

Solidarity

& Workers' Liberty



For social ownership of the banks and industry

PAY: STILL TIME TO TURN THE TIDE

» **Reject**

» **Escalate**

» **Increase tempo**



Pic: Junior doctors' strike, 15 March 2023.
Caption reads: The 90's called, they want their wages back!
"Show me the money" – Jerry Maguire '96

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North Sea workers are planning jointly with environmentalists

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What are the lessons from the 15 March Budget; the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank, Signature Bank, and Credit Suisse; and the figures showing Feb-2022-to-Feb-2023 UK inflation a tad up on Jan-2022-to-Jan-2023, after three months of slight decline in those year-on-year figures?

The Tories saw some budget slack. They also felt confident to use it primarily to make a pension-schemes change for the best-off which is in fact an inheritance-tax cut. They have frozen fuel duty again and extended the subsidy to household energy providers, moves which help some working-class people but do so via helping fossil-fuel profiteers.

The government's biggest social-spending promise in the Budget was on early-years care, but it's for spending to happen after the next General Election – in other words, a promise to be kept or not by the next government, not this one.

The government has quietly licensed marginal concessions to rail workers and to health workers, and minute ones to teachers; may license some to civil service workers. But only marginal; and it's not even clear whether the overall NHS budget will be increased to cover the slight pay improvement.

The government has felt some pressure from industrial action, faltering though it has been; and pressure too from managers in those public services, anxious about recruiting and retaining staff and getting workers to cooperate. It will take sharper, bigger, faster industrial action to win anything like the pay

risers won in the private sector.

The Tories feel confident because the world-market price in the EU of natural gas has been falling since August 2022, and in February 2023 was lower than in September 2021. The "energy price guarantee" has cost them less than they feared; overall consumer spending, and thus tax revenues, seem to have stayed buoyant (many better-off people still have "savings" from lockdowns).

The increases in official interest rates (US, from 0.25% in March 2022 to 5% today; ECB, from 0% in July 2022 to 3.5% today; UK, from 0.1% in December 2021 to 4.25% today), and "Quantitative Tightening" have aimed to slowing inflation. (QT is central banks selling off bonds they bought in "Quantitative Easing", thus sucking cash out of circulation: the Bank of England has ventured into it since February 2022, the US Fed since June 2022).

How far those policies were going to achieve their aims was always doubtful. In the early 1980s high official interest rates in the US and UK damped inflation – but only very high interest rates, sustained for years, and via the channel of deepening slumps, i.e. reduced demand on markets.

Inflation has abated in the EU since October 2022 and in the USA since June 2022. Lower gas prices and the clearing of some blockages in world supply chains suggest inflation will decline over 2023-4. How much so is another matter.

The Tories and other governments see it as a victory that almost everywhere they have kept wage rises below price rises. Up to a point they are right that this will tend to slow inflation. If revenue is shifted from wages to profits, then less of it gets spent, and so de-

mand pressures for higher prices ease off.

Since workers can't control inflation anyway, we should not defer to that calculation by holding back on wages. Lower inflation, but with wages falling behind, is worse than higher inflation with wages keeping up. Longer term, the effect of the Tories' wage squeeze is to shift the balance towards profits and away from wages.

Public sector spending remains relatively high despite wage suppression because of high spending on government IOUs (bonds, some of which in the UK yield payouts to bondholders increasing in line with RPI), and on the subsidies to energy providers.

The governments have all kept official interest rates and QT modest, aiming at a mild slowdown to ease inflation, a "soft landing", rather than a full-scale crash. So far they have succeeded. Unemployment remains relatively low by post-1980 standards in the EU, the US, and the UK.

But do the bank failures show a crunch coming?

Credit Suisse's collapse is complicated, but the issues with Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank seem simpler and more generalisable.

Banks take deposits (your monthly pay, a corporation's daily revenues). They make their profits (and increase cash circulation in the economy) by holding only a fraction of the deposited money and lending out the rest at interest. If depositors rush to get their money back, it is always "not there".

Bank hold US Treasury bonds as assets yielding interest (unlike cash), but relatively safe. You can be sure that a \$1,000 US Treasury bond, at whatever coupon (interest) rate, repayable in ten years will get you exactly \$1,000 when

the ten years expire. But that doesn't mean that you can get \$1,000 by selling that bond today, when the US Treasury is selling new bonds at a higher coupon rate. So some bank assets are especially "not there".

Bank regulation is supposed to control such risks. But banks always throw up new financial tricks to get round new regulations. On the eve of the 2008 crash, financial experts were priding themselves on having evolved the best and neatest system of bank regulation ever.

As Brooke Masters comments in the *Financial Times* (23 March), "benign financial conditions made it possible to believe that changes [since 2008-9]... had made banks safer if not actually nicer or culturally improved."

"Now we know better".

And as Megan Greene puts it, also in the *Financial Times*, "global banking is now inside Schrödinger's box [a thought-experiment box inside which, depending on quantum effects, a cat is alive or dead, but we cannot know until the box is opened]... We can't know if the past week was a series of idiosyncratic, containable issues or the start of a 2008-style banking crisis... We shouldn't assume the cat is dead and a banking crisis is upon us, but we will keep hitting pockets of market dislocation as central banks continue to withdraw liquidity [cash availability]".

The case for public ownership of high finance under democratic control needs to be restored to the prominence it briefly had after 2008. And workers should have no confidence in official forecasts of smooth paths to low inflation and better social provision. Class struggle is the way to win improvements. □

Children, capitalism, and communism



By Martin Thomas

A string of reports on soaring mental illness among teenagers (and of increasing suicides, confirming there is more to it than just increased reporting of trouble). A spate of revolts by school students in England, mainly against uniform and toilet rules.

The advance of technology and capital's increasing demand for a generally-educated workforce has brought

some advances for children and teenagers. In the broad sweep of history, it's not so long since, even in richer capitalist countries, children mostly had pretty much no space to themselves at home, and socialised mainly on the street (or in London, and I guess other cities, on bombsites). It's only a bit longer since many attended little or no school and entered wage-work around the age of nine.

Schooling is more widespread. More children get to nurseries and kindergartens. In 1965 London shut down a secondary school because the teachers refused to hit the students. Now corporal pun-

ishment has been illegal in schools in England and Wales since 1998, and many countries have laws against parents hitting children.

Engels

Yet the programme sketched by Engels in *Principles of Communism* (1847) remains relevant: "communist society... educates children on a communal basis, and... removes the dependence... of the children on the parents".

Contemporary capitalism coops children and teenagers, more than ever in human history, into small "nuclear families". In England especially, but in other countries too, it im-

poses punitive and bossy discipline (elaborate and costly uniforms, silent movement, little liberty even in break times) on school students. Teenagers are habitually accorded less respect and dignity in school than people of their age were (and are) by capitalist employers.

As a result, children and teenagers socialise less than previous generations, and have less real autonomy. Cooped up in small family units, rather than growing up in more flexible, larger communities and households, they inevitably bear the brunt of even better-off parents' spates of material poverty, mental ill-

health, frustration, anxiety, and discord. Socialists have never objected to education preparing young people for work. But today (and again, England is especially bad) education is geared heavily to jobs where work is like sitting at a desk doing an exam.

Teenagers more apt at hands-on, collaborative, productive activity get labelled as "failures" by the school system.

"Abolish the family", wrote Marx in the *Communist Manifesto*. It was a flourish: he didn't mean a law banning "nuclear family" households, but social upbringing and more autonomy for children and teenagers. □



Pay: still time to turn the tide

By Ollie Moore

Despite the votes to accept poor offers on Network Rail and by RCN in NHS Scotland, and despite the suspension of strikes on Train Operating Companies, there is still potential to remobilise and turn the tide. But workers need independent rank-and-file organisation to develop alternative strategies in disputes.

RCN (Royal College of Nursing) in Scotland has announced that among its members in Scotland, 53.3% voted to accept the offer, 46.6% voted to reject, on a turnout of just over 50%. The offer is a 6.5% rise in 2023-4 (or for some, fractionally more) for all staff up to and inclusive of Band 8a, plus a one-off pro rata payment of between £387 and £939. Among Royal College of Midwives members, 44% voted, and 69% to accept. In England, the offer for NHS workers, still to be voted on, is 5% for 2023-4 and a one-off payment for 2022-23 of between £1,655 and £3,789.

On Network Rail, 15,756 workers, out of a possible 18,302, voted, with 12,047 to accept, and 3,709 to reject – a 76% majority. The headline figure for pay was 14.4% for the lowest paid grades to 9.2% for the highest paid – but over two years. The deal gives a guarantee of no compulsory redundancies until 2025, but only until 2025, and voluntary redundancies are still redundancies.

In other areas of the strike wave, there is still potential to remobilise and

turn the tide. The *Guardian* newspaper has given front-page coverage to the campaign by [NHS Workers Say No](#), a cross-union network of health worker activists, to mobilise for rejection of the government's pay offer. Acceptance of that offer, well below current rates of inflation and doing nothing to address years of falling real-terms pay, would represent a deeply unsatisfactory outcome for the thousands of NHS workers who have struck.

The coverage given to NHS Workers Say No's campaign is a testament to what can be done even starting with few resources. There is a real possibility that the offer will be rejected by at least some NHS unions.

In health as elsewhere advocates of rejection must also be advocates of alternative strategies for action. As significant as strikes in the NHS have been, merely resuming them at their previous pace is unlikely to force major concessions, and besides that pace has been lost for a while. A vote to reject unsatisfactory offers must be linked to a push to escalate strikes.

Escalation can take different forms. But whatever particular tactical formulas are developed in a given sector, significant escalation implies a foundation of more frequent and more sustained all-out strikes, with as many workers as possible striking together. Junior doctors in the BMA and HCSA show a better, clearer strategy: their initial strike, from 13-15 March, is now being followed up with a four-day strike

from 11-14 April. The thought is simple: if your initial action does not win, the next strike must follow swiftly, and be longer. Winning other unions to strategies for escalation requires networks like NHS Workers Say No deepening and consolidating their organisation.

Unlike strike waves in the 1970s and 1980s, the current wave is notable for an almost total lack of any independent rank-and-file organisation. In some unions and sectors there are networks that could, with effort, develop in that direction – but few, as yet, have undergone such developments. Organisations capable of developing alternative strategies and mobilising workers to assert them within union structures are need to get from votes to reject poor offers to positive action to win better.

In RMT, London Underground workers and mainline Train Operating Company (TOC) workers returned to striking recently after a pause of several months – although RMT has now suspended the next round of planned strikes on TOCs, due for 30 March and 1 April. Drivers' union Aslef joined RMT on strike on the Tube for the first time since 2016. Tube workers' strikes continue to shut down the service on strike days themselves, but, at their current pace, remain unlikely to force movement from the employer. Indeed, in the days following the Tube strike, Transport for London has announced it is pressing ahead with pension reform, and intends to transfer its staff pension into the Local Government Pension Scheme, which has much worse terms than TfL's existing scheme.

The offer RMT members on Network Rail voted to accept marginally improves on previous ones by guaranteeing workers a greater amount of back-pay, and drops the demand made in previous offers that the union accept Network Rail's plans for "modernisation" (i.e., job cuts) as a condition of any pay increase. That last concession, however, is seen by many as somewhat notional, given Network Rail has already begun to impose elements of "modernisation". There, too, the lack of any rank-and-file network that could offer a persuasive strategy for intensifying action means that even some workers minded to reject the deal may vote to accept on the basis that some, even minor, concessions are preferable to an attritional deadlock.

Conflict in the University and College Union over the direction of its dispute in universities also highlights the need for organisations that can provide a counterweight to the power of unions' bureaucratic officialdom. Such organ-

isations also need programmes for sweeping democratic reform of the unions.

In health, higher education, and other sectors, many of those negotiating on behalf of workers are appointed officials on union staff, rather than elected representatives. Some have never worked in the industries whose workers they are now "representing". Many are paid salaries far bigger than those of the workers whose pay and conditions they negotiate.

There are major challenges in many disputes. Some may be reaching their conclusion. But socialists should be the last people in the labour movement to declare the strike wave "over", or to spread the disempowering idea that unsatisfactory outcomes were an inevitability. We can contribute most to helping disputes win – and, where they do end in poor compromises, to learning the lessons for future battles – by focusing our efforts on developing rank-and-file independence and organisation.

