The conference on 10 October of the Socialist Educational Association decided to call on the government to stop SATs and other high-stakes primary assessments this year. It also demanded that moderated teacher assessment be used instead of examinations for GCSE and A levels in 2021, and that the Labour front bench take up that policy.

The Scottish government has already decided to replace Scotland’s equivalents of GCSEs with moderated teacher assessment.

On 3 October the conference of the NEU school teachers’ union voted to campaign for the replacement of SATs in 2021 by a system of moderated teacher assessment and a mixed model for GCSE and A levels for 2021, including reduced content and moderated teacher assessment.

The decision included a commitment to ballot to boycott SATs in 2021 if necessary. It also recognised that GCSEs, BTECs and A-Levels were unfit for purpose and committed to urgently developing and campaigning for alternatives.

Really GCSEs should just be scrapped, with no replacement at all. (Most countries manage with no comparable exam).

The main arguments against these exams and high-stakes tests were true before the pandemic. Extra arguments are added now.

Students have lost three months already of the two years of frantic exam-cramming which the English school system imposes as run-in to its major exams. With mounting virus infections, it is almost certain that they will lose more, through partial if not total school shutdowns.

The loss will be greater for students from worse-off backgrounds, who are more likely to live in areas with high virus rates, who lack the technology and quiet space to study well online from home, and whose families can’t pay for private tutoring.

The exams should be scrapped for next year on grounds of justice and equality, even if we thought them good in general.

All of us have been “educated” from childhood in the idea that courses of study must be defined and measured by an exam as their aim. That is miseducation.

Schools and universities existed for hundreds of years before modern exam systems. The first high-prestige exam system in England, the maths “tripos” in Cambridge, dates only from the mid-18th century.

One of its results was to set maths in England way behind other big European countries in the 19th century, and for reasons common to many exams: they test only the ability to jump through exam-shape hoops, which may have little relevance to life outside exams. They distort learning, add unnecessary stress, and above all function to label most students as relative “failures”.

As G.H Hardy put it when campaigning for the abolition of the maths tripods: “examinations with reputations and standards and traditions seem to me mistaken in their principle and useless or damaging in their effect... An examination can do little harm, so long as its standard is low”.

Pass-fail tests to check competence at driving buses, or doing electrical wiring, or working with percentages and reading graphs and tables, are necessary for some jobs. They are useful as long as everyone knows that they are not the aim and measure of education, and not the way to sift out the excellent from the competent.

Education should be for learning, not for exams. ☐
To curb virus: reverse the cuts!

T he UK’s virus infections are now rising faster than France’s and Spain’s, and are at a higher level (relative to population) than Spain’s. The government’s measures, since infections started rising fast again in early August, have had little effect. The Tories are set to close bars and cafés again, in large areas at least, and maybe soon for a new lockdown similar to spring’s. In Ireland, which has a lower rate of infection increase than the UK, the government’s scientific advisers have already proposed a new general lockdown, not yet implemented.

Lockdowns (with suitable arrangements for furlough, rent holidays, etc.) may be necessary to pause explosive spread. They are clumsy, but the government’s supposedly more refined measures so far have been ineffective. Deaths are sure to rise in the winter (though maybe not to the levels of spring: Spain’s deaths have plateaued in the last three weeks).

A lesson from the fact that infections have spiked again after the spring lockdowns, though, is that lockdowns aren’t an answer. They only buy time for sustainable virus curbs, which are possible (some countries have them, at least reasonably effective) but demand a basis of social measures.

Social measures

It is the job of the labour movement to win those social measures — to reverse the cuts which the Tories have imposed since 2010, building on what Thatcher did in the 1980s and has never been reversed:

• Full isolation pay for all. Adequate furlough or retraining pay that people are not forced into insecure, unsafe jobs
• Publicly-provided alternative housing for those quarantining, and for those in overcrowding
• Bring elderly care (both in care-homes and domiciliary) into the public sector, with staff on union-agreed public-sector pay and conditions
• Expand the NHS by nationalising and integrating the private hospitals, and giving NHS workers the 15% pay rise they demand
• Public-health test-and-trace, in place of the Tories’ Serco mess
• Increase funding for schools, so they can recruit extra staff, get more space, and fix deficient ventilation, as well as “thinning out” school days by putting students on shorter timetables
• Workers’ control of workplace safety

There are many factors about the countries which have kept virus levels low, but one is the existence or survival of more social solidarity and social provision.

The Great Barrington Declaration, proposing that lockdowns be replaced by targeted shielding of the vulnerable, has been taken up by right-wingers. Some of its arguments have weight. Very long lockdowns (say two years, to give it time for vaccine development, for even incremental improvements in Covid-19 treatment, and for social improvements to be won and kick in, is good. It is down to the labour movement to win social provision. We’ve allowed the Tories to waste the July-August virus lull with only ineffectual tokens on issues like isolation pay and test-and-trace organisation.

We need to make up time now. Reverse the cuts! □

Lessons from Spain

“I really enjoyed working in the NHS”, said a Spanish nurse quoted by the Financial Times on 7 October. “You get longer holidays, more breaks. And workers’ rights are much better”.

His comment tells us less about excellences in the NHS and more about problems in Spain. Those led big protests on 19-20 September about virus measures in Madrid to demand “More healthcare, fewer police”, and are a factor in why Spain’s hospitals have had great trouble coping with the pandemic, and an exceptionally high number of health workers infected.

Spain’s General Nursing Council says the country is 125,000 nurses short. It has 280,000, which is 5.9 per thousand population when the EU average is 9.3. Spain needs to reverse its cuts and improve its health workers’ pay and conditions. And so does Britain. □

Hospitals refuse sick pay

A Freedom of Information request from supporters of the Safe and Equal campaign in Redbridge Trades Council has found that Barking, Redbridge and Havering University Hospitals NHS Trust (BRHUT) is in breach of government instructions to ensure all healthcare staff have rights to full sick and isolation pay.

“Bank” (casual) staff working at the Trust, which includes King George Hospital in Goodmayes and Queen’s Hospital in Romford, are only entitled to Statutory Sick Pay at £95.85 a week if they have to isolate following public health guidance. Most of these staff are nurses, i.e. working directly with patients.

On 27 March, Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), NHS England and NHS Improvement, Public Health England (PHE), Health Education England and NHS Employers put out a joint statement “stating staff should receive full pay whilst in self-isolation. This includes bank staff and sub-contractors…”

This admission that the Trust is breaking DHSC rules for bank workers raises questions about the provision of full sick and isolation pay for outsourced workers, too.

Safe and Equal is calling on supporters to follow the lead of Redbridge Trades Council, submit FOI requests to local hospital trusts and build pressure to ensure all NHS staff are receiving full sick and isolation pay. □

• More: bit.ly/red-sp
Self-determination for Nagorno-Karabakh

By Michael Elms

Around 70,000 people – nearly half the population of Nagorno-Karabakh – have been displaced in the war which broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan in late September this year, in spite of a shaky, Russian-brokered ceasefire signed on 10 October.

The fighting is over the Nagorno-Karabakh region: a 95%-Armenian enclave of mountain territory inside Azerbaijan, with a population of about 150,000 until September 2020. The region set up its own parliament and declared itself independent in 1988. From 1988 to 1994, Azerbaijan fought a war to crush the self-governance of this region and return it to direct rule from Baku. Since 1994, the region has been effectively independent, ruled from its regional capital of Stepanakert and calling itself the Republic of Artsakh.

The 1988-94 war ended with Armenian troops in possession of approximately 14% of Azerbaijan’s territory, occupying a large buffer zone of Azerbaijan land outside the borders of the Republic of Artsakh.

Although there is disagreement over who started the fighting this September, author Thomas de Waal points out that strategically Azerbaijan wants to overturn the status quo: keeping things as they are suits Armenia, as it serves the champion of a Muslim (albeit Shia) nation in conflict with Christians, all the while as the tribune of pan-Turkic nationalist sentiment. This will allow it to gain influence by mobilising large ethnic and religious minorities in Russia and Iran.

Russia has declared that it will defend Armenia against any incursion; but that it will not get involved in Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia maintains military bases in Armenia and to a certain extent guarantees its safety against Turkey and Azerbaijan. Russia also has a close diplomatic relationship with Azerbaijan. Turkey can hope that by encouraging Baku to fight Russia’s other ally, Azerbaijan will be shaken out of Russia’s diplomatic orbit and locked into a closer relationship with Turkey.

As socialists, our role is to oppose the attempt to sow ethnic and religious division in the region as part of the imperialist games of the great powers. We are for reparations and return for refugees from the last three decades of ethnic violence. And the central issue in this war is the right of self-determination for the Republic of Artsakh and an end to the spectre of genocide hanging over the Armenian nation.

Genocide

Modern Armenia was born from genocide. The formative event in recent Armenian history was Turkey’s genocide against Armenians carried out in 1915. An estimated 1.5 million Armenians were killed in that deportation campaign. In 1920, this was followed by a Turkish war against Armenia which took on a genocidal character, with between 100,000 and 250,000 Armenians killed. Amid an ongoing guerilla struggle, in 1918 the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh was able to establish self-governance by force of arms; but British soldiers occupied Karabakh and enforced the rule of the region’s Azerbaijani Christians.

After the region fell under the control of the USSR, Joseph Stalin handed what became known as the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast back to Azerbaijan in 1923, for reasons of diplomatic expediency.

Borders

Within the borders of the USSR, fighting stopped until the 1980s. But the Azerbaijani authorities in Baku pursued a policy of peaceful “Azerification” in Nagorno-Karabakh, settling Azeri families, which saw the Armenian minority in the local population fall to something like 75%. This demographic change would be reversed by ethnic cleansing and mass displacements in subsequent fighting.


The ethnic violence in this period was not one-sided. There was a massive displacement of Azerbaijani and Muslim Kurds from Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Many refugees and internally-displaced people live in misery in Azerbaijan, and demand the right to go home.

But the key, immediate issue in this conflict was, and remains the right of the Armenian-majority population in Nagorno-Karabakh to rule itself. More broadly, the very existence of Armenia itself is thrown into question by the genocidal rhetoric of its neighbours.

