

Solidarity

& Workers' Liberty



For social ownership of the banks and industry

REQUISITION BIG PHARMA!



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C19 cartoon: [@gewman](#)
Other pics: Unsplash

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Requisition Big Pharma!

“” Editorial

Governments have financed the Covid-19 vaccines, by subsidies for research and trials and preparing production facilities, by advance orders before it was even known whether the vaccines would work, and by exempting the pharmaceutical firms from risks of court cases if something goes wrong.

The labour movement should demand that governments now requisition the “intellectual property” produced with that finance – i.e. make the patents available to any competent producer. There is already a mechanism for that, set up by the World Health Organisation eight months ago, the Covid-19 Technology Access Pool. Only, as medical lawyer Ellen ‘t Hoen puts it, “[the Pool is empty](#)”.

Governments should also requisition vaccine production facilities and expertise to organise their rapid expansion.

The boss of Pfizer has demanded the US government “leverage the Defense Production Act” – i.e. requisition capacity – to get him the supplies he wants. The same principle goes for Pfizer itself!

Production constrained by private profit does poorly at developing vaccines fast. Their development and the construction of production facilities is expensive and risky (some Covid-19 vaccine programs are now being abandoned). Even once developed and approved, vaccines are generally not nearly as profitable as medications which lots of people in richer countries will take daily for many years and for which Big Pharma can extract big prices.

It took many years before the big pharmaceutical firms were pressured into making AIDS medications affordable in poor countries. The labour movement should not allow the same to happen with Covid-19 vaccines.

In fact, we want the full public ownership of the pharmaceutical industry. The issues with AIDS medications and Covid-19 vaccines apply pretty much across the board.

Requisitioning and levelling-up is the only way out of the vicious circle of vaccine nationalism, highlighted by the current UK-EU dispute over Astra-Zeneca vaccine supply.

Vaccines are not the cure-all. Vaccination drastically reduce serious illness and death. That fact, together with the strong evidence that risk of serious illness and death increases hugely with age, underpins the carefully-reasoned elderly-first vaccination [schedule](#) designed by scientists. (They explain its advantages over “no, vaccinate me first” cries from rival younger groups).

The vaccines probably reduce transmission to some degree; maybe a lot, but we [don't know](#). It will be difficult finding out. (If transmission drops in Britain now, is that because of lockdown or because of vaccines?)



We don't know how long the vaccines' protection will last. Even with requisitioning, it will take a very long while to vaccinate world-wide. In that time new variants will emerge and could hit countries which have so far suffered less. Maybe the vaccines will be ineffective against some new variants: probably the vaccines can then be modified to catch up, but that will take time. However clumsy and costly lockdowns are, they remain the backstop. The current one in Britain is far from completing its work. New lockdowns will probably be needed, for example in France, where cases have doubled since a full lockdown was eased in mid-December. Even Israel, with the world's highest vaccination rate so far, has just had its lockdown extended.

The labour movement cannot second-guess the scientists. We can and must campaign for social measures needed to make lockdowns and covid-distancing effective and to minimise their social costs: full isolation pay for all, bringing social care into the public sector, workers' control of workplace safety, publicly-provided quarantine accommodation for the self-isolating and people entering countries, maintained and better furlough for all.

Social solidarity is central in fighting the pandemic. □

Diet as a factor

By Martin Thomas

My article in [Solidarity 579](#) on Covid-toll differences between countries omitted diet as a factor. Poor diet and overweight can make people less able to deal with infectious diseases. Japan, with a Covid death rate per population, so far, only 3% of Britain's, has a different diet and an obesity rate of 4%: compare the UK's 28%, the highest in Europe after Malta. The only [scientific paper](#) I can find on this names Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania as countries likely to do well because of diet, and then all three in December had Covid death rates per population higher than the UK. But diet may be a factor. □

For Russia's left, the Navalny protests are not about Navalny

By Rett Perera in Moscow

An aversion to Russia's leading opposition politician, Alexei Navalny, is a sentiment shared by many of the feminists, socialists, leftists, and anti-capitalists who joined tens of thousands in protests around Russia starting on Saturday, Jan. 23.

"I disagree with many things about Navalny's politics: his attitude to migrants, feminism, LGBT," said Daria, 33, who protested in St. Petersburg. But for many, Daria included, there is a bigger enemy to reckon with.

"I believe that it is impossible and humiliating to continue to tolerate the attitude of government structures towards citizens: our regime has long been rotten, and it hinders development," she said.

Ksenia, a member of SocFemAlt – or the Socialist-Feminist Alternative – said that her group, who issued a [statement](#) explaining their participation, faced a lot of criticism for joining the protests. While Navalny is often portrayed in international media as a defender of liberty and justice, easily associated with the left, his capitalist politics are decidedly on the right.

"As a socialist, I cannot support Navalny's liberal and populist program, his nationalist attacks and general right-wing rhetoric," she said. "There are no illusions about his views."

Why Not Navalny?

While the world watches, and international headlines announce "Protesters demonstrate across Russia in support of Alexei Navalny" (*Guardian*) and "Thousands gather across Russia to protest the jailing of opposition leader Alexei Navalny" (*Washington Post*), the vibe on the streets suggests something else: that while Navalny remains an important anti-Kremlin spokesperson for the people, these protests are not really about Navalny at all.

As western leaders call for Navalny's release and threaten another round of sanctions, his relationship with Russia's left has been far from rosy. For Anastasia, Navalny's attitude towards women is impossible to align with. "I don't like his condescending and frivolous attitude towards the feminist movement, or that he does not have an agenda regarding domestic violence, gender inequality in society, and the protection of women's reproductive health," she said. "Once again, it is politics from a man, for men."

Entering politics as far back as 2000 with the democratic Yabloko party, Navalny, now 44, continued his work with the party in various positions until 2007. It was here he was expelled – the reason given was for his increasing involvement with nationalist activities, including advocating for the infamous nationalist "Russian March" of 2006. Digging into the archives, Navalny has [over the years](#)

declared himself a [certified nationalist](#), spoken hatefully on migrants comparing them to flies and cockroaches, and recommended pistols to [deflect them](#). A more recent interview with the *Guardian* shows that while it was a long time ago, he doesn't regret it and called it "artistic license."

At the same time, the [protests](#) his team organise have consistently drawn more crowds, and demanded more attention, than any other in Russia's recent history. With protest posters that boldly say "Not afraid" in contrast to the finer print: "Free Navalny," there's a clear shift to appeal to a larger audience, too.

In 2021, Navalny's complicated relationship with the left has finally reached a tipping point – and all signs indicate it's leaning in favour of protest and platform above politics and policy.

continued overleaf →



Upcoming meetings

Workers' Liberty meetings are open to all, held online over zoom. **In February:**

Wednesday 3 February, 7.15-8.45pm: Cancelling exams for good!

Friday 5 February, 6.30-8.15pm: Young Labour Internationalists – Revolutionary democracy in Sudan, with Nama'a al-Mahdi

Monday 8 February, 6-7pm: Workers' Liberty students – Should students join Starmer's Labour Party?

Sunday 14 February, 11:30-1.30pm: Socialist feminist reading group – Gender, Sex, and Identity

Sunday 14 February, 6.30-8pm: What can the labour movement do to help tackle Covid?

Monday 15 February 7:30-9pm: The Workers' Party (PT) in Brazil

Monday 15 February, 7pm: Making solidarity with couriers

Monday 1 March 7:30-9pm: Why is there no labour party in the USA?

Plus

Every Monday, 6-7pm: AWL Students' discussions

Wednesdays 3, 13 Feb. and 3, 17 March, 7-8.30pm: *The Retreat from Class* by Ellen Wood, study group

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/events](#)

Svetlana, 35, protested in the far-eastern Khabarovsk, which recently saw people [take to the streets](#) in support of their arrested governor. "I do not feel that Navalny has a clear political program for the future," she said. "This is a protest about people's fatigue from the arrogance, malice, dishonesty, and stupidity of the current government at all levels – from municipalities to the president." Because of this, she sees a larger reason to protest.

