

Solidarity

& Workers' Liberty



For social ownership of the banks and industry

SUPPORT THE SCHOOL WORKERS

» Workers' control of reopenings

» Tories' rush hurts provision for vulnerable

» A public-health track-and-trace effort, not Serco outsourcing

No "back to full CO₂-spewing"

Zack Muddle argues it's time for a reset on climate policies

Page 8

Momentum needs "wider vision"

Abbie Clark argues for open debate on policies, not just mechanics of party control

Page 7

A shorter work week with no loss of pay

Janet Burstall calls for action against the "out-of-work" drive

Pages 10-11

Organise against university cuts

Students and workers set plans: Maisie Sanders reports

Page 6

Push Johnson backwards!

By Ben Tausz

The Conservatives' Immigration Bill passed its second reading in parliament on 18 May. It will proceed to committee scrutiny, expected to run until 25 June.

The Bill would end free movement with the EU and write a [blank cheque for the Home Secretary](#), who will be able to create a new immigration regime with limited oversight. Plans published so far indicate an extension to EU migrants of the existing regime's barriers and hostile treatment of "unskilled" (i.e. low-paid) workers. "Guest worker" schemes will facilitate hyper-exploitation and abuse by employers.

Labour rightly whipped its MPs to oppose the bill in its entirety, but fifteen abstained. Most were explained as problems with the new remote voting system, but Diane Abbott [reported](#) that five had explicitly refused to oppose the bill — on the shameful grounds that to do so would supposedly "put further holes in the red wall".

Yvette Cooper spoke openly about her abstention, saying that though the bill is "flawed" and she wouldn't approve it on the final vote if amendments were unsuccessful, she does "recognise that legislation on immigration is now needed". This continues her long record of triangulating to the right on immigration.

While Cooper attracted deserved condemnation, Abbott and some others on the Labour left carefully avoided the elephant in the room. When the Tories introduced a near-identical bill last spring, Corbyn's front bench (including both Abbott and Keir Starmer) initially [whipped for abstention](#) on the exact same basis.

Pressure

Only a last-minute outcry from Labour activists on social media forced them, mid-debate, to flip and vote against. Memories of that backlash (and the subsequent success of the Labour Campaign for Free Movement's policy at Labour conference) likely account for the new leadership's firmer stance.

A few days later, Starmer announced that Labour would propose an amendment exempting NHS and care workers from the immigration health surcharge. Johnson initially defended the fee, but by the very next day, public pressure forced him to relent. We await details of how he will implement the promised exemption.

This is an advance, but the surcharge must be scrapped for all migrants — free healthcare is a right, not a privilege reserved for a "deserving" few. Asked about this before Johnson's capitulation, Starmer's spokesperson explained that he agreed, "but this amendment is specifically targeted at making a bad bill better".

“What we stand for

The Alliance for Workers' Liberty fights for socialist revolution, for the labour movement to militantly assert working-class interests.

See workersliberty.org/about — if you agree, join us! □

With Johnson on the back foot, activists must push Starmer to show more vigour — both against the surcharge and for the wider pro-migrant policy that Labour conference passed. And if the front bench won't press home the advantage, the left should.

Before the vote on the bill, Nadia Whittome MP, a long-time supporter of the Labour Campaign for Free Movement, called for a labour movement campaign "both inside and outside Parliament" for our pro-migrant policies.

Given the Tories' majority, bolstered further by anti-migrant Labour rebels, she is right that we cannot leave it to the MPs. Nor should we allow MPs to stand aloof from campaigning action beyond Westminster. □

• More: www.labourfreemovement.org

Labour: restore accountability!

By Sacha Ismail

Labour's National Executive Committee has agreed to cancel the party's annual conference, which was scheduled to take place in September. Labour NEC member Alice Perry says (see bit.ly/alicepreport) that "a policy conference can take place online instead", but with no details of what this means.

The mainstream media has quoted "Labour sources" saying that the leadership does not mind losing an opportunity to rally support because it also means avoiding clashes with and challenges from the left. No conference means more time and space for Starmer to continue moving Labour to the right with minimal opposition.

There seems a very strong risk that the "online policy conference" will be a Blairite-style consultation exercise, not a meaningfully democratic decision-making body. We should demand details urgently.

A real online conference necessitates that CLPs will be allowed to meet online for business, including electing delegates and agreeing motions.

The organisers of the statement calling for CLP business meetings to be reinstated (see bit.ly/allow-meet), now signed by over a thousand party members, say: "After the [19 May NEC] meeting we have heard that guidelines for restarting meetings will be created 'soon'."

Again, we need to push on that.

More important than getting than a better online conference is getting a real-world conference as soon as possible. We should demand planning begins for a physical conference in the first half of 2021. A conference made up entirely of delegates and key observers (without exhibitors, lobbyists, the great and the good, etc) would be safer and easier — and no bad thing in itself, at least once.

We should not let Starmer continue without democratic accountability and challenge until September 2021! □

Make the schools safe!

“” Editorial

The government's aspiration to open schools to all Year 6, Year 1, Reception and Nursery children on 1 June is likely to be largely unrealised.

That is good. We all want children back in our schools, but the number of cases and the continual spread of the virus indicate that it is not sufficiently safe yet for opening beyond those categories of children who are currently allowed to attend ("vulnerable" children, and children of key workers).

Since Johnson's announcement on 10 May, the National Education Union (NEU) and other school unions have been lobbying and negotiating with the government, with councils, and locally with schools. Within this process the union has reminded those working in schools that if they believe they are in "serious and imminent" danger they can utilise Section 44 of the 1996 Employment Rights Act to refuse to work.

The unions' lobbying has yielded some significant success. The NEU reported on 22 May that more than 30 councils were saying no school would open on 1 June. Many other schools outside those councils will not open on 1 June, because of the judgement of the school leadership or under the pressure of the union.

There will probably be some degree of opening to more pupils in some places on 1 June, but far short of the government's aspiration.

Checklist

The NEU, along with Unite, Unison and GMB, has issued a joint union checklist which reps can use in schools before they can admit more pupils. The unions are clear that it is not supposed to be used to for 1 June openings, but rather when the NEU's five general tests for wider opening are met. The stringent checklist is a tool to empower members where a reopening is being pushed for.

Resisting 1 June, enforcing the checklist, and, failing those, individual members exercising their rights under Section 44, are all dependent on union strength on the ground.

The stronger the union is in a borough or in a school, the less likely school managers will be to push for a hasty wider opening. If the union is strong we will be able to enforce the checklist, or if we can't members will be confident enough to use Section 44.

However, where the union isn't strong, we will struggle to enforce any of that. That is not an easily solvable problem.

The union nationally should be strong and energetic in following its lines of action. There needs to be a guarantee that attempts to victimise members who use Section 44 will be speedily met by determined strike action. Members need to know the union will back them. The union needs to be on a war footing to prepare for the battles that will occur on and after 1 June.

Many on the left of the union want a national ballot for

strike action as part of this strategy. It should be part of the strategy. But even at best it does not address the issues posed by 1 June (a ballot could not deliver action until July). At worst it could distract from building the response for 1 June and the immediate aftermath.

The fact that the union strategy has not been agreed by a decision-making National Executive of the union is a real problem. The fight to get all the lay-democratic structures of the union functioning immediately is central to any possibility of rank-and-file control over the strategy.

Based on current information about the infection rate and the numbers of cases, there should be no wider opening of schools until September. In the meantime, where it is safe to do so, we should increase the already significant efforts to get more vulnerable children in to our schools.

In many schools the definition of "vulnerable" has been extended beyond the government's minimum by those who work with them. We should continue to fight for that. Rather than arbitrary year groups decided by the government, the children who return first should be decided by school workers.

Although the NEU's approach has been less than perfect, the clear and visible response combined with the serious situation have meant the union is growing rapidly. Over 14,000 members joined between 11 and 21 May. During this same period the union also recruited around 1,000 new reps.

