

Solidarity

& Workers' Liberty



For social ownership of the banks and industry

COVID-19: PUBLIC HEALTH, AND WORKERS' RIGHTS TOO!

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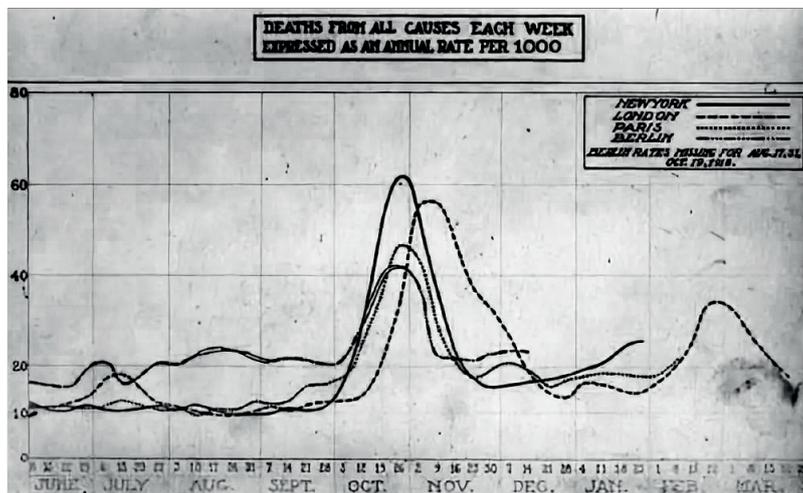
The "Spanish flu" of 1918-20, AIDS, and other pandemics

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Influenza Pandemic: mortality in America and Europe during 1918 and 1919 (graph, left)

The “Spanish flu” pandemic of 1918-20 killed between 50 and 100 million worldwide, with a peak in late 1918. In Europe it killed many, though not as many as World War 1; in the USA it killed more than the war. Deaths were increased through cover-ups by governments worried that telling the truth would damage their “war efforts”. The greatest number of deaths — maybe 18 million — was in then British-ruled India, where the British colonial administration did almost nothing to contain or mitigate the pandemic.

Does America need a socialist party?



Sanders' Campaign

By Eric Lee

In the aftermath of the disappointing results for the Sanders campaign in the primaries following Nevada, supporters of the self-described “democratic socialist” Senator from Vermont have been discussing what happens next.

If Sanders chooses to leave the race, he has already announced – many months ago – that he will endorse and campaign for any candidate chosen by the Democratic Party. Most of his supporters will follow Sanders’ lead, as they did in 2016 when he endorsed Clinton. Sanders has made clear that the top priority must be to defeat Trump, and if that means campaigning for the tired and uninspiring Joe Biden, so be it.

But for a small minority of Sanders supporters, as in 2016, other options tempt – including not voting or voting for a fringe political party.

Fringe political parties in the US, especially on the left, exist – but they are both rare and very small. Even in 2016, when Hillary Clinton’s popularity among American leftists was at its lowest, her main rival to the left, Dr Jill Stein of the Green Party, received just over 1% of the vote – and no votes in the Electoral College, which chooses the president.

This year, no one expects the Greens to

do any better. A socialist, Howie Hawkins, is running in the Green primaries and currently has a lead in the delegate count. But to give an example of the gap between Greens and Democrats, Hawkins won the California Green primary with just 3,556 votes. In the Democratic primary in the same state the winner was Bernie Sanders with 1,548,025 votes. For every voter in that state who voted for a Green, 435 chose to back the socialist running as a Democrat. Third party politics remain as unpopular as ever.

Debs

Why would that be the case? Why is there no movement to create a party (or parties) to the left of the Democrats? And why are the most important and successful socialist politicians in the US – including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez – remaining in the Democratic Party?

Some of the explanation is rooted in the difference between 2016 and this year. There is no evidence that the leadership of the Democratic Party is working to undermine Sanders in the way that they did four years ago.

That’s due in part to the successful effort by the Sanders campaign after 2016 to reform the party. While it did not get everything it wanted, it got a lot – including new rules to reduce the influence of “super-delegates” at the convention

And Sanders has succeeded in pushing other Democratic politicians to the left, most notably Elizabeth Warren.

Even if many Sanders supporters decided that in the long run they wanted to leave the Democratic party rather than take it over, they would need to understand that the history of the last century does not give cause for optimism.

The Greens ran six presidential campaigns from 1996, and never got more

votes than with Ralph Nader as their candidate in 2000.

He won just 2.7% of the popular vote, and no electoral votes. And before Nader, the last relatively large third party effort on the Left was the 1948 Progressive Party campaign of former US vice president Henry Wallace, who won even fewer votes than Nader. It has been more than a century since the Socialist Party was able to win 6% of the vote under the charismatic Eugene V. Debs.

There are many reasons why third parties don’t succeed in America. Ballot access is a problem – which is why Ralph Nader, who was not active in the Greens, chose to work with them so people could vote for him in all states.

There’s also the widespread belief among workers, including union members, that the Democratic Party is somehow their party – a party which they fund to the tune of millions of dollars every election, and for whose candidates they mobilise and campaign. Despite decades of campaigning on the left for unions to withdraw their support from the Democrats, there is no evidence that there is any interest in doing so.

For those reasons, and based on a century of experience, as the American Left contemplates its future post-2020, it is very unlikely that the option of a socialist or labour party will get any traction at all. □

• Eric Lee is the convenor of “London for Bernie”, writing here in a personal capacity.

Another view

Daniel Randall on Sanders, Biden, and the case for independent workers’ politics in the USA — bit.ly/bs-jb □

Sanders on C-19

Bernie Sanders and “The Squad” on the Covid-19 epidemic. □

- Video at bit.ly/bs-squad-cv
- Article by Eric Lee: bit.ly/c19-sanders

Workers' rights in the epidemic

“” Editorial

A “joint statement”, published in the name of the Department for Transport (DfT), eight individual unions organising in the transport sector, and the TUC, appeared online on Wednesday 19 March.

It reports the “first in a series of Ministerial calls” between the DfT and transport unions, and ends with an affirmation that “Transport Ministers have pledged to work tirelessly with the unions to support staff in the transport industry through not only the immediate challenges but also the issues that will affect the sector once the country has overcome this pandemic.”

Good news, you might think. If the pandemic has forced a hostile, anti-union Tory administration into a spirit of dialogue and collaboration with the organisations representing the workers the country relies on to deliver essential services, then that’s surely a silver lining.

But all is not as it seems. Tory leopards do not change their spots, even in a pandemic. This DfT is part of the same Tory administration bent on forcing through new laws to restrict transport workers’ strikes... the same Tory party under whose previous spells in government our railways were privatised, and, more recently, the drive towards de-staffing and “Driver Only Operation” has accelerated in earnest.

Solidarity in the epidemic

During the semi-lockdown for the epidemic, we’re producing *Solidarity* as a printable pdf available online. Please print off and circulate if you can. We may be able to print a limited run centrally and mail some out. The audio and e-reader versions are available as usual. To subscribe to the e-reader version, email awl@workersliberty.org. For our online “meetings”, study groups, and educational during the semi-lockdown, see pages 12-13. □



This is the same Department for Transport which recently intervened to prevent the a settlement to the South Western Railway dispute that would have retained some role for the guard.

What this statement represents, then, is a blank cheque for collaboration with the bosses and their state at the very moment when workers should be demanding control, and refusing to let the architects and partisans of inequality and exploitation call the shots. We do need dialogue and consultation with our employers and the state; that must take place on as open and transparent a basis as circumstances allow, with the maximum degree of democratic scrutiny and control allowed by the pace needed to respond to changing events.

Social peace

In any crisis, pressure mounts on the labour movement to adopt a policy of class-collaborationist social peace, and for workers to suspend our struggles in an “all-in-it-together” spirit. It is pressure to which our movement should not bow.

The decision of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) leadership to commit to not taking industrial action in the union’s dispute with Royal Mail, and instead to demand of the government that the post is designated an “emergency service” is part of the same trend as the DfT statement. Undoubtedly, CWU’s leaders think they can accumulate some social

capital by their stance. They may well be right, but committing more or less unconditionally not to take industrial action, without extracting any concessions from the employer or the state, does not serve their members’ interests. Worse still, Virgin Airlines’ announcement that it will ask workers to take eight weeks’ unpaid leave was announced in the press as having the support of the Unite and Balpa unions.

Democratic deficit

All three cases – the DfT statement, the CWU leadership’s decision, and the Virgin policy — also point to a democratic deficit within unions. There is no indication of the leadership’s policies having been consulted on or informed by discussions amongst rank-and-file members.

At least within RMT, the largest industry-specific union in the transport sector, the DfT statement’s content, nor the decision to co-sign it, were not presented to any level of union democracy. Unity House, RMT’s national office, is currently closed, but no attempt was made to seek comment on or ratification of the statement from the union’s rank-and-file National Executive Committee, which could easily have been done remotely. One can speculate that the mechanism for signing unions up to the statement was similarly undemocratic in the other transport union signatories.

