

Solidarity

& Workers' Liberty



For social ownership of the banks and industry

- » **Hold Starmer to his pledges**
- » **Remobilise the left**
- » **Hold Tories to account on pandemic**

LABOUR & UNIONS: SPEAK OUT INDEPENDENTLY!

Hungary, France, Australia, Italy

Workers and Covid-19
across the world

Pages 4, 5, 10, 16

Sanders' six-point plan on Covid-19

Wages for all, Medicare
for all: Bernie Sanders
challenges Trump

Page 2

More testing, more PPE

Requisition industry
under workers' control to
meet emergency

Pages 5 and 8

The economics of "war"

The pandemic has forced
a shift to public collective
action. And then what?

Page 12

Bernie Sanders' six point plan



Sanders' Campaign

By Eric Lee

Bernie Sanders has drafted a six point plan for dealing with the coronavirus pandemic and the looming economic crisis – and the strange thing is that he doesn't mention the presidential election nor the name of America's current president, Donald Trump.

While Joe Biden tries to make his voice heard from his basement studio in Delaware, Sanders remains an active member of the US Senate, fighting to get things done without waiting for the Democratic party primary season to end – and without waiting for Trump to be replaced in office either.

"Congress must pass, in the very near future, the boldest piece of legislation ever written in modern history," he says.

"We must make sure that every worker in America continues to receive their paycheck during this crisis and we must provide immediate financial relief to everyone in this country," he says. This means "monthly payments of \$2,000 for every man, woman, and child" and guaranteed "paid family leave throughout this crisis."

He adds that "this is not a radical idea. Other countries, such as the UK, Norway, Denmark, France, and others have all come up with similar approaches to sustain their economy."

His second point is a demand for universal health care.

Even today, with Sanders' Medicare for All proposal still far from becoming a reality, he's demanding that "Medicare must be empowered to pay all of the deductibles, co-payments and out-of-pocket healthcare expenses for the uninsured and the underinsured. No one in America who is sick, regardless of immigration status, should be afraid to seek the medical treatment they need during



Hedge-fund boss Bill Ackman has boasted of making \$2.6 billion profit in a few days in March by "shorting" (betting on a fall in) the shares of companies most hit by the lockdown

this national pandemic."

"I am not proposing that we pass Medicare for All in this moment," he admits. "That fight continues into the future."

Sanders' third demand is that the federal government "must immediately and forcefully use the Defense Production Act to direct the production of all of the personal protective equipment, ventilators and other medical supplies needed." He goes further than other politicians in saying that the government must "use any means necessary to secure supplies."

His fourth demand is an increase in funding for food banks and school meals.

Fifth, Sanders calls for emergency aid right now to states and cities that are struggling to cope. He is calling on Congress to "provide \$600 billion in direct fiscal aid."

And sixth, he is calling for a suspension of "monthly expenses like rent, mortgages, medical debt and consumer debt collection for four months" as well as the cancellation of "all student loan payments for the duration of this crisis" and "an immediate moratorium on evictions, foreclosures, and utility shut-offs."

This is not a radical programme, as Sanders is the first to admit. Parts of it have even been adopted by the Tory government here.

What is new and radical is that what he says will resonate among Americans, who are increasingly aware that their system and their leaders failed them. They will welcome much of what Sanders proposes. □

• Eric Lee is the convenor of "London for Bernie", writing here in a personal capacity. For all Eric's columns, and other coverage on Sanders, see bit.ly/el-bs

• See Sanders explaining his answer to the pandemic at bit.ly/bs-cv19

US workers demand conversion

On Monday 30 March, General Electric workers in the USA launched two separate protests demanding that the company convert its jet engine factories to make ventilators.

At GE's Lynn, Massachusetts aviation factory, workers held a silent protest, standing six feet apart.

Union members at the company's Boston headquarters also marched six feet apart, calling on the company to use its factories to help the country close its ventilator shortage amid the coronavirus pandemic. □

• bit.ly/ge-vent

The left and Starmer

“” Editorial

On 4 April Keir Starmer and Angela Rayner were proclaimed Labour's new leader and deputy, and the Labour right won all three by-elections for the National Executive Committee, against a divided field of left candidates.

The left should neither rally to Starmer uncritically (as some have done), nor give up on the fight inside the Labour Party (as others have suggested).

1. Demand fight against the Tories

The media reports that Starmer and his inner circle think it is clever and “statesmanlike” to refrain from too vocal criticism of the Tory government in the Covid-19 crisis. This is wrong.

It is not surprising the government has had a boost in support, despite its poor response to the epidemic. This crisis is like a war, and governments usually achieve a rallying-round in the early periods of wars. Disillusionment and rebellion are likely later, but a lot depends on the groundwork laid now.

The labour movement should be criticising and attacking the Tories on numerous issues, and proposing alternatives. Refusal to do so can only prolong and strengthen their ability to avoid widespread outrage as their failings mount up.

Before the crisis, Labour did very little campaigning outside elections. This was surely a factor in the 2019 defeat. It needs to change. Even while mass demonstrations and meetings are not possible, many other forms of campaigning are. We must awaken the party from its sleep.

We should absolutely oppose Labour joining a national unity government or similar. Practical cooperation against the epidemic should not imply political support.

2. Organise against Starmer and Rayner

Swathes of Labour's organised right and hard-right backed Starmer, many of them very open about a desire to defeat and marginalise the left. His Shadow Cabinet shows a careful but clear shift to the right, or at least centre. Angela Rayner's record gives no reason to think she will provide a major counterweight.

The left needs to start organising for clear, positive, radical goals. That will clearly involve conflict with the new leadership. We need a left-wing opposition.

Left-wing MPs should help the grassroots left organise. They should not take positions in Starmer's administration.

3. Fight for Labour democracy

A lot will depend on the ability of Labour members to organise and bring pressure to bear for radical politics and demands. That implies stepping up the fight to democratise the party: above all, demanding a demo-

cratic conference which actually decides policy and campaigning.

No accident that former Blair official John McTernan, in his proposals for how Starmer should utilise his victory to smash the left, makes further downgrading Labour conference central.

If we had won the principle of conference sovereignty under Corbyn, we would be in a vastly stronger position. The left should unite and campaign to win a sovereign conference as well as other democratic reforms like open selection of MPs.

We should become a megaphone for the radical policies passed by conference but not campaigned for – on reversing cuts, council housing, the Green New Deal, repealing anti-union laws, migrants' rights, undoing NHS privatisation and many other issues.

The left must make a democratic conference, the carrying out of conference policy and getting the party campaigning around its policies central.

4. Be radical

Conference policy is not particularly radical – it only looks like it measured against what Labour has (sort of) campaigned for. Beyond fighting for conference policies to be implemented, we need more radical ideas, to shift the debate in a socialist direction.

The current crisis demands this kind of radicalism. Why has Labour not argued for public ownership of the big supermarkets and the creation of a publicly-owned delivery system guaranteeing supplies for those in need?