Many of the new members and reps are not teachers but support staff. That will change the nature of the union and school trade unionism for the better. We are closer to one school workers' union. □

Upcoming meetings

Workers' Liberty have a packed schedule of varied, important and exciting meetings coming up. They are open to all, held online via zoom videocalling.

From **Monday 25 May to Sunday 7 June**, excluding ongoing study courses:

Wednesdays 27 May, 3 June, 7-8.30pm: ABCs of Marxism — 27 May, [The Transitional Programme](#) 3 June, [What will socialism look like?](#)

Thursday 28 May (and 4 June), 6pm: [Covid-19](#): Back to work or out of work? Informal discussion of politics and the pandemic, different focus weekly.

Sunday 31 May, 6:30-8pm [note time]: [After Sanders, where now for the US left?](#) Workers' Liberty forum with Lois Weiner (New Politics).

Monday 1 June, 7.30-9pm: [Legalising drugs](#), part of "The state, crime, prisons and the police" fortnightly series

Sunday 7 June, 6.30-8pm: [Minnie Lansbury](#) — A different sort of Labour councillor

For full and updated details, zoom links, later meetings, ongoing study courses — newcomers welcome — and other resources, see [workersliberty.org/c19-online](#) □

Fight coming council cuts

By a Stevenage Labour activist

Without an urgent cash injection, sweeping cuts of 20% could be seen across authorities right across England. So the Local Government Association has reported: bit.ly/cut-20. In real terms, the net funding shortfall from the pandemic emergency is estimated at £10 billion.

Labour-held Stevenage Borough Council has been one of the first to break cover, reporting a £4.5 million black hole, expanding to £8 million by the end of year: bit.ly/stv-age. The council's whole annual budget is £9 million.

Without a bail-out this deficit could force the council to declare bankruptcy and issue a Section 114 notice, allowing the authority to make cuts outside of the annual budget cycle and in statutory services. Stevenage isn't alone, and will likely be followed by many more councils as the long-term financial implications of coronavirus start to bite.

Instead of calling on party members and rank-and-file worker activists in the council to prepare to fight back, however, the Labour Group leader made clear in the local press that their greatest priority — over and above the interests of Council staff and services — would be ensuring the financial stability of the Council.

In the next weeks and months emergency budget meetings are planned to explore where the axe could fall. Given the

back-drop of an almost universal failure of Labour councils to fight cuts, this is hardly surprising, but does demonstrate the most-likely response of Labour-held councils now.

The Council leadership would prefer not contemplating cuts right now, but equally they won't be organising worker resistance. The left in Stevenage have started considering this.

The local Momentum branch responded on Thursday 21 May with a motion calling on Labour councillors to coalesce the wider movement locally in united action to defend jobs and services, and for the full reinstatement of all post-2010 grant losses.

Any serious campaign to stop redundancies and save services needs more activity than statements in the local press and letters to ministers, but something built by our movement, and linked to a broader national struggle against austerity. □

Cancel rent!

A new group, "Labour Tenants United" [bitly/l-t-u](https://bit.ly/l-t-u), is supporting calls for rent cancellation already made by groups like the London Renters' Union and the New Economics Foundation (bit.ly/rent-s). The government has legislated for a "holiday" on mortgage payments during the emergency, and looks likely to extend it. □

Why do we call it "social" distancing?

By Margit Pfister

It has become popular to speak of social distancing when we really speak of physical distancing to protect ourselves and others during a pandemic. This leads to the question why or how this term has entered our vocabulary.

We all have social contacts in many ways, even if we can't go out together to the theatre, concerts, pubs or any other kinds of events at the moment. We all have family and friends, we are able to contact, and we do that. We don't want our relationships to break down, we want to be connected.

The feeling of being connected is what keeps us strong. We are not alone in this and we need to be aware of not being alone.

There are so many things happening in this world, due not just to the virus but to many other causes. The virus could be like a pointer, telling us to look at all the circumstances.

In Germany, for example, one of the spotlights is now on slaughterhouses. The working and living conditions for the hired workers, mostly from Eastern Europe, have been known for many years and were tolerated. Agency work, subcontracting, in fact a new form of cheap slave labour, has led to terrible states of health amongst the workforce. The majority live in disgraceful and cramped housing.

Even though various politicians have acknowledged the existence of the inhuman treatment of those workers, not much was done to end their misery.

This is a very clear instance where above all physical distance could have prevented the virus spreading.

People, including doctors living close to the areas where the slaughterhouses are located, wrote about or reported on what they observed. They did not look away or practise "social" distancing. They took social responsibility.

For the time being our aim is to keep the virus at bay by observing a certain physical distance. But we should not allow the term of social distancing to enter our vocabulary and influence the way we interact with each other. We are interdependent social beings. □

Escaping the crisis – why we need public ownership of finance

Public meeting, organised by *The Clarion*. **6.30pm, Friday 29 May** (on Zoom)

Speakers: Ben Selby, Fire Brigades Union; Ruth Cashman, Labour for a Socialist Europe; Abel Harvie-Clark, climate striker and activist. □

- More bit.ly/1banksmeeting
- Facebook event bit.ly/1banksfb

Call for action on social care

By Mohan Sen

Late May has seen significant developments in the fight around social care.

After months of refusing to even address the issue of sick pay and isolation pay for care workers, the Tories have announced a £600m “infection control fund”. Guidance for the fund states that part of its purpose is to “maintain the normal wages of staff who, in order to reduce the spread of infection need to reduce the number of establishments in which they work, reduce the number of hours they work, or self-isolate”.

This is potentially an enormous victory. But the announcement has been very quiet, no doubt because of fear of demands from other workers, and of difficult questions about why it has taken the government so long. It will take trade union and political action to ensure that care workers actually receive these rights.

In HC-One, employing 27,000 carers, the GMB union has just won a leap from statutory sick pay only to full and backdated sick pay. We need to spread such victories throughout the sector.

Union organising and pressure is key. Another channel is pressuring councils to act to ensure implementation in their area (as Salford already had, even before this announcement — see bit.ly/salfordex). For lobbying resources, see the website of the Safe and Equal campaign, which has led the way on this issue: bit.ly/seresource.

Safe and Equal is campaigning to spread these rights to all workers and make them permanent by winning full sick pay for all.

In the last week Safe and Equal activists have also been working with others to push the wider demand for public ownership and provision of social care.

After she was sacked from her frontline care job for speaking out about PPE shortages, Nottingham East MP and S&E supporter Nadia Whittome wrote in the *Guardian* to advocate public ownership. Now a wide range of trade union, Labour Party and other activists have launched a statement quoting

What we demand in the crisis

1. Requisition key sectors
2. Fight for workers’ control
3. Make the labour movement an essential service, fighting on the issues listed here
4. Defend workers’ rights. Work or full pay! Cancel rent, mortgage, and utility payments.
5. Take care of the worst-off
6. Defend civil liberties
7. International solidarity

• See full text at bit.ly/what-d

• Animated video of full demands: bit.ly/demand-video

Nadia’s article and pledging a fight to win public ownership as well as more immediate demands.

Please sign and share: bit.ly/socialcaresetatement

As the statement notes, the last Labour conference passed strong policy for a public care system (see bit.ly/lpcarepolicy). But as on many issues, the Starmer leadership is ignoring the position decided by members.

Labour spokespeople have advocated very little either in terms of immediate demands — e.g. on isolation pay — or the wider organisation of the sector. More funding is about as radical as it gets. More funding, in the absence of public ownership, means more money for the private companies and corporations that have wrecked the care system.

Campaigning to transform social care cannot be limited to changing Labour policy. But as on other questions, Labour policy is an important strand in the struggle we need to wage.

If the labour movement doesn’t fight for public ownership now, in this crisis, it will be spectacularly failing the test of events. Let’s fight to ensure it doesn’t.