Anti-Armenian genocidal rhetoric, in both Turkey and Azerbaijan, is as far from the surface. After Soviet troops shot pogromists in Baku in an attempt to stop the killings in 1990, the local government raised monuments to these “fallen heroes”. In 2004, an Azerbaijani officer, Ramil Safarov, axed an Armenian officer to death at a NATO training event in Budapest. He admitted the killing, stating in court that Azerbaijani would suffer while Armenians still lived, and that he felt shame for not having killed an Armenian before that date. When Baku arranged his extradition to Azerbaijan, he was hailed as a “hero” in government speeches, freed, and promoted to Major.

Turkey seems to be pumping up this nationalist madness across the region, and trading off it. It serves Ankara’s foreign policy goals to position itself as the champion of a Muslim (albeit Shia) nation in conflict with Christians, all the while as the tribune of pan-Turkic nationalist sentiment. This will allow it to gain influence by mobilising large ethnic and religious minorities in Russia and Iran.

Events and campaigns: workersliberty.org/meetings Youtube: youtube.com/c/WorkersLibertyUK Audio: workersliberty.org/audio
Nagorno-Karabakh: too complex?

By Jim Denham

The Morning Star editorial of Monday 5 October was entitled “Nagorno-Karabakh: a complex conflict that must be seen in context.” In fact the editorial gave little factual information and no political steer whatsoever on the dispute.

After an initial, inconclusive, section on Nagorno-Karabakh, the rest of the editorial was a rambling discourse on internationalism in general, often virtually indecipherable.

However, I suspect that the following gives a significant clue as to the true meaning of the editorial:

“There is a certain narrative on the liberal left that sees each of the present-day regional conflicts that stud the perimeter of the Euro-Asian landmass as essentially discrete.

“Thus we are asked to see the Ukrainian situation which has put the heirs of the “nazi” collaborators in power in a question of democracy.

“We are asked to understand what is happening in Belarus as question of electoral fraud and as a special concession to the left, trade union freedoms.

“Hong Kong’s troubles are presented again as a question of democracy, with the former colonial power which ruled for decades without the pretense of democracy the favoured arbiter.”

Leaving aside the Morning Star’s oft-repeated (and slanderous) claim that the uprising in the Ukraine was the work of “the heirs of Nazi collaborators”, this seems to be saying that democracy and freedom (even the freedom of workers to organise) is of secondary importance when set alongside the need to choose the “correct” side in the “East-West axis in which China is the most active force but which is rapidly creating new economic and political realities that challenge the Atlanticist pretensions of the US and its European allies”. And in choosing sides, we should discard “simplistic pictures which posit an abstract moral framework for understanding any of these conflicts.”

Behind the jargon and gobbledegook, the message is actually quite clear: such concepts as democracy, freedom and human rights must be discarded: all that matters is to take the right side – the side of (in the words of the editorial) “China and Russia and… their emerging economic ties with other states like Pakistan and Iran.”

Presumably, it’s because the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict doesn’t fit neatly into this “campist” view of the world that the Morning Star avoids taking a clear position, despite an editorial line that is hostile to Turkish imperialism.

Other factors

Other factors that have been suggested are:

1) They don’t want to criticise the USSR’s nationalities policy, which made such a mess of the region

2) Don’t want to implicitly praise Gorbachev, who did organise armed interventions to stop Azerbaijani pogroms against Armenians in the late 1980s (Baku raised a statue to the pogromists killed by Soviet troops)

3) Are sensitive to Moscow’s contemporary attitude to the war, which is basically: “please put this back in the box, both of you go back to the status quo from last month… and also keep spending tons of cash on Russian weapons”.

A letter to the Star (which, to their credit, they published) made a further point that the editorial completely ignored:

“The problem in Nagorno-Karabakh is quite simply that ethnic Armenians are absolutely terrified of being a minority in a Turkic state. This attitude is due above all to the attempted genocide of Armenians by the Turkish state a century ago, which has never been recognised as such by the modern Turkish state or its allies such as Azerbaijan.”

NEU can prepare strikes

In reply to Colin Foster (letters, Solidarity 565): I have consistently argued that school closures as a last resort, i.e. the majority position of the world’s epidemiologists, I differ from Colin and others in believing the NEU could and should prepare for such an eventuality. Colin and others think such preparations are unnecessary, leaving all power over school closures with the government.

If school workers closed schools in defiance of the government in the context of soaring infection rates then it is self-evident that other workers would have to take time off to look after children, and there is a possibility others may refuse work. This would pose a question of power and could be a step towards workers’ control of pandemic response. It would not be socialist revolution but it would give workers more power than simple verbal arguments.

Such a scenario is not wild optimism given the NEU’s recent history and current position. It just requires the NEU to back up words with action. Colin rubbishes these truisms, by suggesting I thought this would happen in September. I’ve made one reference to “September” in this debate.

In late August I wrote: “If school workers were currently sitting on a national strike mandate then …[they could demand the programme of social measures…[and] refuse to return in September until this was organised.”

No mention of swathes of workers joining an illegal strike in September. No suggestion that I ever thought a September strike was even a possibility. Like the idea of closing schools for six months, it’s all Colin’s invention.

NEU activists don’t think it will “work”? What precisely they think won’t work is not clear to me.

Stuart Jordan, London □

Longer version at bit.ly/neu-sj

What about musicians?

The editorial of Solidarity 566 rightly called for a big expansion of public-sector jobs to tackle the Covid-related economic crisis, through both the creation of new jobs in existing public services and through nationalising corporations that threaten job cuts.

However, there are many worthwhile jobs outside the public sector, not easily nationalised. Unless we are arguing that absolutely everything is brought into public ownership (which the article doesn’t), then the unavoidable implication is that if your private-sector job is under threat, we’re not going to fight to save it, we just think you should be retrained for a decent public-sector job instead.

This might be fine for a minimum-wage barista who now gets to be a teaching assistant. But what about a skilled worker in their chosen career?

What about a chef? or architect? or plumber? or fashion designer? or journalist? or footballer? or painter and decorator? What about people who don’t work for “corporations” but whose jobs are under threat? It doesn’t seem right to me to suggest that if they can’t be nationalised, then we allow their career to go down the pan, safe in the knowledge that they will be retrained to work in a hospital.

Given the photograph of the Tate galleries strikers on the cover, it was ironic that Solidarity’s editorial did not mention arts and culture jobs. Many of them are in the public sector – museums, libraries, etc. – and you could take that to be covered by the article’s call for the expansion of public service jobs. But many of them are not. What does Solidarity have to say to musicians, writers, actors, sound engineers, and other venue staff?

Janine Booth, Lewes

Full employment

In the arguments about job cuts, we need Full Employment as the driver of economic policy across the board, not profitability, financial markets, or the growing wealth of the richest.

Sunak says we will have to put up with millions of unemployed to “save the economy”. He does get criticised by Labour and left for not supporting jobs, but the fundamental idea that you can separate the health of the economy from the number unemployed has been internalised by the labour movement after 40 years of neoliberalism.

Full Employment speaks to general working-class consciousness as an inherent reasona-

ble and necessary demand.

If there is a non-racist logic to much of the working-class support for Brexit, it’s the idea that pre-Common-Market there was nearly full employment, even in deprived northern towns.

Obviously that is not a causal link. Neoliberalism, the decline of union power, and deliberate de-industrialisation are the causes of under-employment and weakness of workers’ power within the system.

If a “Full Employment” policy objective were fulfilled by interventionist Keynesian methods and job creation programmes, it would massively strengthen the bargaining power of the working class, both unions and unorganised workers.

Luke Hardy, Leeds
The labour movement and Nagorno-Karabakh

By Eric Lee

T he recent outbreak of fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenian enclave inside Azerbaijan, seems like something out of another era. Turkey and Russia each support their own side. A century ago, the Tsar would have supported his Christian co-religionists in Armenia and the Sultan his Muslim brothers in Azerbaijan. Little has changed.

The response of the labour movement to a conflict which has already cost over 300 lives and left thousands homeless has been muted, to put it diplomatically.

The International Trade Union Confederation, whose members include national trade union centres like the TUC or the AFL-CIO, has called on both sides to “enter peaceful dialogue to deal with the dispute,” said General Secretary Sharan Burrow.

Luca Visentini, General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation, announced that the ETUC welcomes “the efforts of the European Union and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe to prevent further escalation and to find a political solution to the long-term conflict … We are ready to support these efforts, in close cooperation with the trade union organisations of both countries.”

The other global unions have been largely silent, with the notable exception of the journalists, who have expressed concern about their members being targeted by both sides in the conflict. The European Federation of Journalists reported that its affiliates in Armenia and Azerbaijan have called on “both countries to ensure the safety of journalists covering the conflict.”

Sadly, that seems to be the one bright spot.

While trade union leaders in Brussels speak about working “in close cooperation with the trade union organisations” in the region, the national trade union centres in the two warring countries are both providing full-throttle support to their governments.

The European Federation of Trade Unions of Armenia condemned “the aggressive, criminal actions of the Azerbaijani authorities, which led to victims among the civilian population, numerous destruction and expresses support for the heroic people of Artsakh” — which is their name for the disputed region.

The German union leaders even sent an appeal to the ITUC and ETUC leaderships in Brussels on 29 September in which they expressed their concern “over the current difficult and alarming situation and hopes that the world community will condemn such inhuman aggression when old people, women and children are being killed by shells.” (According to press reports, civilians have been killed on both sides.)

Not be outdone by their Armenian comrades, the Azerbaijan Trade Unions Confederation has been producing daily accounts of Armenian barbarity and aggression, as they see it. The first news story on their website is entitled “The president posted new messages on Twitter” and that sets the tone for the rest.

They refer to the Armenian government — which came to power in a popular rebellion not unlike what is happening today in Belarus — as “fascist”. They condemn Amnesty International for issuing “a biased, distorted, one-sided statement on its website.” (The Amnesty report was entitled “Armenia/Azerbaijan: Civilians must be protected from use of banned cluster bombs.”)

In the last few days, a cease fire was announced due not the efforts of the UN, EU or OSCE, but to Russian President Vladimir Putin and his foreign minister Sergey Lavrov. Under intense Russian pressure, and following a long night of negotiations in Moscow, there was a ray of hope.

Maybe the international labour movement should consider doing something similar — bringing the leaders of the trade union centres in the two countries together in Brussels to try to find some common ground. It worked for Putin and Lavrov. Maybe it will work for Burrow and Visentini too.