For SocFem, Navalny is a political opponent, and the protests were an opportunity to recruit, to organise, and to protest against political repression and dictatorship. "This is our chance to direct the protest against Putin in an anti-capitalist direction, and to be at the forefront," Ksenia said on behalf of the organisation.

The Castle, the Arrest, and the Many Reasons for the Protests

The protests were a culmination of many factors. Perhaps most important were the poisoning, the nature of the arrest, the charges filed, and the fact that Navalny – penalised for failing to attend a court hearing he was scheduled to attend while he was in Germany recovering from the attack – was taken to an unknown location and [kept from his lawyer](#) for hours after his arrest.

His return to Russia following the poisoning attempt many have linked to the Kremlin was live-streamed, from landing to arrest and beyond, on independent news channel TV Rain.

Now in a 30-day pre-trial detention until 15 Feb, Navalny faces a 3.5-year sentence for a 2014 money laundering charge, as well as a sentence of up to 10 years for a separate charge of misappropriating nearly \$5 million in donations to his anti-corruption foundation.

And then there was the video. [Dvoretz dlya Putina](#), or A Castle for Putin, was intentionally released on YouTube after Navalny's return. "We do not want the main character of this film to think that we are afraid of him, or that I would tell his worst secret while abroad," Navalny said in the video.

The investigation got one message loud and clear: This means war. And if this was war, the warriors were ready to show up. As of 30 Jan, it had been watched over 100 million times in just over 10 days. Protestors, many with signs referencing Putin's Castle, some armed with toilet brushes, referring to the 700€ ones revealed in the inves-



St. Petersburg
Pic: @levishka

tigation, and chanting slogans and takeaways from the video, attended in large numbers. And they weren't only in Russia's biggest cities – thousands took to the streets everywhere from Moscow to St. Petersburg, from the Siberian city of Yakutsk where temperatures plunged to minus 50 celsius, to the far-eastern Vladivostok.

Patriotic Protests

On 23 Jan, there was something different in the air. For many, such a large gathering of people, and the peaceful nature of the protestors who had just come for a stroll (the Russian reference "progulky" or to "go for a stroll" as a way to say attending a protest) was what stood out.

But as previous protests have shown, aggression often begins with those in power, in this case the police and riot squad.

"I'd be lying if I told you that I wasn't afraid," said Anastasia, who is concerned by the fact that attending a peaceful protest with no intent of aggression still requires you to be ready for violence. "It's scary to get hit on the head with a baton. But silence is even scarier."

But despite the fear felt all around, the cause was what needed to be the focus.

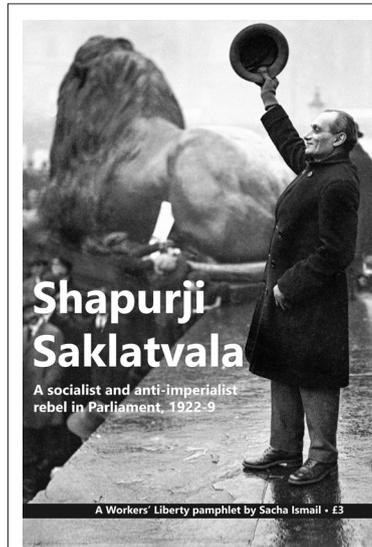
"Every protest, even a single picket in Russia, is a risk that all our members and activists take for the sake of a common struggle and true justice," SocFem's Ksenia said. "There is no room for fear here."

Leftist Unity?

A spokesperson from the Russian Socialist Movement said that while Navalny is a catalyst who encourages this long-awaited action, the protests aren't all about him, nor do they indicate the coming together of Russia's left.

"This is a split between those who are ready to participate in protests and start a revolution," they said, "and those who sit back and take pro-government protective positions."

For revolutionary socialist feminist Ksenia, it may be just the beginning. "This brings the protest movement to a new level. The fact that a huge number of people went to unauthorised rallies in completely different regions, having realised all the risks? That only says that more people will not be silent, and will fight on the streets," she said. "Hopefully, with us." □



Two special offers

With lockdown continuing, so is our special offer, a trial subscription to *Solidarity* for six issues for £2 (UK post). Now an extra offer: six-issue sub *plus* our new pamphlet on Shapurji Saklatvala, the revolutionary socialist and Labour's first BAME MP, £4.50 □

workersliberty.org/publications



Polish protesters face cops



Women's Fightback

By Katy Dollar

Polish Women's Strike reports that 14 people were detained Thursday 29 January, on the second night of protests against Poland's near total ban on abortion, held despite a prohibition on public gatherings due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Poland's constitutional court ruled in October to ban abortions in cases of foetuses with fatal abnormalities. The implementation of the court ruling was delayed by the October-November wave of protest. The ruling finally became law on Wednesday 28 January, triggering a new wave of protests.

The constitutional court argued that allowing abortion when there are congenital defects is unconstitutional because the Polish Constitution protects human life. The court is made up mostly of appointees of the ruling right-wing party, Law and Justice. The ruling would ban abortion of foetuses with a range of foetal abnormalities.

The only remaining legal justifications for abortion under Polish law are if the woman's life or health is at risk or if a pregnancy results from rape or incest. To date, about 98% of all legal abortions in the country – of which

there were 1,110 in 2019 – have been performed on the grounds of foetal malformations.

The Polish government has been criticised for that the erosion of judicial independence which paved the way to the top court's ruling. Irene Donadio, from the International Planned Parenthood Federation, has called the arrest and detention of activists unlawful. She accused authorities of trying to "intimidate and terrify" the protesters. Women's Strike has claimed "political harassment," accusing police of using "excessive force"

A large majority of people in Poland are opposed to the constitutional court ruling and the right-wing government are seeking to beat back the protest movement before it can grow again. □



Activist agenda

Safe and Equal will now run organising sessions weekly on Wednesdays at 6pm, alternate Wednesdays discussions, the other Wednesdays phone-round sessions. The purpose is to push its campaign for isolation pay, which high infection rates make ultra-urgent, so help in the coming weeks will be very valuable: email safeandequal@gmail.com.

A particular focus is on careworkers' isolation pay, and S&E is working with a number of careworkers about local action on that. S&E is approaching other groups which have backed the call for full isolation pay, such as Don't Leave Organise, to propose a coalition or united front on the issue.

And S&E has a new leaflet for door-to-door distribution: email safeandequal@gmail.com to get a bundle.

Free Our Unions plans a public meeting in early March, with a range of speakers from current campaigns and disputes talking about how the anti-union laws have affected them. Its next organising meeting is on 16 February.

The Labour Campaign for Free Movement drew over 100 to its meeting on 27 January, "Free Osime Brown, Workers against deportations". LCFM is now launching an anti-deportations working group: sign up for it at bit.ly/lcfm-f □

• All campaign info and links, and model motions texts, at workersliberty.org/agenda



Our audio!

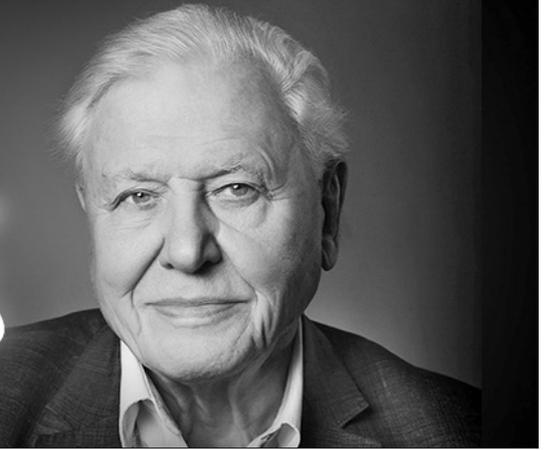
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- Environmental pamphlet and meetings

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HE INTRODUCED US TO THE WORLD.
NOW HE TELLS HIS GREATEST STORY.

David Attenborough
A LIFE ON OUR PLANET



Blaming all of humanity?