To weather the crisis in the interests of the majority and to rebuild on a new basis afterwards, the demand for public ownership of banking and finance – agreed by TUC Congress in 2012 and 2019, but left in a drawer – makes perfect sense.

More broadly, we need to argue for a radically transformed society, based on common ownership and democratic control – socialism.

5. Be internationalist

The Covid-19 crisis should be a stark reminder that the challenges facing humanity require international action and solidarity.

In the face of the insurgent nationalist right, layers of the left have capitulated to the lure of “patriotism”. We must reassert internationalism as the heart of socialist politics.

Internationalism begins at home, with migrants' rights. The mistreatment and scapegoating of migrants in this crisis makes standing up for solidarity urgent.

We must insist the party campaigns for the policies won at last year's conference by the Labour Campaign for Free Movement – policies which are now even more relevant and important. □

• Adapted from *The Clarion*. Longer version at bit.ly/left-against-starmer

• More on Labour and Starmer: bit.ly/st-l-d

Australia in the pandemic

By Janet Burstall

Australian unions first focussed on work health and safety in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In some workplaces unions won improved health and safety conditions, and teachers and parents have protested online against schools being kept open.

Union attention quickly moved onto incomes and jobs, when Qantas stood down 20,000 workers on 18 March. The unemployment benefit was doubled on the spot, from \$550 (£270) a fortnight to \$1100 a fortnight, and the onerous work test was stopped.

By 22 March thousands of workers who had lost their jobs were queuing for hours outside Centrelink [equivalent of DWP] offices around the country, and its website had crashed.

The government's first moves were to rescue business with capital grants, which were irrelevant when there were no customers. The government at first resisted lobbying by unions and employers for a wage subsidy scheme, along the lines of other countries, then introduced a new "JobKeeper" payment (paid via employers) of a flat \$1500 (£730) a fortnight. It says it expects six million workers to claim the payment.

Sally McManus, secretary of Australian Unions, has spoken out for the inclusion of groups initially excluded from JobKeeper payment, including over a million casuals who have not been with their current employer for 12 months, and visa holders. The government has said it will

consider extensions.

Unions are also opposing the government on changing laws that would allow employers to compel workers to exhaust their accumulated leave. This problem follows from an earlier measure billed as a union victory, that workers can access two weeks of unpaid pandemic leave and double the amount of leave they can take at half-pay. Employers could potentially claim the \$1500 a fortnight JobKeeper payment, without passing it on to workers on leave on lower pay.

Disappointingly unions have not said much on topics not directly related to work, particularly about demands for rent, eviction and mortgage suspensions, despite the threat of deepening indebtedness and homelessness for many.

Other surprises from the government include taking over of private hospitals into the public hospital system, and making childcare free.

Conservative prime minister Scott Morrison has said: "There are no more unions or bosses now, there are just Australians."

The labour movement can't afford to be taken in by this claim of class peace. There are rights and needs to defend now, from employers, landlords, banks and governments. And the government fully intends to "snap back", and take back the benefits announced during the crisis.

The shut-down of parliament proposed to last from early April to August shows that the government would prefer less public scrutiny. □

Hungary: three months with decrees but no food?

By a reader in Hungary

The new emergency law passed in Hungary has made waves in the international press, and rightly, though much of the coverage has been inaccurate.

For example, the BBC on 30 March said: "The Hungarian Parliament has voted by 137 to 53 to accept the government's request for the power to rule by decree during the coronavirus emergency".

However, the 2012 Hungarian Constitution (put in place by Fidesz) already grants the power to rule by decree in a state of emergency. The new law is actually about the edicts that are issued during a state of emergency.

A state of emergency legally lasts until the reasons for its declaration (in this case, the pandemic) are no longer present. Generally, an edict proclaimed during this state of emergency lasts for 15 days unless the parliament votes to extend it.

The new law extended the duration of edicts beyond 15 days to the end of the state of emergency.

Parliament will still convene, and will continue to vote on non-emergency laws.

Indeed, things have been moving quickly on that front. Deputy prime minister Zsolt Semlyén, the deputy prime minister proposed a package just one day after the new emergency law. It includes, among other things, curtail-

ing the right to legally change one's gender, reducing the independence of theatres in the capital, and providing free real estate to a foundation belonging to Mária Schmidt, a historian belonging to Fidesz's orbit.

The proposal also included a motion to place groups of commissars above mayors to vet local emergency measures, but that was dropped.

Such are the legislations parliament will continue to vote on.

The difference between the needs of the people and the priorities of Fidesz was highlighted a few days later with news that starvation has set in in Borsod, the poorest county of Hungary, home to a significant Roma population.

Government response to the economic shock has been dismal. In March 30 to 40,000 lost their jobs, and the government has offered no support to those out of work. Orbán asked: "Can we give everyone 50-100 thousand Forints (the equivalent of £120-240) without regard to achievement? Is this a good idea?"

The minimum wage in Hungary is 161 thousand Forints (£388 a month).

The government claims that instead of handing out money it is trying to make sure that no one is out of work in three months' time.

Three months is a long time to spend without food. □

Workers' control of PPE!

By an ambulance worker

There is alarm amongst many about the lack of PPE [Personal Protective Equipment] being provided to workers at risk of exposure to Covid-19. Rightly so.

The information regarding protection has been confusing, with different recommendations initially coming from the World Health Organisation (WHO) and Public Health England (PHE). Workers in the frontline are being told what to do rather than being involved in the decisions that affect them. We don't trust our bosses to protect us.

Many workers are superseding recommended protection with support of trade unions. For example in my workplace, an ambulance service, the union is advising members to enforce the wearing of level 2 PPE, face masks, goggles, gloves, and aprons, for every close contact, because of workers' experiences of pre-symptomatic or atypical-symptomatic patients testing positive.

In the London Ambulance Service the Unison branch is demanding level 3 PPE, which includes mechanical respirators, for every patient contact, arguing that the highest protection should be adopted unless it's proved not to be needed.

At the same time many workers in high risk situations, often the less well organised, have no PPE at all. Home carers are in a particularly vulnerable situation, with many

on zero hours and low union density.

The WHO admits that "the current global stockpile of PPE is insufficient, particularly for medical masks and respirators; the supply of gowns and goggles is soon expected to be insufficient also".

Official recommendations are based as much on available resources as on the, inevitably small, evidence base. The WHO goes on to argue that: "The capacity to expand PPE production is limited".

But with political will production can increase vastly. The problem is that currently the production and distribution lie in the hands of the market. In the UK, the fault lines created by Blair's privatisation of NHS supplies are exposed. We want to see factories requisitioned to increase production and workers devising plans for socially useful production such as PPE.

Immediately we need to agree and enforce levels of PPE for all, through discussion amongst workers and through organising at workplace level and reaching out with solidarity to less unionised workers. □



Where we stand

The Alliance for Workers' Liberty fights for socialist revolution, for the labour movement to militantly assert working-class interests. See workersliberty.org/about and if you agree, join us! □

Beware conspiracy theories!