Or maybe the workers in the two countries, sick and tired of the futility of war, will put pressure on the union leaders to reach out to one another across the front lines — and together with their brothers and sisters on the other side force their governments to seek the path of peace.

Eric Lee is the founding editor of Labourstart. He writes here in his personal capacity.

Universal credit blights autonomy

Women’s Fightback

By Janine Booth

S ome women claiming welfare benefits are finding that the system compromises their financial autonomy. If a woman claims benefits, and lives with a partner who also claims benefits, then the system requires them to make a joint claim. Because this is a joint claim, she will also lose money, up to half of their joint income.

The woman is financially punished despite fulfilling her own, individual ‘claimant commitment’. So the woman loses her right to financial autonomy solely because both she and her partner rely on benefits.

One woman told me how this rule is affecting her. Because of past life events, including homelessness and drug addiction, the only way she feels safe to have a relationship is to remain financially independent. She needs to be confident that her partner’s behaviour will never adversely affect her and prevent her meeting her basic needs for shelter, safety, food and a regular weekly income.

Partner

Her partner is also a benefit claimant. She can not live with him on the DWP’s terms. She can only break up with her partner or live with him and lie to the DWP. If caught living with her partner, in a relationship with the person she loves while maintaining her financial autonomy, she will be prosecuted and may be jailed.

A woman in this situation can ask the DWP to make ‘split payments’ so that the payment is divided in half and given to each partner, but this is not automatically granted: she will only get this if she can convince her work coach or case manager that she has a good reason for it.

The government would not force a woman in paid employment to share a joint bank account with her partner. And yet women poor enough to rely on DWP benefits lose their financial autonomy when they move in with their DWP claimant partner.

Universal Credit seems to be designed to replicate 1950s marriages for all couples applying, whether they want that or not. And it can take a woman who has suffered great trauma and made huge efforts to get her life together, and push her right back into dependency and stress.

Financial independence has always been a core demand for women’s rights activists, for very good reason. When a woman is dependent on a partner, she is devalued as an individual human being and made vulnerable to abuse.

Universal Credit has impoverished many women. Through this particular rule, it has additionally compromised women’s financial independence.
Overdoing doom saps activism

By Zack Muddle

The first 20 years of this millennium, 2000-2019, has seen a sharp increase in major recorded natural disasters, a report by a UN agency on 12 October has found. 7,348 recorded events killed 1.23 million people, affected 4.2 billion (many multiple times), and caused roughly US$2.97 trillion of global economic losses. In the 20 years previous, 4,212 recorded natural disasters killed roughly 1.19 million people, affected 3.25 billion, and caused approximately US$1.63 trillion loss.

While better recording and reporting may partly explain some of the increase in events, much of it is due to a significant rise in the number of climate-related disasters”, they report. Climate related disasters make up the overwhelming majority of these natural disasters.

As greenhouse gas levels rise, and the world heats up, invaluables but scarce reports of different impacts of climate crises come out at ever-increasing frequency. The continued failure of governments and institutions to shift adequately make it tempting for environmentalists to hype the worst-case scenarios, evoke apocalyptic spectres, and prophesy ever-more alarming scenarios of ultimate doom. Surely this will motivate people to make the change we need?

It’s notable that despite many exciting and groundbreaking things being done at CERN, the one thing which first catapulted it into the popular limelight was unfounded concerns that the LHC may accidentally create a black hole which would gobble up our whole planet.

While Wallace-Wells’ The Uninhabitable Earth, as reported by Todd Hanner in Solidarity 563, falls into a long tradition of such environmental doom-mongering. Understandable and tempting it may be, such doom-mongering can badly backfire.


A cross examination of some of Wallace-Wells’ claims convinces me that I should take his claims with a bowl-full of salt. More damningly, a science-reviewing website, looking at the original article the book was based on, states: “Seventeen scientists analyzed the article and estimated its overall scientific credibility to be ‘low’. A majority of reviewers tagged the article as: Alarmist, Imprecise/Unclear, Misleading.”

We know, on the basis of rock-solid science, that the impacts of climate change will be very severe. Exaggeration and cherry-picking are not only unnecessary, but undermine our case. It creates a chink in environmentalists’ armour, undermining trust in science and climate activists.

While Wallace-Wells may be a stark example, these certainly aren’t unique issues in the environmental movement, or in communication about science more generally. It is for this reason, not a particular gripe with one author, that I’m taking up this issue.

More damaging, though, is the double edged sword of the apocalypse narrative. On the one hand it can feed a sense of urgency and importance. On the other hand it can feed a sense of despair, of impotence. This is particularly true with descriptions of climate change as a “hyperobject”. Not only may things become bad, but – as with the prophesies of the bible – you can’t even hope to understand them.

Todd’s review rightly critiques Wallace-Wells’ lack of political strategy, and insists Todd places front and centre “the urgent task” of “developing work-class agency and power.” A sense of agency, of the dangers but also the possibilities, and what is necessary to bring about those possibilities, is what is most needed. This is also a more rational assessment of our predicament.

It’s emphatically not the case that – as is often asserted in the climate movement – beyond a specified date, if we have not reduced greenhouse gas emissions by a minimum proportion, then Game Over, The End of the World is nigh, we will face an Inexorable Doomsday in which first human civilisation collapses, then humanity itself goes extinct, perhaps even followed by all advanced life on earth.

There can be positive feedback mechanisms, which we don’t adequately understand, and can’t fully predict. But we do know that the greater, and the faster the warming, and the less the adaptation, the worse the outcomes. Failing to limit warming to 1.5°C would be catastrophic. But limiting it at 2°C would still be better than 2.5°C, 2.5°C better than 3°C, and even 5°C better than 6°C. There is no point at which we may rationally pronounce that we’ve failed, better luck next time, the best we can hope for is a quick death for humanity and for life on earth.

There is no point at which work-class environmental activism becomes useless because it is completely overwhelmed by doom.

Keeping school as safe as possible

By a London teacher

Schools are large institutions which are fully open. In most there is little possibility of social distancing and the wearing of face-coverings is impossible during lessons and difficult at other times. The virus is being spread in schools are either unrealistic or in communication about science more generally. It is for this reason, not a particular gripe with one author, that I’m taking up this issue.

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The history of anti-vaxxism

By Angela Driver

In recent weeks there have been protests denying that Covid-19 is a problem. Many of these people are also against vaccinations. Why?

Nowadays, vaccinations are very safe. Like all medications they do have side effects, but the chances of a vaccine causing significant harm are many times smaller than the harm that would be caused by the disease that they are vaccinating against.

Yet some parents do not vaccinate their children because of a belief that they cause harm. In 1998 Andrew Wakefield published falsified research claiming there was a link between the MMR vaccine and autism. His corruption was uncovered, his published research was retracted by The Lancet, and he was struck off as a doctor, but many parents remained so afraid of the MMR vaccine that uptake continued to fall and led to outbreaks of measles.

Measles can cause 1 in 500 children to get encephalitis and brain damage compared to the possibility of 1 in a million children getting encephalitis as a result of having the MMR vaccine. Many studies conducted since then have concluded that there is no link between the MMR vaccine and autism (including an 8 year longitudinal study of over 650,000 children in Denmark).

But in the past vaccinations were dangerous. The first vaccine against smallpox, a disease which killed many, was developed in the 1850s. There was little knowledge about bacteria and the need for hygiene, and so many vaccinated babies developed gangrene and died due to the spread of other infections.

The government at the time imposed fines for failure to get vaccinated, and there was protest movement against them. The rationale is that high levels of vaccination protect not only the individuals vaccinated, but the whole population. If a vaccine is 90% effective and taken by 90% of a population, then any freak infection is unlikely to find susceptible people to transmit to, and the unvaccinated are protected. If it is taken by only 80%, or 70%, and the disease is highly infectious, then freak infections will spread and hit the vaccinated, too.

In the 1950s there was a new vaccine against polio, which was then a huge killer. A bad batch where the virus was not deactivated led to 200,000 cases of polio, 200 cases of paralysis, and 10 deaths. But there had been outbreaks that killed over a thousand in short periods of time before the vaccine.

Despite everything, confidence remained high until the 1970s. Pregnant mothers in the US had been given synthetic hormones during pregnancy as part of a research trial without their knowledge, and those had doubled the rate of still-birth. Dr Mendelsohn exposed that, and encouraged patients to question their doctors. This started out as empowering patients. Then he went further to claim without good evidence that vaccines were harmful and to discourage mothers from getting their babies vaccinated.

They supported vaccines in the past. Today that history is feeding into Covid denying movements. At times governments and some doctors have betrayed public trust. In the past vaccinations have sometimes been dangerous. Today every vaccine available in most countries (with the possible exception of Russia and China) is very safe. But it can be difficult for people to know the truth.

Politicians lie, and research is often funded by pharmaceutical companies trying to turn a profit, and published by journals who also rely on profit. Social media and newspapers publicise headlines and click-bait that rarely tell the whole story.

But the research is there. Vaccines have saved countless lives. Despite the hype the vast majority of people do follow advice and most children are vaccinated.

We need science and medicine to be transparent, accessible and trustworthy. Research should be publicly funded without political interference. Questioning and skepticism of this government and authority is appropriate, but the answers to questions must be based on the best available evidence.

Good communication and transparency are necessary to combat conspiracy theories, and give us the best chance of minimising death and illness from Covid 19.

Rosie Duffield and trans backlash

By Angela Driver

It is a common misconception that the proposed reforms to the Gender Recognition Act threatened “single-sex spaces”, toilets, changing rooms, and meant that men just pretending to be women could access them.

These fears are unfounded. The GRA has nothing to say about the use of toilets. The Equality Act 2010 already gives trans people the right to access services appropriate to their lived gender at any stage of their transition. Single sex services are only allowed to exclude trans people under exceptional circumstances, where there is a justifiable reason for doing so. Trans women have always been able to use women’s toilets. That is nothing new.

For some the “fear” goes beyond ignorance and is based on an underlying prejudice that trans women are actually just men “pretending” to be women, on fear of and hostility towards trans people. It has recently spilled out into the open among Labour MPs.

A recent blog post criticised Law Society guidance that transitioning employees should use the toilet they feel comfortable with.

In response to a tweeted comment by Shadow Women and Equalities Minister Marsha de Cordova, Maya Forstater (who is consistently transphobic on Twitter) tweeted that the guidance was for “cross-dressers”. Labour MP Rosie Duffield “liked” Forstater’s tweet, and thus publicly supported the idea that trans women are just men “dressing up” or “pretending” to be women.