Rank-and-file networks are no magic bullet. Union members are not always incipiently militant, with their innate will to strike blocked only by a capitulatory bureaucracy. Winning unions to strategies for escalation is not only a matter of developing and advocating them, or of winning votes on union committees, but of persuading workers that such strategies are worth trying.

In a labour movement where there has been little sustained struggle for a generation, that may be the hardest task of all. But for that, especially, networks that can mobilise and empower activists to do that work of persuasion in their own workplaces and union branches are sorely needed. □

Strikes

31 March-9 April: Heathrow Airport security guards (Unite) strike

Until 3 April: Discontinuous strikes by workers at drinks manufacturer Diageo's plant in Leven, Scotland (Unite)

3-7 April: National Traffic Operations Centre workers (PCS) strike

3-16 April: British Library workers (PCS) strike

3 April-6 May: Passport office workers (PCS) strike

5-28 April: Rolling regional strikes by DVSA workers (PCS)

6-12 April: British Museum workers (PCS) strike

7-10 April: IFS Cloud Cable car maintenance workers (RMT) strike

11-14 April: Junior doctors (BMA and HCSA) strike

27 April: Teachers in England (NEU) strike (probably)

28 April: Cross-civil-service strike (PCS)

2 May: Teachers in England (NEU) strike (probably)

Until 4 May: Serco workers at Devonport naval dockyard (Unite) strike every weekend, and every weekday evening

Ballots

Until 5 May: Junior doctors in Scotland (BMA) ballot for industrial action over pay

Until 31 March: University workers (UCU) re-ballot to renew mandate for industrial action over pay and conditions

Until 9 May: Civil servants (PCS) re-ballot to renew mandate for industrial action over pay and conditions

23 May to 4 July: Local government workers (Unison) ballot for action over pay and conditions □

"Revenge policing" protest in Bristol

By Misha Zubrowski

Around 200 protested in Bristol on the second anniversary of a 21 March 2021 march of many thousands against the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, which was followed by violent policing and a "riot". Over 70 arrests, and those prosecuted have between them since received over 100 years in [jail](#) total. The Bill has passed, amended, and the Tories are attempting to pass [even more](#) restrictions. Solidarity with political prisoners! Repeal all anti-protest and anti-strike laws! □

Nick Wright, Qatar, and “mal-information”



Antidoto

By Jim Denham

The so-called Qatargate scandal, involving corruption and influence-buying by Qatar and Morocco in the European Parliament has led to the arrest of several MEPs, an NGO secretary general and a union bureaucrat on charges of corruption, money-laundering and “participation in a criminal organisation”.

The *Morning Star* has carried two lengthy reports by Communist Party of Britain member Nick Wright (who, being based in Italy, seems to be the paper’s de facto Europe correspondent), going into often fascinating detail about the inner workings of the Socialists and Democrats (S&D), the group to which the implicated MEPs belonged. Nothing wrong with that: Wright’s reports appear to be well informed and – unlike a lot of *Morning Star* articles – factually accurate.

What Wright (fanatically anti-EU, even by the standards of the CPB and *Morning Star*) hasn’t pointed out, however, is that the Greek party Pasok (the main S&D group member implicated) and

the European Parliament itself seem to have acted with relative transparency and speed to co-operate with the police and remove the accused MEPs even before the police investigation is complete. Limited but real anti-corruption reforms are now under consideration. This compares favourably with the evasion and prevarication that still surrounds the multi-billion pounds worth of dodgy “VIP lane” PPE equipment and Test and Trace contracts handed out to friends and supporters of the Johnson government.

Similarly, Wright’s articles have shone an entirely justified light upon the involvement of the leader of the International Trade Union Confederation, Luca Visentini, who has admitted to accepting €50,000 from one of the suspects in the scandal. Visentini’s quite astonishing “defence” is that he used the money to fund his campaign to become ITUC leader! Again, Wright’s coverage is informative and seems to be accurate.

Even before the Visentini scandal, there was much to criticise and even condemn the ITUC over: as Eric Lee explained in *Solidarity* 658 and 596, it has a shameful record on the subject of migrant workers’ rights in Qatar and even praised the re-

gime for supposed “progress” being made there. This amounted to a betrayal of some of the most vulnerable and highly-exploited workers in the world.

As Eric pointed out, the ITUC’s fundamental problem is structural: it is a confederation of national trade union centres (including the British TUC and the American AFL-CIO) that on paper represents hundreds of millions of workers, but in reality is a remote, unaccountable, totally bureaucratic entity.

But Wright doesn’t criticise the ITUC for any of that: he denounces it as “the successor to the cold war-era International Confederation of Free Trade Unions set up in 1949 after a US-intelligence funded schism – aided by our very own TUC – split the World Federation of Trade Unions.” Wright clearly prefers the remnants of “the original WFTU”, which

he describes as rejecting the ITUC’s “notions of social partnership”. That is only true in the sense that state control of a supposed “trade union” isn’t quite the same thing as social partnership: the WFTU includes, alongside some genuine unions like the RMT and South Africa’s COSATU, such regime-controlled outfits as the Syrian General Federation of Trade Unions, the Workers’ Central Union of Cuba, the Workers’ House of Iran, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, and the General Federation of Trade Unions of [North] Korea.

I recently came across the concept of “mal-information”, defined as “information that is not false, but strategically used with intent to harm an individual, organisation or nation”. I’d say that Nick Wright’s coverage of the Qatargate scandal and the ITUC pretty much meets that definition. □

Far right demos outnumbered

By Harry Sheeran

Far-right attempts to mobilise on 26-27 March came up against significant numbers of antifascists.

South London saw astroturfed American import, Turning Point UK, try to stop Drag Queen Story Hour at the Honor Oak pub. They attracted more demonstrators than their last attempt but were still outnumbered.

In Manchester, James Harvey of “Students Against Tyranny” and “Voice of Wales”, was heavily outnumbered as his attempt to organise against the “Marxist University”. A demo in Wakefield, where war right demonstrators were going to burn the Quran, fared similarly. Patriotic Alternative attempted to hold a demo in Llanwit Major against a proposed plan to house Ukrainian refugees in the town. They succeeded only in being outnumbered 20:1, being harassed by anti-fascists as the police escorted them back to the train station in a kettle, and having their Welsh regional organiser publicly identified by an anti-fascist research collective.

27 March saw the far right in Newquay outnumbered by antifascists, and Patriotic Alternative in Erskine, Scotland, too. Posie Parker’s anti-trans London demo, in her absence, also saw her acolytes outnumbered. □



Cartoon by @gewman

The Met: it's not just shape and size

By Carrie Evans

Baroness Casey's review of the behaviour and culture of the Met Police (21 March) did not mince words, unequivocally branding the Met institutionally racist, misogynistic and homophobic.

Women in the Met claimed they were branded "trouble makers" for reporting sexual assault. One was even forced to patrol with her attacker. Other sections highlight how a Muslim officer found bacon in his shoes, a Sikh officer had his beard cut off, and a gay officer would purposely take the scenic route home for fear of running into his own unit while off duty.

The report also outlines a much wider problem with the Met than bullying and harassment in the workplace. It outlines fundamental failings in the Met's sup-

posed duty to "keep London safe".

Casey concludes that the use of stop and search is out of control and black Londoners are "under-protected and over-policed". The report also includes a detective being quoted as saying "You might as well say it, rape is legal", in reference to how little the Met do to stop violence against women.

This report is not by a long shot the first publicly to condemn the Met. In the aftermath of the murder of Stephen Lawrence the Macpherson report famously labelled the Met institutionally racist. This is, however, the first time a mainstream report has gone so far as to suggest the Met needs to be broken up because it's too big to govern.

I'm yet to be convinced breaking it up will actually do any good. People talk about local policing as if it's somehow inherently better and less violent, but

that isn't guaranteed. In fact, I can easily foresee a situation where geographically smaller forces with more time on their hands can act more brutally.

Quibbling about the shape and size of the Met misses the point that it can never protect the average Londoner because it was never designed to do that. From its very formation the modern police force was designed to protect private property, uphold existing power structures, quell rebellions and oppress anyone who had a stake in overthrowing the status quo.

Contrary to popular belief Robert Peel didn't just dream up the Met. He developed modern policing in the colonies, especially Ireland, India and Jamaica. It ended up being such an effective way to deal with dissent there that it was transported back to England to deal with the new unruly, urbanised

working class. There are suggestions in the report, such as the continuous vetting of officers, that I agree with, but socialists should not let fuss around this report distract from our primary message.

No amount of fiddling could ever transform the police into a friend or saviour of the working class. □

Listen and learn from workers



Letter

Ollie Moore (*Solidarity* 666; longer version on web, shorter in print) seems to have learned nothing from the recent firefighters' pay dispute. On 6 March, FBU members voted overwhelmingly by 96% on an 84% turnout to accept the offer, yet Moore still claims they were wrong and should have rejected it.

Moore barely discusses the specifics of the firefighters' pay offer, which included 7% for 2022-23. Nobody disputes that this is less than current inflation. CPI was 10% in the last 12 months; CPIH was 8.8%. But most firefighters also got increased Continual Professional Development and other allowances. Most in London and Greater Manchester will not lose much at all in real terms.

Moore also ignores the rest of the pay offer, including the 5% for 2023-24 and the other commitments made by employers to discuss other pay issues for retained, control, pay progression and broadening the role. These could lead to further pay rises for firefighters, through collective bargaining.

Moore evades the strategic question facing firefighters: the prospects for getting any more. The FBU assessed that no more money was likely, even with strikes. Firefighters have not had to strike. Moore ignores the considerable dialogue between the FBU leadership and its members. These calculations mattered to firefighters considering whether to accept or reject. They should matter to socialist assessments too.

Moore criticises the FBU executive council for not putting a figure on their pay demand. Actually they did in

their original claim. However this dispute was principally about inflation, which was rising through 2022. Often the left argues for a flat rate, not a percentage, but that's more difficult when inflation is the immediate problem. These are tactical questions for negotiations. To insist on a definite figure in all circumstances is paint-by-numbers syndicalism, not Marxist politics.

Moore says "without demands, disputes inevitably become reactive rather than assertive". But these pay disputes are mostly defensive. They are primarily about maintaining living standards in a period of high inflation and lower pay offers. To pretend they are offensive actions is to misread the situation.

Moore is wrong to claim that I dismiss the wider context. Actually, I gave a sanguine, sober assessment of what has been achieved so far in other sectors. The real-

ity is, sadly – little progress.

Moore says "each of the current industrial disputes is substantially bound up with the fate of the others." This is not true. Different sectors have fought separately, on different timetables, with little coordination and no talk of general strikes. To tie the disputes together so closely is to misrepresent reality. Moore issues a belated, rhetorical "appeal" to firefighters to "join us", knowing full well no such appeal was made or even discussed.

Moore's "reject" position had very little purchase with FBU members. Better for socialists to learn to listen before jumping to conclusions that fail to resonate among workers. When socialists get it so wrong, perhaps some modest reflection would be preferable to literary denunciation. □

Jack Horner,
London

Remembering Eden Knight

By Angela Driver

On 24 March about 200 people, mostly young Saudi trans, non-binary, and queer people, protested outside the Saudi Arabian Embassy in London about the treatment of a 23 year old trans woman called Eden knight.

Eden Knight died by suicide on or around 12 March. In her final tweet, she explained that she had been living in America when she met "fixers" who co-

erced and tricked her into returning to Saudi Arabia. She later found out they had been paid by her parents.

Once home she was forced to detransition. She felt life was not worth living in these circumstances and killed herself.

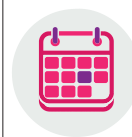
A lot of the speeches at the protest were in Arabic. Trans flags, and Rainbow flags were flown, while the flag of Saudi Arabia (which features words from the Quran) was trampled on.

Some of those attending had de-

clared themselves atheists. Others were Muslim, but explained that transphobia is against their religion.

Social media posts featuring the demonstration have since attracted many comments calling for the death penalty for trans people. In Saudi Arabia LGBTQI+ people are often flogged and even executed.

Many of the demonstrators covered their faces, not due to their religion, but because, as they explained, they fear retribution even in the UK. □



Activist Agenda

The Fire Brigades Union has [called](#) for the TUC to organise a national demonstration and hold a special TUC Congress to discuss how to stop the "Minimum Service" law (or, if it has passed, how to defeat it through "mass non-cooperation and non-compliance").

This is a good move, but leaves some questions open.

The [Free Our Unions](#) website says: "shouldn't we also call on the FBU to initiate the organisation of a demonstration itself" (i.e. not wait for the TUC)? "And if there is no special TUC Congress, will the FBU initiate a labour movement conference?"