By Cathy Nugent

A number of conspiracy theories about malign forces behind the coronavirus pandemic have cropped up in the last few weeks.

These include: the virus is a mass depopulation project by unspecified "powers"; it is a longer-term plot to vaccinate people with a microchip; Disney's *Tangled* included a prediction about the virus; helicopters will soon be sent out to spray us all with disinfectant.

Perhaps not the least bizarre is the "theory" that links the coronavirus to the roll-out of 5G technology. This builds on baseless health scares around the new mobile technology over the last year or so. Celebrities Amanda Holden and Keri Hilson have boosted the new scare about 5G among their Twitter followers.

The social media nonsense transferred to real life in the first week of April when a mobile phone mast was set on fire in Birmingham. Openreach and other telecom engineers have been abused while going about their job keeping us (and essential services) connected during the pandemic.

The new impetus to 5G conspiracy theory seems to have its origins in the fact that Wuhan was one of the places in China where 5G was first rolled out. The link

to the virus is the "theory" that the high frequency radio waves on which 5G is based damage the human immune system.

Smoking, alcohol, poor diet, and stress are linked to immune system problems. But there is no evidence to link those problems to the very low exposure from 5G networks to particular radio waves. Nor do those waves cause cancer.

In fact they are less likely to cause cancer than the radio waves used by 4G, 3G, 2G... Or different forms of radio waves, such as X-rays. (For more on this Google "International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection".)

This conspiracy theory is not a laughing matter. It is dangerous in all kinds of ways. It adds to people's anxiety. Since many mobile phone masts are situated on buildings and near houses, the arson attacks could generate deadly fires.

The labour movement must defend our telecom comrades, and we need the government to be under such scrutiny, and so strongly pressed to answer awkward questions, that its factual briefings will be trusted. □

Coronavirus, China, and the blame game: Statement from the Uyghur Solidarity Campaign. bit.ly/ch-blame

Shut the construction sites!

By Mohan Sen

The socialist film-makers Reel News report that they have been “inundated with messages from construction workers, demanding their sites are shut down during the coronavirus crisis.

“Anyone who’s worked on a building site knows that social distancing is impossible due to the nature of the work – and this is being exacerbated by further unsafe and dangerous practices. Now sites are being forced to shut down through action inside and outside sites.”

They say to check out their Twitter page @reelnews-london and the @shutthesites page, as well as the hashtag #shutthesites for updates.

For a statement sent to us by the Blacklist Support Group, which organises among construction workers, see bit.ly/BSGstatement

On 2 April the Construction Leadership Council (a joint industry-and-government body) put out guidelines calling for the closure of all sites where social distancing is impossible, and then withdrew it within hours.

The *Financial Times* (2 April) estimates that about half of all construction companies are keeping their sites open.

The Reel News website carries a series of reports on construction sites around the country: see bit.ly/reel-newsroundup

After workers’ protests at the MGT site, building a biomass power station near Middlesbrough, only around 100 workers out of the 1,700 are left on site.

But of Britain’s 2.1 million construction workers, 86% are employed by (usually small) subcontractors or (40% of them) formally self-employed.

At the MGT site a big contractor, Balfour Beatty, has paid off 72 workers who were on fixed term contracts ending 30 March – although because of the Covid 19 virus there is still work for them to do on the site, and the company could easily have furloughed them and claimed government help to pay 80% of their wages. As well as shutting the sites, we need to demand pay for all the workers.

Reel News also reports on gentrifying housing project Anthology Hale in Haringey; Smulders yard, working on the foundations of offshore windfarms in Newcastle; Hinckley Point C nuclear power station in Somerset; Keady power station project near Scunthorpe; Affinity Living luxury flats in Manchester.

Also: EEW OSB, producing infrastructure for offshore wind turbines, also near Middlesbrough; Henry Boots construction in Leicester; the Boohoo warehouse in Burnley; in Brighton, luxury flats and a Metropolitan College project licensed by the council; and the Hornsea 2 wind farm project near Grimsby.

The reports sent to Reel News highlight many construction bosses’ seemingly almost total indifference to workers’ and public health, which lies behind the Tories’ reluctance to do anything about closing construction.

Trade unionists and socialists should read them, circulate them and do what we can to support construction workers’ fight. □

France: workers occupy to demand oxygen production

By Michael Elms

Until 2019, the British firm Luxfer Holdings PLC owned and ran an oxygen cylinder factory in Gerzat in northern France.

In May 2019, production ceased. In January 2020, construction teams arrived at the site, only to find it occupied by former workers demanding its nationalisation. That occupation lasted until 19 March.

This plant can produce 950 oxygen cylinders a day, which would be very useful to many sorely-afflicted sufferers of Covid-19. The owners of the plant refuse to re-open it for production.

French President Emmanuel Macron might have declared in a speech that “this pandemic reveals that there are goods and services that must be placed outside the laws of the market” – but he isn’t proposing to nationalise this vital plant, either.

This is not the only piece of class struggle in France today under the pandemic. Employers are failing to provide staff with PPE, especially front-line medical staff. Some employers are spuriously declaring themselves “essential” in order to keep working – such as the Solvay company, which manufactures vanilla extract, and is keeping its workers coming in on the pretext that vanilla

flavouring is an “essential” cough medicine!

In this context, the main trade union federations have signed a joint declaration with the bosses’ union, in the same spirit as the class-collaborationist declarations made by the UK’s RMT and CWU leaderships. But a joint pledge of “good behaviour” is no guarantee against exploitation... especially as the government has just passed an emergency law that permits it to alter workers’ terms and conditions by decree!

This law was voted for and applauded by another group of “left” class-collaborationists: La France Insoumise (much beloved of certain British Stalinist and reformist losers). Mélenchon attempted to save his political dignity after waving through Macron’s authoritarian emergency laws by giving a radio interview in which he called for foreign truck drivers to be forcibly sent home in order to protect French workers... It’s good to know that while this terrible violence doesn’t respect borders, leaders of the European reformist “left” certainly do!

But from the Luxfer workers to trade unionists who oppose the CGT’s declarations of cross-class unity to couriers in Lyon striking against delivery platforms’ disregard for their safety, French workers are fighting for safety, democracy and dignity. We’ve posted translations of communiqués from French workers on [our website](http://ourwebsite). More on Luxfer at bit.ly/o2-lf. □

Jobcentres in the pandemic

By a Jobcentre worker

The coronavirus crisis has radically changed the job roles and working environment in Jobcentres.

DWP [Department of Work and Pensions] policy on self-isolation for permanent staff is relatively good, sending anyone with a relevant underlying health condition home for 12 weeks on full pay, although there are arguments with management about staff who live with vulnerable people still being asked to come in.

G4S staff are on full pay, despite significantly reduced hours because almost no security is needed now jobcentres have been closed to the public, and would be paid if they needed to self-isolate. There have been persistent problems with the supply of soap and hand sanitizer, and there have been problems with local management not following HR rules.