The Labour Campaign for Trans Rights called on LGBT+, the Labour Party’s LGBT+ organisation, to act.

The chair of LGBT+, Heather Peto, criticised Rosie Duffield for liking Maya Forstater’s tweet — saying either she was not being careful or she was actively supporting transphobia. Rosie Duffield mocked Heather, saying she hadn’t “learnt to be careful” but was going to Stepford to be “re-programmed”.

Rosie Duffield has previously had to apologise publicly for saying that only women have a cervix. She took a long time to apologise, and maintained her stance even after it was pointed out that such statements could discourage trans men and non-binary people from having cervical smears.

Despite repeated calls, neither Rosie Duffield nor Marsha de Cordova has apologised, and Keir Starmer has issued no statement on the subject.

The government’s abandonment of proposed reforms to the GRA has led to a significant backlash against trans people, who were already facing persecution.

There is a risk that the government may reduce the rights trans people have under the Equality Act 2010.

The Labour Party has existing policy to amend the GRA to allow self-ID. It should be vocally defending trans rights now more than ever. Instead we are seeing worrying signs that transphobia is becoming accepted in the Labour Party.

The Labour Party must treat transphobia just as seriously as any other bigotry.
Hawkins: “A stronger vote against Trump”


The invective of Trump is what is worse than previous incumbents. Egging on the vigilante militias. Calling the election as being fraudulent before it is even run.

People get scared and they think Hitler is on the horizon. But it is quite different. These rag tag militias aren’t going to be able to change the government. I don’t think Trump is more right-wing than some previous Republicans. His invective is certainly more inflammatory, towards women, immigrants and minorities. But it is not like an army of hundreds of thousands ready to go out and smash a strong workers’ movement. Trump is so offensive to the senses that people can get a little bit hysterical.

The polls show that, since Biden became the nominee, he is solidly ahead. He started out 4 points ahead, and by the time we got to the debate he was 7 or 8 points ahead. This is nationally and also in the so-called battleground states in 2016. He has double-digit leads in those states now.

Biden is ahead in states that used to be solidly republican like Georgia and Arizona and Texas. The whole field has shifted and now Biden is double digits ahead, nationally. The only way he can lose an election is if the Republicans stop the election, and they refuse the count of the mail-in ballots. The Democrats have a whole team of lawyers ready.

Angela Walker, my running mate, was out there on the streets demonstrating for the count in 2000, but Gore and Lieberman called people to get off the streets. This time round, it looks again like the Democrats will be focused on their legal challenge, but we will call people onto the streets. Lots of Democratic voters will want to be on the streets, especially if there is a refusal to count the mail-in ballots.

Do you think Trump will try and hold onto the Presidency whether it is close or not? Will the Democrats call people onto the streets?

Republicans have said in a state like Pennsylvania, they’ve got control of the legislature. So even if Biden wins Pennsylvania, they’re going to send electors who are pro Trump! I think legally it’s hopeful that kind of nonsense will be stopped. But we’re telling people, be prepared to go out and demonstrate, even have a general strike, to get those votes counted.

One of our arguments is you can’t count on the Democrats to fight for our rights. Their policy is to accommodate. Bill Clinton called it triangulation. Joe Biden calls it working across the aisle. And right now they’re rolling over for this nomination for Amy Coney Barrett for the Supreme Court. They could slow that down. They could impeach Trump and Attorney General Barr for undermining the election. They have chosen not to.

An impeachment proceeding would take precedence over any other proceeding in the Congress. But they don’t seem to be willing to fight back hard. The Republicans certainly are. The Democrats are not even fighting on the procedure.

The US is a real anomaly. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe is contacting our campaign as part of their observation of the election. It goes back to the Helsinki Accords, which in its early years was focussed on violation of democratic norms by the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. A two-party state like the US is not much better than a one-party state on some of these questions. It’s a cleverer and more stable setup, and you have the illusion of real choice. But the power structure is still set up to favour the governing parties.

How visible has your campaign managed to be while the debate is so polarised between Trump and Biden?

Ballot access is a huge problem. That’s why our ballot lines are so important. It’s thousands or tens of thousands of signatures to run in each state. The Green Party is not all we want it to be, it’s a vehicle, but at the same time people are standing on the sideline and saying, well, you’re not good enough. Trump is such a danger. We’re going to vote for this very conservative Democrat.

Biden is more conservative than Hillary Clinton, and he’s not promising anything. I thought one of the most telling things in the debate was when they were asked why should people vote for you? And Trump spouted a bunch of lies like he always does about things he hadn’t accomplished that he hadn’t. And then Biden talked about what was wrong with Trump. He never said, why vote for Joe Biden? Millions of people will stay at home. The non-voters are the biggest bloc in the US we could mobilise. A hundred million people didn’t vote in 2016. And right now, from what people might see in the major media, you know, there’s nothing in it for them. Working-class life expectancies are in decline in this country. And Trump says he cares when he doesn’t. Most people see through that. And Biden isn’t really offering much. So it’s a pretty depressing situation.

In states like New York, we are a stronger vote against Trump. To give your vote to Biden is to strengthen him and affirm his positions, against a Green New Deal, against Medicare for all. Against scaling back our bloated military budget. You tell Biden to take it for granted. We don’t see why any self respecting progressive would vote for Biden, particularly in those states. So we are wondering where’s the left solidarity at the moment?

Has there been an increase in Green membership? Or have groups been set up that are backing your campaign, aren’t part of the Greens, but want to do something after the election?

What we found out in the course of the campaign is which people in different states really want to organise. We have a network we can build upon and go forward. And that’s going to involve ballot access, petitioning, running local candidates and helping people become better organisers.

Most Greens and most of the left, both the independent and Democratic Party orientated left, are very focussed on mobilising people for episodic demonstrations or petition drives or other campaigns, but not about going out and listening and building relationships and building real grassroots organisation.

The issue in the US is that the main parties are not membership parties. You tell the state which party you’re in. And that tells them which ballot to give you in the primary elections. And, other than that, if you’ve got an issue in your neighbourhood or your town, you don’t go to the local branch of the Democratic or Republican Party, because they don’t exist. What we’re trying to do is organise the first membership party, which is an invention of the left like in the UK. Tories and the Whigs were built from the top down, you know, rich folks would sponsor them to mobilise the people who could vote. They weren’t a membership party.

It was the left who said you could agree to some principles, pay your dues and have your say. Support the party like you would your union. Most politics now is what you see on TV or you occasionally get a flyer in the mail, an election comes around. But other than that, people are divorced from politics.

For years now “Vote Blue, No Matter Who” has been a common refrain. It is promised that a future time is the opportunity for a third party candidate. How do you persuade the left that now is the time for an independent initiative? And how do you make sure it relates to the people who supported Sanders or who think they can see some shift in the Democrats?

Hal Draper in 1968 was right that the question itself is the disaster. What will really persuade people is if we start electing thousands of Greens to local office, and that’s a foundation for running credible state legislative and congressional campaigns, credible because people say, the Greens and the city council run the school board and they’ve done a good job.

We know what they stand for. We’ve won a few of those over the years, but we could be doing a lot more. And I think the fact that we do it undermines the lesser evil argument better than the best essay.

I’ve been pointing out that Bernie Sanders is a case in point. He was elected mayor of Burlington, Vermont, as an Independent. Several times to Congress, and then a couple more years that the Senate, running as an independent. And when he tried to run as a Democrat for President, the corporate establishment Democratic Party closed ranks against him. □

• Mark Osborn in his article on page 9 makes reference to Hawkins being scheduled for a “live panel discussion” with the antisemitic “Black Hammer” group. The Ohio Green Party, which had agreed to the event, cancelled it after Hawkins supporters complained, and said: “A 30 second Google search could have prevented this. We apologise”. Part 2 of this interview will appear in a future issue of Solidarity.
Democrats: no space for radicals

By Mark Osborn

The main impression I get from Thomas Carolan’s article (Solidarity 565, Trump is a fascist) is that Carolan has belatedly woken up to the threat posed by Trump and is now panicizing. Most of those who have labelled Trump a fascist have done so demagogically to advocate for the right wing and lamentable Democrat, Joe Biden. But Carolan is at least coming from the other direction, declaring Trump a fascist first, before last week (Solidarity 566), following the drift of his first article, and declaring support of Biden’s candidacy. Then, in a third article (also Solidarity 566), Carolan went much further, advocating an activist orientation to the Democratic Party.

Carolan has bought a ticket on a bus, possibly driven by Eric Lee. The next stop is probably an out-of-town hypermarket for a full set of Vote Biden underwear. After that, who knows? That’s a serious point made in a flip-pantry way. Carolan will remain a Trotskyist but who can tell where those who listen to him and take him seriously might end up. We have held a traditional position (do not vote Democrat, argue for a working-class alternative), for a whole raft of serious reasons. To abandon that position, in the abrupt way Carolan has, is alarming. Small Trotskyist groups can become disoriented and come to grief by such shifts.

But, more to the point, Carolan is wrong. I agree with Matt Cooper’s article (Solidarity 566) and I won’t repeat his arguments beyond a couple of brief remarks. Surely, if Trump were a fascist, he would have done more specifically “fascist stuff” in the last three and a half years, while President. It is not as if Trump is not an obnoxious, lying, narcissistic right-wing pig. He is, of course. But a fascist President – one with fascist intent, if not yet an organised base – would have done much more to seriously curtail US democracy.

We know that Trump has seriously damaged US political debate and attempted to bully the press. Nevertheless there is a free election about to take place (and I know the attempts at restricting the vote in Florida and Texas etc. are an important qualification), which Biden seems set to win.

If Trump is a fascist – if words are to mean anything, and “fascist” is not to become a synonym for “right wing loudmouth” – he would have to share key features of the original Italian fascist movement. In other words Trump would be building a mass movement to replace US democracy with a single-party, militarised-nationalist, totalitarian state. He has done nothing like this.

Trump has built and cultivated a personal base, but one which he approaches as a multi-millionaire television showman, not a Goebbels-like Gaukler of Berlin. Barrie Hardy’s comment (Solidarity 561) that, “The closing round of the Trump presidency may be the last stage of a real Fascist movement in the White House grounds would have done the late Joseph Goebbels proud”, is not serious political comment.