A collective, state-led, social response

continued overleaf

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to the crisis is necessary to confront it. Clearly, that requires workers in the services integral to that to play our part. A working-class desire for everyone to pull together comes from a good place, usually informed by some elementary spirit of social solidarity. But that should not involve writing blank cheques for the bosses, with whose interests our own remain irreconcilably opposed.

For sure, the boss class will not be suspending the class struggle from its side. It was ever thus: in 1915, during the First World War, James Connolly wrote: "Of course, we will be told that 'now in this supreme hour of our national danger', etc., all ideas of war between classes should be laid aside and we all should co-operate harmoniously together. In answer we would ask – Has any capitalist or landlord shown any forbearance towards the workers more than they have been compelled to by the force of law, or by the power of labour unions? Is it not the fact that 'in this supreme hour of our national danger' the employers are seizing eagerly upon every pretext to reduce wages and victimise the workers?"

Victimising workers

Virgin's policy on unpaid leave is just one example of "employers seizing early upon every pretext to reduce wage and victimise the workers"; there are numerous others.

Ferry company Stena Line, where RMT organises, is refusing to pay company sick pay even to staff diagnosed with Covid-19. Outsourced contractor Sodexo unilaterally laid off agency cleaners at the Institute of Education, part of University College London. Pub chain Wetherspoons has refused to extend its company sick pay policy, which currently only covers managers, to other staff. Supermarket giant Morrisons is proposing that staff who take time off due to self-isolation or caring responsibilities "make up the hours" at a later point... with no additional pay.

Landlords are continuing to demand rent, despite the government's mortgage holiday, and private healthcare firms producing coronavirus tests are engaging in blatant profiteering, charging hundreds of pounds for the tests. The state is continuing its brutal policies towards migrants, and refusing to release detainees despite crowded conditions in detention centres posing an increased health risk.

Civil liberties may also come under attack, with the state using surveillance methods to invade privacy, and violent repression against people who breach possible curfew conditions. The labour movement will be severely hampered from resisting such attacks if it has gone along with a policy of social peace and class collaboration.

Unions should be issuing our own statements, reiterating our demands for improved working conditions, and highlighting the fundamental structural reality of capitalism that this crisis reveals: that it is our labour that makes society function.

As Eugene Debs, the railway worker

and socialist leader, put it: "We can run the mills without them, but they can't run them without us." Or, as a picket line placard during the Uprising of the 20,000, a strike of migrant garment workers in America in 1909, proclaimed: "Our employers have wealth, but we have the power of reproduction."

It is perfectly possible, and necessary, to continue to prosecute the class struggle during the pandemic. Workers should continue to raise basic class-struggle demands – for higher wages, reduced hours, and improved conditions – as well as demands specific to the crisis itself, including improved workplace safety and full sick pay for all.

Wherever possible, workers should organise action to pursue such demands. On London Underground, for example, RMT has demanded that self-service ticket machines be powered down and that all cash handling cease, given the hygiene risk this poses. If Tube bosses refuse to agree, workers should organise to impose the measures themselves.

The CWU could use its ballot mandate to call action in the form of a refusal to deliver non-personal mail, such as advertising circulars and junk mail.

Already, some gains have been made, with union pressure securing commitments that outsourced cleaners on London Underground and outsourced workers at the Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy will be paid in full if they self-isolate.

"Blitz spirit"

As the "Blitz spirit", the historic touchstone for a moment of "all-in-this-together" adversity, is increasingly invoked, we should recall that then, too, class struggle continued. As Raymond Challinor's essay "The Class War in the Blitz" recalls: "Britain was a class-divided society. Not everyone had to endure [...] hardships. [At the Dorchester Hotel,] management had converted the cellars into expensive luxury shelters. Nine peers slept there each night. One of them was Lord Halifax, the foreign secretary. Throughout the night, he stayed well-supplied by a waiter with his favourite brand of whisky. Their wives and lady friends tended to frequent part of the subterranean complex that had been turned into a games room. Other wealthy people arranged for their own private shelters to be built."

Working-class people organised to demand such things as safe access to Tube stations as public shelters, initially opposed by municipal government.

A crisis like this will require sacrifice. It will require emergency measures. It will require all of us who are able to make extraordinary efforts to help society through. What it does not require is the suspension of our basic struggles; the suspension of democracy in our movement; nor the suspension of our fundamental understanding that bosses and workers have opposing interests. No class peace in the crisis! □

“Where we stand”

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Independent working-class representation in politics.
- A workers' government, based on and accountable to the labour movement.
- A workers' charter of trade union rights — to organise, to strike, to picket effectively, and to take solidarity action.
- Taxation of the rich to fund decent public services, homes, education and jobs for all.
- A workers' movement that fights all forms of oppression.
- Full equality for women, and social provision to free women from domestic labour. For reproductive justice: free abortion on demand; the right to choose when and whether to have children.
- Full equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.
- Black and white workers' unity against racism.
- Open borders.
- Global solidarity against global capital — workers everywhere have more in common with each other than with their capitalist or Stalinist rulers.
- Democracy at every level of society, from the smallest workplace or community to global social organisation.
- Equal rights for all nations, against imperialists and predators big and small.
- Maximum left unity in action, and openness in debate.

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

Fight epidemic, yes. Back the Tories, no

By Mohan Sen

The Labour Party has made some important demands for the Covid-19 crisis, including improving the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme which underwrites part of wages and extending it to the self-employed; insisting employers guarantee to keep people in work; and increasing a range of benefits.

The problem is that the party shows no sign of campaigning around these demands. Its leadership acts as if that the epidemic obliges it to express positive support for the Tory government.

Big demonstrations and crowded public meetings are obviously out at the moment. But Labour wasn't going in for those things much before Covid-19. And there are nu-

Emergency powers: who checks?

Yes, any government would need emergency powers in an epidemic like this, to shut down activities which endanger not just those taking part, but others near them, and endanger the NHS too.

That does not mean that we should trust the Tories.

The government agreed under pressure to have the emergency powers reconsidered after six months, not to run for two years as they first proposed.

In this fast-moving emergency, that should be monthly.

Parliament should go online rather than either shutting or being depleted due to self-isolation. Make the government accountable!

The legislation gives exceptional powers to immigration enforcement officials as well as cops.

We say: send the immigration agents home. They are not an "essential service" but a drain on supplies like PPE and an infection vector. The longer they work, the more they will deter many people from getting the help they need to keep themselves and those within reach of them safe.

Cancel all data-sharing from emergency services to the immigration authorities; extend all visas and other permissions for the duration. □

merous ways even now in which the party could campaign for its demands in a concerted and determined way.

Labour has promoted community support or mutual aid groups, but feebly and after much delay and evasion.

And from the party itself, where are the leaflets, posters, stickers, graphics, online petitions, social media activities? Where is the attempt to use the press and public appearances to hammer away at clear demands and suggest Labour is organising a fight to further shift the government?

A few sporadic remarks aside, Labour has not even indicted the Tories over the open goal of the NHS.

Some union leaders have been positively gushing in positive support for the Tories.

"This is a real breakthrough. Rishi Sunak has shown real leadership. We're glad he's listened to unions and taken vital steps to support working families" — Frances O'Grady, TUC General Secretary

"Rishi Sunak's wage support measures are bold and very much necessary. The chancellor has done the right thing and we look forward to working further with him in the coming days" — Len McCluskey, Unite General Secretary

No trust

Of course the labour movement should cooperate practically even with this government to fight the epidemic, in the same way that workers cooperate practically with employers every day to do our jobs and keep essential services going. That is a very different matter from failing or refusing to remind the working-class public that the Tories and the employers they represent have not changed their character, that they cannot be trusted to tackle this crisis in the interests of working people, and that it is necessary to oppose, fight, and seek to replace them.

Cooperate against Covid-19, yes, but from a stance of militant distrust and opposition. Instead, Labour has gone as far as to say that it wants to "maintain public trust in the government"!

The party has won Parliament the right to review every six months new emergency powers which include a facility to ban all gatherings, but apart from that has gone along with them.

Last but not least: in a crisis which has forced the government to introduce a limited and crude form of capitalist "socialism", a serious left-wing party, let alone

Defend disabled rights

Disability Rights UK says that the government's version of emergency powers will:

- Remove disabled people's rights to social care
- Change the duties to educate to meet children's educational requirements to a 'reasonable endeavours' duty
- Severely undermine the civil liberties of disabled people and erode their rights to support.

They say: "the government must treat our essential social care service as key infrastructure, alongside the NHS, and provide the necessary funding to keep this vital service running". □

a socialist one, would argue for radical measures to take society further towards real working-class socialism.

Corbyn's Labour has not even argued that pro-working class measures introduced during the crisis – the suspension of benefit sanctions, for instance, and evictions – should be maintained afterwards.

In response to the Tories' move to effectively nationalise the railways, Labour's transport spokesman Andy McDonald responded not with a call for permanent public ownership of transport but by "backing" the government and adding only that an "honest debate on the future of our transport system" is needed.