Our union, PCS, is arguing for improvements to social distancing measures and for full pay for all outsourced workers, but the campaign lacks visibility.

Because the workforce is relatively old, once those with underlying conditions and those self-isolating were sent home our Jobcentre was down to around a third of its normal staff level. This has risen slightly as some workers' self-isolation ends.

Over a million new Universal Credit claims have been made, and all staff have been moved onto contacting claimants by phone to process new claims. Around seven backroom staff from DWP HQ have been redeployed to our Jobcentre, and we are currently training them to han-

dle claims using the new streamlined process.

The process essentially involves verifying housing costs, children, capital or savings, self-employment, immigration status etc., but now, to speed up the process, based on the information given by the claimant and without requesting any evidence. Management maintain that somewhere down the line, someone will be going through these claims and requesting the evidence retrospectively. Given we are talking about several million individual verifications, this seems fanciful.

All routine and work-search-related appointments have been cancelled and the requirement to accept a "claimant commitment" outlining job search requirements has been suspended. In practice that suspends the "sanction regime". The "standard allowance" has gone up by £20 a week.

But people who have had no or little experience with the benefits system will discover its harshness runs much deeper than sanctions. Rules like the extremely harsh cap on housing element for single claimants under 35 (very few of whom will have their full rent paid), or ineligibility based on savings or immigration status, will be a rude awakening for many who never expected to rely on benefits. □

Deaths in custody

Under the emergency powers of the Coronavirus Act, unless a medical professional deems it necessary, death certificates for people that die in custody will not have to be signed by a coroner.

Yet the law was passed with little debate and with almost no opposition to these provisions from the Labour leadership.

Inquest reported that in the financial year 2018-19, there were 276 deaths during or following police contact, 16 in or following police custody.

Of those 16 deaths, 10 people were identified as having "mental health concerns" and 13 were known to have a link to alcohol or drugs. Six of the sixteen people who died in or following police custody had force used against them by the cops or by members of the public before their deaths.

There are too many cases like Edson Da Costa, a 25-year-old Black Portuguese man whose family ran a campaign of protest after he died on 21 June 2017 while detained by the police. And many of them young black men.

Labour should analyse and press for changes to this and other clauses of the Act. □

Tube: unions on the case

Whether by local management showing common sense, or frontline staff initiative for social distancing in Tube stations, we've seen:

- The use of tensa barriers and tape to mark distancing zones around gatelines and POMs [ticket machines]
- Staff rotation and redeployment around the station
- Repurposing of rooms around the station so staff don't have to crowd into small mess rooms

In contrast is a station where the Area Manager has said, in writing, that they believe "business as usual" should prevail as much as possible. Union reps are on the case.

An employee bulletin has recommended that station staff "avoid" touching the POMs [ticket machines]; but, for safety, the machines should be switched off, and gates left open.

London Underground's engineering management has surpassed themselves with wanton risk-taking with workers' health.

In "Asset Operations", management have sent an Employee Bulletin to all workers telling them that they should try to stay two metres apart, but if they can't, just crack on anyway.

Workers should protect themselves, their families, and their workmates, and stick to social distancing. □

Requisition and workers' control to get tests and PPE

By Martin Thomas

In the Thursday 8pm "clapping for the NHS" on 2 April 2020, many people chanted "Test! Test! Test! PPE!"

Health workers are pressing the government on its failure to meet its promises to expand testing hugely, to make PPE [Personal Protective Equipment] available to all, and to agree adequate PPE guidelines for health workers.

So, even, are NHS bosses. NHS Providers, a confederation of NHS hospital, mental health, community, and ambulance trusts, said on 3 April: "There are still trusts that are unable to begin testing, and lack of swabs, reagents and test kits is a continuing concern".

They welcomed upgraded PPE guidance, but said: "There are still parts of the health service lacking in the right kit".

The government has been evasive about why it has failed to meet its own promises and targets on testing and PPE. One factor cited by academics is the government's failure to mobilise university and research-institute facilities onto the task of processing tests.

Even the Trump administration in the USA has felt obliged to use a law from the Korean war, the Defence Production Act, to force General Motors into producing ventilators for the USA without dilly-dallying and haggling over terms. Spain and Ireland have nationalised their private hospitals.

Requisitioning

The labour movement should demand that testing facilities and industries producing tests, PPE, and ventilators and their inputs be requisitioned (i.e. taken under emergency public ownership and control).

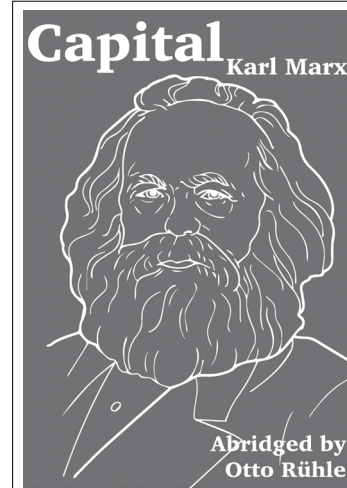
We should demand also workers' control: health workers' and production workers' unions, with the assistance of experts, should be able to check and scrutinise the plans to increase supply, and blow whistles when they see obstacles.

Germany and Australia have both tested over one in a hundred of their populations, and South Korea about one in 110.

The UK, as of 5 April, has tested one in 340, only one-third of South Korea's level.

Yet the UK still has comparatively big chemicals and pharmaceuticals industries. It has the biggest biotech industry in Europe. It has five out of the top eight universities outside the USA for biological sciences.

The NHS has been run for years on the basis of stretching constantly cash-starved resources to meet immediate and visible "market demands", a pattern which leaves little scope for building up spare capacity and reserves to



Weekly featured book

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

131 pages, including introduction and study notes. £5 + post.

Study course on *Capital* starts 4pm, Wednesday 8 April. □

• workersliberty.org/books

cover the unpredicted, and probably makes it difficult to switch into emergency-expansion mode.

But with the advantages to hand, UK industry could be, should be, must be mobilised to produce enough tests, PPE, and ventilators to serve this country, plus, on top of that, a large surplus to be exported to countries which don't have the industrial base for emergency production.

The virus has not yet gone into freewheeling explosive spread in poorer countries. Not yet. Iran, which saw early rapid growth, has reported stable or declining daily numbers of new cases since 28 March, and stable or declining daily numbers of death since 19 March.

One factor there may be a younger population. In Iran, 4% of the population is over 70, and thus at special risk from Covid-19. In Italy, it's 16% (and in the UK, 11%).

So far the highest death rates in proportion to population are in Italy and Spain (between 250 and 270 per million). Then follow Belgium, the Netherlands, and France (between 125 and 103 per million).

Even hard-hit Iran is on a lower level, at 43 per million.

