Public-health test-and-trace, not Serco profiteering
Take social care, NHS logistics and supplies, into public ownership
Workers’ control

E-campaigns to street campaigns
Public health against the virus; NHS workers’ pay protests

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The French revolution and Black liberation
Alex Dumas was a black general in the French revolutionary armies

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What is an activist?
Vogue magazine has a special issue on “Activism Now”. But Vogue's image of activism is not ours.

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Support the Tower Hamlets strikers!
New strikes against the Labour council’s pay-and-conditions cuts.

Page 7
Resonances from the 70s

By Clive Bradley

Mrs America is a mini-series charting the battles in the 1970s between the rising feminist movement in the United States and its enemies over the Equal Rights Amendment (an amendment to the Constitution which still hasn’t been ratified by enough states to become law).

It shows us well-known figures from the American women’s movement at that time, like Gloria Steinem (played by Rose Byrne) and Betty Friedan (Tracey Ullman), but focuses also on the woman who set out to defeat them, Phyllis Schlafly (Cate Blanchett).

Steinem herself, and others, have criticised the series for overstating this conflict between women (a “cat fight”, as Steinem puts it), and ignoring the wider, corporate interests which set out – successfully – to frustrate the struggle for the ERA. Whether or not that is valid criticism historically, as drama Mrs America is powerful stuff.

Contemporary concerns

Two things in particular make it a drama which addresses contemporary concerns, rather than merely illustrating struggles in the past.

First – a central part of the concept for the show – Phyllis Schlafly, a right-wing (ultimately, as the show poignantly demonstrates, would-be Reaganite) Republican, has many echoes in the world now. The movement she led prefigures one important part of the base of Donald Trump – white (especially middle-class) women. The show is a study of that constituency – of the concerns which animate it, and also, in the end, of the fundamental deceit at its heart. The penultimate episode traces the experience of one of the few fictional characters, Alice Macray (played by the wonderful Sarah Paulson), at the big women’s conference in Houston in 1977, where she learns that her enemies are not the terrifying devils she imagined.

Even more important, Mrs America draws out the stories of other women involved in the struggle for the ERA, less well-known than Steinem and Friedan. Indeed, as Episode Three introduces us properly to Shirley Chisholm (Uzo Aduba, nominated for an Emmy) – an important, but lesser known, African American leader of the ERA struggle, the show significantly shifts gear, even tone.

Written by Tanya Barfield (the only member of the writing team to get an Emmy nomination this year), and directed by black British director Amma Asante, this episode takes us into a new place, not what we might have expected from this material, and – of course – with striking contemporary resonance.

Mrs America is a powerful, compelling series which tells us a great deal not only about America in the 1970s, but about America now.

Mrs America was made by the streaming service Hulu, and broadcast in the UK on BBC2.

Some see 45%, some see 3%

Women’s Fightback

By Katy Dollar

As workers were furloughed and schools closed, confining families to the home, housework and childcare increased. Articles and blog posts told of pressure on women to take on more and more.

Research coming out of USA, Canada, Germany, Turkey and the Netherlands has found men doing more domestic work during the pandemic than they did before it. But they haven’t closed the gap with women, “Across the board, whether it’s dishwashing, laundry, childcare, reading to kids, physical care, we’re seeing a universal movement toward more egalitarian sharing,” says Dan Carlson, a sociologist at the University of Utah.

That movement may be in part because women dominate in some of the largest key worker sectors. In the USA, women are 76% of healthcare workers, about 80% of nurses, and close to 90% of home and personal care workers. Many of them have been forced to stay away from their families, whilst male partners are furloughed.

It may also be that where both parents are at home, the temporary merging of the work and domestic spheres has brought domestic labour out of the shadows.

NYT and USA Today surveys, in the USA, had discrepancy between men’s and women’s reports of who is doing what in the household. For example, in the NYT story, 80 percent of women report doing the majority of homeschooling, and only three percent of women report their male partners as the primary educator. Yet 45 percent of men also claim to be doing most of the schooling.

Another US survey finds that 70% of women report being primarily responsible for homeschooling during the pandemic, and only three percent say their male partners as the primary educator. Yet 45 percent of men also claim to be doing most of the schooling.

Both men and women report men are doing more domestic work, but they differ on the proportions. Let’s hope that there are some conversations and discussions, to shift attitudes permanently, rather just discrepant perceptions reported to researchers, as this all shakes out in the months to come.
From e-campaigns to street campaigns

Editorial

"Y ou’ve got to give all employees in the country the ability to self-isolate on full pay and it’s only that approach, in my view, that will really get this Test and Trace system working properly”, said Greater Manchester mayor Andy Burnham on 10 August.

With Liverpool mayor Steve Rotheram and the TUC, and with the backing of the unions Unison, GMB, Usdaw, Unite and CWU, he has launched a new website calling for all workers to get full pay, guaranteed by the government, when they self-isolate because they have Covid-19 or are identified as contacts of someone who has it.

Since early in lockdown Solidarity has been promoting the Safe and Equal campaign, safeandequal.org, whose leading demand is exactly that: full isolation pay for all. It’s great to have another website spreading the message.

But it’s also time for more urgent action than just websites.

From April through to mid or late July, countries in Europe bit-by-bit eased their virus lockdowns, and their infection curves kept going down.

Since mid or late July, many infection curves have been going up again, as yet modestly. The obvious explanation is that the lockdown-easing has been tipped over its safe limit by the reopening of tourist activity.

Most scientists expect virus-resurgence in winter, maybe slight, maybe strong. The virus may well be seasonal, as many are. Colder weather, with more people crowded indoors, will boost infections. An overlay of ordinary seasonal flu will make it harder to detect Covid-19 cases.

An officially-commissioned scientific report published four weeks ago called for July and August to be used to get systems into place to deal with virus-resurgence. We have just three weeks of August left. The government has done very little.

Opening schools should be a priority. The short-term costs of school closure bear almost entirely on the work - done very little.

We want reopening to go with democratic and transparent planning in schools, resources, workers’ control aided by expert scientific advice on safety measures, and workers’ readiness to use their legal right to refuse unsafe work areas. And policies to control infection in the towns and cities around schools.

• Isolation pay
• A public-health, publicly-accountable strategy, not the current mess of Serco and Deloitte profiteering in test-and-trace, not the webs of private-profit contractors, sub-contractors, and sub-sub-contractors in NHS supplies and logistics
• Taking over of the private hospitals and integrating them into the NHS
• Taking social care into public ownership, and staffing it on regular public-sector pay and conditions
• Extension of furlough payments, and rent holidays, to prepare for closing areas like pubs, cafés, and inessential travel if infections mount.

We now have a window of time when the labour movement is more confidently on the streets again, as in the NHS pay protests on 24 July and 8 August. We need to use it to go beyond e-campaigning.

Demand Labour backs the Manchester-Liverpool-TUC initiative! If Starmer won’t, then left Labour groups like Momentum should do so, and actively.

Get on the streets with stalls and petitions to amplify the demands!