Also: unions can and should refuse to cooperate in defining "Minimum Service" levels, but will then face injunctions against industrial action unless they comply with the levels defined without their cooperation. How to fight those injunctions?

The Labour Movement Solidarity with Hong Kong campaign has called for a new umbrella campaign in solidarity with the oppressed peoples and workers of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet & the Uyghur Region.

An inaugural conference is planned this summer in London. Co-sponsors so far are: Power to Hongkongers; Red Roots Collective; Peter Tatchell Foundation; Democracy for Hong Kong; Left Chinese Student Association; Uyghur Solidarity Campaign (UK). Contact: WorkersSolidarityAgainstCCP@protonmail.com. Draft platform: bit.ly/china-call.

Most of the General Secretaries of big unions other than Christine McAnea of Unison, Paddy Lillis of Usdaw, Patrick Roach of Nasuwt, Dave Ward of the CWU have signed a [statement](#) initiated by the Fire Brigades Union to "send our solidarity to... groups fighting for refugee rights... support the call for safe and legal routes into the UK... call on workers and trade union members to show their solidarity and to mobilise against the far right". □

• Links for campaigns and motions at workersliberty.org/agenda □

A workers' plan to shut down oilfields



Environment

By Stuart Jordan

North Sea oil workers have done something that no government or fossil fuel company has even attempted: they have devised a plan for shutting down the oil fields and transitioning to renewable energy.

The *Our Power* report has emerged from a coalition of environmental groups and trade unions working closely with offshore workers. The plan involves investment in retraining and infrastructure so that oil rigs can be decommissioned in the UK and we can build the wind and marine energy we need for the future.

The collaboration between workers and environmentalists started with a survey organised by environmentalist groups Platform, Friends of the Earth Scotland, and Greenpeace UK in 2020. This survey got an overwhelming response from offshore workers and led to the 2020 report *Offshore: Oil and Gas Workers' Views on Industry Conditions and the Energy Transition*.

Solidarity 668 on 12 April

Because of difficulties in distribution caused by the Easter holiday, *Solidarity* will skip a week on 5 April, and no.668 will be 12 April. We had to skip a week on 22 March, because of so many of our paper team being off sick, but we'll be back to the usual schedule soon. □

Offshore workers have to pay thousands of pounds for their own training, including safety critical training, and there is a whole marketplace of for-profit training providers who game the system. Workers wanted standardised training across the sector to allow them to transfer their skills into offshore renewable energy.

The 2020 report led to a joint campaign for an Offshore Training Passport that would allow workers to switch from the fossil fuel industry to wind energy. Through joint campaigning on this issue, environmentalists built the relationships with offshore workers necessary for developing the fuller plan for just transition. In the *Our Power* report the training demand is expanded to include three years' protected income and free training to allow workers clear pathways out of high carbon jobs.

Throughout the *Our Power* report workers describe how the relentless pursuit of profit frustrates a rational transition to clean energy and erodes basic workers rights and safety standards. In 2016 the Gross Value Added per oil or gas worker was calculated at £229,807, but very little of that wealth ends up in the pockets of workers or their communities.

Many workers are precariously employed with bullshit self-employed status. Workers who raise concerns are easily fired, undermining an effective safety culture. The sector is heavily dependent on hyper-exploited migrant workers living on as little as £4.80 an hour and working four to six months at sea without seeing family or friends. Such "wild west" employment practices are being recreated in the offshore wind energy sector.

To fix these problems, workers are demanding a universal rights and wages floor across the UK Continental

Shelf regardless of nationality, effective union-enforced grievance and whistleblowing policies, and public ownership.

The UK's privatised ports are inadequate for the energy transition. Chronic underinvestment means that there is insufficiently large plant to decommission oil rigs or manufacture and process wind turbine platforms, towers, blades and nacelles. Despite the fact the UK has one of the highest levels of offshore wind in the world and plans for massive expansion, it has failed to develop an associated industrial base.

The Tory plans for low regulation "free ports" will further prevent necessary investment. The report details how "new and larger quays, extra laydown space, and the ability to lift larger weights" could allow the UK to produce 80% of its offshore wind turbines and decommission and recycle old oil and gas infrastructure. Public ownership could also allow more ambitious projects like floating offshore wind and tidal power.

Workers are demanding public ownership of wind energy and heavy taxation on fossil fuel companies. At the moment, instead of oil and gas wealth being redistributed to workers and their communities, taxpayers augment the bumper profits of fossil capital with generous subsidies. Between 2015 and 2020 large oil and gas companies re-

ceived £3.2 billion taxpayers' money.

The Energy Price Guarantee and Energy Bill Relief Scheme could gift North Sea gas and oil companies over £7 billion in the next six months. Rishi Sunak's windfall tax contains a loophole that means for that every £100 invested in expanding North Sea fossil fuel extraction, companies will have to pay just £8.75, with the remaining £91.25 being paid by the public.

Frequent comparisons are also made to Norway, where oil wealth was kept in public ownership. Norway now has sovereign wealth fund worth over \$1 trillion, funding much of its health and education. The UK has extracted more gas and oil but has no equivalent: the revenue has flowed to private shareholders.

The *Our Power* report is the first major workers' plan for the ecological crisis. The idea of just transition was pioneered by US trade union leader Tony Mazzochi of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union in the 1990s. Workers' Liberty activists and our allies within Workers' Climate Action were energetic in popularising the idea within the Climate Camp movement in the late 2000s.

It is a major step forward that mainstream environmentalist NGOs are adopting this approach and that workers are keen to engage with them. □



Women's Fightback 28

Women's Fightback is a socialist feminist magazine by Workers' Liberty. Issue 28 includes articles on NHS, Iranian uprisings, China and the Feminist Five, Ukraine, one year on, 'Rebel Rebel' review, the family, Flora Tristan and much more. □

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Abolish benefit sanctions!



Women's Fightback

By Katy Dollar

Jeremy Hunt has changed the benefits system for lead parents, most of whom are women.

Hundreds of thousands of parents who rely on Universal Credit will be discouraged from providing day-to-day care for their children. The changes affect 800,000 parents or carers. About 300,000 people with young children

will face a greater risk of sanction (having benefits docked), according to estimates from the Work Foundation.

The government says it could dock benefits unless parents:

- Are available for work up to 30 hours a week once their youngest child turns three, up from the current requirement of 16 hours.
- Meet with a job coach every three months – up from every six months – once their child turns one. Parents of two-year-olds will have to attend coaching monthly.
- Seek employment if their partner is in paid work but

their wages are topped up with Universal Credit. These individuals previously had no obligation to work.

The measures are being introduced as the government faces labour shortages caused by Brexit, low wages and NHS delays.

The changes, according to the Department for Work and Pensions, are designed to "align" benefits with Hunt's early childcare offering, which will result in those on Universal Credit being able to reclaim more childcare costs and have their claims paid upfront. Parents who fail to meet the requirements will face the

prospect of benefit sanctions. Latest figures show 422,000 individuals across the UK received a sanction in the year to October 2022. The average penalty was about £660.

This month the Department for Work and Pensions has been ordered to release research into sanctions are effective in getting people to take a job or work more hours. The internal DWP study was commissioned in 2019 after a cross party committee of MPs concluded that while there was no evidence benefit sanctions increased numbers in work, they did have a negative effect on claimants' health and finances.

Parents eligible for help through Universal Credit will now be given childcare funding upfront. There will also be increased childcare hours possible to claim, increasing over time. The extra help for childcare costs comes after an outcry from local government amid concerns that only 13% of parents are claiming the level of support they are entitled to receive.

The labour movement must demand adequate benefits and well-paid flexible work for parents. Sanctions are a cruel ineffective policy which should be abolished. □

Trump: Too big to jail?

By Tom Harrison

Orson Welles said he was discouraged from standing for senator because he was divorced. The great American public would deem that marital status as signifying immoral character. Welles chose not to stand and voters in Wisconsin ended up sending one Joseph McCarthy to Washington.

The appearance of moral probity was thought a necessary attribute for a successful political career and hypocritical transgressions were thus kept firmly behind closed doors. The saintly J F Kennedy, a serial womaniser, had fixers who prevented details of his sexual-harassing behaviour leaking to the media.

It was different for Democrat presidential hopeful Gary Hart: details of a secret lover sank his campaign. Then we had the spectacle of Bill Clinton impeached not for soliciting help from a foreign power or calling for the violent overthrow of an election result, but for lying about having an extra-marital affair.

Rules regarding upright moral character certainly don't matter for Donald Trump and certainly haven't stopped him being overwhelmingly backed by the holier than thou evangelical community. Trump is the ultimate misogynistic sleazebag, yet the Access Hollywood tape where he bragged about sexually assaulting women didn't prevent him getting elected in 2016.

He may now face his first-ever criminal indictment over a hush money payment made to adult movie star Stormy Daniels. She claims she had an affair

with Trump in 2006, which he denies ever happened. The denial is accompanied by slights about Daniels' appearance, as with the old insult "she's not my type" which he's levelled against E Jean Carroll, who alleges she was raped by him.

Evidence on all the possible criminal charges lined up against Trump are very much in plain sight. The incitement to riot, the stolen classified document finds, the phone calls to Georgia election officials, the hush payments made by his former lawyer, Michael Cohen. It has been suggested that the indictment over the Stormy Daniels case is coming first because it is the least "political".

None of that has stopped Trump and his cronies denouncing any prosecution as a "witch-hunt", slurring the prosecutors involved and stirring up "the base" towards violence.

Trump has upped the rhetoric on his ironically named Truth Social media platform, warning of "potential death & destruction" should anyone dare prosecute him. He has called Afro-American heritage Manhattan DA Alvin Bragg an "animal", and others in Trump's circle have compounded the anti-black racism with anti semitism.

False claims that Bragg received a million dollars from George Soros as his Jewish "master" further demonstrate that toxic white supremacy



flows through the veins of the modern Republican Party.

The US Federal government continues to face its biggest threat since the Civil War. The 6 January attack on the Capitol should have been a Fort Sumter moment, leading to decisive action against the organisers of the anti democratic conspiracy. However, those ringleaders still walk free. Only the small fry ended up behind

bars (and are now being hailed by the likes of Marjorie Taylor Greene as "political prisoners").

Never missing an opportunity to grift his followers, Trump spread rumours of his impending arrest and duly raised \$1.5 million in three days. That sum practically matched the amount his New York real estate business was fined for tax evasion last January. Playing the victimhood card is a cash cow which keeps on giving. He also relishes the prospect of doing a "perp walk" in handcuffs, should he ever actually get arrested.

As well as egging on his supporters to violence once more, Trump's antics have served another purpose. He has forced virtually all leading Republicans to come out in support. Ron DeSantis, once mooted as a serious challenger for the Presidential nomination, seems to be falling by the wayside, putting Trump on course for a rematch with Biden in 2024.

Those who think it good for Trump to be a candidate again because he is "bound to lose" are engaged in very foolish wishful thinking. The 2024 race will be highly contested, with some polls showing Trump running neck and neck with Biden even before factoring in behind-the-scenes shenanigans in various states plus established biases to fix the Electoral College despite what the popular vote may show.

Prosecuting and jailing Trump in the current climate would take a lot of courage. Prosecutors, judges and even jury members would be under threat of violence against them and members of their families. Postponing or scrapping those prosecutions though, will only delay the inevitable showdown against the Trumpist far right.

The American left and the labour movement cannot rely on the state to take action against Trump and his far right and fascist backers. Grass roots organisations for the defence of democratic rights are necessary. as is the formation of a party which truly represents the interests of the American working class. □



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

Harvard's academic helots organise

By Lewis Joyes

Following a near-five year effort to build a campaign, recruit organisers, seek national union affiliation, and build sufficient levels of initial support, the Harvard Academic Workers union ([HAW](https://haw-union.org)) launched on 6 February 2023.

HAW is a union for "non-tenure track" staff, including all university teaching and research staff without permanent academic jobs, which at Harvard encompasses around 6,000 staff (lecturers, "post-docs", instructors and "preceptors"). Such is the state of higher education, the bulk of the research and teaching often rests on these most cas-

ually employed/contracted workers, who often work on contracts lasting no longer than a few years.