If an explosive impact of the epidemic in poorer countries can be delayed sufficiently that, by the time it comes, masses of spare medical equipment can be shipped from richer countries, or conceivably even vaccines or partial treatments are available, then millions of lives will be saved. □

NHS workers' campaign

NHS workers are campaigning for full isolation pay for all, and for adequate PPE [personal protective equipment]. □

- See safeandequal.org
- and the PPE survey at bit.ly/PPE4all



Covid-19 crisis: online resources & meetings

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

Online meetings

- All meetings are open access and use Zoom videocalls.
- Monday 6 and 20 April, 7.30-9pm:** [The fight for trans rights](#), past, present and future.
- Wednesdays 8, 15, 22, 29 April, 7-8.30pm:** ABCs of Marxism – [What is Stalinism?](#) **15 April:** [Nationalism and the national question](#). **22 April:** [Who was Lenin?](#) **29 April:** [The Communist Manifesto](#)
- Thursday 9 April, 6pm:** [Covid-19, capitalism and socialism](#). A weekly hour-long informal discussion about organising in and around the crisis.
- Thursday 9 April 8pm:** [Trotsky's "History of the Russian Revolution"](#) A 13-week online study course.
- Sunday 12, 19, 26 April, 6.30-8pm:** [Sunday "political hangout"](#) – **12 April:** [alternative history of Italian Renaissance](#), with Cath Fletcher. **19 April:** [Abolition of the Monarchy](#). **26 April:** [Marxism and Religion](#).
- Sundays until 10 May:** [Marxism and trade unions](#). Reg-



Audio recordings of publications and meetings

We have been recording an audio version of our paper, *Solidarity*, for some time. We have recordings from various other publications and meetings – many new this week!

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 version of *Solidarity*.

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! ☐

istration closed.

Friday 24 April: [Fifty years of women's liberation, forum](#)

All articles on Covid-19: workersliberty.org/covid-19. See also: [Tubeworker bulletin](#) ; [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.
- [Home care worker](#). A blog by and for home and social care workers.
- [Disabled Workers and the Covid-19 Crisis](#). Briefing.
- [London Renters Union campaign](#) for mortgage and rent holidays.
- [Online Workers' Liberty – facebook page](#)
- Local mutual aid [group listings](#)

Buy our books!

Order from workersliberty.org/books

Add £2 for postage. For three or more books, post is free, and the third and subsequent books are half-price.

Pay at workersliberty.org/payment



Workers' Liberty videos

Explore Workers' Liberty's videos and playlists, subscribe to youtube channel: bit.ly/wlvideos

New this week:

- [Key workers need a pay rise](#), Ed's Corona Diary #2, plus [Ed's Corona Diary #1](#)
- [Coronavirus: unions are an essential service](#), by a tubeworker
- [Clap for Carers \(and for PPE, tests, and better pay\)](#), and [Wherefore art thou Capitalism?](#) Poems written and performed by Janine Booth

Featuring:

- Several videos giving [socialist commentary on the Covid-19 crisis](#), a playlist
- [In Defence of Bolshevism](#): series by Martin Thomas accompanying the book, its namesake
- [A debate on Marxist perspectives on Irish history](#): 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. ☐

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



workersliberty.org/audio



Online meetings & resources: workersliberty.org/c19-online

Sign petition to pause Brexit

By Sacha Ismail

Pressure for the government to extend the Brexit transition period beyond 31 December is growing.

With the deadline for requesting an extension now less than three months away (30 June), it is likely to grow further. The left should do everything we can to amplify that pressure.

The European parliamentary group of the "centre-right" European People's Party – too moderate for the Tories – has called for the UK to apply for an extension. The EPP is the largest bloc in the European parliament and linked to many EU governments. Its stance is a clear signal that an application for extension would be accepted by the EU.

There is growing speculation in the British press about the issue. The Scottish and Welsh governments have called for an extension, as have a number of bosses' organisations.

Absurdly, however, there is widespread silence on the left. Despite the impact a hard Brexit following fast in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis would have on workers and the badly-off, both the Labour Party and the trade unions have said nothing.

Asked about the issue by the BBC's Andrew Marr on his second day as Labour leader, Keir Starmer essentially refused to commit.

The whole left and labour movement, regardless of wider views on Brexit, should demand a serious extension as a basic matter of working-class self-defence. The anti-Brexit left must not be afraid to lead the way.

Labour for a Socialist Europe and Another Europe is Possible are beginning to campaign on this, beginning with a petition and a statement for Labour members and trade unionists. □

• More at labourforasocialisteurope.org

• Petition at bit.ly/ex-bx

According to polling commissioned by Best for Britain and Hope Not Hate, extending the Brexit transition is backed by: 69% of women and 58% of men; every age group, ranging from 78% of 18-24-year-olds to 52% of over-65s; every region, ranging from 78% of Scotland to 57% of Yorkshire; and every "social grade", ranging from 69% of "B"s and 68% of "C1"s (non-manual workers) to 57% of "C2"s (manual workers).

65% want the UK to remain a member of the EU's Early Warning and Response System for medical emergencies; only 12% back the Tories' desire to leave it. □

• For the full polling data, see bit.ly/bfbpoll

More online

Turkey under Erdogan: an interview with Kaya Genc
bit.ly/iv-kg

La France Insoumise and Covid-19
bit.ly/lfi-cv

Two communiqués from France
bit.ly/2c-f-cv

Socialism and science fiction
bit.ly/soc-sf □

Strikes in Italy win shutdowns

Cinzia Arruzza, co-author of *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto*, spoke on 26 March about Covid-19 and workers' struggles in Italy.

It was an online meeting organised by the "Workforce Coronavirus Support Group" (bit.ly/coronaworkers), Manchester Trades Council, and Reel News. Extracts:

To keep things short, the Italian government didn't take measures to suppress the virus in the way that China and South Korea did.

When they were finally forced to call for a lockdown, first of Lombardy and two days later the whole of Italy, it stopped shops, schools and public offices and so on, but all industrial production was still going on.

The first reaction against this came from some spontaneous wildcat strikes organised by Fiat workers in a couple of plants, especially in the south, where basically workers said they were not willing to go to work because they weren't very conscious of measures in place to make sure contagion didn't spread in the plants. Then there were legal strikes, also at Fiat, organised by their union.

This probably did have an influence on the decision on Fiat-Chrysler to shut down their plants. These were the

only plants that were actually closed in Italy.

With spontaneous pressure from rank-and-file workers, and the threat by the main unions to force a strike, the government issued a first stop of non-essential production on Monday [24 March]. This stop of non-essential production was a mockery, in that production was still going on, say of wallpaper or weapons.

There was a wave of strikes yesterday [Tuesday 25 March], organised by the main unions in Lombardy. All industrial sectors went on strike, and there was a general strike organised by the radical union USB. This did have an effect. It forced the government to revise the first order and to exclude a much greater range of production from the list of essential production. It did work, though still not enough.

None of this would have happened without the pressure from workers, without wildcat strikes, without calling in sick, all possible forms of spontaneous refusal of work, and also finally, especially in the last days, the pressure from and strikes organised by the unions. □

• More: bit.ly/lvreport

Domestic violence spikes



Women's Fightback

By Katy Dollar

Nine people died in domestic killings in Britain's first week of lockdown, following a global trend of increased domestic violence during coronavirus quarantine.