Demand the unions which have backed the initiative discuss organising demonstrations, rallies, and workplace protests for it! □

Test? Only if you have a car

By a Solidarity reader in Bristol

A fter developing a cough, my housemate self-isolated, and tried to get tested. When self-referring in Bristol you are offered an on-the-day test only if you say you have a car or van to travel in.

The testing centre is ten miles from the city centre. My housemate made up a car registration plate number, booked a test, drew the number on cardboard in marker pen, and cycled there. He was refused as not “in” his vehicle, so had to ask for the slower, less reliable, postal home-testing kit. The official reason for refusing is to reduce levels of infection to staff, but the policy makes people take taxis to get tested, with added risks. Walk-in testing centres are being run in some places. Quick testing shouldn’t depend on car ownership. □

No. 560 26 August

Solidarity skips a week on 19 August to allow staff a weekend off. No.561, 2 Sep. With no.562, 9 Sep, we’ll return to our usual tabloid format. Because of the probability of a second virus surge, we won’t run our weekend school Ideas for Freedom (postponed from 20-21 June) on 21-22 November as tentatively scheduled. □
Grades? Let the students into uni!

By a London teacher

Scottish school students received grades for Nationals, Highers and Advanced Higher courses on Tuesday 4 August.

Grades had been estimated by schools after exams were cancelled due the Covid pandemic. 125,000 grades, or a quarter of the total, were lowered by the Scottish Qualifications Authority.

Amid a storm of protesting parents and students the Scottish First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, said any “genuine individual injustices” would be rectified under the appeals process. This is almost certainly untrue, because there is a systemic problem with the methods being used, not individual errors.

The problem in Scotland will arrive in England on 13 August when students get A Level and GCSE grades using a methodology similar to that used in Scotland. The Telegraph (5 August) commented accurately that: “[The method being used] hits the schools the Government should be most proud of – the rapidly improving ‘turnaround’ schools that have been on a steep upward curb in recent years.” This has been widely understood by teachers and head teachers for months.

Teachers have been asked to set students a grade and then order the whole cohort. So, say, a maths teacher with 60 A Level students will have produced a list of kids from 1 to 60, top to bottom, each student with a grade assigned.

These lists will then be compared with recent results at the school and adjusted – lifted or downgraded – to match. If a school did badly last year, but is doing much better this year, then a lot of kids will lose out. It practice means a lot of working-class children will lose out.

School managements have one eye on school results’ tables and Ofsted, and are seriously untrustworthy. Teachers have the pressure of performance related pay and a natural bias towards students they have worked with.

Whatever the solution, leaving schools to determine grades, unmoderated, is not the answer. “Teacher predictions” alone would mean massive grade inflation.

After the Scottish shambles, Ofqual has announced a reform of the grading system which will allow schools (not individual students) to appeal against grades. That might even be reasonable if it proves to be a genuine reform rather than window-dressing to confuse angry parents.

Labour spokesperson Kate Green commented that she was against grades being driven by “computer algorithms”, proving she has no understanding of computers, algorithms, or the grade system under discussion. She could just as usefully have spent the day in bed.

That’s a shame because the lack of exams provides us with an opportunity to rethink the exam system. Certainly GCSEs, which put students under vast stress for no good reason, and distort the curriculum and learning, should be abolished.

Right now A Level students who miss their university offers by a grade or two should be admitted to their first choice university. Similarly, GCSE students should be admitted to Sixth Forms or Colleges to do the subjects they have applied for even if they “miss the grades”.

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Featured book

Can socialism make sense?

A book from Workers’ Liberty which makes the case for socialism. This book explores what socialism means, whether it can rise again, how, and why. It answers questions such as: What about Stalin? Are revolutions democratic? How can we have a planned economy? and is socialism still relevant? 400 pages, £12 workersliberty.org/books

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New audio!

Listen, download or subscribe to Workers’ Liberty audio recordings of our paper, other publications, and many meetings. New these last two weeks:

- Solidarity 558, part 1 and part 2
- Minnie Lansbury – A different sort of Labour council, intro speeches by Janine Booth and Selina Gellert
- How to beat the racists, a Workers’ Liberty pamphlet in ten audio parts, going out daily. Eight released so far.
- Brazil and the pandemic, intro on the pandemic, its political impact, and the anti-racist protests in Brazil
- Marxism and religion, intro speech by Kate

See workersliberty.org/audio for links to the audio version. All recent episodes can be found through most podcast providers: search “Workers’ Liberty” or “Solidarity & More”. More information on subscribing and using podcasts at the URL above.

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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!
**15% rise for all NHS workers!**

**By Mark Boothroyd**

Mark Boothroyd, Unite branch secretary at Guy’s and St Thomas’ hospitals in London, and an organiser of the NHS pay protests on 8 August, talked with Sacha Ismail from Solidarity.

The movement grew organically out of NHS workers’ anger at being excluded from a public-sector pay rise, after all the sacrifices made during Covid. Some workers set up a Facebook group called “NHS Workers Say No to Pay Inequality”; it hit 50,000 in a few days, it’s now 78,000, overwhelmingly NHS staff. The people who set it up called for demonstrations on 8 August.

My union branch, Unite at Guy’s and St Thomas’, has been very active on pay, and since we’re near Parliament and Downing Street we proposed calling a protest march there to build momentum. We managed to get about 1,000 people on 29 July.

On 8 August there was a great response, I think a couple of thousand in London and similar in Cardiff and Edinburgh, with hundreds in cities and towns around the country, overwhelmingly health workers.

The plan is a day of action on 26 August, with rallies in NHS workplaces around the country. There’ll be other actions in the run up to that. Partly we’re aware infection rates will be rising again and there may be local lockdowns, so workplace actions are less risky. But also we want people to focus on building in the workplace. There should be things that others can do to support us on the day too.

It’s being spearheaded by nurses. We are working hard to bring in all other groups of workers, with some success already. Physios and OTs are quite well organised. A lot of us work in A&Es, and through that we’ve made links with London ambulance crews. There’s a lot of sympathy and support from junior doctors.

### All workers

One of our demands is that any pay rise applies to all NHS workers, however they’re employed. Some GMB activists who represent a group of outsourced cleaners have come to the demos. Everyone involved agrees workers should be brought in-house, and that’s something we may demand formally as the campaign develops.

We have a model motion which has a series of demands, including one influenced by Black Lives Matter, about addressing the racial pay gap. More broadly, the general vibe is left-wing, pro the Corbyn wing of Labour.

Some of the activists who set things up work in privatised services themselves. There are some who work for Virgin, where they’ve had our last pay rise delayed by a year while the corporation sits on the money. So there’s a good understanding of privatisation.

The campaign is demanding 15% for all NHS workers.

Unison, which generally represents the lower paid workers, is asking for a £2,000 flat rise, which would obviously benefit the low-paid more. They may also be making a sort of conservative calculation that there’s a limited pie and that a smaller pay rise means more money for jobs and therefore more subs money. The RCN is demanding 12.5%. It represents quite a lot of nurses on relatively high salaries; for them £2,000 could be 6% or even less. Unite the same, they represent a lot of technical staff in higher bands, though they haven’t put out a figure yet.