Over half of Sweden’s 4,000 Covid-19 deaths have been in care homes.

In response, unions have negotiated a deal with the government and local authorities to attack precarious employment in the sector by making 10,000 casual care workers permanent, with improved rights and training.

Even now, on latest figures 62% of Britain’s care homes have had no virus cases. There is still time to save thousands of lives by action on PPE, isolation pay, and other worker-conditions issues.

• See safeandequal.org: campaign to make all workplaces safer by calling for full self-isolation pay for casualised workers.

Another £1,510

Thanks to Eddie and Christie, this week we’ve raised an additional £1,510 for our fund appeal. This brings us to £2,265 towards our target of £10,000 by 22 November.

Our office is now open. On reduced hours and with reduced staffing, but we are now able to send out *Solidarity* to all our inland subscribers. (International mail is still too unreliable to use).

Over the coming weeks we are increasing our rate of video and audio content. We are improving some of our editing software and putting more emphasis on promoting our videos “live”.

All the fundraising we receive is helping us with the physical resilience needed to adapt to the “new normal”, which will present new challenges to us and require some changes to what we do. You can help us to adapt and continue with our work: workersliberty.org/donate.

Organise against uni cuts!

By Maisie Sanders

Coronavirus is intensifying the fault lines in UK higher education, and huge cuts are coming to our universities.

Universities are announcing job cuts and hiring freezes to mitigate the huge predicted loss of income from international students' fees. Staff on casual, fixed-term or hourly paid contracts will be the hardest hit, and their workloads will be pushed onto permanent staff. Lots is still unclear.

On Sunday 24 May, Student Strike Solidarity held a meeting to discuss how students can organise with university workers to stop these cuts. We heard from activists involved in local campaigns to defend precarious staff and stop cuts at Edinburgh and Sussex Universities, Pandemic PGRs (postgraduate research students), Unis Resist Border Controls, and Cath Fletcher from Manchester Met University. Edinburgh and Sussex activists spoke about the need to set up "assemblies" and campaigns made up of all campus unions and students. At Sussex, the "Crisis Justice at Sussex" campaign of the local UCU, Unite and Unison was set up after the plan to cut all "non-essential" temporary or casual staff and freeze hiring for PhD students was leaked in March.

They are demanding:

- no cuts
- full pay during the pandemic regardless of contract or visa status
- the implementation of a 6:1 pay ratio between the highest and lowest paid member of staff (it is currently 17:1)
- transparency and full consultation on decisions made for the campus unions and students' union.

Newly elected left-wing student union officers, elected on a ticket of student-worker solidarity, enter office this summer.

At Edinburgh, the Pandemic Precariat campaign of casualised workers and postgraduate students is raising similar demands, including:

- the extension of all casual contracts by two years to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on staff
- a 5:1 pay ratio
- a £10 per hour minimum wage
- moves towards a reduction in working hours negotiated with the unions, such as a four-day week
- withdrawal from the Research Excellence Framework
- an end to monitoring of international staff and students
- an increase in mental health support services.



Wake up Labour!

Call for the Labour Party to restart decision-making meetings, to function as a campaigning force in the pandemic, and to get accountability for councillors and the parliamentary leadership! Sign here: bit.ly/w-u-l

Allow online Labour meetings

Another petition demands that the next NEC meeting gives permission for formal business to be conducted by Labour Party units online: sign at bit.ly/allow-meet □

We discussed the need to ask where the wealth is in our universities and demand university managers open the books to show us who earns what, the reserves and property and other assets owned by the university, and the money is spent on things like marketing.

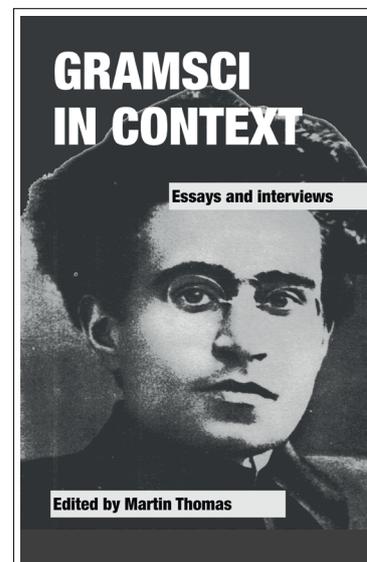
For example, Sussex University has over £300 million in unrestricted reserves. At Essex University, where hundreds of casual teaching jobs are being cut to make a £1 million saving, a freedom of information request revealed that £8 million is spent annually on the salaries of the 72 highest paid staff members (it is not clear if this includes the Vice Chancellor's rent, which is paid by the university), and £3 million is spent on marketing.

Some Vice Chancellors, such as Imperial's, are taking voluntary pay cuts. But at £554,000, she could take a 94% pay cut (not her actual 20%) and still earn more than an early-career lecturer. Students can play a big role in demanding that any cuts come from the top, not from low-paid precarious workers' jobs.

We agreed to hold a follow up practical organising meeting to discuss out in more detail ideas like experiences of bringing unions together on campuses, how we can campaign during the pandemic and how we can hold wider political discussions about education and our universities, and reach out to more and new students ready for the start of term when Freshers' Fairs and other gatherings are unlikely to happen due to social distancing. □

• To get involved email solidaristudent@gmail.com or follow:

- [@occupation_hub](#)
- [Edinburgh Pandemic Precariat](#)
- [Crisis Justice Sussex](#)
- [Pandemic PGRs](#)
- [Unis Resist Border Controls](#) — Mutual aid fundraiser for international students, many of whom have been left with no pastoral support from universities, no income and no recourse to public funds.



Featured book

Gramsci's ideas, name, and terminology are widely misused. This book presents and engages with debates around Gramsci's major ideas; disputes the "post-Marxist" readings of Gramsci; discusses the relation between Gramsci's ideas and Trotsky's; and more. Second, expanded edition: 140 pages, £6.

workersliberty.org/books
Plus
bit.ly/wl-pamphlets

Demanding bigger things

Abbie Clark is Secretary of Stevenage CLP and a candidate for the National Coordinating Group of the Labour left group Momentum [nominations open 28 May, election 16-30 June], on the Forward Momentum slate and elected onto the slate as part of Momentum Internationalists. She spoke to Sacha Ismail.

I'm part of Momentum Internationalists because we need a wider vision. Momentum has never fulfilled its potential as a campaigning organisation that can bring together and coordinate activists in various struggles. As a result it has no real campaigning perspective inside Labour either.

What's your assessment of Forward Momentum so far?

It's very good there's a project that has highlighted the democratic deficit within Momentum. It's also very good that there are so many different people involved, and that there have been attempts at meetings and discussions to debate policy, as well as the election for candidates.

However, the banning of Ruth Cashman was a pretty large hole in the process. The decision was completely wrong. If Ruth stands in the election, that would be legitimate.

The call that was made for people to declare automatic loyalty to the slate is problematic given this, and given that it's still not been determined what Forward Momentum's policies are.

More broadly, some of the attitudes towards our wing of the left, but particularly the obsessive sectarianism that exists towards the AWL, is really unhealthy.

What are the demands we should be raising?

To achieve unity in campaigning you also need space to discuss ideas. One reason the left is so fractured is there's no political education and discussion. I know in DSA [Democratic Socialists of America] they have political education committees in which members develop an education program. There's practical training, but on a wider range of things including organising at work — and also reading groups, film screenings, political discussions...

However, it also has to mean a sovereign conference in order to make the debates meaningful, with real impact. We can't get pissed off about the Labour Party not carrying out motions passed at conference or putting them in the manifesto when Momentum doesn't even have one!

Members are already organising in various campaigns and struggles, so Momentum needs to actually support that work. Migrants' rights is particularly crucial.