The low level of reporting makes statistics on domestic violence unreliable, but domestic violence deaths and police reports are going up. The government has responded saying women can leave their homes to seek help at a refuge, which ignores that many refuges are already struggling to meet need and that many access domestic violence services through something like their child's school, children's centre, or library.

Sandra Horley CBE, Chief Executive of National Domestic Abuse charity Refuge, has said:

"While in lockdown or self-isolation, women and children are likely to be spending concentrated periods of time with perpetrators, potentially escalating the threat of domestic abuse and further restricting their freedom".

We must fight for better funding for domestic violence services and the gateways toward them, but we should also seek to understand domestic violence in order that we prevent it. That means understanding the psychological damage of gender and its relation to violence. Though men also experience domestic violence and women can be perpetrators, women are far more likely to be seriously injured by men and their attempts to control them.

Gendered violence is shaped by broader societal gender expectations. Masculinity is associated with physical strength, toughness and dominance over women. Since "masculinity" is supposed to confer authority, men seek to exert that authority in a realm where they feel a degree of control - the home. The absence of the respect, authority and social status that masculinity was supposed to confer in life must be compensated for at home.

There are factors which determine which men are most prone to violence, the same factors which make them most likely to be victims of violence at the hands of other men. These are poverty, isolation, cultural dislocation, involvement in violent cultures or institutions (e.g. war, policing, or criminal activity), intense stress, and associated coping mechanisms such as alcohol or drugs abuse. For women the greatest protection is the degree of gender equality in her environment and independent social life.

It isn't only physical proximity of families and restriction on movement which will likely increase rates of domestic violence in the current crisis. Families will be exposed to many of the key risk factors - poverty and other forms of deprivation, stress, a loss of status for example through sudden unemployment or significant loss of pay.

Given that large essential sectors (supermarkets, care, and health) have high rates of female employment it will be common for women to continue working whilst male partners cannot. These risk factors do not cause domestic violence, nor are men or some men "naturally violent". Damaging gender roles interact with social pressures and conditions to trigger domestic violence.

In the short term we must defend and increase escape routes from domestic violence, but we must also dismantle the structures which cause this violence. □

- Women experiencing domestic violence can call The Freephone National Domestic Abuse Helpline, run by Refuge on [0808 2000 247](tel:08082000247). Men experiencing domestic violence can call Men's Life Advice on [0808 8010 327](tel:08088010327). In an emergency, always call [999](tel:999).

Threat to disabled people

By Janine Booth

Disabled people's organisations (DPOs) are objecting to the lack of adequate healthcare, the loss of social care support, the erosion of rights - and the ominous attitude that disabled people are somehow less worthy of life.

At the onset of the pandemic, assurances abounded that people need not worry too much, as the virus posed a serious threat only to the old and those with underlying health conditions. These people were "someone else" in messages directed to the "normal" population.

Even now that it has become clear that everyone is in danger, disabled people remain more vulnerable, not just to the virus but to the inequalities in the system.

DPOs are particularly concerned about measures in the Coronavirus Act, which limited the rights of disabled children to education, removed the obligation on local councils to provide social care, and allowed one doctor (rather than the usual two) to "section" (i.e. forcibly detain) a person in mental distress. Inclusion London sounded the alarm and ask people to email their MPs over the weekend days before the Parliamentary debate. Over two thousand people did so.

Reports are now emerging of discussions about who should get priority for life-saving treatment, with suggestions that the old and disabled give way to the younger and fitter. Such discussions only happen in a situation where there is not enough treatment to meet the need.

Government-imposed austerity and inequality have fertilised the ground for this inhumane discussion, and unless we step up the pressure, the consequences will be fatal to many. □

The economics of “war”

By Martin Thomas

Schools were shut down and requisitioned for other purposes. 140,000 patients were sent home from hospitals to “clear the decks” for a dramatic new influx.

Millions of people were taken out of their ordinary jobs and sustained meagrely at government expense while not contributing to production.

Alongside them, large numbers were unemployed, about 9% of the workforce. For the first six months unemployment rose because of the closing-down of many small businesses and the disruption of trade patterns.

Other industries and services were run at emergency speed. The usual criteria of market signals were overridden in favour of publicly-decided priorities such as mitigation of death rates and provision for those suddenly made destitute.

The government introduced drastic emergency powers, but in the tumult lacked the means or the will to exercise them widely. Many short and local strikes won gains. Often bosses, caught off balance, conceded that they now had no choice but to give unions a good hearing.

Much of the fabric of social life, in emergency conditions, came to depend on an army of up to two million volunteers and part-timers.

That is how it was in World War 2, at least in London and in the early period of the war.

Much was different from the current “war” against Covid-19. By May 1941 one-sixth of the population of London was homeless, and with only improvised and patchy provision for emergency shelter.

The character of the shift in economic life was similar. In ordinary times capitalist economic life is governed by “market signals”. Production is pushed up and down, or sideways, by those who have cash to spend. Investment is governed by calculations of future market signals.

Result of “market signals”

The result: production is systematically biased towards the output of luxuries for the rich and the relatively well-off; the worse-off suffer; often production as a whole slumps, because markets signal to the wealthy that they will do best to hold on to their cash for the time being, and credit implodes.

And advance provision for emergencies which generate no advance “market signals”, like the pandemic (or climate change), is inadequate.

A war or the pandemic forces even a capitalist government to adjust: the capitalists will not be able to make profits in future unless they act to safeguard life now.

In 1939-41, as now, Britain had been under Tory or Tory-led rule for a decade. These were Tories as callous and as caste-minded as the current ones, or more so.

Their provision for air raid shelters in London, for example (even though they had predicted higher casualties from air raids than actually happened), were inept and class-biased. They were pushed into better provision only

late and by such action as people unilaterally taking over Tube stations as shelters.

The terms “bullshit” and “under the counter” (well-off people getting round rationing) became widespread in that period. The “Excess Profits Tax” was easily evaded.

State capitalism

It was a variety of state capitalism. Yet the Tories lacked the apparatus and the will to impose a full wartime police state as Hitler or Stalin did. They had to deal with a labour movement which had suffered many retreats since the defeat of the 1926 General Strike, but had survived. So it became a semi-social state capitalism.

Public criticism of Winston Churchill was scant after he became prime minister in May 1940. Even the previous Tory prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, had a 70% approval rating in November 1939.

Under the surface left-wing dissent and criticism grew, and would explode into plain sight with the landslide Labour election victory of July 1945.

At first the war brought increased unemployment and rapid inflation. The Tories had to shift in the May 1941 Budget. Although delivered by a conventional Tory, Kingsley Wood, it was largely shaped by the left-liberal economist John Maynard Keynes.

Keynes proposed drastically increased taxation of the best-off and even the comparatively well-off, but exemption for the worst-off. A part of taxation was to be “deferred wages”, put into blocked savings accounts to be released after the war. (In the event, those “post-war credits” were released only in dribs and drabs, mostly as recipients reached retirement age, and a large chunk of them had still not been released by the early 1970s).