HAW's initial campaign is focused on winning a majority of those 6,000 workers over, by getting more than 50% to sign union supporter cards. With at least a 50%+1 majority, the union can then petition Harvard to recognise HAW as an official bargaining unit, or (more likely if Harvard say no) challenge them to do so via a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) election (whereby the NLRB would ballot all staff eligible to endorse/not HAW, in which 50%+1 in support of its formation would legally mandate Harvard to recognise

HAW). The reaction from Harvard thus far has been muted. But the experience of other non-tenure track academic unions suggests that hurdles will emerge as soon as the union demands its recognition.

Harvard is the richest university on the planet, with an endowment of over \$50 billion (a sum roughly half the annual budget of the NHS).

Tricks

So whilst the case for winning a union should be easily won amongst staff (in no universe can Harvard claim HAW demands "unaffordable"), Harvard has enough money to pull off every union-busting trick money can buy. Evidently win-

ning union recognition is not an impossible task; if successful HAW will be the third union on campus, alongside the Harvard Grad Student Workers Union (HGSWU-UAW) and the Clerical and Technical Workers union (HUCTW).

Obscure labor laws in the US mean that union amalgamations for staff on different contracts is legally difficult, hence the formation of a new unit, instead of merging with either of those pre-existing unions.

There is swelling of support and militancy on US university campus unions more widely (led mostly by UAW-affiliated unions) with grad student workers (who share many of the same workload burdens

as non-tenured academics) striking for better wages and conditions, prominently in places such as Columbia University (New York) and across [California](https://bit.ly/shop-wl). Both of those have shown that whilst it is first necessary to win union recognition, recognition alone won't guarantee an end to rampant casualisation, low-pay and enormous pay disparities. HAW will need to next learn the lessons of those struggles if it wants to win its campaign, and then bring about the end of gross exploitation of Harvard's non-tenured academic workers. □

• Abridged. More: bit.ly/haw-o

Iran: schoolgirls under attack

By Dan Katz

According to the US news station, NBC, 2,000 Iranian schoolgirls have reported symptoms of poisoning. One member of Iran's parliament suggests that the numbers may be far higher, and that 5,000 girls have been poisoned.

800 girls from 58 schools across ten provinces have been hospitalised.

Alireza Monadi, head of parliament's education committee, has admitted that schools have been deliberately attacked and that 30 toxicologists in the Health Ministry believe the toxins are nitrogen gas.

Girls have reported strange smells (chlorine or cleaning agents, or tangerines) in their classrooms and feelings of nausea, headaches, coughing, breathing difficulties, heart palpitations, and pain in their hands or legs.

The first cases came from the religious city of Qom, in November, at the height of the wave of street protests following the police murder, on 16 September, of Mahsa Jina Amini, a young Kurdish woman who was arrested for breaking Iran's strict dress codes for women. 18 girls were treated in hospital after the release of a "poisonous gas" at the Noor Yazdanshahr Conservatory.

Over 500 protesters, including 71 children, have been killed by the state since Jina's murder. Human rights groups estimate 20,000 people have been jailed and at least four executed. The Norway-based Iran Human Rights group said in early February that at least 100 detained protesters face possible death sentences. On 16 March Amnesty International issued a statement accusing Iran's security forces of "committing horrific acts of torture, including beatings, floggings, electric shocks, rape and other sexual violence against child protesters as young as 12."

Parents and teachers worried about the apparent poisonings have already protested in several cities, including Esfahan, Gilan, Saghez and Rasht. Mothers with placards have demanded answers by picketing the education ministry buildings in Tehran. And on 14 February parents demonstrated outside the Qom governor's office demanding action and an explanation. Some protests have been dispersed with water cannon or tear gas.

On 8 March students at Tehran's Alameh Tabatabai University, Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, and Amir Kabir University of Technology staged on-campus protests at the government's slow response to the poisonings. Some students were then attacked by security guards.

Many parents in Qom are now keep-



Pic: @thijsreuten

ing their daughters at home.

Having ignored the reports of poisonings for months the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's so-called Supreme Leader, called for the death penalty for those who are found to be guilty of the poisonings.

On 15 March Sky News reported that over 100 people had been arrested in connection with the poisonings. Regime figures have publicly accused some of acting with the People's Mojahedin (MEK) a banned, militarised "leftist" sect, and with foreign intelligence agencies. These allegations make no sense and are almost certainly fabrications invented by the regime to divert attention from its own failings.

It is difficult to assess exactly what is happening because of the authoritarian Iranian state which lies, represses and distorts information and prevents the free circulation of media and opinion. During the recent wave of protests Reporters Without Borders estimates 55 journalists have been arrested. The World Press Freedom index puts clerical-fascist Iran amongst the 10 worst countries for freedom of the press.

A 1986 press law demands journalists "do not offend the clergy and the Supreme Leader", which effectively means that if they report anything the state finds problematic journalists are in danger. Arrests take place in the middle of the night, often without warrants.

Activists have blamed the regime for the schoolgirl attacks and claim they are revenge for the recent, anti-regime, mass protests against the compulsory hijab law and for freedom and equality for women.

Although the street movement has subsided since January, following serious repression by the state, many women continue to refuse to cover their hair. It is now common to see women in some areas of Tehran, for example, in public without a hijab.

Attacks against women similar to these apparent poisonings have taken place before in Iran. The most recent example was a wave of acid attacks around the central city of Isfahan 2014,

which at the time were believed to have been carried out by religious hard-liners targeting women for how they dressed.

Another possible explanation – or possibly partial explanation – for the distress suffered by the schoolgirls is that their symptoms might be the result of the stress and anxiety on young Iranian women who suffer severe discrimination and have just been through a period of extreme political tension and street revolts in which many of them will have taken part.

Afghanistan

A similar outbreak was reported in Afghanistan from 2009 to 2012, with hundreds of girls across the country complaining of strange smells and poisoning. The World Health Organisation said it appeared to be "mass psychogenic illnesses", although a British chemical weapons expert told the BBC that the Afghanistan events in 2009-12 had not been properly investigated.

Professor Simon Wessely, a psychiatrist and epidemiologist at King's College London, told the BBC that he believed these events are in fact not poisonings, but are instead a case of "mass sociogenic illness", in which symptoms spread among a group with no obvious biomedical cause.

Meanwhile the authorities are continuing to ruthlessly repress opposition. A video of five girls dancing to the Nigerian singer Rema in the courtyard of Block 13, in Ekbatan, central Tehran, was released on Instagram on International Women's Day, 8 March. Ekbatan has been one of the centres of opposition to the regime.

The girls' film was viewed, liked and shared hundreds of thousands of times. The girls, dressed in baggy track-suit pants, hair uncovered, are clearly having great fun and just look like any other kids, enjoying being young. But Iran is run by fanatical religious bigots and misogynists, so what they were doing is illegal and considered by the state to be immoral and subversive.

Apparently the girls have been iden-

tified, forced to wear headscarves, and to apologise in forced-confession videos.

The residents of Ekbatan welcomed Persian New Year (Nowruz, a Zoroastrian festival dating back 3,000 years, starting on 20 March) by chanting "Death to the Dictator" (a popular chant aimed at Khamenei) from their balconies.

Illegal independent trade union organisation continues in Iran. On 19 March the Coordinating Council of Teachers' Syndicates issues a statement declaring, "The tyranny can no longer stand," referring to the past year as "a year full of glory and complaints." In recent years Iranian teachers have protested for better pay and alongside girl students to demand equality for women. Workers currently face inflation running at 40-50%.

The regime is repositioning itself, promising a new wave of actions against women who defy Iran's strict, misogynist dress codes. Parliamentarians have recently called for new penalties for women who do not cover their hair, including cutting off their internet access and being sacked. Some shops, including restaurants and pharmacies, have been closed for not enforcing the hijab law.

Now the more ideological parts of the state's repressive apparatus, the Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) and the Basij Islamist militia, are attempting to reimpose street patrols to enforce the compulsory hijab. They aim to start in Qom. Iran's so-called Supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, has attempted to deal with the political crisis around Iranian women's rights by changing the subject to a discussion on righting the dire economic situation. He has called for privatisations. And Iran is attempting to mend relations with hostile Sunni Arab states in the Middle East. On 10 March China brokered an agreement between Iran and the Saudis which would ease tensions between the two states. Saudi Arabia cut ties with Tehran in 2016 following the execution of a prominent Shia cleric in Saudi Arabia and attacks on Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran.

Iran is increasingly isolated following the breakdown of the deal it had with the West to prevent it getting nuclear weapons, and the military aid it is providing Russia with in support of Putin's war in Ukraine. It aims to rebuild better relationships with regional powers where it can. □

• Activist Sepideh Gholian was released from jail on 15 March, but then jailed again the same day: bit.ly/sep-g

Make childcare a universal service

Sarah Ronan of the Women's Budget Group talked with Solidarity in the run-up to the Budget.

We know that the current offer of free childcare is not funded at cost. Freedom of Information requests from 2021 show that the government knowingly underfunds the schemes by around £2.60 per hour. That obviously forces providers to cross-subsidise by increasing fees, and means that providers can't pay the wages that they need to pay to compete in the current labour market and attract and keep staff.

It doesn't meet the needs of parents, particularly in the gap between parental leave and when significant support kicks in at the age of three with the 30 hours entitlement. Mostly women take decisions to step back from work, forcing families into poverty. That is made worse with the current cost-of-living crisis.

A rescue and a reform approach is needed. Increase the funding for the existing schemes. Then fundamentally rethink and reform and transition to a new type of system that works for people and meets the needs of communities as well. There is a role for local authorities in that.

This could include co-production and parent-led nurseries. With the way that early and childcare is delivered at the moment, how parents access it is too rigid and there aren't enough options.

We also have a real issue around children with special educational needs and disabilities getting early years and childcare provision.

The alternative is not necessarily workplace nurseries. To be realistic, if you live in London, you're not going to go each morning on the Tube with your children. It's more about co-working spaces or more community provision.

We need to be asking how we meet the needs of families, not just in terms of enabling access to employment and around working hours, but in terms of allowing parents time to spend with their kids.

We must think about outcomes around children feeling safe and happy, not just their educational attainment. We need spaces where you can support that kind of flexible approach, both the right to work and to childcare.

We need to get the funding in right now so that we don't see more providers collapse and go out of business, and so we have something to reform to meet the needs of communities and families.

It's oversimplification if we make it all about affordability and don't really think in the long term about what we want to transition to. What does that look like? Not just about the cost, not just about the education value for children, but about how was it delivered? What can we learn from other countries that are doing things differently?

Economy

It's about an economy that allows people to be cared for and to care in a way that meets their needs; about it fitting together as part of a much bigger kind of social fabric, as well as seeing children are citizens in their own right.

Early years care needs to be treated like a vital public good in the same way as other forms of education. If we move on from the concept of early years childcare as somewhere to dump children so you can go to work, we can look at it as the education that it is. People in this sector are not babysitters, they're educators.

If you look at it in those terms, it's far easier to buy into the idea that it is social infrastructure and it should be a universal service in the way that health care is, or adult social care, or primary and secondary school education.

We need a universal service is because the benefits are universal. Most people don't realise that. You care about the fact that you can't get a GP appointment. But how do you think your GP is getting to work? Who is caring for their children?

We all benefit from a well-functioning childcare sector. It should be a uni-

versal right for a child to experience high-quality early-years education. Every child should have that start in life.

We modelled it, and a universal childcare system would pay for itself through increased employment, both within the sector and elsewhere in the economy, and through reduced reliance on means-tested benefits.

In the immediate term to deliver 30 hours of free childcare to all children, from the age of six months onwards, and ensure that staff are highly qualified (45% of staff have a degree, 55% level three), with pay at the real living wage for level three and higher for degree-holders, is asking for a large investment. But 70-80% of that investment, once the system is fully implemented, would be recouped through direct and indirect employment.

It's not just reduced reliance on means-tested benefits, but also how throughout a child's life they have reduced reliance on means-tested benefits because they've had better educational outcomes.

Promises

That Labour is talking about universality of early-years childcare is encouraging. Bridget Phillipson is going out to Australia and learning from what they're doing there, where they learned the hard way with the collapse of ABC Childcare (the biggest private chain) in 2008.

The danger is that 20 months out from an election, we get promised all these nice shiny things. They promised so much in 2019 that hasn't been delivered.

Labour may eventually want to move towards having some of the funding go directly to parents: let them use it how they want, whether that's to pay for more informal care or grandparents.

The problem with that is that it fundamentally undermines the value of education. You create a two-tier system, and you embed a class system from an early age with some parents that can afford high-quality early-years, and low-

er-income parents who need to make that money go further so have informal care through family.