There was a poll on the NHS Workers Say No page, which asked if we want to demand more than the RCN, and the response was overwhelmingly yes. We’ve had a 20% real pay cut over the last decade so 15% relates to that and is actually pretty modest.

Among the activists there’s a lot of frustration at the health unions and their inaction. We only know even the official union pay demands because they’ve been leaked! Unite has backed the protests at a London level. RCN has sat on the fence, saying it supports members going, but it can’t back because it’s not in dispute! Unison has simply refused to support us.

### Unions

Most of the people who set up the campaign and are doing the core organising are solid union members, though not necessarily that active previously – but many of those engaging and organising locally aren’t. People are having the experience of joining and finding they don’t get union support. So we have to make the arguments to make sure people join and stay in and become active in the unions. Particularly because of the anti-union laws, but for other reasons too, getting the unions to move is key.

We’re holding regular Zoom meetings of the leading activists.

The pandemic has massively changed how we organise – you don’t have to book a room, get train tickets sorted and so on, you can just set up your Zoom and there you go. There are disadvantages, but big advantages in terms of moving fast.

Some local organisers did contact their Labour MPs to ask them to speak on 8 August, but I don’t think anything came of it. A couple of the Socialist Campaign Group MPs have made supportive statements. I do wonder if there’s a reticence because this is not organised through the unions officially, which is how Labour left MPs tend to relate to things. We absolutely need to demand support from Starmer. He’s being crap, saying nothing when there’s an open goal. Say we can’t expect anything from his leadership just means letting them off the hook.

People should absolutely raise in their CLPs, back our demands, see what they can organise, and call for their MPs and the national party to act.

For us, though, while the Labour Party is important, it’s secondary. The key thing is building up organisation in the workplace and translating that into organisation in the unions so we can get them to move.

Healthier and less polluting

By Zack Muddle

A study led by Oxford University academics and published on 15 May has highlighted the successive gaps between most people’s diets and national or WHO [World Health Organisation] dietary guidelines; and between these guidelines and multiple international targets which governments have signed up to.

Across the 85 countries considered, with national guidelines, if those guidelines or WHO ones were followed, then (the study reckons) “premature mortality” would fall by almost one sixth and food-related greenhouse gas emissions by almost a seventh. More ambitious “EAT-Lancet recommendations” would give over a third greater reduction in premature mortality, and over three times more cut in emissions.

The study recommends reforming national and WHO dietary guidelines, moving towards predominantly plant-based diets, in particular limiting beef and dairy, and increasing intake of whole grains, fruits, vegetables, nuts, and legumes.

The central job for environmentalists is to confront “fossil capital”. To shift into “blaming” individuals, consumers, the bulk of humanity, the working classes, is self-defeating. Obsessional preoccupation with diets and veganism falls into such a trap.

But the change we need must include planting many billions of trees to remove many billions of tonnes of CO2 already in the atmosphere or certain to arrive there soon (see Solidarity 529). The trees will take gigantic expanses of land, much of which is currently used for agriculture. Animal agriculture is much less efficient, in meals provided per land used, than plant-based food.

The current shift is in the opposite direction: widespread deforestation for agriculture, primarily to make animal products. Agriculture, and especially animal agriculture, have many other environmentally destructive impacts, and the need for enormous reductions in animal products internationally, on environmental grounds, is demonstrated by the scientific literature (bit.ly/t-529).

In fact a shift towards greater meat-eating is underway. Changing direction requires social measures as well as more public-health education: buying or expropriating land for reforestation, and thus increasing relative prices for meat and other animal products compared to plant products; research into and subsidies for plant-based foods; public measures to require availability of plant-based foods in nurseries, schools, canteens, shops, etc.

Of course some aspects of a socialist environmentalist programme will take longer than others to win the case for. But we want to transform the “commanding heights” of the food industry.” (bit.ly/t-529)

Empowering people, empowering the working-class, is central to socialist politics, to the politics that will win the environmental changes we need.

“Populations” cannot be herded into dietary changes by censorious instruction. The social changes in agriculture, food, tree planting, etc. will have to be implemented deliberately by the organised working class. Empowering the working-class, individually and collectively, in consumption, is also important.

We want better food, tasty food, socially-consumed not stress-eaten food – which can also be environmentally sustainable, and even healthy. ☐

Arts under threat

By Colin Foster

Workers at the Tate galleries in London and at the South Bank Centre have organised union-backed protests against big job cuts. 200 jobs in the cafés, shops, etc. at the Tate galleries are threatened (these jobs are in Tate Enterprises, the profit arm of Tate, which passes its profits to the charitable arm of Tate), and 400 (two-thirds of the total) at the South Bank Centre.

There is more to it than the lower ticket sales for exhibitions or shows, or even than café revenue being down. Since the 1990s such venues have been pushed into a “model” where a lot of their income comes from hiring out space, after hours, for upscale parties, receptions, weddings. The layout of art exhibitions may be decided by the highest bidder rather than on artistic criteria. The labour movement should demand that the government puts in more money (a small amount on the scale of Covid-spending) to sustain these permanent public assets through the disruption. ☐
On 13, 14 and 17 August Tower Hamlets council workers will strike again to defeat the “Tower Rewards” attack on their terms and conditions. 17 August will be their ninth strike day since the start of July.

According to Tower Hamlets Unison, two thirds of the workforce have refused to sign the new, inferior contracts, despite all kinds of management lies and bullying, including threats of sacking. The Tower Hamlets workers have run an energetic, determined campaign, generating enthusiastic support from their community and from bottom to top of the labour movement. The notable exception has been the people with the most power to help them – Keir Starmer’s Labour leadership. Starmer fobbed off the workforce have refused to sign the new, inferior contracts, despite all kinds of management lies and bullying, including threats of sacking. The Tower Hamlets workers have run an energetic, determined campaign, generating enthusiastic support from their community and from bottom to top of the labour movement. The notable exception has been the people with the most power to help them – Keir Starmer’s Labour leadership. Starmer fobbed off their ninth strike day since the start of July.

Unison general secretary Dave Prentis has written an open letter to Tower Hamlets mayor John Biggs attacking “Tower Rewards”, saying he “fully support[s]” the decisions taken by his members and flagging up the “potential” for a reballot.

However, the national Unison leadership is not a reliable ally of any group of workers in struggle. It is still not clear if it will allow the Tower Hamlets workers to reballot when their current strike mandate under the anti-union laws expires on 22 August.

More info and resources at Tower Hamlets Unison site bit.ly/th-u

Labour’s internal elections

Nominations for the elections for 18 places on Labour’s National Executive (NEC), and for the Young Labour national committee, remain open until 27 September.