No, Trump is not, now, a fascist. Trump’s project is not to build a totalitarian state, but to keep Trump in the White House. For which he seems prepared to do more or less anything he calculates he can get away with, pushing boundaries, breaking rules and traditions as he needs to. So it is at least imaginable that Trump’s willingness to do anything to stay in power might end up with Trump, or an anti-Trump, anti-racist, anti-totalitarian street movement which becomes his main, stable political centre.

Polls

I have been assuming, for months – based on the polls – that Trump will lose the popular vote and the electoral college vote for President. I still think that is right. The Financial Times data, for example, seems pretty clear on this.

That assumption needs some qualification. Polls can be wrong. Trump is capable of many things, up to and including starting a war, in the election run-up – and he might take an initiative that changes the calculations.

Nevertheless, shortly after the polls shut, Trump will declare victory. Assuming he has actually lost, this will amount to some sort of open theft. He will back his declaration with legal action and by calling his people out onto the streets, as right-wing street theatre, to create some chaos. Presumably there will be some shooting and killings. He will bluster and boast and try to intimidate the Democrats into conceding. At this point, in the crisis that is surely coming, it is possible to imagine Trump coalescing something that more resembles a fascistic street movement. But, we are some distance from that yet, and there are lots of other possibilities.

Whether he gets away with his power grab will depend on how close the vote is, and how Biden responds. Since Biden is utterly useless, the best that can be expected is that he does not concede, immediately (as Gore collapsed in very vaguely similar circumstances over the vote in Florida, 2000). It will also depend on the scale of the counter-protests. Our job is to back the US labour movement and broadly-defined left fighting to defend democracy. Articles in Solidarity by Barrie Hardy have argued that US democracy is “fragile”. It is not. It is under threat, and can be damaged, but it is not fragile.

It is worth considering past US crises, for example, the 1968 election. In the election run-up Robert Kennedy was assassinated. Before that Martin Luther King was murdered and scores of innocent African American men and women were killed. The Vietnam war was in the background. There was street-fighting outside the Democratic convention in Chicago. An open segregationist, George Wallace, took 10 million votes and five states.

US democracy has survived big challenges before and will not just roll-over and die. Trump’s attempt to cheat is and will be contested, bitterly and fiercely. And it is not just the separation of powers in the US which means Trump will find it hard to impose himself. Various US traditions, such as the right to free speech, are not just banners of the right; they will be fought for by Trump’s opponents.

The US is post 2008/9 crash and inside a Covid crisis, and that makes the conditions difficult and the ground more favourable to build right-wing movements. That’s true, and needs putting on our balance.

But it is also not clear how bourgeois institutions will react to a Trump clear loss, are the army leadership going to back him (the confrontation between the army and McCarthy, televised in 1954, effectively ended the McCarthy threat)? The Economist magazine is not even sure his own appointees to the Supreme Court will support an open power grab.

The point is to have a balanced discussion about this. Designating Trump a fascist is of no help, it disorientates and only adds a layer of confusion and panic.

I agree with the AWL’s position to vote for the Green candidate, the socialist Howie Hawkins, with two caveats. First, I am alarmed at reports he intended some sort of joint event with an antisemitic black nationalist group. Second, given the very narrow and unsubstantial nature of the Green campaign I am not sure if it is of much interest to us, the Trotskyists, as I can not see it educating many new socialists, and I can’t see much being consolidated after the campaign ends.

Voting Biden is arguable. Wrong, but arguable.

What is certainly impermissible is inventing a new analysis of the Democratic Party to suit the current need (as Carolan sees it) to call for a Biden vote (as Carolan does in his third article, Socialists for Biden, Solidarity 566).

He writes that the US labour movement involves itself in the Democratic Party. Some of the labour movement already does that, unfortunately. And the Biden-supporting unions are treated like dogs by the Democrat’s machine, patted on the head, and given pretend influence.

Do you want to become Joe Biden’s puppy dog, comrade Carolan? Because there are no effective mechanisms at all for the unions or the socialist left to work in this bourgeois party. You become a petitioner, cap in hand, in front of the rich and powerful who control the Democrat show, an electoral machine with no real space for people like us.

Joe Biden is a creep and a right-wing shit, running for a right-wing, mainstream bourgeois party. If he is elected he will be a disaster and may well prepare the way for a new Trump, something even worse than Trump. Do you want to take a share of the responsibility for that?

Carolan cites the Sanders movement’s insurgent attempt to disrupt normal Democratic Party functioning. He cites Sanders it as if such moves have never happened before. The women’s movement, the Civil Rights leadership – not only the unions – have found themselves tied up and slowly strangled by the Democrats. If I remember rightly even Elaine Brown and Bobby Seale ran in Oakland in 1973 as Democrats.

Radicals go to the Democrats with good intentions, but die there.

Yes, Sanders led an important movement, of which I was an enthusiastic supporter. But one of the key reasons I supported Sanders is I thought a Sanders candidacy might split or break up the Democrats along useful, progressive lines. Carolan is right, some of the future socialist left might well be in orbit around the Democrats. That’s something to relate to, not collapse into. We do no one any favours by pretending the Democrats are something they are not. □
Democrats: the danger of co-option

By Daniel Randall

Thomas Carolan (“A socialist vote for Biden”, Solidarity 566, 7 October 2020) is right that a “tradition” should not be allowed to become “superstition”. He is also right that “making an absolute principle of never working in or voting for a bourgeois party” would be mechanical and dogmatic.

Standing aside from the Sanders movements in 2016 and 2020 because he was running in the primary of a “bourgeois party” would have been hopelessly sectarian; refusing to campaign or vote for him if he had won still more so. But Carolan goes way beyond that basic point to conclude that socialists should be “supporting or involved in the Biden campaign”, as if “the Biden campaign” is a terrain as permeable to the kind of intervention Sanders was able to make into the Democratic primaries in 2016 and 2020. “Socialists can work openly and independently around the Democrats, can’t they?”, Carolan asks – note how “in” and “around” are used interchangeably throughout the article, as if Carolan knows that the kind of direct intervention in the Democratic party he appears to be advocating isn’t perhaps as viable as he claims. But can they? The Sanders movement proves that a left-social-democratic bid for the Presidential primary can have a big impact and mobilise large numbers. It does not at all follow from this that even the politics Sanders represents can have a similar impact “in” or “around” the Biden campaign itself, which is entirely under the control of the Democratic machine and conditioned by the kind of politics Biden represents, which Carolan doesn’t even mention, as if the political perspectives and record of the actual candidate – in a presidential election, no less – shouldn’t bother us.

The truism that “a lot of the working-class and trade-union forces that will a create a future independent workers’ party (in the USA) are in and around the Democrats” is used to justify a view that, despite accepting that the Democrats is a straightforward “bourgeois party” rather than a “bourgeois workers’ party”, it should be a, or even the, primary terrain of political action for socialists in the US, in the way that Workers’ Liberty sees the Labour Party in the UK. Carolan gives no sense of what this intervention might look like. He must surely know that the Democrats has no real equivalent of the Labour Party structures, including its direct link with affiliated unions, that make ongoing and systematic intervention by socialists and labour movement activists possible. Work “in” the Democrats means, essentially, running in Democratic primaries. That may make sense in certain instances. It will undoubtedly be one of a range of strategic approaches that the socialist left in the US will use on the way to establishing an independent working-class party. But doing this work on a basis that doesn’t lay it open to simply fizzling out, or to whatever progress it makes being co-opted by the Democratic machine, requires explicitly maintaining that long-term horizon of breaking from, rather than “reclaiming” or transforming, the Democrats. And the possibility of doing that work in certain instances does not imply wider possibilities for a more sustained intervention into the Democratic party as such.

Evidence

Unfortunately neither Sanders nor Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the two examples Carolan gives as evidence for his position that an “intervene in the Democrats” strategy is justified, have anything like this perspective. Even Sanders, who formally retains his status as an independent senator, sees his project in terms of transforming or “reclaiming”, the Democratic party.

The Sanders movement has had little formal life, beyond the NGO-type organising of “Our Revolution”, between elections; AOC has made no attempt to build anything that could meaningfully be described as an ongoing movement. Unless socialists with a clear analysis of the nature of the Democrats can win at least large minorities of the people enthused by figures like Sanders and AOC to the perspective that the left and the labour movement need an independent organisation, the potential opportunities will be lost.

Carolan raises a comparison with attitudes to Stalinist Communist Party during the Cold War. These, too, were parties that people from our tradition saw not as working-class parties but as parties of an enemy class – the Stalinist ruling class of the Soviet Union and its satellites. But they were also mass parties of workers who “wanted to be socialists”, as Carolan puts it, so wouldn’t “shunning all cooperation” with CP members have been wrong? Yes, of course, but there’s yet more slippage and rhetorical sleight-of-hand here. Who is proposing to “shun all cooperation” with Democrat-voting workers? But seeking “cooperation” with CP-supporting or Democrat-supporting workers doesn’t require voting for their presidential candidates. Presumably Carolan would not have advocated a “socialist vote” for Earl Browder or Gus Hall.

Carolan says that socialists should support the Biden campaign whilst “advocating distinct socialist ideas”. But one of the essential “distinct socialist ideas” the US left needs to advocate is that the working class needs its own party, and that a lesser-evilist strategy of voting for Biden is hopelessly limited. If his view is that we should say to workers, “vote Biden this time, but on 4 November we must return to the task of building an independent movement that breaks from the Democrats”, he needs to explain how this tallies with his project in terms of transforming or “reclaiming”, the Democratic party.

Carolan’s arguments are a recipe for locking the socialist left into permanent lesser-evilism that tails, rather than attempting to challenge, workers’ acceptance that government by the least-bad of the two bosses’ parties is the best they can or should hope for. The Green Party, in and of itself, will not be an instrument for the creation of an independent workers’ party in the US. And Howie Hawkins’ campaign may well be unable to realise the already limited opportunities for an independent socialist intervention in the 2020 election. Those facts do not justify Carolan’s support for an orientation to the Democrats. It is also undeniable that most left-minded people and labour movement activists will see a vote for Biden, however critical of him they are, as the only available means of removing Trump. In a direct and immediate sense, they’re right. Socialists should be sympathetic to their instincts. But we have a political perspective beyond simply removing Trump from office. We want to defeat his movement, and change the social conditions that generated it. That requires winning the argument for independent political action and organisation, on the basis of socialist politics. Winning that argument requires making it, and the US left will be hopelessly constrained in its ability to make it if it has allowed its horizons to shrink down to lesser-evilism.