With Momentum Renewal, you know the claims that are going to be made, that Labour lost the election because it was too pro-Remain, which is bollocks. Talk about working-class communities which doesn't also take on board working-class communities in big cities, particularly people of colour and migrants, is a problem.

How do you think the labour movement's response to Covid-19 has been?

The response across the labour movement has been disjointed and piecemeal, nervous about calling about the Tories. We should be saying yes but we demand this now, not praising the government.

Now is the perfect opportunity to raise public ownership of all health and social care, and lots of other things. Scrapping no recourse to public funds. Full sick pay for all workers from day one, full pay to self-isolate, 100% pay on furlough. Angela Rayner has been burnishing her trade union credentials, but why aren't they talking about scrapping the anti-union laws?

These things I'm raising are not radical, and they've been passed at conference. They should be givens, and socialists should be demanding bigger things too. □

- Full interview on *The Clarion* at bit.ly/abbieinterview

Momentum Renewal

Scan its founding supporters list (bit.ly/mrsupport1) and you'll see that the new Momentum Renewal faction is a species of "continuity Momentum", supported by the bulk of those responsible for the organisation's trajectory over the last three and half years.

Those behind it were in general strong defenders of Momentum as it existed until this campaign launched. Their criticisms of it have been from the right — from a viewpoint that is more nationalistic, more Stalinist and weaker on tackling antisemitism. They represent not just the Momentum office faction, but the worst wing of it.

Now they are adopting Momentum democracy and class politics as convenient banners.

They say they want to "put Momentum back in the hands of its members" and bandy about around the word democratic. No one should believe that, given their record — destroying Momentum's democracy and creating a toxic, intolerant political culture on the left.

Even if you could take them at face value, the procedural changes MR advocates (bit.ly/mrdemands1) go nowhere near meaningful democratisation.

MR's other selling-point is that it stands for a movement "rooted in working-class communities" and so on. Many of its supporters have taken to social media to proclaim MR as the voice of class politics and decry rival organisation Forward Momentum as middle-class, liberal, London-centric, etc.

Making class central is good. But Momentum has done very little to promote class politics and class consciousness. It has done very little to support working-class struggles — even when asked directly for support. It has refused to call for repeal of the anti-trade union laws.

It has predominantly pursued political relationships with top trade union officials, elected and unelected, not grassroots workplace and union activists.

Given the *Morning Star*-connections and Stalinist-influenced politics of so many of those involved, and the prominent role of MPs like Ian Lavery and Jon Trickett, phrases like "working class", "communities", etc, also function as code for nationalistic, conservative left politics.

Although its founding statements avoid mentioning these issues, MR is clearly a pro-Brexit and anti-free movement campaign. □

- Full article at bit.ly/mrarticle1

No return to “full CO₂-spewing”!



Environment

By Zack Muddle

The Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare our vulnerability as humans, as societies, in the face of “the forces of nature”; our biological, molecular, physical environment. We face threats of *even greater* crises in the future driven by climate change, as [Covid-19 was in part](#).

Environmental impacts of this crisis have already been dramatic. Nitrogen dioxide levels and air quality have [improved the world over](#). People in areas of Punjab, northern India, have reportedly seen the Himalayas for the first time in decades. It is estimated that improved air quality in China from Covid-19 shutdowns will save tens of thousands of lives. Globally, an estimated seven million people die each year from the direct health impacts of air pollution.

More significantly, shutdowns have caused record falls of CO₂ emissions levels. In the height of the crisis, one study estimates, daily global emissions fell by up to 17%, to [levels last seen in 2006](#). On average, for individual countries, daily CO₂ levels were down 26% in peak shutdown.

While energy use has increased in homes, this has been more than offset by much industry, aviation, and transport temporarily suspending.

Yet while emissions have dropped temporarily, atmospheric levels of greenhouse gasses [continue to increase](#).

Until 2020, the global economy has had its foot on the accelerator, hurtling humanity ever faster into greater and still greater environmental destruction.

Momentarily pre-occupied by the viral threat, the foot has

been temporarily lifted off the accelerator. We are still, currently, hurtling into these crises, albeit, for once, at a reduced rather than increased speed. And, once the driver has regained control, with a promise to jam the foot onto the accelerator again.

We need to instead force the foot onto the break, jump out of the vehicle, and even start to run in the opposite direction.

Horizons

More important than the chemical and physical fallout of the Covid-19 crisis is the political impact.

The global response to this pandemic has shown the possibility of societal, state, economic intervention on a scale far beyond that recently dismissed and ridiculed as belonging to the realm of fantasy.

“Magic money trees” have been openly harvested, sacred taboos about governmental intervention in the economy and society publicly broken. Against the previously unquestionable rights of private property, of corporations and their bosses, the — supposed — needs of society and the economy as a whole are championed. It is discovered that environmentally destructive industries — which could not previously be stopped, slowed, or transformed — can in fact be turned off.

The importance of workers, work, and socially useful “key” work has been thrown into sharp relief.

The social, individual and economic difficulties we are now facing are significantly beyond what would be needed for even many of the most ambitious environmental transitions.

The horizons of possibility have been widened. We must demand that governments rise to the climate crisis with comparable — indeed greater — seriousness than they have done against Covid-19. We must organise to make the labour movement do likewise. □

New videos!

Watch Workers' Liberty's videos and playlists, and subscribe to [our youtube channel!](#) Many have subtitles, if desired. **New this last fortnight:**

- [It's your right to refuse unsafe work!](#) and [No back-to-work drive!](#) Videos by Stephen Wood of *Solidarity* editorials
- [Crime and policing](#) — the intro to the second of a series of meetings “The state, crime, prisons and the police”
- [What is the state?](#) Intro to the first of the same series
- [Covid-19 crisis: what we demand](#). Animated doodles by Janine Booth explaining our demands.
- [“The politics of identity”](#), opening speech by Cathy Nugent, from “ABCs of Marxism” meetings series. □

Please watch and subscribe; like, comment and share! All at: youtube.com/c/WorkersLibertyUK

More online

Venezuela in the pandemic

Eduardo Tovar on the overlapping crises and a new group of Venezuelan socialists
bit.ly/venz-c19

Debate on the NEU and balloting

Two views on the demand for the NEU to call a ballot on further school opening
bit.ly/neu-ball

Unite, schools, and 1 June

Unite's policy is less clear-cut than it should be
bit.ly/unite-sc

The pandemic: where we're at

Martin Thomas takes stock, six months after the first cases in Wuhan
bit.ly/c-20-05-23

Children, parents, school workers: solidarity!



Women's Fightback

By Katy Dollar

The education unions are right to say schools should not accept further mass return of pupils until the five tests are met. We should fully support any school workers who will take action on health and safety grounds from 1 June to keep their workplaces open only to vulnerable and key workers' children.

That does not mean we, or school workers, are oblivious to how difficult school closures have been on families. *Solidarity* has covered, and will continue to cover, the increased risk of domestic violence and neglect in a stressful period with less contact between the household and the outside world.

There has been a problem getting vulnerable children to attend schools in this period because of understandable fear of the virus. School workers are discussing how to reach these children (a task made more difficult by arbitrarily ordering in entire year groups).

Mental health may be under strain in many families. It's normal for children and their parents to feel worried or anxious at the moment. We've all experienced sudden changes in our routines — and we're living with lots of uncertainty about the coming weeks.

Anxiety and isolation

There is a big concern that particularly in young people, the coronavirus pandemic may also worsen or trigger anxieties they were already struggling with. The lockdown has brought with it increased isolation. When lockdown restrictions were eased to allow gatherings of two people of different households, single parents of small children were horrified to find they'd be shut out, as they couldn't meet others whilst also caring for their child.

The slightly increased risk of two members of a household being in the meeting should be accepted in order to mitigate against risk of isolation of single parents.

We know the government is pushing to bring schools back to ensure people can go back to work even if it is not yet safe. Many parents, particularly on low incomes, are desperate to get back to work as they are receiving no or reduced wages as they care for their child.