There are over 170 candidates in the NEC contest. Two slates (or two-and-two-halves) lead the contest for the nine CLP [Constituency Labour Party] places. Since the election is by STV, both the right-wing coalition Labour To Win and the Centre Left Grassroots Alliance (CLGA) are pushing only six names. Open Labour is pushing two, and the Tribune group of MPs three.

While siding with the left against the right, we want the shortcomings of the left slate process to be noted. Instead of first establishing a left platform, covering at least the issues key for the NEC, conference sovereignty and internal democracy, the CLGA first agreed names then asked the six to sign a platform. It got only the blandest generalities.

Jermain Jackman, on the OL slate, is as left-wing as any of the CLGA nominees, and deserves to be nominated too.

For the NEC youth place, candidates need two affiliated groups (unions or other) to reach the ballot paper. So most won’t, but the two certainties seem to be Lara McNeill (CLGA) and Kira Lewis, informally backed by LTW.

They don’t need CLP nominations. If they seek them, we want it noted that under the leadership of Lara McNeill and her friends, Young Labour has declined and has had a narrow-minded regime. Lara McNeill herself has been photographed giving the “vigilance salute” adopted by the Stalinists in Young Labour from the anti-Trotskyst witch-hunts of the 1930s and 40s.

Candidates for the disabled place need five CLPs. The front-runner is CLGA-backed Ellen Morrison, who already has two union nominations (Unite and Bakers), but Morrison is on a similar wavelength to McNeill. We would rather nominate Richard Rieser, well-known as a Trotskyist, and internal democracy, the CLGA first agreed names then asked the six to sign a platform. It got only the blandest generalities.

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Nominations for the YL committee places are made by individual under-27 members, not by CLPs.
The French revolution

By Sacha Ismail

The famous French novelist Alexandre Dumas was mixed-race. His father, Thomas-Alexandre Dumas Davy de la Pailletière, was born in the colony of Saint-Domingue (today’s Haiti), the son of a French nobleman and a black woman he owned as a slave. Under the name Alex Dumas, he became a top general in the French revolution – not in Haiti, but in Europe.

Before he was 32, Alex Dumas was commanding over 50,000 troops as General-in-Chief of France’s Army of the Alps. By 40 he was excluded from all power and influence and at 43 he was dead.

Dumas’ fate, which provided the basis for his son’s The Count of Monte Cristo, was bound up with international conflicts following the revolution – and compounded by conflict with the leader of France’s domestic counter-revolution-from-within, Napoleon Bonaparte. The Napoleonic reaction had a specifically racist dynamic.

Through the amazing lens of Dumas’ life, Tom Reiss’ book Black Count tells the story of the French revolution’s politics on race, how they radicalised and then went sharply into reverse. It deals with some of the same issues as Marxist writer CLR James’ Black Jacobins, about the Haitian revolution which branched out from the French.

The Saint-Domingue where Thomas-Alexandre was born, in 1762, had complex and shifting racial politics. There were growing tensions and conflicts between white and mixed-descent elites, even as both enjoyed the wealth produced by 85% of the population, brutally exploited black slaves producing sugar and coffee.

In the struggle against slavery and for independence, the country would be devastated and impoverished, but earlier it was one of the richest places on earth.

Thomas-Alexandre and his three siblings were born into slavery. His father sold his siblings, but brought Thomas-Alexandre, his favourite, to France and raised him as the free son of a nobleman.

Race and revolution

In France itself, even under the old monarchy, Enlightenment philosophers, lawyers and activists launched their own successful political and legal battles to establish that no-one could keep slaves in France.

There was a growing racist reaction. Laws were introduced against black people living in France.

In 1777, Louis XVI decreed a comprehensive legal code with the aim that “in the end, the race of negroes will be extinguished in the kingdom” – through a system of racist immigration controls, detention centres and deportations. Restrictions on black people in France included a requirement to register with the state and a ban on marriages between white and black or mixed-race people.

Like many rules in the last years of the ancien régime, all this was patchily administered. Napoleon would be much more thorough.

Thomas-Alexandre undertook military training under the Chevalier de Saint-Georges, who was also mixed-descent, a member of the king’s bodyguard, and a renowned composer.

In 1786 Dumas enlisted in the army as a private. When his father objected and demanded he use a pseudonym, he enlisted under his (slave) mother’s name, Dumas, listing his father as a Dumas too. The symbolism should not be underestimated. Alex Dumas was born.

Then came the revolution – and a series of battles and victories against racism.

In 1790, black legions were formed in the French army, as an anti-racist and internationalist political declaration. Through a sort of bidding war, Dumas leapt from corporal to lieutenant colonel. Through his talent and daring, he became a general three years later.

In 1791 the campaigning organisation “Friends of the Blacks” persuaded the King (France was still a constitutional monarchy) to sign a law reaffirming slavery could not exist in France itself and banning distinctions of colour in citizenship rights within the country. The colonial planters, many based in Paris, fought hard to block further change, in particular interference with slavery.

From August 1791, what Friends of the Blacks leader Abbé Grégoire called “the volcano of liberty” erupted as the largest slave-revolt in history took control of much of Saint-Domingue.

In April 1792, the National Assembly extended full citizenship to free blacks and “men of colour” in the colonies, but did not yet act against slavery itself.

Even left-wing leaders hesitated, fearful of the economic impact during growing conflicts with foreign powers. Nonetheless the white planters turned against the revolution, and it turned against them. At first the French Republic (proclaimed September 1792) fought with the slave-owners against the former slaves; in 1793-4, as the revolution reached its zenith, the alignment reversed.

In August 1793 Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, sent to Saint-Domingue to quell the revolt but now allied with the former slaves, declared the abolition of slavery.

In February 1794, three of Sonthonax’s deputies arrived in Paris. One was an ex-slave; one a free mixed-race Saint-Dominguan; the third a white Frenchman who had lived for years in the colony. Following a passionate anti-slavery appeal to the National Convention, the revolutionary government became the first in history to abolish slavery, granting full citizenship rights to the emancipated.

In some parts of the empire slavery was actually abolished. In others, for instance France’s Indian Ocean colonies, slave-owners managed to block implementation of the Convention’s decree.

From 1794, the republican regime began to shift to the right. In 1795, there was repression against the more radical Jacobins and the Paris masses were crushed. A more
and black liberation

conservative government, the “Directory”, came to power. Yet anti-racist struggles continued to progress. At least a dozen black and mixed-race legislators were elected in the bicameral system which replaced the National Convention – including two former slaves.

The Directory instituted a colour-blind and integrated elite secondary school, the National Colonial Institute, at which the sons of former slaves studied alongside those of white and mixed-race anti-slavery activists and others. Pupils included the sons of Saint-Dominguan revolutionary leader Toussaint Louverture.

In the mid-1790s Dumas was a key figure in revolutionary France’s conquest of central Europe. For a time, his slavery untouched. Dumas was increasingly unhappy about what they were doing there and increasingly desperate to leave. Enmity between him and Bonaparte grew.

When Dumas got out, he was shipwrecked and fell into the hands of the counter-revolutionary Kingdom of Naples. He was held in dire conditions for two years. He was only 37 when taken prisoner, but his previously magnificent health was wrecked.

