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Cost-of-Living Crisis: Beyond the windfall tax

Why is mainstream discussion of the "cost-of-living crisis" so shallow, when, for example, an energy company boss says that 40% of households may soon be in "fuel poverty"? The labour movement's failure to argue loudly for alternative policies, and push the Labour Party to do so, is a big factor.

This is the flipside of the shortage, so far, of strikes to push up wages – despite favourable conditions to make gains; with low unemployment, more workers back in the workplace, and a discredited government. The left needs to tackle both problems.

The labour movement needs an emergency plan of proposals to defend living standards and confront and reduce inequality.

Labour's campaign for a windfall tax on the profits of fossil fuel giants, to subsidise household energy bills, doesn't involve street-activity or demonstrations, let alone strikes. But it's at least a hint at how to actually argue for something. There aren't demonstrations, street stalls, workplace leaflets, speaker tours, door-to-door canvassing... but Labour's leaders, its MPs, its representatives, spokespeople and social media are vocally and continuously hammering the demand. It's a start.

The windfall tax is virtually all Labour is proposing. The profits of BP, Shell, and the rest are outrageous, and emergency

money to mitigate energy bills is necessary. But subsidising energy bills will only cushion the squeeze on living standards to a limited extent, and public subsidy of energy providers' profits is not a good longer-term solution.

The labour movement should be exploiting this situation to win public ownership of energy, so we can have a planned push to bring down bills, transform the industry – including to help tackle climate change – and avoid and prepare for future upheavals.

The TUC and unions' demands for the "We demand better" march in London on 18 June are better than Labour's – a real pay rise for every worker, a real Living Wage for all, end "zero hours", increased Universal Credit, and more, but union mobilisation for the protest is slow so far, and the Labour Party hardly seems to be promoting it at all. Starmer's Labour leadership refuses to support strikes, and isn't arguing for workers to unionise even on the level that Joe Biden does in the USA.

He's not even proposing to restore the £20 a week the Tories cut off Universal Credit in October. That £20, plus uprating all benefits at least in line with inflation, is essential to prevent the worst impacts on society's poorest. Benefits should be significantly increased, to at least regain the real value they've lost over forty years; and punitive conditions and sanctions scrapped.

Where does the money come from? Another way in which public debate about all this is so impoverished is that, fuel companies aside, it largely ignores the huge wealth being piled up by employers and the rich. There's no shortage of wealth in society, but it is concentrated in the hands of a few. The total Rishi Sunak allocated as "household support" for poor households during the pandemic was £500 million. He and his wife alone have £730 million!

Workers' Liberty advocates taking the banks and big financial institutions into public ownership and democratic control, to unlock wealth to tackle the social and ecological emergencies and begin transforming the economy in a socialist direction. Even short of that, however, the labour movement should be shouting to TAX THE RICH – through income tax, corporation tax, a wealth tax (ongoing, not one-off) and as many other means as possible. That's urgent to cut down inequality and diminish the power of the rich, as well as providing funds for alternative policies.

Last but not least, there is one crucial policy to redistribute wealth that wouldn't require any public spending. We should urgently demand the repeal of all anti-union and anti-strike laws, so that workers can fight to drive up living standards freed from the current web of legal restrictions and bureaucratic harassment.

Boots on the train

As if catering staff pushing trolleys didn't have enough to put up with management are now insisting that they wear uncomfortable boots not trainers. Through experience RG staff know what footwear works for them and as long as they meet the safety standards why would you want to make life more difficult for your staff? Seems like a decision made by somebody who has never done the job before.

"SECURITY!!"

If you've recently noticed a lack of Nottingham security staff at night chances are they'll be at Chesterfield locking up because EMR have got rid of the platform staff that used to do it. We'd just like to know how EMR can tell that there won't be issues at Nottingham when security are 25 miles away.

Burning Questions

Are you a manager and thinking about becoming a Contingency Guard to break the upcoming strike, then please think again. It isn't only that some managers' pay is linked to the pay of the staff they manage

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meaning your action could indirectly reduce their pay. More importantly you'll be reducing the chances of those on much lower pay than you getting a pay rise to help them through the cost of living crisis.

Take a break. Where?

Cleaners have been forced to take their meal breaks on the platforms at Nottingham since their recently arrived manager took over their mess room for an office. But then station managers weren't happy with staff eating in public and said they couldn't do it. Is it really too much to ask to have somewhere to eat your food in peace?

Data breach

EMR would like us to think that they take data protection seriously but that isn't the message they are sending with their latest wheeze. They are asking staff to read a training booklet and complete a quiz in their own time, but the union has rightly pointed out any training needs to be agreed with them and is advising members not to do it until the proper discussions have taken place. This will obviously cause delays in getting the training done which kind of begs the question how important GDPR really is for the company.

Who needs a pay rise?

In a recent vlog a company director told us that in the context of the pandemic we can't have a pay rise unless we become more efficient.

Perhaps if we broke down that "we" a little more it would illustrate the cheek of that statement. In 2021 the highest paid director got £200,000 and today one of the current vacancies listed a starting salary of £22,000. Maybe somebody on more than 9 times their pay can afford to be blasé about a pay rise and, to be honest, doesn't really need one, but what about that Customer Service Officer?

Remember when we got the 170's back and the first one was called "Key Worker", we should call the first Aurora "Fat Cat Director" to more accurately reflect the true state of affairs.

SAVE THE DATES

Wednesday 1st June, 19.30,
Worker's Solidarity with Ukraine
– Nottingham

contact us for details.

Saturday 18th June TUC march
– London

<https://bit.ly/3LHR8K4>

What is Notts Off The Rails?

Notts Off The Rails is a rank and file socialist bulletin, published monthly and written by rail workers, for rail workers. It is published by the socialist group Workers' Liberty, but is produced in editorial meetings open to all rail workers.

Got a story for us?

We welcome reports and comments from all rail workers. Email us at:

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