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. See workersliberty.org/anti-racist-resources

See workersliberty.org/anti-racist-resources
**Different in two ways**

**By Martin Thomas**

This US presidential election is different in two ways.

It narrows down to a contest between a fascist demagogue with a militant and part-militarised mass base, and a standard-issue neoliberal. And recent years have seen a sizeable though diffuse new US socialist current round Sanders’ campaigns and the Democratic Socialists of America.

At the same time, the International Socialist Organization has wound itself up, and Solidarity sees itself more as an “educational centre” than an activist group.

Conclusion: the most active, interventionist step on 3 November towards building an independent working-class socialist party in the USA is to create a socialist, democratic, critical profile within the rallying of left-minded, anti-racist, and pro-union voters to stop Trump by voting Biden. That will energise people round the urgency of defending and extending democratic rights and round working-class and socialist ideas. Not as well as a campaign by a socialist party, but that’s not available.

The climate-activist Sunrise Movement, as passed on by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, says: “Young people have the power to crush Trump, and he knows it. That’s why he’s trying to steal the election, but we’re going to be there to stop him. Once he’s out, and we’re still in the streets, our movement can set the tone for the next four years…”

The DSA says: “The death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg reminded us all of the fragile state of our democracy… We know that a second Trump term would have devastating effects for our class and for our movement”. Draw your own conclusion? The DSA doesn’t. If DSA groups campaign on the Sunrise Movement basis, they will contribute more.

Black Lives Matter leaders like Patrisse Cullors and Alicia Garza are combining a Biden vote with left-wing criticism. Voting Biden requires saying no more “for” him than leftists who oppose voting for him already say.

Voting Howie Hawkins might be better if he were running for a substantial working-class party that could build itself in the election. But, for understandable reasons of realpolitik, he is running for the Green Party, not a socialist or working-class party. His own socialist group, Solidarity, is not backing Howie Hawkins in the presidential election.

A Hawkins vote is a weak gesture, not movement-building.

Sticking to principles is not the same as sticking to old formulas. The long-established formula is for US Trotskyists never to vote Democrat.

All those socialists, the majority, who favoured backing Sanders’ bid for the Democrat nomination, and would have backed him if he’d won that, have already modified the formula. The socialist movement before 1914 focused rightly on building independent working-class parties. It had no principle that it was better to sit on your hands than to vote for bourgeois-democratic candidates against monarchists or the like. On the contrary.

After 1914; the argument of principle was for real working-class parties, and ones which saw themselves winning the majority of the working class in a not-distant-future, to use elections to build themselves rather than renouncing that in favour of bourgeois lesser evils.

There was argument about independent candidates in Germany in the run-up to Hitler’s rise to power, for example. There, in the November 1932 election the Communist and Socialist parties won 37% of the vote, as against the Nazis’ 33% and a declining share for the bourgeois liberal parties (Zentrum 12%, DDP 1%). Right-wing Zentrum politician Franz von Papen would then in January 1933 persuade the President to appoint Hitler Chancellor (himself, von Papen, as Vice-Chancellor).

**Ramshackle**

The Democratic Party is to a large extent not a party in the European sense, but rather a bureaucratic subsection of the USA’s capitalist state government. There is no equivalent of Labour Party conference, of the political processes in CLPs, or of Labour’s NEC elections (even at their worst). Nearest are the “primaries”, run by government structures, not the party.

But then Bernie Sanders didn’t have to be a Democrat senator in order to run for the Democrat nomination. Bernie Sanders has never been a revolutionary, but he didn’t have to move to the right to contest the nomination. Experience has shown it possible to participate in action like the Sanders campaign, and to build organisation from it, without being drowned.

The Trotskyist “don’t vote Democrat” tradition was always linked to saying that there was little or no difference between Democrat and Republican candidates.

In 1932 the Trotskyists backed the Communist Party candidate because they worked as an expelled faction of the CP. In 1936 they backed the Socialist Party candidate because they were in the SP. In 1940 and 1944 they said little about the presidential election except (truly) that there was little difference between the leading candidates.

In 1948 both the Orthodox Trotskyists (SWP) and the Heterodox (WP) shifted, basically the better to counter the Stalinist Henry Wallace “Progressive Party” candidacy. The SWP ran a candidate and the WP recommended a vote for the SWP or either of two other minor socialist candidates.

Even in the 1960s, Hal Draper’s argument was that the pressure of “bureaucratic-statified capitalism” made differences between liberals and conservatives largely illusory.

**Against**

As far as I know, there is nothing in the literature against voting for a clearly-defined, high-stakes bourgeois lesser evil (not a might-be-a-shade-in-it-one) when there is no real working-class alternative in the race, before the arguments I made for an active minority “blank vote” in the Chirac/ Le Pen second round of the French 2002 presidential election. They don’t apply here.

To say that the USA is already fascist, or that Trump can make it immediately fascist if he “steals” the 3 November election, would be to proclaim a possible future defeat as already complete, like the Stalinists in the early 1930s saying that Germany was already fascist before Hitler took power. Saying that Trump personally is fascist, and that he may severely damage democratic rights, is accurate.

Trotsky’s comment on Piłsudski is relevant here: “It is methodologically false to form an image of some ‘ideal’ fascism and to oppose it to this real fascist regime which has grown up, with all its peculiarities and contradictions, upon the terrain of the relationship of classes and nationalities in the Polish state”. So is the US Trotskyists’ assessment of McCarthy as an American fascist in the early 1950s. Not knowing that the period was the beginning of an unprecedented capitalist boom, they overestimated his impact, but they were right not to dismiss him as “not fascist” because he lacked the trapings of European fascists.

That Max Shachtman lost his revolutionary activism from the mid-1950s shaped what he later did around the Democratic Party, but was not caused by it. On a world scale, he saw Stalinism as dynamic and stable and capitalism (even in the long boom) as in “unarrested decline and helplessness” (as he wrote in a book preface as late as 1961). If Stalinism won, all bets were off. If bourgeois-democratic capitalism could get a reprieve from the Stalinist steamroller, then a workers’ socialist movement might be built in the interim.

And gradually he had given up on building a revolutionary socialist movement, hoping instead that in that interim social democracy would come good. From being a writer and activist appealing directly to left-minded youth, he drifted to being a behind-the-scenes fixer and adviser in those circles of US trade-union officialdom where many radicals of the 1940s had landed. That orientation took him into Democratic Party string-pulling, not vice versa. The finale was Shachtman in 1972 following the AFL-CIO’s line of… neutrality in that year’s presidential election. □
Is US democracy under threat?

By Barrie Hardy

A very healthy debate has been taking place in the pages of Solidarity on how socialists should relate to the forthcoming US presidential election. Having written a number of articles on the subject recently, I think it necessary for me to give my take on things.

I was taken aback by one reader who found it “objectionable” for me to say that bourgeois democracy was under threat in the US. Trump’s gang have done their utmost to trash its institutions, codes and conventions. He’s gone out of his way to capture the Supreme Court for the reactionary right and also thanks to his henchman, Attorney General Bill Barr, removed several District Attorneys investigating Trump. Numerous Inspectors General – oversight officials there to stop overreach by the executive branch – have been sacked. In late spring Trump got rid of five in the space of six weeks. All of this could have escaped most people’s attention, but we have a President who says he refuses to accept the result of the November election unless he has called for the arrest of his political opponent, Joe Biden, along with Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, in the middle of the election campaign. Voter suppression has also been taken to a new level with the deliberate sabotage of the US Postal Service. As if this wasn’t enough, we’ve had Trump flattering the various white supremacist and neo-Nazi “militias” and calling on them to stand watch at voting stations where they will be no doubt armed to the teeth. This comes on top of FBI arrests of 13 far right terrorists charged with various plots against the state of Michigan, including one to kidnap its Governor, Gretchen Whitmer.

Given all of this I would like to know what more it would take as evidence that bourgeois democracy is not imperilled? Perhaps those who believe this way have a touching regard for the US Constitution and its ability to withstand all challenges, but they shouldn’t count on it! Of course, if you believe that bourgeois democracy is not in danger, then who to vote for doesn’t matter. A democratic system will broadly be in place even if Trump emerges victorious. That’s why denying Trump is a fascist follows on with this line of thinking.

If fascism is a form of far-right authoritarian ultranationalism which craves for dictatorial power and the forcible suppression of opposition, then Donald Trump is a fascist. He might not have fully worked out political ideology, parade around in uniform or sport a silly little moustache, but Donald walks like a duck and talks like a duck.

Not all fascist regimes came to power on the backs on mass fascist movements. General Franco was not an ideological fascist when he launched his coup against the bourgeois-democratic republic in 1936, but an old-style pro-church, pro-landlord, pro-monarch reactionary. He utilised the Spanish Falange as auxiliaries during the civil war then merged them into one state party with the Carlists afterwards. I doubt if anyone reading this newspaper would describe his regime as anything other than fascist, however.

In the case of next door neighbour Portugal, there wasn’t even a mass fascist movement behind Salazar, and he didn’t set up his fascist state until seven years after a military coup. Again I doubt there’d be many takers for calling Salazar anything other than fascist.

In the case of the United Front between the two mass workers’ parties, namely the Social Democrats and the Communist Party, to defeat fascism in Europe.

Today there aren’t two mass workers’ parties in the USA. Historically there’s never even been one. Independent working-class organisation is of course needed. Some of it will come from struggles happening in the street of American towns and cities. Other elements will come from the left of the Democratic Party and its supporters in the trade unions. We cannot cut ourselves off from these people by enabling another Trump term.

Wave of wildcats

By Sacha Ismail

Since the start of March there have been over 1,000 strikes in the US, many related to the Covid-19 crisis and some to the Black Lives Matter struggle. Most are wildcat strikes, without formal vote or official union endorsement. In some cases they have taken place in workplaces where there is no union.

The crowd-funded website Payday Report has put together a map tracking these strike. It argues that its tracker probably underestimates the actual numbers.

The strikes, concentrated in the Eastern half of the US and on the West Coast, have taken place in industries and workplaces as diverse as the Detroit auto industry, Pittsburgh sanitation, chicken-processing in Kathleen (Georgia), iron works in Bath (Maine), grocery workers in Memphis, Amazon warehouse workers in Staten Island and bar workers in Portland.

