Trump strives for chaos
Far-right in USA still mobilising against election result.

Brexit: still battles ahead
Fight at every step to reduce barriers between countries!

“Progressive pact” or socialist politics
Micheál MacEoin slams calls for Labour to ally with Lib Dems.

Rent strikes at 40 universities
Students refuse to pay for near-campus housing they can’t use.
39 Labour MPs rebel on Tory Brexit deal

Editorial

In the Parliamentary vote on the Tories’ Brexit deal, 30 December 2020, 39 Labour MPs (including two for now excluded from the Labour whip) defied Labour leader Keir Starmer’s whip to vote for the deal.

Three Labour front-benchers resigned in protest at Starmer’s line.

In the days and hours before the vote, hundreds of Labour activists had signed a statement protesting at the plan for Labour to back the Tories’ Brexit deal.

The statement had been put together by Labour for a Socialist Europe and Another Europe is Possible.

UK and EU officials had announced a Brexit deal on Thursday 24 December.

The document, some 2,000 pages, has been vetted by every EU government. It came into operation “provisionally” on 1 January 2021 and is to be ratified by the European Parliament later in January.

Perhaps Starmer wanted to placate or appeal to people exasperated by the Tories’ multiple goings-to-the-brink, deadlines, and swerves over the last four and a half years.

The Brexiters failed to negotiate a deal over four and a half years, until the very last minute, because it is impossible to get what they want – full license to cut social and environmental standards below EU levels, and raise barriers high against people moving between here and the EU, together with smooth trade flows. They went to the brink in negotiations again and again in order to squeeze out the nearest approximation to their impossible demands.

The EU has conceded much, giving the Tories license to cut some standards with only a proviso that if they do it too much then tariffs may be put on British exports.

Labour was wrong to back a deal on that basis.

The bad effects of the Tory Brexit deal will be felt bit-by-bit for years to come. It will become harder to travel to the rest of Europe, let alone to go and work or study or retire there. It will be harder for the EU27 migrants who have contributed so much in Britain, especially in the NHS and in social care, to come here; sometimes even for settled migrants to stay here.

It will be harder for students from Britain to do the study-time in Europe they could previously do with the Erasmus scheme, and harder for students from the EU27 to do study-time in Britain.

The Tories have secured a deal which will let them drop social and environmental standards below EU levels, with only the risk of tariff retaliation if they fall too far below.

Much additional bureaucracy will be needed to construct UK systems of checking and regulation to replace participation in EU systems.

Brexit happened on 1 January 2021. But the issue is not over and done with. Not at all.

How much free movement for people can we regain? How far will Britain diverge from EU standards? Just how high will the barriers be between Britain and the EU? Will Scotland secede, so that we have an EU-Britain land border stretching 150 km which in normal times tens of thousands of people cross each day for work, shopping, and visiting? Or, on the contrary, can we win re-entry into some EU schemes? Norway, Serbia, and North Macedonia are in Erasmus though not in the EU.

The lobby group Best for Britain has produced a list of ten priorities for reducing EU-UK borders even after 1 January 2021.

Some of those are of more interest to capitalists than to workers or the labour movement. But we have no interest in business being clogged by trade barriers and multiplied regimes of regulation. Other issues, like mutual recognition of professional qualifications and Erasmus, are directly important for workers and students.

Fundamentally we are for the UK rejoining the EU. We are for bringing down again the new barriers raised between countries.

Work for that policy will be uphill for a while. Polls suggest that most people, while thinking Brexit a mistake, see no choice now but to “get it done”. The bad effects of Brexit will mostly show up over the years, rather than in big new truck queues in January 2021.

In the meantime, however, there is scope for campaigning on many detailed issues of resisting and working to reduce the new barriers.

• Abridged. More at bit.ly/210103b

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Send us £2 and we’ll mail you six issues of Solidarity, so you can support our work, and follow all our coverage and debates properly. Because of the new virus surge and accompanying restrictions which limit street protests, street stalls, and in-person meetings, we’ve extended the offer to 31 January 2021. To send the £2 – bit.ly/sub-sps, phone 020 7394 8923 to pay by card online, or other options at workersliberty.org/payment. □
Support British Gas strikers!

By Ollie Moore

British Gas engineers are due to strike from 7-11 January, as they fight to stop Centrica, British Gas’s parent company, forcing its workforce onto worse terms and conditions.

Workers voted for industrial action by a nine-to-one majority, and thousands have attended online events to build the campaign. A GMB referendum on the proposed new contracts saw the terms rejected by an 86% majority. The section of the affected workforce organised by GMB and in the dispute is comprised of electricians, smart-meter installers, and engineers repairing, servicing, and installing boilers in residential and commercial locations. The total number of British Gas workers affected by Centrica’s plans is around 20,000.

British Gas wants to level down workers’ terms and conditions to bring them closer to the standard in the wider industry. In part as a legacy of higher levels of unionisation, British Gas engineers’ conditions are relatively better than in other gas companies. If the new contracts are imposed, we could see a large proportion of workers facing pay cuts of up to 10%. The new contracts also involve a raft of detrimental changes to terms and conditions. These include:

- A levelling down of holiday entitlement, representing a loss of up to a week’s holiday for many workers
- A move to an across-the-board 40-hour week, an increase in working hours for many workers
- A new bonus scheme that could see workers deducted pay if they are less active during certain periods of their shift
- A reduction in sick pay, to 13 weeks full pay followed by 39 weeks half pay (currently 24 weeks full pay, 24 weeks half pay)
- A three-year pay freeze for all workers except smart-meter installers
- Rostering changes representing up to an additional 156 working hours per year for some workers
- An increase in compulsory weekend working

Imposing new contracts

British Gas’s planned means of imposing the new contracts – threatening to dismiss its workers and re-engage them on the worse terms – is likely to be an increasing feature of class struggle in the months ahead. Throughout 2020, workers at Tower Hamlets council fought a similar “fire and rehire” scheme, and workers at Heathrow have also struck recently against similar plans. British Airways plans to use the method to worsen conditions for its 30,000-strong workforce. Labour leader Keir Starmer used his speech at the September 2020 TUC Congress to call for “fire and rehire” schemes to be made illegal.

A successful strike by British Gas workers could stop other bosses who may be planning “fire and rehire” initiatives in their tracks. It would also embolden workers facing other attacks, including job cuts, to fight back.

British Gas claims that 80% of its workforce has indicated they will accept new contracts from February, although GMB activists query those figures. In any case, that 80% is drawn from a larger total than the workers involved in the GMB dispute, and represents a provisional indication rather than formal acceptance of the new contracts.

Effective strikes could force bosses to back down. The engineers in dispute are based at home rather than in depots, and so have no ordinary workplace to picket; workers are discussing ways to maximise the impact of the strike.

Workers’ Liberty meetings are open to all, held online over zoom. In January:

- Sunday 10 January, 11.30-1.30pm: Socialist Feminist Reading Group – Sex wars and (trans)gender panics
- Monday 11 January, 6-7 pm: AWL students – After Covid, a better Uni is possible
- Tuesday 12 January, 7pm-8:30pm: Unite, Labour, and working-class political representation
- Monday 18 January, 6-7 pm: Workers’ Liberty students – The student struggles of 2010
- Monday 18 January, 7:30-9pm: North London – The history of labour representation in Britain

Plus

- Every Monday, 6-7pm: Workers’ Liberty Students online political discussions
- Thursdays, 8-9pm: Marx’s “Grundrisse”, study group

Our calendars of events: browse or subscribe!

All online

For full and updated details, zoom links, more meetings and resources, visit workersliberty.org/meetings
Back Tory Brexit deal? Morning Star says: doesn’t matter

By Jim Denham

With a characteristic smirk the charlatan Johnson portrayed his Christmas Eve deal with the EU as a personal triumph and proof that Britain can, indeed, eat its cake and have it.

The “no-dealers” of the Tory-right ERG cabal were — initially, at least — not so sure, and immediately set up a “star chamber” to check that the deal was sufficiently free from continuing EU influence over the UK’s fishing quotas and other unspecified matters of tremendous importance. They concluded that the deal, while not perfect, was good enough to allow them to support it in Parliament.

Over at the Morning Star, something similar was going on. The paper’s initial response (Monday 28 December) was to warn of possible “erosion” of workers’ rights and environmental protection — which was a bit odd, given that the paper has been claiming for years that EU rights and protections are worthless.

But the paper had its own “star chamber” in the form of the Communist Party of Britain, who issued a solemn statement.

After noting that the agreement was a “compromise between the interests of British state-monopoly capitalism, on the one side, and those of German and French monopoly capital — represented by their states and the EU — on the other” the CPB “star chamber” continued: “This new deal frees Britain from the sovereignty of the EU”.

(Though, sadly, “not from the sovereignty of big business, whether British, European or US.” The words “statement” and “bleedin’ obvious” rather spring to mind).

On the plus side, “the new agreement certainly improves on the terms set out by Theresa May’s Tory government, which would have tied Britain — locked in by Northern Ireland arrangements — to the Customs Union, to Single Market rules under the jurisdiction of the anti-trade-union European Court of Justice, and to large general contributions to EU funds”.

“The new agreement does not, for example, lawfully permit a future left government in Britain, Scotland or Wales to plan economic development and direct the policies of the big capitalist corporations”, but “leaving the EU and its Customs Union fully on January 1, 2021, may make it easier in the long-run to achieve these objectives.”

But how should left MPs vote?

On Wednesday 30 December, the Morning Star editorial concluded 500 words of waffle with an attack on the left-wing Another Europe Is Possible campaign (who were organising for Labour MPs to oppose Johnson’s deal):

“They call on Labour, the labour movement and other opposition parties not to support the Tories’ Brexit deal...

an exercise in gesture politics ...

“The working-class movement has big tasks ahead which are not helped by this kind of strategic confusion... We are where we are and this means a here-and-now battle for job security, new jobs, income protection and properly funded public services.”

The only possible conclusion was that the Morning Star advocated Labour MPs voting for Johnson’s deal, but didn’t have the guts to come out and say so.

Then came the news that Jeremy Corbyn intended to abstain, while another Morning Star favourite, arch-Brexiteer Ian Lavery (and his “No Holding Back” group) advocated voting for the deal.

This presented a problem: how to keep in with both of those? The MS’s answer? To say it didn’t really matter...

“Given the common ground in Corbyn’s and the No Holding Back team’s criticisms, and the inevitability of its passage in a parliament with a big government majority, it hardly seems worth debating whether Corbyn’s vote against or their recommendation of a vote for was correct. What is important is the issues they raise” (editorial, 31 December).

Now, apply that same logic to a vote on 18 March 2003, when the Labour leadership and the Tories were both in agreement on how to vote, and the result was a foregone conclusion... to support “the decision of Her Majesty’s Government that the United Kingdom should use all means necessary to ensure the disarmament of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction”.