That regime, coupled with a “points” system of rationing (you had a fixed number of “points”, but could choose what to use them on), limited inflation. It even brought an improvement in average standards of nutrition (and a fall in infant mortality and tuberculosis rates) during the war.

After World War 1, with a weaker labour movement and a hard-faced Tory-dominated government elected in December 1918, unemployment and poverty rose fast to a peak in 1921, and remained high through the 1920s.

The record after World War 2 shows that, even short of the socialist revolution which our comrades advocated then, a strong and active labour movement could win a transition from war economy with relatively low unemployment and with an expansion of many of the elements of social provision won when the ruling class was thrown off balance during the war. □

Coronaverses

poems from the pandemic

A new book by Janine Booth and others: bit.ly/cv-p □



What we demand

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

- private hospitals, as Ireland and Spain have done
- the pharmaceutical and medical-supplies industries, so that production can be ramped up in a coordinated way to meet the crisis
- high finance, so that the epidemic is not compounded by a snowballing economic slump resulting from an implosion of credit
- and other sectors where coordinated mobilisation is necessary.

2. Fight for workers' control

The workers themselves, taking expert advice, should have a decisive voice in identifying and running what is essential, and how to work as safely and effectively as possible in the emergency.

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, those in jail, the disabled.

4. Defend workers' rights

All workers outside essential services should be at home, working from home if possible, on leave otherwise, on full pay.

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.

We demand immediately accessible fallback pay for all. The government has promised to ban evictions during the emergency. We demand cancellation of all rent, mortgage, and utility payments during the emergency.

5. Take care of the worst-off

People held in detention centres should be released and offered accommodation if needed. The same for those in jail, excluding only those whose conviction indicates a threat to human life if they are released.

"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 deportation.

House the homeless. (The government said it would re-

quire councils to do that by the weekend 28-29 March). Hotels and similar accommodation should also be made available to domestic violence victims.

6. Defend civil liberties

There is a public-health case for restricting movement and assemblies. But the emergency powers law pushed through by the government goes beyond that in a number of ways.

7. Think internationally

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

Why still deliver junk mail?

By a postal worker

The atmosphere in the workplace is strange. You can feel how on edge people are.

There are markedly fewer workers in. I think between 50-60 people are off work. Non-driving staff were told not to come in, and people with underlying health conditions were told not to come in. However, some managers were coming in on Sundays, and were trying to get workers to come in on Sundays too to deliver backlogs of mail that had built up through the week.

The provision of Personal Protective Equipment in the workplace hasn't been great. No hand sanitiser was available; you had to go all the way down into the basement to wash your hands.

Distancing has been possible, due to the reduced numbers of workers in the workplace. But what happens when people start returning from self-isolation?

The difficulty of safely distancing in the workplace was one of the issues in a recent wildcat strike at an office in Kent, one of three walkouts that have taken place recently. Nationally the union is demanding staggered shifts, to reduce the numbers in the workplace and the amount of days people need to come in.

The demand not to have to deliver non-essential, non-personal mail, such as advertising circulars or take-away menus, which was also taken up by the unofficial walkouts, has a lot of grip. That mail is delivered "door-to-door", to every house on your route, so is already greatly resented for adding weight to our bags and more time to the walk.

I was disappointed by our national union leadership's apparently unconditional refusal to call any action from our ballot mandate, and the demand to be designated an "emergency service", without securing any concessions from the employer.

We need to make sure demands about not delivering junk mail; PPE provision; and safe distancing in the workplace are now raised nationally, and, wherever possible, that action is taken to win them locally. □

Manual Handling



Diary of an engineer

By Emma Rickman

This week I've felt like a thief going into work early on deserted streets. Workers are eager to chat (at a safe distance), getting in as much face-to-face human interaction as possible before we go home.

One morning me and three operators spend an hour cracking jokes about the mysterious free pizza that came with the night shift's takeaway curry.

There have also been varying levels of anxiety, claustrophobia and fatigue. We're on skeleton shifts - our teams reduced to one mechanic, one electrician and one apprentice, on 12-hour shifts, followed by three weeks off or on-call.

The electrician on my shift is gripped with worry about the virus and spends much of his time in the workshop trying to stay away from everyone (and social media). A handful of operatives are being shielded or in isolation with symptoms, but there are no confirmed cases.

The new manager does himself no favours by insulting everyone's intelligence and hard work. The city managers have "panic ordered" waste deliveries from all over South Yorkshire, and for most of the week bin wagons queue all the way down the street waiting to tip their loads into the pit. All the fresh waste makes it difficult to keep under emissions limits.

The drivers, I hear, are threatening strike action because management have not considered the consequences of cramming three workers into a wagon during the pandemic.

I spend the week assisting the fitter - J - removing and replacing motors and gearboxes in awkward places; finding and carrying tools; hitting bearings with hammers; levering motor flanges with crow bars; cleaning filters with jets of compressed air; spraying fasteners with lubricant and trying to get purchase on them; tensioning conveyor belts; greasing bearings, lubricating fasteners and assembling chain links.

We become filthy every day, covered in ash, lime, grease, oil, dust and at one point treated pigs' urea. Working on the crane J and I put on the new PPE and can barely hear each other through the heavy-duty dust masks; "I feel like I'm in Chernobyl!" "Eh?!"

J makes it look easy, but he's a very hard worker, pressing on into overtime without breaks when under pressure. He diligently checks and re-does tasks when they haven't met his standards.

I notice - but J never comments - that I need more physical strength; intellectually I understand what must be done, but often lack the muscles to do it. Instead I'm

learning to anticipate what tools are needed, what tasks can be done simultaneously, and manual-handling with care.

When I finally lift the heavy gearbox comfortably close to my body, I realise I've allowed a trail of oil to follow my route back to the lift. J reassures me "Ye know that motor? I wired it in reverse twice - coz that's the sort of thing I'd do."

In every room there are posters, disinfectant wipes and hand sanitiser. Cleaning hands and worktops constantly - especially near the electrician - becomes part of the rhythm of work.

With all of the regulations, there's also a sense of pride at being "needed" by society in a direct and physical way. "We're key key workers -" laughs a young operator "Waste and power and heating - key key key!"

"Hang on power and heating are just one 'key', don't get ahead of yourself." "Would the hospitals function without us?" "Yeah, they have back-up generators..."

At the same time, everyone misses their freedom, pretends not to be worried, and speculates about when lockdown will end. □

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

Section 44 walkout wins

Refuse workers in Medway, Kent, have won all their key demands after a short walk-out under "Section 44" (of the Employment Rights Act 1996, which gives workers the right to withdraw from work areas which they see as offering "serious and imminent danger").

They have also won full pay for the two days of the stoppage. There are still some issues to be sorted out, but the workers' main concern was not having to go out three or four to a cab in the wagons.