Right now the Tories aim to placate parents and address the affordability issues, but without considering the long term sustainability of the sector, and without considering what kind of economy we're trying to create, how inclusive that is, what kind of society we want to build.

From Labour we're seeing moves in the right direction in terms of universality. I'm worried that people won't be able to see past the Tory promises and will focus narrowly on the affordability and making things easier for parents right now.

We need to hear the voice of the early-years workforce and boost trade union membership there. We also need to hear from others: the parent organisations like Pregnant then Screwed and Gingerbread, and grassroots organisations like the domestic workers' Nanny Solidarity Network. When Covid lockdown hit, nannies lost their homes and their jobs overnight.

People look to the Scandinavian countries as the idealised model. I think that you have to be realistic about what those economies look. The Fawcett Society did a [comparative literature review](#) of economies that were similar to Britain, Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, and Switzerland. There's good stuff happening in Ireland as well.

Following the lockdowns, other governments have recognised the value of care in general, not just childcare and early years, but also education, adult social care, and health care, and took steps to invest properly. Britain has not done that. It's one of the reasons why we have the levels of industrial action that we've got now, on top of 13 years of austerity policies.

I think that we can learn a lot from just seeing early years prioritised as a policy area elsewhere. I don't think anybody's really perfected it. □

Childcare: gaps in Tory promises

By Dave Pannett

The Tories' 15 March Budget recognised the high cost of early years and childcare for working parents, and how little funding comes from the state. The present system of payments via [Universal Credit](#) and [tax-free allowances](#) isn't making a difference. With labour shortages in almost every sector of the economy, the

government is keen to find a way to get women with young children back into work, and promises to make childcare cheaper and more affordable.

Promises

It promises to:

- expand the free entitlement for some working parents from three-year-olds to include as young as nine months. That is to be rolled out

gradually by September 2025.

- create more places, by lowering the staff ratio for two-year-olds from 1:4 to 1:5 and by bonuses for new childminders, especially those employed by agencies.
- pay Universal Credit childcare money upfront and increasing the maximum payment, which will benefit families in London and south east
- plan for wraparound child-

care for every primary school (no funded entitlement, though). Funding looks to be the key issue here.

Fees

At present the sector makes most of its income through setting its own fees on the market for most children from birth to three and for the hours above the free entitlement.

If the government funding

for early years becomes 70+% of the sector's income, then how much the government pays for the free entitlement becomes more important. So far there is a promise to increase rates for two-year-olds by 30%, and for older children by 4%. The rates have not been set for children under two, where the staff ratio is 1:3 (it's 1:8 or 1:13 for three- and four-year-olds). □

Connolly's Marxism, part four

Physical force in Irish politics



Connolly politically unexpurgated

By James Connolly

The articles by Connolly we have this week formulate his attitude to the physical-force and cultural-nationalist traditions in Ireland as he found them on his first arrival there as a socialist organiser.

Ireland occupies a position among the nations of the earth unique in a great variety of its aspects, but in no one particular is this singularity more marked than in the possession of what is known as a "physical force party" – a party, that is to say, whose members are united upon no one point, and agree upon no single principle, except upon the use of physical force as the sole means of settling the dispute between the people of this country and the governing power of Great Britain.

Other countries and other peoples have, from time to time, appealed to what the first French Revolutionists picturesquely described as the "sacred right of insurrection," but in so appealing they acted under the inspiration of, and combated for, some great governing principle of political or social life upon which they, to a man, were in absolute agreement. The latter-day high falutin "hillside" man, on the other hand, exalts into a principle that which the revolutionists of other countries have looked upon as a weapon, and in his gatherings prohibits all discussion of those principles which formed the main strength of his prototypes elsewhere and made the successful use of that weapon possible. Our people have glided at different periods of the past century from moral force agitation, so-called, into physical force rebellion, from constitutionalism into insurrectionism, meeting in each the same failure and the same disaster and yet seem as far as ever from learning the great truth that neither method is ever likely to be successful until they first insist that a perfect agreement upon the end to be attained should be arrived at as a starting-point of all our efforts.

To the reader unfamiliar with Irish political history such a remark seems to savour almost of foolishness, its truth is so apparent; but to the reader acquainted with the inner workings of the political movements of this country the remark is pregnant with the deepest meaning. Every revolutionary effort in Ireland has

drawn the bulk of its adherents from the ranks of the disappointed followers of defeated constitutional movements. After having exhausted their constitutional efforts in striving to secure such a modicum of political power as would justify them to their own consciences in taking a place as loyal subjects of the British Empire, they, in despair, turned to thoughts of physical force as a means of attaining their ends. Their conception of what constitutes freedom was in no sense changed or revolutionised; they still believed in the political form of freedom which had been their ideal in their constitutional days; but no longer hoping for it from the acts of the British Parliament, they swung over into the ranks of the "physical force" men as the only means of attaining it.

The so-called physical force movement of today in like manner bases its hopes upon the disgust of the people over the failure of the Home Rule movement; it seeks to enlist the people under its banners, not so much by pointing out the base ideals of the constitutionalists or the total inadequacy of their pet measures to remedy the evils under which the people suffer, as by emphasising the greater efficacy of physical force as a national weapon. Thus, the one test of an advanced Nationalist is, in their opinion, one who believes in physical force. It may be the persons so professing to believe are Republicans; it may be they are believers in monarchy; it may be that Home Rule would satisfy them; it may be that they despise Home Rule. No matter what their political faith may be, if only they are prepared to express belief in the saving grace of physical force, they are acclaimed as advanced Nationalists – worthy descendants of 'the men of '98'. The '98 Executive, organised in the commencement by professed believers in the physical force doctrine, started by proclaiming its adherence to the principle of national independence "as understood by Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen," and in less than twelve months from doing so, deliberately rejected a similar resolution and elected on its governing body men notorious for their Royalist proclivities. As the '98 Executive represents the advanced Nationalists of Ireland, this repudiation of the Republican faith of the United Irishmen is an interesting corroboration of the truth of our statement that the advanced Nationalists of our day are utterly regardless of principle and only attach importance to methods – an instance of putting the cart before

the horse, absolutely unique in its imbecility and unparalleled in the history of the world.

It may be interesting, then, to place before our readers the Socialist Republican conception of the functions and uses of physical force in a popular movement. We neither exalt it into a principle nor repudiate it as something not to be thought of. Our position towards it is that the use or non-use of force for the realisation of the ideas of progress always has been and always will be determined by the attitude, not of the party of progress, but of the governing class opposed to that party. If the time should arrive when the party of progress finds its way to freedom barred by the stubborn greed of a possessing class entrenched behind the barriers of law and order; if the party of progress has indoctrinated the people at large with the new revolutionary conception of society and is therefore representative of the will of a majority of the nation, if it has exhausted all the peaceful means at its disposal for the purpose of demonstrating to the people and their enemies that the new revolutionary ideas do possess the suffrage of the majority; then, but not till then, the party which represents the revolutionary idea is justified in taking steps to assume the powers of government, and in using the weapons of force to dislodge the usurping class or government in possession, and treating its members and supporters as usurpers and rebels against the constituted authorities always have been created. In other words, Socialists believe that the question of force is of very minor importance; the really important question is of the principles upon which is based the movement that may or may not need the use of force to realise its object.

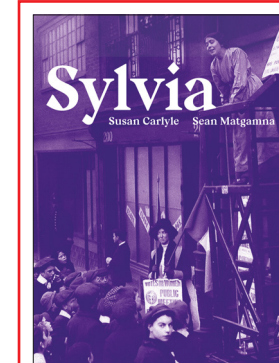
Here, then, is the immense difference between the Socialist Republicans and our friends the physical force men. The latter, by stifling all discussions of principles, earn the passive and fleeting commendation of the unthinking multitude; the former, by insisting upon a thorough understanding of their basic principles, do not so readily attract the multitude, but do attract and hold the more thoughtful amongst them. It is the difference betwixt a mob in revolt and an army in preparation. The mob who cheer a speaker referring to the hopes of a physical force movement would, in the very hour of apparent success, be utterly disorganised and divided by the passage through the British Legislature

of any trumpery Home Rule Bill. The army of class-conscious workers organising under the banner of the Socialist Republican Party, strong in their knowledge of economic truth and firmly grounded in their revolutionary principles, would remain entirely unaffected by any such manoeuvre and, knowing it would not change their position as a subject class, would still press forward, resolute and undivided, with their faces set towards their only hope of emancipation – the complete control by the working-class democracy of all the powers of National Government.

Thus the policy of the Socialist Republicans is seen to be the only wise one. "Educate that you may be free"; principles first, methods afterwards. If the advocacy of physical force failed to achieve success or even to effect an uprising when the majority were unenfranchised and the secret ballot unknown, how can it be expected to succeed now that the majority are in possession of voting power and the secret ballot safeguards the voter?

The ballot-box was given us by our masters for their purpose; let us use it for our own. Let us demonstrate at that ballot-box the strength and intelligence of the revolutionary idea; let us make the hustings a rostrum from which to promulgate our principles; let us grasp the public powers in the interest of the disinherited class; let us emulate our fathers and, like the 'true men of '98', place ourselves in line with the most advanced thought of our age and drawing inspiration and hope from the spectacle presented by the world-wide revolt of the workers, prepare for the coming of the day when the Socialist working-class of Ireland will, through its elected representatives, present its demand for freedom from the yoke of a governing master class or nation – the day on which the question of moral or physical force shall be finally decided. □

• *Workers' Republic*, 22 July 1899



The story of Sylvia Pankhurst including her working-class organising in the East End of London. £4 (inc. post) □ bit.ly/shop-wl

Socialism and nationalism

By James Connolly

In Ireland at the present time there are at work a variety of agencies seeking to preserve the national sentiment in the hearts of the people.

These agencies, whether Irish Language movements, Literary Societies or Commemoration Committees, are undoubtedly doing a work of lasting benefit to this country in helping to save from extinction the precious racial and national history, language and characteristics of our people.

Nevertheless, there is a danger that by too strict an adherence to their present methods of propaganda, and consequent neglect of vital living issues, they may only succeed in stereotyping our historical studies into a worship of the past, or crystallising nationalism into a tradition – glorious and heroic indeed, but still only a tradition.

Now traditions may, and frequently do, provide materials for a glorious martyrdom, but can never be strong enough to ride the storm of a successful revolution.

If the national movement of our day is not merely to re-enact the old sad tragedies of our past history, it must show itself capable of rising to the exigencies of the moment.

It must demonstrate to the people of Ireland that our nationalism is not merely a morbid idealising of the past, but is also capable of formulating a distinct and definite answer to the problems of the present and a political and

economic creed capable of adjustment to the wants of the future.

This concrete political and social ideal will best be supplied, I believe, by the frank acceptance on the part of all earnest nationalists of the Republic as their goal.

Not a Republic, as in France, where a capitalist monarchy with an elective head parodies the constitutional abortions of England, and in open alliance with the Muscovite despotism brazenly flaunts its apostasy to the traditions of the Revolution.

Not a Republic as in the United States, where the power of the purse has established a new tyranny under the forms of freedom; where, one hundred years after the feet of the last British red-coat polluted the streets of Boston, British landlords and financiers impose upon American citizens a servitude compared with which the tax of pre-Revolution days was a mere trifle.

No! the Republic I would wish our fellow-countrymen to set before them as their ideal should be of such a character that the mere mention of its name would at all times serve as a beacon-light to the oppressed of every land, at all times holding forth promise of freedom and plenteousness as the reward of their efforts on its behalf.

To the tenant farmer, ground between landlordism on the one hand and American competition on the other, as between the upper and the nether millstone; to the wage-workers in the towns, suffering from the exactions of the slave-driving capitalist; to the agricultural labourer, toiling away his life for a wage barely sufficient to keep body and soul together; in fact to every one of the toiling millions upon whose misery the outwardly-splendid fabric of our modern civilisation is reared, the Irish Republic might be made a word to conjure with – a rallying point for the disaffected, a haven for the oppressed, a point of departure for the Socialist, enthusiastic in the cause of human freedom.

This linking together of our national aspirations with the hopes of the men and women who have raised the standard of revolt against that system of capitalism and landlordism, of which the British Empire is the most aggressive type and resolute defender, should not, in any sense, import an element of discord into the ranks of earnest nationalists, and would serve to place us in touch with fresh reservoirs of moral and physical strength sufficient to lift the cause of Ireland to a more commanding position than it has occupied since the day of Benburb.