Environment

By Zack Muddle

David Attenborough: *A Life On Our Planet*, the critically acclaimed [late 2020 documentary](#), is a powerful watch. Awe-inspiring natural beauty, captured on film, is interwoven with his signature emotive narration, plus a personal touch from this infamous presenter. It's no surprise that this environmental call-to-arms caused ripples.

This "witness statement" tracks a lifetime studying nature: and its continual destruction and decline. Humans increasingly dominate and destroy the natural world, consuming more and more of the earth which supports us.

The great disaster he focusses on is biodiversity loss, particularly as caused by direct destruction or over-exploitation of ecosystems. This he intersperses, not clearly demarcating, with interrelated environmental crises of global warming and resource depletion.

These crises are compared to the Chernobyl disaster. That is: bad planning, an innocent human mistake. This false innocence throughout is most clearly exposed when he recounts how, in his youth, no-one was aware of environmental issues or of biodiversity loss.

"All progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil" – so wrote Marx, in the 1860s. Attenborough is old, but not *that* old. Yet environmental science is not the most important thing that he could learn from the socialist and environmentalist movements. (While Attenborough was on all [accounts](#) a late advocate of action on climate change, to be fair to him, *mass* environmental movements only kicked off seriously later in his life.)

As previously, a key issue for this natural historian is population. Transitional clips, as we move from one decade of his life to the next, show the clocking up of world population, followed by increased atmospheric carbon concentration, then dropping remaining wilderness. The

visual cues have a clear implication: there is a correlation – nay a *causation!* – between these factors. Increasing population, we may then understand, is driving these environmental crises.

That too many people *existing* is at fault follows naturally from the fairytale notion that humanity is acting in a harmony of interests. Attenborough's film portrays the benefits brought about by chopping down rainforests, the incentives to deforestation, as *generalised*. Benefits by and for "people", as a whole: resistance or contestation is absent.

Too much fun

This is how accelerating environment destruction, keeping pace with accelerating understanding of its harmful impacts, seems a simple mistake. Humanity has got carried away having too much fun.

If, as he contends, humanity has broken loose from our limits, we might ask why, and why now? No answer is forthcoming. A Marxist account can do better – I will sketch one next week.

This witness statement does advocate positive environmental changes: phasing out fossil fuels, limiting fishing, cutting out meat, and afforestation and rewilding.

Yet it is not clear what policies he advocates for bringing these changes about. As for winning such undefined policies in the first place, while he does touch on environmental movements, the focus seems more on communicating the urgency of tackling the climate crisis to the rich and powerful.

The same class, system, and institutions, that is, who have got us into this mess in the first place. And who, in large part, earnestly recognise that climate change poses significant threats, but have [responded](#) with inaction, greenwash, and hot air.

A Life On Our Planet offers valuable reminders of the urgency of tackling climate crises: while simultaneously pushing an inert – and therefore harmful – environmentalism. □

• The second part of this article will be in *Solidarity* 581

Points and immigration

By Sade Sawyers

In the 2016 Brexit referendum, the very much anti-migration "Leave" side of debate talked a lot about "taking back control of our borders" and controlling the influx of migrants "taking our jobs".

The new "points-based" immigration system is supposed to deliver on those promises and, as Priti Patel puts it, "only allow the real talent" into Britain.

How will the points be awarded?

To qualify for a work visa the applicant looking to migrate to the UK [first needs 50 points](#) from being able to speak English (10 points) and having a job offer from an approved employer for a "skilled job" (40 points). Then you need another 20 points. One way to get them is for the job to bring in over £25,600 a year.

An applicant can also gain 10 points for a PhD related to their job, or 20 points if the job-related PhD is in science, technology, engineering or maths; or extra points for a job in an industry which has a shortage, including certain health-care or education sectors.

Money

Those who have those points have to pay a big fee even to apply; have to pay an NHS surcharge (currently £624 a year) when here, even though they are paying taxes in Britain; and are dependent on their job for their right to remain, so they have to reapply if they change jobs. To get "Indefinite Leave to Remain", so the [Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants](#) reports, "a person must usually have been lawfully resident in the UK for a minimum of 5 years and be earning a minimum salary of £35,450".

What does this mean for lower-paid migrants?

Employers who have relied on lower-paid migrant workers are urged by the government just to adjust. In simple terms, the points-based system shuts the door for those "low-skilled".

Already Covid has taught us that those workers are essential, as was seen in 2020, when employers quietly hired Romanian migrants to pick fruit in Britain, following failed attempts by Prince Charles to rally the nation to "step up".

So were these lower-paid migrants ever "stealing" those cleaning, farm-hands, or waiter and waitress jobs? It looks like the whole anti-migration and xenophobic Brexit campaign was based twisting the truth.

The big change with agricultural workers is not that they won't come, but that they will become more insecure. They can come under the much-expanded [Seasonal Agricultural Workers' Scheme](#) for a six-month period, but then they must leave and cannot even apply to return until after a further "cooling off period" of six months.

If they stay after six months, or come by tourist entry, then they become "illegal". That will lead to no workers' rights and possibly little to no human rights for many workers who have been the backbone of the British work-

force for years.

And the people of the UK will be left with many workforces deeply understaffed.

Where does this leave us?

With uncertainty. With the impact of Covid-19 on the future of higher education, the government will also be hoping that many will apply for the "skilled jobs". With the UK attempting to grovel and crawl out of the pandemic, it may find itself in a more desperate situation to fill some jobs than post World War 2.

And it will need to turn back to these "low-skilled" migrants it is shutting the door to. But, on the government's plans, with fewer rights, and more obstacles to integration into society. □

Chagos: the struggle continues

By Lindsey Collen (Lalit, Mauritius)

In the apparently low-stakes dispute between Mauritius and Maldives over the delimitation of their maritime boundary, the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) on 28 January found, on a preliminary issue raised by Maldives, that Britain has no claim on Chagos [islands previously ruled with Mauritius by Britain from which Britain evicted the whole population in 1967-73, to hand them over to the US for a military base]. Not even "a claim".

The judgment thus lands a legal knock-out.

Now, unfortunately, the Mauritian government's obsequious stance over the military base will again be exposed, as we move forward. Instead of calling for a time-table for base closure, the Mauritian State wants rent money from the USA for the military base.

Lalit has, together with Chagossians, maintained a struggle to get the wrongs of Chagos and Diego Garcia righted – by means of petitions, communiqués, street demonstrations, forums, international conferences, hunger strikes, court cases, leaflets, posters, books, newspaper articles, candle-light vigils – for over 40 years... [and] la luta continua! For:

- Complete decolonization of the entire Chagos.
- A democratically organised right to return for all Chagossians.
- The right to free movement in the whole of Mauritius, including Chagos for everyone, especially Chagossians.
- The closing down of the military base on Diego Garcia. □

• Abridged from the website of the Mauritius socialist organisation Lalit bit.ly/itlos-c

Council cuts: battles looming

By Ruth Cashman

A BBC survey has found nine out of ten major local authorities in England with not enough cash to cover their spending plans in the financial year 2021-2. Coronavirus could lead to them going £1.7bn over budget. To keep services going, say council leaders, billions cut from central government funding to councils over the last ten years must be restored.

Although higher than previous settlements under Tory governments since 2010, the council funding settlement for 2021-22 is radically insufficient. Already one in six children's centres and nearly a thousand libraries have closed. Councils have lost large and widely-varying chunks of their revenue through the pandemic, and have spent heavily for the same reason, with central government covering only part of the extra spending.

Council tax will increase again in real terms in 2021-2, taking it to 60% of council income. The government has eased its curbs on councils raising council tax, and allowed them to make an additional increase via adult social care precept.

Over the years since 2010, there has been a shift from central grants to local funding, which is often unstable as businesses close and residents lose their jobs and cannot pay.

Those factors will affect councils unevenly depending on local economies and balance of tax bases. Revenue losses due to Covid-19 are unevenly distributed, and so are losses due to pandemic-caused falls in property prices.

Councils have taken on what the Public Accounts Committee calls "extremely risky levels of debt in recent years" by investing in commercial ventures "in an effort to shore up dwindling finances". With lockdown closures and an economic crisis, those commercial investments done as ploys to make up lost grant money will bring huge budget pressures.