Now free Assange

On 4 January a judge denied the USA’s call for extradition of Wikileaks founder Julian Assange on grounds of mental health.

However, the USA has said it will appeal to try to get Assange on trial in the USA on charges of leaking official documents, and Assange is set to stay in jail, where he has been since April 2019.

Despite Assange’s erratic politics, socialists should back the call for Assange to be released and allowed to return to his native Australia.
The campaign was bolstered by growth in the women’s movement, in particular the outrage over violence and murder of women, rallying around the slogan and hashtag #NiUnaMenos (“NotOneLess”, meaning we must not lose one more woman to violence). We hope pro-choice activists across Latin America and the world can learn from the struggle in Argentina and continue to gain ground in this long-running struggle against reaction.

Women’s Fightback

By Katy Dollar

Pro-choice activists celebrated on the streets at the close of 2020, as Argentina joined a handful of Latin American states to legalise abortion, a landmark decision in a country where the Catholic Church has long held sway.

On social media, the once popular hashtag #SeráLey (#ItWillBeLaw) was replaced with #EsLey (#ItIsLaw). Before this, the only Latin American regions allowing voluntary abortion in the first trimester were Uruguay, Cuba, and two Mexican states. Elsewhere, such as in Chile and Brazil, abortion is available in very limited circumstances, including rape, incest, foetal deformity, or risk to the mother’s health. In El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua, it is banned, and women can be sentenced to jail even for having a miscarriage.

The new law is a win against religious reaction. The alliance of evangelical churches issued a statement calling it “a sad day.” After being mostly silent during Argentina’s 2018 abortion debate, the Catholic Argentine Bishops Conference denounced the “hypocrisy” of trying to legalise abortion in a year when the government asked Argentinians to “stay home to save lives” during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Perhaps showing the strength of the green wave, the reactionaries’ wild card, the Argentine-born Pope Francis was relegated to sub-tweeting at the last minute, after not intervening in the public debate.

Hours before the Senate discussion was set to start, the pope tweeted:

“The Son of God was born discarded to tell us that everyone discarded is a child of God. He came into the world as a child does, weak and fragile, so that we can embrace our weaknesses with tenderness,”

Pro-choice activists have campaigned for years to change the anti-abortion laws that date from 1921, adopting a green scarf as their symbol. The scarves are a nod to the women’s movement against the Argentine military dictatorship “Madres de Plaza de Mayo”, mothers who wore white scarves and demanded the return of their “disappeared” children.

Argentina’s abortion debate made international headlines in 2018 when millions of feminists waited in the streets for a Senate vote after legislators in the lower house of Congress approved a bill to legalise abortion. When the bill narrowly failed in the Senate, instead of re-treating, activists pushed forward the movement to legalise abortion in what is now called “the green wave”.

 ns Ley! Argentina legalises abortion
“Veganuary” in 2020 was unprecedented in size and publicity. 2021’s veganuary is predicted to break the record once again, reaching even bigger heights as individuals worldwide experiment with being vegan for a month.

This comes the month following the “Sixth Carbon Budget” by the UK’s official Climate Change Committee (CCC)’s. The report is politically and economically conservative, and as a result ecologically conservative, aiming for net zero carbon dioxide equivalent emissions by 2050. Its most ambitious “scenario only reaches Net Zero in 2042, with a reduction of 87% by 2035”. This stands in stark contrast to the justified demand of net zero by 2030, or even 2025, of much of the environmental movement.

The CCC’s conservative targets have nonetheless faced even more conservative pushback, notably over proposals to reduce animal product creation and consumption. The report states:

“Changes in consumer and farmer behaviour can release land from agriculture...five measures could reduce annual agricultural GHG [Green House Gas] emissions...with diet change the most significant”.

They advocate “a 20% shift away from meat and dairy products by 2030, with a further 15% reduction of meat products by 2050[; to be] substituted with plant-based options.” Their most ambitious vision involves “50% less meat and dairy by 2050.” In either case they recognise that corresponding reduction in livestock and grassland would deliver large GHG abatement.

They model this dietary shift as part of wider changes to agriculture, reduction in food waste, and carbon sequestration. “Around 9% of agricultural land will be needed for actions to reduce emissions and sequester carbon by 2035 with 21% needed by 2050. Improvements in agricultural productivity and a trend towards healthier diets are key to releasing land”.

“Among the measures to release land, moving diets away from the most carbon-intensive foods delivers the highest emissions savings.” On top of this, dietary shifts aim to reduce emissions associated with food imports, rather than outsourcing them as “carbon leakage”.

Their models convert the “land sector” from a significant source of greenhouse gases currently – “12.8Mt CO2e in 2018, equivalent to 2% of UK GHG” – to a major net carbon sink of 19MtCO2e by 2050.

This is through a combination of planting forests, peatland restoration, and bioenergy crops. While the first two will remove a lot of carbon from the air, while also supporting biodiversity, bioenergy is not so green. The report’s theory is that land could be used for bioenergy crops, which remove carbon from the air, and Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) prevents it from re-entering the air.

CCS is not a reliable or widely used technology, and could capture only some of the carbon. Really Existing Biomass emits more CO2 per unit energy than coal; and devours more fuel than is planted for its consumption. As such, it burns pre-existing forests, releasing novel CO2, destroying ecosystems and consequently degrading soil. This cannot easily be reversed, and releases yet more atmospheric carbon.

Their suggestion of “increased use of wood in construction”, if done in sustainable ways at sustainable levels, is a good one. Their model’s reliance on unproven Direct Air Capture of CO2 with storage is not. They should instead be more ambitious in wider GHG reductions, and also in planting forests and so correspondingly in animal product reduction.

“Our analysis starts with the assumption that land is prioritised for housing and other economic activity and food production before climate objectives”, they acknowledge. They suggest only £1.5 billion annually for the necessary land use changes, which they recognise bring “co-benefits for health and recreation, air quality, flood alleviation and biodiversity.” In total, they would only “increase woodland cover from 13% of UK land area to around 18% by 2050”.

Larger investment and policies to bring about faster dietary change would bring greater advantages in all these areas, wider woodland cover, and sequester more carbon.

As previously argued (Solidarity 559 bit.ly/eat-I): “The central job for environmentalists is to confront ‘fossil capital’. To shift into ‘blaming’ individuals, consumers, the bulk of humanity, the working classes, is self-defeating. Obsessional preoccupation with diets and veganism falls into such a trap.”

However, a vast reduction of animal products is necessary: as far and as fast as possible. We must aim, internationally, for collective solutions – not individual moralising – to reduce it by much more than 50%, considerably sooner than 2050. Current levels of animal-sourced production cause a plethora of environmental harms. Big agro even plays a major role in churning out ever-more frequent epidemics.

Solidarity and Workers’ Liberty engaged, in the months leading up to the pandemic, in much debate around reduction of animal products (Solidarity 529 bit.ly/p-529 and bit.ly/t-529). It seemed de facto settled, although wasn’t fully, and the debate moved on, then was surpassed by Covid-19.

How important is this component of our environmental programme? Should socialist environmentalists advocate individual veganism? Is my contention that we should aim to phase out the vast majority of animal products internationally correct? ☐
By Barrie Hardy

On Wednesday 6 January, pro-Trumpers will attempt a mass demonstration in Washington to coincide with the formal vote in Congress to ratify the Electoral College decision from the presidential election.

A crowd of conspiracy theorists, fascists, and plain deluded have been encouraged to “Be there, will be wild”. Maybe some think they can storm Congress in the same way as right-wing terrorists invaded the Michigan State House last May.

A strong police presence will make such an attempt unlikely to succeed. But Republican members of Congress are still prepared to indulge Trump. They’ll admit in private there was no voter fraud, but some of them will be echoing the demonstrators and challenging the Electoral College count on 6 January.

In Britain departure of a head of government is mercifully speedy. The furniture van picks up the belongings of the defeated candidate the day after the election and they are whisked away to write their memoirs or do a lucrative US university lecture tour. American presidents are allowed three months before the handover.

When Lincoln won, it was even longer. In those days Presidents weren’t sworn in until March. Lincoln’s wait allowed slave-owning states to organise secession and start a civil war in defence of slavery. Trump’s last weeks may yet witness some outbreak of major civic strife, and possibly him starting a war with Iran.

In any case, the end of Trump’s term leaves a high body count, a country devastated by a Covid pandemic whose behaviour did much to exacerbate. When I suggested the American death toll from Covid would be 350,000 on Biden taking office, that was sadly an underestimate. The figure is going to be over 400,000. The Civil War clocked up 600,000 dead. Expect Covid to claim more than that in the USA.

Trump’s bragging that he’s “working tirelessly” to provide Covid relief is yet another piece of bullshit. Apart from playing many rounds of golf since his defeat on 3 November, Trump has had only two preoccupations – seeking to overturn the result of the Presidential election and handing out corrupt pardons to criminal cronies.

His undemocratic efforts to thwart the electorate have gone to bizarre lengths even for him, as when he sought to appoint crazed conspiracy-theorist lawyer Sidney Powell as a Special Counsel to “investigate” baseless claims of widespread voting fraud. Powell suggested that Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez had manipulated computer algorithms to fix the vote, even though Chavez has been dead for seven years!

Powell proposed Trump invoke the Insurrection Act and seize voting machines. Michael Flynn, a recent recipient of a Trump get out of jail card supported this, suggesting Trump declare martial law. Such are the ideas circulating not on the fringes, but at the centre of the Trump movement.

Trump’s doling-out of corrupt pardons will continue in the final weeks. Apart from obvious candidates like Manafort, Flynn and Roger Stone, Trump has pardoned four killers who worked for Blackwater who committed a massacre of women and children in Iraq which has been compared to My Lai. Unlike the prisoners he’s had executed in Federal jails, none of them are black. And they all worked for long time Trump supporter Erik Prince, brother of Trump’s Education Secretary, Betsy DeVos. So they got off.

The pardons once again raise the question of whether the Biden administration will allow Trump himself to escape prosecution. American history doesn’t offer a good track record here. Confederate leader Jefferson Davis served only two years in prison for leading a treasonous rebellion. Nixon got a pardon, despite his henchmen doing time.

There are ten counts of obstruction of justice Trump could be charged with, and pardons could come back to bite him on the backside if they are considered as bribes. Prosecution depends in large part on whether the new Attorney General has the will and determination for it. Republican senator Lindsay Graham has said that a Republican Senate majority will not approve any AG who is prepared to investigate Trump.

A lot hinges on the outcome of the run-off Senate elections taking place in Georgia on 5 January. A win for both Democrats there will give Biden control of the Senate. A defeat will stymie much of his program. The miserly Covid relief measures the Republicans have just passed, giving hard-up Americans a $600 check when Trump himself cut them to hard-up Americans a $600 check when Trump himself cut them to $2000, shows how much working people will be under the financial cosh if the GOP continues to dominate.