These developments have been widely noted and discussed among left-wing labour activists in the US. There is debate about the extent to which all the actions involved constitute strikes.

It is also worth noting that the number of actions has tailed off in the second half of the year, and that most of them are small. Unsurprisingly, figures for big strikes have declined sharply in 2020.

These struggles have lessons for workers in Britain. For a useful discussion of some of the issues, including the vital importance of workplace direct action in the pandemic and the need to take over and transform trade unions, see this article by US socialist Dan La Botz.

Terror

Trump has the backing of numerous right wing terrorist groups including the KKK. The adulation teenage killer Kyle Rittenhouse has received in Republican circles implies that these groups believe they have a license to kill.

A Trump victory will embolden both Trump’s drive for authoritarian rule and raise white supremacy once more to dominate American life. Should “handmaid” Amy Coney Barrett get onto the Supreme Court, women’s rights are going to get trashed also.

Which brings us to the question of how to vote in November. I do not have a problem with people wanting to vote for Green candidate Harry Hawkins in states like New York and California, where Trump has no chance of winning. In swing states like Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania, however, anything other than a vote for Biden would be a criminal dereliction of duty.

If your political position is wanting to see Donald Trump defeated at all cost then there is no logical reason for splitting the anti Trump vote and letting him win. Jill Stein, the 2016 Green candidate, got a bigger vote in all three states mentioned above than the margin between Clinton and Trump.

There’s no way of telling if with Stein not standing the outcome would have been any different, but there’s no proof of the opposite either.

Many on the American left, supporters of Bernie Sanders and AOC included, have never forgiven the Greens in respect to the way the votes panned out in the Mid West. They aren’t going to be too happy with a similar outcome this time and won’t look too kindly on those who advocated it!

Some readers have argued that calling for any vote for Biden is a form of “populist frontism”. Trotsky was of course opposed to popular fronts with bourgeois parties and instead called for a United Front between the two mass workers’ parties, namely the Social Democrats and the Communist Party, to defeat fascism in Europe.

More online

“Don’t back Biden, even vs Trump” Article by six members of New Politics editorial board

bit.ly/no-bid
Belarus: crackdown and gestures

By Pete Radcliff

Svetlana Tikhonovskaya, opposition candidate in Belarus’s rigged 9 August election, declared on Telegram on 13 October: “The regime has 13 days to fulfill three main requirements: 1. Lukashenko must leave. 2. Street violence must stop completely. 3. All political prisoners must be released. If our demands are not met by 25 October, the whole country will peacefully take to the streets with the People’s Ultimatum”. Evidently the opposition assesses that it is strong enough at least to have a chance of this “ultimatum” having at least some force.

Sunday 11 October saw street protests again across Belarus. They were a lot smaller than previous. In part, because of heavy rain. In part, because of fierce repression. Since August, large demos in Minsk had been left alone by the state security forces, who waited for the demos to disperse before harassing small groups. On 11 Oct, the state security forces attacked everyone.

Alongside that repression, Lukashenko seems to be showing a sudden desire for compromise. On Saturday, 10 October he visited the Belarus KGB prison and met some of the imprisoned opposition leaders held there. Hardly a fair or equal discussion, when one participant holds the others in indefinite imprisonment.

After the meeting, two prisoners who claimed to have taken part in the meeting with Lukashenko were released. Yuri Voskresensky, the campaign manager of one of the barred presidential candidates, Eduard Babariko, claimed he had been asked by Lukashenko to draft possible amendments to the constitution.

If this is true, it is unclear whether Voskresensky would be acting on behalf of Babariko or other imprisoned oppositionists.

If Lukashenko is looking to make deals, in the hopes of meeting Putin’s demand for results and placating some in the opposition, it would most likely be through Babariko, the most radical and most pro-Russian of the barred presidential candidates.

Lukashenko has now made a statement about possible changes to the constitution over who has control of the election process. He has also talked about an “inclusive process” of further constitutional changes and the need for tax reform.

Over the last two weeks there have been several discussions between Putin and Lukashenko. They come before the “Unbreakable Brotherhood” exercises by Russia’s close allies, due to take place from 12 Oct – in Belarus!

Neither Putin nor his alliance is strong at the moment. Armenia has pulled out of the military exercise because of war with Azerbaijan around Nagorno-Karabakh. Kyrgyzstan pulled out due to the overthrow of its government on 5 Oct after a siege of its Parliament.

As in Belarus, the uprising in Kyrgyzstan’s capital Bishkek was a response to claims of rigged elections. There has been speculation that this might encourage protests against Lukashenko.

There have been few reports of further workers’ organisation or strike activity in Belarus. Eyes may be on Lukashenko and Putin.

There are risks that under Putin’s pressure and a mixture of threats and promises from Lukashenko, a deal may be done with unreliable elements of the opposition like Babariko.

Babariko may not have much public following despite his imprisonment. However Maria Kolesnikova, probably the most visible and charismatic of the opposition leaders, does, and she was brought into politics by Babariko’s earlier campaign. (Kolesnikova refused to attend the prison meeting).

The democracy movement’s dependence on the liberal leaders of the opposition has always been a weakness. That is why workers need to be organised independently; through the popular, if still weak, independent trade union movement, and further, politically, into a collective class-conscious force that can make sure that Belarus’s battle becomes one for workers’ democracy and workers’ organisation across Putin’s empire.

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What we stand for

Today one class, the working class, lives by selling its labour power to another, the capitalist class, which owns the means of production. Capitalists’ control over the economy and their relentless drive to increase their wealth causes poverty, unemployment, blighting of lives by overwork; imperialism, environmental destruction and much else.

The working class must unite to struggle against the accumulated wealth and power of the capitalists, in the workplace and wider society. The Alliance for Workers’ Liberty wants socialist revolution: collective ownership of industry and services, workers’ control, and a democracy much fuller than the present system, with elected representatives recallable at any time and an end to bureaucrats’ and managers’ privileges.

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

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

- Independent working-class representation in politics
- A workers’ government, based on and accountable to the labour movement
- A workers’ charter of major industries and finance for a rapid transition to a green society
- A workers’ movement that fights all forms of oppression
- Full equality for women, and social provision to free women from domestic labour. Reproductive freedoms and free abortion on demand
- Full equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people
- Black and white workers’ unity against racism
- Open borders
- Global solidarity against global capital – workers everywhere have more in common with each other than with their capitalist or Stalinist rulers
- Democracy at every level of society, from the smallest workplace or community to global social organisation
- Equal rights for all nations, against imperialists and predators big and small
- Maximum left unity in action, and full openness in debate

If you agree with us, take copies of Solidarity to sell – and join us!

workersliberty.org/subscribe

Cutting tools

Diary of an engineer

By Emma Rickman

A week ago I felt like giving up, but this one I think I might be getting somewhere. This is often an up-and-down job.

I’m asked to make a pin for the crane from a rough sketch. I can’t find any solid bar of the right size, so I use a cutting saw to trim a piece to size, then the pillar drill to punch a 7mm hole through the centre. When the hole ends up off-centre on the curved surface, I cut another hole and drill it again, but accurately.

I’m happy that this is simple, but good, work. I’m not even fussed when A tells me threaded bar will snap too easily to be useful – I followed J’s instructions and the error is not mine.

To fulfil the role of pin we use a large bolt, then adjust the sensor to account for the shorter length. Me, A and L put on paper overalls, masks, gloves, cover-shoes and hoods to get onto the crane gantry and drill fresh holes in the steel arm, thread them, screw in the sensor and position the new bolt “pin”. Job done.

In the afternoon the apprentices take it in turns to fault-find on an unused cassette in the switch room. P tells me the basics of how a cassette functions, and when it’s my turn I fumble my way through the schematic, testing the switch, testing the contacter incorrectly, testing it correctly, and finally landing on a missing link – the small connecting wire between two terminals has fallen loose.

Normally an emergency stop button would be linked to this, breaking the circuit and deactivating the power supply to the machine. P congratulates me, and gives me a little fist-bump.

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

Dirty work in US politics

Kino Eye

By John Cunningham

A film about the US elections seems only appropriate, and there’s much to choose from. In The Best Man (Frank J. Schaffner, 1964), liberal candidate William Russell (Henry Fonda) is up against loud-mouthed populist Joe Cantwell (based on Richard Nixon – actor Cliff Robertson) for the President-
tial nomination of an unnamed party. There is much “dirty work at the crossroads”. Cantwell illegally obtains a psychiatric report on Russell and threatens to expose him. Russell hears evidence that Cantwell is a closet homosexual but he refuses to use this against him.

Eventually, Russell withdraws and releases his delegates. They vote for outsider Governor John Merwin, who wins the nomination.

This was the first time that the word “homosexual” was ever used in a mainstream US film.

Stickers and reprints

Our total now stands at £9,249. A modest increase from last week, but taking us to just £751 off the target of £10,000 by 21-22 November. It’s allowed us to print more stickers to advertise our weekly Zoom meetings to students and others.

Thanks to the Nottingham branch of Workers’ Liberty and others for their support with the donations this week.

- workersliberty.org/donate

Eireannach?

A place I lost I scarcely knew, The childhood land I never outgrew, My father’s life, my mother’s tales; Of hunger, wars, workhouses, jails, The memories not quite my own. To which my memories are sewn: Inextricably in Erin’s net, I am what I refuse to forget.

Our pamphlets

Browse, download, buy, or listen to our pamphlets:

- The German Revolution: selected writings of Rosa Luxemburg
- For Workers’ Climate Action
- Two Nations, Two States
- Workers Against Slavery
- How to Beat the Racists
- Remain and Rebel
- Stalinism in the International Brigades
- Left Antisemitism: What it is and How to Fight it
- Arabs, Jews, and Socialism: Socialist Debates on Israel/Palestine

More: workersliberty.org/pamphlets
Deliveroo workers strike again

By Michael Elms

Deliveroo workers continue action as organisation spreads

Deliveroo workers in the IWGB union in Sheffield have voted to take two days of industrial action on 14-15 October, as they continue to push Deliveroo nationally on pay and unfair sackings. Following several weeks of boycotts and organising in Sheffield, the union is continuing to grow. And now, workers from nearby towns have reached out to the Sheffield union branch.