It may be pleaded that the ideal of a Socialist Republic, implying, as it does, a complete political and economic revolution, would be sure to alienate all

our middle-class and aristocratic supporters, who would dread the loss of their property and privileges.

What does this objection mean? That we must conciliate the privileged classes in Ireland!

But you can only disarm their hostility by assuring them that in a free Ireland their "privileges" will not be interfered with. That is to say, you must guarantee that when Ireland is free of foreign domination, the green-coated Irish soldiers will guard the fraudulent gains of capitalist and landlord from "the thin hands of the poor" just as remorselessly and just as effectually as the scarlet-coated emissaries of England do today.

On no other basis will the classes unite with you. Do you expect the masses to fight for this ideal?

When you talk of freeing Ireland, do you only mean the chemical elements which compose the soil of Ireland? Or is it the Irish people you mean? If the latter, from what do you propose to free them? From the rule of England?

But all systems of political administration or governmental machinery are but the reflex of the economic forms which underlie them.

English rule in England is but the symbol of the fact that English conquerors in the past forced upon this country a property system founded upon spoliation, fraud and murder: that, as the present-day exercise of the "rights of property" so originated involves the continual practice of legalised spoliation and fraud, English rule is found to be the most suitable form of government by which the spoliation can be protected, and an English army the most pliant tool with which to execute judicial murder when the fears of the propertied classes demand it.

The Socialist who would destroy, root and branch, the whole brutally materialistic system of civilisation, which like the English language we have adopted as our own, is, I hold, a far more deadly foe to English rule and tutelage, than the superficial thinker who imagines it possible to reconcile Irish freedom with those insidious but disastrous forms of economic subjection – landlord tyranny, capitalist fraud and unclean usury; baneful fruits of the Norman Conquest, the unholy trinity, of which Strongbow and Diarmuid MacMurchadha – Norman thief and Irish traitor – were the fitting precursors and apostles.

If you remove the English army to-morrow and hoist the green flag over Dublin Castle, unless you set about the organisation of the Socialist Republic your efforts would be in vain.

England would still rule you. She would rule you through her capitalists, through her landlords, through her financiers, through the whole array of commercial and individualist institu-

tions she has planted in this country and watered with the tears of our mothers and the blood of our martyrs.

England would still rule you to your ruin, even while your lips offered hypocritical homage at the shrine of that Freedom whose cause you had betrayed.

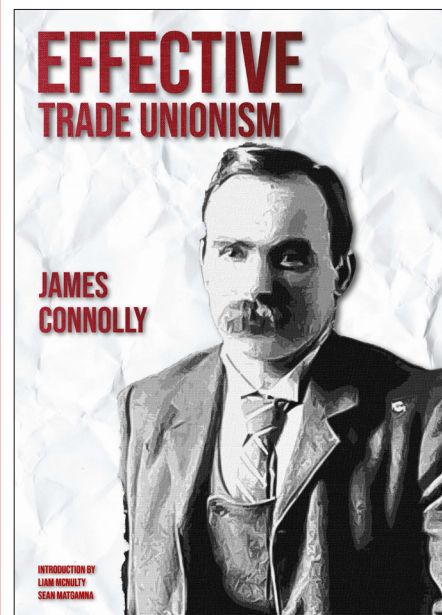
Nationalism without Socialism – without a reorganisation of society on the basis of a broader and more developed form of that common property which underlay the social structure of Ancient Erin – is only national recreancy.

It would be tantamount to a public declaration that our oppressors had so far succeeded in inoculating us with their perverted conceptions of justice and morality that we had finally decided to accept those conceptions as our own, and no longer needed an alien army to force them upon us.

As a Socialist I am prepared to do all one man can do to achieve for our motherland her rightful heritage – independence; but if you ask me to abate one jot or tittle of the claims of social justice, in order to conciliate the privileged classes, then I must decline.

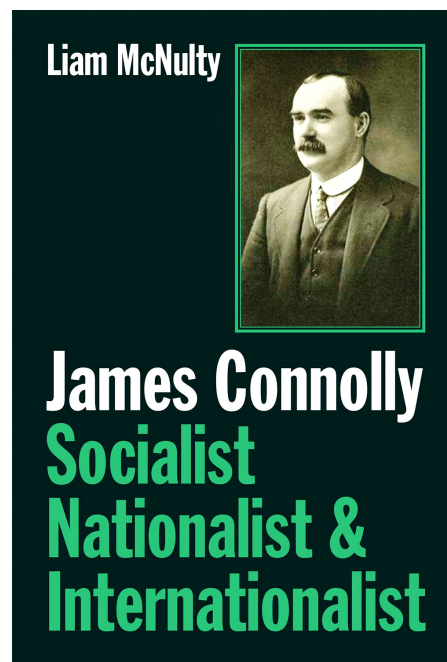
Such action would be neither honourable nor feasible. Let us never forget that he never reaches Heaven who marches thither in the company of the Devil. Let us openly proclaim our faith: the logic of events is with us. □

• From *Shan Van Vocht*, January 1897



Aiming to replace capitalism with socialism, James Connolly's organising and ideas evolved considerably. One idea he clung to from the turn of the century to his death was industrial unionism, workers' solidarity across grades and trades, and sympathetic strikes. That is how he saw his work in the Irish Transport Union. 64 pages £5 □

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This book discusses Connolly not just as an Irish hero, but traces how he was shaped by and responded to the international socialist and labour movement of his time.

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How to win on pay in the civil service

By a supporter of PCS Independent Left

The Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) has announced a strike of its members working in the Passport Office, from 3 April to 5 May. In this article, a supporter of PCS Independent Left, a network of rank-and-file reps and activists within the union, argues for a sober assessment of the union's strategy, and what can be done to improve it.

If you look at disputes in the NHS and on the rail, for example, employers have made offers, sometimes multiple offers, which have improved each time. That's not to say those offers are adequate or should be accepted, but it shows that the government and the employers in those sectors felt under sufficient pressure to make renewed offers. There has been nothing equivalent in the civil service, which shows we are not putting our employers under sufficient pressure. That shows the need for a significant intensification of action.

The union has now started the process of re-balloting [20 March to 9 May 2023]. Winning that is obviously a priority. The ballot period is eight weeks, which in itself is an acknowledgement of the weakness of our organisation; if we were stronger and more confident, we could shorten that period.

Independent Left is arguing for a continuation of selective action, but as a supplement to all-out strikes, not as an alternative to them. We would like to see further national action taken as soon as possible, but given the balance of forces on the current National Executive Committee it may be that there will no further national strikes until after the re-ballot concludes on 9 May. [Since this article was written, 28 April has been named for a strike]. Going forward, we want to see an escalating programme of national, all-out strikes called, with the strike period increasing month-by-month (two days, then three, then four, etc.). That is the type of strategy we'll promote throughout the re-ballot.

Persuading members of the need to escalate action in that way will be a hard task in itself. Although all the evidence I have is that the two days of national action were well supported, many activists I have spoken to ask where the dispute is going, and worry that members are increasingly detached from the dispute. In any case, a minority union, as we are in many places, can only punch up to its weight.

We need a massive expansion of the information and communication going out in workplaces, along with a turn to the non-members to try to win them over and build the union. At the moment it doesn't seem as if the union has any plan to undertake that kind of work. If we renew the mandate on the basis of that kind of campaign, we stand a chance of winning the dispute. If we fail to renew the mandate, or if we renew it but keep pursuing a strategy of sporadic 24-hour strikes, we're unlikely to win our demands.

The union has been defeated in every major national dispute we have fought, for ten years or more. Our membership has shrunk massively, from over 300,000 in the late-90s and early-00s to under 200,000 now. Civil service jobs have been cut, but not in the same proportion. We have lost density, and are now a minority union in many departments, sometimes significantly below 50%.

In fact even as the civil service grew in the last few years, we continued to lose members. Only in the last two years or so have we started growing – slowly, and then more quickly since the beginning of the national dispute. That said, we have not made a real dent in the number of non-members. Not that most members would know: the union does not publish density figures, not only because it cannot be honest as to where we are, but also because, as far as I can see, it does not collect the data to actually work those figures out – but we are still, nevertheless, a self-proclaimed "organising union"!

The leadership also likes to think of PCS as a fighting union, and as being radically left-wing and progressive. But what does this actually mean in practice? After decades of leadership by these would-be radicals, many of them self-professed Marxists and socialists, we still have only two officer positions, general secretary and assistant general secretary, that are elected by members. All other officers are staff appointees, often paid salaries significantly in excess of many of the workers they are supposed to organise and represent. There have been no meaningful efforts to expand rank-and-file control over disputes; proposals for doing this have been blocked. Our negotiations aren't



transparent or accessible to members.

Following decades of defeat, the national leadership, the core of which has remained the same for years, seems to have acknowledged that something had to change. But they have drawn the wrong conclusions. The tactics undertaken in the current national dispute have been characterised by an over-reliance on selective action [i.e., strikes only in selected departments or workplaces].

Reversal

This is a 180° flip-flop from what the same people advocated previously. In the past, advocates of selective action like ourselves were denounced by the leadership almost as traitors, people who didn't have confidence that the members could deliver national action. Now there is a fetishisation of selective action, to the point of stymieing national action.

Whilst it was right that we started the dispute over pay and conditions, we did so in a poor way. Most crucial, of course, is that we are a minority union, with huge numbers of non-members, particularly in the strongholds of the leadership, in the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and and Revenue and Customs (HMRC). In both of those departments, there has been no effective fight over office closures and staff cuts, and the leadership made no effort to build up the activist core (in their sectarian way, they don't want self-activating, thinking reps, as that might lead to opposition to their inactivity). It was no surprise that in the DWP, we only just got over the 50% threshold in the ballot, and in HMRC we did not. It took a second ballot there and focused support from the national union to help to get over the threshold.

Along with poor organisation, we

started the dispute with a relatively small strike fund, at least measured against the degree of selective action we wanted to take. The leadership opposed levies and then just flipped over, with no explanation, as is normal, and decided a few years ago to levy an extra 50 pence from members. If this had been done when Independent Left supporters had suggested it, we would have had a much bigger war chest going into the current dispute. Whilst I favour the current levy, given the circumstances, it we had done the work in the past, then it would not have been needed – or if it was, could have been applied at lower rates.

We waited months after securing the ballot mandate to call any action. This reflects the leadership's lack of faith in members. They have convinced themselves that members are too poor to strike. They also, for all their bluster, recognise the relative weakness of the union. This explains why, in the whole life of the current mandate, we've only struck twice nationally, for only 24 hours each time. Much of the selective action has been effective and well-supported on its own terms, and there has been a form of escalation there by taking out departments for sustained periods. But it hasn't been sufficient to draw any offers from the government.

Our National Executive Committee (NEC) elections open on 20 April (and PCS conference is 23-25 May). Independent Left is standing a joint slate with the Broad Left Network, in which the key animating force is the Socialist Party. They were part of the leadership regime for many years, and helped design and defend many of the strategies we in Independent Left criticised in the past. But the leadership faction fractured somewhat several years ago, and we're working together in these elections because we share broadly similar criticisms of the way the leadership is handling the current dispute.

A new leadership on the NEC won't solve all the problems by itself, but it could ensure the union's resources are more focused on the kind of campaigning work necessary to mobilise escalating action. Winning those elections will break the logjam in the union and at least allows us the possibility of doing what is needed. □

UCU: union democracy needed

By a UCU member

As *Solidarity* goes to press (28 March), higher education members of UCU are being asked whether to move to a formal consultation on employers' proposals in their two disputes, one over the pre-92 university pension scheme USS, and one on pay and pay-related elements across the sector. Alongside this, a rebalot continues (to 31 March), allowing six months' further action.

There has been real progress on USS, with a commitment to restoration of benefits. There are still potential pitfalls as the details are thrashed out, but it seems unlikely that more action in that dispute at present will bring further gains. The picture on pay, however, is very different.

There, employers have imposed their

offer of an extra 2% pay rise from February, and then 3% from August 2023, meaning a total rise of just 8% between August 2022 and 2024. On casualisation, equality and workload they have promised only talks.

In a follow-up to her previous unilateral suspension of action, UCU General Secretary Jo Grady tried to sell this as a victory, despite the many get-out clauses that it gives employers. She launched a manipulative e-survey of members, asking in a single question whether they supported suspending action and undertaking consultation without distinguishing between the disputes.