In any case, a Biden administration, conformist and neoliberal from the start, will face relentless right-wing obstruction and denunciation over the coming years from a still-mobilised demagogic Trump movement.

A way through the current crisis is best found by the propagation of socialist solutions, despite reactionary propaganda that portrays “socialism” as an evil bogeyman.

Mass mobilisations around class, racial and gender equalities are the most reliable ways of doing this and finding a way out of the American carnage Trump has exacerbated. ☐
Jeremy Corbyn’s new project

By Rhodri Evans

Former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn is launching a new “Peace and Justice Project”. Sadly, its basis is no defined policies, but rather that it is “founded by Jeremy Corbyn”.

Its website is not named after policies or even general ideals, but thecorbynproject.com.

The Labour left surely needs to remobilise, after the disarray created by Labour’s erratic floundering over Brexit and antisemitism, the December 2019 election defeat, and the (only weakly-resisted) shutting down of local Labour Party life in March-July 2020 on the pretext of virus precautions.

Solidarity has argued for the priority of regrouping the internationalist left (anti-Brexit, pro-free-movement, anti-antisemitic) by structuring and strengthening groups like Momentum Internationalists. From that basis useful alliances can be made on a variety of issues, sometimes with the more old-fashioned sections of the left, sometimes with “centre” groupings like Open Labour which are better on many internationalist issues but weaker on economic questions.

It is good that Corbyn wants to organise, but his choice of a top-down project organised around a personality rather than policies or ideas is a poor one for mobilising.

“Virtual seminars” are the thing. The project explains: “We bring together academics and researchers, leaders and campaigners, and grassroots people and organisations to highlight injustices and solve problems together”. So, dear reader, you and we, mere “grassroots people”, may have a part here, but mostly of listening to the “academics”, “leaders”, those whom I suppose we must think of as the “tree people” above us.

The project goes with moves by Corbyn back to more explicit association with the Morning Star, for whom he wrote a weekly column before he became Labour leader in 2015.

On Wednesday 16 December he was top of the bill at the Morning Star’s Christmas rally. The event was promoted by the Unite union, and another billed speaker was Unite’s chief of staff Andrew Murray (who was a heavyweight part-time adviser in Corbyn’s Leader’s Office).

Unite general secretary Len McCluskey is a billed speaker at the “Corbyn Project” launch on 17 January.

The new Corbyn project stresses old “peacenik” and liberal themes, but the alliances indicate problems with translating those into clear ideas and policies.

In his introductory interview, Corbyn spoke about the plight of refugees. Yet his ally in this project, Len McCluskey, was the chief voice in the Labour Party to argue that the leadership should defy and reject the 2019 Labour Party conference’s vote to defend and extend free movement.

“I don’t think [what conference voted for] is a sensible approach and I will be expressing that view.”

McCluskey’s Unite leadership was also a main force in the Labour Party under Corbyn’s leadership to keep Labour supporting Trident replacement and British nuclear weapons.

The Morning Star called for a “no-deal” Brexit, with borders raised high.

Another problem is this. Peace and justice must include Jews facing growing antisemitism, and the Palestinians. Yet, presumably because Corbyn fears burning his fingers again as he has over antisemitism within Labour over recent years, the project says nothing about antisemitism, or about the right of the Palestinians to a real independent state alongside Israel.

It must also include the Uyghurs, and the people of Belarus. That requires solidarity with them against the Chinese and Russian states.

In a launch interview, Corbyn says: “I have many criticisms of the Russian government – I’m realistic about the situation there”. Good. But the “I’m realistic” reads more like “yes, I know it’s not perfect” than “I stand in solidarity with the workers, democrats, and oppressed nationalities against Putin”. And he follows that sentence by saying: “There is no secure future for anybody if we get into a war of rhetoric between the US and Russia or China”. Which is a way of pouring cold water on the much-needed “rhetoric” against Xi Jinping and Putin which the left should be voicing, while sounding as if he is advising peace and diplomacy between states in place of war.

The Corbyn project sadly resembles dozens of “projects” launched in and around the Labour left since 2015, which offer employment for website designers, occasional webinars, but not really organisation. John McDonnell’s “Claim the Future” is more left-wing and feisty than the new Corbyn project, but still a long way from the democratic organising we need.

Let’s work at that democratic organising.”

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
Dozens of constituency or branch Labour Party officials, chairs, secretaries, and so on, have been suspended without due process simply for allowing debate on “banned” motions about other disciplinary crackdowns.

“If I have to suspend thousands and thousands of members, we will do that”, declared Labour’s deputy leader Angela Rayner on 29 November, following a new message from Labour Party general secretary David Evans that local Labour Party officials could be suspended for allowing debate on restoring the Labour whip to Jeremy Corbyn.

It’s a Catch-22 logic: suspensions can never be stopped, because objecting to suspensions is itself grounds for suspension...

Evans and Starmer can scarcely carry the Catch-22 process far enough to outlaw all protest. Motions in CLPs on these lines:

This CLP resolves to write to the General Secretary and the NEC to express opposition to what we see as lack of respect for democracy and freedom of discussion in recent decisions

convey the message, and can be carried without setting local chairs and secretaries up for suspension.

The suspension-mania hinders rather helps the fight against antisemitism within Labour. That fight can be won only through political argument — as trenchant as necessary — to convince the majority of the harmful implications of antisemitism operating under cover of what purports to be only “criticism of Israel” but is in fact denial of the Israeli Jews’ right to national self-determination and conspiracy-theory portrayal of Israel, and of Jews who identify (however critically) with Israel, as the hidden axis of global right-wing politics.

No such political argument is coming from Evans and Starmer. The suspension-mania is a substitute for the political argument and an obstacle to it.

We had two waves of “thousands and thousands” of suspensions and exclusions without due process in 2015 and 2016, attempts to exclude or discourage the left and so tilt those years’ leadership elections.

This current wave is probably at dozens, so far, but could well go further. A significant number of those suspended or excluded in 2015 or 2016 were long-standing Labour Party members who had remained active without retaliation, if with little success, through the Blair and Brown years. The balance this time is different, though, and on one estimate includes 30 or 40 CLP chairs or secretaries.

Some suspensions are reported to have been “pre-emptive”, without specific charges, as of the secretaries of Tottenham and Liverpool Walton CLPs. Other CLPs with officers suspended include Bristol West, Nottingham East, South Thanet, Camberwell and Peckham, Chipping Barnet, Chingford and Woodford Green...

Maybe 80 to 100 CLPs — and Young Labour’s leadership — are estimated to have to have defied David Evans’s decrees in some way or another, so more members could be suspended.

It is still unclear what Labour’s new “independent” disciplinary processes will be, but they will be a joke if they make no barrier against the suspension-mania. Labour talks of getting lawyers to vet disciplinary proceedings. Even if Labour can get hanging-and-flogging-minded lawyers for the job, people attuned to Amy Coney Barrett’s doctrine that the right to vote should be reserved to “virtuous citizens”, the lawyers are likely to be concerned enough for their future professional reputations to object to exclusions carried through with no due process, no charge at all, or no charge other than complaining about another exclusion without charge or allowing a debate.

Perhaps the objective of Evans and Starmer is to intimidate enough activists into quitting and dispersing that they can be sure of a docile 2021 Labour Party conference. No-one should help them out by quitting, or voluntarily inviting suspension, out of disgust.

At another pole, a few on the left are positively supporting the suspensions and crying for more. That is foolish. Some of those suspended have been part of a low-grade “left antisemitic” culture in the Labour Party. But not all. And confronting that culture through political argument should come first. The current regime positively discourages that argument.

The initial ruling under which this purge started, to ban local Labour Party discussions on suspensions or expulsions from the party, came in March 2019 from the previous, “Corbynite”, general secretary Jennie Formby, not from Evans or Starmer.

Resistance to the current purge is weakened by the fact that few on the left objected to Formby’s decree. Many of those suspended chose to keep quiet about it, despite the charges against them being flimsy or just not stated, on the Catch-22 grounds that by complaining about being suspended they would break rules even if they had broken no rule before. Consequently we don’t know how many were suspended between March 2019 and the current purge started in November 2020, but it was a lot, maybe as many people (though not as prominent) as targeted in this wave.

We must contest Formby’s decree as well as Evans’s. □

Suggested wording for motions: bit.ly/mo-pe

**Featured book**

Steve Cohen’s That’s Funny, You Don’t Look Antisemitic: an anti-racist analysis of Left antisemitism, first published in 1984, was a seminal work. Workers’ Liberty is selling copies of the third edition, published in 2019: 212 pages for £5 plus post. This “must-read” classic looks at the history of Left antisemitism from a socialist perspective.

workersliberty.org/publications
Shapurji Saklatvala: a revolutionary trailblazer

By Sacha Ismail

The trade union leaders’ surrender of the 1926 General Strike produced a wave of sackings, raids and arrests. The Communist Party, fighting to rally workers for self-defence and in solidarity with the embattled miners, quickly doubled its membership from 6,000 to 12,000.

Saklatvala, the party’s only MP, had been arrested just as the strike began, after a speech calling for soldiers to support it. Held in Wormwood Scrubs for two months, he was in Parliament two hours after his release attacking the Tories and the ruling class. Speaking in Battersea and across the country in the months that followed, Saklatvala was hailed as a hero by angry workers.

As reaction set in, the British labour movement retreated and moved to the right. Union leaders campaigned for “industrial peace”, rolling over to employers and the government while warring against the Communists and other left-wing activists. The Labour Party moved to implement the ban on CP members it had initiated in 1924–5. A number of left-wing local Labour Parties which refused to comply, including Battersea North, had already been expelled on the eve of the strike; now more were purged and new local parties set up.

Within a couple of years, the CP was reorienting itself not by a considered, measured shift to the left but by a wild swing, reflecting the “ultra-left” turn enforced by the emerging Stalinist bureaucracy in Russia – the “Third Period”. It alienated the CP’s periphery, allies and potential allies, leaving it isolated and powerless.

The party liquidated the National Left-Wing Movement of disaffiliated local Labour Parties and left-Labour groups in other constituencies (its Sunday Worker had by far the widest circulation of the CP-associated press). It effectively liquidated the National Minority Movement in the unions. It abandoned any united front approach towards Labour.

When the Great Depression started in late 1929, CP membership was much lower than it had been before the General Strike. Bureaucratic ultra-leftism reinforced demoralisation after the abandonment of the strike and the defeat of the miners.

In Battersea, following a period of warfare between the disaffiliated, Communist-led but wider-based left-wing local Labour organisation and the new official Labour Party, the CP was marginalised, in large part because its increasingly sectarian stance pushed away its allies.