The whole situation, and the responses it is pushing the Tories into – in their own way and for their own reasons – suggests immense radicalism. Why, for instance, does Labour not call for nationalisation of the big supermarket chains and their delivery arms, and for a coordinated service guaranteeing deliveries for those in need?

The labour movement should be eager, not afraid, to develop new policies whose radicalism meets the extremity of situation. It should activate radical policies which it has agreed but not campaigned for – like public ownership of banking and finance, to unlock the resources and control to tackle this crisis in the interests of the working class. □

Lessons from pa

By Martin Thomas

The nearest historical precedent to the Covid-19 pandemic is the “Spanish flu” which swept the world between March 1918 and March 1920, in three successive and distinct waves.

On the best estimates, made decades later because no-one counted well at the time, that strain of flu infected about one-third of the world’s whole population and killed between 50 and 100 million, possibly more than World War 1 and World War 2 combined.

The deaths peaked sharply in the second wave, between mid-September and mid-December 1918. Most strains of flu disproportionately kill the elderly and the very young. “Spanish flu” also disproportionately killed people between the ages of 20 and 40. Like Covid-19, though it seems less so, it killed males more than females.

As Laura Spinney remarks in her history of the “Spanish flu”, “there is no cenotaph, no monument [for it] in London, Moscow, or Washington DC”. It is oddly absent from general political histories.

The November Revolution in Germany in 1918, in which workers’ councils rapidly spread across the country and took a large part of effective power before handing it back to a Social-Democrat-led bourgeois government, happened when the “Spanish flu” was at its worst. Yet political histories of the time, and the writings at the time by Rosa Luxemburg and others, scarcely mention it.

Equally, Victor Serge’s book on *Year One of the Russian Revolution* does not mention it, although the Bolsheviks’ chief organiser, Yakov Sverdlov, was among the many who died from the flu in Russia then.

In the big European countries more died from the war than died of the flu. In the USA, more died of flu. The biggest toll was in India. The disease was brought there by troopships returning from the war, but the British colonial administration did nothing to check it or even to count the deaths, estimated by later researchers at 18 million.

The revolutionary left campaigned against the World War whose troopships, aggregations of soldiers in the trenches, and contingents of returned prisoners of war seem to have been the main incubation-points and carriers of the disease. They campaigned against the poverty, malnutrition, and insanitary housing which made tens of millions less likely to recover from the flu than the better-off. And they campaigned for Indian independence.

By the end of the “Spanish flu” epidemic the world’s first “NHS” (though a primitive and patchy one) was being built, by our comrades, the Bolsheviks, in Russia,

and with an emphasis on public health and the prevention of epidemics.

In bourgeois West European states, the epidemic was followed by governments setting up health ministries. In Britain, the patchy social-insurance system for GP care initiated in 1911 was extended after the epidemic, and working-class self-help contributory schemes gave more and more working-class people access to treatment in a growing network of hospitals.

Unpreventable

But while millions explicitly set themselves to try to prevent another imperialist war like World War 1, fewer explicitly set the goal of preventing or being able to stall future epidemics. Even the Bolsheviks knew little beyond generalities about how.

The epidemic, in mass awareness, had been just another of the plagues which had been sweeping society for hundreds of years. And the mass awareness was patchy.

It was called “Spanish flu” not because it originated in Spain, or hit Spain especially hard, but because Spain, neutral in World War 1, openly reported on the epidemic. The US, British, French, and German governments hushed it up for fear of damaging their war efforts.

The first known case was in a military camp in Kansas, USA. The virus spread from there to different military camps and to the troopships. The US military commanders said they must keep the troopships sailing, and only toyed with the idea of reducing overcrowding on them.

Scientific medicine had begun to emerge, but only begun. Doctors thought, rightly, that the flu was caused by some tiny organism being transmitted from person to person through such mechanisms as coughs and sneezes. There was a widely-accepted, but false, theory that the flu was due to certain bacteria. A vaccine was developed on the basis of that false theory, used patchily in the USA, and proclaimed effective, though in fact it wasn’t.

Beyond that, face-masks were recommended and sometimes mandated (though probably they had little effect). There were lockdowns in US cities somewhat like the current ones, with theatres, bars, and so on shut, and sometimes schools. In those days before widespread electronic communications, there was of course no “working from home”.

New York never shut its schools, and came through the epidemic somewhat better than other US cities. One reason seems to have been that conditions in schools were healthier than in the tenements where most working-class children lived. Another, that in school infected children

had a better chance of being identified and offered treatment than in the tenements.

“As usual”, reports Alfred Crosby in his book on the epidemic in the USA, “the poor tended to suffer more”. Statistics for San Francisco, for example, showed that Italian immigrants did much worse than American-born people. The Chinese population showed no spike in death rates from flu and the pneumonia which often followed it. “A patent impossibility”, comments Crosby. “The deaths were not reported as such or, possibly, not reported at all”. As with the deaths in the mass of the population in India.

In Japanese-ruled Korea, at least the deaths were counted: Koreans died at twice the rate of Japanese settlers.

The odd and unexplained exception is that African-Americans, on average, suffered less in the epidemic than white citizens of the USA.

The “Spanish flu” spread worldwide with an unprecedented speed and reach because of the mass movements of people, often in cramped and unhealthy conditions, for the war.

Previous epidemics had for some time been more localised. Russia, in 1891-2, had a cholera epidemic, following a famine, which killed maybe 300,000 people.

There, the political dimensions were clearer. The Tsarist regime became much discredited, even among large sections of the landowning class and bourgeoisie, for its indifference and ineptitude.

The pioneer Russian Marxist Georgi Plekhanov, in exile in Geneva, wrote a pamphlet, *The Tasks of the Socialists in the Famine*, which shaped the thinking of such figures as the young Vladimir Lenin, then just edging into political activity. The pamphlet gives a classic explanation of what socialists do (bit.ly/p-tsf), and coined the later-much-discussed distinction between “agitation” and “propaganda”.

Indifference?

Hostile biographers of Lenin tell the story as one of Lenin being indifferent to the suffering in the famine and epidemic, and concerned only for how it would increase popular revolt. The truth? Lenin agreed with Plekhanov criticising socialists who buried themselves in relief efforts organised at local level by the liberal nobility, as many did.

Plekhanov’s arguments bore fruit in the next years. The Russian Marxist and workers’ movements first became a big force in the mid-1890s.

Only shortly before that 1891-2 famine and epidemic there had been a new strain of flu, originating in Russia in 1889 and spreading to kill maybe a million world-

st pandemics

wide, including the great mathematician Sofya Kovalevskya.

In the 1930s and 40s, the different variants of flu and other viruses began to be identified through electron microscopes, and the first vaccines against polio and flu were developed. Together with the development of antibiotics (first, penicillin, from 1942), plus a piecemeal but real development in many countries of more sanitary working-class housing and at least of public health-insurance schemes (if not NHSs), that gave medicine new confidence against the infectious diseases which had periodically ravaged humanity since, probably, the beginnings of agriculture.

When I was a child, in the early 1950s, my small home town, like others, had two hospitals: the general hospital, and a special one for tuberculosis patients. Now, at least in richer countries, and usually, most people die of cancer or of cardiovascular problems rather than infectious diseases.

But bacteria can mutate to become resistant to antibiotics. Viruses can jump species barriers (vast numbers of viruses are endemic in different species of animals, as in bats, probably, for Covid-19), or mutate dramatically when already established in humans. Climate change, which disrupts habitats and creates new intermingling of species, and mass global travel, accelerate the risk.

“Hong Kong flu”

In 1968-9 a new strain of flu (“Hong Kong flu”) infected over 500 million worldwide and killed between one and four million.

In 1981 the AIDS pandemic was first identified. It now seems that the viruses leading to it, HIV-1 and HIV-2, had been in circulation for decades: people can live with the virus for a long time before developing AIDS.

Between 30 and 40 million people have died from AIDS, mostly in Africa, and 40 million are still living with HIV.

No vaccine has yet been found, though research is continuing. It took time to develop the medications which now make HIV infection not a death sentence.

Those who suffered worst were partly the poorest, as with most epidemics — drug companies were slow to make medications available affordably in Africa — plus partly those who are not necessarily poor, but victims of prejudice.

Homophobia made many people (and governments) see AIDS as a “gay plague” and thus possibly not much risk to “sound” citizens, or maybe even a divine punishment for sins. The Catholic church denounced the use of condoms for safe sex.

Splinters on the left, or claiming to be left-wing, became (small) impediments



The Ebola pandemic of 2013-6 in Liberia (above) and other West African countries was made deadlier by a history of corrupt and discredited government

too. The Revolutionary Communist Party, a group now mutated into the Institute of Ideas and Spiked Online, said: “The principal threat to homosexuals in Britain today is not from AIDS, but from the safe sex campaign... divisive moralism and phoney public health propaganda of the establishment”.