In Nottingham, the collapse of the council's Robin Hood Energy company is projected to have lost it £38m. The council will be putting up bills by 5%, as well as making cuts, which means axing 272 jobs, reducing services and charging more for other things it provides.

Manchester Airport was built by the city council, and it has owned a large chunk of it ever since. The pandemic has brought a loss of airport income that will affect budgets for years to come.

In the past 20 years the Manchester Airport Group has bought Stansted and East Midlands airports and, in 2011, created Airport City, one of the government's low tax Enterprise Zones. Manchester City Council holds the largest stake with 35.5%, while the region's nine other councils share a further 29% between them. In 2018 they received more than £110m between them, with nearly £60m going to the City Council. And now?

Labour-run Luton Borough Council has also lost expected airport revenue. It has passed an Emergency Budget to cut spending and avoid a financial shortfall of £49 million. The council is the major share holder in Luton airport. The council's emergency response threatens 365 jobs as well as key services.

Bath and North East Somerset Council owns over 1000 commercial properties, and the council relies on rent from those to make up losses in central government grant money. The council announced a wholesale "review" in December, after losing millions in rent payments.

Social care provision is a big chunk of local government spending, and so is likely to see cuts where councils have lost revenue. The Coronavirus Act allows for "easements" to the Care Act, meaning that councils have been allowed to evade their previous statutory obligations to assess and meet the needs of sick and disabled people and their carers.

The impacts will be far more acute in some areas than others. Neither the local government unions nor Labour has yet initiated any across-the-board anti-cuts strategy, so action will probably start in particular councils or group of workers, and with resistance to particular local cuts in particular services.

We must extend solidarity to all those local government fight backs, rather than allowing them to be isolated.

The Labour left and Momentum should build a national strategy for fighting for an increase in local government grant funding as well as supporting the campaigns. □

Rally against council cuts

Lambeth branch of the public services union Unison has called a meeting to bring together activists across local government unions, community campaigns and the Labour Party to discuss stopping local government cuts looming in the 2021-2 budget year. Tuesday 23 February 2021, 19:00, on [Zoom](#); more details bit.ly/c-23feb. Speakers: Bell Ribeiro-Addy MP; Sean Fox, Unison Chair of the National Joint Council Committee; Susan Matthews, Unite Branch Secretary and Executive Council member; Andy Prendergast, GMB Southern Region Lead Officer for Public Services; Duncan Morrison, Lewisham NEU; Councillor James McAsh. Chaired by Ruth Cashman, Lambeth Unison. □

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 □

Scotland, separation, and socialism

By Dale Street

According to a Panelbase opinion poll recently published by the Sunday Times, support for Scottish independence now stands at 49%, with 44% against and 7% undecided. Subtract the undecided, and it's 52% for and 48% against.

Attitudes towards the holding of a second referendum on Scottish independence at some point in the next five years are virtually identical: 50% for, 43% against, and 7% undecided.

The poll's findings were not a blip. Prior to the 2014 referendum, support for independence had consistently hovered between 20% and 25%. Since then, and especially since 2016, it has risen.

A section of Remain voters who had voted "No" in 2014 has now shifted into the "Yes" camp. The "Yes" camp has also picked up support from the SNP's record on handling the Covid-19 pandemic (in reality, nearly as bad as the Tories', but Sturgeon sells it a lot better).

Waiting for a Labour government in Westminster as an alternative to independence has lost its attraction. There have been three general elections since 2014, and Labour lost all of them.

Boris Johnson is far more unpopular in Scotland than in England, with Sturgeon receiving positive approval ratings triple those of Johnson. Johnson's pronouncements against independence, or even a second referendum, only boost support for the "Yes" camp.

The impact of longer term patterns is also nudging up support for independence.

While nationalism has generally risen worldwide since the 2008 crash, "Britishness" has been in decline for decades. The institutions around which it traditionally crystal-



ised (the monarchy, the army, the Westminster "Mother of Parliaments" etc.) have steadily lost status and significance.

Today, 56% of Scots self-define as Scottish-only, or as more Scottish than British. Only 12% declare a primary allegiance to the UK.

The SNP is well on course to win this year's Holyrood election in May, on an election platform which includes a second referendum. But what happens then?

The Tories have made it clear that they will not agree to a Section 30 order, i.e. authorisation by the Westminster Parliament to hold a referendum. According to Johnson, 40 years is the "appropriate" time gap between two referendums.

The SNP cannot look to Labour for support. Keir Starmer's line is that 40 years is rather a long time to wait, but a second referendum in the immediate future would be too soon.

The dominant right wing in Scottish Labour is even more hostile: No referendum even if a majority of Scottish voters want it, and no transfer of powers to call a referendum from Westminster to Holyrood.

The SNP's answer is that if returned to power in May, the SNP will enact a bill for a second referendum. The Tories then have three options.

They could grant a Section 30 order (which they have already ruled out). They could agree that Holyrood has the powers to call a referendum (which they will not do). Or they could take "legal action to dispute the legal basis of the referendum."

Socialists should combine opposition to turning the clock back over 300 years and raising barriers along what has long been an almost invisible border (i.e. to separation for Scotland) with support for the democratic propositions that if a majority of Scottish voters want a referendum, then one should take place, and that the power to call a referendum should be transferred from Westminster to Holyrood. □

• Abridged. More at bit.ly/scot-sep

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Why prosecuting Trump matters



Letters

For Joe Biden and his cabinet it's all about "getting back to normal". They regard the Trump presidency as an aberration, and now Washington politics can return to the old ways of wheeler dealing and horse trading between the two traditional parties of American capitalism.

Yet such wishful thinking flies in the face of the attempted insurrection of 6 January and socialists who once dismissed the notion that what passes for a democracy in America is fragile need to reconsider that stance.

The Biden administration is likely to face a concerted campaign against it by white supremacist terrorists who have been emboldened by Trump and have very much come out into the open. How Biden deals with this threat is a major concern for the future of the American working class.

One Representative newly elected to Congress is Marjorie Taylor Greene. She has called for the assassination of Nancy Pelosi, propagated QAnon conspiracy theories, and maintained that school shootings are fake. Greene sits alongside many Republicans in the House who are responsible in one way or another of encouraging an attack on the most important democratically elected body in the country. The inspiration for this is obviously the behaviour of Donald Trump.

Stephen Wood in [Solidarity 579](#) doesn't think we should be bothered so much about this as to demand Trump stand trial for the numerous crimes he has committed.

Trump faces trial for encouraging an insurrection against a democratically elected government. He also faces criminal prosecutions for much more than tax evasion. The list includes money laundering, fraud and rape. There are probably numerous other charges which may be uncovered through covert investigations.



How can we turn away elements in the mass of Trump supporters away from him? Exposure in court for his crimes is one way to make the scales fall from the eyes of some deluded followers. That Biden wants to surreptitiously stitch up a deal to let Trump get away with most of it must be exposed.

Stephen makes a wrong-headed claim that Biden has "little interest in extending democratic norms," because the existing norms "have served the Democrats well." That doesn't square with the fact Democrats won the popular vote in five of the last six Presidential elections but only got three Presidencies. Neither does it fit with the domination of the Senate by the Republicans even though they represent States with much lower populations. Or with the Senate's filibuster power, left over from the Jim Crow era, which effectively prevents much Democrat legislation going through.

I understand Stephen's main concern about the need to build working-class grass-roots organisations to fight for workers' rights and racial justice, but it's a false dichotomy to counterpose this to demands Trump and Co should be brought to justice. Rather, the failure of the Biden administration to do so must be exposed, as well as the half-heartedness of attempts to suppress white supremacist terrorism. □

Barrie Hardy, Liverpool

Israel's is not the worst vaccine nationalism



Letters

Daniel Randall's rejoinder ([Solidarity 579](#)) to John Nihill ([#578](#)) would make sense if Nihill had been arguing for Israel to be excluded from a series of articles criticising vaccine nationalisms across the world.

