

Solidarity

& Workers' Liberty



For social ownership of the banks and industry

PUBLIC OWNERSHIP OF ENERGY WORKERS' CONTROL



- » **Worker-led transition from fossil fuels**
- » **Heatwave shows green policies urgent**
- » **Stop profit drive frying the future**

See inside

New anti-strike law on the books

The Tories' Minimum Service law and how to fight it

Page 3

Solidarity with Ukraine!

On-the-spot report from talks with socialists and feminists

Page 12

The "intelligence" behind AI

AI is based on a narrow subset of mathematical methods

Pages 10-11

Why is Israel the exception?

Open letter to ex-comrades who now deny Israeli rights

Pages 16-17

The ideas that Starmer wants to ban

Heatwave shows urgency of green policies



Death Valley, California 53.3C; Sanbao, Xinjiang 52.2C; Mexicali, Mexico 50.2C; Tunis 50C; Sicily 47.3C. The July heatwave has been as unrelenting as it has been extensive.

And now (31 July) Rishi Sunak has announced that the government intends to give over 100 new licences for oil and gas development in the North Sea, with all their carbon-emission implications.

While the UK has experienced a month of damp weather, large parts of the world have suffered temperatures near the limits of human survivability. This is the world at 1.2C warming. Emissions are still rising, and temperatures will continue to rise.

Heat is the most immediate impact of climate change. The human body must discharge heat to the environment or we die. As we exit the stable climatic conditions of the Holocene, many densely populated parts of Earth will experience longer periods at these lethal temperatures. Short of these extremes, high temperatures bring significantly increased risk of heart attack and stroke. The 2022 heatwave claimed 61,000 lives in Europe alone.

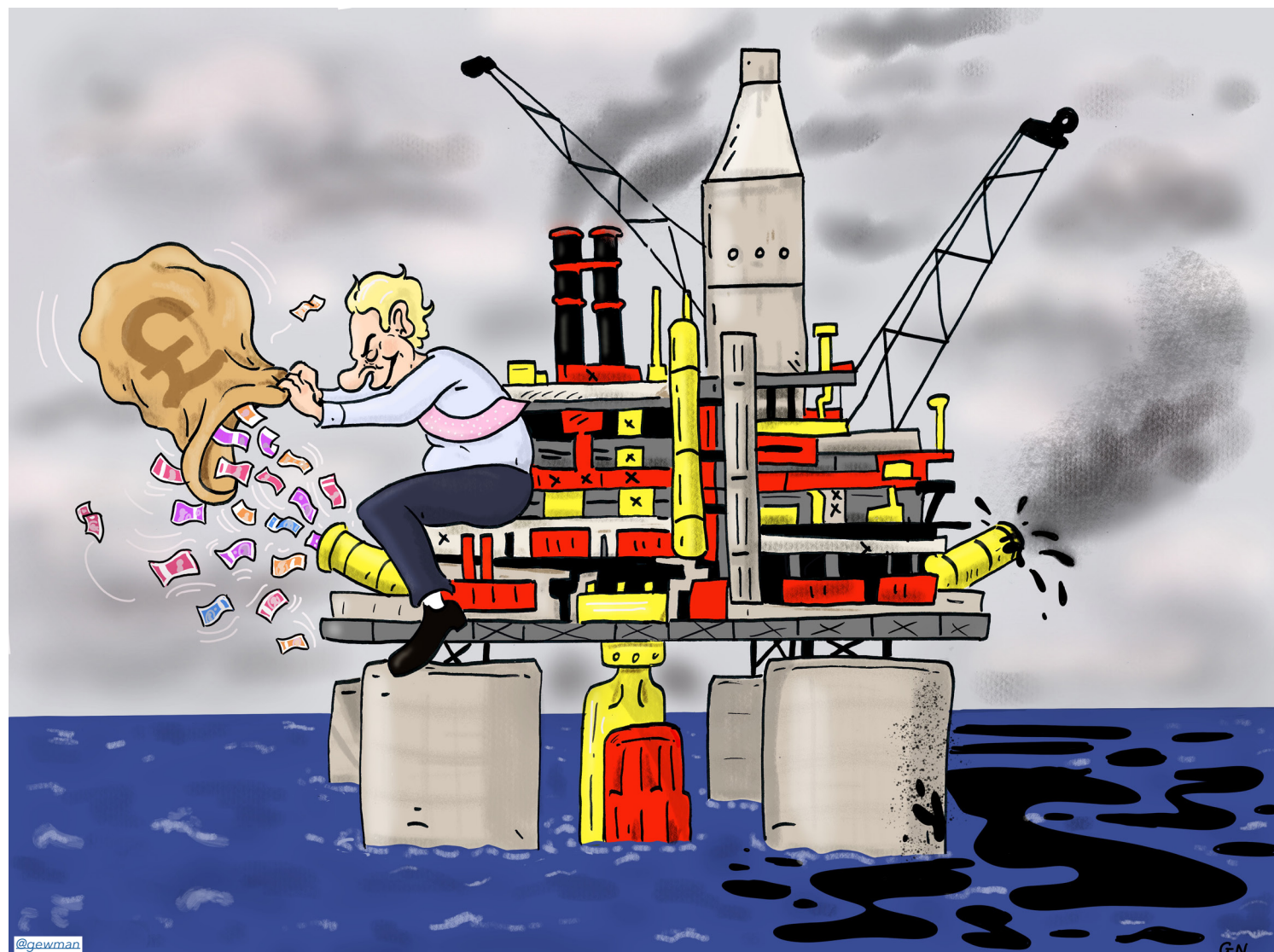
Beyond these immediate casualties, the heat also brings into view feedback loops and tipping points we have long talked about.

The heat transforms rich ecosystems into tinder. Although wildfire is a naturally occurring phenomena and many ecosystems have evolved to adapt to periodic wildfire, rising temperatures mean fewer but larger infernos. Wildfires in Spain, Greece, Algeria, Italy and Canada have broken records for carbon emissions. The Canadian wildfires released an estimated 100 million tonnes of CO₂.

During the stable climate of the Holocene, ecosystems would bounce back after wildfires. The increasing scale and intensity of Anthropocene wildfires is pushing these same ecosystems into terminal collapse and destroying important carbon sinks.

Some of the worse heatwaves in recent years have been in the Arctic circle. This June Siberia experienced temperatures of 39.6C. These heatwaves are melting the permafrost, releasing methane that has been trapped in the ice for millions of years. Methane is a greenhouse gas roughly 82 times more potent than CO₂ (over a 20-year period).

90% of the heat from global warming is absorbed by the oceans. Alongside fertiliser runoff and the dumping of sewage, rising sea temperatures are a major cause of hypoxic deadzones. Warmer water holds less oxygen, stim-



ulates oxygen-depleting organisms and sustains less life. Marine heatwaves are also disrupting relatively stable and predictable global weather patterns and increase the risk of extreme weather. The melting of the ice caps is further reducing the albedo effect (ice reflects more solar radiation than liquid water). This leads to further warming and more rapid melt of polar ice caps.

Alongside the heat, the increased CO₂ is driving ocean acidification, which also depletes the amount of life in the ocean and depletes a further carbon sink.

Human efforts to respond to the heat are also adding to greenhouse effects. Adapting to the heat requires resources and energy. China broke records for energy consumption this month as people fired up their air conditioning units and electric fans. About 10% of world electricity generation is used by the world's two billion air conditioning

units. Low carbon alternatives are available, but carbon-intensive technology is more profitable, so those alternatives have not been developed.

Air conditioning is a typically neo-liberal solution to rising temperatures. 70% of air conditioning units are in private residences. Each household cools their own air by pumping out waste heat and emissions and increasing outside temperatures.

Night-time temperatures in Phoenix, Arizona, are about 1C higher due to the "heat island effect", and that in a city which has experienced rising numbers of heat related deaths, especially among the homeless population.

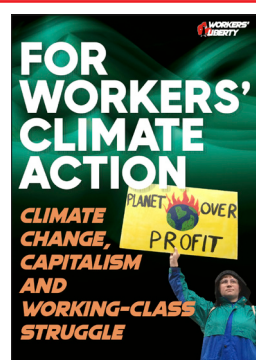
In the Tunisian port town of Sfax, migrants from sub-Saharan Africa report having to "rent" shade from people-smuggling gangs to avoid the lethal effects of direct sunlight. As comfortable environmental conditions become increasingly scarce, capitalists see opportunities for further commodification and profit-making.

The World Meteorological Organisation now says it is more likely than not that we will exceed 1.5C warming

by 2026. We are on a rising curve of global temperatures. That will continue to steepen as long as annual emissions rise.

Emissions will fall eventually – but either through conscious human effort to take fossil fuels and the Earth's resources into common ownership and regulate their use, or through economic slump driven by the breakdown of ecological conditions we had previously taken for granted. Already we have an unprecedented movement of people seeking access to a liveable part of the planet and running up against brutal border regimes. Capitalism both exacerbates the crisis and limits our chances of surviving the consequences.

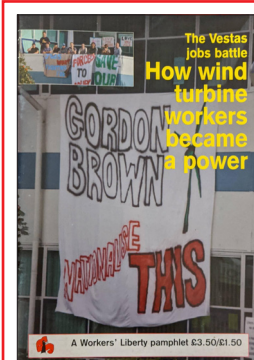
Against the chaos and cruelty of our world that is parcelled off and exploited as private property, we stand for common ownership, democratic economic planning and international workers' solidarity. □



Arm yourself with the ideas needed in the fight to halt and reverse climate change, 60 pages £3. Now as audio or PDF. □ bit.ly/shop-wl

August schedule

Solidarity is skipping some weeks in August. No.682 will be 23 August; 683, 5 Sep; then back to our usual weekly schedule. □



Wind turbine workers occupied their factory in 2009, demanding it be nationalised and remain open. □ bit.ly/shop-wl

Minimum Service Law passes: demand repeal, prepare defiance!

By Gerry Bates

On 20 July the Tories' Minimum Service Levels bill passed into law. The government, in collaboration with employers but over their heads if it sees fit, now has the power to formulate "minimum service levels" in rail, health, education services, fire and rescue, border security and nuclear decommissioning. Setting those levels is likely to take some months.

Employers can then issue "work notices" compelling workers to work during strikes to provide the minimum service. Unions which organise strikes and do not make "reasonable efforts" to ensure their members comply with work notices could face injunctions to make the whole strike unlawful. Individual workers refusing "work notices" will be open to dismissal.

The Free Our Unions campaign is working for resistance on three fronts.

The legislation says employers "may" issue work notices, not "must". The SNP First Minister of Scotland, Humza Yousaf, has already [said](#) the Scottish government will "never issue or enforce" work notices. The Welsh government has [declared](#) that it will do nothing to implement the Minimum Service law. On 13 July the Labour council in Islington, north London, passed a similar policy.

Unions must demand that other employers make similar commitments.

Local authorities controlled by anti-Tory parties could commit to refuse to issue work notices in the event of strikes by education workers in local authority



schools. The Labour-led Greater London Assembly under Mayor Sadiq Khan could say it will not issue work notices in the event of strikes by Transport for London workers. Labour mayoralities in Greater Manchester and Merseyside, which are directly involved in transport provision, could do likewise.

These demands can be campaigned for politically, via union links to Labour and campaigns of lobbying and protest.

Unions could also launch disputes and industrial action ballots, and potentially strikes, to pursue the demand. Such strikes would test the limits of

existing laws designed to outlaw "political" strikes. There is a strong legal argument that a strike to demand an employer commits to refusing to issue work notices would be a legitimate "trade dispute".

Choice

Some employers, of course, will issue work notices. The first time a union calls a strike is called in an affected sector and a work notice issued, the union will have to choose between making "reasonable efforts" to ensure its members comply, or refusing, and then facing a court injunction against the whole strike and fines for contempt of court if it goes ahead.

Free Our Unions believes we must organise to ensure our unions defy the injunctions. This a step up from anything unions have done against anti-strike laws in the last 40 years, but a necessary one.

Most trade unions have longstanding policies opposing all anti-union laws and supporting their repeal. But there has been remarkably little active campaigning on the issue. A demonstration in October 2022 organised by Free Our Unions in conjunction with Earth Strike UK, some hastily-organised midweek demonstrations called by the RMT, and a token effort by the TUC, have been

the only public, on-the-streets activities in opposition to the Minimum Service Levels Bill.

Several unions have policies to call a national demonstration against anti-strike laws. None has done so. But even now a proper-sized demonstration could have an impact. It would send a message to the government that our movement is not accepting the new law as a fait accompli, not simply shrugging and hoping to "box clever" around it.

Specific campaigning to demand an incoming Labour government makes the widest possible commitment to repeal not only the newest law but all anti-strike laws, including those from the Thatcher era, is also needed. Starmer still says he will repeal the Minimum Service Law and the Trade Union Act 2016. But without significant pressure, a Starmer-led Labour government is certain to compromise as much as it can with the status quo.

Workers need a full right to strike – in the manner of our choosing, over issues of our choosing, at a time of our choosing. □

• Adapted from Free Our Unions, freeourunions.org

Strikes

From 27 June: Workers at St Mungo's homeless charity (Unite) on indefinite strike

From 3 July: Brighton university workers (UCU) strike indefinitely against redundancies

From 24 July: Camden traffic wardens (Unison) strike indefinitely, over pay

4-8 August: Baggage handlers and other ground staff at Gatwick Airport (Unite) strike

11-15 August: NHS junior doctors (BMA) strike

For other and more local strikes, see bit.ly/ro-up

Ballots

19 June-31 August: Junior doctors (BMA) re-ballot

2-16 August: Scottish junior doctors (BMA) vote on offer

3-31 August: Civil servants in England and Wales (PCS) ballot on pay offer

Transform: new party, or a waste of time?



Antidoto

By Jim Denham

A report in the *Morning Star* of 26 July announced “Starmer’s benefits stance prompts bid for new party”. It was a news item, but it read more like a plug: “Figures from the labour movement have called for the creation of a new party ‘Transform’, warning that Sir Keir Starmer is ‘planning to follow the same brutal policies as the Tories’.” The report informed us that the initiative includes the Breakthrough Party, Left Unity and the People’s Alliance of the Left, “with more groups reportedly set to join in the coming weeks.”

Wikipedia informs us that the Breakthrough Party was founded in 2021 “in response to the 2020 Labour Party leadership election” and in January 2022 announced a “memorandum of understanding” with the Northern Independence Party, the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition and Left Unity “under the name People’s Alliance of The Left”. Somewhere along the line, TUSC jumped ship, but essentially it seems that the three component parts of Transform are, in fact, the same people under different names.

According to the MS report, “other supporters include former Labour women’s committee and Momentum NCG member Solma Ahmed and writer

and former Green Party speaker Derek Wall”. The report also quotes the Bakers’ Union president Ian Hodson saying something that could be taken as support for a new left-wing party. This appears to be a welcome for Transform. Not so simple, given another article in the same issue of the MS.

A welcome would be consistent with the MS’s increasingly shrill (though often justified) denunciations of the Labour Party and Starmer, its hero-worship of Jeremy Corbyn, its support for the conspiratorial antisemitic film *Oh Jeremy Corbyn: The Big Lie*, and its enthusiasm for Jamie Driscoll running as an independent. It has to be said, though, that the repeated denunciations of Starmer’s “authoritarianism” ring a little hollow, coming as they do from a paper that uncritically eulogises Xi Jinping’s leadership of the Communist Party of China. The equally uncritical adulation of Welsh Labour First Minister Mark Drakeford remains a mystery.

The other article in question in the 26 July MS is by regular columnist and former Corbyn adviser Andrew Murray. It itemises the “heavy legacy of failure” that litters “the well trodden road” of attempts to form a new socialist party in recent years ... the Socialist Labour Party (“secured little traction”) ... the Socialist Alliance (“the ‘war on terror’ provided the coup de grace”) ... the Scottish Socialist Party (“It fell apart in a baroque story involving Sheridan, a sex club in Manchester and allegations



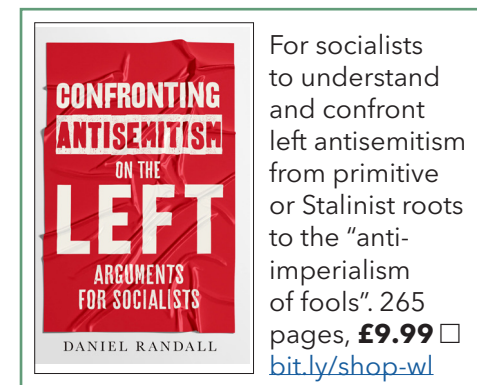
of perjury”) ... Respect Mk1 (“fell apart in another painful dispute”) ... Respect Mk2 (“its second going triggered by an unedifying argument over Julian Assange’s alleged sexual conduct”) ... Left Unity (“tried to transpose experiences from abroad without success”) ... the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition (“still in the field attracting derisory votes”) ... the Workers Party (“borderline moribund and its pitch – ‘for the workers, not the wokers’ – borderline *Daily Express*”).

Interestingly, Murray makes no mention of the recent electoral fortunes of the party of which he is a member, the Communist Party of Britain. Nor of his assessment now of his argument within the CPB around 2004 for supporting Respect (the CPB majority demurred). Or of the No2EU coalition in 2009, which the CPB did back, alongside the RMT, with the Socialist Party doing the

legwork. “Can any general lessons be drawn from this sorry narrative?” asks Murray.

He goes on to provide a rambling semi-answer that amounts to “don’t bother” but, maybe, look to “some alliance of independent socialist candidates coming together from Jeremy Corbyn to Jamie Driscoll, and any number of councillors.” But this rather pathetic hope, which would of course result in the expulsion of any Labour members who got involved, is not put forward with any degree of enthusiasm and is at least partially contradicted by Murray’s final proposition... wait for a Labour government and let Starmer do the heavy lifting:

“It may be that the experience of Starmer in power, a continuation of neoliberal authoritarianism, allied to growing working-class militancy and still-fresh memories of insurgent Corbynism will generate the required momentum (no pun) to make a new effort at socialist organisation sustainable.” □



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

Ideas for Freedom 2023: uplifting and nuanced

By Dylan Seah

Over the four days 13-16 July 2023, Workers’ Liberty held its annual festival of socialist ideas, Ideas For Freedom.

It is rare that different groups on the left come together in person to debate their differences with one another. Ideas for Freedom featured not one but two discussions between different left groups – a debate between Socialist Party and Workers’ Liberty on how socialists should relate to the Labour Party, and a debate between people from the Green Party, Workers’ Power and Workers’ Liberty on how the left should organise and regroup itself in order to make interventions in wider politics.

The festival kicked off on Thursday 13th with a walking tour in Southwark which brought to life the 1926 general strike. On Friday, a screening of Pakistani film *Joyland*, an intensely dramatic film about how the ideology of gender causes all of us pain, left many of us stunned.