In 2002-3 an epidemic of SARS (a virus similar to Covid-19) claimed 800 deaths in 8,000 cases, mainly in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Canada. It is more deadly than Covid-19, but is transmitted less speedily. One reason why Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore seem to have contained Covid-19 more successfully than other countries is that their experience with SARS was powerful enough to override the usual capitalist mode of dealing only with what gives “market signals” today, not future threats.

But the epidemic abated quickly enough that work on vaccines and treatments languished after 2004. Some say that if that work had pressed on, it could have produced results capable of quick adaptation to a vaccine for Covid-19.

In 2009-10 “swine flu” infected about one billion people, but killed a smaller proportion (about 300,000 to 400,000: about 70 million people die worldwide each year).

The most recent of the virus epidemics foreshadowing Covid-19 was Ebola, which had had localised outbreaks since the 1970s, but erupted into a full-scale epidemic in West Africa in 2013-6, killing about 11,000. Ebola kills up to 90% of those infected. A vaccine has now been developed.

Donald Trump, then only a property developer, called for US missionaries in West Africa who had contracted Ebola not to be allowed back to the USA for treatment. In West Africa, the obstacles to containing Ebola were lack of medical resources and sanitary living conditions, but also, according to Mark Honigsbaum’s history of 20th century pandemics, popular suspicion of anything coming from governments or

from “the West”. Doctors had their cars stoned and their hospitals besieged by mobs.

The history yields several lessons:

It highlights the need to check climate change, and possibly the need to take more care over quarantines, even if that slows down international travel somewhat.

Planning for future

It mandates health systems governed by provision for future as well as current needs and risks, and not primarily by “market signals” (even “market signals” which mediate public rather than individual payment for care).

It shows that more equal societies, with better housing for the poorest, can deal with epidemics better.

Societies with greater democracy and social solidarity do better. In them, governments will be less disposed to neglect, or even cover up, epidemics — to think that they can be let run, so as not to disrupt “business” (or war), because they will primarily affect “lower” or stigmatised sectors of the population; and individuals will better follow public-health advice.

It looks as if a police state, as in China or Singapore, can “work” up to a point to check epidemics, with its ability to enforce isolation and extend surveillance so as to track all contacts of infected people.

The police state, however, comes with all its other sides, such as those in China which made the government at first penalise the doctors raising the alarm rather than fight the epidemic.

Democratic social solidarity is better. It is possible, but it must be won by a fight also against the “reactionary anti-capitalists” of the “anti-vaxxer” conspiracy-theory type.

And 1891-2 and 1918 suggest that if socialists organise well in the crisis, then after it our message of democratic social solidarity can gain ground to change things for good. □

An emergency plan

By Martin Thomas

1. Requisition (in other words, take into emergency public ownership):

- private hospitals, so that all their resources are directly available to the NHS
- the pharmaceutical and medical-supplies industries, so that production can be ramped up in a coordinated way to meet the crisis
- manufacturing facilities which can be adapted to produce ventilators and other medical equipment
- hotels and empty houses, to use them for the NHS, for the homeless, and for domestic violence victims
- transport and logistics, so that essential deliveries and travel can be coordinated and planned
- the big supermarket chains and food supply operations, so that food supplies can be guaranteed in the most cooperative and coordinated way
- high finance, so that the epidemic is not compounded by a snowballing economic slump resulting from an implosion of credit
- all big businesses which lay off workers in this emergency

2. Fight for workers' control

Millions of NHS and other essential-services workers are decisive for the fight against the epidemic. Many of our managers are working from home, overwhelmed by the emergency, or blinkered by bureaucratic inertia or profit priorities.

The workers themselves know best how to run things and how to adapt for the emergency (including sometimes redeploying workers to different duties).

In every essential service running during the semi-lockdown for the epidemic, we want to see emergency commissions on which the unions are represented and through which they are informed, with the right to speak out independently when they need to.

3. Make the labour movement operate as an essential service!

It is the duty of the labour movement to make itself an essential service in the emergency:

- to impose workers' control on the emergency response, to stop it being impeded by bureaucratic inertia and profit priorities
- to defend workers' rights — all workers, including those still at work in essential services, those who have to self-isolate on public health advice or stay at home to

look after children, and those already laid off

- to stand up for the worst-off, who generally suffer the worst in epidemics: low-paid and insecure workers, the homeless, migrants.

Too many union activities have been shut down during the emergency. For example, trade union educational courses have generally been shut down, instead of being moved online, as they could have been.

Too many union officials have failed to push for workers' rights even when a small but determined push could have won them. Union officials in the NHS have failed to publicise the NHS England policy document from early March calling for full pay for all workers in NHS workplaces (that includes casual and agency and subcontracted workers) following public health advice. It's been down to local union activists, workplace by workplace, to get that policy enforced.

Too many union officials have rushed to offer uncritical or all-but-uncritical support for the government.

Too many union officials have accepted that all industrial action is ruled out in this emergency. It is not. Often, industrial action or the threat of it may be an essential tool to push management into a serious response to the emergency, and to safeguard workers' rights.

Plenty of employers are still pushing on with established plans for cutbacks. It may take industrial action to stop them.

If it is safe enough for workers to go to our workplaces, then it is certainly safe for us to take industrial action inside the workplaces or to organise picket lines (with necessary social distancing) outside them.

It is also a legal right (and not "industrial action" in terms of the law) for workers to refuse to enter parts of a workplace where they reasonably think they face "serious and imminent danger". The Employment Rights Act 1996, section 44, makes it illegal for the boss to subject workers to "any detriment" for such refusal (i.e. to dock wages, or threaten of disciplinary action). Unions should be publicising that right.

In Queensland, Australia, the teachers' union has refused to rule out striking (even though it would be illegal under Australian law) if schools are not closed for routine operation from 25 March.

In practice a school closure there would be an early start to a school holiday due to start soon. But the union is also moot-ing the idea of having students who lack internet at home as well as key workers' children in school under future reduced operations.

Post workers in Bridgwater, Somerset,

struck on Monday morning 23 March to demand improved safety in the workplace. They said they were ready to work, but refused to start until they got an agreement on improved safety.

4. Defend workers' rights

In Britain, as in the USA and other countries, the government has moved first to bail out big business — with a £350 billion package — and only later to make provision for workers.

- All workers outside essential services should be at home, working from home if possible, on leave otherwise, on full pay. As of 24 March, most construction sites, for example, are still working. Some construction work in repair and maintenance may be essential to continue, but in London, for example, much work continues on new blocks of luxury flats. There's nothing "es-

Migrants and the homeless

The Migrant Rights Network has put out a detailed list of demands to safeguard migrants and the homeless in the epidemic, including:

- The suspension of NHS charging and data-sharing with the Home Office for the purposes of immigration enforcement
- The suspension of "no recourse to public funds" conditions
- The release of everyone detained under immigration powers to reduce the risk of Covid-19 entering the detention estate and causing avoidable harm.
- Each local authority must set up a Covid-19 and homelessness taskforce and conduct an urgent needs analysis of the homeless and rough sleeping population in their area
- Local authorities must block book hotels or other suitable accommodation so that homeless or overcrowded individuals and households (including rough sleepers and those who are sofa-surfing) can self-isolate
- Empty homes, council estates facing demolition, private housing developments standing empty and university halls of residence should also be put to this use
- Accommodation must be made available with "light-touch engagement". Any data collected must not be shared with the Home Office or any agency for the purpose of immigration enforcement. □

• migrantsrights.org.uk

for the epidemic



Labour for Free Movement @labfreemvmt · 55m

Essential:

- migrant NHS workers ✓
- migrant supply chain workers ✓
- migrant carers ✓

Not essential:

- Tories ✗
- Capitalists ✗
- Immigration enforcement ✗

#HomeOfficeGoHome

#RightToStay



9

33

essential” about those being finished a few months earlier rather than later. The workers should be allowed to stay home on full pay, to be safe themselves and not endanger others. Workers and unions should demand a voice in what is essential and what is not.

- In all essential services, unions must insist on full pay for every worker in the building (including zero hours, agency, and subcontractor staff) who takes time off to follow public health advice or because they have to care for children whose schools or nurseries are closed.

- There needs to be fallback pay for all, including the self-employed, including workers whose employers have already shut up shop. The government has promised to increase Universal Credit by about £20 a week and to increase advance payments, but as things are moving so fast

Freeze utility bills!

The government promises that utility disconnections will be suspended and that people who can't pay can “contact their supplier for help”.

The Fuel Poverty Network has made these emergency demands:

- Free credit to all prepayment meter users, promptly, so that they are not left in the cold or without power while negotiating with suppliers.

- Guarantee that customers in financial distress, including those self-isolating or losing jobs or customers, will have bills reduced to what they can afford – and not just deferred. □

probably even the demand to pay Universal Credit in advance (rather than in arrears) is not sufficient. Whether or not Universal Basic Income should be considered a general substitute for the benefits system (and in our view there are drawbacks), right now an immediate payment, sent to all, without application and assessment procedures, is called for. Even the US government has promised rapid universal payments of about

\$3000 per household (one-off). Bernie Sanders has demanded a universal \$2,000 per month per household for the duration of the emergency. All “reviews” of benefits (for example of disability benefits like PIP) should be cancelled during the emergency.