But no. The fault that Nihill was criticising was not of the writer of the article but of the editor (myself). We gave a page to denouncing vaccine nationalism in Israel but none to any other country, as if Israel were the only or main factor in the "vaccine-nationalist" almost-monopoly for richer countries of timely vaccine supplies.

The UK-EU vaccine row instructs us otherwise. The USA,

the EU, and the UK have made vast advance purchases, and also hold most of the production sites. Thus most poorer countries have had no or almost no timely supplies – even those with high current Covid death rates, such as Lebanon and South Africa (until 1 Feb).

The EU has a scheme (working poorly) for equalising supplies between richer and poorer countries within the EU. The WHO has a vaccine-sharing scheme, Covax (underfunded). Otherwise "vaccine nationalism" rules.

The socialist answer is requisitioning of the "intellectual property" and production facilities and expertise of Big Pharma, and levelling-up.

The first reason why Israel has got special coverage is that, perhaps uniquely, it has had a vocal internal lobby criticising its vaccine nationalism and demanding aid

continued opposite →

Left backs Lennon

By Ann Field

The 30 January Emergency General Meeting of the Campaign for Socialism (CfS – Scottish Momentum) agreed to support Monica Lennon for elected leader of the Scottish Labour Party. The ballot runs from 9 to 26 February.

Lennon is not a member of the CfS and has not sought its support. Nor is Lennon overly left-wing.

Lennon was first elected to the Scottish Parliament in 2016, having previously been a councillor in South Lanarkshire. She backed Richard Leonard in the 2017 leadership contest and led the campaign against period poverty which led to Holyrood legislating for free period products.

In other circumstances, she would not be a natural candidate to win support from the left. But the current circumstances are defined by the fact that the other candidate in the leadership contest is Anas Sarwar.

A vote for Monica Lennon is a vote against Anas Sarwar. It's as simple as that.

Sarwar, the odds-on favourite in the contest, is hailed in the media as an accomplished politician. In fact, his "political" skills are a mix of charlatanry and clientelism.

Following in the footsteps of his father – a millionaire businessman who is now Governor of the Punjab – Sarwar was elected MP for Glasgow Central in 2010, lost the seat in 2015, and was elected as a regional list MSP in 2016.

In 2017 he stood for Scottish Labour leader against Richard Leonard. His campaign was marred by the revelation that part of his income was derived from the Sarwar family business – which did not recognise a trade union and did not pay its workers the Scottish Living Wage.

For the next three years Sarwar spent his time stabbing Richard Leonard in the back, briefing the media against

him, and generally undermining him.

In 2018 Sarwar was sacked from Scottish Labour's front bench at Holyrood, along with MSP Jackie Baillie, for briefing the media against Leonard. He should have been sacked a lot sooner.

But now there is a real prospect that Scottish Labour could end up with Sarwar as leader, with Baillie already installed as deputy leader. That would be a victory for bullying and intimidation, a victory for those who refuse to accept democratic votes when they go against them.

And it would be a disaster for Scottish Labour. Sarwar is promising to rebuild the party if elected leader. But it was his politics and self-centred careerism which wrecked it in the first place. □

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→ from page 10

to a neighbouring nation. So the Israeli government (although very right-wing and chauvinist) was pushed into a first [consignment](#) to the Palestinian Authority in mid-January, and more now. The Israeli consignments to the PA are small, as are the donations from three other countries (that I know of) to neighbours or other worse-off places: Norway, India, China. Not Britain! Norway and China have low Covid tolls, and India one in strong decline, while Israel has had a fast-rising toll, only tentatively levelling off.

The "give vaccines to the West Bank and Gaza" campaigners in Israel are our comrades. They say, reasonably, that they want Israel to withdraw from the West Bank and stop blockading Gaza – to allow the creation of a real independent Palestinian state alongside Israel – and as long as Israel doesn't do that, it should at least give help like vaccines, even if the PA health people don't request them. (For "diplomatic" reasons, they haven't, and expect

their main supplies from Russia and from Astra Zeneca, starting about now).

The issue is with the transmutation, in wide circles of the British left, of news of an *anti-nationalist* campaign in Israel into proof positive that Israel is not only the world's hyper-imperialist, but also its no.1 vaccine bad guy. I had that at my local Labour Party meeting last week: attacks on Israeli policy were dropped into the talk about vaccination, but no criticism of British (or any other) nationalism.

Israel is surely very nationalist. History makes it impossible that it will become otherwise until after a settlement stabilises in which it concedes an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel *and* other states in the region drop threats to conquer or erase it.

We endorse no nationalism, but we should steer clear of everything which singles out *Israeli* nationalism as a world-scale super-evil way beyond its real proportions. □

Martin Thomas, Islington

It's a Sin: AIDS and



TV review

By Clive Bradley

The main characters in *It's A Sin* (Channel Four), Russell T Davies' five-part drama about the AIDS crisis in Britain through the eighties into the early nineties, are roughly my age. It describes, therefore, an experience I lived through. (Minor spoilers here).

I remember vividly the first rumours of a disease killing gay men in America, the first time I heard the term "AIDS" (I was sitting in a freezing cold kitchen in Manchester). I remember the growing sense of dread; I remember – this must have been in 1984 – calculating (god knows on the basis of what) that I had a 1/50 chance of dying as a result of every sexual encounter.

I remember arguments – dramatised very well in *It's A Sin* – with men who thought the whole thing either a plot to stop us having sex, or a lot of fuss over nothing (in particular one guy, who described himself as "Foucauldian", explaining that it "depends how you problematise disease").

These arguments, of course, have an unintended, chilling resonance with debates now about Covid. In fact, though, I was lucky, if that's the right word. Of course I knew people who died, but only one I could meaningfully describe as quite close to me. Even at the time I was aware that there was this storm raging around us – I knew people who were exhausted by all the funerals – yet somehow it was only indirectly affecting me.

I honestly don't know how that happened. Maybe it's just as simple as that I got a boyfriend in 1985 and we were (I think) monogamous for a few years and by the time I was back on "the scene" we knew a lot more about it, about HIV, about safer sex. Maybe it was just that.

Nevertheless, *It's A Sin* cuts very close to the bone. Its characters live (at first) in a maelstrom of wild parties and youthful exuberance I did not recognise (unless I've just forgotten it), but I recognise myself in them. It captures that time, and the problems gay men faced, with a raw potency which I'm sure will affect even those less connected to it than I am.

Russell T Davies is the obvious person to have written this. He made his name with *Queer as Folk*, over twenty years ago, and since then, in addition to reinventing *Dr Who*, he has written several dramas which chronicle British gay life – most notably *Cucumber* (with its companions *Banana* and *Tofu*), in 2015; *Years and Years*, in 2019, featured a central and very moving gay storyline. AIDS was absent from this body of work; he has said he felt it was time he wrote about it, and is perhaps better able to



write about it, now.

The contrasts are striking, in fact. Although the character-types in *Queer as Folk* and *It's A Sin* are recognisably similar, the problems they face are radically different. Indeed, AIDS is not a problem in *Queer as Folk*. Right at the start the sexually-successful (and about-to-turn thirty) Stuart has sex with (underage) Nathan, who later gleefully describes to his best friend at school what it's like to be fucked, but the threat of dying as a result is never (as far as I can recall) discussed.

Here, the threat hangs over everything. The fabulous wild partying in *It's A Sin* is – we know – setting us up for the horrible crash which is to come. It's Paradise, but with the Devil slithering in.

As with *Queer as Folk*, we follow a group of friends. Ritchie (played by pop star Olly Alexander) has narrow-minded parents on the Isle of Wight who can never know he is gay. Roscoe has to run away from his Nigerian family when they threaten to send him back to their village. Colin has come to London from Wales to work in Saville Row, where he meets a charming and cultured gay man (played by American TV star Neil Patrick Harris) – who is (sorry, spoiler), the first character we see when he's sick. Ash is Ritchie's sometime lover. The group is bound together by Jill (Lydia West, a Davies alumna from *Years and Years*), whom Ritchie meets at university.