The jam-packed programme for Saturday and Sunday 15-16 July had a strong emphasis on anti-racist politics. In one session, author Kenan Malik discussed the themes of his book, *Not So Black and White* with Camila Bassi, author of *Outcast: How Jews were Banished from the Anti-Racist Imagination*.

In another anti-racism workshop, writer Ralph Leonard

and socialist activist Sara Lee discussed the history of race and how capitalism produces and reproduces race, especially in the labour market. Common to all the sessions on anti-racist politics was the idea that we must fight for the labour movement to take up specific and explicit anti-racist demands in order to truly unite workers.

In keeping with the theme of “Workers of the World Unite,” participants heard from Ukrainian trade unionists about their fight against both Russian imperialism and Ukrainian capitalism. Workers’ Liberty was proud to host Denys Pilash, activist with Ukrainian socialist group Sotsialnyi Rukh, who argued for Ukraine’s right of

self-determination and their right to have weapons to defend themselves.

Ideas for Freedom also featured talks by Iranian, Chinese, Indian and Hong Kong socialist activists about feminist and working-class struggles in these countries.

Perhaps what was most inspiring was the plenary, where a panel of trade union militants talked about their successes and ongoing struggles in the strike wave.

We were uplifted by stories of how the Abellio bus drivers in Twickenham held out against their intransigent bosses and eventually won an inflation-level pay rise; of how rank-and-file NHS workers went up against the trade

union bureaucracy and prevailed in getting members to reject a 5% pay offer; and of how an ongoing battle is being waged inside the NEU to also reject a poor deal.

The fight to democratise our trade unions is crucial, and much was said about Assistant General Secretary of PCS, John Moloney, taking a workers’ wage and returning the rest of his official salary to union funds.

One participant described the politics at Ideas for Freedom as “sensible and nuanced.” Workers’ Liberty is a group that is able to develop nuanced perspectives on things because it is willing to discuss and debate its ideas out in the open. □

Why are thousands of women jailed each year?



Women's Fightback

By Justine Kennedy

On 12 June 2023 Carla Foster was sentenced to a 28-month custodial term for carrying out an abortion that exceeded the legal term limit of 24 weeks. Foster's sentence has since been reduced on appeal to a 14 month suspended sentence and she has been released from prison. This case has reignited calls for the full decriminalisation of abortion. Demonstrations are planned for 2 September.

The Offences Against the Person Act 1861 (OAPA), the Victorian law that Foster was prosecuted under, was passed during a time when women had little medical and legal rights over their bodies. OAPA came into law 20 years before married women could own property and 70 years before all women could vote.

The ethics of Victorian medicine

were almost unimaginable by modern standards, especially for women. Most physicians believed women should not be given pain relief during childbirth or else they would become sexually aroused and abandon any self-control.

Until Carla Foster's trial, the conversation on reproductive rights in the UK was largely around the roll back of rights in the US. While the right to abortion is stronger in the UK, abortion still sits somewhere between healthcare and legal paternalism. The decriminalisation of abortion would remove consensual abortion away from criminal law to be regulated as healthcare.

The most vulnerable women are affected by the current criminalisation, usually survivors of domestic violence and those who cannot travel.

Carla Foster's trial should also make feminists turn to wider reform of the justice system. The issue of prison reform is important for all genders, but the intersection of gender-based oppression and class society makes the need for prison reform for women an acute issue.

Around 85% of women in prison are in for non-violent crimes. The justice system's reliance on imprisonment essentially criminalises poverty amongst women who have largely been failed by society (DV survivors, care leavers, etc).

Given that women are the primary caregiver in most families, when a woman is sent to prison her children are punished as well. Carla Foster was one of many mothers in the prison system. Three out of five women in prison are mothers. 95% of children are removed from their homes when their mothers go to prison.

One can only speculate what would have happened to Foster and her children if the full sentence had been upheld. Precedent dictates that she would have lost her home, her job, and temporarily custody of her children. Even though she was quickly released from prison, her short stint could have been enough to leave her without a home and job long term. She may have been one of the 4% that leave prison to have to sleep rough. Without stable housing,



she would not be able to regain custody of her children.

Like many women, Carla Foster should have never been in prison. The laws criminalising her own access to her body should have never been in place, same as the criminalisation of drugs and of non-payment of fines for non-payment of a TV licence. For many women the right to abortion is about the right to liberty and control over one's life.

Feminists who are outraged by the criminalisation of abortion that largely affects society's most vulnerable women should seek to widen their understanding of women's autonomy to curb wider criminalisation and the imprisonment of thousands of women every year in the UK. □

The German October



Eric Lee

By Eric Lee

This month marks the 100th anniversary of the decision by the Communist International to launch an armed uprising in Germany. The uprising, which took place in October that year, was a dismal failure. It also marked the final attempt by a Communist Party anywhere in Europe to come to power in the same way that the Bolsheviks had done in Russia.

The uprising was not something the German working class needed or desired. The Weimar Republic, however imperfect, was a democracy. Workers could vote for the Communist Party or the Social Democrats or any other party they wanted. In the 1920 elec-

tions, the Communists polled only a tenth of what the Social Democrats won, but their support was growing.

The uprising was needed by the Soviet regime, not by the Germans. The goal was to create a Soviet Germany – which would do more than anything else to ensure the survival of the Soviet regime in Moscow.

When the Bolsheviks seized power in November 1917, they bet everything on world revolution. Initially, there was great hope that several central and Eastern European countries would follow the Russian model. Soviet regimes were established in Hungary and Bavaria. They did not last long.

Left-wing critics of the Bolsheviks had argued all along that Russia was not ripe for socialism. The leading Bolsheviks, among them Lenin and Trotsky, knew this. But they were convinced that the "dictatorship of the proletariat"

which they had established needed to only survive until other, more advanced countries had their revolutions. And the most important of these was Germany.

By the late summer of 1923, Germany was in crisis – indeed, it faced several existential threats. French troops had occupied the Ruhr. Hyperinflation had caused an unprecedented economic crisis. And a little known right-wing politician named Adolf Hitler was preparing an attempt to seize power in Munich, which ultimately took place a month after the abortive Communist uprising.

In Moscow, the leader of the Comintern, Zinoviev, called for the German Communist Party (KPD) to seize power. He was supported by, among others, Trotsky. Key Soviet leaders, including Karl Radek, were secretly sent to help the KPD – but in vain. The "German Oc-

tober" was largely confined to Hamburg and lasted a couple of days before being crushed. The Soviet gamble had failed. The "proletarian dictatorship" established by the Bolsheviks was now completely isolated.

The long-term results were catastrophic for the Germans and the Soviets. In Germany, it dealt a severe blow to the Communist Party from which they never recovered. The relationship between the KPD and the Social Democrats, already a difficult one, became much worse. The two parties eventually could not bring themselves together to fight the fascists. A decade later, the KPD was outlawed and crushed by the Nazi dictatorship.

And in the Soviet Union, the eventual result of the 1923 events in Germany was to strengthen Stalin's hand and contribute to his ideas about "socialism in one country" and

the abandonment of the goal of world revolution.

Looking back at the "German October" one hundred years later, it must be seen as a desperate bid by the Bolsheviks to keep their revolution alive. The difficult situation faced by the Soviets in 1923 was entirely of their own making, having launched a successful coup which proved impossible to export to other countries. They gambled on other revolutions in Europe which never happened, and the events of late 1923 in Germany were the final blow. After this, Stalinism became all but inevitable. □

• Eric Lee is the founder editor of LabourStart, writing here in a personal opinion columns.

• As regular readers will know, by definition personal opinion columns often conflict with the views of the editorial team, and often debate develops in following issues...

A parent's view on trans rights in schools

By Iris Renboga

As a parent and as an educator, I have followed the development of the guidance for schools around transgender pupils from both perspectives.

As a parent of a transgender child, this has made me think deeply around the rights of the parent to know what is going on with their child. Do I want to know that my child is questioning their gender, using a new name and new pronouns, exploring what it is to be gender non-binary? Yes. Of course I do. However the how and the when of that discussion is of supreme importance.

My son came out in his own time. He

had been using he-they pronouns for a year with his friends and his sister. He came out to me and my partner once he was more confident and able to express himself clearly. I wonder what would have happened if someone else had told me the moment he started questioning his gender.

A compulsion to be told at once is what the government wants to introduce. The Attorney General has deemed it [unlawful](#) under discrimination laws, so the government is reworking its plans.

Had a teacher contacted me before my son was ready to come out, I truly believe this would have had a seriously

detrimental impact on his mental health and on our relationship. He would no longer have the space and privacy to work it through for himself.

This issue is not just the safeguarding issues about outing students to non-supportive, perhaps transphobic parents. It is about the mental health issues of outing students to anyone before they are ready.

The government guidance is also looking at allowing teachers and other students to deadname and misgender trans students to prevent anyone feeling "uncomfortable".

As a parent, I find the thought of my child being subjected to that by exactly

those adults who are there to protect and educate beyond abhorrent.

This guidance should provide educated and evidenced guidance of how to support those students who are questioning their gender. To help them explore and find themselves, as we do with all students. To provide safe spaces to talk without fear of judgement or unnecessary consequence.

So as a parent, as a parent of a transgender child, and as an educator, I will fight this guidance any way I can. □

• Petition and template for writing to your MP at tnb.org.uk

Free Sarah Jane Baker

By Angela Driver

Sarah Jane Baker is currently a political prisoner. On Wednesday 12 July 2023 she was arrested because of a speech she made at Trans Pride (8 July). In it she said, "If you see a TERF, punch them in the fucking face".

It was wrong, and she has publicly apologised for it. It was said in anger, to be outrageous and to give confidence to her audience. She didn't imagine that anyone would actually act on it. Since her release from prison in 2019 Sarah has never been violent to anyone. She has been the victim of transphobic assaults and harassment but has never retaliated.

The initial response from the police was to take no further action. Sarah was under probation, for crimes she committed over 30 years ago, but probation also decided that her speech would not result in

her recall to prison. However, after an intervention from the Tory Home Secretary Suella Braverman, both the police and probation reversed their decisions.

Sarah was charged under section 4a of the Public Order Act 1986, and her life licence was recalled. She was arrested and imprisoned, and will remain there indefinitely.

It seems clear this action is politically motivated, and if this government can force police and probation to change their minds, in the pursuit of their culture war, then the threat to protesters and freedom of speech in all forms is clear.

To add to the injustice Sarah has been sent to a male jail. She is challenging this, and hopes to be transferred to a female jail soon.

Sarah Jane Baker is a well-known campaigner on trans rights and a variety of other issues. She has worked on

prisoners' rights, Black Lives Matter, Stop HS2... Sarah has always championed freedom of expression and identity and continues to do so, even whilst behind bars.

She has significant support, and a campaign to free her has formed. There have been two well-attended demonstrations outside the court where her case is being dealt with, and more demonstrations planned for future court sessions.

She will be appearing via video link on 17 August at Westminster Magistrates' Court, and her trial will be on 31 August in the City of London Magistrates' court. There will be demonstrations both days from 10am.

Future events to raise awareness are planned including exhibitions and performances. As well as being a campaigner Sarah is an author of two books: *Transgender Behind Prison Walls* and *Life Imprisonment: an unofficial guide*, the latter published under the name Alan Baker. She has another book due to be published in the coming weeks.

She is an award-winning composer, artist, violinist, guitarist and poet. Future events will feature her art in its many forms as well as contributions and collaborations from her many creative friends and supporters. □

• More: [Facebook](#), Twitter [@freesarahjbaker](#), email freesarahjanebakerinfo@proton.me
• Crowdfunder: bit.ly/f-sjb
• Messages of support for Sarah to: freesarahjanebaker@proton.me

Regrouping in local government

By a Unison member

Unison union representatives on the local government National Joint Council (through which, with other unions, they negotiate on pay) met on 11 July following the 23 May-4 July industrial action ballot on pay, which fell foul of the Tories' 2016 legal requirement for a 50% turnout.

Only a small number of branches hit the 50% threshold, many schools got over the threshold and some other councils got over 40%. The Unison NJC reps discussed continuing the dispute, but only representatives from the north west supported the idea. Unite is still consulting members, but action over this year's pay offer looks unlikely.

We still believe that Unison and the other NJC unions in England and Wales should, following a 75% vote to reject the offer of £1,925 (£2,352 for London members) flat-rate, go back to the employers to ask for more.

Leaders of the school workers' unions are supporting acceptance of a 6.5% deal, but it is still possible that some pay action could restart in the autumn. Any council worker earning more than £29,600 per year will get a lower pay rise than if they were teachers.

Achieving a 31% turnout up in the May-July ballot, up from about 15% in the last formal ballot almost two



years ago, shows that Unison is learning some lessons.

We need put in a bolder flat rate claim for April 2024, including a £15ph minimum wage, and also to start a real campaign against council cuts (the Tories promise more).

In Scotland, for a second year in a row, Unison is balloting key workers where they have maximum impact and are organised. From 31 July, Unison school staff members are being balloted for action over the their pay offer. Key workers in Glasgow have already been balloted (to impact the World Cycling championships, 3-13 August), and waste workers in four councils, of which two reached the 50% threshold. The plan is for action in schools in September which will be on behalf of all council and school workers.

Unison Scotland's claim is for £4,000 or 12%, and the offer is 5% plus slightly more for different grades (the highest paid workers being offered 6% in total). □



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Driscoll's opt-out is a misstep

By Dan Katz

North of Tyne Labour mayor, Jamie Driscoll, has resigned from the Labour Party. He intends to run as an independent for the position of North East mayor.

In June Driscoll was barred from the selection longlist for the role by the Labour leadership.

On 17 July Labour chose Kim McGuinness, currently Northumbria Police commissioner, as Labour's candidate. McGuinness, the clear choice of Labour leader Keir Starmer, apparently polled 76% of a turnout of just under 50% of eligible Labour members. She easily beat the only other candidate, former MEP Paul Brannen. McGuinness says her priority is reducing child poverty in the region.

The election for North East mayor will be held in May 2024.

Driscoll, a Momentum member, has been shabbily treated. He was allegedly prevented from standing because he hosted an event about his films for the well-known director, Ken Loach. Loach, a supporter of former leader Jeremy Corbyn, is an expelled Party member.

Driscoll declared he would run for North East mayor if he was able to



quickly raise £25,000. He got that amount within a few hours and has raised more than £120,000 in eight days. More than 5,000 people have made mostly small donations of five and ten pounds to support his campaign.

Clearly there are a lot of Labour members who believe Starmer's intervention into the election contest is unreasonable and unfair. They are right about that.

Eight of the 22 constituency Labour Parties in the north east refused to endorse any mayoral candidate in protest,

and three did not meet to nominate.

At least five local Labour councillors have resigned from the Party. Some party members have also left; no doubt others will let their Labour membership drift or refuse to help Labour's campaign in protest at the action against Driscoll.

Driscoll may win. It is also possible he will split the left vote and let the Tories win the mayor post. In his resignation letter Driscoll slated Starmer: "You've U-turned on so many promises: £28 billion to tackle the climate emergency, free school meals, ending university tui-

tion fees, reversing NHS privatisation... to say Britain is broken, and then claim things are now so difficult we will abandon any plan to fix it [is wrong]."

In this Driscoll is also right. However, Driscoll went on to say he had no alternative but to resign and stand against Labour.

That's not true. He should have stayed in the Labour Party and organised the left to fight Starmer. That is a difficult, unglamorous job. It promises no immediate headlines. But it makes no sense to step out of that fight on the (probable) eve of a Labour government when there is currently little prospect of organising a substantial, rational, socialist organisation to the left of Labour.

The forces around Driscoll will dissipate. Driscoll seems likely to run a limited, parochial campaign. And the Labour Party will trawl through lists of those who are backing him, expelling those who do so. Driscoll's backers will also, therefore, exclude themselves from important future battles against the Labour right.

We need to organise to force Labour to abolish the anti-union laws, tax the rich to rebuild the NHS, and nationalise the privatised public utilities. And that can't be done by expelled people isolated in a single region. □

Labour after the by-elections

By Simon Nelson

Two by-election defeats on 20 July and a narrow victory in a third have damaged the Tories.

A big victory for Labour in Selby and Ainsty for Keir Mather, a former CBI staffer who had previously worked for Wes Streeting and for *Times* journalist Matthew Parris, is exactly what Starmer would have hoped for. The derisory Labour vote in Somerset and Frome reflects the Lib-Dems going all out to target the seat. It was never likely to see a Labour victory.

But the scale of the vote squeeze there, and the Tories holding on in Uxbridge and South Ruislip, should tell us that Labour's current Steve-Reed-run ultra-Blairite electoral machine cannot guarantee victory in a general election.

Labour's abandonment of the pledge to scrap the two-child benefit cap, and a fight in the National Policy Forum

(22-23 July) in which Unite believe that workers' rights guarantees have been watered down, will further alienate Labour members. Starmer's ongoing refusal to make any "unfunded spending commitments" means, in fact, saying very little.

In Uxbridge a clear flip-flop on policy was seized upon by the Tory candidate. The Uxbridge and South Ruislip selection was already mired in a now familiar controversy between the central party and the local members. The selection committee was dissolved and the candidate who had only one ward nomination, Camden councillor Danny Beales, was selected.

Beales, who we have to assume is leadership-loyal, was licensed to change his mind on the extension of the Ultra Low Emissions Zone (ULEZ), coming out against it as the Tories attacked the policy of the Labour Mayor of London.

So voters heard mayor Sadiq Khan saying he would press on

with the policy, viewing it as essential to clean up London's air; Danny Beales saying now is not the right time to extend ULEZ; and Keir Starmer saying he understood there were concerns about the way the policy was being applied, but would neither call for it to be halted nor say it should go ahead.

Subsequently Starmer has made noises which suggest stalling ULEZ. He certainly opposes Labour saying anything radical, saying in his NPF speech: "[W]e are doing something very wrong if policies put forward by the Labour Party end up on each and every Tory leaflet."

Many policies of a halfway radical Labour government, even during the timidity of the Corbyn period, would of course provoke outrage from the Tories. Starmer's reaction to Uxbridge is likely to include a further watering down of Labour's already meagre environmental commitments. He and his allies are allowing the Tories to set the agenda, and

to have a free-fire zone on an apparent "culture wars" issue.

The ULEZ, in fact first planned by Boris Johnson as mayor in 2015, introduced in inner London in 2019 and then the area between the North and South Circular roads in 2021, and due to extend to outer London on 29 August 2023, is a blunt instrument and will disadvantage some lower-income and working-class people with older cars.