- The government has promised to ban evictions during the emergency. The London Renters’ Union and others have called for a rent “holiday” during the emergency. A group of senators in New York state, USA, led by Michael Gianaris of the Working Families Party, is campaigning for cancellation of all rent and mortgage payments during the emergency. That will help the self-employed and people like small shopkeepers too. Utility bills should be cancelled during the emergency, too. Cancelling rent and utility bills for everyone, and giving them enough income to buy food during the emergency, will enable everyone to get through, and stop people being forced to go to work, unsafely, in order to survive.

5. Take care of the worst-off

- London mayor Sadiq Khan has talked of arrangements with hotels to house the homeless. The hotels should be requisitioned to make that work quickly and comprehensively.

- Hotels and similar accommodation should also be made available to domestic violence victims.

- People held in detention centres should be released and offered accommodation if needed, and “No Recourse to Public Funds” and other rules and charges restricting public services for migrants should be abolished. Suspend all enforcement of restrictions on migrants, and enable “illegal” migrants to get help, and defend their rights, without risk of depor-

tation.

- Many thousands of volunteers have flocked to mutual aid groups. Local councils should support them; and, conversely, mutual aid groups should also act politically, pressing councils to mobilise resources for the homeless, domestic violence victims, and migrants, and helping workers in their local areas to claim their rights.

6. Defend civil liberties

There is a public-health case for restricting movement and assemblies. But the emergency powers law being pushed through by the government goes beyond that in a number of ways documented elsewhere in this issue of Solidarity. In particular, it would give the police the right to disperse any picket line, even one by workers in essential services who will be safer on that picket line than in their workplace.

The rail union RMT, for example, has suspended all industrial action ballots on the grounds that it is no longer possible to operate and count them (by law they must be *postal* ballots). Unions should be demanding that the postal-only legal rule is changed as part of the emergency legislation, at least so that *online* ballots become admissible.

7. Think internationally

Things look bad in Britain. They look worse in many poorer countries where health care is way below the level of the NHS even in its cuts-raddled shape, and where housing for poorer people is crowded and may lack even clean running water.

They look worse again in the refugee camps in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Greece.

The labour movement has a duty to think internationally, and to demand the resettlement in decent conditions of those held in the refugee camps, and massive aid to poorer countries. □

More online

London Tube workers fight for a service under workers’ control, and combat rogue managers — workersliberty.org/twblogger

Natalia Cassidy on Keynesianism and Covid-19 — workersliberty.org/k-c-19

John Taylor reviews Mark Osborn’s book *Solidarnosc: the workers’ movement and the rebirth of Poland, 1980-1* — workersliberty.org/sol-jt □



Pause Brexit now!

From Labour for a Socialist Europe

Whatever our differing views on Brexit, the whole Labour Party and labour movement should call and campaign for the Brexit transition period due to end on 31 December to be extended significantly – by at least a year, and maybe up to the full two years permitted under existing rules.

Even before the Covid-19 crisis, the possibility of the UK striking a deal with the EU in time looked tenuous. The Tory government has been threatening to walk away and prepare for a No Deal Brexit if the essentials of a deal are not in place by June!

Now the next round of UK-EU talks have, because of the Covid-19 crisis, been cancelled. (As if symbolically, the chief negotiators on both sides are in isolation with symptoms!) Proceeding with Brexit at the end of this year certainly means a No Deal Brexit, which will combine with the dislocation from C-19 to produce an even worse economic and social catastrophe.

In addition to the huge economic shock of a No Deal Brexit in the midst of or soon after the C-19 crisis, No Deal will mean the UK exiting the EU's Early Warning and Response System, which has helped during the current crisis and in previous outbreaks including bird flu, SARS and Ebola. It will also very likely mean British citizens living abroad losing their right to free healthcare.

Only the most zealous nationalist or wild-eyed supporter of disaster capitalism eager to crash-restructure the economy at workers' expense should welcome the prospect of crashing out of the EU in this way. Unfortunately, the UK government is run by people who fall in one or both of those categories.

The government could easily request an extension of the transition – there is an established UK-EU mechanism in place to do so – and it would certainly be granted. But it is clear from Boris Johnson and senior ministers' comments that they do not want to.

Johnson told reporters: "It's not a sub-

ject that's being regularly discussed, I can tell you, in Downing Street at the moment. There is legislation in place that I have no intention of changing." (The Tories' Brexit Bill included wording to bar ministers from requesting an extension, but of course Parliament can change that decision.)

Labour for a Socialist Europe opposes Brexit. But the whole labour movement and left should unite to demand extension of the transition period, whatever our differing views on Brexit itself and on the best tactics after the Tories' election victory. This is matter of basic working-class self-defence of our rights and living standards.

Most importantly, the Labour Party and its leadership must start making this demand loudly and insistently.

Campaigning and forcing the Tories to concede on this will help prevent an exacerbated disaster, and weaken them and strengthen us for many other necessary struggles too. □

• labourforasocialisteurope.org

Requisition pharma!

By Rhodri Evans

Personal protective equipment (PPE) for health workers, ventilators, Covid-19 test kits, and even hand sanitiser and paracetamol are in short supply in hospitals. Why?

Arguing that the then-common socialist demand that workers receive the "full fruits of their labour" was nonsense, Karl Marx explained that from the total social product must be deducted:

"First, cover for replacement of the means of production used up. Secondly, additional portion for expansion... Thirdly, reserve or insurance funds to provide against... calamities, etc".

And further "the part which is intended for the common satisfaction of needs, such as schools, health services, etc. From the outset this part grows considerably in comparison with present-day society..." (*Critique of the Gotha Program*).

A market-based system inevitably skimps on provision for calamities, because it generates no "market signals". The workings of capitalism tend always to maximise the part of the "fruits of labour" grabbed by those who live from profit, at the expense both of wages and of social and reserve provision. The mottos are "cost-cutting" and "just in time".

The National Health Service has been run on as near as possible the minimum to meet current demand, with scant reserves. When funds are available, their allocation will always be biased to meeting current demand, because that generates "market signals", even if they are signals through a managed market run on public funding.

Campaigners have been sounding the alarm for years. The NHS has been running so close to capacity that even something much less dramatic than the Covid-19 epidemic — a slightly-harsher version of the constantly mutating flu virus, or just a cold winter — could overwhelm it.

Evidently the NHS's reserve supplies, and its pre-planned capacities for boosting them in emergency, have been much less than we needed.

The answer is to requisition (i.e take into emergency public ownership) the whole pharmaceutical and medical-supplies industry, and run it under workers' control with democratically-discussed reserve capacity and reserve stocks. □



Correction

Ignore the third graph on p.12 of *Solidarity* 539 (bottom right corner of the page). It's titled "Age and voting in elections 1987-2010", but is, by mistake, a copy of the graph for age and voting in 2017. In 1987-2010 the slopes were less steep. Sorry. □

Help for domestic violence victims is a key service



**Women's
Fightback**

By Katy Dollar

The often-quoted figure is two women a week killed by a current or former partner in England and Wales.

As we enter a new decade in 2020, the number of women being murdered per week in the UK by an abusive partner or ex-partner has risen to three. A further three women a week commit suicide to escape abuse.

Millions of women experience domestic violence every year. We can't ignore these figures when the government has introduced measures to force people to stay at home.

There were increased reports of domestic violence in Wuhan following "lockdown" to prevent the spread of Covid-19. The US domestic violence national hotline has also reported a growing number of calls.

We have expect a similar increase in domestic violence in Britain as increasingly couples and families are confined to the home together.

