but waging determined and vigorous class warfare.

The growing strike movement, whose vitality was demonstrated so impressively on 1 February, and that commands extensive wider public support, is not yet widespread, intensive or coordinated enough to beat back the Tories, to convert their weaknesses into real paralysis and retreat. Pushing for such escalation is the urgent task for socialists and labour movement activists. As the new

members flowing into unions, or parts of unions, that are striking, shows, that is the way to build up the labour movement's strength and organisation.

Our side's weakness is also political. Despite everything, the Labour Party still rests to a large extent on the support and structures of the trade union movement; and it still contains many thousands of left-wing activists. Yet under Starmer it has promised to repeal the Minimum Service Law only after some hesitation, and won't promise at all to repeal and reverse other recent Tory attacks – let alone address the damage of the last decade and a half (let alone do more).

So the labour movement should break with Labour? In fact Starmer and co. continue on this path in large part because they face so little political pressure and challenge from the unions.

The problem is not the unions being linked to the Labour Party, but of the unions refusing or failing to use the channels the union-Labour link gives to push a working-class agenda.

At the 28-29 January London Labour conference, a motion to support the strike wave and a series of pro-working class policies was defeated by just over 1% (49.4% to 50.6%). The motion would have passed easily but for choices made by the party's biggest affiliated trade union, public sector union Unison. Unison cast its vote – perhaps 15% of the conference – against and actively argued (and no doubt organised behind the scenes) against the motion. That is because people who support the Labour leadership and oppose the left still control the union's Labour Link structures.

In that fight, the second biggest affiliated union, Unite, did the right thing. But at last September's national Labour conference, the supposedly left-wing and militant Unite effectively [helped Starmer](#) avoid any serious left-wing challenge.

The unions are still doing little in the way of serious political campaigning, through the Labour structures or on the streets, for pro-working class policies (on the NHS, benefits, housing, creating jobs, council funding, and all the rest) – despite the reams of such policies passed at their conferences.

The fight against the Tories' new anti-strike law,



the Minimum Service Levels Bill, illustrates the problem.

The RMT and allied campaigns have called two lively but smallish week-night demonstrations in London. The TUC declared the 1 February strike day also a day of action to defend the right to strike, though that issue was not prominent on the picket lines and demonstrations (somewhat more so on social media). That's a step up from where we were before Christmas. But now? It's not at all clear.

The unions still have no plan for a national demonstration to stop the Minimum Service Bill, let alone anything more widespread and disruptive.

And meanwhile, the policy passed by multiple union conferences – and by TUC Congress, and indeed by Labour conference – to demand repeal of *all* anti-strike laws, not just tinkering with the most recent, is ignored. Workers' Liberty is working with others in the Free Our Unions campaign to change both these things.

We want the Tories weak. The weaknesses in their position will only become general weakness – and produce widespread victories for the working class – if the labour movement is much stronger. Escalate the strikes! Build campaigning for working-class policies! □

NHS: how to win on pay and rebuilding

By Alice Hazel

In the week of 6 February, we have had the biggest strikes in the NHS dispute so far, with RCN members in 73 Trusts, GMB ambulance workers, physiotherapists and Unison ambulance workers all coming out.

There are possibilities for escalation. Some Unison branches that did not reach the threshold are starting to push for rebalancing, and the BMA strike ballot closes on 20 February.

However, the RCN leadership has called off strike action in Wales to consult on a feeble offer. They also suspended strikes in Scotland for negotiations.

The Welsh government has offered an additional 1.5% plus 1.5% unconsolidated, on top of the current £1,400, backdated to April 2022. Pat Cullen, the RCN chief exec, made it clear she would call off strikes in England for something similar.

The Welsh offer is nowhere near inflation and

is likely to be rejected by Welsh nurses. Halting strikes for any offer, or even just for negotiations, seems to be the RCN leadership's attempt to look reasonable in order to increase pressure on Westminster. Instead the pause indicates weakness to an increasingly intransigent government.

Escalating by naming a series of UK-wide dates for all the Trusts with mandates is the way forward. Co-ordinating dates with other health unions would also step up the pressure. Escalation beyond that is possible in future by combining with Unison, to win wider mandates, and potentially with the BMA.

The strike also needs to become more political, explaining and exposing the obvious context of a collapsing NHS. The unions should call local protests and a national demonstration for the rebuilding of the NHS, with clear demands for massively increased funding paid for by taxing the rich, a reversal of fragmentation and privatisation, and an end to the market-based restructuring. □

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Solidarity

For a workers' government



By David Pendleton

The National Education Union's (NEU) first nationwide strike, on 1 February, was a success. The strike was of teacher members in England and Wales and support staff members in Wales. Hundreds of thousands of members struck.

The big majority of schools in both countries were affected, with hundreds closed and many more with only minimal provision. The strike occurred on the same day as strikes by the UCU in colleges and universities and civil servants in the PCS union. There were rallies in cities and towns across both countries, involving hundreds of thousands. The NEU had recruited over 43,000 new members since announcing the strikes. A new generation of activists is developing rapidly.

In many of the union's Districts, strike committees are being established. These com-

mittees are crucial in developing rank and file control over the dispute and allowing the new activists generated by the strike to be involved in the decision-making about the dispute as it goes forward. They should also reach out to other groups of striking workers, either through trades councils or otherwise, to discuss tactics and liaise on local initiatives.

The success of 1 February is to be followed by a rolling programme of regional strikes between 14 February and 2 March. Then there will be two more days of national strike on 15-16 March. This will include a Budget day demonstration in London on the 15th, which will be supported by other unions.

It is imperative that the pace and intensity of strike action is increased after the 16th. The Executive will meet on 25 February. It seems it will see a proposal to send an emergency

motion to NEU conference on 3-6 April about further strikes in April.

That may seem laudable in terms of democracy, but we can't afford losing tempo by a month's inaction between 15-16 March and the start of the third term in mid-April. The union must announce dates for more action before the Easter break. We must also announce a re-ballot of support staff in England.

We will not win this action jogging along with a day here and a couple of days there. In the third term we will enter the most intense period of preparation for SATs, GCSEs and A-Levels. That will make it harder to persuade members of taking action. We can and we must have those arguments. It will be easier if the union has already shown a serious commitment to winning the dispute by a big programme of action. □

The ideas that Starmer wants to ban