Integrated, free public transport is one answer to that, and improved support for those who will need it on the scrappage or fixing-up of non-compliant vehicles. (Other modifications have been suggested which can ease the burden for low-income old-vehicle owners while reducing the emissions).

94% of vehicles in the current zone are already ULEZ compliant. 85% in the outer London boroughs are already compliant, according to Transport for London. ULEZ has 58%-24% opinion-poll sup-

port in London. The policy has cut air pollution by 26% in the area within the North and South Circulars. On 28 July the High Court has now dismissed a legal challenge to ULEZ expansion from five London Boroughs and Surrey County Council.

When people are dying and suffering chronic illnesses from poor air quality, to dance to the Tories' tune on this is a poor political choice the leadership are willing to make.

The Labour leadership wants to fight an election "barnacle free", i.e. free of any policies that might fall foul of the Tories' "culture wars" or increased public spending.

These by-elections warn against that approach. Labour activists should step up their attempts to get radical policy back on the agenda. Many local Labour Parties will be deciding motions to the 8-11 October Labour conference in their September meetings: see bit.ly/mo-pe for left-wing template motions. □

Stop the charges for migrants! Tax the rich!

By Martin Thomas

Rishi Sunak on 13 July said: "We're accepting the headline recommendations of the pay review bodies in full. But we will not fund them by borrowing more or increasing your taxes... Government departments have had to find savings and efficiencies elsewhere in order to prioritise paying public sector workers more".

Further: "We're going to increase the charges that we have for migrants who are coming to this country when they apply for visas... [and] the immigration health surcharge, which is the levy that they pay to access the NHS".

The visa-fee increase is earmarked for the police pay rise, and the health-surcharge increase for the doctors' pay offer.

Families already routinely have to pay tens of thousands of pounds in repeated visa charges to settle in the UK, more than in other countries.

The NHS surcharge for immigrants, payable with the visa application, is £624 per year.

Tax the rich instead! Just a mild wealth tax and other tweaks would raise [£37 billion](#) a year.

A twist to the story is that the Tories are overestimating the cost of the pay rises. A good chunk of it will come back to the government via increased income tax and VAT receipts. But that extra doesn't reflect in department budgets. The government wants to keep the extra in reserve. The net cost of, for example, the teachers' pay rise, is of the order of some hundreds of millions.

The government will spend about £100 billion this year on interest payments to capitalist enterprises which hold government IOUs (bonds), and [£40 billion this year](#), £40 billion next, on compensating the Bank of England for losses incurred on (i.e. subsidies given

to banks from) its Quantitative Easing effort from 2009, when it bought up bonds (IOUs) from banks and other firms in order to boost their cash reserves and avoid a worse credit-crunch.

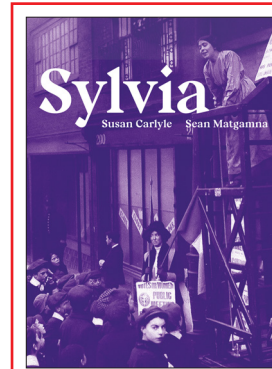
The answer isn't as simple as "demand the government stops those payments", because stopping them would crash the UK's relation with world financial and payment systems, so is hardly imaginable short of full-scale economic collapse or a socialist revolution also spreading to other technologically-advanced countries. Taking the whole of high finance into public ownership, and so annexing what are now high-finance profits for public purposes, would be the best first step.

The size of the numbers shows up the government's whinges about the cost of pay rises, and its rationalising for its anti-migrant moves, as self-serving nonsense.

In fact all the amounts involved in

the pay rises are much smaller than the prediction errors inevitable in government budgets. The issue for the Tories is not to put an exact limit on the government's spending – some £1,200 billion annually – but to use the economic turmoil as a lever for shifting resources from the working class (especially migrants) towards profits. □

• UCU members' protest against the surcharges: bit.ly/m-sur. Abridged. More: bit.ly/tax-r



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

Again on agitating for socialism

By Martin Thomas

The [editorial in Solidarity 680](#) urged readers to help "build up a coherent network of activists, reliable each week in the workplace, in meetings, and on the streets, who educate each other in the principles of working-class solidarity..."

At least one reader has complained: what about those who, through physical or other impairments, find weekly activity unworkable?

Many such people can make valuable contributions. But, I'd argue, that only "works" with a framework created by those who are "reliable each week" about in-person activity out in the world.

This isn't moralism. The class struggle goes on each day, at different levels, and whenever we are not on the spot, others prevail. Bringing people to a comprehensive socialist commitment takes consistent communication on many issues, on many occasions, not just one-off activities, however deft.

A workplace union rep is not effective unless they are reliable and prompt about lis-

tening to and educating their workmates and organising and attending meetings. Only with a core of reps and other activists reliable each week will the workplace union organisation have the capacity to use the contributions of those who are active only sporadically.

Equally, agitation for socialism will be fit for purpose only if a core of activists are reliable and prompt in meetings, protests, picket lines, street stalls, etc. where they can by speech or by distributing papers or leaflets make socialist ideas available and relevant.

There were always "armchair socialists". Always those active in say trade-union work but reluctant to go further. Always the only-half-convinced. Always those overwhelmed by life pressures. But everyone recognised that their ability to make a contribution, or even to know what was going on, depended on more regular activists sustaining activities.

Something has changed with smartphones and social media. Since maybe 2008-9 it is possible to feel in the swim of socialist efforts, and even overloaded in that respect,

with no, or only minimal, out-in-the-world, in-person activity. You get a constant stream of messages via WhatsApp or Instagram or email, and maybe send a few electronic messages yourself, and that seems like saturation.

The other complication is that after decades marked by working-class defeats, the average age among revolutionary socialists is higher these days than at maybe any previous time. The generations brought into activity by 1968 and after, or by the 1984-5 miners' strike, are still central.

As activists get older, they come up against limits. (The present author too: arthritis now; before that, small children, frail parents...) Meanwhile, young activists have come into activity in an era of slower tempos of struggle and where there are few youth movements, and inevitably many of them will adopt slower tempos themselves.

Sad evidence: the new revolutionary socialist groups formed in Britain in the last decade or so, Counterfire, International Socialist Network, RS21, Socialist Alter-

native. When launched, each had sizeable numbers, and talented and experienced organisers and writers. Now ISN has folded. None has a regular publication, though Socialist Alternative has an irregular paper, 37 issues in four years. Generally you see little from any of them, though Soc Alt still does some good union activity.

At a [big early ISN event](#), many were glad about separating from the SWP because they could now be active from home, via the internet, rather than having to go out and sell papers and such. But "socialism without breaking a sweat" doesn't work.

Of course, regular real-world activity will be at different levels. An activist group needs some who are active seven days a week, and will have others who manage two or three activities a week. But all need to be continuously "on the alert"; and the group's ability to help elderly or frail people, or those with heavy caring duties, make a contribution, depends on what the weekly activists do.

The French revolutionary so-

cialist organisation Lutte Ouvrière has many shortcomings, but virtue in the systematic way it trains its members to be regular and reliable in activity. Because of that, its members seldom waste energy on half-done efforts, and for most of them the activity is less hectic and stressful than in more disorganised groups.

And because of that also, LO is better than other groups in enabling comrades with severe impairments to make a contribution, and at listening to what those comrades offer. The frail or afflicted socialist for whom it is a big effort just to get to a meeting or a picket line will be drawn in only if they are sure that the younger, fitter members will arrive on time, be well-prepared, follow up well, make the collective activity purposeful.

Pushing for solid weekly activity by those who have good health does not cut across drawing in those with special difficulties, or, for that matter, the half-convinced or erratically convinced. On the contrary, it is the precondition for it. □

Yemen in the wake of the Saudi-Iran deal

By Dan Katz

On 10 March Iranian and Saudi officials signed an agreement in the Chinese capital Beijing which aimed to reduce tensions between the two regional powers.

Normal diplomatic relations, which broke down seven years ago, are being restored. Saudi Arabia cut diplomatic ties in 2016 after its embassy in Iran's capital Tehran was ransacked and set on fire.

On 2 January 2016, 47 people were executed in Saudi Arabia, including a well-known Shia cleric, Nimr al-Nimr. Saudi has a significant Shia minority (about 10% of the 21 million Saudi population, and more than 25% in the east of Saudi Arabia), which is heavily repressed by the sectarian Sunni state. Nimr al-Nimr had led protests in Saudi Arabia against repression of the Shiite Muslim minority.

Protests in Iran against the execution led to a mob attacking the Saudi embassy.

On 6 June 2023 Iran reopened its embassy in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is expected to open its embassy in Tehran soon.

The deal is part of a broader realignment. Saudi Arabia is also restoring relations with Syria and has been attempting to remove itself from the war it has been fighting and sponsoring in Yemen.

Following the Saudis all the Arab Gulf states with the exception of Oman had downgraded or cut ties with Iran in 2016. Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain (with a Shia majority population, ruled over despotically by a Sunni monarchy) also supported Donald Trump's policy of maximum pressure on Iran.

Under the terms of the new agreement Saudi Arabia has promised to stop

funding media outlets agitating against Iran; Iran has apparently pledged to cut back on its arms shipments to the Houthi movement in Yemen.

Old agreements to cooperate on security, terrorism, drug trafficking, sporting and cultural initiatives are also to be revived.

The new deal underlines China's growing influence in the Middle East. The rapprochement will also have an impact in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen where Iran and Saudi have backed opposing political parties and militias.

One immediate impact was to strengthen the Iranian rial, which rose 10% against the US dollar on 11 March. Iran hopes to improve its economy and ease the political isolation created by US-led sanctions aimed at preventing Iran develop nuclear weapons.

Reconciliation talks between the Saudis and Iran had been taking place in Iraq over several years. Iraq, where Iran is a major force, hopes the deal will pave the way for new Saudi investment.

The Saudi-Iran deal was signed eight years after the start of the Saudi intervention into Yemen. The Saudis intervened in 2015, wanting to prevent the largely Shia Houthi movement (also known as Ansar Allah), based in the northern hills, and aligned with Iran, from sweeping to power across the whole of Yemen.

The Saudi intervention has been an expensive, embarrassing failure which has directly led to 15,000 civilian deaths.

The Saudis ran a devastating bombing campaign, disgracefully backed by the US and UK. According to the Yemen Data Project the Saudi-led anti-Houthi coalition carried out 24,676 air raids in Yemen up to January 2022. Air strikes had hit marketplaces, wedding parties,



and schools.

The Saudis aimed to restore the government of Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, which had been driven out of the capital, Sanaa. Hadi had little support inside the country and spent most of the subsequent war in Saudi Arabia. In April 2022 Hadi resigned and made way for a new ruling council.

The contending sides in the Yemen war are all reactionary. The Houthi movement's main slogan is: "God is the greatest, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews, Victory to Islam." None of the contending forces can be backed. Their war aims are contemptible. But peace of any sort is better than the war.

Saudi Arabia also blockaded Yemen, preventing not only Iranian arms shipments to the Houthi movement, but also oil tankers and humanitarian aid docking at Hodeidah port in western Yemen. Saudi Arabia's ally, the UAE, also put thousands of soldiers on the ground in southern Yemen, only withdrawing in 2019.

The Saudi war has made things worse in Yemen, which has the world's worst humanitarian crisis. The UN estimates that 60% of the 377,000 deaths in Yemen between 2015 and 2022 were caused by food insecurity and lack of health care, both linked to the Saudi bombing. Three quarters of Yemen's population – or 25 million people – are in need of humanitarian aid; five million are at risk from famine; one million

have been affected by cholera.

Four million Yemenis are internally displaced.

In February 2021 US President Joe Biden ended US support for the Saudis' offensive operations in Yemen. He also revoked the designation of the Houthi movement as a terrorist organisation. However, the US continues to sell arms to the Saudis.

Saudi Arabia has been actively attempting to extract itself from the Yemen war for two years. The UN brokered a ceasefire in April 2022. Active fighting still remains at low levels. This process is taking place within the general framework of Vision 2030, the Saudi attempt to remodel itself from above, modernising its social structures and placing itself at the centre of the Arab world.

The Saudi moves to normalise relations with Iran, and remove itself from the Yemen conflict, should be seen in that context. The Saudi-Iran agreement might well help the prospects of peace in Yemen, but peace also depends on the forces on the ground. The Houthi movement has taken Iranian weapons, but it has substantial autonomy from Iran. It is not just a puppet of Iranian policy.

Peace in Yemen will depend on the Houthi movement's willingness to negotiate, and the coalition government's ability to put forward workable compromises. □

HSBC moves against HK socialists

By Chan Ying

The Nigel Farage bank account episode goes on. The Tories try to claim the moral high ground of defending freedom of expression. What hypocrisy and double standards! They have claimed to support Hong Kongers' fight for freedom and yet have done absolutely nothing about HSBC closing the bank accounts of many Hong Kong activists and exiles.

It's over a month since HSBC [closed down](#) three bank accounts in Hong Kong opened by the League of Social Democrats (LSD) 17 years ago. HSBC has also closed down the personal bank accounts of four of the League's members. HSBC would not give any explanation, other than saying in a letter that it had "carefully taken into account multiple factors and conducted a comprehensive assessment prior to reaching this decision."

The LSD is the only remaining political group still trying to act as an opposition to the HKSAR Government, despite the draconian National Security Laws. Its other bank accounts with the Bank of China and with Hang Seng Bank (a wholly owned subsidiary of HSBC) have also been closed. These closures show that HSBC has chosen to "ignore its social responsibility for the sake of its business in China," said Chan Po-ying, the LSD

Chair, who was fined by the police for conducting a street collection without a permit.

Lost voice

"When an organisation loses its accounts for receiving donations, and is fined for fundraising on the streets, what can it do? It will be waiting for its own death as Hong Kong loses another voice", said former LSD Chair Mr Chau.

On 19th June, Chan wrote to HSBC in London asking

for the closure decision to be reversed: "Your bank's decision will reduce the freedom of expression and freedom of choice of ordinary Hong-kongers and is in violation of your bank's commitments to uphold the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights." To date she has had no reply.

Demand HSBC reinstate the LSD's bank accounts immediately! □

Into the black



Book review

By Bruce Robinson

Reviewing two books that look critically at the mathematics behind the artificial intelligence applications that are becoming more and more prevalent both in science and in everyday life: Junaid Mubeen's Mathematical Intelligence – What we have that machines don't and Justin Joque's Revolutionary Mathematics – artificial intelligence, statistics and the logic of capitalism.

Much critical writing on the recent upsurge of artificial intelligence is focused on its outcomes – for example, systems that perpetuate racism or sexism through a bias derived from the data they use. Both of these books, while acknowledging these end products, go beyond this to look under the bonnet of the currently predominant form of AI, machine learning (ML), to examine critically the mathematics that lies behind it and the philosophical assumptions that lie beneath them – what Joque calls their metaphysics and the “mysteries” they embody – and to suggest ways in which things might be different.

Machine learning operates by finding patterns in a mass of data which can then be used to produce what appears to be intelligent behaviour. This can be the result of a human guiding the process or a machine locating patterns in the data on its own. As the resulting model can be further updated in response to new data, the process by which the model is created and updated is called machine learning. As it is based on induction (reasoning from examples) it cannot produce absolute certainty and thus may always produce an incorrect knowledge. This process of learning has been described as “applied statistics” as it is based on probabilistic reasoning. Joque's book explains the statistical techniques used in detail. Statistical inference takes place through complex mathematical relationships generated on the fly. The process is usually too complex to make how a given result is achieved transparent to humans.

The authors share the view that mathematical truths have to be located in a historical and social context. For example, Mubeen writes that “mathematics takes on rich and diverse forms, all of which are birthed in the context of local environment and experience.” In doing so, he rejects the Platonist and

formalist schools of mathematics that hold respectively that mathematical objects are “abstract entities independent of language, thought or practices” or that mathematics is “a self-contained system of logical truths, each derivable from first principles”.

Mubeen also draws a distinction between calculation – the form of mathematics typically taught at lower levels in schools and used in everyday life and which is readily computable – and what he calls mathematical intelligence which embodies the principles and forms of behaviour typically used by mathematicians. The main part of Mubeen's book is given over to spelling out the principles and their application which results in him showing “what we have that machines don't”.

The shortcomings of ML are resolved by applying these principles, which imply a different division of labour between machine and human and through this shift rehumanise AI as a valid tool to achieve human goals. Mubeen concludes his book by saying “mathematical intelligence is a guidepost to getting us the cognitive allies we want: machines that work alongside us, for the purpose of human flourishing.”

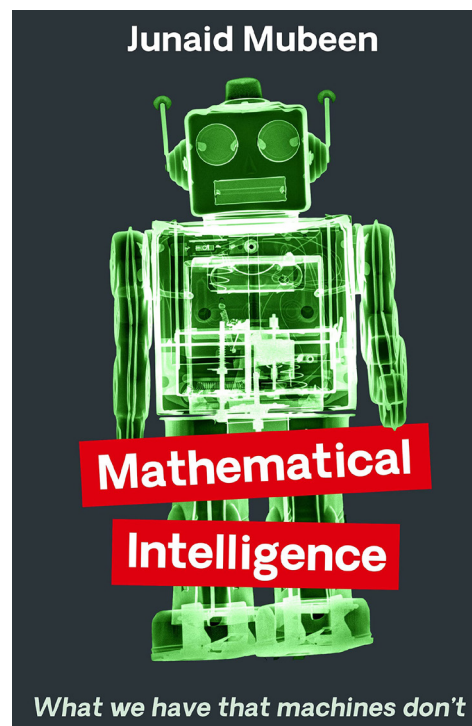
Abstraction

Joque, by contrast, considers the historical development of statistics in parallel with that of capitalism, relating its growth to the development of value, culminating in what he describes as “algorithmic capitalism”. “It is through a fundamentally metaphysical act of ‘making computable’ that statistics and capitalism objectify the world”.

For both Mubeen and Joque abstraction – the process of moving from a messy and complex reality to concepts – is central to deriving algorithms and models. Abstraction when seen as an active human process reinstates human choices and agency in this process. In the case of machine learning this includes the choice and structuring of the data. The actual process is not visible from the final output thus imparting a spurious objectivity to it.

Despite these shared aspects, Mubeen and Joque come to their conclusions from different vantage points: Mubeen as a mathematician and Joque as a Marxist. This obviously brings them to different analyses and conclusions, though they are in many respects compatible. We shall now examine these in more detail.

What then are the seven principles of mathematical intelligence that Mubeen identifies and in what respects do they



highlight deficiencies in artificial intelligence?

- Estimation: An exact sense of number and approximation are best used in alliance. Humans choose which is appropriate depending on the particular case and the context we are faced with. Computers do not have a means to choose.