When the general made it home in 1801, everything had changed. On paper the Republic still existed, but Bonaparte was now the dictator Napoleon (“First Consul”) and counter-revolution was in full-swing. The ancien régime would not return, but much of value in the revolution was destroyed. In no sphere was this counter-revolution deeper than that of racism.

Much of the support for Napoleon’s 1799 coup had come from a coalition of slave-traders and exiled plantation owners, calculating a tricolour-draped dictator would create better conditions for restoring slavery than any sort of representative government – particularly one that included black people, abolitionists and other radical ideалиst. The interests of capitalism or proto-capitalism were pitted against equality and freedom.

In 1804 the invasion was defeated, after the loss of thousands of lives and the wrecking of the country’s economy. Haiti broke away, at great cost, becoming a source of inspiration to anti-slavery struggles and fear to slave-owners worldwide. But slavery was restored throughout France’s remaining empire, and not abolished until 1848.

Racist laws were introduced in France itself – and enforced. The National Colonial Institute was closed, and its students forced into menial labour. Marriages between white and non-white people were banned. There followed a complete bar on black and mixed-race people entering France “unless supplied with special authorisation”.

Remaining black and mixed-race soldiers were forced into segregated units doing only hard, dirty and dangerous work. Because of a ban on black ex-soldiers living in Paris and nearby, Dumas had to get permission to remain in his own home.

In the revolution, as Reiss puts it, “blacks and people of colour [had] experienced true freedom and thus [felt] the full pain of knowing what it meant to lose it”. Dumas died at 43, in relative poverty, stripped of position and official honours. Napoleon had told soldiers who petitioned him to assist his former general: “I forbid you to ever speak to me of that man!” Records of Dumas were edited to obscure his role, his politics and his ethnicity.

After campaigning by fans of his son, Paris got a statue of Alex Dumas in 1912. It was destroyed by the German occupation forces in World War 2 and not replaced. We should resurrect this inspiring figure.

• Full article: bit.ly/alex-d
• Tom Reiss on his book: bit.ly/tomrdumas
• “In defence of the French revolution”: bit.ly/indefrev

Solidarity with women and LGBTIQ people in Poland!

Andrzej Duda of the radical right Law and Justice party has been re-elected as Poland’s president. Duda has attacked LGBTIQI people, women, and minorities, consistently over the last five years. He’s undermined the democratic processes, rights and the constitution. He intends to make gay adoption illegal. He recently further criminalised abortion, and proposes to legalise domestic violence. See an interview with Ana Oppenheim, a Polish-born socialist: bit.ly/p-ana

Activists in London and beyond are showing solidarity with people persecuted and attacked by the Polish hard-right regime; for human rights, freedom, and dignity; and with those resisting and fighting back.

• London protest: Saturday 15 August, 1pm, Polish embassy, 47 Portland Place, W1B 1JH: bit.ly/15-pol
• Newcastle Upon Tyne: Saturday 15 August, 1pm, Monument, Contact Ed
What is an “activist”? 

By Sacha Ismail

The widely-publicised September special issue of fashion magazine Vogue, billed as “Activism Now” and focused on antiracism, includes an article titled “How one lawyer-turned-fine-jeweller made sense of Black Lives Matter – from her Left Bank apartment”:

“I stopped feeling guilty that I wasn’t marching. I no longer find it strange that a typical day might start with me picking up a finished piece of jewellery from the atelier in the Marais, heading over to my diamond dealer to sort through piles of grey diamonds looking for just the right hue for a custom design, and then end with rushing back home to jump on a Zoom call to strategise on next steps in the fight for justice for Breonna Taylor [a health worker murdered by Kentucky police in March].”

Nothing else in the issue is quite so parody-like. But the lawyer-turned-jeweller piece does reflect something wider.

That Vogue wants to talk about political activism reflects the upsurge of the BLM movement and the many left-wing activists or potential activists it has generated. The problem is that, despite the progressive vibe, what Vogue has produced is neither really political nor about activism.

Last September Vogue produced a special issue edited by Meghan Markle (“HRH The Duchess of Sussex”). Entitled “Faces of Change”, it featured photos of and articles about a range of celebrity “campaigners”. Essentially they have done the same thing again, but with a black-focus and the words “activism” and “activist”.

The cover of “Activism Now” features footballer Marcus Rashford, who challenged the government over free school meals, and model Adwoa Aboah, involved in mental health initiatives. It is the first Vogue cover photographed by a black male photographer. Inside the cover are photographs of 38 other “activists”.

The type of politics involved is very much a variant of the top-down, elitist and corporate-backed liberalism that has worked hard to benefit from the Black Lives Matter struggle, particularly in the US. There is a wider discussion needed about corporate “anti-racism”; the Vogue brand is part of this and the celebrity antiracism it promotes here very much embedded in it.

While a few of those featured are political activists of a sort, most are just celebrities who have been publicly outspoken and support various charitable causes. Quite a few of those writing or interviewed seem to not be politically “active” in any real sense at all, but define their “activism” simply in terms of being black, queer, trans, etc.

Editor Edward Enninful’s article suggests more diversity on the actual left, certainly in Britain, a political culture has grown up which sees “activism” as a matter of following leftish celebrities, or more widely left-wing journalists, NGO people and so on, and pursuing it as a matter of seeking a job in these kind of milieux – in an NGO, working for a politician, as an unelected union official.

The work of actual activism – organising meetings and discussions; recruiting people one-by-one to unions and campaigns and socialist groups; publishing and selling political literature; setting up campaigns from the grassroots; protesting and propagandising on the streets; organising in and around workplaces and in unions; studying and learning – has been widely downgraded in favour of a more left and active version of the Vogue approach.

The dominance and hardening of this culture in the “Corbyn movement”, i.e. the fact that it was no longer really a movement, was surely part of what brought about its failure. With the defeat, at least temporarily, of the Labour left, the pressure in this direction is likely to grow, as more people abandon political debate and organising in favour of passively following left commentary and trying to carve out a niche for themselves – “activist” but not really activist.

To remobilise the left, and to build up and transform the labour movement into a force for socialism, we must push the other way.

□
“Black youths were able to bring along the rest”

Robert Cuffy is a member of the Socialist Workers Alliance of Guyana, currently based in New York, where he is a public sector worker, trade unionist, and member of the Democratic Socialists of America. He spoke to Daniel Randall from Solidarity.

By Robert Cuffy

This time around, when George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis, everyone could see the real crisis our society was in, because by then we had millions of people unemployed across the world, tens of thousands of people dying from Covid-19, and we also had Covid-19 disproportionately affecting people of colour, and black people especially, and the economic crisis falling hard on black people and other people of colour as well. That was also true of the 2008 crisis and the subprime mortgage crisis which caused it, which fell heaviest on black owners and caused a generational theft of wealth.