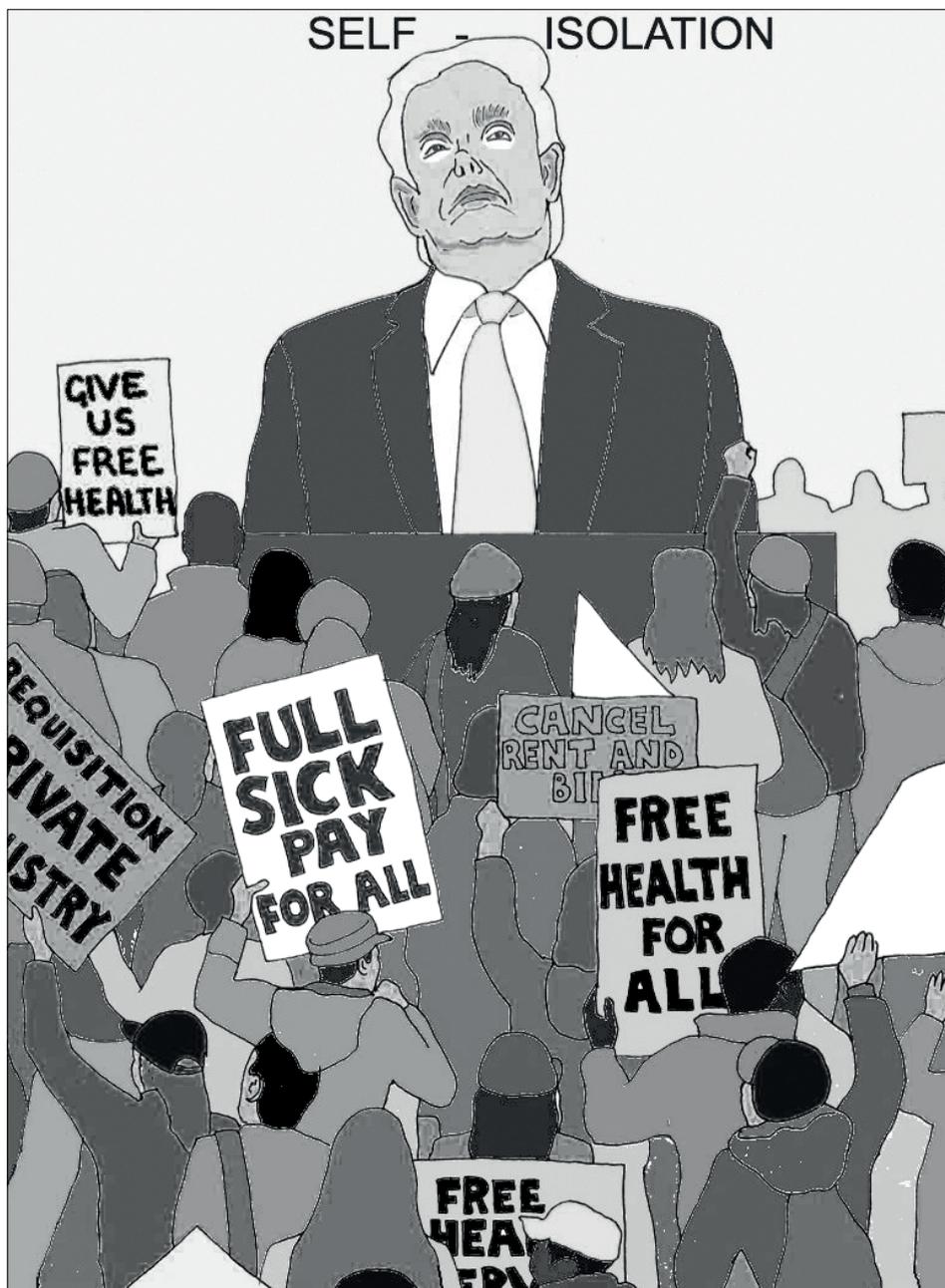
Even before the added Covid-19 measures, victims who had made the decision to leave an abusive partner found it difficult to escape from dangerous homes. Austerity had hit already badly funded domestic violence services very hard.

Cuts have forced many refuges and community services to close and the ones left are struggling to survive, turning away those who need them because of lack of capacity.

Demands

Workers and campaigners in the domestic violence sector are calling on the government and local authorities to consider victims of domestic violence at this time. Women's Lives Matter have launched a petition demanding;

- As an emergency measure, use hotel rooms and B&Bs, and requisition empty properties, to safely house victims needing to flee abusive situations.
- Experts must be involved in decision making and advice to ensure safeguarding.
- Put measures in place to assist victims to safely leave their homes and get to secure accommodation.
- Immediately give substantial funding to current domestic violence refuges – with a view to replacing the refuges that have



been cut under austerity and funding more refuges to open to deal with the crisis in lack of provision.

- Emergency funds for those fleeing violence to support them with immediate provisions such as transport, food etc.
- Treat domestic violence specialists as key workers.
- Seek to reach out to specialist workers who have lost their jobs due to domestic violence service closures and re-deploy their skills to new services.

There is no reason to believe the Tories

who have been cutting domestic violence services for years will suddenly protecting the victims of domestic violence. It will take mass campaigns to ensure the most vulnerable are protected.

This is one of the essential jobs of the women's and labour movements now. □

- See and sign the petition at bit.ly/dv-c19

Political education in

By Misha Zubrowski

Today, we are in a health crisis, and, increasingly, an economic crisis. But it is not simply a “natural crisis”, an “act of god”. This pandemic and the crises it cause have partly political roots, and require political solutions.

This crisis heightens, rather than decreases, the need for serious political education, agitation, and organisation. Political education is necessary to arm and guide ourselves in the struggle against our bosses, our government, and capitalism; and for a fairer, democratic, socialist society. We needed this before, we need it now, during the Covid-19 crisis. We will continue to need political education, and what we have learned through it, after the pandemic subsides.

Political education and the ideological front of the class struggle are at the core of what Workers’ Liberty does. The pandemic forces us to modify *how* we educate ourselves and others, but not to do less of it. Perhaps more.

We’ve done online study courses before. Now there are better technologies for that. Zoom, for example, allows for shared reading, and a shared whiteboard which every participant can write on, as well as listening and talking. And we’ll be experimenting a bit with other media. Readers and supporters of *Solidarity* should engage with our different platforms, familiarise yourself with them, and spread the good word!

Meetings

Discussions, debates are a crucial part of political education. We have a packed schedule of interesting online meetings, on a wide range of topics. (See “[Covid-19 cri](#)



Audio recordings of publications and meetings

We have been recording an audio version of our paper, *Solidarity*, for some time. We also have recordings from various other publications and meetings — such as many [sessions from Class struggle environmentalism](#); and of the pamphlet *Automation and the working class*.

Links to the audio version are at [workersliberty.org/audio](#), and can be found through many podcast providers: search “Workers’ Liberty” or “Solidarity & More”. More information on subscribing and using podcasts at [the URL above](#).

E-reader version

Email awl@workersliberty.org for e-reader versions of *Solidarity*. □



Workers’ Liberty videos

Explore Workers’ Liberty’s videos and playlists, and subscribe to our youtube channel, at bit.ly/wlvideos

Featuring:

- Covid-19: “Make the labour movement an essential service” by Martin Thomas
 - “Covid-19, fight for socialism”, by a young socialist activist
 - In *Defence of Bolshevism*: a series by Martin Thomas to accompany the book of the same name
 - A debate on Marxist perspectives on Irish history, between Rayner Lysaght and Sean Matgamna
 - Two nations, Two states 101 — Camila Bassi explains our perspectives on Israel/Palestine
- Plus many more debates, introductions, comment pieces, and coverage. □

[sis:online resources](#)” to the right.) We have been organising these by video-call, so all participants can hear and see each other as in a normal, in-person, meeting.

Earlier this evening, as I write on 23 March, I took part in an enjoyable and interesting meeting in [the series on trans rights](#). Twenty of us took part. We had no technical hitches. It was easy, dynamic and felt natural. We use the software “Zoom”: you install this on your computer, phone, or tablet, from zoom.us/download, and then open a link specific to each event. Even “technophobes”, or people who were anxious or sceptical about online meetings, have found video-calling better than expected. Video guide: bit.ly/zoom-vid

Media

We have a large and expanding quantity of audio available to listen to, download, or “subscribe” to: [see box](#). Our audio is fairly and I think increasingly popular, is more accessible for some people than text, and can be listened to while washing up or cooking. Links, and an explanation of how to do this, [online](#).

We’re once again boosting our efforts to add new videos to our sizeable collection.

Our wealth of written content isn’t going anywhere. You can still order our excellent [books](#) and [pamphlets](#) (see right) on a large range of topics, and our [website](#) is an even more expansive treasure trove.

Systematic study

Historically, many socialists have had long periods in jail. The Bolsheviks’ rule of thumb, in Russia, was that they might last six months in each spell of activity before being jailed and exiled to Siberia.

An essential part of being a socialist, for them, was to re-dedicate themselves, while incarcerated, to systematic study. Not just reading this or that article or book in an ad hoc way, but studying systematically and critically to arm themselves for the future.

Such systematic study is always important. In this period many of us can, and should — like our imprisoned comrades — use the opportunity for even more. We have a wealth of resources — see “[Study guides](#)” box — and are organising online courses on some.

Promoting political education

Some individuals find some media better than others to learn from. And of course, learning is best done by using multiple media to approach the same subject: one online meeting is no substitute for reading (or listening to) a whole book. Try them all out — you might be surprised! And share them: maybe share a video or audio recording with a political activist or friend, or invite them to an online meeting.

For a democratic, activist approach to political education, we must not only share content, but that we feel empowered, and empower each other, to produce it. Challenge yourself: film a short political video? It’s no more difficult than talking in a meeting!

Finally, one to one political conversations are one of the backbones of political organising, of political education. Phone activists, colleagues, friends, to talk — about the Covid-19 crisis and more — they’ll appreciate it! □

Study guides

Many educational resources, lots of them tried, tested, and revised over years or decades, can be found at workersliberty.org/study. Includes:

- [Marx’s Capital](#). A study guide, link to *Capital* in audio format; 19 short videos; extensive background notes.
- 13-session “[Introduction to Workers’ Liberty](#)”
- [Russian revolution](#): 13-session study guide to Trotsky’s History of the Russian Revolution; The Fate of the Russian Revolution vol. 1; vol. 2; more...
- [The revolutionary party and the working class](#): Pierre Broué’s *The German Revolution 1917-1923*; Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?*; Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*; more...
- And much, much more...