- Representations: Mathematics is particularly rich in different forms of representation while machine learning only uses one: the vector (a one-dimensional array of values). But “not all the world is a vector.” Switching between modes of representation and simulating multiple viewpoints is central to generalised human intelligence

- Reasoning: After a strong refutation of inductive reasoning, he suggests that its problems can be solved by adopting the mathematical method of reasoning by proof as “framework for keeping our biases at bay and establishing logical arguments that defy all attempts at refutation”. However mathematical reasoning cannot be used for open, real-world problems

- Imagination: What computers are not capable of, according to Mubeen, is “the ability to break out of a given set of rules... Computers necessarily operate within whatever constraints are given to them. Humans in contrast attracted to possibilities arise from breaking free of any such restrictions. Our rebellious instincts are sometimes the most creative.”

- Questioning: the computer answers only to the questions we humans ask of it. “For a computer to define its own goals, it would first need to become sentient.” There are some questions

computers cannot answer because they are not computable or do not lend themselves to answers the computer can make meaningful.

The last two of Mubeen's principles that computers lack concern ways of working. The first is temperament by which he means the methods of thinking that we bring to problem solving. While computers may have the benefit of speed, there are situations in which slower thinking is more appropriate. Similarly humans can draw on subconscious thoughts which can lead to “eureka” moments.

Mubeen's final principle is that of collaboration. Mathematicians work together both in defining problems and in solving them, but he is here also considering the possibly beneficial results of computers collaborating with humans. “Human strength, even our values, emerge as a collective.”

Many of Mubeen's arguments for the limitations of AI echo classic critiques recast in a mathematical framework and illustrated with a wide range of examples which gives them an added force. At the same time, the problems raised by AI cannot be solved by mathematical intelligence alone.

Joque, in contrast, defines the aim of his book as being “to bring to light the central role that statistics and theories of probability play in shaping the possibilities of [digital] systems and tying them fundamentally to the functioning of capitalism.” He talks of an “algorithmic capitalism... where statistics and algorithms are more efficient at creating new realities... than they are at representing the world.”

Metaphysics

He sees the metaphysics – the fundamental philosophical assumptions – underlying such systems as giving objective force to the systems and therefore as being as important as the detailed mathematical processes that apply them in explaining their social role.

Joque chooses statistics not merely because of their importance in machine learning in AI but also because he sees an “unstable relationship between world and number [as] especially apparent in the realm of statistics and probability, where these shifts both determine and are determined by social and economic formations.” In other words, statistics has an immediacy that is less visible in the more abstract forms of mathematics and is rooted more directly in the social world which makes a critique more straightforward.

He uses two major Marxist concepts

box of AI

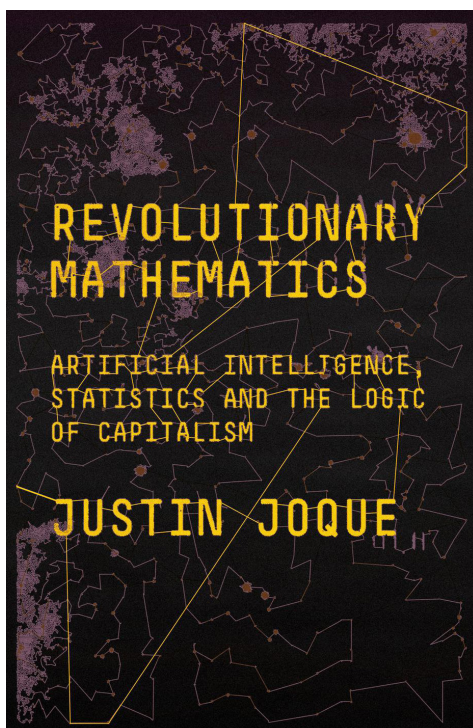
to explain the metaphysical underpinnings of statistics. The first is objectification, which he defines not as a form of false consciousness but as the process by which certain things appear objective and have objectivity and agency assigned to them. Statistics, in this view, are “redefining the world in uniquely abstract ways, turning data about that world into concepts, predictions and inferences.”

Real abstraction

The second concept Joque uses is that of real abstraction – abstract concepts which exist in thought but are grounded in social relations and exercise a real force. (Examples are Marx’s concepts of value and of abstract labour.) For Joque, statistics produce what he calls “the ghost of departed quantities”, real abstractions that take us from the particular in the form of real measures of quantity to abstractions, the products of the application of statistical procedures.

Next he presents a history of the development of such procedures in the 20th century and their attempts to pin down an elusive meaningful quantification of probability. He starts with the “frequentist” Ronald Fisher who aimed to find an objective scientific measure of probability. Joque details the critiques of Fisher’s views from within statistics and particularly points out how humans can intervene in the procedures of frequentism to make certain results more plausible – in particular, altering the level at which differences are taken to be significant statistically.

Joque then outlines a major shift away from frequentist views towards so-called Bayesian statistics which have become important in ML. A Bayesian measure of probability contains a



subjective element in that probability is based on how a “degree of belief” should rationally change to account for the availability of related evidence. The degree of belief may be based on prior knowledge about the event or on personal beliefs about the event. The probability then is adjusted according to various Bayesian formulae to reflect how new data changes the likelihood of whatever’s being measured. It is well suited to machine learning as it can be used to readjust outcomes when faced with a constantly changing flow of data.

For Joque, the subjective element means these methods provide a way of objectifying subjective views and thus a means for the incursion of the goals and values of capitalism into statistical procedures.

Beyond this, Joque is insistent that there is a link between probability and

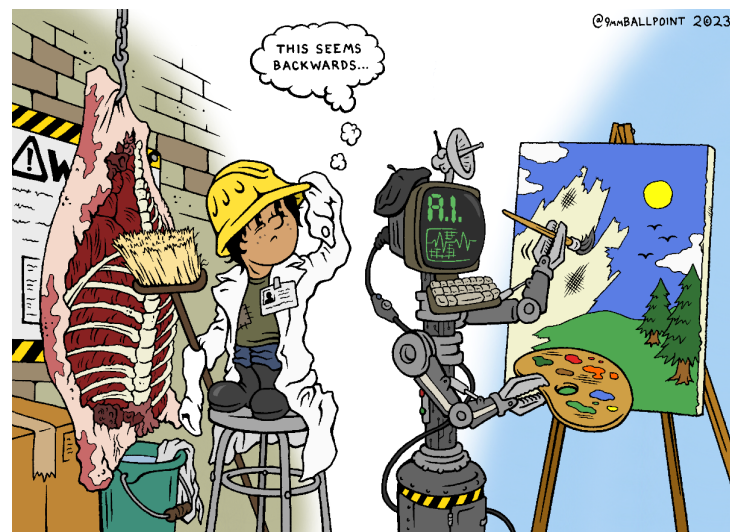
economic value and thus between statistics and capitalism. He produces two arguments: one is at the level of analogy and shared features – that they operate in similar ways; the other is a more direct link derived from a theory that translates chances into contracts, making probability a means of exchange. He sees the consequence of this to be that the commodity is no longer the central form of capitalism “as value appears to derive directly from automatic computation”. I do not find this convincing and it has the implication that if one rejects the value driven nature of capitalism, one must reject statistics and computation too.

Revolutionary

However Joque insists: “by no means should this be taken as opposition to statistics, calculation or prediction... Statistics is nothing short of magic...” But he immediately adds that “they reflect not the world as it is, but rather the world as it is profitable.”

Given this, one would expect Joque to propose different statistical methods as part of his “Revolutionary Mathematics”. Instead his alternative focuses on the metaphysics and politics of statistics, machine learning and mathematics more generally: “the work of the revolutionary mathematician is... less mathematical than it is metaphysical.”

There is much in what Joque says here to agree with – in particular, his account of the process and effects of abstraction, his examination of the privatisation of knowledge production, his critique of machine learning and how technology calls out for collective ownership and development. However



there is a real tension here: do we just replace the metaphysics that lie behind current statistical methods leaving them as they are, do we require new statistical methods or is the link to capitalism so strong that we must start again from scratch?

Joque appears to give one answer when he writes that “Revolutionary mathematics requires that we create new objectifications that call upon us to build a different future”. Elsewhere he says that existing methods enable us to produce “abstractions that are collectively productive providing for the world rather than exploiting it.” He tries to square the circle by making alienation and objectification as he defines them inseparable from algorithmic and machine processes under any form of social organisation.

Both of these books are worth reading, particularly when setting them alongside each other. Mubeen’s assertion of the human through the mathematical and Joque’s social location and metaphysical critique of AI contribute complimentary aspects to an overall understanding. They both look beyond critiques of the effects of AI to root them in the processes by which AI is carried out. Yet neither should be adopted uncritically and they are in conflict on many points. A Marxist critique of AI will have to draw on elements of a detailed technological examination, the human orientation and social critique that taken together can be found in Mubeen and Joque. □

• Abridged. More: bit.ly/ai-rev

Workers’ Liberty Australia makes new turn

By Martin Thomas

At a conference in Brisbane on 29-30 July, Workers’ Liberty Australia decided to turn more to environmental activist groups.

Trade union activity, our “traditional” focus, remains important, but right now our small group has fewer openings there, with some of our comrades retired and the union movement at a low ebb.

Some activity in the Australian Labor Party links with en-

vironmental action, through the Labor Environment Action Network, but Australia’s big cities also have dozen of ad hoc or local environmental groups. Australia had some of the world’s biggest school student climate strikes in 2019, and remnants continue, though at a much lower level.

The climate-change issue is posed differently from in most countries because Australia’s contribution to global emissions is mostly through its exports of coal and gas (lead-

ing to three times as much carbon-emission as domestic, though that is also high). Labor governments, although denounced as far too green by the conservative opposition, are still licensing new coal and gas projects.

Workers

A wharfie (docker) comrade reported that on the wharves most young male workers, especially, are indifferent or hostile to environmental issues. There is no way round that

other than building a strong enough working-class-oriented environmental movement which stimulates a revival of solidarity and collective responsibility.

A few unions are open to environmental politics, notably the relatively strong and traditionally militant Electrical Trades Union.

Demands we will be pushing include:

- Stop new fossil-fuel extraction; tax remaining extraction to fund transition; stop subsi-

dies to fossil fuels.

- Electrify everything (and new jobs that way).
- Strict greenhouse-gas emission controls on industry.
- Public ownership and workers’ plans.

We also discussed developments in the Australian labour movement; the Indigenous Voice to Parliament referendum (probably late October), where we will vote yes; trans rights; our Zoom reading group and newsletter; and local reports. □

With socialists and feminists in Ukraine

By Sacha Ismail

The first of the two full days of the recent Ukraine Solidarity Campaign (USC) mini-delegation (2-5 July) had in the country was spent mainly meeting trade unionists. We delivered a vehicle and equipment to the KVPU union federation to take east; met with Lviv teachers' reps; and visited a mine and hospital in nearby Novovolynsk.

The second day was spent mainly with left-wing political activists.

Feminist Workshop

USC had held a conference on post-war reconstruction on 17 June, and some UK-based Ukrainian feminists attended. One of them put us in touch with her organisation, the Lviv-based [Feminist Workshop](#), and we went to meet them.

Before the war Feminist Workshop, founded in 2014, was a campaigning organisation. Now it also participates in providing social support, primarily shelters for people displaced by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Nastia and Ivanka, who both work for the organisation, met us – me and Chris Ford from USC, Vladyslav Starodubtsev from Ukrainian socialist group [Social Movement](#) – for a discussion before showing us one of the shelters.

Like many of the young activists we met that day, both women are themselves originally from eastern Ukraine. Ivanka said many in her family are pro-Putin; she is virulently hostile to Russia and she found it intolerable back home. However she went back recently – to near the frontline – to run a camp with activities for children affected by the war.

When the full-scale invasion began last February, activists in Feminist Workshop quickly found themselves doing things they previously had no experience of doing, particularly to establish and run the shelters. They have got some funding, but it is little and precarious; one of the shelters they run is about to close and they've had to do a lot of work just on finding people somewhere else to go.

They are still campaigning, particularly to demand sex and relationships education in schools. This is very limited in Ukraine, and when some schools have introduced it on their own account they have faced pressure from right-wingers and religious conservatives. We suggested putting them in

touch with the teacher trade unionists we met the day before.

They also mentioned a number of protests, for instance about a rape, that have taken place, for whatever reason being tolerated by the authorities despite martial law.

Ivanka is also part of an "anticapitalist feminist" organisation, Bilkis – which also originated in the north-eastern city of Kharkiv, before relocating to Lviv with the invasion. They were running a "free market" that day – we hoped to go and have a look, but ran out of time. After she left Nastia described how Feminist Workshop have sought, gently and carefully, to introduce feminist ideas to those using their services who were not previously engaged with them.

In the context of debates in the UK, it seems worth mentioning that Feminist Workshop are a pro-trans rights and trans-inclusive organisation. They said that there were disagreements about this among Ukrainian feminists, but they worked to maintain a strong stance.

The shelter we visited was small, resource-poor but impressive and well-maintained. So was their small office in the same building, full of all kinds of resources and campaigning materials.

Social Movement

Though not members, the Feminist Workshop comrades expressed a very positive view of [Sotsialnyi Rukh](#) (Social Movement, SR), the other organisation whose members we spent a lot of time with that day.

Earlier in the day, while I stayed in bed, Chris met an activist, Olia, from the organisation [SD Platform](#) (Social Democratic Platform). Two SR people I asked about SD Platform praised its youthfulness, energy and connections among teachers. They criticised it for its lack of clearly left-wing politics and engagement with social struggles.

After we left Feminist Workshop's shelter, we met six SR comrades – Vladyslav, Denys (our translator during the workplace visits the day before), Zhenya, Maksym, Pavlo and Katya.

I didn't realise till after she'd left that Katya was [Katya Gritseva](#), the renowned socialist artist and illustrator!

Katya, Maksym and Pavlo told us about their activity as students, including in reviving the left-wing student union Direct Action. The latter sounded



to me more like a broad left-wing activist group, but I may have misunderstood. I told them about the rise and fall of the student movement in the UK over the last 15 years. They also asked some questions about the broader political situation on the British left, including about what can be expected in the Labour Party under Starmer's regime.

Zhenya works as an editor for left-wing journal [Spilne](#) (*Commons*), loosely connected to SR. We went back to her flat and stayed there past curfew for some very interesting discussions, joined by two others, Sasha and Maryna. (Curfew, 10pm, is no longer very vigorously enforced in Lviv; but I was still extremely pleased that by chance Zhenya lives on the same street as our hotel!)

Chris told the young Ukrainians about his visits to Ukraine, Poland and elsewhere in eastern Europe in the 1980s. We debated, from a fairly wide range of positions, socialists' attitude to nationalist movements, including in Scotland and Wales. We discussed what eastern Ukraine, where most of the Ukrainian comrades with us come from, is like; deindustrialisation there; and lessons from deindustrialisation in the UK. (For some of this time Denys was in the other room, speaking at a pro-Ukraine online fringe meeting for the Irish TUC Congress.)

We had a very long discussion about the range of mixed [Ukrainian-Russian](#) that dominates in many of Ukraine's small towns and villages. (Trotsky grew up speaking a version.) Is it a language,

a dialect, or even a single thing? How does it interact with social class in Ukraine? What will and should happen to it as more and more Ukrainians refuse to speak Russian in protest at the invasion?

Zhenya and Maryna, Surzhyk speakers, had recently been led to the production of a magazine discussing the issues, with articles in Surzhyk and Ukrainian.

Following the [destruction](#) of the Kakhovka dam, comrades were very worried about a possible Russian attack on the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. However, it turned out the imminent threat was more immediate. The next night, back in London, we got frightened messages from our friends in Lviv. Russia was bombing the city – destroying a block, injuring nine, killing four.

Politics

Our time in Ukraine reinforced the need for active solidarity with the Ukrainians against Russian imperialism, but also very much with its labour movement and particularly the organised left.

Often on the UK left, certainly at the moment, we feel we operate in a difficult and confusing political environment. But in Ukraine the broad left-wing politics that dominates the labour movement here, deeply inadequate and ineffective as it is, simply does not exist.

Numerous observations brought this home. The first KVPU staffer we met, young and energetic, seemed surprised by the suggestion that Western corporations might have damaging plans for Ukraine. The Lviv office of the other union federation, FPU, had leased parts of its space to far-right group Right Sector, allowing them to dominate the entrance of the building – not because the FPU leaders sympathise with Right Sector but, I think, because of the lack of clear political lines in Ukrainian society. Members of SD Platform work as staff for MPs in Zelensky's party, despite the extreme neoliberal policies it is imposing.

These kind of contradictions exist here too, very much so: but in Ukraine they take much sharper form. That is why, as Denys explained to us, widespread aspirations there for a more equal and socially just society find such limited political expression. We must help Ukrainian socialists change the dynamic. □

Stop the atrocities in Manipur!

By Mohan Sen

In mid-July the viral spread of a video showing two women being paraded naked and sexually assaulted, prior to being gang-raped, in the eastern Indian state of Manipur caused a surge in awareness of the horrific situation there. We should work to increase it further, and try to engage the British labour movement and left.

The events shown in the video actually took place more than two months ago! There were no arrests until it got past the internet shutdown, went viral and caused embarrassment for the state authorities.

Nor did the national Indian government of Narendra Modi comment about the situation in Manipur until then – when the state has been in flames for two months. Then Modi made only the most cursory and shallow remarks. He still refuses to go to Manipur. At least 180 people have died in the violence, including children, and 60,000 been displaced (in a state of three million people). There has been rape on a mass scale, torture, mutilation and beheading. And the violence is continuing.

The peoples of Manipur

The women in the video are from the Kuki (or Kuki-Zomi or Kuki-Zo) ethnic groups; the men assaulting them are Meiteis. The Kukis are tribal people living mainly in Manipur's hills, 15 or 20% of the population, while the Meiteis, a majority, live on the more fertile plains and dominate the state's government and its resources. (More numerous than the Kukis but less than the Meiteis are the Nagas, who seem to have been less centrally involved in the conflict.)

There is violence on various sides, and the state is arguably now in a situation of civil war; but to a large extent the Kukis are being persecuted by the Meiteis. According to the Indian government's own data, 113 Kukis and 62 Meiteis have been killed, making the Kuki death rate six times higher.

The trigger was tensions following an order from the Manipur High Court to the state government to recommend Meiteis be included in India's national list of "Scheduled Tribes". This decision, though appealed to the state Supreme Court, alarmed the Kukis, the Nagas and other tribal peoples in the state, who organised protests; and Meitei chauvinists grabbed the opportunity to launch the violence and push forward a long-standing agenda.

The reason for the alarm and the protests at the High Court decision is that granting the Meiteis tribal status would weaken any protection the tribal peoples have against existing Meitei advantages in jobs and education. It would allow Meiteis to gain access to



Kuki women in Manipur seek refuge from the violence that has displaced many

land currently set aside, at least in theory, for tribal communities. As it is the latter are already being deprived of their traditional areas by various mechanisms.