In the context of this acute economic crisis, as well as the crisis of the long-term profitability of capitalism, and a public health crisis which has been poorly managed in the United States, the George Floyd rebellion represents what I would see as the leading edge of the class struggle in the United States. It’s a movement that is attempting to claim space from the capitalist class. [...] Black youths who rose up in struggle were able to bring along the rest of the class, young people especially, into that fight.

We’re at a place now where we have to ask, “what are our demands?” The main demands that have come up from the movement are to defund the police, to get cops out of our schools, and to get cops out of our unions. With those broad demands, what we as socialists and Marxists have to do is dig down into and interrogate them, and draw on lessons from the past to frame both our current struggle and the society we want to see. There’s no obvious answer to these things. In New York, for example, when we said “defund the police”, which became a demand to defund them by $1 billion over a fiscal year, we got okie-doked by our city council, because they achieved it by transferring the school security staff from the NYPD to the Department of Education, and making other line-item changes, whilst still instituting an austerity budget.

I would argue that the path to universality and universal demands come through winning the wider working class to the fight for these particular demands. As particular as they are, they have an underlying class content to them. Yes, the police kill black people disproportionately, but the ultimate role of the police in our society is to keep the working class in check.

A lot of people have a conception that labour, organised labour, should take the lead in these fights. We can tell by looking at the labour movement that it’s not in the state where it’s going to use the weapon of a general strike, but we have also seen that when black people have taken to the streets and launched this great protest movement, unions have followed, by issuing statements of solidarity, which we didn’t see in the same way in 2014 and 2015.

We’ve seen bus drivers in Minneapolis and New York City refuse to transport arrested protesters. These are real acts of solidarity. We’ve some some unions take meaningful, if symbolic, steps, like the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), which held a day of action for George Floyd, where they shut down ports across the country, and prior to that held an eight minute, 46 second work stoppage, the amount of time Officer Chauvin had his knee on George Floyd’s neck. Most recently, on 20 July, a coalition led by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) held a day of action under the banner “Strike for Black Lives”.

[We need to] follow the lead of the most oppressed layers of the working class, because they have less invested in the system. [...] But this needs to be differentiated from the tokenistic version of “following black leadership”, where you follow leaders simply because they are black, and you don’t interrogate the political programme you’re following. We could follow the Congressional Black Caucus. But if we did that, we’d be following them into kneeling with Nancy Pelosi, and that would get us nowhere. [...] Despite a mass movement that has shifted consciousness on the police in this country, we are still yet to see any concomitant or resultant material changes in the lives of black and working-class people. What we’ve actually seen in response to these crises is austerity budgets being passed on a federal, state, and municipal level, which continue to disproportionately hurt the working class, people of colour, and black people most of all.

Anti-racist resources

We have compiled various anti-racist resources to learn about anti-racist movements, and arm yourself with ideas to beat back racism: readings and pamphlets, video and audio. New content this week!

See workersliberty.org/anti-racist-resources □

• Abridged from bit.ly/r-cuffy

workersliberty.org/audio Online meetings & resources: workersliberty.org/c19-online 11
“I May Destroy You”

By Jill Mountford

The big hit of the summer, in the gloom of the pandemic, and coincidentally amid a global wave of inspiring Black Lives Matters protests, is a show about rape, consent and justice.

It is described by the BBC as a comedy-drama. Race, gender and class are central themes. Drugs and alcohol flow freely and social media acts as judge and jury on matters small and large.

Every episode is written to challenge and take you out of your comfort zone. Like your friends, all the characters you get to know are neither all good nor all bad. They make some good decisions and some real shit ones, some that leave you full of empathy and others that leave you quite unsettled.

I May Destroy You is powerful and compelling. It explores race, gender, sex, consent, and a generation’s obsession with social media in a way that hasn’t been done before in popular drama. It’s way ahead of Fleabag, though perhaps it’s not fair to compare the two.

The main thread of the story, and there are very many threads, is about a rape that takes place after a drink spiked in a pub. The next 11 episodes are an exploration of dealing with the trauma, injustice, even revenge and a whole lot more.

Spiking drinks with “can’t remember” drugs has doubled in last three years though still only three out of every 200 rape allegations actually lead to prosecution and court.

I cannot think of any other TV series where I’ve felt the need to stop female acquaintances in the street, and entice female colleagues and sisters into discussion to ask their opinion on a show. Only one out of the four women I tempted into discussion on the street had actually watched any of the episodes, and she had decided to park it because it seemed a bit too bleak for lockdown.

And so I turned to the endless discussion on Twitter, in podcasts and in interviews and articles in print and online.

I, like millions of people (probably mostly women), have become obsessed with the show. It works on several levels. You find yourself smiling, laughing and sometimes within seconds of that wincing, gulping, crying or crying.

Michaela Coel, the lead actor, the awe-inspiring writer, and co-director of the show, challenges stereotypes, expectations and assumptions. She has pulled together a world where young black women and a young black gay man take centre stage in powerful, funny, clever, insightful and sometimes crazy roles struggling to make sense of of their world. Much of the subject matter is bleak, but the characters are overall life-affirming, inspiring and full of hope.

Coel, who was raised on a council estate in East London by a single mum from Ghana, turned down a million dollars from Netflix in order to maintain artistic control over her work. She is clever, witty and wise. She might well be the cleverest, wittiest and wisest of her generation (I’d vote for her), but this could not explain why she was, in 2009, the first black woman in five years to get a place at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. That’s racism.

It’s not stop and search, it’s not getting beat up because you’re black, but it is racism.

In a drama workshop at the Guildhall her cohort was asked to divide into two parts, one part whose families owned their homes and the other whose families did not. Michaela stood alone. She described her fellow students as being “middle-uppers” and, of course, white. She says this made her resilient and determined and argues “there’s blessings in struggle”. Indeed there are.

The central theme of sexual assault is drawn from her real life experience. Quite what is real and what is fictional in I May Destroy You is not clear and Coel is keen to keep it this way. She wanted us left feeling unsure, thinking about it, with nothing for certain.

She achieves that in spade loads. Most of all, she’s left me craving for her next piece of work.

New videos!

Watch Workers’ Liberty’s videos and playlists, and subscribe to our youtube channel! Many have subtitles. New these last three weeks:

- Minnie Lansbury — A different sort of Labour councilor — intro speeches by Janine Booth and Selina Gellert
- Expand jobs, boost pay! Nationalise social care! Solidarity editorials
- Brazil and the pandemic, intro on the pandemic, its political impact, and the anti-racist protests in Brazil
- Marxism and religion, intro speech by Kate

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

Anti-racist series

The Historical Roots of Racism: An Anti-Racist Educational Series. Alternate Mondays, from 10 August, 7:30-9pm, on zoom.

Monday 24 August: Scientific Racism
Monday 7 September: After Slavery & Mass Migrations
Monday 21 September: Racism Today and How to Fight it

For full and updated details, zoom links, more meetings and resources, see workersliberty.org/c19-online
See also: workersliberty.org/anti-racist-resources

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Unite: run the contest now

By Ann Field

While Unite members face job losses and attacks on terms and conditions, General Secretary Len McCluskey and Head of the Legal Department Howard Beckett have a different priority: ensuring that the Beckett succeeds as General Secretary.