Previously an enthusiastic supporter of working in and with the Labour Party, Saklatvala was disgusted by its reaction. He was part of a strong, consistently built-up working-class movement – in Battersea, across the UK and internationally – and its class-struggle, internationalist wing.

His distinctive contributions were not limited to his time in Parliament – but his contribution as an MP was outstanding and unique, quite different from those of even the best left-wing MPs today. He focused heavily on supporting and organising working-class struggles. Despite a large ego and forceful personality, he undoubtedly conceived of himself as an advocate and organiser for collective and democratic workers’ movements.

He made propaganda for workers to organise and act as a class against the capitalists. He argued for a new, so-

Lessons and inspiration

The first “BAME” Labour MP – and the last until the 1980s – Saklatvala blazed a trail for later generations of black and Asian radicals in Britain. He was the only member of a colonised subject people to sit in the “Imperial Parliament” at the height of the British Empire, and did not let anyone forget it. Despite his bourgeois background, he was part of a growing trend towards political representation specifically for the working class.

He was able to use his talents and position to “represent” very different groups of working people because he was part of a strong, consistently built-up working-class movement – in Battersea, across the UK and internationally – and its class-struggle, internationalist wing.

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Last years

Saklatvala lost his seat to Labour in the 1929 election, coming third with 18.6%. The campaign that ousted him was run by his former close ally John Archer, London’s first black mayor.

Saklatvala remained a committed revolutionary socialist, as he understood it, and loyal to the CP and its twists and turns for the rest of his life. He stood as a Communist in elections across the country, but never again won office. He remained a hyperactive speaker and campaigner, helping build up the party and leading British activism for the imprisoned “Meerut” trade unionists in India and for the Scottsboro Boys, black teenagers falsely accused of rape in the US.

All efforts to overturn the ban on him travelling to India were in vain. He died in London in 1936, aged 61 – eliciting tributes from across the international labour movement and the Indian liberation struggle.

There is no denying that Saklatvala became a Stalinist. He told a friend he regarded criticism of the Bolsheviks as “like a sin against the Holy Ghost”, and that does not appear to have changed later on, when Bolshevism was supplanted by Stalinism. His final visit to the USSR was in 1934, as the Great Terror was starting, and he came back flowing with enthusiasm.

He died before high Stalinism took shape, with the Moscow Trials. His daughter Sehri told biographer Marc Wadsworth she thought her father would have opposed fully-consolidated Stalinism in 1956 (the Hungarian Revolution) and 1968 (the Prague Spring).

Saklatvala’s going along with Stalinism does not erase what is distinctive in his earlier record and contribution. On the basis of that record, Saklatvala belongs to us – to the internationalist, class-struggle, revolutionary left.

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He made propaganda for workers to organise and act as a class against the capitalists. He argued for a new, so-
cialist society, explaining the difference between reforms to capitalism and its overthrow by the working class.

Saklatvala’s militant approach to politics stands in bright contrast to the dominant culture in today’s labour movement and left of avoiding difficult issues and not saying things you know are true and important for fear of controversy and criticism. He relished debate, did not fear unpopularity, and was eager for disapproval from the rich and powerful.

He rejected many offers of a career in the Labour Party if he would abandon the CP, and instead got ostracism, police surveillance, arrests, imprisonment and permanent exile from India.

Above all, Saklatvala was an internationalist. He stood up against the nationalist and imperialist shift of the leaders of the British labour movement, and pushed to solidify and energise British Communists’ commitment to anti-imperialism. The Indian national struggle was also a priority, but he was “no narrow nationalist”. His work for Irish freedom, African liberation movements and black liberation in the US made him well-known and admired far beyond his two home countries.

He was embraced by an overwhelmingly white working class in Battersea and other areas, for instance South Wales’ mining communities, largely because of his anti-imperialism – not despite or regardless of it.

For socialists who want to use intervention in mainstream political life, including elections and Parliament, to build up working-class organisation and struggle, and a revolutionary force rooted in the working class, all this is full of lessons and inspiration. Doubly so, in an ever more globally interconnected capitalist system and a UK whose working class is ever more diverse and “global”.

In 2015, with the rise of “Corbynism”, there was a flurry of interest in Saklatvala on the Labour left, quickly subsid. Attempts to link him to Tony Benn and Jeremy Corbyn, whatever the merits of these figures, dramatically underestimate his radicalism and importance. Saklatvala is part of an alternative tradition, far more dangerous to those working to keep labour movements subordinated to national states and the interests of capitalism. □

• All six articles on Saklatvala, including a longer version of this final one, at bit.ly/sakarticles. Marc Wadsworth’s biography of Saklatvala reviewed at bit.ly/mw-sak

Marcus Garvey, model capitalist?

While I was writing my Solidarity pieces on Marcus Garvey I heard of a short Radio 4 program Black Star Line: The Story of Marcus Garvey. Produced in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, the program, narrated by 1Xtra DJ Seani B, sought in less than 30 minutes to tell us about Garvey and examine the influence Garvey and Garveyism has had today.

Even as a potted history it has some holes. We are told that Garvey faced opposition from other black leaders in the US like Du Bois and A Philip Randolph, but never why. It suggests Garvey was an ambitious entrepreneur who believed in black pride and wanted to get black people across the world to buy shares in the Black Star Line so they would become self reliant.

The program mentions the fact the Black Star Line aimed to take black people to Africa, but it doesn’t tell us about Garvey’s plans for repatriation or pan-Africanism.

On Garvey’s influence today the program is far worse. It praises the early Nation of Islam as like Garvey’s UNIA, but with religion. The example of Jay-Z, the first billionaire musician, who is a more successful businessman than Garvey ever was, is cited as another positive.

Garvey is said to have been both a revolutionary and a fighter for equality, and the man who wanted more black billionaires!

Garvey deserves attention because of the movement he built, not as a role-model for the message (rather than the musicality) of lyrics like:

“Serial entrepreneur, we on our own
Stop sittin’ around waitin’ for folks to throw you a bone
If you can’t buy the building, at least stock the shelf (word),
Then keep on stacking ‘til you stocking for yourself...
Black nation, Black builder, Black entrepreneur,
You in the presence of Black excellence and I’m on the board, Lord”.

(Entrepreneur, by Pharrell Williams, featuring Jay-Z)

Stephen Wood, Southwark
“Progressive alliance’

By Micheál MacEoin

The theoreticians of the Popular Front do not essentially go beyond the first rule of arithmetic, that is, addition: ‘Communists’ plus Socialists plus Anarchists plus liberals add up to a total which is greater than their respective isolated numbers. Such is all their wisdom. However, arithmetic alone does not suffice here. One needs as well at least mechanics. The law of the parallelogram of forces applies to politics as well. In such a parallelogram, we know that the resultant is shorter, the more component forces diverge from each other. When political allies tend to pull in opposite directions, the resultant prove equal to zero.

“A bloc of divergent political groups of the working class is sometimes completely indispensible for the solution of common practical problems. In certain historical circumstances, such a bloc is capable of attracting the oppressed petty-bourgeois masses whose interests are close to the interests of the proletariat. The joint force of such a bloc can prove far stronger than the sum of the forces of each of its component parts. On the contrary, the political alliance between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, whose interests on basic questions in the present epoch diverge at an angle of 180 degrees, as a general rule is capable only of paralyzing the revolutionary force of the proletariat.” – Leon Trotsky, Lessons of Spain, December 1937

The proposed launch of a Compass Labour Network has started a new round of debate on the old idea for a “Progressive Alliance” between Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party.

Compass, a centre-left think tank, was previously linked to soft left Labour figures such as Jon Cruddas but lost substantial influence in the Labour Party in 2010 when it advocated tactical voting for the Liberal Democrats.

Its latest initiative is to establish Compass-aligned networks within the three parties mentioned in order to push for “positive collaboration” between parties and a “centre and left alliance” to defeat the Tories.

The Compass Labour Network is backed by figures such as journalist Paul Mason, Momentum’s former national co-ordinator Laura Parker, academic Jeremy Gilbert, and Labour MP Clive Lewis.

Though the idea recently received support from a Guardian editorial on 14 December, it has been a long time in the making, and was common in the circles around Clive Lewis’s short-lived leadership campaign in late 2019.

In 2017, a Compass pamphlet authored by Gilbert elaborated the basis for the “progressive alliance” at length, and its arguments will be attractive for many activists reeling from Labour’s 2019 election defeat.

On the basis of Antonio Gramsci’s advice that “it is necessary to engage battle with the most eminent of one’s adversaries... if the end proposed is that of raising the tone and intellectual level of one’s followers and not just... of creating a desert around oneself by all means possible”, it is worth taking a closer look at Gilbert’s arguments.

The backdrop for the pamphlet is the uphill struggle facing Labour’s attempts to form a majority government. Writing in March 2017, Gilbert highlighted Labour’s dire position in the polls. Though this increased markedly in the 2017 general election itself, the defeat in December 2019 further confirmed the scale of the challenge, prompting renewed calls for the “progressive alliance” as a short-cut to return Labour to power.

The cost of 1997

Gilbert prefaces his argument by noting that Labour has only once – in 1997 – won a comfortable majority from opposition. (Harold Wilson in 1964 won a majority of four seats). However, the price of the 1997 victory was the wholesale adoption of a neoliberal programme “to win over the Sun, the Express and many powerful players in the City of London” and a promise never to seriously challenge their interests.

Blair channelled the view that “there was literally no alternative to globalisation and labour-market deregulation; it was up to the individual to equip themselves to respond to the demands of the global market”. As the social discontent piled up, exacerbated by the 2008 financial crash, people increasingly looked to xenophobic and racist narratives to explain their situation, for example through the scapegoating of migrants and a tendency to blame “Europe” for all manner of ills, both real and imagined.

Bound by the pact with the City and the Murdoch press, Blairite Labour was unable and unwilling to blame the ruling-class and capitalism for growing economic inequality and, as a result, “the only narrative that many of the public heard was the one that Paul Dacre and Rupert Murdoch wanted them to hear”.

Now, with Brexit, and “the real threat hanging over us that a significant section of the voting public might be drifting towards support for actual fascism, or something like it”, Labour must sign up to a “Progressive Alliance” if it wants any shot at a return to power.

Gilbert pitches his “Progressive Alliance” arrangement as a light-touch one-off set of electoral deals: “The initial proposition of the Progressive Alliance strategy is simple. There are literally dozens of Tory-held par-
or socialist politics?

Parliamentary seats wherein the combined vote for Labour, Green, Liberal Democrat and Plaid is significantly larger than the Conservative vote. There are many key target seats for Labour where the Lib Dem vote is significantly higher than the Tory majority. There are also many constituencies where Labour has no hope of ever taking the seat but in which the Labour vote is higher than the Tory majority over the Lib Dems. Under these circumstances it makes perfect sense to try to work towards local agreements which make it more likely that sitting Conservative MPs could be beaten.