For studying in reading groups, in pairs, or alone. If you’d like to work through one, but might like to discuss it with someone [contact us](#) and we may be able to buddy you up! □

the time of Covid-19



Covid-19 crisis: online resources

workersliberty.org/c19-online brings together articles, online meetings and resources related to and to help us through the crisis. Selection below.

Online meetings

Wednesdays from 25 March Weekly Marxist discussions from 7-8.30pm, the first on nationalism and the national question.

Thursdays from 26 March, 6pm to 7:30pm: the latest in the epidemic and the fight for workers' control

Thursdays from 26 March, 8pm to 9pm: Trotsky's "History of the Russian Revolution". A 13-week online study course.

Friday 27 March, 7.30-9.30pm: Automation and the working class

Sundays from 29 March, 2-3.30pm: regular Sunday "political hangouts"; informal discussions, on wide-ranging issues

Mondays 30 March and 6 April, from 7.30pm: The fight for trans rights, past, present and future

Tuesday 31 March, 7-9pm: Rise of the far right in Europe: how to fight it

From Sunday 5 April: Marxism and trade unions. A six week online course: what trade unions are for and the role of socialists in them. Register by 29 March.

Sunday 5 April, 12-2pm: Socialist feminist reading group (monthly) — Full Surrogacy Now

• All meetings are open access and use Zoom videocalls

All articles on Covid-19: workersliberty.org/covid-19.

See also: [RMT demands support for Steps Into Work students](#); [CoronaVerses: poems from the pandemic](#).

See workersliberty.org/audio for audio on the Covid-19 crisis and beyond, and bit.ly/wlvideos for videos.

Resources and campaigns

• [Campaign by NHS workers for safer workplaces safer and to support casualised workers](#)

• [Take action to win safe workplaces](#). A briefing for workers and union branches.

• [Disabled Workers and the Covid-19 Crisis](#). A briefing.

• [London Renters Union campaign](#) for mortgage and rent holidays.

• Local mutual aid [group listings](#)

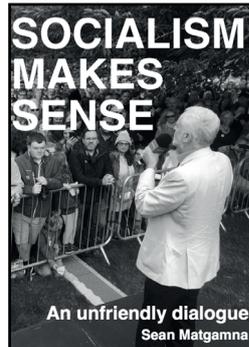
Buy our pamphlets from workersliberty.org/pamphlets — The German Revolution; For workers' climate action; Two nations, two states; more!

Buy our books!

Order from workersliberty.org/books

Add £2 per book for postage, or 50p for 1919. With three or more books, post is free, and the third and subsequent books are half-price.

Pay at workersliberty.org/payment

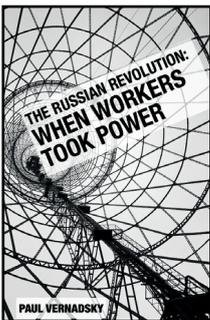


Arguing for a society based on human solidarity, social ownership of industry and banks, and political, economic and social democracy. 182 pages. £5.

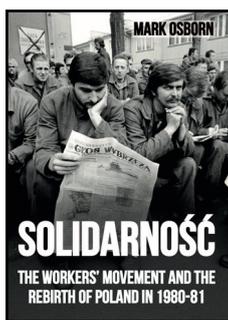


Otto Rühle's abridged version of Capital, putting aside current factual material, illustrations, polemics, is a good lead-in for the full book.

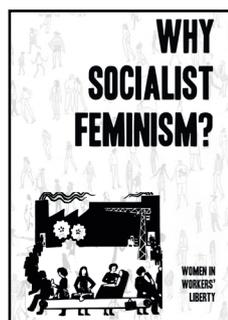
131 pages, £6



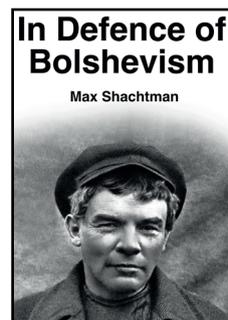
The 1917's revolution's real history, and lessons. 374 pages, £12



The history of Solidarność, from its dawn until the coup. 116 pages, £5



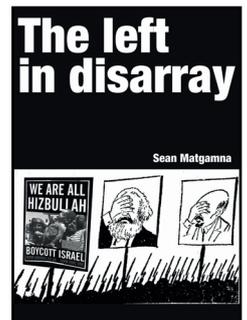
A socialist approach within the recent "wave" of feminism. 102 pages, £5



Defending the Bolsheviks and their relevance today. 312 pages, £10



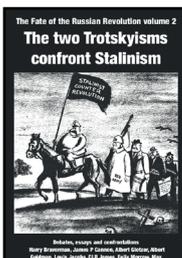
A debate on reform, revolution, Labour, democracy, more. 107 pages, £5



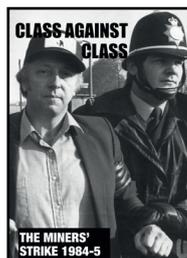
Critical history of the disoriented left, and the way forward. 408 pages, £12



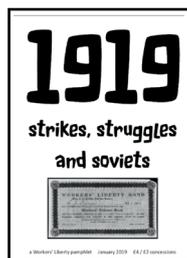
Fate of the Russian Revolution £8



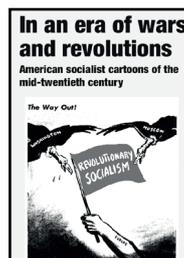
The Two Trotskyisms £20



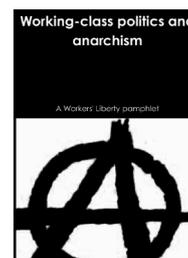
Miners' strike £9



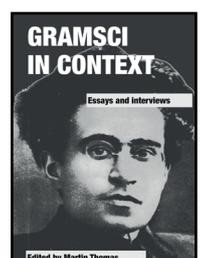
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Night shift



Diary of an engineer

By Emma Rickman

I was rostered onto District Energy (DE) last week (ending 20 March). There are lots of repair jobs; because of the major leak near the swimming pool last month, sections of the network have been isolated several times.

As pipes cool and warm back up the metal expands and contracts slightly, leading to leaks at other weak-points. As well as these there is street-resurfacing to complete, and a big hole in the ground to fill.

D, my mentor, is a chatty ex-miner with dodgy knees. His role is to issue work permits to the civil engineering contractors, supervise jobs, isolate the network where necessary and assist with planning and access. On Tuesday night he has a job to supervise on Norfolk St, and I decide to go along. I haven't worked at night since pulling pints in a London pub, so I take a flask of coffee.

At 10:30pm the streets are empty, but the plant is (reassuringly) running as usual. D explains straight-off; "I got a call from C (head of the team of contractors) at 7:30 asking where I was! He said he thought we were starting at 8 – I said no, permit's at 11."

The job is a night-shift because the repair is next to Arundel Gate, a busy bus interchange opposite a theatre. The machine now positioned on the junction is a large box-like wagon with a hose suspended on a hydraulic ram. The machine sucks gravel into it like a vacuum cleaner.

LATE

To avoid disruption to traffic and extra highway works permits, this job needs to start late, although the workers are obviously frustrated. They begin positioning the hose the instant D steps out of the van. The operator moves the arm with a set of levers held in front of him on a strap, like the controls to a toy plane.

The two District Heating pipes emerge from the ground, step over a section of buried concrete, then turn 90 degrees to head under the main road.

I'm told the concrete block had been an

anchor for the old pipe, which is still visible set in the concrete where it was cut up. Instead of removing the concrete, it was faster during an emergency repair to route new pipe over it. The new pipe will also have to be anchored at some point to ensure steam hitting the bends inside doesn't cause it to rock under the pavement.

The hole where the pipes go underground is 6 metres deep, and for temporary stability the hole has been back-filled with gravel. Now, to install more durable support, the gravel needs to be removed. To open the hole from above, the manhole cover is shunted off by three strong workers using leverage tools. The frame the cover sits on shakes worryingly. Then the hose is lowered into the hole and makes a racket sucking out gravel. All the workers watch the hose closely under lamps powered by a portable generator; I sit on one of the pipes so I can watch from the side – the gravel moves, slowly dragging the rest around it like a pile of sand. I stand up, warm.

"Is that the flow or return?"

"Flow," says D "You wouldn't be sitting on that without insulation I'll tell you that."

BUSY DESPITE

Much earlier than I expected, D drives me to McDonalds, which is busy despite the pandemic. None of the workers are wearing gloves or hair-covers; the drive-through is closed.

A young man shifts from table to table, talking to himself. We order and wash our hands, and as we eat I try to avoid talking about anything personal or political. D is the sort of person who really wants you to open up, but I still don't quite trust him, so I keep it as trivial as possible.

Back at site the hose has hit some larger debris and the vacuum won't lift it. "We can get the stuff around it," C says "but that leaves the heavy stuff at the bottom, and we have to get that out."