A majority of members voted yes—as did a narrow majority of branches at an advisory meeting based with similar questions. An attempt to bounce the Higher Education Committee into

suspending strikes on the basis of the survey, however, was rightly rejected.

This week (starting 27 March), the leadership is trying the same tactic again, claiming they have listened to complaints about the e-survey. Yet though they have now split the questions about pausing the disputes, the problem remains that plebiscites are no way to make decisions in a union. Strikes and "action short" need collective and deliberative decision-making if they are to work. Why should members who are scabbing on the dispute get an e-vote about whether to call it off?

After fifteen days of action in total, with little to show for it on pay and pay-related claims, members (especially post-92 and casualised staff outside USS) are understandably frustrated. The tactic of on-off strikes has yet again proven not to work. Without

the ACAS pause we might well have forced employers to table something better, but the General Secretary has frustrated that. We need to keep up pressure not only on employers but also for democracy within the union. □



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CWU gears up for more strikes

By Ollie Moore

Communication Workers Union (CWU) general secretary Dave Ward announced, in a video message to members on Fri 24 March, that the union's postal executive had agreed to serve notice for further strikes in Royal Mail "early" in the week from 27 March.

The CWU secured a huge mandate for further industrial action in its most recent ballot but has held back from calling further strikes to pursue talks with Royal Mail. A joint statement between Royal Mail and the CWU, setting out the parameters for those talks, indicated workplace CWU reps would be expected to engage in local consultation over how

Royal Mail's proposed changes could be implemented.

Ward's message said that, although he understood postal workers' frustration about changes Royal Mail was already imposing, workers would realise worse had been held back "if [they] could see" other intended changes Royal Mail had revealed in talks. He also said the CWU would not "shirk change", and that the union might have to accept "changes that not everyone will like."

Ward stressed the importance of pushing back a culture of overbearing, bullying management, and especially of targeted campaigns of disciplinary victimisation against

union reps.

Although it is positive that CWU now intends to return to action, the direction of the dispute poses questions about the relationship between rank-and-file union members and the union's leadership. Ward and other leaders pose matters in terms of workers needing to "support their union", rather than emphasising the union as the expression of workers' own collective organisation and power. Although any national dispute in a union with a centralised structure involves some degree of "top down" direction, disputes where the strategy is determined wholly or largely from above, with rank-and-file workers trained

to see their role as loyal foot soldiers who "support their union" by carrying out its leadership's instructions, are rarely successful.

Long breaks between rounds of action also allow employers to seize momentum and establish "facts on the ground" by imposing changes and victimising reps, forcing the union into an ever more defensive stance as it has to strike merely to regain ground lost during the cost of the dispute, rather than to pursue positive demands.

Winning the dispute now will require a significant escalation of action, possibly to an indefinite strike. Building support for that strategy amongst rank-

and-file postal workers means ensuring they feel like they are driving their own dispute, rather than simply following orders. A significantly expanded system of hardship payments will also be needed to support members through sustained or indefinite action. □

Solid strike wins 16.2%

By Mark Simon

Drivers working for the National Express bus company have won a 16.2% pay rise, better accident pay, and higher rates for Christmas holiday working, in a one year deal. The 3,100 drivers from nine bus garages across the West Midlands struck for six days and had stayed on strike while the company offer was voted on by members.

The campaign had been co-

ordinated by the reps working closely with the Unite Bus Combine. The reps were critical of the role of union full-time officers in previous disputes, and had failed to get over the threshold in a ballot of members in the last pay round.

The strike was due to start on Thursday 16th. A few days before that the officer who had been in contact with management tried to get agreement to recommend a three year deal. The strike was postponed. A

recall meeting of the bus reps called by the Bus Combine decided not to recommend the deal. National Express backed down from the three year deal and offered 14.1% over one year. Members rejected it by 71% and the strike was back on.

Pickets

The strike started on Monday 20 March. Picket lines were large and the Coventry pickets blocked buses and physically

pushed back against the police.

The strike was rich in lessons. The campaign started with a mass survey of members, lots of communication with members and tracking of turnout to ensure a high vote for action. The indefinite strike really focused pressure on the company, and reps having the support of the Bus Combine helped keep the campaign on track when it could easily have been derailed. □

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“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.

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- 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! □

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Paying more for less



Diary of a Tubeworker

By Jay Dawkey

Every time a driver is unavailable to pick up a train, for whatever reason, there are a number of knock-on effects. How these are managed can have a big impact on your mood and what kind of service passengers get.

You might be on a train for up to four hours and fifteen minutes. As soon as someone isn't available that might mean a train cancellation, and that means the current driver needs to get the train to a depot, siding, or an alternative place it can be picked up and "reformed" into a train that was previously cancelled. That headache largely

sits with the Line Controllers. On weekends the number of ONAs (Operator Not Available) can go up to 60+.

Your first thought as a driver is about getting to the end of your rounder or duty and making sure you get off on time for your grub or to get home. So one bugbear is being told of an ONA late in the duty. Sometimes it can happen when you have been waiting for a driver to take your train from you. For good reason, you can't just leave a train full of passengers with no driver. That means delaying you even further, as you then have to get everyone off the train and take it to the nearest depot or sidings or somewhere else where you can be relieved.

Controllers no doubt find it frustrating as well. Cancelled trains mean being unable to run a full service. London Underground passengers continue to pay more per kilometre travelled than

metro systems across 39 cities, according to the COMET survey from Imperial College's Transport Strategy Centre..

Why are there so many ONAs? Sickness, training, secondments, suspension are some of it. But the reality is that management continues to plan timetables and ways of working that don't provide for enough spare drivers. We need the staffing numbers that would mean the shifts can be covered.

The Piccadilly line has not run a service as timetabled for over six years. While that is the extreme, other lines are also badly affected. It is rare, particularly on a weekend, to hear that all lines are operating without delays due to cancellations. These problems pre-date the latest funding crisis, and Covid. A win in our current fight about job cuts, agreements and pensions will go some way to ensuring the situation is not made any worse. □

Amazon workers fight back

By Darren Westwood

Amazon workers at the BHX4 facility in Coventry have been striking, most recently from 13-17 March, in their fight for a £15/hour minimum wage and other improvements. Darren Westwood, an Amazon worker and GMB union activist, spoke to Solidarity.

We're now getting close to the level of membership we need for statutory recognition. I think we'll get over the line in the run-up to our next strike. The way management responded initially actually encouraged more people to join the union, and I think they

realise that. If we win recognition, we'd become the first unionised Amazon workplace in the UK.

One obvious next step for the campaign is to spread to other Amazon sites. During our five-day strike, we did some visits to warehouses in Coalville and Mansfield to speak to workers there about what we were doing. There's been another visit in the last week. We want to reach out to more and more sites, we feel if other warehouses follow us there'll be a domino effect.

As well as the issue of pay, there are lots of other issues in the workplace, especially around health and safety and

the way we're treated by management. Management have given disciplinary warnings to workers have had time off with cancer, diabetes, and other illnesses. One worker had a heart attack whilst work, so obviously had some time off. When she came back, she was hauled into a disciplinary interview, which then triggered another cardiac episode. As she was getting into a taxi to go to hospital, the manager was telling her she'd have to book any time off as emergency leave, or she'd be given a disciplinary warning.

We give so much of our time to our employers. As workers, we're asking ourselves, "what's one hour of my life worth?" We have to stand firm and say that it's worth being paid enough to live on, and to have decent, safe working conditions. □

• Abridged. More: bit.ly/amz-c

Conrad Veidt, anti-fascist: 1893-1943



Kino Eye

By John Cunningham

Although he was almost always cast as a Nazi villain (most famously as Major Strasser in the Hollywood classic *Casablanca*), the German actor Conrad Veidt was an active and committed anti-fascist. On 3 April it will be 80 years since his untimely death, aged only 50.

He sprang to fame with his role in the German Expressionist film *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* (1920), and became one of the most popular actors attached to the German UFA Studio. Under the new Nazi laws introduced in 1933 Veidt was expected

to sign a racial declaration. He put his "race" down as Jewish – his wife was Jewish but he wasn't – and soon after they fled Germany to live in Britain, where he acted in a number of films directed by Michael Powell.

In 1941 he moved to the USA. He was stricken by a form of hereditary cancer and *Casablanca* was the last film of his that was screened while he was alive. While in Hollywood he pushed for America to join the war and, along with other German exiles, such as Marlene Dietrich, the writer Thomas Mann, and dramatist Bertolt Brecht he was a vocal opponent of fascism, lamenting on a number of occasions that he always seemed to play the roles of precisely those people who had made him quit Germany. After his death he was buried in Golders Green in London. □

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PCS to strike 28 April



John Moloney

The PCS union is to take one day of all-member industrial action on Friday 28 April. Along with that, selective action will continue. The decision was made against the background of no current substantive pay discussions or offer from the Civil Service. Between the selective action and the all-out action, hopefully sufficient pressure will be brought to bear on the government so that it makes us a serious offer.

In parallel to the action is the re-ballot which started on 20 March. To help maximise turnout, voting will continue until 9 May. Within a few weeks of that, PCS national conference (12-15 May) starts, where of course delegates will decide the way forward in the dispute.

The main debate, unless we get an offer to discuss, will be on the balance between selective action and all-member action. I hope the conference agrees that the balance should be as much of both as possible in order to maximise the pressure on the government.

Given that offers have been made to many public sector unions but not to us, there is a possibility that we may end up at the back of the line, with all the other disputes are settled. That remains a danger. In the end the union has the responsibility to fight its own battles and to win its own dispute, though a campaign in conjunction with other unions is more ideal. □

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

£700 in fourteen days

The Mirror reports on 27 March that household bills could be up as much as £700 from April for some families.

The Workers' Liberty office now faces monthly electricity bills in excess of £400 per month. The printing costs for our paper are now over £700 per week.

Thanks to Ed, Josh and Ed for the £700 in the last two weeks, but we really must increase the amount we take in if we are to get anywhere close to the £35,000 we need to find new premises and continue to staff our office. Total so far £5,294. □

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NEU plans strikes 27 Apr, 2 May

By Patrick Murphy

On 25 March the National Education Union (NEU) Executive met to review the progress of our pay and funding dispute. On the eve of the meeting the Department for Education had made a new offer on pay and some other issues after more than a week of intensive talks with all four unions representing teachers.

The offer was £1000 one-off cash payment for 2022-23 and a 4.3% consolidated pay rise for most teachers for 2023-24. No-one argued that it should be recommended to members. It failed to address the current year's below-inflation offer with anything more than a lump sum payment. It offered a small

Workers' Liberty schoolworkers believe there would be problems in getting escalated strike turnouts in secondary schools during GCSEs and A levels, because of the focus in schools on last-minute cramming and teachers' worries about letting down "their" students. A plan for action should include strikes with demonstrations in late June and July, alongside a rebalot for further action in September. □

increase in the cost envelope for next year's award but expects the vast majority of this to be funded within existing school budgets. And the proposals on workload came nowhere near making a real difference.

The debate on the Executive was focused on how best to reject the deal and whether to put it to members at all. Some of us argued that the offer should be rejected out of hand by the NEC with an all-member online meeting, direct communications and local meetings. Others argued, successfully, that it should go to members with a strong recommendation to reject. They argued that a rejection by members was more powerful and that it would reach more members with details of the deal than a straightforward rejection from the Executive.

I was concerned that the government and right-wing press will exploit any support for the deal as a shift in members' confidence and determination and a signal that they can ride this out. The government did just this with a RMT ballot that rejected a poor deal but suggested a sizeable number of people prepared to accept.

As soon as we start our consultation

the offer will be off the table in any case. That's because the government set the condition that the offer would be withdrawn if any other four unions rejected the deal or put it to members with a recommendation to reject. Apart from the NEU Executive's decision to recommend rejection, it is very likely that by the end of Monday 27 March at least one of the other unions will have rejected it.

Rejecting the deal does beg the question of where the NEU strike campaign goes next. On that the Executive decided that, assuming a rejection by members, notice of two further strike days would be issued for Thursday 27 April and Tuesday 2 May. The programme of action beyond that will be decided by delegates to NEU conference, 3-6 April. The most contentious and complex issue to navigate for that period is the fact of secondary external exams which run from 15 May to late June. The Executive will put an urgent motion to conference, open to amendment by delegates. Currently that motion assumes a pause in action between 15 May and late June, but that is subject to amendment at NEU conference. □

Junior doctors strike again 11-15 April

Grace Allport spoke to Solidarity

The first round of strikes [13-15 March] was fantastic. At my hospital [in Wigan] we had a good turnout on strike, and probably 30 pickets out of about 200 junior doctors. There was positive energy and morale stayed high.