There are large mineral deposits in the hills, which mining and other companies are eager to exploit. This has been an important element in growing assaults on indigenous tribal peoples in other parts of India too.

A body that is supposed to have administrative powers in Manipur's hill areas has been progressively weakened, and the state government – which passed into the hands of Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) last year – has acted more and more blatantly in the interests of the Meiteis. There are numerous indications that the state government has done little to stop the violence, and that in many cases the police are aiding the Meitei pogromists. The women in the video say police officers were present in the mob. The state government appears to have provided almost no support to the thousands of people, mostly Kukis, now languishing in camps.

Many Kukis are, understandably, demanding their own separate state so they are no longer at the mercy of Meitei chauvinists. During the current conflict there have been large protests for this demand. The BJP, the Hindu right and Meitei chauvinists, while aggressively insisting that Manipur must remain a single state, are doing everything they can to drive its communities apart – now accelerating a process they have been promoting for a long time.

There are or were also Kukis in the

BJP, and of course Meiteis who have opposed the chauvinist frenzy.

The Hindu far right

In addition to right-wing party solidarity and a desire to dispossess the tribal people's in the interests of corporations, there is also a religious-sectarian dimension to the national BJP's silence while its comrades preside over mass killing and rape. The Kukis are predominantly Christian while the Meiteis are predominantly Hindu; at least three hundred churches have been destroyed in the violence (including some Meitei churches); and Manipur fits into a wider anti-Christian campaign by the Hindu far right across India.

Agitation, locally and by the BJP nationally, against migrants and against minorities branded as migrants is another dimension. The Kukis and other tribal people share ethnic and kinship ties with people across the border in Myanmar who are facing persecution by the military regime there; denunciation of "illegal infiltrators" and "narco-traffickers" is another aspect of the anti-Kuki campaign.

The violence is reminiscent of the Gujarat massacres of 2002, when Modi was that state's chief minister. In fact one reason why the national government is not willing to push for the resignation of Manipur chief minister Biren Singh may be that it would draw attention to Modi's role in 2002, recently under scrutiny again.

We must raise our voices to try to help stop the violence and, as with Gujarat, indict the BJP.

In Gujarat the pogroms were organised by Hindu nationalist organisations directly linked to the BJP and the RSS

militia that originally spawned it (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh – National Volunteer Organisation). The chauvinist organisations leading the violence in Manipur, Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun, have a more distinct local character but RSS connections.

Mention should also go to former women's-rights-now-Meitei-chauvinist group Meira Paibi, which is actively participating in the campaign: one 18 year old Kuki rape victim has testified that a group of its members handed her over to the assailants. (When the Communist Party of India-linked National Federation of Indian Women sent a fact-finding mission to Manipur earlier this month, they were arrested – specifically on grounds of offence caused to this organisation.)

Even in Gujarat the police did not actually arm the pogromists; and while the violence there was carried out largely with blades, reports from Manipur describe automatic weapons and mortar shelling. The current events represents a further sharpening of the fascist project in India.

Since the mob-assault video went viral there have been protests in many parts of India, including mass protests and strikes in other tribal-dominated areas; and widespread smaller protests in the Indian diaspora. The wave of outrage and protests should be amplified and taken as far as possible in other countries, crucially beyond the diaspora. Here in the UK we must demand labour movement organisations and representatives speak out. □

The addled rebirth o



Book review

By Martin Thomas

John Kelly, the author of the new book *The Twilight of World Trotskyism*, was in the Communist Party (CP) from 1979 to 1991.

The CP had grown a bit in the early 1970s, despite losing political energy and confidence ever since the USSR's suppression of the Hungarian revolution in 1956 and Brezhnev's sending troops against liberalising reform in Czechoslovakia in 1968. But by the late 1970s it was sagging.

Martin Jacques, a brash advocate of social-democratising "Eurocommunism", took over the CP magazine *Marxism Today* from 1977, and drove the CP majority to liquidate into soft-left "social-movement-y" think-tank politics. The anti-Jacques wing held on to the CP's daily paper, the *Morning Star*, decisively defeating Eurocommunist attempts to regain control in 1984, and would in 1988 create today's Communist Party of Britain.

Kelly, I think, stayed with the main CP until its official winding-up in 1991. It looks like then he was impressed by the fact that avowed Trotskyist groups (which the CP would long have taught him to despise as all "ultra-left" and "sectarian") remained active, and he decided to research them. Thirty years on, though, he dismisses the politics he has written two books about (*Contemporary British Trotskyism* and the new *Twilight of World Trotskyism*), and reverts to something much more like the Communist Party in its dying years. A much younger writer, James Schneider, arrives at similar politics from a different angle in another new book, *Our Bloc*.

There are at-first-sight grounds for being more sceptical of generic "Trotskyism" now than in the early 1990s.

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) would claim 10,000 members in the early 1990s. The Militant (forerunner of the Socialist Party, Socialist Appeal, and Socialist Alternative) had peaked (so Kelly tabulates) in 1986, but even after that did well in the anti-poll-tax movement. (It would then decline through the Socialist Appeal split in 1992, followed by breakaways by the majority of the former Militant activists in two strongholds, Glasgow and Merseyside).

In the *Twilight* book, Kelly tabulates the misfortunes of such groups since then, and concludes that any sort of Trotskyism is a dead end.

Instead, he suggests that "radical left" parties like Syriza, Die Linke, France Insoumise, and so on are doing better. Those mostly offer some recycling of the old Eurocommunist-type politics, or take a space in the political terrain mapped out by that politics.

They have less support than the Eurocommunists of the 1970s had, and, as Kelly's own tables show, mostly have declined in recent years. To be sure, even their small relative successes show that avowed Trotskyists of all sorts have been unable to change the broad political landscape recently. And the facts that Kelly piles up about Trotskyist groups declining and splitting in recent times are true. The self-disbandment in April 2019 of the International Socialist Organization in the USA and the December 2022 split of the French Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA) into two NPAs, each maybe one-tenth the size of the NPA when launched in 2009, signal an undeniable malaise.

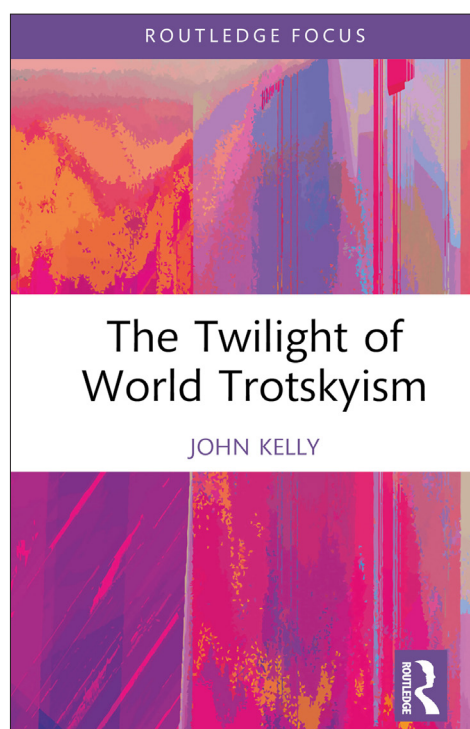
For Kelly, that malaise is the attachment of all avowed Trotskyists to doctrines which are "irrelevant and unpopular", while the "radical left" parties have succeeded through "popular and charismatic leaders". To disprove what he takes to be core basic Trotskyist "doctrine", Kelly uses quote after quote from wooden and declamatory "revolutionary crisis coming" ceremonial texts, mostly of the various offshoots of the Militant tendency or of the "Morenists" (once strong in Argentina).

Reworking

In fact, the "doctrines" of the Trotskyism of Trotsky's time have (as proper for theories attempting to map the real world) been reworked on a large scale more than once over the decades (and often by tiny and harassed groups poorly equipped for the task). The differences between reworkings increase, and by now only a loose family resemblance can be seen between different "Trotskyisms". Events since 1991 have increased the need to rework.

From 1948, and with foreshadowings going back to 1940 or 1941, the "Orthodox Trotskyists" (with different variants: Cannon, Pablo, Mandel) veered to seeing the driving force of history as not so much the working class as "the world revolution". The empirical expression was Stalinist and semi-Stalinist victories, though they said that action by the working class would eventually be necessary to perfect the "deformed" results.

The "Heterodox Trotskyists" (Shachtman, Draper, and others) saw the advance of Stalinism as the advance of a new exploiting class, and socialist hope



in a working-class "Third Camp" against "both Washington and Moscow". Even after capitalism unmistakably started booming again in the early 1950s, they described capitalism as at least notionally in ever-deepening decay (despite its actual expansion), and Stalinist advance against that decay as inexorable. Actually, it was always impossible for statist "industrialisation in one country" to go beyond spectacular bursts of early industrialisation and find a route to "go round" and overtake world-market capitalism. But the main heirs of "Heterodox Trotskyism", Shachtman, Jacobson, Harrington, got ground down into approximating left social democracy, and Draper opted out into (valuable) literary Marxology.

In 1989-91 a new reworking was necessary. Workers' Liberty was clambering out of our "Orthodox Trotskyist" inheritance. We worked to evolve a continuation of "Heterodox Trotskyism" that would register capitalist expansion and the "utopian" element in Stalinist developmentalism.

We were critical of our own past illusions, but did not renounce the core ideas we had from historic Trotskyism: "To face reality squarely; not to seek the line of least resistance; to call things by their right names; to speak the truth to the masses, no matter how bitter it may be; not to fear obstacles; to be true in little things as in big ones; to base one's programme on the logic of the class struggle; to be bold when the hour for action arrives – these are the rules of the Fourth International."

The reworking, we believe, allowed us to respond rationally to the rise of political Islam as a pseudo-anti-imperialist force, and to keep a focus on the

transformation of the labour movement as the way to build the agency for socialism, yet not collapse into gradualism and string-pulling politics.

But we have been doing our work in a long period dominated (not exclusively, but dominated) by working-class defeats and a wide mood of resignation and pessimism. We could surely have grown more if we had deployed more energy and avoided more mistakes. Probably the broader environment precluded anything qualitative.

SWP

Back around 1991 the Socialist Workers Party and its international associates seemed to have a strong starting point, with years of the slogan "Neither Washington, nor Moscow, but international socialism". But they had in fact been hegemonised by "Orthodox Trotskyism". From 1986-7 they lurched decisively into a new version of the politics of "two world camps" first promulgated by the Stalinists from about 1947, only their positive pole, their "anti-imperialist" (i.e. anti-US) camp, became chiefly the Islamist movements. In domestic politics, after a period of what we called "fake ultra-leftism" in the early 1990s, they settled into a reliance on "united fronts" on the model of the Stop The War campaign (founded 1999, over Kosovo, relaunched 2001, over Afghanistan).

In 1991 and after, the most capable of the "Orthodox Trotskyists", the Mandelites, registered a collapse of their whole previous perspective, which saw the decades since 1943 as a continuing (though imperfect) "advance of the world revolution" (though in "deformed" shape). From 1991 they called for a new beginning: "new epoch, new programme, new party". In practice that orientation came down to them trying to nudge post-Stalinist left-reformist

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f Eurocommunism

parties like the Workers' Party in Brazil, Rifondazione in Italy, Podemos in Spain, etc. fractionally to the left, or, where no such was available, self-cancelling by presenting themselves as essentially only an agency to help piece together in due course a future "broad party" which would in due course produce the "new programme".

There were some waves of partial left remobilisation over the three decades following 2021, mainly marked though they were by working-class defeats.

"The new anti-capitalism", developing after the Battle of Seattle in 1999 and through the Social Forums and such, largely filtered through into left NGOs, which came to offer more and more jobs, offices, and "communications" options to young people wanting a "career" in left politics.

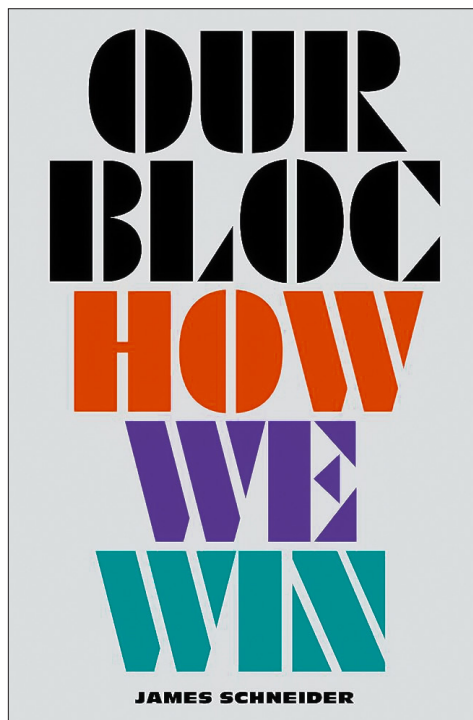
NGOs

The original Eurocommunist schemes had been devised before the rise of NGO politics. But NGO politics dovetails with them neatly. Generally the new "broad left" currents which Kelly now sees as the best option going are built from the considerable residues of 1980s CP-type ideas – the whole spectrum, from the Eurocommunist to the CPB-Morning-Star type – melded with elements of NGO-ism.

Part of the Eurocommunist schemes was that we should no longer think of "the state" as the governing core – armed forces, police, prisons, higher bureaucrats – but in a broader definition, including and indeed dominated by public services (education, health, welfare, utilities, etc.) The old Marxist idea of breaking up the capitalist state (machine of rule) should be replaced by one of transforming the "broader" state.

As left NGO and think-tank employees and "policy wonks" became more numerous, they were ideally placed to aspire to do that.

James Schneider's trajectory would have been impossible in any previous era: from studying theology at university and being a Liberal Democrat, to starting a career in journalism, then straight to being hired as a key back-room operator in Momentum, then in the Corbyn Leader's Office, then with Yanis Varoufakis's CCP-friendly "Progressive International". Schneider is intelligent and talented, and in the first year of Momentum tended to be a voice for democracy and fair dealing. But a "career" in politics exclusively at "the top", without any preparation in the arguments and battles of the workplaces and picket lines or even local Labour Parties or activist campaigns,



cannot but give a special shape to his thinking.

The blurb of his book *Our Bloc* claims that it sketches today's "groundwork... we need to enter the state tomorrow". Notice: to enter. The author's hoped-for passage from the Leader's Office to 10 Downing Street occupies centre-stage, rather than the activity of the working class in workplaces and communities.

The book reproduces, or even caricatures, the old Eurocommunist doctrine of transforming or working "in and against" the state. The British Communist Party's scheme since the early 1950s, which the Eurocommunists only refined, was that socialism would come through a left Labour government (with large influence within it of

Labour friends of the CP) legislating under pressure of a "mass movement" led by the CP. Schneider writes about a new version: a "bloc", a formal alliance, linking the Labour left with unions and "social movements".

The emphasis on "social movements" comes from the Eurocommunists rather than the 1950s CP. It makes less sense for Schneider than it did for the Eurocommunists of the 1970s, who theorised at a time when each locality, at least in big cities, was likely to have several active women's groups, a lively and visible anti-racist or anti-fascist campaign, and often active organisations of Black and Asian youth, too.

The Black Lives Matter demonstrations of summer 2020 were lively, inspiring, sometimes large; also disparate, and leading to no continuing campaign organisation. The abortion rights protest of 17 June 2023 drew in many people not habitually demonstration-goers; but was mainly organised by the British Pregnancy Advice Service, a socially-minded business rather than a campaign, and scarcely a thousand strong.

Fantasy

Schneider's picture of structured "social movements", presumably with leaders authorised to sign up to the formal "bloc" he proposes, is a fantasy. The idea of union leaders, even avowedly-left union leaders, signing up to this "bloc", is fantasy too: the strike wave of 2022-3 has been marred by their general inability even to coordinate their strikes on similar dates, and to organise joint demonstrations, when they are all running campaigns for essentially sim-

ilar pay demands, let alone anything more ambitious.

If there is a political "common denominator" between the left NGOs which are the major continuous organised expression of the "social movements", a range of unions, and the disparate Labour left, it is too minimal and vague to consolidate a real "bloc". It was too minimal and vague to do that even in the best days of Corbynism.

An alliance of the most combative elements on different fronts – not what Antonio Gramsci called a "historic bloc", for he meant something quite different, but perhaps more like what he called a hegemonic apparatus – is necessary for revolution. But it can be formed only on the basis of revolutionary politics, not via post-Eurocommunist fantasy diplomatic negotiations. And only after a sufficient force has developed those revolutionary politics and won a base for them on all the fronts.

The other element of all varieties of CP politics was always adherence (more critical for the Eurocommunists than for other CPers) to a "super-power" counter to the USA, seen as the centre of capitalist power. China as a model of anti-imperialist advance is common coin in the constituencies Schneider appeals to, and in his "Progressive International" too. And, to complete the circle, Martin Jacques, the Eurocommunist of the 1980s, is now an advocate of a future *When China Rules The World*, dominated by a Chinese Communist Party which is a "hybrid of Chinese Marxism and Confucianism, shaped by and as complex as Chinese civilization of which it is a fundamental part". □

Starmers and the two-child cap

By Luke Hardy

On 16 July Labour Party members discovered from a TV interview that abolishing the two-child limit to means-tested benefits was, according to Keir Starmer, no longer party policy.

In February 2020, when Starmer was running for the leadership, he said he would "tackle the vast social injustice in our country" and specifically mentioned the two-child limit as one of the causes of the inequality. On 3 June 2023, Jon Ash-

worth, the Shadow Work and Pension Secretary told the *Daily Mirror*: "We are very, very aware that this [the two-child cap] is one of the single most heinous elements of the system which is pushing children and families into poverty today".

The two-child cap was introduced by former chancellor George Osborne, and came into force in April 2017, under Theresa May's government. In April 2023 the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) said that lifting the two-child limit is one of the most effective way to

end child poverty. It would immediately lift 250,000 children out of poverty and reduce poverty for 850,000 more.

Outrage

Outrage across the Labour party over this has come from people on the soft left and some even from the right.

Starmer and other shadow cabinet ministers gave as reason that Labour could not make unfunded spending commitments. But, for example, the estimated £1.7 billion cost of

scrapping the two-child limit would be covered by equalising Capital Gains Tax with tax rates on income.

More and more Labour members and supporters are feeling alienated by the ever more rightward trajectory of the leadership faction. Rather than resigning in disgust, they should join the growing rebellion against Starmer, and fight for socialist policies both in Labour and in the unions. □

• Abridged. More: bit.ly/2-child

Open letter: why is I

By Sean Matgamna

Rachel, Naomi, Andrew: I write this way for five main reasons.

All of you are long-ago prominent Jewish members of what is now AWL.