In May McCluskey proposed to the chair and secretary of the United Left (UL), the “Broad Left” in Unite, that they hold hustings to select the UL candidate for the next General Secretary election.

The UL has always functioned primarily as an election machine. But it got a low turnout in the 2017 General Secretary election and a miserable performance in the recent Unite Executive Council elections. It has increasingly functioned as a transmission belt for “decisions made in Holborn” (Unite HQ). On broader political issues (Cuba, Venezuela, Palestine, etc.) it takes its lead from the Morning Star.

The UL hustings and balloting, in mid-July, were a contest between Beckett and Assistant General Secretary Steve Turner.

Turner is an affable individual with an established trade-union record, though primarily one of being a union bureaucrat whose horizons have never escaped the limits of mainstream left-ish trade unionism.

Beckett lacks both affability and a trade-union record. He is a millionaire. In 2011 he and his partners sold their law firm for £2.6 million. As Head of the Unite Legal Department, he has squandered millions of members’ money on no-hope legal proceedings.

In public, McCluskey has maintained a stance of neutrality between Turner and Beckett. In reality, he has “groomed” Beckett to be his successor – giving him responsibility for selected industrial disputes, and a greater role in Unite-Labour Party affairs.

Turner won the UL ballot by 370 to 367 votes. The narrowness of the headline result is misleading.

Nearly two thirds of Beckett’s vote came solely from Scotland, where the “Progressive United Left Scotland” (PULS) – created by Unite full-timers in 2016 and run by them ever since – drummed up 237 votes for him.

Citing alleged procedural deficiencies, Beckett has refused to accept the result. His real reason for challenging the result is that he lost.

Beckett’s main public outlet for his campaign for a re-run is the Skwawkbox blog. Skwawkbox “owes him one”. In recent legal proceedings involving ex-MP Anna Turley, Unite and Skwawkbox, Unite squandered money on Skwawkbox’s legal fees, and the Head of the Legal Department would have had a decisive say there.

Behind the scenes, McCluskey has been pressuring the UL into a re-run of the ballot.

A recent bizarre interview with the Observer was also an attempt to rally support for Beckett: What McCluskey proposed in the interview dovetailed into Beckett’s “sales pitch” for the General Secretary nomination.

To its credit, and for all its failings, the UL has refused to back down. Its National Co-ordinators’ Committee has twice endorsed the hustings result, with only the PULS delegates voting against.

But the overall result is a complete shambles.

Sharon Graham, head of the Organising Department, has declared that she will be standing for election and is rumoured to be using her staff to lay the groundwork for her campaign – hardly rank-and-file trade unionism!

Beckett still refuses to accept the ballot result and is plunging the UL (and not just the UL) into civil war. Turner, having been duly selected by the UL, is busy “raising his profile” as a preliminary to more overt campaigning.

And McCluskey himself – now 70 years old, and first elected in 2010 as a strictly “one-term-only” General Secretary – has now declared that he will be staying in office for his full term, until 2022. This is patently a manoeuvre to buy Beckett time to overturn the UL ballot result.

Unite now faces the destabilising and divisive prospect of prolonged electioneering in the absence of an election, cutting across the need for a unified response to the threatening jobs tsunami.

It would be far better to get the General Secretary election over and done with. An election right now would put candidates to the test: what are they actually doing to save jobs (as opposed to: what do they promise to do if elected).

An undemocratic rule change passed by last year’s Unite conference – which more than tripled the number of branch nominations needed to get on the ballot paper – makes it more difficult for a rank-and-file candidate to make it through to the final ballot.

But an intervention by a rank-and-file candidate in the form of seeking branch nominations, even if unsuccessful, could open up debate beyond the machine politics of the full-time establishment and promoting basic ideas of class-struggle trade unionism.

Having created this shambles, McCluskey must go – now. He should announce at the next meeting of the Executive Committee that he is standing down, thereby triggering an election.

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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
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
By Jay Dawkey

"You realise there are a number of people downstairs without masks on?"

"Yes, it's unfortunate", I say. Experience tells me passengers who ask this can't be placated.

"You are playing a lot of announcements but what are you going to do about it?"

"Very little", I say, perhaps too candidly. So I add: "I'm not able to enforce it, and I don't want to have confrontations with everyone not wearing a mask. We are all trying to keep our distance from people, even when we are assisting them".

"So nothing then. You mean nothing. We have to rely on the police to fine them? You think you'll end up in confrontations with people you challenge? And where are the police?" he says, gesticulating to prove there are no police around.

I bite my tongue and shrug.

He walks off shaking his head and scowling. "Another satisfied customer", D says, as he comes to relieve me.

"He asking about masks again? Every time he comes through, same thing. I get people are stressed out, but has he not got better things to worry about?"

We've got more to worry about. Our station has been busier than Waterloo at times. And it's small. It's getting harder and harder to keep our distance from customers. Situation isn't helped by the end of cash payment on the majority of the network. Once the shops are closed and you can't top up your Oyster card there, we feel the brunt.

"I get it. It's less for us to do, they want to stop the sketchy people hunting for Oysters and begging, but it doesn't feel exactly fair." G says. "If they speak to me, ok, I'm letting them through. Lots of people don't have bank cards".

"Government wants to write our policy", says P. "Then they'll come for the pensions. I hope I can get out before then, because nothing we can do about that. You think any of the unions are gonna get ballots on that? No chance".

I say P is a bit quick to write things off. He's retiring? Fine for him, but no good for rest of us.

"Well, Night Tube isn't coming back, is it? Not for a while".

"Or we could say we'll prepare to fight those cuts, wherever they come, and we won't just accept it?"

"Yeah, yeah. Well, I don't expect much for any of you that stay".

E shakes her head. "Fuck sake man. It's alright if you done 25 years and can look to sitting on your backside for rest of your time. Ain't the one for most of us".

Stop the Met Police’s criminalisation of strikes!

Striking security guards, members of the UVW union, were legally striking and picketing at St George’s, University of London, on 13 January 2020. Police threatened the striking workers and union officials with mass arrest under Section 119 of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008. Franck Magennis, UVW barrister and trade union official, was arrested and handcuffed in mid-conversation with a police officer as he enquired into the legality of the threatened arrests. As a result, the picket-line fell apart. This is part of a series of attacks by the Met Police on trade unionists.

UVW’s solicitors are "looking at all legal avenues to ensure that the police are held to account, that trade union members are not criminalised for going on strike, and that people are not arbitrarily arrested." They are raising (pledged) money – a £30,000 target by 25 August – to ensure they can cover severe legal costs if they lose. If they win, or raise money over the target, it will go towards the UVW strike fund.

More to worry about

More about solidarity

As trade-union struggles re-emerge, we need to bring forward the idea of solidarity too. One of the greatest historical lessons in solidarity in the English-speaking world was the 1913-14 “Labour War” in Dublin.