The objective would be to secure a non-Tory majority, to introduce Proportional Representation and perhaps call a further General Election on that basis. Gilbert opens up the question of whether such a Lab-Lib-Green government would have a more ongoing programme for government.

Though the argument is motivated by Labour’s electoral situation, it speaks to a much wider problem: how the left responds to the rise of a far-right populism, and what alliances and compromises are permissible within the framework of a principled left-wing politics.

The very same issues underly debates and discussions about voting for Emmanuel Macron in the 2017 French Presidential election or, more recently, for Joe Biden and the Democrats in the 2020 elections in the United States.

The urgency of Gilbert’s argument is clear, and has only been rendered more urgent by the scale of the 2019 defeat. His solution, however, is unconvincing.

Having set out what he means by a “Progressive Alliance,” Gilbert’s pamphlet proceeds discursively through setting up and answering a number of common objections to his argument.

**The problem of the Liberal Democrats**

The first and common objection from left-wing Labour members is that “the Liberal Democrats are not progressive”, are ‘just as bad as the Tories’ or ‘cannot be trusted’.

Gilbert argues that this misses the point, which is “not to validate and celebrate the progressiveness of the Liberal Democrats” but about “beating the Tories.” Indeed, Gilbert says that he “really [doesn’t] care if the Liberal Democrats are not ‘properly progressive’, not a real left-wing party or even desperately untrustworthy.”

There is, however, an issue here. Gilbert’s proposal involves telling Labour voters in certain seats where the Liberal Democrats are more likely to defeat the Tories to vote for the Liberal Democrats. That, at the very least, implies a degree of political confidence in them. That in certain circumstances a vote for Labour and the Liberal Democrats are commensurable implies a framework of a shared “progressive politics”, utterly emptied of any class politics.

We will explore the underlying politics of the “progressive alliance” further below but, first, there are a few practical objections to the proposal.

For a “Progressive Alliance” voting arrangement to work, Labour not only would have to tell its voters to vote Liberal Democrat, but it would be relying on Liberal Democrat voters to reciprocate.

There could be an issue here. If a Liberal Democrat voter in a no-hope Liberal seat has consistently voted for the Liberal Democrats, despite knowing that the result would be a Tory victory in that seat, what confidence should we have that the local Liberal Democrat electorate would break more than 50% for the Labour Party if the Liberals stood aside? With most left or centre-left voters voting Labour anyway in such seats, what value is there to be gained from the Liberal Democrats standing down? In some seats, it may well benefit the Tories, especially if Labour in future had a left-wing leadership, by driving disenfranchised Liberal voters into the Tories’ arms.

Secondly, there is a democratic argument. Electorates would rightly object to local or national-level political horse-trading which results in them being denied the opportunity to vote for a party of their choosing. The consequence would be passive resentment or, worse, could lead to a backlash against the parties involved.

More to the point, the labour movement should put representatives up for election in all seats. If Labour had taken the position in the late 1800s that some seats would always “naturally” be Liberal or Tory, it would never have broken the two-party system in the first place. Similarly, today, we should not deny working-class voters the right to vote for a Labour candidate, even if their immediate prospects of election look remote; we should aspire to change those prospects and lay the ground for future victories.

More fundamentally, however, there is a stadial logic to Gilbert’s position: first, we make an alliance with the Liberal Democrats and the Greens, then we can work for a left-wing Labour programme.

However, in reality, politics does not proceed in the fashion of pre-conceived stages, and Gilbert’s argument assumes that the benefits of an electoral deal come without political costs.

The sort of political conditions which would be necessary to bring about a political alliance between Labour and the Liberal Democrats would not leave the internal dynamics and the political character of Labour unchanged. 

Continued page 14
The right-wing nature of the Liberal Democrats means that they would undoubtedly set conditions and limits on the sort of Labour Party they found acceptable to do deals with and recommend a vote for, however tactically.

In the run-up to the 2019 general election, Jo Swinson explicitly ruled out even a temporary coalition with Labour under Jeremy Corbyn, telling the Financial Times that: “Look, Liberal Democrat votes are not going to put Jeremy Corbyn into Downing Street. He is not fit to do that job”.

Swinson’s party ran candidates against Labour in no-hop hope areas, costing Labour victory in seats such as Kensington. This is because in 2019, at root, the party did not fundamentally prefer a Labour government to a Tory one, just as it preferred to put the Tories in office in 2010 and inaugurate a decade of austerity.

Faced with the choice of a centre-left liberal and former Coalition grandee Ed Davey, the membership of the rump party definitively chose the latter, only confirming their rightwards development.

Such a party would be unlikely to forge an alliance with Labour unless the latter was placed safely in the centre of the political spectrum. The pursuit of a “Progressive Alliance”, then, would create a right-wing gravitational pull, reinforcing the “moderating” course of the current Starmer leadership, and leading Labour further and further away from the radical and transformative politics that are necessary to meet the challenges of Covid-19, mass unemployment and a hard-line Tory Brexit.

The price of even a limited electoral deal would be an an poor Labour policy platform, even if Labour limited itself for the common programme to items such as PR and a new election.

This would repeat the very errors of the Blair period which Gilbert highlights in the opening to his pamphlet (and at a time of greater economic and social polarisation), leaving Labour unable to provide the radical solutions which are vitally necessary to meet our current challenges.

As social crises continue to deepen, support could grow for political forces even darker than the current right-wing Tory government, with no plausible countervailing forces.

**Don’t capitulate to the right, build support for socialist ideas**

Another objection Gilbert cites is the “Trotskyist” argument that “doing deals with liberals constitutes ‘crossing class lines’.” Gilbert bats this away by dismissing “the idea that the Labour Party somehow expresses the pristine, unadulterated interests of the united proletariat, while the Liberal Democrats represent only the treacherous petty bourgeoisie” as “ludicrous.”

Certain elements within Labour, he argues, “are far more closely tied to key sections of capital than are the Liberal Democrats or any of their factions”. Moreover, there “are unions with close links to industries such as nuclear power, just as there are intimate cultural, ideological and monetary ties between the Blairites and key players in the finance and PR industries”. The Liberal Democrats, “by contrast… do not represent or have the backing of any significant section of the capitalist class, having their main social base among well-paid professionals and the more socially liberal and egalitarian sections of the commercial middle classes”.

It is true that the Labour Party contains influential sections representing the interests of capital. This is why Marxists have insisted upon the characterisation of Labour as a “bourgeois workers’ party”, a party which bases itself on the working-class and the labour movement, but whose leadership is thoroughly reconciled to capitalist society and expresses a bourgeois outlook on the world.

It is also true that certain trade unions put the narrow economic and corporatist interests of certain sections of their membership – for example, in carbon-heavy industries or defence – over the interests of the working-class as a whole for a socialist Green New Deal and a reduction in armaments and war spending.

None of that is new. However, the key point, surely, is that socialists should not accept this state of affairs: we should set ourselves the goal to transforming the labour movement.

This means building support within the Labour Party and the wider labour movement for socialist ideas. Central to that is the notion that the working-class has the potential to transform society should it rely on its own strength.

Gilbert rejects this because his argument is premised on largely accepting this state of affairs “for now”, rooted in a pessimistic view of the way forward. “[It] must be clear from any sober assessment of contemporary British society”, Gilbert writes, “that the British working class is currently too weak, disorganised and demoralised to have any hope of mobilising autonomously against its enemies for the foreseeable future. Without some form of coalition with the more progressive sections of the middle classes at least, there is no hope of defending what remains of the social democratic settlement or challenging the Right’s desire to turn Britain into the world’s biggest offshore tax haven”.

This is perhaps the crux of the disagreement. Gilbert’s proposal may (perhaps) be compatible with winning a non-Tory majority. But is it compatible with building a socialist movement? I would argue not.

It may be argued that the “Progressive Alliance” is a
means to an ultimate end, a future Labour government. For those of us for whom the election of a Labour government is not the be all and end all, but a step towards more substantial and permanent social change – socialism – such means as the “progressive alliance” are not permissible.

That is because, at its root, socialism is the self-emancipation of the working-class, based on a labour movement fully conscious of its potential power and confident in its capacity to transform the whole of society.

Trotsky put it best in this regard when he wrote:

“Permissible and obligatory are those and only those means...which unite the revolutionary proletariat, fill their hearts with irreconcilable hostility to oppression, teach them contempt for official morality and its democratic echoers, imbue them with consciousness of their own historic mission, raise their courage and spirit of self-sacrifice in the struggle.

“Precisely from this it flows that not all means are permissible. When we say that the end justifies the means, then for us the conclusion follows that the great revolutionary end spurns those base means and ways which set one part of the working class against other parts, or attempt to make the masses happy without their participation; or lower the faith of the masses in themselves and their organization, replacing it by worship for the ‘leaders’.”

Gilbert argues that the working-class is too “demoralised to have any hope of mobilising autonomously against its enemies” but it is this autonomous mobilisation which is the very goal of socialist to promote. In the early years of the Russian socialist movement, Georgi Plekhanov expressed this duty crisply:

“A necessary condition for the victory of the proletariat is its recognition of its own position, its relations with its exploiters, its historic role and its socio-political tasks.

“For this reason the new Socialists consider it their principal, perhaps even their only, duty to promote the growth of this consciousness among the proletariat, which for short they call its class consciousness.

“The whole success of the socialist movement is measured for them in terms of the growth in the class consciousness of the proletariat. Everything that helps this growth they see as useful to their cause: everything that slows it down as harmful”.

If the duty of socialists is to promote class-consciousness, the pursuit of a “progressive alliance” between Labour and what Gilbert himself describes as a party of “well-paid professionals and the more socially liberal and egalitarian sections of the commercial middle classes” is at direct variance with that duty.

Indeed, when one gets into the detail of Gilbert’s defence of a “progressive alliance”, it becomes an altogether more enduring project than his initial pitch of a one-time electoral pact to secure PR.

In response to Martin Kettle, who accuses advocates of the “progressive alliance” of assuming a natural dividing line between Tories and non-Tories, Gilbert argues that he makes no assumption, and that his idea “proposes to offer leadership to a coalition of interests all of which would be defined by their opposition to the rightwing consensus promoted by those parties and their allies in the press”. He concedes that “we are fully aware that such a coalition does not yet exist and that building it would prove challenging” but that “this is not a reason not to try to build it”.

It is argued here that rather than tie the effort of activists up in promoting the “progressive alliance”, a more pressing need is to rebuild a much-needed sense of class consciousness in the British labour movement.