Others are expected to work from home whilst they look after their children. Full pay should be given to anyone who must take leave from work to care for others. This will not "solve" the issue of a sudden shift of even greater share of social reproduction into the home, and primarily onto women. It will reduce some of the pressure in homes.

Balancing public safety with increased demands on individuals for social reproduction is messy, and no solution will be

perfect in such a difficult and unusual time. We have to understand how many families are struggling with school closures. Our arguments and demands must guard against moralising against stressed parents who desperately want it to be safe to reopen schools because they are struggling.

We must show full solidarity to school worker activists, many of whom are struggling parents as well as key workers and trade unionists. □

Tories dig in for hard Brexit

New polling commissioned by liberal anti-Brexit campaign Best for Britain and anti-far right campaign Hope Not Hate says 59% expect the Brexit transition period will be extended.

Unfortunately that may be naive. The government is digging in further and further, saying it will not under any circumstances apply for an extension. The deadline for applying is 30 June — less than five weeks. Labour and the unions remain silent at best, with Keir Starmer saying he is "not calling for an extension".

Starmer, whose popularity with Labour members and others was built partly on the basis of an anti-Brexit, internationalist reputation, is (whatever his motivations) effectively collaborating with the Tories' plan to push through a hard Brexit with no democratic scrutiny.

The Lib Dems are preparing to put a parliamentary bill for a two-year extension of the transition. But even aside from the substantial Tory majority, it is not at all clear that Labour will vote for it.

Time is very short. It may already be too late. But an about-turn from Labour could still blow up what is potentially a difficult and divisive issue for the Tories.

Every week, virtually every day, brings some new difficulty. Ministers have just had to concede that their planned soft border in the Irish Sea — already a cumbersome, messy and probably unstable scheme — will not be ready by 2021. That implies a very hard border including some customs checks between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. Or what?

The internationalist left, and all those who can see the importance of stopping the Tories' drive for No Deal, need to continue organising and fighting — to maximise the chance of things blowing up before 30 June, and the chance of reopening the issue afterwards if not. □

- Sign the statement for Labour and the unions to demand an extension: bit.ly/labourextend
- More: labourforasocialisteurope.org

A shorter work week

Janet Burstall argues the case from an Australian perspective. The same basic ideas are applicable in Britain and elsewhere.

The most optimistic assessment by the Reserve Bank is that it will take a “few years” to reverse “much” (i.e. not all) of the increase in unemployment from the Covid-19 lockdown. The wages vs jobs trade-off debate is back with a vengeance.

Unionists are arguing that keeping up incomes will stimulate demand and economic growth, while employer voices argue that they cannot afford a 4% rise in the minimum wage, and many will cut employment or go out of business.

The system is lose-lose for workers. Our employment has to be profitable, and capital has not “invested” in full employment for over four decades. Previous periods of sharp rises in unemployment have resulted in union concessions, retarded wage growth plus loss of job security and conditions.

When unions agreed to a series of Prices and Incomes Accords with Labor governments in the 1980s and 1990s, they accepted the argument that wages had to be traded off in order to save jobs. The consequence of those union concessions was not a more even share of jobs and incomes. What actually followed was persistent unemployment, under-employment side by side with overwork, long hours, and two-income households juggling work-life balance — plus inequality,

poverty, and punishment of the unemployed.

We’re dealing here with a system of capitalism. It allocates (or doesn’t allocate) labour according to private employers’ calculations of return on investment plus government agency calculations of best conditions for employers to decide to invest. It is not a system of allocating labour to where work needs to be done in order to take care of people, or planet.

Workers need to invert the economy, so that we start with what people need to consume, and how to share the working time fairly among the people able to produce it, rather than starting from how to make investment profitable, with capital choosing who gets an income from working to make their employer a profit.

The work that needs to be done, in order to care and provide for the population, could be shared around more equally, with a shorter standard working week. This would mean an increase in the hourly rate of pay to maintain incomes.

Incomes would be more secure with a shorter and standardised work week (with worker-driven flexibility) and limited use of part-time and casual employment.

A 32 hour or four day standard week with no loss of pay would increase the minimum hourly rate of pay from \$19.49 to \$23.15, and be the equivalent of an 18.5% pay rise for part-time workers.

Time, our time, our free time is something that the union movement used to fight for, but there has been no reduction in the standard working week of 38 hours for almost four decades.

Unions won shorter hours, starting with the 48 hour week in Melbourne in 1856, then a 44 hour week in 1939, 40 hour week in 1948, and 38 hour week from 1981.

But since about 1980 there has been a slight increase in the actual weekly work hours of full-time workers.

Productivity increases have been the basis for shorter working hours, but these increases have gone to capital, not labour income or time-share. “Between 2000 and 2012, productivity rose by an average 1.3% per year, while real hourly labour income rose by only 0.6% per year on average. In 2000, the labour share was 65.6% — this had fallen to 59.7% by 2012. The labour share recorded in 2011 was the lowest for at least fifty years” (ACTU 2013: Shrinking slice of the pie).

According to *Construction News* (22 May), the percentage of big construction companies’ employees laid off on the British government’s furlough scheme is 22%, down from 30% in late April. A return to work on construction sites, which began well before 10 May, is continuing, but slowly and partially. Another survey, including smaller contractors, reported 46% of staff furloughed in the two weeks ending 7 May, the same percentage as in the two-week period ending 19 April. Even on sites run by big contractors, many workers are employed by smaller subcontractors.

89% of construction businesses have used the furlough scheme. But bosses are still cutting jobs. On Wednesday 20 May Wates said it would cut 300 jobs because new construction work has slowed down. □

Workforce statistics

The workforce in Australia is nearly 14 million people out of a population of 25.6 million.

Unemployment around 5-6% has become normalised over the last 25 years, even called full-employment, or the “natural rate” of unemployment, supposedly the rate that would not accelerate inflation.

Covid-19 lockdown: More than 1.4 million workers suddenly and unexpectedly found themselves faced with the ignominy and financial distress of unemployment.

30 April 2020: About 1 million people on Job Seeker [unemployment dole].

Unemployment is expected to be between 10-15% of the workforce (of nearly 14 million people) for at least the rest of 2020.

As of October 2019, the Australian Unemployed Workers’ Union reported three million people looking for work in Australia.

As of April 2020, Roy Morgan Research reported over 2 million people needing work, or more work, before the lockdown, and 3.92 million at the end of March.

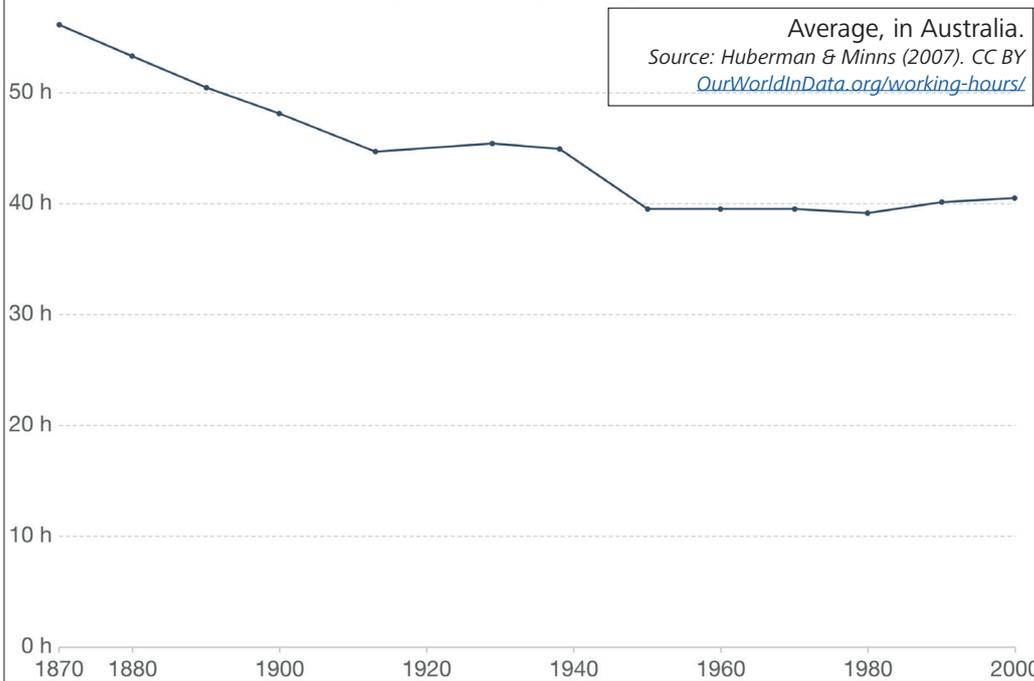
Less than half of employed Australians have permanent, full-time employment with leave entitlements.