A group of drivers in Barnsley have been in contact and report that they are now discussing action on parking fines and low pay. In neighbouring Penistone, food couriers have taken inspiration from the fight in Sheffield, and are discussing taking organised action against a local restaurant with a bullying manager. They also complain of low pay from delivery platforms.

As well as low pay and disrespect from restaurant managers, unfair dismissals are a major issue for couriers. Deliveroo and other apps have no dismissals process. Couriers can be terminated from the app following a single anonymous complaint.

Sheffield driver Khalid Kalil has been campaigning (with the help of the union and Labour MP Gill Furniss) to get his job back after just such one anonymous complaint resulted in his termination with no warning. He also was obliged to launch a crowdfunding appeal to keep his partner and three children from eviction.

The appeal originally asking for £500 to cover this month’s rent. The response from the local labour movement and others on social media was overwhelming, swiftly raising £2,000.

Deliveroo riders protest in Bristol in 2019

Strikes wake up sleeper bosses

From Off The Rails

Caledonian Sleeper workers struck again on 11-12 October. Their trains formerly had “pantries”, which staff used to get some downtime during the night – not even a kip, just a sit-down, a break.

When the company refurbished the sleeper, the company assured staff were assured that there would still be areas where they could take breaks. But like so many assurances from so many employers, it came to nothing. There are no suitable areas to take a break on the newly-refurbished sleeper trains.

Each two-coach section has a “room”, which has no seating or facilities and is no bigger than a studio flat’s broom closet. Despite this, management won’t let staff sit in empty berths or in the lounge car even when it is unused, both of which the union suggested as a temporary measure until a more permanent solution is found.

The upshot is that all staff are on their feet all night – twelve hours if the train runs to time, more if running late. On top of this, they are being contacted through their period away from work by managers, breaking their sleep and disciplined for not accepting the calls, being forced into using their rest days to take non-compulsory courses, meaning they have little time away from work.

Add to all this a problem of bullying by some lower-level management, and the place is a mess.

So it is hardly surprising that sleeper workers voted massively for industrial action. As well as the strikes, here will also be no overtime, rest day working or higher-grade duties, so pressure on management should soon kick in.

Solid action forced this company back down the last time it upset its staff, so workers are aiming for a prompt win this time too!
Democratising Labour, democratise the unions!

By Sacha Ismail

The Executive Council of the big trade union Unite has agreed to cut its affiliation to the Labour Party by 10% or 50,000 members, in what is generally seen as a protest against Keir Starmer’s leadership. It is not a good or effective protest, if the aim is to promote left-wing policies, Labour democracy, and a working-class voice in politics.

Unite’s official statement, bit.ly/unitecut, is cryptic. It does not refer to Starmer’s leadership or the direction it is taking Labour, except in the vaguest of hints, instead talking about support for “emerging talent”, “talented thinkers” and “energetic organisations”.

It says this will promote “a collective voice from the shop floor to the grassroots, helping to ensure the party listens to and genuinely reflects the aspirations of the many for a Labour Party and labour movement that will truly deliver on our shared vision and values”.

Rather than clarifying what this mother-and-apple-juice stuff means, repeated and widely-circulated comments from Len McCluskey have focused on Starmer et al’s decision to settle the legal cases brought by former party officials who complained about antisemitism.

There are reasonable arguments the decision was wrong, but wanting to put the matter to bed and move on has sense too. The problem is why McCluskey has chosen to focus on this issue rather than numerous clearer and more important ones, and rather than making arguments for working-class and socialist politics.

None of this does anything to promote the kind of left-wing, pro-working-class policies Starmer is quietly abandoning, democratic control over policy-making, or party democracy more broadly. More generally the Unite hierarchy does very little to fight for these things.

Unite is associated with a kind of generic “leftism” in the Labour Party. But in terms of actual, concrete policies, the main noise it has made since 2015 has been to block left-wing stances on issues like nuclear weapons and airport expansion.

The policies Unite has submitted to Labour’s conference have in general been extremely bland. Left policies agreed by the union’s democratic structures have remained on paper. Unite has never submitted or done anything to promote the demand to repeal the anti-trade union laws, though this was clearly agreed by the union’s last policy conference in 2018.

When Labour and trade union activists fought for fully democratic (“open”) selections for parliamentary candidates in 2018, the Unite leaders opposed the demand — in violation of the union’s conference policy.

Posing things in terms of financial give-and-take promotes not collective working-class political representation but a US-style, business-unionist conception of politics. It allows the Unite leadership to posture as critical without engaging in any actual struggle within the party.

With this approach, it seems unlikely that money saved from affiliation will be used to promote a serious fight in the Labour Party. It seems likely it will be used to create jobs for Stalinist-influenced careerists, many of whom are Unite members.

A necessary lever for turning things around in the party is to turn things round in the unions, too: members should organise for democratic control over policy, and in particularly for the many left-wing policies agreed by Labour and union conferences to be campaigned for.

Universities: the right to move

By AWL students

Issues of health and safety, together with increased workload, alongside cuts, have led to a number of local disputes opening up in universities. A staff-student online assembly organised by the UCU Solidarity Movement on 10 October has called a day of action on 16 October.

Groups of students at a number of universities are discussing rent strikes, but these need to be backed up by local student unions and the National Union of Students running a much higher profile campaign around “the right to move” (to get out of accommodation contracts, to return home, to defer courses).

Most universities will go online eventually, but dragging this out continues to endanger staff and students. In Manchester, a handful of students had been hospitalised, some even in intensive care.

Many students will be anxious and their lives made worse by the lack of adequate support. At the University of Nottingham the management has tried to enlist staff to be unpaid volunteer support. Why weren’t properly trained support staff recruited months ago?

Senior managers at UK universities had clear indications back then that their policy of insisting first-year students move into crowded, high-transmission-risk student accommodation to attend face-to-face was unsafe.

Mass outbreaks of Covid at US universities in August were one clear warning. Over the summer, campus unions warned about health and safety only to be ignored and dismissed as scaremongers. Now we know that on 21 September the government’s scientific advisory group, SAGE, recommended “all university and college teaching to be online,… unless absolutely essential.”

Yet despite clear evidence that Covid is spreading rapidly through universities and out into local populations, university managers continue to insist on unnecessary face-to-face teaching.

The UCU’s Covid dashboard gives some idea of the scale of the continuing outbreaks, although not all institutions are being transparent with their reporting.

At Northumbria, which has seen one of the biggest Covid outbreaks (over 1,000 students confirmed as infected), the university moved to online teaching only after staff threatened strike action. Manchester’s universities only went online because they were, essentially, told to by Public Health England.

The driving factor behind this negligence is a financial imperative for universities to declare “business as usual”. Cuts and redundancies are now being made across many institutions. Some – Roehampton, Christ Church Canterbury, University of Portsmouth, University of East London – are in serious jeopardy.

Students and staff are demanding:

• The right to move! Students should have the right to get out of all tenancy contracts, both university-owned and private accommodation. In Scotland students have the right to terminate contracts. Students must be told their rights.

• Full transparency over infection numbers. This is public health information! Vulnerable students and staff, especially cleaners and security staff who have to work in infected areas, need to know.

• Some students will chose to stay in university accommodation. This should be organised at reduced capacity.

• Earlier self-isolation (before test results) is better, and students should be given clear guidance on it. Much more testing on campus, essential in a population where most infected people have few or no symptoms. Adequate PPE for all staff who have to be on campus.

• No surveillance of students. Stop punitive fines. Additional support for international students.

• Recruit and put in place trained support staff. A university-organised programme of delivering food and other essentials free of charge to students in isolation."
The conference on 10 October of the Socialist Educational Association decided to call on the government to stop SATs and other high-stakes primary assessments this year. It also demanded that moderated teacher assessment be used instead of examinations for GCSE and A levels in 2021, and that the Labour front bench take up that policy.

The Scottish government has already decided to replace Scotland’s equivalents of GCSEs with moderated teacher assessment.

On 3 October the conference of the NEU school workers’ union voted to campaign for the replacement of SATs in 2021 by a system of moderated teacher assessment and a mixed model for GCSE and A levels for 2021, including reduced content and moderated teacher assessment.

The decision included a commitment to ballot to boycott SATs in 2021 if necessary. It also recognised that GCSEs, BTECs and A-Levels were unfit for purpose and committed to urgently developing and campaigning for alternatives.

Really GCSEs should just be scrapped, with no replacement at all. (Most countries manage with no comparable exam).

The main arguments against these exams and high-stakes tests were true before the pandemic. Extra arguments are added now.

Students have lost three months already of the two years of frantic exam-cramming which the English school system imposes as run-in to its major exams. With mounting virus infections, it is almost certain that they will lose more, through partial if not total school shutdowns.

The loss will be greater for students from worse-off backgrounds, who are more likely to live in areas with high virus rates, who lack the technology and quiet space to study well online from home, and whose families can’t pay for private tutoring.

The exams should be scrapped for next year on grounds of justice and equality, even if we thought them good in general.

All of us have been “educated” from childhood in the idea that courses of study must be defined and measured by an exam as their aim. That is miseducation.

Schools and universities existed for hundreds of years before modern exam systems. The first high-prestige exam system in England, the maths “tripos” in Cambridge, dates only from the mid-18th century.

One of its results was to set maths in England way behind other big European countries in the 19th century, and for reasons common to many exams: they test only the ability to jump through exam-shape hoops, which may have little relevance to life outside exams. They distort learning, add unnecessary stress, and above all function to label most students as relative “failures”.

As G H Hardy put it when campaigning for the abolition of the maths tripus: “examinations with reputations and standards and traditions seem to me mistaken in their principle and useless or damaging in their effect... An examination can do little harm, so long as its standard is low”.

Pass-fail tests to check competence at driving buses, or doing electrical wiring, or working with percentages and reading graphs and tables, are necessary for some jobs. They are useful as long as everyone knows that they are not the aim and measure of education, and not the way to sift out the excellent from the competent.

Education should be for learning, not for exams.

Curb COVID-19: REVERSE CUTS!

US presidential contest
Interview with Howie Hawkins, and debate

Azerbaijan and Armenia at war
Self-determination for Nagorno-Karabakh is basis for peace

The history of anti-vaxxism
From the right to query, to dangerous anti-science

Deliveroo workers strike
Sheffield couriers out again 14-15 October