In a sense it is Jill's journey we most closely follow – up to her inevitable confrontation with Ritchie's mother (played with terrifying uptight rage by Keeley Hawes). It is she who first takes the threat of this new disease seriously;

d the 80s



she who sees most clearly what is happening to young gay men and why.

It's a pity, therefore, and my one substantial criticism of the show, that the character has so little life beyond her relationship with these men. She seems to have no emotional, romantic or sexual existence outside of them at all (okay, we meet her lovely mum and dad), and is pretty much from start to finish an almost-literal angel.

Indeed, Ritchie's mother throws this at her ("where's your boyfriend?" she asks angrily); but this feels like an afterthought rather than a deliberate feature of the character.

It is my only substantial criticism, though. I watched all five hours of *It's A Sin* in one day, glued to it. I laughed and I cried. And I don't think you can ask for much more than that. It is surprising, moving – though far from the relentlessly bleak story you might expect with this subject matter – and very entertaining.

It is a feature of Davies' writing that sometimes you hear his voice above the character's as he climbs on his soap box. But this is a drama with a point to make, and if soap boxes sometimes have their place, this is one of them.

Now that the dread of AIDS has faded – medication means most people who contract HIV are able to live long and healthy lives (though there are worries about the consequent abandonment of safer sex practices by younger gay men) – it would be easy to forget what it was like. We should not forget.

It's A Sin, which I'm sure will be watched by a few million people at least, is a powerful antidote to forgetting. □

The Good Lord Bird



TV review

By Sacha Ismail

Many in the Abolitionist movement to destroy US slavery were originally pacifists, hoping to convince slave-owners to abandon the institution. When the Civil War finally came in 1861, the vast majority backed the Northern war effort.



John Brown, the subject of seven-part TV series *The Good Lord Bird*, was frankly opposed to non-violence. He devoted himself to organising violence in the cause of freeing slaves, and was killed on the eve of the war attempting to spark a slave-insurrection.

Brown led guerrilla bands in the proto-civil war in 1850s Kansas. In 1859 he organised and led a multi-racial group to seize the federal armoury at Harpers Ferry in Virginia, hoping to rally enslaved people throughout the South to rise up. Most of the group were killed and Brown put on trial and hanged. Interviews he gave in prison and his speech at the trial made him a hero in the North and a villain among white people in the South, inflaming both sides. Harpers Ferry has been called "the first battle of the Civil War".

The Good Lord Bird, based on a 2013 novel by part African-American, part Polish-Jewish author James McBride, is told from the point of view not of Brown, but of Henry Shackleford or "Little Onion", a fictional enslaved teenager who ends up in Brown's gang.

Ethan Hawke, who co-adapted the book, is excellent as Brown, vividly portraying his combination of serious revolutionary commitment with, well, craziness. 15-year old Joshua Caleb Johnson is very good as Onion. Unfolding the story from his viewpoint creates a number of important elements. It highlights some contradictions in Brown's attitudes: passionately committed to destroying slavery and to racial equality, he also had something of a "white saviour" complex.

In addition, Brown thinks Onion is a girl and puts him in a dress. Most of the central characters only learn the truth at the end of the story, creating some intriguing gender dynamics as well as comic episodes.

Onion gets to meet formerly enslaved Abolitionist leaders Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman. It's an irreverent, indeed mocking take on Douglass (by Daveed Diggs) as vain and image-obsessed, though as with Brown he is depicted as flawed but heroic. Tubman on the other hand is stereotypically saintly.

The Good Lord Bird is a very entertaining way of starting to learn more about Brown and his comrades. □

• Available on Now TV, nowtv.com. You can get a free trial and cancel for up to seven days.

Trump: Caligula



Debate

By Thomas Carolan

US democracy is in its greatest crisis since the civil war of the 1860s. The depth and seriousness of that crisis was demonstrated by President Trump's clumsy, many pronged attempts at a "constitutional" coup d'état against those who voted him out of office in November 2020, climaxing in the insurrectionist invasion of the Congress building on 6 January by an armed mob chanting "Hang Pence" (that is, Trump's out-of-step vice-president), forcing legislators to hide in fear of their lives. It is a crisis rooted in the shambolic and undemocratic nature of the political system.

For more than two decades, the relationships within the different parts of the US political system have been modifying and shifting and redefining an already undemocratic system. Power had shifted from Congress to the President. Despite his wish to undo Trumpism, circumstances force Biden to continue the drift to a "strong" presidency.

Of the five presidential elections this century, two gave power to the candidate who got less of the popular vote, George W. Bush in 2000 and Donald Trump in 2016; and indeed, Bush won the 2008 election only because he was the ruling president.

Both Bush and Trump were made President by the Electoral College, and Bush in 2000 also by the Supreme Court. Both were exceptionally bad and incompetent presidents who did great harm to the people of America and the world.

In Donald Trump, the US political system produced its Presidents Caligula and Nero in one man. A lumpen half-crazy millionaire fussed and fiddled and lied spectacularly while the raging corona-inferno consumed the lives of over 400,000 Americans, so far.

One of the central functions of elections is to manufacture consent or the semblance of consent of the governed for those who rule. The 2020 election did not do that, in tens of millions of Americans. About a third of the US electorate now believes that the presidential election was rigged and that Trump, not Biden is the legitimate US president.

That lie led to a big crowd on 6 January trying to strong arm the US Congress. On all precedents, including the USA in the 1990s, that will generate right-wing terrorists like Timothy McVeigh, who killed 168 people in Oklahoma City in 1995.

In four years Trump ripped apart the culture of agreed ways and means, agreed procedures, unwritten rules and

conventions of decades and centuries by which the top layers of US politics has regulated itself.

At the end, Trump challenged the foundation ritual of all bourgeois democratic government, the peaceful surrender of power by those who lose elections.

Without that, bourgeois democracies such as those of Western Europe and the USA would be impossible.

Trump tried to destroy that keystone of bourgeois democracy, first, by questioning the possibility that an honest and fair election could lead to his ejection from office. If he lost, he said it would be positive proof that the election had been rigged and stolen from the legitimate president, "President Trump".

He sabotaged the US Postal Service, to try to obstruct postal votes. He called on supporters to rally at the polling booths to deter anti-Trump voters.

Then he lied that the election had been rigged. He tried to disqualify the votes of electors in key areas where black voters predominate. He tried to get state legislatures to ignore the popular vote and give the Electoral College votes to Trump.

Fraud

Then he brought over 60 cases of alleged electoral fraud, every one of which he lost. Finally, he told an armed body of his supporters to march down the road to the Capitol, and be "strong", that is to strong-arm Congress. Representatives and Senators inside the Capitol became hunted fugitives from an enraged mob of Trumpists.

One measure of the crisis of U.S. democracy is that on the night of the armed assault on the Capitol, most Republican members of the House of Representatives still voted for Trump, i.e. against the House of Representatives endorsing the certification of the president elect and confirming that Joe Biden had been duly elected president. 121 voted to reject the Arizona result, 138 to reject the Pennsylvania result.

By any one of a dozen tests, Trump is a fascist. He has control of the Republican Party to the degree that a majority of Republicans in the House of Representatives associated themselves with armed insurrectionists and voted to obey the demands of the insurrectionists and overturn the presidential election, that is, to organise a coup in Congress against the electorate and President-elect Biden.

The Republican Party, as of now, is no longer a party of bourgeois democracy. On what will happen inside that party in the aftermath of the insurrection and the ejection of Trump depends the fate of the existing bourgeois-democratic US system of government.

Trump ripped up not only the cultures underlying and shaping US politics in Washington, but also the culture of rational discourse in US society itself, such as it was.

and Nero in one

Journalists have counted the number of Trump's political lies. It is past 30,000 in four years, reaching a crescendo in the election and its aftermath.

In place of rational discourse, Trump installed demagoguery, the appeal to raw, unfiltered feelings, the exploitation of people's real grievances and just sense of being wronged and excluded. Explicit disregard for facts, truth, reasoning based on facts and objective reality. Wallowing in lies, assertions, prejudices, secondary narcissisms. The virtual denial of the existence of an objective, verifiable reality and of ways of assessing and testing what it is. The creation in millions of minds of a parallel reality, of "alternative facts", so that Trump's devotees have a quasi-religious perception of the political world.