If the 6.5 million full-time jobs based on a standard 38 hour week (most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics data on hours of work, May 2018) before the pandemic, were cut to 32 hours, and the time made up with more full-time 32 hpw jobs, that would mean 1.2 million extra full-time jobs. □

with no pay cut!

Weekly Work Hours, 1870 to 2000

Work hours of full-time production workers (male and female) in non-agricultural activities.



Work insecurity became a much wider problem in the 1980s and 1990s. There was an unemployment spike in each decade. Workers and their unions feared unemployment, and employers won industrial reforms to extend flexible employment practices, including casual employment.

1986 — The Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission ruled “claims for reduction in standard weekly hours below 38, even with full cost offsets, should not be allowed” (Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission 1986. National wage case)

1986-1996 — Unions agreed to “structural efficiency principles” in wage reviews, under which conditions were lost. The proportion of part-time (including casual) employment grew at the fastest rate ever in this decade.

1997 — Howard Government workplace reforms excluded clauses from awards and disallowed EBAs [Enterprise Bargaining Agreements] from specifying proportions of an enterprise workforce to be employed in categories such as casual, full time and part time.

The benefits of a shorter standard working week include:

Workers have more control of our lives and work.

Standardisation reduces insecurity. We lead Just-in-Time lives — as work has become more insecure, and incomes more precarious, and as employers have more control over hours, irregular hours, casual employment, and the gig economy.

Unity and inclusion. All workers can be benefit mutually, those in insecure employment, in full-time work with long hours, struggling with work-life balance, in any sector of employment, and without work at all.

Gender equality in unpaid and paid work. A standard working week that is shorter would make it easier for women and men to more equally share unpaid caring work. Employers in

the 1980s and 1990s took advantage of women’s need for shorter hours of work, by undermining the standard working week and kicking off an explosion in female-dominated, low-paid casual work.

Unemployment damages people. Of the many traumatic consequences of unemployment is suicide risk. “Modelling from the University of Sydney’s Brain and Mind Centre has forecast the financial and psychological toll could result in an extra 750 to 1,500 suicides a year, with fears Indigenous and multicultural communities are among those at greatest risk.”

Climate action. Less hours of work could reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The increased availability of employment across industries would enable workers in emissions intense industries to find incomes elsewhere.

Free time is freedom.

Let’s get radical — while so many people care

Previously unthinkable policies have been adopted in response to Covid-19, including the (temporary) doubling of unemployment benefits. Sudden change is possible. Gradual change might never happen. □

• Abridged from bit.ly/sww-jb

Safety inspection shut down

Britain’s official Health and Safety Executive responded to the virus danger in the many workplaces still operating throughout the lockdown, by... suspending its workplace inspections. It phased out everything that couldn’t be done by its staff working from home.

Between 9 March and 7 May, the HSE received 4,813 reports about workplace issues relating to the virus, but it has started no proceedings against any employer.

From 2009-10 to 2016, successive Tory cuts reduced the HSE’s budget by 46%, and the number of inspectors it employed fell by over a third.

On 20 May the HSE announced it would start “proactive” inspections of sites. Unions must demand HSE funding be restored, but also use their workplace strength and rights (including “Section 44”) to enforce safety measures without waiting for that. □

The pandemic, homeworking, and automation

By Bruce Robinson

The Covid-19 pandemic has radically changed the way people are working. Some of these changes, driven by the need to contain the virus, are likely to become established in the long-term.

Before the lockdown only about 5% of the workforce worked from home, predominantly highly-paid workers or managers. They had been joined in recent years by growing numbers of workers who made at least some income from online work at home. There is also a long-term group of traditional homeworkers, mainly women working on low-paid, low-tech jobs such as making clothes, and freelancers.

In April 2020, according to the Office for National Statistics, 49% of the UK workforce was working at home. That includes most clerical, information, and communication workers. Those who can't work from home include those involved in face-to-face interaction with the public and most of those in manufacturing and construction.

Expanded homeworking is likely to persist after the emergency, though probably not at the same level.

From the bosses' point of view, homeworking saves costs on offices and may enable more flexibility in how many people to employ and on what contracts.

Despite better means for the surveillance of remote online workers, there remain problems of control and organisation. But Zoom and similar may make face-to-face meetings less necessary. And there is evidence that homeworking results in a rise in productivity.

The most likely form of working from home to be offered to established workers is a mixture of home and office working, say two or three days a week at home. That makes it possible for fewer workers to be in an office at one time.

From the workers' point of view, homeworking saves the time and cost of commuting, makes it easier to balance work with home demands such as childcare, benefits disabled workers, and may enable a more flexible choice of when to work.

There are, however, serious problems with it. There are dangers of isolation, socially and from workmates who can help, provide support with the job, discuss work issues, or provide solidarity against management pressure. Some evidence shows that homework in the pandemic has led to increased work beyond agreed hours.

The blurring of boundaries between work and home makes it easier for managers to press workers to be available at any time and for women to be expected to perform domestic labour alongside working. And not every home provides a suitable space for work. Home may be the environment for abuse or bad mental health, as the lockdown has shown.

Expanding homework also creates a danger of more two-tier workforces, with a core that does at least some work from the office and a periphery of casual workers taken on as part of the gig economy to work at home, often to perform individual tasks ("microwork").

Broadly, our aim should be to ensure that homeworking benefits the worker. Most basic to that is the individual worker's right to choose whether to work from home and how to divide time between home and office; and unions' right to bargain about and control the location of work. Ursula Huws and others have drafted more detailed demands on homeworking: bit.ly/huws-g.

Working from home will make union organisation more difficult, and much more difficult if workforces become at-home-only or majority at-home. Unions may not have direct access to the workers and, in the same way as with postal ballots, their being at home will remove the workers from workplace collectivity and decision making.

Another major shift that will now be accelerated is automation, particularly of jobs that have been crucial including retailing, cleaning, and care, and others where there is a risk of contracting Covid 19 (for example, sorting recycled waste). Fear of contracting the virus will make automated activity more normal and acceptable.

A recent survey of over 2000 executives worldwide showed about 35% of them planning to bring forward plans for automation as a result of the pandemic. If automation is aimed in the short-term to minimise human contact, in the long-term the attraction for employers is the lower cost of running machinery compared with paying workers. In the coming recession, costs of finance and of the technology will drop to make automation affordable for many employers.

The pandemic has opened up many issues about how and how much we work, and what we do. The labour movement needs to formulate and fight for its own specific demands rather than letting things slide into a "new normal" over which we have no control. □

• Longer version bit.ly/home-w

• See our or listen to our pamphlet "Automation and the working class" at bit.ly/automation-pamphlet or respectively bit.ly/automation-audio

Scrap health surcharge for all

Nadia Whittome MP tweeted straight after Johnson u-turned on charging migrant health and care workers to access the NHS: "Glad that the government has caved on the Immigration Health Surcharge for NHS and care staff, but *nobody* should have to pay extra for the NHS on top of the taxes they already pay. There are no good immigrants and bad immigrants. Healthcare is a right for all." The whole Labour Party and labour movement should be demanding this.