We had visits from other trade unionists and some strikers went on the big cross-union demo in Manchester, with good feedback. We also had strong support from the public. Our clear core message is that doctors are not worth less than they were in 2008 [the BMA demand is for a clear timetable for "pay restoration", to take pay above its real-term level in 2008, when it peaked].

The reports I've had, mainly from the north west, suggest it was similar elsewhere.

There was an issue of rumours going round that striking might impact people's visas, which is not true. BMA activists put a lot of effort into combating that.

The new NHS pay offer is totally inadequate. It just delays another serious real-terms pay cut – we'll get the non-consolidated payment this year, but then next year... It's like the way so much of the debate about the energy crisis was couched in terms of one-off or short-term payments, not higher wages and benefits.

So I hope Agenda for Change staff will reject it and continue their fight.

It's wrong-headed to suggest this all we can get. On the contrary, the shifts the government has made are evidence it can be shifted further.

The Tories want to avoid different groups of health workers on strike at the same time. It's worth noting that consultants have just had a consultative ballot over pay and pensions – and voted heavily in favour of action. Some older, more senior consultants are more focused on the pension issues, whereas I think younger ones may be more interested in pay restoration. They may come in to action in the not too distant future. Meanwhile we need unity and coordination with nurses and others.

I think one thing the government is achieving is a change in consciousness among some in the health service, and elsewhere, who might not previously have seen themselves as workers or part of the labour movement. Doctors and barristers are obvious cases in point, but even among nurses I think there's a change in consciousness. In terms of junior doctors, the political ideas and conversations on my picket lines were, I thought, surprisingly left-wing. I have high hopes that those who took part in picketing, went to demos and so on will have strengthened not just their political ideas but their consciousness of themselves as workers.

The nature of the BMA is changing: among junior doctors we've had two

national strikes in seven years, after decades where doctors did not go on strike. If we can strengthen trade unionism among doctors, nurses and other NHS workers we will have a potentially powerful instrument to improve working conditions in the health service, but also to defend and rebuild it as a service more broadly. Unity between health workers will be key. □

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NHS: reject the pay offer, organise to escalate

By Alice Hazel

The result of the government negotiations with the RCN, Unison, GMB, Unite and CSP on behalf of health workers on Agenda for Change contracts in England was announced on 16 March – a one off taxed payment for 2022-23 between £1655 and £3789 increasing by pay band, and 5% for 2023-24.

The health unions will run online member consultations on the offer in the next few weeks. RCN and Unison from 28 March -14 April, GMB from 3 April and Unite 31 March to 28 April. RCN, Unison and GMB are recommending the offer, and Unite will not make a recommendation.

Over the preceding months the government had refused to negotiate on pay, insisting that the Pay Review Body was the sole mechanism. The fact that barrier is broken is good, and would not have happened without strikes; but beyond that, this offer is very bad.

The 2022-23 bonus is effectively a bribe to get hard-pressed workers to accept a shoddy deal. This payment is non-consolidated i.e. will not be added to the pay scales, meaning that the 5% for 2023-24 will actually be a cut in pay (relative to 2022-3 rates plus bonus) of about 1%. The total offer will still leave the average nurse £4,400 worse off in real terms than they were in 2008. The reaction of health workers was immediate: social media was filled with condemnation.

Once the mood of RCN members became clear their exec met to reconsider their recommendation, but decided to stick with it. At the Unison Health Exec the vote was 20 for recommendation, 15 for rejection, close considering the strong steer from the negotiators. No one thinks this is a good deal.

The “Vote Reject” campaign has started strongly, with two online meetings of over 200 people in the first week. Weekly national organising meetings are planned, publicity has been produced and local and sector groups have been established. These people will be leafletting and talking to members of all the unions during the consultations, explaining the facts of the offer, countering the national union propaganda, and importantly discussing a future strategy to win a better deal.

The anger of RCN members, as those who have committed to striking in the greatest numbers,

has been the loudest. An early decision by the RCN officialdom to have the consultation campaign run by lay activists, rather than union staffers, in some areas, was quickly overturned when it became clear that members would refuse to follow the accept line. Many of the official dispute Whats App groups have been frozen.

A motion calling for an emergency general meeting of the RCN quickly gained the 1,000 members required by the union constitution. The pressure on the leadership was shown in their attempt to discredit this revolt via the pages of the *Daily Mail*.

Some have argued that moves like the EGM petition are a distraction from getting out the reject vote. The wording of the petition may not be ideal, but the campaign in workplaces needs to be combined with work in the unions. Pressurising branches, holding officials to account, and preparing for the union conferences all need to be done, alongside speaking to members.

The full machinery of the health unions kicking in to back the offer means the campaign will be hard fought. In difficult times a sizeable one-off payment will appeal. The unions are also parroting a government threat that the offer will be withdrawn if not accepted. That is not what happened when RCN members rejected offers in Scotland and Wales.

The reject campaign must be able to convince union members that a significantly better offer can be achieved. That means not only a clear explanation of the detail of the offer but also the outline of a strategy for escalation. So far we’ve seen a lack of co-ordination across the unions, including pulling strikes just as the BMA junior doctors started their action, and keeping strike days sporadic and isolated.

The lack of control by members and democracy and transparency in the unions has also hampered the dispute. The reject campaign needs to be organised in a way that it can lay the basis for a democratic rank and file organisation. It needs to have relevance in workplaces, organise inclusively in local areas, put forward strategies for the future, hold the union leaderships to account and aspire to lead health workers in a fight over their terms and conditions and for the future of the NHS. □

• NHS Workers Say No has published a “vote no” leaflet: bit.ly/nhs-no

Israel: “solidarity among all who live here”

By Martin Thomas

On 27 March, Israel’s right-wing prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, leading a new coalition government with heavy far-right representation, said he would delay until the next Knesset session (starting 30 Apr) the constitutional changes he wants.

The delay came after Netanyahu sacking his Defence Minister for suggesting such a delay – and after 12 weeks of street protests reaching a crescendo on Sunday 26th, a call for a full general strike by Israel’s Histadrut trade-union federation, and that strike starting on the Monday morning.

But the changes have only been paused, not dropped. The Jewish-Arab social movement Standing Together called for “solidarity among all who live here: we will not agree that in exchange for freezing the coup d’état legislation, a Kahane-ist [ultra-right] militia will be established to serve the racist vision of Ben Gvir” (the far-right Security Minister, who has been promised control over the National Guard as a quid-pro-quo for accepting the pause).

This Netanyahu government has already “legalised” four Israeli settlements in the West Bank renounced by Ariel Sharon in 2005. It has appropriated more West Bank land for an Israeli army training range. On 26 March Israeli police raided the Al-Aqsa mosque compound in Jerusalem.

Netanyahu’s drive is to sustain his coalition, and to change the law to safeguard himself against the corruption case long brewing against him. His constitutional changes would enable the government to control appointment of judges and, with only the slightest parliamentary majority, to override Supreme Court rulings about conflict with Israel’s Basic Law.

Israel has long had a trickle of “refusers”, teenagers who refuse the military service compulsory for non-ultra-Orthodox Jewish citizens. Now large numbers of experienced reservists are refusing to report.

The air force has had to cancel a training exercise because reservists chose not to report. There is talk of career “special operations” soldiers resigning. Less specialist units have a 10 to 15 percent drop in people reporting for service in the West Bank. On 23 March, military-industry workers staged a protest outside a major military-equipment factory.

Former bosses of the police and of Shin Bet (Israel’s equivalent of MI5) have said that in a showdown between the Netanyahu government and the courts, their institutions will follow the courts.

Netanyahu has dissociated from some far-right members of his coalition who want to ban Chris-

tian advocacy in Israel (penalty: one year for talking with an adult, two years for a minor: Israel has a sizeable Arab Christian minority). But he has pointedly not kicked back against moves by ultra-Orthodox members of the coalition to narrow the definition of “Jews” eligible to enter Israel under the “Law of Return”.

The protests have been dominated by the “moderate” right, and political leaders who have never objected to the expansion of Israeli settlements and military control in the West Bank, or the blockade and bombardments of Gaza. The “mainstream” Israeli left, much diminished in recent years, has said little distinctive.

Standing Together

But Standing Together, a Jewish-Arab grassroots movement for “peace and independence for Israelis and Palestinians, full equality for all citizens, and true social, economic, and environmental justice”, has mobilised. It stresses that the moves against democracy within Israel are fundamentally linked to the increased aggression against the Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, and the denial of the right of the Palestinians to an independent state of their own.

On 19 March Egypt hosted a conference with Jordan, the USA, the Palestinian Authority, and Israel, to talk about avoiding a lurch into full-scale guerrilla war in the West Bank, or renewed war (as in 2021 and many times previously) between Israel and Gaza, especially during Ramadan (22 March to 21 April). Arab governments linked to Israel through the “Abraham Accords” are limiting themselves to mild complaints.

The Palestinians in the West Bank have every right in principle to resist Israeli occupation arms in hand. However, the configuration under which the Palestinians are mostly assigned to 160-odd distinct areas, towns and villages with nominal autonomy, surrounded by an “Area C” under Israeli military control, means that military clashes are more likely to help Netanyahu recoup some support within Israel than to push him back. The way to win Palestinian rights is through an alliance between Palestinians and democratic and internationalist opinion within Israel, on the basis of recognising the rights of both nations, as against both Netanyahu’s all-too-real drive for “one state” marginalising the Palestinians, and the hopeless Hamas programme of overrunning Israel in favour of an Islamist and Arab conquest.

Much depends on the capacity of Standing Together and others to make the connections, and to build from the backlash against Netanyahu a positive mobilisation for democracy and for social equality. □



Solidarity

For a workers' government

FRANCE: POWER IN THE STREETS

By a member of the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste

The use of 49-3 [the government pushing through pension changes over the head of parliament] didn't have the effect that the government had hoped for: that people would see it as a defeat and as an end.

Since Macron invoked his powers under Article 49-3 of the Constitution, the protests have been bigger in big cities because the high school and university students have been more mobilised. We are witnessing the biggest youth protest in 20 years.

More than striking (apart from a notable minority in the transport sector), people are participating in repeated demonstrations. On the other hand, the fact of the "reconductible" strikes [i.e. renewed daily in mass meetings] is creating an atmosphere in which there is vast participation in demonstrations, in some towns several times a day. I have been active in Poitiers which is quite small, mostly a university town. There's a General Assembly (GA) every day this week of several dozens of people, staff and students, in a uni of 30,000. There are demonstrations several times a day, barely organised, "wildcat": they roam

around the town despite police violence.

The cross-union leadership body, the Intersyndicale, has more or less said "reconduct strikes [renew them daily] if you want to reconduct". That suits the leaders. But the minority strikes are creating an ambience.

In Dunkirk there is a dock strike today, the biggest in 30 years. More significant than strikes are blockades, occupations. These are minority actions, but near Marseille, when the police cleared a big blockade after 49-3, the workers pushed them back. And the Intersyndicale is forced to call for regular protests.

There is a bit of an idea that organising a demonstration in a DIY manner is just a recipe for facing the police on the streets. That's certainly the attitude in big towns.

In small towns there may be more self-organisation on the "yellow vest" model, with nightly gatherings, even if they are quite small. People tend to come on demonstrations on their own private account, with their families and friends, and less as members of this or that workplace team, marching behind a banner belonging to their workplace.

The [far-right] Rassemble-

ment National's pitch is: "don't worry about fighting, just vote for us and we'll do it for you". If workers perceive that they can win in the streets, that pitch is less attractive. The RN has also been aided by the monomaniacal focus on Macron, and on the problem coming from "Anglo-Saxon finance" as opposed to "French" values, which some left-nationalists have tended to promote. That has created enormous confusion. But when there are mass movements, they are in a difficult position.

NPA says: power is in the street, we can overpower parliament. France Insoumise more or less follows the mood on the street, which is for demonstrations. But they are already looking for institutional solution, and will call for a general election when it becomes convenient. There are other options now: Macron could appoint a new ministry; there could be a vote on the law. The Unions, the Socialist Party, and the Communist Party are simply calling for a referendum. □

- The Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA) split into two groups, both called NPA, at a congress in December 2022: a member of the group at nouveauantipartcapitaliste.fr spoke to *Solidarity*.