"You need harnesses and confined space [permits] to get in there."

"Should've left the manhole off."

D and C chat a bit, then D tells them he's going back to the yard for a bit "If you can't do it you'll just have to ring me." In the van he says "If a contractor is struggling, there's no point breathing down their neck – leave 'em to get on with it."

In the empty office, D dims the lights and falls asleep for an hour or so. I drink my coffee and feel groggy. Around 3am we head back – the truck has been emp-

ty tied twice and the gravel is moving slowly again. It's cold and wet, and D doesn't feel the need to get out of the van. A group of skateboarders troop past from the city centre – maybe they were making the most of the empty streets; it's surreal to see lots of boys in cut-offs and caps at 3am in the rain.

A drunk driver reverses very slowly into the back of one of the pick-ups. The woman next to him gets out immediately, and calmly abandons him. There's no damage, but he's bladdered. We watch him arguing with a worker trying to get his insurance details, give up, drive his car out of sight then come back to carry on arguing – eventually both D and the contractor phone the police. The driver is trying to look casual but he sways as he walks and his hands flex in and out of his pockets.

At 4.30 the hole is not empty, but the machine operator has finished his shift, and packs up. The workers are sluggish, including D, who drops the manhole lever into the hole trying to get the cover back in place. Two young men in a police car show up casually and take a statement from the contractor; apparently they find the car quickly, but the driver has cleared off.

We replace the fences and guards – the job is not close to finished. C signs off the work permit, and I head back to change and cycle home. □

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

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**John
Moloney**

Suspend all job cuts!

The labour movement needs to assert itself in the current crisis. Whilst being sensitive to what is happening around us, we cannot suspend our struggles and demands. The movement needs to raise big political demands, such as the demand for a complete moratorium on lay-offs and redundancies.

We're raising that demand with the civil service. We know that the Department for Work and Pensions is about to announce yet more office closures and resultant redundancies. We have made it clear to them that if they don't back down from that then we'll be in dispute. Exactly what form that will take in the current circumstances will need discussion and planning, but we will not be suspending the struggle against closures.

PCS is meeting the civil service employer today, 24 March, to put a number of demands to them, including the demand for an immediate pay increase, in recognition of civil servants' work during the crisis. Civil servants in Scotland have already been offered a 3% pay increase. We're also demanding increased facility time for our reps, and the scrapping of all restrictions on union activity, so our elected representatives are better able to organise to defend and extend our members' interests.

In the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency, union pressure resulted in an agreement to stop driving tests. If mass testing had not been suspend we would have issued advice to our members that anyone who refused to work on health and safety grounds would be supported by the union. Where employers initially refuse to take precautionary measures to minimise risk, unions should make it clear they'll support members in taking the necessary steps themselves. In HMRC, the industrial action ballot of our members in the operations centre in Bootle was scuppered by the crisis, with many reps having to take time off work. Unfortunately it didn't meet the turnout threshold, but it did return a nearly 99% vote for action, which shows the strength of feeling.

That dispute is over local working conditions, and we'll discuss how best to pursue those demands going forward. □

• John Moloney is the Assistant General Secretary of PCS, writing here in a personal capacity.

ZERO HOUR CONTRACT WORKERS: NHS ENGLAND SAYS: IF YOU ARE WORKING ON NHS PREMISES YOU ARE ENTITLED TO TO SELF-ISOLATE ON FULL PAY

LOCAL MANAGERS SHOULD COMPLY



If another member of your household has any of the symptoms of COVID19 – a new continuous cough or high temperature 37.8 Celsius and above; then all household members must stay at home and not leave the house for **14 days**.

If you develop these symptoms stay at home for **7 days**.

More info here: bit.ly/33BjrFW

Full paid leave for all in NHS!

Essential workers at East London NHS Foundation Trust have organised and taken action to reduce the risk of infection and to keep each other and the patients safe.

"We are the workers that will keep going through this pandemic. Together we can take action for safer workplaces", they say.

On 16 March mental health nurses, doctors, social workers, admin and cleaners in East London, emailed the chief executive seeking assurances that all workers operating in ELFT premises would be entitled to full paid leave, where necessary, to comply with the government's public health advice.

By Thursday 19 March they had still not heard back from the Trust managers. By that time they had discovered that the provision they had asked for already existed, buried deep in a policy document. Only, no effort had been made to inform staff, least of all the staff most affected.

Workers then put up posters advertising the policy throughout the hospital as

a basic infection control and health and safety measure.

On Friday 20 March they discovered a leaked letter from NHS England to all NHS Trusts dated 2 March. Contained within that letter was the provision they had been asking for. On page three it instructed NHS employers to:

"Ensure that any member of staff, including bank staff and sub-contractors, who has to be physically present at an NHS facility to carry out their duties, receives full pay for any period in which they are required to self-isolate as a result of public health advice". ("COVID-19 NHS preparedness and response").

This will only be effective as an infection control measure if essential workers on zero hours contracts who will be working in the NHS through the shutdown are aware that it exists.

ELFT workers are calling on NHS employers to make the policy known, loudly and publicly. □

Union action makes the difference

In the week ending 20 March, bus drivers for Metroline were told they were now running a Saturday service and would be paid for only 20 hours a week. However at Victoria Coach station, TfL (Transport for London) management, under pressure from union stewards, committed to full pay on reduced time and even in a shut down. With the government offering an 80%-pay guarantee, the unions need to go on the offensive: no job cuts, no cuts in pay, full sick pay, and a fallback rate for any zero hours workers. □

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Solidarity



For a workers' government

No going back! Fight for socialism!

By Sacha Ismail

In the emergency, Britain's right-wing Conservative government is going for a limited, crude and undemocratic form of "socialism". It is overriding market signals and criteria, and being forced to fall back on a bureaucratic and hierarchical approximation of the socialist ideal of "from each according to their ability, to each according to their need".

In sector after sector, from the (patchy) steps to guarantee incomes for those unable to work, to banning evictions, to acquiring private hospital facilities, to taking over rail franchises to removing competition-law curbs on cooperation between supermarket chains, the Tories' measures point in the direction of a form of capitalist "socialism".

It's a stepped-up version of 2007-8, when the British government, and many others, intervened dramatically in and against the market, effectively nationalising the bulk of the banking system.

At the same time we have the government claiming wide police powers, and bosses using the crisis to push through, for example, a poor wage deal on the Tube which would otherwise face resistance.

But, in plain view, we see that the capitalist market way of running society "works", even in its own terms, only in its good times and only for some. In the crunch, to operate the vast "socialised" networks of the modern economy, the government has no choice but to fall back on public planning and even (reluctantly) on a degree of workers' cooperation and control.

Historically, many steps forward for the working class have come in the wake of major crises. In the aftermath of crises, many people don't want to go back to the crap they put up with before. They think they deserve better after so much hard



YOUR NEW NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE

On 5th July the new National Health Service starts

NHS leaflet, May 1948

work and sacrifice. They have drawn conclusions from seeing the state mobilise resources regardless of market logic. They no longer accept that can't be done.

Thus we got votes for women and working-class men, alongside many trade union gains, at the end of World War 1. We got the NHS, the welfare state and other reforms after World War 2.

Reversal

But without a strong enough fight by workers, inspired by socialist ideas, the state helps the ruling class revert to its old ways. After World War 1, the government returned the mines and railways to the private owners. The bosses were more on the back foot after the 1940s, but even then they came back to reverse the gains, under Thatcher.

Starting now, we need an aggressive campaign to insist that the changes made in this crisis – on public control of services, on sick pay and sick policies, on benefit sanctions, rents, evictions and many other issues – are not reversed but maintained and developed further.

In many workplaces, unions and workers who went on the front foot have won important gains from bosses caught off balance, for example on full pay for zero-hours and agency workers when they observe public health advice.

Unfortunately, most of the leaders and the higher structures of the labour movement have instead gone quiet.

If instead of working-class self-assertion, labour-movement inaction domi-

nates, then a sense of "all in it together" social peace, plus the government's attacks on democratic rights, will help the ruling class cut corners to their own shape during the epidemic, and push back hard for a return to "normal" market rules after it.

Let's raise the slogan now, "No going back"! That will lay the basis to advance away from the capitalism that brought us this crisis and towards real socialism.

Today's circumstances make campaigning difficult; but they also make the possibility of victories and the stakes at play higher. Everyone who considers themselves a socialist or a fighter for the rights of the working class needs to organise and educate for this fight, even if for now it's only the organising and educating you can do over the phone and online.

The climate and environmental crisis makes this even more necessary and urgent. Accelerating destruction and degrading of natural habitats and biodiversity may well be a factor in the rise and spread of Covid-19, and future epidemics.

The weeks of the crisis have seen a rapid reduction in carbon emissions and pollution, showing there is nothing inevitable in humankind progressively destroying the natural environment. A rationally, democratic planned economy could reduce carbon emissions while providing a decent life for everyone – as long as we eliminate the overblown wealth and power of the few. That is what we must fight for. □