• Please sign and promote Another Europe is Possible's petition: bit.ly/scrap-sur.

“Section 44” and civil service

By Chris Marks

Civil service employers have been reticent to go for a return-to-work drive in the short to medium term. The Cabinet Office informed the union that they would continue to support homeworking.

That approach isn't completely uniform, and the Cabinet Office hasn't exerted any particular pressure to rein in departmental employers who are taking a different approach, but there has been no central, concerted, back-to-work lurch.

The major exception to this is the outsourced contractors, who have behaved appallingly and are forcing workers to continue working despite the buildings they clean or maintain being largely empty. Union pressure has forced outsourced contractors in many departments to pay full pay for periods of sickness and self-isolation, but, again, this has not been uniform.

This has led to what is in my view effectively an act of murder, with cleaning worker Emanuel Gomes, who worked in the Ministry of Justice and was a member of the United Voices of the World union, dying from the virus after working through his symptoms because his employer, the contractor OCS, refused to pay full sick pay.

There has been a particular flashpoint around the Passport Office, where the employer wanted people to come back quite early, to conduct work that clearly wasn't essential. The union won on that initially, and pushed back a return-to-work drive. Now we may have a similar flashpoint over workers in the Ministry of Justice, in the courts and judicial system, being pressured back to work to deal with backlogs of court cases. The union has a smaller density in that department, which obviously makes organising resistance harder.

Victories

We have also won smaller victories in individual workplaces where workers have threatened to refuse to work on safety grounds.

Our last National Executive Committee (NEC) meeting agreed a set of tests and demands that we need to see met before we deem it safe for there to be a substantial return to the physical workplace. These include a policy of only conducting essential work that cannot be carried out remotely; all workplaces to have union-approved risk assessments; access to adequate PPE for certain tasks, where necessary; social distancing measures in place in the workplace; access to both antigen and antibody testing for all workers, outsourced and directly-employed; for a track-and-trace strategy when confirmed cases occur; and protection for vulnerable workers, or those who live with vulnerable people.

As well as risk assessments, we want to see equality impact assessments that deal with the disproportionate risks faced by BAME workers, as well as the impact on others such as disabled workers. We've specifically demanded that where employers cannot guarantee the safety of BAME workers, including outsourced workers, they should make provisions for them to work at home, or, if that's not possible, give them special paid leave.

The majority of the union leadership is hostile to the idea of

the union taking a lead about using health and safety legislation, specifically Section 44 of the 1996 Employment Rights Act, in a collective, assertive and combative way, and explicitly encouraging members to collectively use their rights under that legislation to refuse unsafe work if necessary, and have voted down proposals submitted by myself and other Executive members outlining such a strategy.

Passivity

I have also supported the idea of national ballots in any department/employer where workers feel they are being forced back to work, again also voted down on the NEC in lieu of a passive statement of support for any individual workplaces or branches that wish to take action.

It is a near inevitability that employers will at some point demand members return to workplaces and collective industrial action will be the only thing left in our armoury. If balloting legally will take too long, but we are too cautious about attempting to collectivise Section 44 walkouts because of worries about legal challenges, then we (and any union) are rendered impotent.

The vagaries in the law around Section 44 mean my preference is to risk that strategy if the need arises.

The Independent Left caucus has highlighted the limitations of not giving explicit leadership and support in terms of encouraging members to use legislation to organise collective refusals of unsafe work. A section of the union bureaucracy is concerned that this could get the union into legal difficulties, but this is based on an extremely conservative interpretation of the law.

If we acknowledge that ballots will take too long, but won't give members leadership and confidence around using the law, we have to ask what weapons we actually have left in terms of taking any direct action. □

• Chris Marks is a PCS Independent Left supporter on the National Executive Committee of the civil service union PCS, writing here in a personal capacity.

((•)) Upcoming livestreams

Workers' Liberty have a schedule of videos going "live". Please tune in to watch, take part in the conversation as they are streaming, invite others, even organise watch parties on facebook! The videos (often subtitled) will "go live" simultaneously on our [twitter](#), [facebook](#), [instagram](#), and (generally) [youtube](#). Visit the sites at the times below!

From Monday 25 May to Sunday 7 June:

Monday 25 May, 6.30pm: Crime and policing

Thursday 28 May, 1.30pm: "Make the schools safe!"

Stephen Wood's video of *Solidarity's* editorial this week

Monday 1 June, 1.30pm: Climate change and Coronavirus, two speakers, organised by Lewisham Workers' Liberty

Thursday 4 June, 1.30pm: Stephen Wood's video of *Solidarity's* editorial next week

Going cashless



Diary of a tubeworker

By Jay Dawkey

1 8 May was meant to be crunch day, with services up and running towards some kind of normal. An expected rise in passenger numbers.

I'm not at work and don't hear anything to suggest a dramatic change has happened. The next morning at 0430 the bus is definitely busier. But I can still socially distance and now I have a crappy surgical mask. How effective, I don't know. It's a pain. It makes my glasses steam up and I really want to scratch my nose.

When I flag down the bus, I wave at the driver, I say "morning" as I board, when I leave, I shout "thank you" and we wave as I get off. Before the crisis, this level of chat with the bus driver was reserved for outside London, where you can leave via the front door. We may not all be in it together, but transport workers now know we have a lot in common.

I work the whole week with the same person every morning. It makes it easier to sort out who can leave early on which days. O is still driving in, while parking is free and mileage is being paid.

We get our first customer complaining. "Why can I not pay cash?"

"They have stopped that at most stations now. You can use cash in some places and also top up at the shop just there".

"So it is free is it?"

"No, as I said..."

"Stupid. What am I meant to do? I always use cash"

"I appreciate that but as I've said..."

"What are you going to do if I just walk through the gate?"

"Well nothing, but as I said..."

I look on as the customer walks through, I sit back down and get back to trying to find an episode of "I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue" I haven't already heard. There are mixed views about going cashless. "Stops the vagrants" someone says. "We don't have to mess about with cash round the back, fewer mistakes, less aggro customers with lost money". "They'll come for jobs though. If we don't have money to deal with, they'll say they

don't need all of us".

It isn't noticeably busier until later in the week. My station doesn't have any security marshals dealing with the feared crowds. I see several elsewhere, sometimes in the station itself, one at a lift.

"Maximum 5 in the lift" says the sign. Not sure where that figure has come from, and no one is standing 2m apart while they wait for it to turn up.

Poor guy, standing underground all day just directing people to a lift. He shouldn't even be in the depths of the station to begin with. □

• "Jay Dawkey" is a Tube worker.

Factory gate meeting

By Jane Edwards

Unite members working for Great Bear distribution recently organised a factory gate meeting at the Unilever Port Sunlight factory to protest at the dismissal of a Unite shop steward and the company's refusal to pay full sick pay for workers self-isolating.

The meeting, organised by Unite North West, showed how protests and workplace meetings can still be organised safely and effectively.

Everyone observed social distancing rules. When the organisers were explaining why the meeting took place, they made sure that they explained to local residents who were watching and listening why the meeting had been organised and how they were adhering to social distancing measures.

Steve Gerrard, the Unite officer who organised the meeting, said that the managers of Great Bear locally had decided to ignore the guidelines of the national company on paying full sick pay during the pandemic. It had said that workers who were ill or self-isolating would only get statutory sick pay. They could legally do this because the sick pay system at Great Bear is a discretionary scheme, with no contractual agreement for full sick pay.

A Unison health worker gave a message of solidarity and said that the Safe and Equal campaign had been organising on this very issue. Following some debate, the meeting voted to begin the process of organising strike action.