A vast bog of emotion-regulated, ultra primitive religions in the USA and in its citizens supports Trump. That mindset, the credulity, the inability or unwillingness to think straight about nature and supposed supernature, the fusion of emotions with reason, fundamental to those religions, has spread into US politics.

Donald Trump has used TV and the social media to create a demented mass cult. The Trumpists believe what he says because he says it. Trumpism is a cultist, quasi-religious phenomenon. In their attitudes to the Covid epidemic, the Trumpists have been a borderline death cult. Trump is their pope, ayatollah, totem and purveyor of miracle-cure crank medicines.

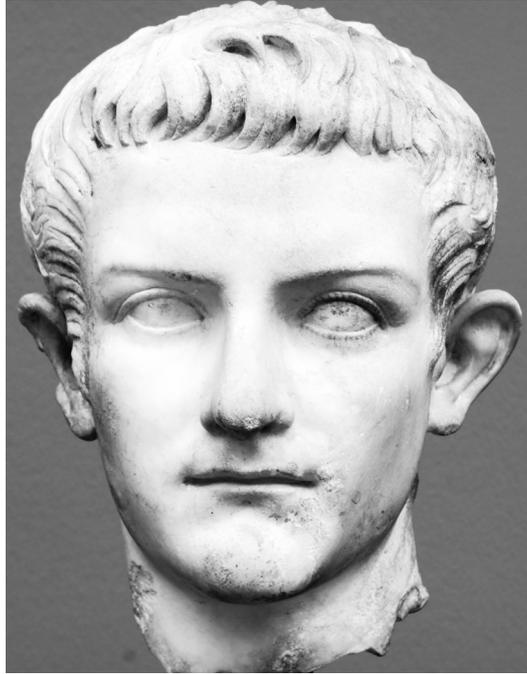
Trump has parlayed his TV stardom and his centrality on the political stage as president into a cult status that is unique in any non-fascist, non-authoritarian society.

He has persuaded people with real grievances to accept him as their champion. Using the power of the presidency, he has bullied and corrupted a large part of one of the two main US parties into aligning with insurrectionists who seized the Capitol.

Trump's attempts at a coup against the 2020 presidential election have been inept, clumsy, counterproductive for him. Trump's childishness served his opponents well.

But Trump set a precedent for more able, more serious, less crazed authoritarians. The Republican Party is in flux now, but the votes of so many Representatives against accepting the results of the election exposed what that party has become.

US socialists who fight for the allegiance of US workers, a lot of whom voted Trump in the election, need to argue



for a radical transformation of the existing political system.

This must include such demands as:

- abolish the Electoral College
- make Supreme Court judges serve for a fixed term and not as now for life
- abolish the Senate
- apply the existing constitutional prohibition on establishing a religion. (In fact, the US state supports all religions by exempting them from tax: remove tax exemption for all and every religion!)
- legislate so that independent fact checkers can reply in the same print or electronic media to what political and state officials say, and have a legal right of reply
- legislate equal voting rights, removing the many obstructions to black Americans registering and voting
 - access to ballot papers for duly nominated candidates, and with workable nomination thresholds
 - demilitarise the police. □

Beware new “security” powers

By Sacha Ismail

Measures now mooted in the USA include an expanded no-fly list, new crimes on the statute book to give more avenues for prosecution, and expanded use of the death penalty.

Rashida Tlaib and other left-wing members of Congress are [pushing back](#), arguing that the problem is not lack of police powers but a reluctance on the part of politicians and the state machine to recognise the threat from white supremacists and the radical right.

They are backed by [135 civil rights organisations](#).

Tlaib and the others call for a serious, transparent investigation into the 6 January attack, with a commitment to release all findings to the public; recognition of nationalist and Qanon groups as a major threat; and recognition that the threat from such groups has not been addressed because of reluctance to act against them, not a lack of security powers. □

- Abridged. More at bit.ly/us-sec

How social media has fed the right

By Matt Cooper

The first part of this article (*Solidarity* 579, bit.ly/twit-b) looked at the recent rash of internet censorship. Much of this has been directed at the right, as we saw with Trump's removal from Twitter and Facebook, though there have been some attacks on the left.

This second part will examine why social media platforms have become seedbeds for the right.

Because social media relies on user-generated and third-party content, it has become not only a forum for discussion but the medium through which other media, including the news, is now seen. In the UK 75% of people get some of their news via television, 65% from social media, and only 35% from newspapers.

The social media platforms are media in a radically different sense to traditional media. Social media are machines for constantly gaining your attention. Their business model is to use that attention to gather data on you and sell targeted advertising based on that data. In order to gain your attention social media will put content in front of you which, on the basis of your past behaviour, is likely to hold your attention.

At the same time the social media platforms gather data on which content attracts attention from "likes" and clicks. That content is then prioritised to users similar to those whose attention has already been captured. There are millions of pieces of content thrown at social media every hour, and social media is a device for finding and promoting the popular ones.

So the social media platform show people content they might like? Fair enough? No. Consider the following.

Untrue spreads

First, a 2018 study of news items on Twitter found that untrue stories spread six times faster than real news. It is not difficult to see why. Consider a story that was popular on leftists' social media feeds at the time of the Capitol invasion: a right-winger had concealed a taser in his underpants, and he suffered a fatal heart attack by it accidentally delivering repeated electric shocks to his testicles. An unfit Trump supporter did die of a coronary, but otherwise the story is entirely untrue. It spread because it met social media users' needs.

Second, the populist and far right are far less rooted in the truth than the left. Consider Trump: for every two hours he was President he made a public statement (more often than not via social media) that was a lie.

Third, more generally, the far right seeks mobilising myths to build their movements. More recently fascists have looked to conspiracy theories to accelerate the collapse of the social order to their advantage.

The right has always lied. But social media platforms are the Wuhan wet markets of right-wing virality. Not only do they bring a variety of right-wing memes to a wider audience, they select the most contagious (i.e. those that receive attention) and promote them to the individuals most likely to catch and spread the disease. It is a super-

charged evolutionary process aiding the memes' human authors. Thus QAnon.

That is not the finding of some left-wing academic. It is what Facebook themselves concluded in an internal study in 2016. They chose not to act, since the only way of acting would be to curb the efficiency of their attention machine.

This analysis suggests that the left cannot simply fall back on free speech. Another tool that the left has used for dealing with this issue is "no platform". In its best form no platform is only applied to fascists since they represent a physical violent threat to socialists and minorities, and by looking to working class and community mass action to win it. Other iterations of no platform, often found on the broader and liberal-left, look to bureaucratic or state bans, often extending then to more generic "hate speech".

Bureaucratic bans

The action taken against the populist and far right by social media platforms in the US is more like the second form of no platform. Facebook explicitly states that it is targeting the promotion of real-world violence including "violence-mobilising conspiracy theories". There is a tendency for wider hate speech to be taken as an indicator of those. These are bureaucratic bans, and in Germany an extension of existing state regulation of free speech onto the internet.

There are very limited examples of workers' action attempting to pressure the social media platforms. The most notable was at the peak of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg decided not to delete a post from Trump suggesting that those involved in street disorder around BLM would be shot. Staff across Facebook downed their digital tools in protest. It would be optimistic to think that was a generalisable engine of change across the sector.

Analysing the problem is the easy part. Seeing a clear way out of it is more difficult.

Certainly, we cannot favour a popular front in cyberspace: the left should not rely on the techno-utopians of Silicon Valley as a progressive form of capitalism against the right. And relying on the state to stabilise the situation for capital-as-a-whole is not a solution, either.

In the short term socialists should at least point out how the social media platforms' drive for profit has created a problem. We should defend Enlightenment truth and rationality, which at the moment are more under threat than free speech.

Politics still happens in movements primarily off-line (pandemics allowing).