Two of you are vociferous anti-Israelis, who think that you are just anti-Zionists; and in that you are typical of the kitsch-left.

In the early 1980s our paper then, Socialist Organiser, was, I think, disgraceful, perhaps the worst of the “revolutionary” press, on Israel and Zionism. Andrew wrote a lot of that coverage.

I thought then something like I think now, but there were only a few of us who thought that way. That didn’t begin to change until I replaced Martin Thomas as joint editor of the paper in June 1983 and the other joint editor, John Lister, soon after departed for a better-paying job.

I won Rachel to wishing for the defeat of Israel in 1967, and helped clinch Naomi in anti-Israeli politics. Andrew, I think, got his politics on the issue from Tony Cliff of IS [today’s SWP]. But what Cliff and we all said then was far from what the left said later.

Cliff wrote: “The only possible solution to the needs of the Middle East is the workers’ and peasants’ revolution aimed at the establishment of a socialist republic, with full rights for Jews, Kurds and all national minorities”.

Rachel and I wrote: “The precondition for such a change is an end to the exclusively Jewish (Zionist) nature of the State of Israel, bringing to an end the oppression of the Arab minority. Israel must withdraw from the occupied territories and pay for reinstating and compensating all the refugees – from 1967 and 1948”.

We thought Cliff was demagogic, imposing “socialism” as an immediate solution where the possibility of socialism did not exist.

There is no easy solution to the Israel-Palestine problem. We say Israel should get out of the West Bank and release its grip on Gaza, and should permit two states side by side, Israel and Palestine.

What puzzles me about your attitude

now – that Israel must be destroyed – is this: from what politics, from what principles, from what analysis do you proceed by in relation to Israel and Palestine?

Time has radically changed all the possible meanings of what became the general left slogan after the war of 1967 and in the 1970s: “replace Israel and the occupied territories with a single secular democratic state.” That slogan was always deceptive. Its real meaning was the same as the old Arab invasion slogan of 1948 and of the PLO until after the Six Day War of 1967: “drive the Jews into the sea”. But it could be thought to mean something different then, in a way it cannot now.

Your basic position is not to get the best possible outcome for the Palestinian Arabs. It is to have Israel not reformed but abolished – to deny self-determination to the Hebrew nation.

That can only be done by external force. Standing for that puts you on the side of some of the most reactionary forces on planet earth, including the Islamic clerical fascists who rule Iran. Making an absolute principle of that, as you do, means solidarising with those who advocate killing as many Jews as “necessary”, and with the extreme reactionaries who run Gaza, Hamas, who lob rockets on Israeli civilians when they can. (And whose election victory over Fatah in 2006 was celebrated by your near co-thinker on this question, the SWP. Or did you disagree with them? In the name of logic, why?)

Or do I misunderstand you? For the programme “destroy Israel” to begin to make sense and not to mean plainly “drive out or kill all the Jews”, you have to expect Israeli Jews to simply accept, peacefully, the destruction of their state, leaving themselves at the mercy of their enemies of a century and more. They won’t do that. No people that had a choice ever did that. It is a preposterous idea.

A “one state” proposal, understood to be an Arab-dominated state, presupposes the conquest of the Israelis to force it on them, if they won’t “see reason”. Your reason.

You aren’t obliged to accept what the PLO accepts – which is two states, as we advocate – nor are you obliged to accept what Hamas says, though you do. But you are obliged to take the Palestinians into account. What you advocate pays no need to them. “Destroy Israel”, which you advocate, offers nothing to the Palestinians now or ever



1941 Nazi-inspired pogrom, Baghdad

but indefinite waiting. It is not workable. And if it were workable, it would be wrong and would come only by way of conquest by an external power like Iran, reducing the whole area to ruins. Now and foreseeably, the “one state” that we are on the way to get in the area is Netanyahu’s Jewish supremacist state.

Some of you will recall that my own change of mind on this issue from a period of going along with the “secular democratic state” slogan began with understanding that the slogan was nonsense. It implied either Jewish agreement to dismantle the state or their conquest – invasion and subjugation and forcible destruction of the Israeli Jews as a nation – and that therefore we were talking nonsense when we advocated “secular democratic state” as a “solution” for the Israeli Jews too.

Some believed the seeming promises of the “secular democratic state” to do justice to both Arabs and Jews. Some of you will recall that a lot of people shifted when both groups within the new Workers’ Socialist League of the early 1980s, who had the same words, “secular democratic state”, divided on the meaning of the common slogan, the Thornett side seeing it as Arab rights and at most as freedom of religion for the Jews. Our side – and we were the truly stupid ones, seeing only what we wanted to see in the slogan – saw equal rights for Jews and Arabs. Half the organisation didn’t believe in

rights for Jews in the area.

What made us stupid of course was our hostility to Israel’s colonialism after the 1967 war combined with our rejection of “drive the Jews into the sea”. Except that “secular democratic state” was only a disguised – and therefore more deadly – way of saying “drive the Jews into the sea”.

But the refugees? Yes. But why is Israel the exception? Why for Israel alone is mass “return”, reversal of decades-old population movements, demanded?

“Exist! Resist! Return!” and “From the river to the sea” have become standard slogans for recent demonstrations in Britain. They mean “return” to the territory of pre-1967 Israel. Not to the Arab-majority occupied-territories area, as our 1967 article, rightly I think, demanded, but to Israel of 1948.

The State of Israel is 75 years old. The refugees from 1948 numbered about 750,000. The descendants still entitled to UNRWA services – and needing them, because the states where they live deny them rights – now number six million. Arab and Islamic propaganda seizes on that figure of six million as if they were all refugees.

Jews driven out of Arab countries to Israel then and in the next several years numbered about 600,000. From Iraq for example, where there had been anti-Jewish riots in 1941 during Rashid Ali’s anti-British, pro-Nazi, “anti-imperialist” revolt, almost all the Jewish population left for Israel or were expelled. Maybe a quarter of Baghdad’s population had been Jewish. In Israel the descendants of the Jewish refugees from Arab countries now outnumber the descendants of the Jewish population of 1948.

Much of the 20th century, and the 21st too, is a story of forced population

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Israel the exception?



German refugees from East Prussia, 1945
movements. We of course disapprove. What concerns me here is: why is Israel the exception in our attitude to the sequels?

Some 800,000 Tamils fled Sri Lanka during and after the communal civil war there, where they were finally defeated in 2009. Some 700,000 Rohingya Muslims were expelled from Myanmar in 2017, and there are now over 900,000 in refugee camps in Bangladesh.

At the end of World War 2, about 13 million Germans were driven west into a ruined Germany, including the population of Pomerania, Silesia, and East Prussia, whose territories became part of Poland or of Russia, and the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia.

The leaders of the great powers agreed, stipulating hypocritically that it be done "humanely". Half a million at least died or were killed by recent victims of the Nazis in the long forced trek to Germany. One in four citizens of present day Germany is said to be a de-

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scendant of the expelled of 1945.

And mainly around a Greek-Turkish war in 1919-22, the big majority of over two million Greeks living in what is now Turkey were driven out, or removed in a forcible population exchange.

In Germany some of the expelled supported the Right, and the Communist Party oriented left dubbed them the German revanchists. But for decades there has been no movement, no demand, for the Greeks or Germans and their descendants to "return" en masse.

It is only for Israel that such a thing is suggested. Frame it as the question: why are other refugees, or descendants of refugees, not the subject of such special demands as the Palestinians are?

To reinstate the Germans in Eastern Europe after the mid-1940s would have taken a major war and tremendous upheavals.

For Greece and Turkey too, only war and the migration of millions could have restored anything like the status quo ante.

As time went on, people built new lives. Turning back the clock became unimaginable. Except for Israel...

The Palestinian "six million" remain an issue because the Arab countries refused to allow them to find a place in the Arab countries, refused to allow them to integrate. They were more useful as "refugees", as pawns in the agitation against Israel by the Arab states and by Iran's mullahs (as Muslims).

The idea that Israel alone is responsible for the suffering is one of the biggest lies in the delegitimisation of Israel. Why should socialists go along with it? It is only by falsifying history that Israel is given sole responsibility for and is delegitimised by the plight of the refugees' descendants.

Israel is "different" because of Arab

oil power, and Arab and Islamic refusal to let go of the issue and to integrate the descendants and the few remaining refugees; their insistence in effect that that area of the world is pre-designed by God to accept only devotees of Islam.

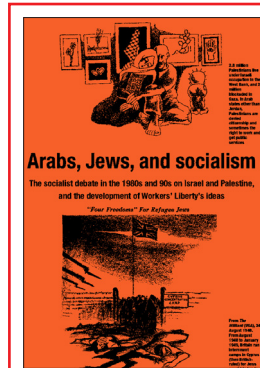
You are all old enough to remember the change in the mass media here in the aftermath of the 1973 war, where the Arab countries made a surprise attack on Israel and nearly won.

You must know that when you assert the right of "six million" to "return" to where they have never been, it is a mass displacement you are demanding. And Israel now, highly urbanised, has little in common with the Israel most of the millions didn't leave 75 years ago. No-one can "return" to anything like the conditions of 1947. Nor should you pretend that the "six million" can.

You are also aware, you can not but be aware, that at least some of your fellow warriors against Israel are simply old fashioned antisemites who have retooled. No, I don't include you in that category. But you are dangerously close to it, aren't you?

Time passes and changes everything. "Return" to pre-1948 Israel as the solution always was a programme to displace Jews.

"Return" now means something different. There can't be many Arab or Jewish survivors from 75-76 years ago.



Socialist Debate in the 80s and 90s on Israel and Palestine. Reprinted with a new introduction **£5** (inc. post) ☐ bit.ly/shop-wl

A few tens of thousands on either side, I suppose.

Why do you say that the descendants have more right in the territory of Israel of 1948 than those born there, whose parents, grandparents, and sometimes great grandparents were born there, and who transformed what it was then to what it is now?

There is only one possible answer you can give. The "six million" have a right bestowed on them by their ancestors. The Arabs who have never been to Israel are legatees of their ancestors, though many of their parents or even grandparents had never been there either.

The descendants of the Arabs of 1947-48 have the "right genes" whereas the Jews who live there don't have the "right genes". A matter of having the right or wrong genes. Well, isn't it? Your positions comes down to that. And the kitsch left and yourself apply that "hereditary" argument nowhere else. Only to Israel and only to the better-genetised Palestinians.

I've always opposed calling "left" anti-Israel people racists for the good enough reason that I didn't think it true. I don't want to say it of you now. Of course, in general you are as opposed to racism as I am. But what do you call an argument for displacing Israeli Jews with people whose genes – whose descent from ancestors who had and can pass on the right to live in 1948 Israel – give a better right to live there than the Jews who were born there? Than they and their descendants can ever have? ☐

• For the 1980s debates, see our pamphlet [Arabs, Jews, and Socialism](#).

The full names of those whom this letter is addressed to are Rachel Lever, Naomi Wimborne-Idrissi, Andrew Hornung.

Putin in anti-trans, anti-gay drive

By Rhodri Evans

Gender transition surgery – legal, though usually difficult to get, in many countries since it was pioneered in Germany in the 1920s – was banned in Russia on 24 July.

The lead author of legislation passed in Russia's tame parliament and now signed into law by president Putin linked it with Russia's

invasion of Ukraine, seen as a confrontation with the too-liberal "West" (although in fact liberal advances in Ukraine on LGBT+ rights are very limited).

"A special military operation [i.e. war] is taking place not only on the battlefields, but also in the consciousness of the people, in their minds and in their souls. Today, we are fighting so that in Russia instead of

mum and dad there isn't 'parent No. 1,' 'parent No. 2,' 'parent No. 3.'"

Putin himself has said that "the West" can have "dozens of genders and gay pride parades", but Russia will resist those "trends".

The new law also bans hormone therapy and changing gender on official documents like passports. It annuls any marriage where a spouse changes gender.

In 2013 (for under-18s) and again late in 2022 (for everyone) Russia adopted laws against depictions of gay lifestyles – what the government called "gay propaganda".

In Russia as in many other countries at many times, denunciations of "the West" are often entirely reactionary. ☐

• More: bit.ly/putin-t

Trumpist right targets the unions

By Martin Thomas

Think-tanks in the USA are [working hard](#) to sketch policies and prepare personnel for a 2025-9 Trump administration. Some have alarming proposals about replacing unions by “non-adversarial” worker organisation.

Trump’s term in 2017-21 was chaotic. Although Trump rallied much of the right-wing Republican base brewed up over decades in churches, gun clubs, and local Republican organisations, most top-level political operatives of the US right didn’t trust Trump and didn’t expect him to win the 2016 election.

Trump had no coherent and consistent team to translate his demagoguery into detail policies and push them through the USA’s ramshackle and high-inertia machinery of government.

After the 6 January 2021 storming of the Capitol, it seemed at first that the top-level operatives of the US right would write off Trump as an embar-

assment. In fact Trump has re-hegemonised the Republican party, including more of its top-level operatives.

The free-marketer American Enterprise Institute and Cato Institute keep their distance from Trump. The Heritage Foundation is closer. The [America First Policy Institute](#) of Brooke Rollins, and [American Compass](#), led by Oren Cass, play a bigger role.

AFPI is the more Trump-aligned, and has a section on its website offering “Biblical Foundations” for its policy schemes. Its “pro-worker” pretence is largely based on claims that deregulation boosts jobs. Cass, previously an adviser to anti-Trump Republican Mitt Romney, has veered pro-Trump, has former Trump officials in his team, and offers more detail.

Not adversarial

American Compass, emphasising the limits of free markets, offers detailed proposals for “new forms of worker organisations that might provide benefits,

work collaboratively with management, and bargain industry-wide for baseline employment conditions”.

It proposes “non-union worker-management committees” in workplaces, “workplace committees (sometimes employer-funded) where employee representatives are empowered to discuss issues of common concern with management, in a posture [not] adversarial”. It advocates that “the United States should establish parameters for creation, governance, and composition of worker benefit organisations and make them eligible to receive government funds for administration of public programs”.

Its report does not say explicitly that currently-existing unions should be suppressed, only that they should be barred from political action. It claims, however, that “most workers say they would prefer a worker organisation jointly run by workers and management” and suggests “an alternative form of apolitical union that workers

would likely prefer” [to the existing unions].

All this is presented as a pro-worker push, in a style similar to that of far-right movements of the 1920s and 30s which claimed that their organisation of forced class collaboration was more advantageous to workers than the existing “too political” unions.

The US right does not worry at present about the risk of the working class taking political power soon, as the far right in Europe worried in the 1920s and 30s. It demonises “Big Ed” (the universities), “Big Government”, seen as drivers of liberal or progressive ideology and of government regulations hindering business, and “the union leader who praises abortion access or job-squeezing environmental mandates [or is] routing dues to progressive war chests”.

But the threat to workers’ freedom to both organise their own unions and to deploy union strength for social and political causes is serious. □

Grammar schools and educational exclusion

By Patrick Yarker

Grammar schools are academically-selective secondary schools funded by the state. There are 163 grammar schools in England, and 5% of secondary school-aged children attend them.

In 2018 the DfE and the Grammar School Heads’ Association (GSHA), the body which represents most grammar schools, signed a four-year “Memorandum of Understanding” (MoU) rooted in the deceptive quarter-truth that grammar schools enable impoverished children to slough off their circumstances and enter the middle class.

The MoU set out a “shared ambition”: to see more children in receipt of the Pupil Premium apply for grammar school, secure a place and be accepted as students. The proportion of students in receipt of Pupil Premium funding who attend grammar schools is around 8%, according to the campaign group Comprehensive Future, while the proportion of all such secondary students in England is over three times as high, at about 27%.

The 2018 MoU also proposed closer partnership between selective and non-selective schools in a given locality, supposedly so that all

children might benefit. In practice this meant more publicity about grammar schools, some help for parents to understand the nature and demands of the selection test, and token coaching for handfuls of children.

Mobility?

Theresa May’s government backed these aims with public money. May regarded grammar schools as engines of upward social mobility. She devised grand plans in 2017 to change the law and create more of them. When her poor showing in the General Election prevented this, she established funding mechanisms to finance the enlargement of existing grammar schools. One of these mechanisms, the Selective Schools Expansion Fund (SSEF), gave £64M to 22 schools.

The result? An evaluation published in June 2023 by the DfE reveals that over the four-year MoU programme the percentage of Pupil Premium funded students enrolled in grammar schools rose by all of 0.7%, from 7.2% to 7.9%. Out of 367 additional places created at the SSEF-funded schools, only 77 went to impoverished students.

As if this wasn’t evidence enough of abject failure, or calculated disdain, in five of the

original 16 grammar schools which bid for SSEF money the proportion of poorer children admitted actually went down.

The SSEF ended in 2022. Grammar schools still stealthily expand. No sanctions have been applied to those which failed to admit more children of the poor. Instead, the government has rewarded the GSHA with a new four-year

MoU rendered even weaker than the earlier version. Gone is any requirement to track the number of grammar school applicants in receipt of Pupil Premium funding. Schools need track only the number of such pupils actually accepted, “with a view to seeing an upward trend”, the document whimpers.

Our aim is neither to en-

hance social “mobility” nor “improve” grammar schools. We work to establish a comprehensive education system: non-selective, free from the ideology of “ability”, democratically accountable and suitably-funded.

Such a system is the only foundation which can secure the proper education of all children. □

UCU: risk of ballot delay

By a UCU member

As *Solidarity* goes to press on 1 August, we await the outcome of the latest talks between the University and College Union and university employers’ organisation UCEA.

The union’s congress voted for a summer reballot to continue the mandate for action into the autumn term, but it looks increasingly likely that this will be delayed, meaning the mandate will expire at the end of September. That means it will not be possible to call action at the start of most university terms, leaving the union in a weak position in the current negotiations.

Rumour has it that the General Secretary would prefer to run a new ballot campaign during the academic year, to coincide with her campaign for re-election.

The Marking and Assessment Boycott has caused significant disruption to summer graduations, with some students still waiting for degree results. In response, the more hardline managements have imposed punitive deduc-

tions from wages – with some members losing 100% of income. Local fighting funds and wage-sharing schemes are providing support, but the long campaign is inevitably proving difficult.

There is, however, some evidence of a split among employers, with two of the better-off Russell Group institutions making local settlements. Queens University Belfast awarded an additional 2% pay rise on top of the nationally-agreed 5%, breaking with national bargaining to do so, while UCL is amending grade boundaries so that staff at the top of grades will get an extra increment, which keeps it just within the UCEA rules. On the other hand, there are big job cuts elsewhere, including at Brighton (where UCU members are on indefinite strike), UEA and Huddersfield. Management at Chichester are threatening to close a unique UK Masters programme in African history.