Gilbert complains that “time and again, critics point out to us that the Progressive Alliance does not yet exist as if that were some kind of arguments against trying to create it”. He asks that these critics “now to stop and reflect – if that’s the best argument you’ve got, then you should be aware that it is informed by wholly circular logic, and amounts to an argument against ever trying to make anything happen anywhere that isn’t happening already”.

A similar objection can be made to Gilbert’s argument that because “the British working class is currently too weak, disorganised and demoralised to have any hope of mobilising autonomously”, it is necessary to give up on class politics in pursuit of a “coalition with the more progressive sections of the middle classes.”

For independent working class politics!

Gilbert’s arguments are, in essence, a rationalisation of political pessimism. It is exactly when the movement is at a low ebb that it becomes all the more important for socialists to uphold the notion of working-class self-emancipation.

As Gramsci put it: “Only they who can keep their heart strong and their will as sharp as a sword when the general disillusionment is at its worst can be regarded as a fighter for the working class or called a revolutionary”.

Socialists cannot, at will, rebuild the labour movement, though our efforts in organising and agitating can and do, of course, contribute. Similarly, we cannot, at a stroke, reverse decades of decline in union organisation and density.

What we can do, however, is maintain our insight – against the whole weight of bourgeois opinion – that capitalism is a system based, fundamentally, on the exploitation of wage-labour and that, therefore, the working-class remains, objectively, the privileged and potentially most powerful agent of social change.

This power depends, above all, on workers’ consciousness of their situation. It is this consciousness which socialists exist to promote. We cannot do this if we commit political hara-kiri in pursuit of the “progressive alliance” with the Liberal Democrats.
Afghanistan: expect anything except peace

By Chris Reynolds

Joe Biden will take over as president from Donald Trump on 20 January with the USA in the midst of its second or maybe third attempt to extricate itself from Afghanistan.

After the 11 September 2001 Al Qaeda attack on the World Trade Centre in New York, the USA sent troops and support to help Northern Alliance warlords in Afghanistan to drive out the Taliban, which then controlled most of the country and provided a reserve base for Al Qaeda.

The Northern Alliance won quickly. The Taliban abandoned the capital city, Kabul, which they had ruled since 1996, before Northern Alliance troops even got there, and the people poured onto the streets to cheer.

By May 2003 Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defence for US president George W Bush, declared an “end to major conflict” in Afghanistan.

Yet the Taliban had regrouped in areas of north-west Pakistan largely outside the control of Pakistan’s government. It had support from some elements at least of Pakistan’s military. From the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003, it went back on the offensive and regained ground.

Bush increased the US military presence, bit by bit, to about 30,000. Barack Obama became president in January 2009 with a policy of pulling US troops out of Iraq, but putting extra troops into Afghanistan.

In 2014 the US and NATO officially handed over responsibility to the Afghan army, and stepped back to an advisory and supplementary role. But the “surge” in Afghanistan, in which the US military presence had risen to over 100,000 by 2010, had had not even the limited and short-term success the 2007 US “surge” in Iraq had had. High civilian casualties and the corruptness of the Kabul government drove people in rural Afghanistan towards the Taliban.

And the costs were huge. The US’s military spending on Afghanistan was $120 billion in 2011, and over 2001-20 has been maybe $800 billion. Its total related spending, maybe $2,000 billion over those 20 years. With essentially nothing to show for it.

Obama turned to winding down and hoping for the best. He announced a plan to withdraw completely by 2016. At the end of his term of office there were still 8,400 US troops in Afghanistan.

Donald Trump took office promising to withdraw from Afghanistan, but initially increased troop numbers to 17,000.

In 2019-20 he made another drive to get out, more or less anyhow. In February 2020 the USA signed a peace deal with the Taliban over the heads of the Afghan government. From September 2020 the USA finally strong-armed the Kabul government and “civil society representatives” into faltering direct talks with the Taliban.

There are now around 4,000 US troops in Afghanistan (in a total of 11,000 NATO troops, in contingents from 38 countries), and Trump officials say they plan to have that number down to 2,500 by mid-January.

On all indications, the Taliban will continue its war despite all talks and agreements, seeing no reason to stop short of fully regaining power.

Failure

It is not certain it can do that. Before 2001, it never gained control of the whole country. The old Stalinist (PDPA) government in Kabul, under Mohammad Najibullah, held on to the city for three years after USSR troops withdrew in 1988-9, and was defeated (initially by a looser Islamist alliance, to be supplanted by the Taliban in 1996) only after Russia withdrew aid in January 1992. Kabul now has a population of over 4 million. (It was down to 500,000 in 2001.)

But the US presence, despite all the billions spent, has been maybe even less successful in nurturing a substantial and coherent modernising force in Afghan society than the USSR’s disastrous war in 1979-1989 was. The longer the US stays, the worse the prospects for after its withdrawal become. Only a working-class and democratic upheaval in Pakistan, cutting off the Taliban from its nurturing hinterland, could change that calculus.

The judgement of a 2012 report on the economy still rings true: “Afghanistan [outside the subsistence-level agriculture still widespread in the rural majority of the population] has a service economy concentrated on cosmetic projects mainly driven by the donor community... Energy is wasted on projects and activities in the name of privatisation and the free market, which have brought more harm than benefit to the country and the economy”.

The presidential election of September 2019 drew only 1.8 million voters, out of 10 million registered. The result was not announced until February 2020, and then was rejected by the leading candidates, opening a crisis resolved only by them agreeing a power-sharing deal (as they had done after the previous election in 2014).

The Afghan feminist Malalai Joya puts it like this: “From what is going on under the name of the so-called peace efforts in Doha [the talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government and ‘civil society’], expect [anything]... except peace!”

• Abridged. More at bit.ly/afg2021
Second wave of Covid-19 in prisons

By Matt Ford

Prisons in England and Wales are currently in the middle of a second wave of Covid-19. After a lull in cases and deaths over the summer, confirmed infections began to climb again in September, and rocketed in October and November.

There were 883 new confirmed cases in October, and at least 1,464 in November. This compares to only a handful of cases over the summer months. October also saw five new Covid-related deaths, after none since June. There were at least ten additional Covid-related deaths in November. From the official data it is too soon to tell whether cases are levelling off.

It appears as if the second wave is worse than the first in terms of cases, but as yet it is not as deadly. Cases dropped quite rapidly after April, when the prison service implemented a strategy to contain outbreaks and prevent new infections entering prisons. Initial modelling by Public Health England suggested there could be 77,800 cases and 2,700 deaths amongst prisoners without mitigation measures.

By the end of May, there had been 480 confirmed cases and 1,385 probable/possible cases recorded before improved testing capacity meant that from mid-April all symptomatic prisoners were tested.

The strategy employed by the prison service involved implementing a highly restricted regime in prisons to enable social distancing, and compartmentalisation of the estate. Under the new regime, the following were suspended: social visits, all education, training and non-essential employment activities, access to gyms, religious and general association. Most prisoners spent more than 23 hours a day in their cells due to restrictions on the numbers allowed out at any point in time.

Transfers of prisoners between prisons were significantly reduced. Within prisons, “cohorting” strategies were implemented. These included “protective isolation units” to accommodate known or probable cases, “shielding units” to keep the highest risk prisoners, identified through the health service, away from the general prison population, and “reverse cohorting units” to hold new receptions or transfers to prison in quarantine for 14 days so any infection could be detected.

In order to achieve this compartmentalisation, “head room” of around 5,000 to 5,500 places needed to be created in a notoriously overcrowded estate. The suspension of court activity in April and May provided a drop in the prison population totalling more than 5,000, or 6%, as of 4 December. Capacity was expanded by installing about 900 temporary single occupancy cells and opening a wing of a closed children’s prison.

A number of early release schemes, including release of “low risk” prisoners within two months of the end of their sentences and pregnant women and new mothers, ended up in the release of just over 300 people, despite initial indications that up to 4,000 could be released. The main scheme was paused in August.

It is important to note that Public Health England said that the best form of compartmentalisation is single cell occupancy, but that this would require a drop in the prison population of about 15,000. Interestingly, this was supported by the Prison Governors’ Association.

The restricted regime began to be eased over the summer and into Autumn, with different prisons moving at different speeds based on local circumstances. Anecdotal evidence suggests the restricted regime had significant impacts on the mental health of many prisoners, particularly for women separated from their children. The official statistics on self-harm and suicide in prisons actually show decreases in the months of the lockdown, although, as the outgoing Chief Inspector of Prisons indicated, further analysis is required to understand this properly. Access to health services has become even more difficult for prisoners, and rehabilitative and educational programmes have been disrupted.

The data suggests that it is difficult to prevent outbreaks in prisons whilst infection levels in the community are high without imposing a highly restrictive and oppressive regime. These regimes are potentially dangerous to prisoners, and mean they are resigned, even more than usual, to being warehoused without any purposeful activity.

A much bigger reduction in the prison population is now required to enable a more normal regime where social distancing can be observed. Calls by the Prison Officers’ Association to make certain aspects of the restricted regime permanent should be resisted.

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- For Workers’ Climate Action
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- Workers Against Slavery
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- Left Antisemitism: What it is and How to Fight it
- Arabs, Jews, and Socialism: Socialist Debates on Israel/Palestine

More: workersliberty.org/publications
Leo Panitch, 1945-2020

By Martin Thomas

Leo Panitch, an assiduous and important Marxist writer on political economy and an active socialist, died on 19 December 2020, from Covid-19 contracted after being admitted to hospital with cancer.

His biggest book, *The Making of Global Capitalism*, written with Sam Gindin, is essential reading, and summarised a vigorous programme of research into post-1945 capitalism.

I first met Leo Panitch, I think, at an “International Marx Congress” at Nanterre University, near Paris, in 2004. He was off-hand, and I guessed he had the typical attitude of a famous university professor (at York University, Toronto) to Marxist activists without similar academic credentials.

Far from it. Evidently I’d caught him at a bad moment. In general he was always ready to argue and pursue ideas, with vigour and without pomposity. In the following years he did many interviews with me for *Solidarity*, and he spoke at one of our weekend schools in 2010.

His Marxist and socialist training was as a postgraduate student with Ralph Miliband at the London School of Economics in the early 1970s and in the Waffle, which was first a left faction of the New Democratic Party, his native Canada’s equivalent of the Labour Party, and then for a while an independent grouping.

In 1985-86, he became a co-editor with Ralph Miliband of the Socialist Register, an annual volume of debate and theory, and he continued to edit it until his death.

He remained active in day-to-day socialist politics too, through the Socialist Project group in Toronto.

Panitch (and Ralph Miliband as refracted through Panitch) were, as far as I can make out, prime theoretical inspirations for the inner circle of the *Jacobin* magazine in the USA, with all its strengths and weaknesses.

So many unfinished arguments, so many not-yet-asked questions, that now we will never be able to pursue with Leo Panitch. His death is not the end of a gradual fading-away, but a brutal cutting-off-short.