The story is told in the RTE series Strumpet City, part 1 at bit.ly/dublinlw.

"As ships came into the Port of Dublin each ship was held up by the dockers until its crew joined the [seafarers’] union, and signed on under union conditions and rates of pay. The Union up and down the docks preached most energetically the doctrine of the sympathetic strike… The sympathetic strike having worked so well for the seamen and firemen, the Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union began to apply it ruthlessly in every labour dispute… When the coach-makers went on strike the Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union took over all the labourers, paid them strike pay, and kept them out until the coach-makers won… The mill-sawyers existed for twenty years in Dublin without recognition. The sympathetic strike by our union won them recognition and an increase of pay".

More bit.ly/1913-14
A message of solidarity

On 5 August, ABM cleaner and chair of the RMT London Transport Region Cleaning Grades Committee Mohamed Said addressed a virtual strike rally for outsourced cleaners in HMRC offices in Merseyside, striking from 3-28 August to demand living wages and full sick pay.

We know all about ISS [the HMRC cleaners’ employer] on London Underground; prior to 2017, when the cleaning contracts were consolidated, ISS was one of several contractors employing cleaners on the Tube. They were notoriously exploitative, routinely short-paying their workers.

After strikes in 2008, ISS invited cleaners to a work meeting; when they got there they found UKBA officials waiting for them, and some cleaners were deported. Their immigration status wasn’t a problem for ISS when they wanted to exploit them; it only became an issue when they started to stand up for themselves.

In 2013, ISS attempted to impose a biometric booking system on which used biometric data from cleaners’ fingerprints. Given the history, cleaners were understandably concerned about this data being shared with immigration authorities. Industrial action by RMT members to refuse to use the system led to cleaners being locked out of work for months, but the system was eventually scrapped.

Today, London Underground cleaners are in a similar situation to cleaners at HMRC. Wherever you find outsourced companies, there is always injustice and discrimination of employees.

Your demand for full sick pay is not only a demand for basic justice, but a vital safety and infection control measure in the ongoing pandemic. We all know Statutory Sick Pay is not enough to live on. If workers can not afford to self-isolate or take time off sick, the virus will continue to spread.

RMT is fighting to end the outsourcing of cleaning work on London’s underground and overground rail networks. During the pandemic, RMT pressure secured a temporary commitment that cleaners would receive full pay for self-isolation and sickness. This was an important step forward, which we would not have achieved without our existing organisation and campaign. But it’s only a partial victory, as the commitment is temporary and only covers cleaners for a maximum of 12 weeks. We’re fighting to extend this gain and to make it permanent, and for cleaners who have been furloughed to receive the 20% salary top up, which ABM and TfL have so far refused to pay.

• Abridged from bit.ly/clean-s
• Tubeworker monthly meeting Thu 20 August, 4pm: Resisting cuts bit.ly/tw-20a

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

£6,405 towards £10,000

A few bits and pieces bring us to £6,405. A slower week, but still on track for our £10,000 target by 21-22 November. The money we are raising has allowed to us to pay for professional help to start on new steps of website development: improvements to our search (now done), and an online shop for our books, pamphlets, t-shirts and other merchandise. Please keep your contributions coming in.

• workersliberty.org/donate

More online

Protest vote or independent political action?
A discussion article by Barry Finger about the Nov 2020 US presidential election
bit.ly/bf-nov20

The politics of some statues
Pete Boggs discusses the arguments about the Emancipation Memorial and the memorial to the 54th Massachusetts
bit.ly/54th-m

Debate: “workers’ action to impose lockdown”
Stuart Jordan and Martin Thomas debate between a focus on social measures, and one on trying to force lockdown by strikes
bit.ly/w-i-l

Contact us

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

The workers at the Haft Tappeh sugar cane complex in south-west Iran, who have struck repeatedly in recent years, are now in the 8th week of a new strike. Their action has been joined by a rash of strikes over unpaid wages in Iran’s oil and gas industry.

Iran is in deep economic trouble, with high inflation and unemployment. The oil price is low, and US sanctions are hurting. Despite the new power which Iran’s rulers have gained over the last decade or so in Syria and in Iraq, domestically they are more and more seen as a corrupt robber regime.

On top of that comes the rulers’ incapacity to limit the spread of Covid-19. Iran had a rapid rise of infections early on, starting late February. After an initial lockdown, infections declined in April. The government wound back the lockdown ineptly, with infections still high, and since May cases, followed with a lag by deaths, have risen again.

On official figures, infections and deaths have now plateaued, at a high level, but many sources say the real toll is much higher yet.

Unlike in other countries overwhelmed by the virus, in Iran many workers are fighting back, with industrial action.

The regime has stepped up executions of its political prisoners, including of protesters from late 2019 and early 2020, but workers remain militant.

The Haft Tappeh workers’ main demand is to revoke the privatisation of the sugar-cane complex.

Their demands include:

- Immediate payment of unpaid wages and renewal of insurance booklets.
- Immediate reinstatement of all sacked workmates.
- Immediate arrest of Omid Asadbeigi (former CEO of Haft Tappeh) and life sentences for Asadbeigi and Mehrdad Rostami (chair of the board: both are currently on trial for fraud reaching $1.4 billion).
- Return all embezzled wealth to the workers immediately.

Since April or May there have been hundreds of strikes in sectors including coal mines, steel, rail, power, heavy machinery, textiles, timber, domestic gas, hospitals and local councils. There have been protests by teachers, nurses, university lecturers, retirees, copper miners, and other workers.

In early August, workers at many sites in Iran’s petro-chemical industry, its main revenue-earner, joined them.

Workers of Kangan, Parsian, Sepehr Lamerd and Exir companies in phase 13 of the South Pars gas field, have stopped work three days in a row and gathered at their workplaces.

More than 10,000 workers are said to have lost their jobs at refineries across Iran. On 4 August, Petropalayesh workers in the South Pars Energy Special Economic Zone joined the strike. The protesters are demanding job security, revoking blank-sheet contracts, the payment of wage arrears, as well as a pay rise.

Workers of Qeshm Heavy Oil Refinery stopped work on 1 August in protest at non-payment of their wages.

Workers of the Abadan refinery stopped work the same day, to protest at non-payment of five to six months arrears of wages.

At the Lamerd refinery workers struck, on 1 August again, over four months’ wage arrears.

At the Persian refinery, on the same day yet again, the strike was over lack of job security and non-payment of wages.

The protesting workers say that four years ago, in order to implement a government decree, they became “contractors”, but since then, the status of payment of some of their wage benefits has remained unknown. The protesting workers added: “While the employment contracts are all based on a bachelor’s degree or higher and the bad weather conditions at the workshop, these benefits have not been taken into account so far.”

There have also been strikes in phases 22 and 24 of the Kangan South Pars refinery, and at Pars Phenol Petrochemical in Assaluyeh.

The Shahrokh Zamani Action Committee works in Britain to get news of these workers’ struggle and promote solidarity. More: shahrokhzamani.com