Despite all this, the union leadership is not putting on the level of pressure that it might. □

How can the union-activist layer revive?

By E M Johns

On 29 July between 150 and 200 trade unionists met in Manchester at the Troublemakers at Work conference.

Called by a number of labour movement organising projects (Workers Can Win, Strike Map, Organise Now!), the conference gained an impressive breadth of backers and was marked by a refreshing lack of political sectarianism. Different left groups were free to distribute their literature.

Sessions were participatory and genuinely worker-led. The surface-level attempt at radical rhetoric from general secretaries and officials, that unfortunate feature of too many left-trade union events, was notably absent.

It's a positive step to have a conference with an avowedly "rank-and-file" orientation. Indeed, even to meet and have some in-depth discussions about what we mean by a rank-and-file approach to trade unionism feels like an all too rare thing.

There were opportunities around the sessions for people to make worker-to-worker connections with others in the same sector that will hopefully prove useful going forwards. The conference heard from various rank-and-file oriented projects including the Pan African Workers' Association, Notes from Below, and NHS Workers Say No.

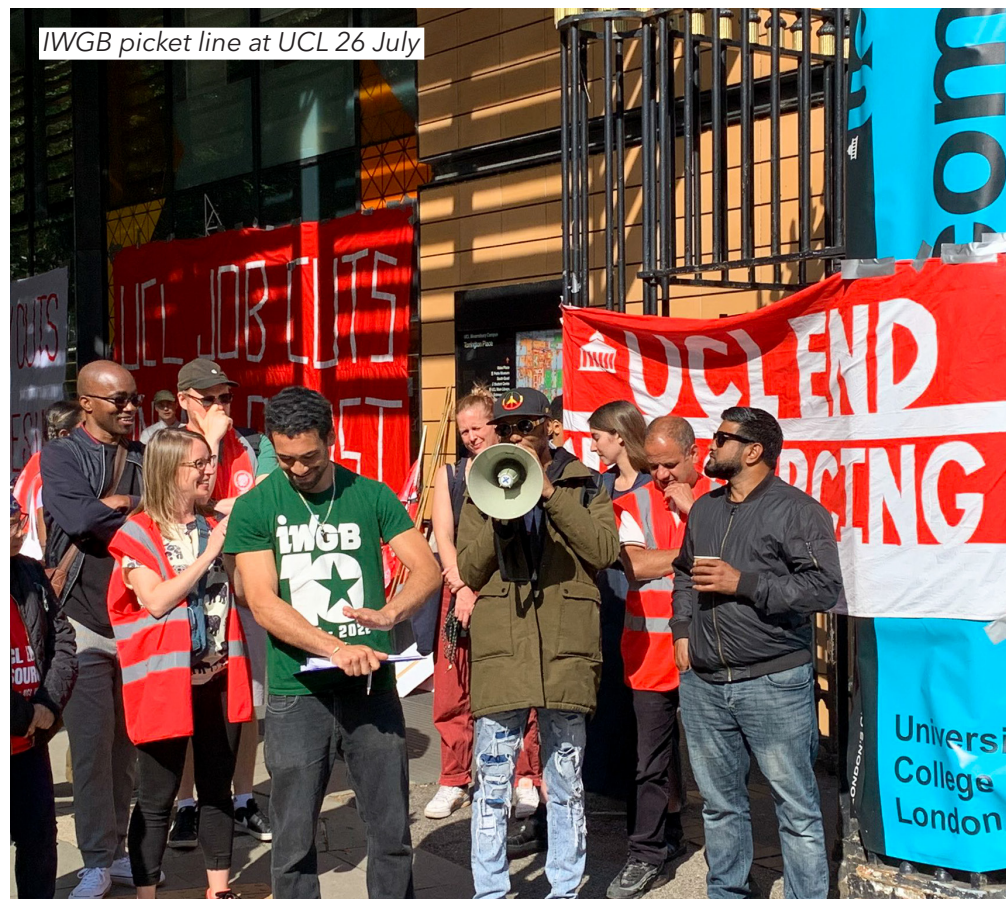
The context of the current strike wave coupled with the still too timid and conservative culture predominating in the trade union movement was on the

minds of many of the attendees. The issues facing the rank-and-file are sharp and time sensitive. No wave of industrial action lasts forever, but a longer term revival of the trade union movement, and just as importantly a revival of our activist and rep layer, is on the cards.

There are few, if any, fully developed rank-and-file networks in the UK trade unions. Internal left-wing factions exist in some and are more or less successful at electing people to union committees. These factions have some permanence but rarely have any presence on the shop floor, do not often push bold reform programmes within the unions, and in some cases rarely even make their criticisms of union leaders' strategies known until too late in the day.

The grassroots movements that have emerged to reject inadequate compromise deals in various industries contain the potential to develop into rank-and-file networks. This potential is almost certainly time limited and therefore the question of organisation is sharply posed.

We need to develop basic but resilient organisational forms that are flexible enough to respond to industrial developments, but also have enough capacity to pro-actively decide upon and campaign for radical reforming demands within the unions themselves. Whether the newly radicalised activist and rep layer in the movement will be able to do this is an open question, and a key one for revolutionaries to engage with in the coming weeks and months.



Further questions will arise regarding how independent rank-and-file groupings should relate to "organising model" projects that are in practice often run by unions' full-time machinery.

It's important that the developing rank-and-file movements avoid replicating the worst elements of UK trade unionism – closed-off leadership, an acceptance of "confidentiality" i.e. se-

crecy in negotiations, a timidity in the face of the anti-union laws, and so on – but rather become the incubator for a new model of trade unionism that is bold, democratic, and focused on industrial solidarity. This will not be easy, but it is possible.

The conference organisers are holding a Zoom call on 3 August to discuss next steps for the Troublemakers project. □

Ukrainian unions back Scottish strike

By Dale Street

Barring a last-minute settlement, GMB members employed at the Department of Defence Equipment and Support depot in Beith (near Glasgow) will strike again Friday 4 and Monday 7 August.

The munitions depot supplies weapons to British nuclear submarines based in Faslane, and Storm Shadow and Brimstone missiles to Ukrainian forces fighting the Russian invasion.

The dispute centres on the existence of a two-tier workforce in the depot. Managers and craft workers are paid bonuses, but non-craft workers are not. To make matters even worse, their current hourly rate of pay is just 23p more than the National Living Wage (£10.42).

This leaves them on a lower rate of pay than many super-

market workers. As one GMB official put it: "It means that these workers get less for moving huge bombs around than they would a tin of beans around a shop – no offence to anyone working in retail."

The new strikes will follow two days of strikes in July by some 50 workers at the depot, after a 93% vote in favour of strike action. These were the first strikes at the depot since it was built in 1943.

The strike has been backed by the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine. In a message of support its chairperson, Mykhailo Volynets wrote:

"The supplies you ensure are a lifesaver for civilians in cities under constant attack by Russian forces, as well as for the brave Ukrainian military on the frontline."

"We sincerely appreciate your commitment to support-

ing Ukrainian workers during these hard times and stand in solidarity with union members in their struggle. We urge the employer to negotiate to resolve the problem as soon as possible."

The strike has also been backed by Ukrainian MP Lesia Vasylenko:

"The work being done by GMB Scotland members at Beith could not be more important to Ukraine as we fight for our freedom. I thank every one of them for their efforts, support their fight for fairness and urge managers to quickly negotiate an end to this dispute and ensure their crucial work continues."

(Vasylenko was a human rights lawyer before she entered the Ukrainian Parliament in 2019 as one of 20 successful candidates of the Holos party, an economically and politically liberal party affiliated to

the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe. The latter's British affiliate are the Lib Dems.)

Of course, Ukrainian trade unionists and a Ukrainian MP backing a strike by British workers does not fit in with the Stop the War Coalition portrayal of Ukraine as a neo-Nazi state in which there are no trade unions.

But that contradiction simply underlines how far the Stop the War Coalition and its supporters in the *Morning Star* and Socialist Workers Party are removed from reality. Their coverage of the July strikes also contains some oddities.

The *Morning Star* boasted of its investigative journalism: "A source confirmed to the *Morning Star* that the Beith factory is involved in providing missiles supplied to Ukraine."

In fact, the depot's role in delivering weapons for Ukraine

has been covered extensively on the BBC and STV, and also in the Scottish press. No need, therefore, for this to be confirmed to the *Morning Star* by "a source". Or had "the source" simply been watching television?

According to *Socialist Worker*: "Socialists should support the striking workers. But we have to argue that defence workers' skills should be used in socially useful sectors, not making weapons that cause death and destruction around the world."

As a general argument that is true. But has the Socialist Workers Party ever actually tried arguing with a Ukrainian that their country should not be provided with weapons to defeat Russia, on the grounds that the only result will be "death and destruction around the world"? □



Amazon strikes spread

By Ollie Moore

Amazon workers' strikes over pay and conditions are due to spread, as workers at a fulfilment centre in Rugeley, Staffordshire, have voted for industrial action.

The GMB balloted just over 100 workers, who voted by an 86% majority to strike. Although the union's membership represents a small minority of the workforce, union membership at the BHX4 site in Coventry exploded as an ongoing campaign of strikes began, and activists will be hoping for a similar effect at Rugeley. The GMB says its membership in the Coventry site is now over 1,000.

The fight there has an additional dimension, as the Rugeley warehouse has been earmarked for closure by Amazon, with workers being offered alternative roles in a warehouse in Sutton Coldfield.

Amazon workers in Coventry have struck 19 times so far this year, most recently from 11-13 July. GMB is demanding a £15/hour minimum wage; pay is currently £10.50. Amazon plans to impose a 50p/hour increase. The strikes at Amazon have seen mass pickets, with up to 400 workers mobilising. Spreading the energy and assertiveness of the Coventry strikes to other Amazon sites could be key to forcing concessions from the employer. □

Security guards step up UCL campaign

By Michael Baker

Outsourced security guards at University College London, organised in the IWGB, are organising a series of [strikes and protests](#) over restructuring policies by subcontractor Bidvest Noonan.

40 of the 256 security staff on the campus are being made redundant, while the remaining members are being forced to accept drastically changed working conditions, or else lose their jobs. UCL and Bidvest claim that this does not count as "firing and rehiring", as the workers do not have to reapply for their new roles. The IWGB, and many of the individual members on the picket line, say otherwise.

The most significant change to conditions is an extreme reduction in hours for large quantities of the workforce - in some cases from 60 hours to just over 30. This leaves a significant portion of the workers around £1,000 worse off every month. This comes in the middle of a several-year-long campaign for security staff to be brought in-house

at UCL, a topic that was discussed at length in discussions on the picket line on Wednesday 26 July.

The vast majority of security staff employed through outsourcing companies are black, brown and/or migrant workers, creating an effective two-tier system of employment. The fact that these workers are then paid less, treated worse by management, and forced into redundancies and reduced pay via a faster, more ruthless process is systemically racist. The current campaign is right to say so loudly in its slogans, speeches and demands.

After collective picket line discussion on 26 July, pickets and supporters took a journey to the City of London to deliver letters and protest outside the offices and favourite haunts of several UCL board members. They were joined on this occasion by Unite members from St. Mungo's charity, who are on indefinite strike over pay. Solidarity between striking workers, and support from other unions on the same campus as the security guards, primarily Unison and the UCU, is important. □



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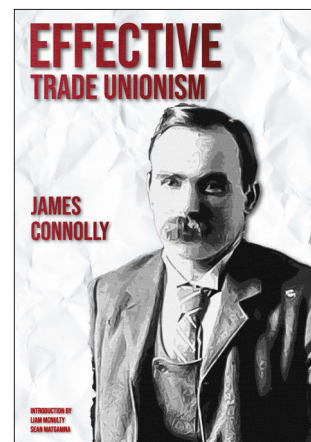
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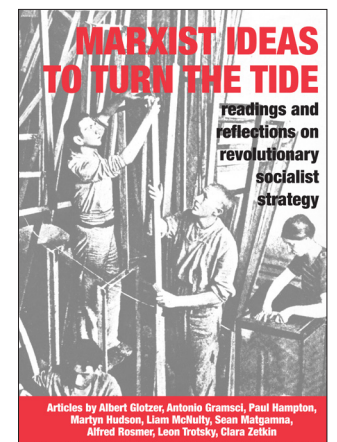
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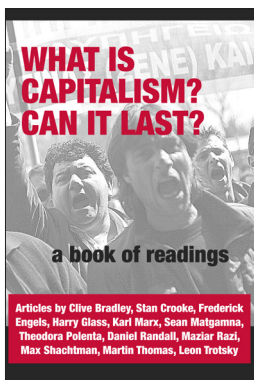
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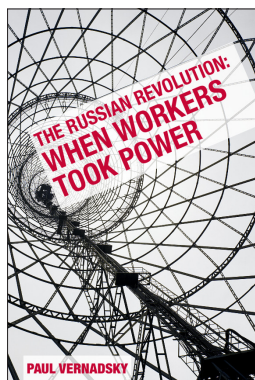
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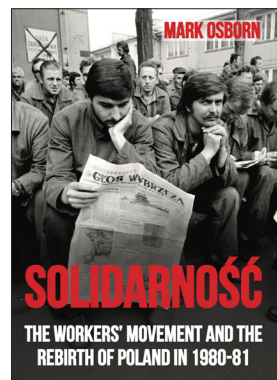
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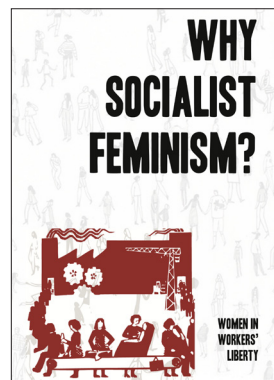
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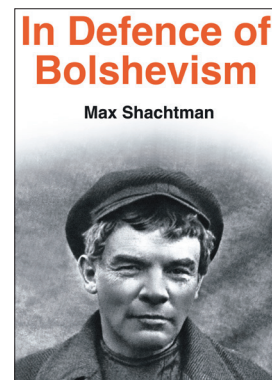
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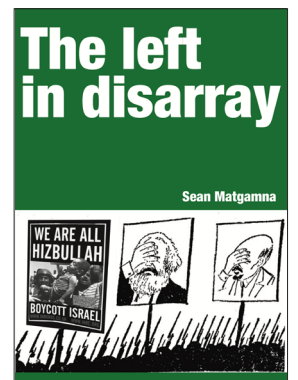
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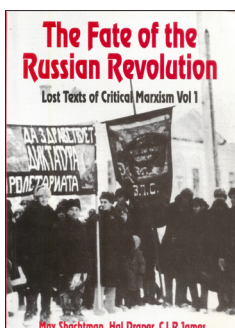
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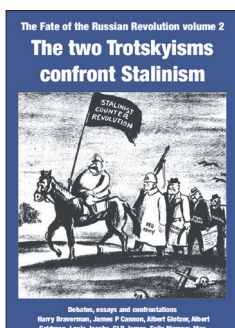
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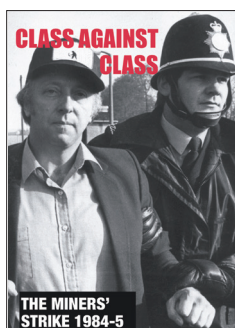
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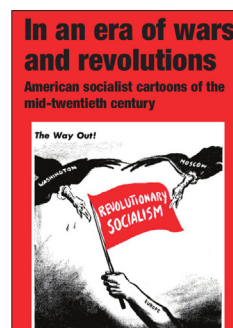
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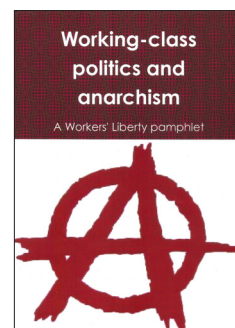
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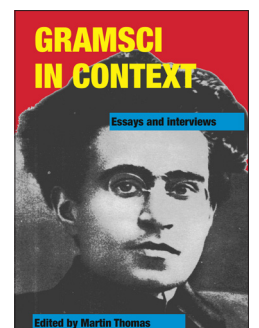
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Unite: industrial advances yet to feed into politics

By Mohan Sen

The big general union Unite has won a string of disputes in the private sector during the 2022-3 strike wave, and is arguably regenerating parts of its industrial organisation. The 11-14 July 2023 Unite Policy Conference – it's biennial, so this was the first since the end of the lockdowns and Sharon Graham's election as general secretary (August 2021) – illustrated how that does not automatically feed through into effective working-class politics.

One very positive development is the emergence of the Unite Grassroots [Climate Justice Caucus](#). Although it lacks roots in the crucial high-emission sectors, its intervention and meetings at the Policy Conference gained it new contacts in those areas. Unite members should get involved.

And Unite's Rules Revision conference, taking place immediately before the Policy Conference, voted overwhelmingly to remain affiliated to the Labour Party. As usual, Policy Conference passed a raft of [policies](#) that provide a basis for campaigning politically, including inside or around Labour – for instance, very strong and specific policy on the anti-union laws.

But Sharon Graham's trite, evasive

comments about "putting Labour on notice" didn't suggest any plans to shift the union from its current political [passivity](#) (the issue of the anti-union laws being a key example).

Unite press-released its disapproval of certain decisions made at the recent Labour National Policy Forum – but with almost no details and no advocacy of any action. Serious left-wingers present at the NPF say that, far from leading any kind of fight, Unite simply boycotted crucial parts of the event.

Many of the left-wing or "left-wing" motions passed at Unite Policy Conference represented, from the union hierarchy's point of view, "safe" forms of radicalism. On some issues creating serious lines of divisions, notably on climate change, both its main groupings – the old United Left faction and supporters of Sharon Graham – took a conservative position.

Thus the motions opposing new fossil fuel projects were pushed off the agenda by an Executive Council statement which harped on about a "just transition" but completely avoided commenting on the actual issue of controversy in the motions (accompanied by some awful speeches). More generally there was an increase in the use of such statements as a way of short-circu-



iting democratic debate.

Delegates did show some independent-minded democratic spirit on some issues, but generally more minor ones.

The conference passed a fairly solidly pro-Ukraine statement from the Executive, incorporating some language from a strong amendment put forward

through an AWL supporter's branch. But the statement also specifically justified NATO membership.

The Sharon-Graham-supporting wing of the left held a meeting at the conference to set up a new grouping. Its political basis remains to be seen. □

Parking wardens on indefinite strike

By a Unison member

Parking wardens in Camden, north London, began an indefinite strike over pay on Monday 24 July.

Wardens responsible for street, car park, and CCTV parking enforcement are outsourced to a private company, NSL. The workers, organised in Unison, are demanding a rise from £12.70 per hour to £15.90. NSL bosses claim this is unaffordable – by which they mean, it will cut intolerably into the large profits they make from the borough.