This protest demonstrated that physical meetings, where there is debate and collective decision making, are the most effective and democratic form of organising. Instead of the union being a distant agency that represents people individually, branch members here could see that they themselves are the union, and their dispute with management could best be responded to collectively and strengthened by solidarity from other workers.

The movement can organise these meetings and protests safely, and we should do so. □

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 email your name, address and postcode to us at awl@workersliberty.org, or phone 020 7394 8923.

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

Fined for taking stand on safety?

From the Tubeworker blog

On 18 May, train drivers' union Aslef reported that up to 30 London Underground drivers were sent home after raising safety concerns, including some who raised concerns about not being able to safely distance in staff mess rooms due to the number of drivers on duty.

Some drivers were issued with a letter from their local manager which read:

"You have indicated you are not willing to undertake your normal rostered duty, despite the fact that it is safe to do so and you have been provided with assurance documentation that confirms [there is] no serious and imminent danger.

"I must now advise you that your continued refusal is without justification and is not reasonable. As a result of your actions you are considered to be making yourself unavailable for work and, as a consequence, normal pay is at risk.

"You are also now requested to leave LU premises given your refusal to work as required. Whether you choose to stay or go will not make any difference to LU's decision with regard to your pay."

It is not for individual bosses to unilaterally declare a particular task safe, nor insist that we be satisfied with a piece of paper saying it is. We have a right to insist on dynamic risk assessments, scrutinised by union safety reps, that satisfy us we can work safely. If we're not satisfied, we have the right to request alternative work that we are confident is safe.

That is what drivers did today. We are not "refusing to work"... we are refusing unsafe work.

Senior LU bosses on trains and stations have insisted they will not make us work in conditions in which we feel unsafe. Apparently the message hasn't filtered down to local managers at depots. If drivers who were sent home find that local managers' threats to dock pay have been carried through, we need an all-grades, cross-union response. Being fined for insisting on our safety is not acceptable.

Meanwhile, the fallout from the new TfL bailout deal con-

tinues. As part of the government's conditions for agreeing emergency funding, they are pushing for cutbacks: one thing they had in their sights was restricting the times at which disabled people could use their Freedom Passes to travel.

So disabled workers — already paid on average significantly less than non-disabled workers — would have to either pay to travel during the peak or be late for work and face the consequences.

Not surprisingly, this provoked objections from disabled people's organisations, supported by disabled Tube workers through our unions.

Within a week, TfL management were issuing reassurances that disabled people's Freedom Passes would not be restricted.

Now they have older people's Freedom Passes in their sights. Perhaps loud objections will push them back on this as well.

There will undoubtedly be further ramifications from the bailout. In exchange for the £1.6 billion package, Mayor of London Sadiq Khan has agreed to return the Tube to 100% service levels "as soon as possible", and to a long-term review of TfL's finances — which the Tory government will no doubt use to demand further cuts.

Khan also agreed that information on staff absences will be sent directly to the government — which can't mean anything good for us as staff. Khan has also offered to increase fares by 1% above inflation, breaking an election pledge.

As part of the deal, government officials will now sit on the TfL board.

Another one of the orchestra of strings attached to the government financial bailout of TfL is that the company now has to report staff absence data to the government.

This is pretty obviously a precursor to "improving" attendance figures by cracking the whip once we are back to 'normal' times.

But if the Covid-19 crisis has proved one thing, it is that attending work when you are sick can be deadly. It is indefensible for our current punitive attendance policy to be restored after the crisis, let alone for an even harsher one to be introduced. □

• Tube cleaners in the pandemic: bit.ly/tube-cl

New audio!

Listen, download or subscribe to [Workers' Liberty audio](https://workersliberty.org/audio) recordings of our paper, other publications, and many meetings. **New this last fortnight:**

- [What is the state?](#) and [Crime and policing](#), both intros from "The state, crime, prisons, and police" meetings series
- [Solidarity 548 part 1](#) and [part 2](#), plus 547 [part 1](#) and [2](#)
- [Fighting for trans rights in today's labour movement](#)
- [Marxist ABCs — Who was Lenin?](#) an intro

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](#). □

Contact us

 [020 7394 8923](tel:02073948923)

 solidarity@workersliberty.org

 Write to us (industrial estate now re-opened): 20E Tower Workshops, Riley Road, London, SE1 3DG

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

Solidarity



For a workers' government

FIGHT THE “OUT-OF-WORK” DRIVE!

By Martin Thomas

In the coming months workers face an out-of-work drive as much as a back-to-work one.

Some manufacturing and construction sites are restarting, usually slowly and partially. But between 11 May and 17 May the number on the government's furlough scheme *went up* from 7.5 million to 8 million.

Taking an optimistic assumption that “the lockdown period starts to be eased from the middle of May and... economic activity... resume[s] safely in the second half of the year”, the National Institute of Economic Research estimated in late April that unemployment would rise to “about 10 per cent of the workforce in the second half of 2020”: bit.ly/niesr-28a.

Similar jobless figures are estimated for countries which have had lighter human losses from the pandemic, and again for others which have locked down less. A 10% rate later this year is estimated for Australia, 15% for New Zealand, 10% for Sweden, 8.5% for Germany. The USA is at 15% *already*. Chinese economists have estimated China's rate as 20.5% *already* (and then retracted the figure).

Slumps

Aviation and tourism will have long and deep slumps even on the most optimistic guesses about the future of the pandemic, and those slumps will echo down supply chains. A snowball effect may follow as firms become unable to pay off previously-contracted debts and the supply of new credit shrinks.

At the mechanical-digger manufacturer JCB, the GMB union is doing a deal to save “up to 915” jobs by workers doing reduced hours and being paid 39, but only on basic contractual rates.

Hundreds of white-collar jobs, and 500 agency jobs, at JCB are still under threat. Likewise 9,000 jobs at Rolls Royce, 10,000 across Europe in Airbus, 12,000 in British Airways, 2,600 in Scottish and Southern Energy.

“Entry-level” job openings for school-leavers and students finishing university look like being sharply down this year.

The website of Unite, the biggest union in manufacturing, is full of protests about these job cuts. But as remedy the union calls only for the government to set up a National Recovery Council with union representation.

The most immediate call on the government should be for the continuation of the furlough scheme at its full rates through to October, and for extra funding to local authorities.

The labour movement should also demand an increase in good, in-house, publicly-employed jobs in health and social care.

Unions should work out their own plans for converting industrial equipment and skills in industries to new uses, and for shorter working weeks without loss of pay. And start discussing possibilities for industrial action. □

Not just Cummings

By Colin Foster

Not just the unelected Dominic Cummings. Boris Johnson should go.

In fact, the whole Tory cabinet should go. But Johnson going would be a good start.

Cummings' trip to Durham, and Johnson's endorsement, have disgusted millions who think: we made sacrifices, followed the rules so we didn't see loved ones who were ill, lonely, dying — and you people don't bother.

It shows up the arrogance, bluster, bluff, brazening-out, floundering, and stonewalling of the government throughout the virus emergency. No-one can trust this government to tell even an approximation of the truth.

Three months after (so the figures now show us) the virus began to spread exponentially in Britain in late February, the boss of NHS Providers (an umbrella body for NHS trusts), said on 25 May that “securing sufficient levels of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)” is still “a challenge”.

The NHS still doesn't have “sustainable supply in place, and really effective testing of NHS staff and patients”.

She explained that boosting test figures by sending out tens of thousands of tests in the post is little help. It is “not just about the numbers”, but about “having targeted testing... [to] have the test and trace in place so that we can contain local outbreaks”, and rapid results from tests.

Following the debacles of outsourcing the NHS stockpile to Movianto, NHS logistics to Unipart, and virus testing to Deloitte and others, the government is now outsourcing tracking-and-tracing to another group of their private-contractor mates, Serco, who are advertising for 12-week jobs on minimum wage or little more.

Make Labour indict the Tories now! □