Honour Leo Panitch by reading *The Making of Global Capitalism*, if you haven’t already done so.

—

Top 1% dominate wealth

By Alan Gilbert

A new report from the Resolution Foundation finds that family wealth in the UK is grossly unequal and becoming more so.

The top one per cent (average net wealth £5 million per adult in the family) have 23% of all household wealth, and a much higher proportion of the wealth that brings power (financial wealth and business assets, as against wealth in houses or in pension assets). The top 10% have 55%.

The new report draws on a range of statistics and calculations to offset under-reporting in the official Wealth and Assets Survey.

Wealth inequality decreased over the 20th century until the Thatcher years (probably because of the decline of the landed aristocracy plus widening house-ownership plus more occupational pensions plus middling-income people living longer). It has risen since then.

A big factor in the rise since 2006-8, according to the report, is price-rises for financial assets, in parts thanks to boosts from Quantitative Easing.

The *Wealth Tax Commission* report published on 9 December 2020 finds that “a one-off wealth tax payable on all individual wealth above £500,000 and charged at 1% a year for five years would raise £260 billion; at a threshold of £2 million it would raise £80 billion.”
Rent strikes at 40 universities

By AWL students

At the start of 2021 rent strikes are planned at up to 40 universities.

Thousands of students will withhold rent as it falls due throughout January; the campaigns are demanding 30% or 40% rent rebates and many other demands. Unions and the Labour Party and other students not involved in the strikes should back the action. It can spearhead a push to reverse the disastrous course managers and government pursued in higher education last year.

The government is shifting; but it is too little and too late. Rent strikes have come as the Tories have issued last minute advice to UK universities and UK and international students, stipulating that students should not travel to term-time addresses until at earliest 25 January – unless their course involved practice or lab based education, or if they need to live independently.

That date for return to campus is unrealistically early. Some universities have recognised that – for example University College London (UCL) has said students should not return until the end of February! – but not others.

A return to face-to-face teaching makes no sense as infection rates continue to rise. Students should not be asked to travel. As the University and College Union (UCU) has argued, courses must, by default, go online until Easter, if only because clear plan now will provide a consistent educational approach and stability for both students and teaching staff. The government had previously planned to use lateral flow tests to open up campuses. That plan must now be completely scrapped.

The biggest fault of government and uni managements, locked in to unis-as-business ideology, has been the failure to provide crucial financial support for students – to allow the ending of accommodation contracts and offering rent rebates as compensation for what will be many weeks when student cannot live in term-time accommodation.

The head-in-the-sand approach is causing misery to students and danger to wider communities. It has to end. The quickest way to ensure it ends is to build the biggest possible campaign of solidarity with the rent strikers.

• Rent strikes are planned at: Manchester; Bristol; Warwick; Sussex; UCL; QMUL; London halls; Oxford; Cambridge; Manchester Met; LSE; Plymouth; Edinburgh; Portsmouth; Goldsmiths; UAL; Dundee; York; Liverpool; Brighton; University of East Anglia; KCL; Sheffield; Sheffield Hallam; Nottingham; Newcastle; Lancaster; LSE; Brunel; Kingston.

School workers lead fight on new variant

from back page

cember, and now known to have spread in November and to be spreading in at least 33 other countries, VUI-202012/01 or B1.1.7, transmits a lot faster, as research from Imperial College London published on 31 December documents.

Even the strict lockdowns of March-April brought only a slow decrease (average 22% decrease in reported infections per week in the “best” period, 22 April to 2 July; it was about 10% decrease per week in the November lockdown).

Add faster spread to such slow decrease, and you get a rising rate of infection, if a big majority of the cases are the new variant.

And being more transmissible also makes new variants outpace old variants, and come to be dominant even when they start with only one case.

It is probable that infection rates will be rising for a good few weeks or even months, or even longer than that.

Maybe not. Maybe the new variant is less transmissible than we think, maybe vaccinations will slow spread quicker than we think. We don’t know.

Schools are an essential service. School closures (especially of primary and lower secondary schools) are a last resort, as we’ve often argued.

But now we are in “last resort” territory. We are scrabbling for even marginal additions to transmission-reduction.

We have long called for GCSE and A Level exams scheduled for summer 2021 to be cancelled. Now the government has conceded. GCSEs require no replacement (16 year olds should be allowed to enter whatever apprenticeships or further study they want). A levels do need makeshift replacement: the makeshift should be worked out now, in consultation with teachers, to get something that minimises disadvantage for students from worse-off backgrounds.

For the months ahead, when they reopen, schools also need extra funding for virus-precaution measures which should have been installed already. They need extra funding now to distribute laptops and hire extra staff for online teaching.

• Abridged. More at bit.ly/cv210102
Couriers: half a step forward

By Michael Elms

Food delivery firm JustEat is set to bow to pressure and start employing couriers as employees rather than as spuriously self-employed “independent contractors”.

The company plans to start employing 1,000 workers “directly” via a delivery arm (Scoober) which will be operated by the recruitment agency Randstad. This means that these workers will all receive some measure of sick pay, holiday pay and other employment rights which most UK food delivery workers are currently denied.

JustEat’s move is part of a Europe-wide move by the firm towards regularising the employment of its delivery workers. The decision reflects growing organisation among those workers. It also reflects the fact that “the gig economy” is losing its sheen of novelty and being widely recognised for what it really is: a step back in time to Victorian gang-master-style exploitation.

It also comes on the heels of a major court victory for workers in the UK. In December 2019, Stuart (the gig economy firm which currently organises JustEat’s delivery arm) lost an appeal against a courier. The court confirmed that this worker was in fact employed by Stuart as a “limb (b)” category worker or “dependent contractor” and therefore had a claim to back-dated holiday pay and other rights. This move may be an attempt by JustEat to escape the fall-out from that decision before more workers make use of this precedent.

These things are all good news. But JustEat’s move should not be over-stated. Firstly, 1,000 workers is not a lot compared to the current – large – numbers of workers employed by JustEat via Stuart on a gig-economy basis. The “gig economy” racket will operate alongside the “employment agency” racket.

Secondly, Stuart is continuing to “onboard” workers, flooding the streets with food couriers to increase competition between workers and put pressure on earnings.

Help couriers’ strike fund

By Hannah Thompson

This January I’m going to wild swim every day to raise money for the South Yorkshire Couriers’ Network Strike Fund.

Covid 19 has made demonstrations, pickets and face-to-face meetings difficult or impossible. It has also hit key workers in precarious employment very hard. By getting in cold water every day, I hope to spread the word about the couriers’ struggle against poverty wages, verbal and physical abuse, exploitative working conditions and unfair dismissal.

Contribute at gofund.me/e9bb4505

Second-hand books

Workers’ Liberty is selling one hundred second hand books, on politics and many other topics. Visit bit.ly/2h-books for the full list, pricing, and to order them. Featured this week:

- The Assassins – F A Ridley
- The Faber Book of 20th Century Women’s Poetry – Fleur Adcock
- Engels on Capital – Friedrich Engels
- Anti-Duhring – Friedrich Engels
- Ludwig Feuerbach and the end of classical German Philosophy – Friedrich Engels

Thirdly, being employed by a recruitment agency isn’t great! Randstad has made it clear that they will be using zero hours contracts. In 2019, Heinz food processing workers employed by Randstad organised protest meetings and reported the following to Wigan Today: “The recruitment agency Randstad has also been making mistakes with people’s wages week in week out. Staff are having to phone them up to basically beg for their wages.

“There have been cases of people waiting two months to get what they are owed. You can just imagine how much pressure this puts on working families already living on the breadline. Staff have had to go to foodbanks because of these mistakes. This treatment is disgusting…”

Food delivery workers deserve a real living wage instead of piece rates; they deserve security, dignity, sick pay, holidays and pensions: they do not deserve “disgusting” treatment at the hands of Randstad! The IWGB union has rightly demanded the JustEat should employ all of its delivery workers in-house.

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What we stand for

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

See workersliberty.org/about – if you agree, join us!
DHL workers strike for better pay

Workers at DHL Supply Chain, a distribution company based in Liverpool which distributes Burton biscuits to shops in the north west, struck on 19-23, 29, and 31 December, and 3-4 January, demanding a 50p/hour pay increase. From April 2021, pay rates will be just 2.5p/hour above the minimum wage. The low pay is despite DHL’s profits increasing by nearly 20% in the second quarter of 2020.

Police were called over 10 times as bosses attempted to disrupt successful picketing at the depot.

Nine days’ strike at British Airways

Cargo workers employed by British Airways (BA) at Heathrow Airport struck for nine days, from Christmas Day to 2 January, as BA attempted to “fire and rehire” its workforce, leaving some workers facing pay cuts up to 24% – from £5,000 to £11,000 per year.

BA workers voted by a 98% majority for the strikes. Although passenger travel is dramatically reduced due to the pandemic, the strikes still impacted flights transporting goods.

The BA strikes follow a series of strikes on 1, 14, and 17-18 December, by workers employed directly by Heathrow Airport itself, over a similar “fire and rehire” attack, which could see workers’ pay cut by 20%.

Great Ormond Street Hospital cleaners win

Hundreds of cleaners outsourced to the multinational contractor OCS at Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children in London will be made NHS employees on 1 August 2021 following a campaign by the workers and their trade union United Voices of the World.

UVW had warned hospital bosses that it would move to a ballot for industrial action and a legal case for institutionalised racism (the cleaners are mostly ethnic-minority).

UVW won a previous victory in April 2020, when Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust gave their 1,200 outsourced staff NHS contracts.

The union reports that “the cleaners – almost all of whom are Black, Brown and/or migrants – joined UVW at the start of the Coronavirus pandemic in protest at what they described as ‘institutional racism’ as they received far worse pay rates and terms and conditions than their majority White in-house colleagues, including only being given Statutory Sick Pay of about £19 a day rather than the NHS’s full pay sick pay rates”.


Care home workers to strike

Cleaners and care workers at the Sage nursing home in North London will strike on 15-17 January because bosses have stalled negotiations on the workers’ demands for £12 an hour wages and parity with NHS sick pay and annual leave.

The care home owners called in a £354 per hour union busting legal consultant to advise them in their stonewalling tactics.

Negotiations due to take place in December were suspended after Sage bosses refused to allow elected union reps from the United Voices of the World union (UVW) to attend the talks. Bile, a worker and UVW activist, said:

“It’s an act of defiance and irresponsibility from Sage to avoid meeting us for negotiations. We are incredibly frustrated, because all we are asking for is respect, dignity and equality. We deserve a living wage; we deserve full sick pay and a better holiday scheme. And if Sage thinks it can just ignore us and that we’ll go away all they’re really doing is boosting our motivation to stand up for our rights and for the right of our union to be recognised. We have never been more united”.

“Alternative” cuts?