In the current strike wave, it has only been extended or indefinite strikes, supported by union strike pay, that have successfully defended or improved real-terms wages against inflation. Camden's

wardens have rightly launched straight into just such a strategy.

This strike is the latest stage in years of work and action. The workforce has organised itself solidly, with a strong density of shop stewards, and held extended strikes in past years (e.g. 33 days total in 2018) that won pay rises higher than neighbouring boroughs. They are well-supported by the rest of their branch. This year they voted 100% "yes" to strike on a 73% turnout.

Their record shows that organisation and militancy from workplace and branch level can push even relatively conservative union bureaucracies to sign off on aggressive industrial action, which in turn can extract valuable concessions from employers.

Longer-term, the wardens and the Unison branch are building toward a fight to end outsourcing and bring them in-house, to end the second-class conditions on which these disproportionately Black and migrant workers are employed.

Reps report that about 90% of workers have joined the action. On the first day of the strike, after picketing they held a mass meeting, linked up with St Mungo's workers also on indefinite strike action, and protested at the council offices.

In all these aspects, the parking wardens are a positive example to the rest of the labour movement – one contrasting clearly with the unsuccessful, stop-start, "marathon not a sprint" approach promoted by some union leaders. Join their



picket lines to strengthen their strike and learn from their example. Labour members and affiliates should pressure the

Labour councillors who run the council to back the strikers and bring them in-house. □

• More: fb.com/camdenunison

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Trackworkers back in the day



Diary of a Trackworker

By Matt Shaw

The railway industry when I joined decades ago was an "institution", full of odd bods.

One of the people I worked with in my first days sang Barry Manilow songs all day long. He had a decent voice, though his choice of singers was not to anybody else's taste. He made a second income singing in local workingmen's clubs. He actually did look a bit like Barry Manilow.

Another was very clumsy, always catching people with tools or odd bits of his body. His favourite was lurking round a corner and then when he heard someone coming, walking round the corner into them. Then he would try to put the blame on them. It was all an act on his part; in social events outside work he was "normal".

After World War Two a lot of returning military were taken on by the railway or the post office. When I joined, those people formed the backbone of the "proper" workforce. They were used to following orders, but paradoxically, were also the strongest in the union,

which at that time was well organised but reluctant to use its strength.

As my time went on, more odd bods turned up. One guy was on a cabbage diet before it was fashionable, much to our chagrin because his methane output was loud, constant, and malodorous.

Another character had married into the area from rural Portsmouth. He could barely understand us if we had anything like a strong local (northern) accent. Neither of those two lasted long.

We also received people from depots which had been closed down. At that time, the rail industry operated a resettlement policy. If you were made surplus in your old depot, then you could apply for a vacancy anywhere in the country. As a consequence you often heard accents and dialects from quite a wide range of places. Translation could be a problem.

One morning one of those relocated guys (from the west country) walked in looking like a bad impersonation of a horse. His mouth was being forced out by an enormous set of false teeth (his own teeth had been bad).

After a few days of us trying to understand what he was saying, and not to laugh or neigh at him, he went back to the dentist. The following day he came

into the mess room with no teeth at all. It turned out he had been given someone else's false teeth first time round.

One of the older guys was the last Sheffield champion at bare-knuckle boxing before it was banned. He was very dark skinned, with a Mediterranean look about him. In his younger days, apparently, he was a "ladies' man". His tales were about the railway and his many affairs with women.

Unfortunately, his boxing exploits had left him punch-drunk and needing to use a hearing aid. By rights, he should not have been working on the track, but in those days things were allowed to slip. The standing joke about him was that since he was getting old it would only take four of us to hold him down. □

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Production team: Martin Thomas (editor), Sara Lee, Sacha Ismail, Dan Katz, Simon Nelson, Zack Muddle □

Milan Kundera (1929-2023) and a "joke" about Trotsky



Kino Eye

By John Cunningham

The famous Czech writer, Milan Kundera, died on 11 July. Best-known for *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), he also wrote *The Joke* in 1967.

Adapted for the screen by Czech film director Jaromil Jireš in 1969, the "joke" in question refers to a comment by the main protagonist Ludvik Jahn, a Young Communist, who sends a postcard to his lover, Markéta, while attending a Party Summer School. Ludvik thinks Markéta is far too serious and although the postcard is obviously meant as a (not very funny) joke, the repercussions are serious.

It reads: "Optimism is the opium of

the people. A 'healthy spirit' stinks of stupidity. Long live Trotsky! Yours Ludvik". Apparently, he is unaware that even to mention Trotsky in Stalinist Czechoslovakia is a crime.

A special "hearing" is convened at his college and he is denounced by everyone including Markéta. The result is six years' "re-education" in prison and the army. On release he does not return home but some twenty years later he finally returns to the place of his birth planning revenge.

However, his various schemes backfire badly. *The Joke* was immediately banned in Czechoslovakia and was the last film of the Czech New Wave. □

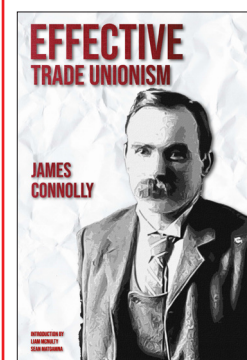
• More online: Myths of Cinema #4, bit.ly/myth4. Was a cinema audience in the USA really influenced to buy extra Coca Cola when a single frame was flashed on screen with the words "Drink Coca Cola"? Or was the report just a load of baloney?

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Writings by James Connolly of his views on industrial unionism and the sympathetic strike. £5 (inc. post) □ bit.ly/shop-wl



NEU: setback, but elements to build on



By Patrick Murphy

Despite a fairly active reject campaign, members of the National Education Union (NEU) have voted overwhelmingly in an 18-28 July ballot to accept the improved teachers' pay offer from the government (6.5% from September). 86% of members voted to accept the offer on a turnout of 60%.

A parallel consultative ballot of support staff voted by 85% to accept on a return of 46%. Support staff were balloted on whether to accept the funding element of the offer as they were not part of the pay dispute.

As soon as the NEU Executive voted

to recommend the deal it was almost inevitable that it would be accepted by members. More action in autumn could certainly have pushed the government further, but it would have been carried out by the NEU alone and that point was emphasised in the material circulated in the ballot.

That was a problem, but it could have been overcome by a leadership prepared to be bolder and give a positive lead. Instead members got the message that their Executive didn't think we were up to it.

Even so the majority for accept was overwhelming. The leadership of the NEU enjoy huge credibility and their

recommendation and judgment carried real weight. That credibility and respect could have been used in a much more positive and ambitious way to continue this fight.

In truth the signs of retreat were there before the latest offer. The leadership wanted to reduce the promised three days of strikes in July to one or even pull them altogether. Only some rare unity between socialists on the Executive ensured that two further strike days took place.

It is important for the future, however, that the response of activists who voted to reject is not mired in despair or negativity. We could have won more but

the strike campaign shifted the government from a position where they planned an increase of only 3.5% to one where teachers will get 6.5% on all pay points and allowances.

The will to fight remains and the NEU can go into future battles stronger, better organised, with more workplace reps, more confident activists and the knowledge that action works. The next task is to ensure that those battles do take place and to raise the horizons and ambitions of the union – not least its leadership. □

• Abridged. More: bit.ly/31-jul

Tube dispute: real concessions but not enough



The rail unions RMT, Aslef, and Unite suspended strikes planned for the week from 23 July on London Underground (LUL). The com-

pany has moved, a bit... but is it enough?

LUL has agreed to pause the imposition of its horrific new attendance policy. That's progress, but it doesn't mean they won't bring that policy back in new talks.

There's a commitment not to change pensions until 2026. But we always knew the pro-

cess of pension reform would be drawn out, and we were never fighting for a mere stay of execution.

"Trains Modernisation" has been stopped, for now – but, again, LUL will simply bring its proposals back in the new negotiation process it's agreed. The company hasn't agreed to abandon cuts, merely to

negotiate over them in formal channels.

Protection of earnings for Customer Service Managers (CSMs) at risk of forcible demotion as part of a new proposed reorganisation on stations has been increased from three to four years, but that's still less than you'd get under the current policy for being medically redeployed, and way short of the lifetime salary guarantee displaced staff got as part of "Fit for the Future."

Tubeworker doesn't believe these concessions justify the cancellation of strikes that could've shut the job down for a week and won much more. Some union officials need to remember that the mobilisation of members isn't a light switch that can be flicked on and off at will. Building for strikes takes time and effort, and cancelling action at the last minute doesn't keep everything static until union leaders decide it's time to strike again, it sets mobilisation back.

There are also real concerns about the process by which the strikes were cancelled. The picture varies from union to union, but on the whole it

seems to be one of union Executive Committees voting to cancel the strikes on the basis of reports from officers and small groups of "senior reps", without much (or any) wider input. Negotiations move fast and sometimes require a measure of confidentiality that makes things difficult. But any democratic union should be pushing at those limits as much as possible.

With more regular and comprehensive updates, reps and members could at least follow the negotiators' line of thinking, even if they didn't agree with their recommendation. As it is, many members feel frozen out of the process, and treated like a stage army being marched up and down the hill.

We should avoid doom-mongering; the threat of escalated action has forced some concessions. That's positive. But we fear an opportunity to win more, by mobilising the collective power of the entire workforce, has been missed. Tubeworker supporters will be mobilising in our workplaces and branches to ensure we learn lessons from this experience and seek to change course. □

Doctors strike in August

By Sacha Ismail

British Medical Association junior doctors will strike again 11-15 August and consultants (senior doctors) probably on the 24th and 25th, demanding real-terms pay rises as steps towards "pay restoration".

There are also rumblings about a possible GPs' strike. NHS radiographers, who have their own union, struck on 25 and 26 July – their first ever national strike – and may strike again.

Junior doctors, who make up about half the hospital

doctor workforce (consultants are 40%), have already struck for 13 days since March. As socialist junior doctors have argued in *Solidarity*, however, the current pace of about three days a month seems unlikely to budge the Tories. The August strikes will be a challenge because on 2 August junior doctors move to new "rotations" (job assignments, often new work sites) and a cohort of newly-graduated medical students joins the ranks.

In Scotland, junior doctors have won a significantly better deal, including a 12.4%

rise this year, guaranteed inflation-matching rises for the next three years and a written though blurred commitment to pay restoration. They are voting on the offer 2-16 August.

We should agitate about the Labour Party's refusal to advocate anything clearly different from the Tories, and demand it gets behind the doctors.

At a time when most public-sector workers, and many private, have lost out for over a decade, we should fight to popularise the idea of "pay restoration". □

After NPF, make unions fight back!

By Sacha Ismail

The 21-23 July meeting of Labour's National Policy Forum was its first full pre-election gathering since 2014 (supposedly because 2017 and 2019 were snap elections). It's tricky to report on it in any detail, given a dearth of solid information.

For sure the Labour Party leadership is doubling down on its existing course – right-wing, anti-democratic and dishonest. They *should* face rebellion at Labour Party conference (8-11 October, Liverpool) and beyond, and Labour's affiliated trade unions should lead it.

At the NPF Starmer and co. pushed hard to take the party further to the right not just on anything involving public spending commitments – denouncing “unfunded policies” while refusing to advocate taxing the rich – but also on workers' rights, the right to protest, and trans rights.

Andrew Fisher, Labour's head of policy under Jeremy Corbyn, summarised the political character of the NPF meeting and the party it epitomises: it “showed the Labour leadership in full control of the party – but looking remote and powerless in the face of the economic, social and climate crises they will inherit”.

As explained by Labour National Executive Committee member [Ann Black](#), the party bureaucracy adopted new procedures for the NPF that made it hard for its members – let alone the wider membership – to get a general picture of what was happening at the event.

I attended a report-back Zoom meeting organised by various Labour left organisations and my picture remained blurry. I spoke to a left-wing trade unionist who was there the whole event and played a leading role, and even then the way the thing had been run meant it was hard to build a general assessment.

There is not much culture of NPF members taking serious notes and finding ways to get round and challenge confidentiality rules; or of the unions, which have easier access to information than others in the NPF, sharing it and coordinating with the Labour left.

It will be possible to say more once the documents agreed by the NPF are released. On the crucial issue of workers' rights, the leadership seems to have pushed right on collective bar-



gaining, tackling bogus self-employment (“single status”), rights from day one of the job, and banning zero hours contracts. It doesn't seem that the pivotal question of repealing anti-strike laws was seriously discussed at all.

Unions apparently put more effort into pushing back on these questions, with some results, and went softer, for instance, on scrapping the two-child benefits limit. That is understandable and logical, but it is also a political problem.

On trans rights the leadership apparently agreed a form of words which it told activists meant demedicalising the process for gender transition – only to then immediately brief the press that it has ditched “self-ID” and supports having to get approval from a doctor.

Starmer apparently told the NPF that Labour's policy on the two-child limit was not settled and of course it is necessary to “do something about child poverty”. But shadow ministers and party spokespeople repeatedly brief the media that the limit will stay under a Labour government.

On very important issues including the two-child limit, restoring Sure Start, repealing anti-protest laws and reversing academisation, the NPF backed up the leadership against the left. But the NPF, stuffed with various de facto representatives of the leadership, the parliamentary party and so, was designed for stitch-ups, and in the left's current disarray that dynamic was naturally reinforced.

The balance of forces at Labour Party conference is potentially far more favourable. The left should take it seriously and demand the unions do likewise. Rebellion there will only impact the party leadership, however, if it helps launch much wider revolt and agitation in the labour movement for clear alternative policies. □

Putin blocks grain shipments

By Dan Katz

On Monday 17 July Russia pulled out of the UN- and Turkey-brokered deal that ensured safe passage for Ukrainian grain shipments through the Black Sea.

The Black Sea grain deal was signed in July 2022. It allowed desperately needed Ukrainian food to pass through the Russian blockade of Ukraine's ports.

Since leaving the deal Russia has repeatedly attacked Odesa and other Ukrainian Black Sea ports with missiles, causing extensive damage, killing civilians and destroying grain held in storage units. Ukraine's Agriculture Ministry reported that 60,000 tonnes of grain were destroyed in the port of Chornomorsk, outside Odesa.

90% of Ukraine's grain was exported through its Black Sea ports before Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022.

Ukraine produces 10% of the world's wheat and 15% of its corn. Lebanon, Pakistan, Libya, Ethiopia and Tunisia are particularly dependent on Ukrainian wheat exports.

According to the Turkish Defence Ministry 33 million tonnes of grain had been exported from Ukraine since the deal came into force in July 2022.

The UN World Food Programme (WFP) is a major buyer of Ukrainian grain as part of its food-assistance programme. The WFP said it had shipped 655,000 tonnes to Ethiopia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Sudan, Somalia and Kenya.

The WFP estimates 345 million people face serious food insecurity in 2023. Russia's actions make famine more likely.

On Wednesday 19 July the Russian Ministry of Defence announced that civilian ships in the Black Sea were now legitimate military targets. Wheat prices jumped by 8.2% on European markets.

Why is Putin threatening this agreement? Doing so will damage any sympathy Russia has amongst African and Arab states.

Putin is attempting to use the grain deal as leverage to extract concessions from the pro-Ukraine Western powers. On 19 July he announced his demands for returning to the deal: lift sanctions on Russian grain exports; reconnection of Russian banks servicing food exports to the international SWIFT banking system.

However, the demand to lift sanctions on grain makes no sense. There are no sanctions on Russian grain and fertilizer exports. In fact, last year Russia exported 45.5 million tonnes of wheat. This was a record (and almost certainly included



Odesa after Russian attack, 20 July 2023

produce stolen from Ukrainian farmers in Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory).

It also seems that the ending of the deal is aimed at Turkey and the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The deal is profitable for Turkey and made Erdoğan look good. However, recently, there have been signs that Turkey is asserting itself against Russia, assessing Russia to be weak and vulnerable, especially after the Wagner mutiny in late June.

On 8 July Turkey released five leaders of the Ukrainian military resistance in Mariupol, allowing them to return to Ukraine in a propaganda coup for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The Russian authorities accused Turkey of breaking an agreement to keep the Ukrainians in Turkey until the end of the war.

Erdoğan also supported Ukraine's application to join NATO at the recent NATO summit (11-12 July in Vilnius).

The Russian threat to the deal is also a rebuke to Erdoğan.

Now Ukraine finds itself in a difficult position. The EU had opened “solidarity lanes” allowing Ukraine to export grain into Europe using land routes. 29 million tonnes of grain went via these routes, but also provoked a backlash from farmers in Eastern Europe as local prices crashed. The governments of Eastern European EU states gave in to their farmers' street protests and the “solidarity lanes” initiative no longer properly functions.

The willingness of the Russian regime to use the hunger of some of the world's most vulnerable people as a weapon in its invasion of Ukraine underlines Putin's unscrupulous brutality. □



Solidarity

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PCS: REASONS FOR VOTING NO

From PCS Independent Left

The ballot on whether to call off the [civil service pay] dispute starts very soon [3-31 August, on the government offer of flat-rate payments to compensate for past cost-of-living issues and 4.5% for the next year].

Now you might say that's not true as the [PCS union] leadership claim we are moving to a new phase, just pausing the dispute and not calling it off; that later this year, we will evaluate the outcome of the pay settlements and then decide whether to begin action again.

Let's pick that claim apart.

When the leadership say "later this year", they are talking of November by which time all existing strike mandates will have run out and would mean having to re-ballot everyone and start afresh, causing further delays to any action.

Given that the General Secretary and Assistant General Secretary elections will be running in November, they won't start any industrial action ballot whilst that electoral race is ongoing. Voting ends on 14 December and the leadership



are not going to start a strike ballot during this period so this means we'd be looking at closer to Xmas to restart the process

We believe that the Left Unity leadership will say in those circumstances, let's see what the 2024 remit is (this sets the pay budgets and usually comes out in March), so pushing off any ballot until mid or late next year. So that's why we say the ballot is about calling off the dispute for this year. Kicking the can further and further down the road, starving the dispute of oxygen.

In previous postings we have set out in detail why the pay announcements are the lowest in the public sector, are not close to what the union demanded, and show how equality considerations were ignored.

We indeed concluded that there was a fundamental failure

by the leadership in regard to equality.

Now we are working as individuals in branches, to support the branch based campaign PCS Say No. If you go to that site [pcssayno.co.uk], you will see material that you or your branch can use for the ballot. You can follow them on Twitter [[@PCSsayNo](https://twitter.com/PCSsayNo)] as well.

Whilst we are up against the machine (creaky as it is in PCS), and they will throw everything into getting a yes vote, we, together can mobilise members to oppose the ending of the dispute. We have the facts on our side, the arguments as well. If we get those to members, then the vote can go the right way. □

• Taken with thanks from the PCS Independent Left: bit.ly/il-pcs