Bosses have also agreed to provide PPE and hand sanitiser, and arrange for public toilets to be kept open or accessible for the refuse workers. □

Subscribe to Solidarity

Trial sub (6 issues) £7; Six months (22 issues) £22 waged, £11 unwaged, €30 European rate.

Visit workersliberty.org/sub to subscribe.

Or send your name, address and postcode with payment to 20E Tower Workshops, London SE1 3DG

To subscribe with a standing order: £5 a month, or pay us more to support our work. Forms online, as above. □



John Moloney

We now have a civil-service wide agreement that all out sourced workers will be paid in full if their workplaces shut down, or they have to self isolate.

We are awaiting confirmation they will receive full sick pay as well. The union has to be active in policing the agreement.

There are agency staff in some government departments, doing processing and admin work, and the employer has agreed to furlough them on 80% pay if they have to self isolate etc. That's better than nothing, as the risk was that their contracts would simply be terminated, but the union is pushing for those workers to be paid in full, and longer-term for them to be civil servants.

The inequality of contractual arrangements flags up the injustice of outsourcing and agency labour. Whenever we've won agreements to equalise conditions, such as sick pay, during the pandemic, we need to agitate, starting now, for a policy of "no going back". We won't accept a return to inequality, and outsourced workers not being able to afford to be sick, once the pandemic is over.

In general our policy to have as few workers as physically possible in the workplace itself, and to maximise the number of people who are able to remain at home on full pay. The more workers there are in the workplace, the harder it is to distance safely. There have been two offices where our members have taken action to win safer workplaces – a Home Office site in Liverpool, where management conceded five of workers' seven demands after a three-hour walkout, and a DWP office where a walkout secured commitments to put increased safety measures in place.

This crisis has shown that senior managers running the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and Acas are not working in the interests of workers. The HSE has proven itself entirely toothless, utterly failing to enforce legislation. Acas has issued guidance that disciplinary hearings can be carried out via telephone, meaning bosses can sack workers with a phone call. These bodies are meant to be independent, set up to enforce legislation, but in a moment of crisis they seem to be firmly on the employers' side. Our policy is that disciplinary processes, redundancies, and office closures should all be suspended for the time of the crisis.

We want health and safety legislation and public health guidance to be complied with in full. We as a union will apply pressure at a national level, and we remind members that they have rights, and can act to assert those rights. Workers should not feel like they are chained to their workplace. Wherever our members take action to improve safety, we will support them. We won't allow our members to be made ill, or potentially die, because bosses are more interested in forcing people to work than in ensuring safety. □

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

Work or full pay!

As of 1 April, 950,000 new people had applied for Universal Credit in just two weeks.

Usually new applications run at about 100,000 a week.

Hundreds of thousands, or millions, of people have lost their jobs because they were on casual contracts, and because they worked for businesses which have laid them off or simply shut down.

Many small employers have laid off workers, but also big ones, like universities.

Many who are self-employed – really self-employed, or formally self-employed while really being wage-workers – are not able to use the government's scheme for aid to the self-employed, or at least not to get money from it fast.

The government has increased the rates of Universal Credit (thus admitting that they were inadequate before), and loosened the conditions and checking on applications.

Even so, for the first five weeks after a claim, you can get no Universal Credit. Only, if you're lucky, a repayable advance. The Salvation Army has called for these advances to be made non-repayable.

In the USA, Bernie Sanders has demanded a backstop payment, made immediately, automatically, and without application procedures, of \$2000 a month for every household.

Something like that, coupled with cancellation of rent, mortgage, and utility payments during the lockdown, would safeguard those otherwise falling through the big holes in the "safety net".

The government should also requisition the big supermarket chains and their delivery operations so as to deliver food to those in need identified by local mutual aid groups.

The core demand should be: work or full pay for all!

In Germany and France, previously-established schemes, essentially subsidies to employers whereby the government pays 60% (Germany) or 84% (France) of wages to workers temporarily laid off or on short hours, have softened the blow recently. Some five million workers in France are on that scheme now.

In Italy, especially the south, where pre-pandemic more people depended on insecure employment or the "black economy", the blow is particularly harsh.

In the USA, where there is no standard provision for sick pay and no job security for most, likewise. □

Contact us

 [020 7394 8923](tel:02073948923)

 solidarity@workersliberty.org

 **20E Tower Workshops, Riley Road,
London, SE1 3DG**

Solidarity production team: Cathy Nugent, Martin Thomas (editor), Misha Zubrowski, Sacha Ismail, and Simon Nelson.

Solidarity



For a workers' government

EMPTY THE JAILS AND DETENTION CENTRES!

By Sacha Ismail

The government is planning to temporarily release something like 4,000 prisoners in order to control the spread of Covid-19 in jails.

4,000 is about 5% of the prison population of 83,000. Of those 83,000, at least 60% are in prison for crimes that do not involve "violence against the person" or a sexual offence.

The figure of 83,000 is not one necessary for public safety. Other countries get equal or better public safety with lower rates. The Netherlands and Sweden have only 61 prisoners per 100,000 population, while Britain has 139, and the USA 655.

Turkey is releasing almost a third of its prisoners (though none of its political prisoners), showing that 5% is a low figure.

The prison system is extremely overcrowded. Releasing 5% of inmates will not relieve much pressure. Overcrowding could see the virus spread like wildfire in prisons, as it seems already to have begun to do in the USA, sentencing many inmates to a high risk of death.

The Tories have made a big deal of insisting that no one who has served less than half their sentence can be released.

Kate Paradine, head of charity Women in Prison, says: "As a matter of urgency, the government must now plan to release many more people to drastically reduce the number of people in prison. Failure to act may have catastrophic consequences, causing many more avoidable deaths in our communities both in and outside of prison."

We must demand the release of tens of thousands, and not just temporarily. Many fewer people in prison is essential for safety now; and for a more rational, less brutal society in the future.

Close the detention centres!

Following a string of actions by campaigners and im-

migration lawyers, something in the region of 350-400 people have been released from immigration detention centres, leaving about 700 detained.

The government is again dragging its feet, no doubt aware that if the numbers fall too far its whole justification for maintaining immigration prisons will look distinctly shaky.

Now is a good time to demand the Labour Party argues loudly for the policy agreed by its members, through party conference, to release all detainees and close all detention centres. □

Hunger in Italy

According to the mainstream Italian daily *Corriere della Sera* (30 March): "There is an increasing risk that a social powder keg will be created in the South [of Italy]."

"In Campania, as in Sicily, episodes of night thefts or small assaults in supermarkets are multiplying..." Police have now been stationed outside supermarkets in some areas.

In Naples, an exhibition hall has been converted to a food aid centre. On 31 March the city of Palermo set up an online facility to register for food aid, and it was quickly flooded.

In Italy's South, many people have depended on insecure jobs, petty trade, or the "black economy". The far-right "Brothers of Italy" continues to rise in opinion polls (to 13% now), though not faster than pre-pandemic.

The left must fight for social support for the worst-off, and against the xenophobic right. □