From Tubeworker

The “Independent Review” into transport funding commissioned by the Mayor and the Transport for London [TfL] Board has now been published. Remember, this was the “independent” alternative to the KP-MG-led review commissioned by the Department for Transport, which – although we can’t know for sure, as it hasn’t been made public – we assume is driving the DfT’s demands for cuts and “workplace reforms”.

The “alternative” review strongly recommends attacks on workers’ pensions, and says cuts to services can’t be ruled out either. In summary, it’s one long argument for workers and passengers – rather than bosses, big business, and the rich (i.e., the people with money and power) – being made to pay for the funding crisis.

Fare increases are explicitly recommended, as is the continued withdrawal of the 60+ Freedom Pass from use in the morning peak. The review explicitly opposes sourcing ring-fenced transport funding from taxation of businesses which profit from the functioning of public transport, a relatively mild form of which already operates in Paris.

The report rules out lobbying the government to permanently reinstate a central government subsidy

Let’s not wait for the attacks to come... let’s make positive demands for the changes we want to see, including no detrimental changes to terms and conditions, including pensions, and if the bosses won’t commit to that, let’s ballot for action.
Vaccines and “we don’t know”

By Emma Rickman

On my last shift at work before a break, the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine breakthroughs had just been announced. J, a fitter, seems to be caught between his friends’ scepticism and his Mum’s anxious experience cleaning hospital wards.

“They’re not forcing anyone to have it, but eventually you’ll have to have it in order to do certain things – like fly abroad, or work in certain cities. And it’ll get harder and harder to do things without it – that’s what worries me.”

He talks about his Mum with some half-mocking, half-anxious laughter:

“She’s hearing the news and tying herself in knots. I said we’re within the rules to see you at Christmas – I said look, you’re better off with us, you’ll go down a hole left on your own. She’s working in hospitals and she’s seeing all these patients and cleaning up after them. One day this group of workers were sat in the canteen without masks, and she went on about them all week.”

There’s a general, hard-to-pin-down mistrust of lockdown and the vaccines among my colleagues, which is unnerving. I ask L, an electrician, what he actually thinks is going on here.

L “What concerns me, is how fast they got this vaccine out. How do they know it’s safe? What if in six months it has massive side effects? I think I’ll wait till I have to have it.”

Me “So you’ll use the first load of people having it as guinea pigs before you trust it?”

L “We don’t know what it’s going to do – it could dissolve your bollocks off in two years’ time – no one knows.”

Me “Look, right – it makes sense that this vaccine got out quickly, doesn’t it? Because literally the whole world and the economy is stuck until it does. Everyone’s resources are going into this, and governments are pushing hard. You’re a ‘trician, right – would you trust someone unqualified to do your job?”

L “No.”

Me “No, ok! So you need to trust the doctors and scientists who’ve spent their whole lives working on their professions to know what they’re talking about.”

L “There was that drug pregnant women were taking, formaldehyde [thalidomide?]; even in tests they didn’t know what the effects would be.”

Me “Sure – and that’s very scary, but that drug is not the same as these vaccines. They got through rigorous trials on real people, they’re not pulling these figures out of the air – the Pfizer vaccine has a 95% success rate. I mean – why? Why would the government fake the data? Lockdown their own citizens without good reason? They’d only be shooting themselves in the foot – in the face!”

L “I don’t know!” he smiles and shrugs cynically “That’s the thing – we don’t know.”

I show him a BBC graph of measles and smallpox vaccines which show the number of cases plummeting over time.

“These were very common illnesses before vaccines – now smallpox is gone.”

L “You seem pretty worked up about this!”

Me “I am! What I’m trying to say is that this isn’t about you – us – as individuals, it’s about everyone, literally everyone in the world. If this vaccine is 95% effective, that means that 5% of the population – millions of people – are still vulnerable to covid. And if, given the chance, we don’t get a vaccine because we’re not worried about dying, or we have paranoid hang-ups about getting jabs, we’re still transmitters and can spread it to more vulnerable people. That 5% becomes 10%, another million people, more deaths…”

I run out of breath, laugh humourlessly. “This is important.”

• Emma Rickman is an apprentice engineer at a Combined Heat and Power Plant.

When abortion was illegal

Kino Eye

By John Cunningham

Good news from Argentina: its Senate voted for abortion rights on 30 December. Back in the 1960s one of the most restrictive places in Europe for abortion was Nicole Ceauşescu’s Romania, where Abortion Law 770 was passed in 1966. Obtaining an abortion necessitated going “underground”, and estimates suggest that 500,000 women died because of the crude, unsanitary methods used. Abortion was relegalised, on similar lines to Argentina, after Ceauşescu was overthrown in 1990.

Christian Mungiu’s film 4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days (2007) takes us through the harrowing experience of Găbiţa (Gabriela), who undergoes an expensive illegal abortion. The procedure nearly kills her, and the male abortionist charges extra because she is further into her pregnancy than he thought (once a pregnancy passed a certain point, termination was classed as murder).

Helped by her friend Otilia, she survives. In the final scene, utterly traumatised, they vow never to speak of the events again.
Reopening call centre as infections rise?

**John Moloney**

The vast bulk of PCS members continue to work from home. This throws into sharp relief the struggle of those of our members who have to attend the workplace.

The call centre in Swansea has reopened on 4 January. Swansea is a Covid hotspot, in a country with some of the highest Covid rates in the world; the call centre in particular has been badly affected. Our view is that it’s not safe for that workplace to be open and so we are in discussions with the branch and Groups as to what should be done.

Given the current increase in infections, driving tests have been suspended in many areas. As a consequence, a planned strike of Driving Examiners has been suspended, but that situation may change. Outsourced workers in the Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) voted by a 94% majority on a 73.7% turnout for strikes to demand to be accommodated away from the office – catering workers, security staff, cleaners, and porters, and others are still being forced into work despite the building they service being almost empty. Negotiations there are ongoing.

Within the union, we continue to discuss perspective and strategy over UK civil service pay. Most of our members face a pay freeze in 2021, and the union is determined to deliver serious action on that. One challenge is posed by the fact that bosses in HMRC, a department which represents our second largest membership bloc, will offer members there a department-specific, three-year pay deal.

It’s difficult to tell workers to turn down a pay increase in current conditions, but at the same time departmental deals which involve changes to contracts and that divide our membership could severely weaken any potential fight back, so the discussion will have to be approached sensitively.

- John Moloney is assistant general secretary of the civil service workers’ union PCS, writing here in a personal capacity.

John Leach for RMT GS!

**Tubeworker**

Workers’ Liberty members active in the National Union of Rail, Maritime, and Transport workers (RMT) are supporting John Leach in the election for the union’s next General Secretary.

John is a former London Underground station worker, and is currently Regional Organiser of the RMT’s London Transport Region, the largest region of the union.

His platform emphasises rank-and-file democracy and effective militancy. John also emphasises the need to empower marginalised groups within the union, such as women workers, black and ethnic minority workers, LGBT+ workers, and disabled workers.

RMT branches are currently nominating candidates, in a phase of the election ending on 10 February. All candidates with 10 or more branch nominations will then go forward to a One-Member-One-Vote ballot of the entire RMT membership.

- More at the campaign Facebook page

Barnoldswick strikes 4-22 January

Workers at the Rolls Royce plant in Barnoldswick have begun a further three weeks of strikes, from 4 to 22 January. 350 jobs at the plant are threatened, as part of a bosses’ plan to offshore work to other countries. Nationally, Rolls Royce cut 5,000 jobs in 2020, as part of planned cuts of up to 9,000.

Unite activists say that if Rolls Royce bosses fail to agree proposals to keep work at Barnoldswick, they will aim to spread action to other Rolls Royce sites.

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SCHOOL WORKERS LEAD FIGHT ON NEW VARIANT

Covid-19

By Martin Thomas

Pushed by school workers in the National Education Union (NEU) refusing to comply with school reopening on 4 January, the government on the evening of 4 January announced a new lockdown.

It is vital now for the labour movement to take the initiative and campaign on our own program, rather than just relying on government measures. We must campaign for full isolation pay and other social measures, and to uphold the right to protest, picket, and strike during lockdown.

Because many school managements had made 4 January, the day the Tories pushed for most primary schools to restart fully, into a staff-only day, sometimes with participate-via-Zoom options, it is hard to know how many schools were stopped that day by school workers asserting their “Section 44” rights to refuse workplaces posing “serious and imminent danger”.

Surely hundreds. 400,000 people had joined an NEU Zoom meeting on 3 January. And the school workers were vindicated within hours when Boris Johnson announced the new lockdown, with schools closed.

There was only a modest downturn during the lockdown between 5 November and 2 December, and it soon became clear that cases were rising again. The government stalled, with a messy “tiers” system, some extension of furlough, but no movement on isolation pay and other key social measures.

School unions and councils in many areas called for an early end to the September-December school term (and the Tories started legal action against those councils). The biggest school workers’ union, the NEU, called in December for a delay in January school reopening.

On 22 December, the government’s official scientific advisory group, SAGE, decided in muted but clear terms for drastic new covid-distancing rules, including school closures.

On 30 December, the “Independent SAGE” group of scientists called for a new lockdown and for schools to close for at least a month. “We are no longer in the same pandemic we were in up to December...”

As for Solidarity, we already said on 2 December that the “tiers” system was “too light” and prospects were “difficult”. We didn’t yet know about the new virus variant, or the sharp rise in infections which would come from mid-December. We based our opinion on the meagreness of the results of the 5 Nov/ 2 Dec lockdown. But that was evidence enough. On 9 December we sharpened the warning – “it will take months, maybe many months, for vaccinations to slow the death rate decisively” – and continued to sharpen it online over the Christmas and New Year period, especially after the 14 December news of the new virus variant.

When asked on 4 January what he had to add to the government’s new anti-virus policy, Labour leader Keir Starmer shamefully cited nothing, not even full isolation pay, which Solidarity has campaigned for since March.

Independent SAGE’s 30 December declaration, however, did imply support for demands which Solidarity has raised:

- Full isolation pay for all
- Publicly-provided quarantine accommodation

As far as we know, fewer than 20% of those testing positive, let alone contacts and arrivals from abroad, are self-isolating properly.

Other measures are needed both to limit both the toll of the pandemic, and the costs of the lockdown:

- Bring social care into the public sector
- A public-health test-trace operation, in place of the Serco-Deloitte contracted-out mess
- Emergency public ownership of private hospitals and of NHS supplies and logistics
- Workers’ control of workplace virus curbs
- Further extension of furlough payments and the Universal Credit boost

Probably lockdown-level or near-lockdown measures of covid-distancing will be needed for months yet. We made some progress on isolation pay and (often using Section 44) on workplace virus curbs in the spring: we need double that progress now.

The new virus variant officially reported on 14 De-