It is easy to say that only ideologically and organisationally revived socialist and working class movements will undercut the social basis of the populist and far right and clean out the Augean stable of the internet. But it is true. Only on the basis of that real struggle will the horse shit be cleared out. □

USA: building the movement

By Traven Leyshon

There is a division in the US left between doubling down on an electoral orientation, essentially to the Democrats, and those who want to focus on the harder but more fruitful task of building up the grassroots labour movement.

We're in a better position than under Obama. At that time the entirety of the unions and the entirety of the NGO-type "left" put complete faith in Obama to bring about "change". We've progressed to some extent in that there's now a much more significant layer of people who want to exert pressure for left-wing demands. Nonetheless the bulk of the unions and the NGO world are still operating fundamentally as if Biden is our man, and a lot of the more activist left is falling into that trap too.

In principle consciousness could develop more rapidly under a Democratic administration, as people push for demands and face resistance and gradually lose their illusions. That is not necessarily how it will go, though – it can cut both ways – and it is certainly not automatic. It depends partly on what the left does and the kind of arguments it makes.

The reality is that the AOCs and Cori Bushes and so on represent a small force and can't change very much. The Democratic Party as its leadership and most of its representatives are constituted are not going to go anywhere near policies like Medicare for All. Even on something like the right to organise, on trade union rights, where Biden's platform includes a lot of the right policies, it would be foolish to rely on them to fight for that against solid and aggressive Republican resistance.

The Democratic Party is not a working-class electoral vehicle. In many ways it has shifted further away from the working class, towards trying to win over dissatisfied Republicans in the suburbs.

Without wider working-class self-activity, more democratic organisations and a larger labour movement with fresh leadership, our ability to operate in the electoral arena for working-class interests will be very limited, whether through activity in the Democratic Party or through building an independent workers' party.

Really the best that AOC and the like can do is act as tribunes of the people. The fundamental thing we have to do, the thing the critical class-struggle left must advocate, is building up struggles and organisations in workplaces and communities.

We need to take the far right seriously. Not least because support for Trump and Trumpism among white workers is such a signal of disorientation and a barrier to



developing consciousness.

My guess is that the right will develop some what more independent from Trump now, though it is purely a guess. They've got a momentum which I think can continue even if Trump fades or stumbles.

There's some discussion among socialists about the need to develop an anti-fascist united front which could involve mass organisations, in particularly trade unions, as distinct from the mainly anarchist Antifa-type groups. That's a minority view. In DSA [Democratic Socialists of America] there are people who argue we should ignore the far right; if I'm honest there's also a fear of mobilising against them, since in this country the right moves to arms very quickly.

There's a real debate that needs to be had, in the first instance even just an educational debate, but DSA isn't really set up to have these debates properly. □

• Traven Leyshon is a long-time socialist active in Vermont, USA. He talked to Sacha Ismail from *Solidarity*.

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Democracy for right-wing dissidents

By Zack Muddle

Distracted by the USA's Capitol's storming, readers may have overlooked another, more serious "attempted coup".

"[T]he US establishment is attempting to carry out a 'soft coup' in Cuba", say some – and the San Isidro Movement (MSI) artists' collective is to the fore.

The rapper whose arrest sparked the movement videoed a police officer serving him summons while "swearing at the officer and declaring in English 'Trump 2020, Trump is my President!' He was subsequently arrested and on 12 November was sentenced to eight months for insulting a police officer".

An [article](#) from the pro-Cuban-regime Revolutionary Communist Group expands on how nasty some of the right-wing US-based opponents of the Cuban regime are, and suggests: this rapper got his just deserts.

At 17, I was arrested at a protest. A friend then swore at the police, and was arrested too. Pretty much everyone I know thought that excessive. And my friend was not even charged – let alone jailed for months. But the RCG thinks it right and good that what they see as socialism should be more repressive than British capitalism?

The RCG article recognises a wider protest of 200 Cuban artists, triggered by repression of MSI:

"They expressed a more general and longer-standing discontent with a proposed law (Decree 349) which places restrictions on artists' freedoms: requires them to seek licences for exhibiting and selling work, prohibits pornography and other exploitative depictions, and forms of art that offend 'la patria' (the nation). This law was withdrawn pending discussion with Cuban artists, given the general discontent surrounding the proposals including from well-known artists committed to the revolution."

Why should any "revolutionary state" or "socialist" country even *consider* such a decree?

The RCG recognises that the artists are unlikely to make an actual "coup", so suggests that "a second bet [behind attempts to spark social protest] would be to provoke a crack-down by the state that will make it more difficult for the incoming Biden administration to return to a policy of rapprochement." What is about the state that just a small group of obstreperous artists will provoke it into a full "crackdown"?

Some Cuban dissidents take money from US government sources and right-wing groups. Some, although not MSI as a whole, are right-wing themselves. Yet others, in a mirror of UK leftists who champion any government which is hostile to UK foreign policy, applaud right-wing US politicians who are hostile to Cuba's police state even though they do not support what the politicians stand for.

None of that should impact on their basic democratic rights. None of it justifies police repression.

Sam Farber, a Cuban-dissident in exile, offers a different, and in my view more genuinely socialist, "third camp" [perspective](#):

Independent left

"Under the direction of the Cuban government, the members of the San Isidro Movement were recently arrested by the police... for publicly protesting as a group against state repression of one of its members.

"With increasing frequency, [the Cuban state] argues that those activities are financed and organized by U.S. imperialism.

"Thus... the "gag law" [prosecuting] the distribution of financial or any other kind of material resources proceeding from the U.S. government.

"This accusation has been well founded in several cases involving the financing of dissident political activities. Even then... at least from the socialist and democratic point of view... it is very unjust and undemocratic for the Cuban judicial system to punish those who have turned to sources such as the government of the United States to obtain the necessary resources to conduct this type of political activity. The US government should be unambiguously and strongly condemned for its hostility to the self-determination of the Cuban nation. But the dissidents and oppositionists that receive those funds are being legally punished in Cuba for engaging in political actions that would be legal in any democratic country.

"For the independent Cuban left, however, the most important thing, in addition to defending the democratic political rights for all, is to ensure the access of the Cuban people to the ideas that criticise the government from a socialist, democratic, and anti-imperialist standpoint. This is a point of view that, above any other consideration, opposes US intervention in Cuba's internal affairs based on the right to national self-determination.

"Contrary to the argument of many people in the Cuban right-wing opposition, the defence of the right to self-determination of the Cuban nation in no way suggests approval or support for the Cuban regime. Rather, it claims that Cuba's destiny should be in the hands of the Cuban people and remains opposed to other countries, especially the imperial powers, taking control of Cuba as they did in the pre-revolutionary period.

"It is true that it is difficult to survive as a government opponent or dissident in Cuba today. But there are alternatives to US governmental support.

"By following the easy way of turning to the U.S. government agencies [dissidents] compromise the independence of the opposition to the Cuban government..." □

Myanmar's dictators break cover

By Sacha Ismail

Having governed since 2015 and won a landslide in November's general election, Myanmar's National League for Democracy, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, has been ousted by a military coup. Taking a leaf from the Trump playbook, the generals are claiming fraud.

The NLD won 58.6% for the lower chamber and 61.6% for the upper chamber, versus 5.9% and 3.1% for the military front party USDP.

The military, who have run Myanmar for most of the time since its independence in 1948, never really gave up much power. The problem is not *just* the NLD's timidity: NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi has denied that the regime and its far-right Buddhist supporters are committing genocide against the mainly-Muslim Rohingya people of Myanmar's Rakhine state, and repeated its narratives about illegal migrants from Bangladesh and Islamic terrorism.

The Rohingya have been described as "the world's most persecuted minority". In addition to tens of thousands killed, two million have been driven into exile in Bang-

ladesh, Pakistan and elsewhere; the remaining minority are held in an apartheid-style set-up. Allowed to resettle freely, they would approach a majority of Rakhine's population. Myanmar denies they are even citizens,

From the late 1980s and particular in the last decade Myanmar's regime has loosened up a little. A semi-legal trade union movement has emerged in recent years. But forced labour and extreme violence against minorities continue.

Despite the NLD's supine record, the generals evidently feared that eventually they would be pushed to one side. In any case, the NLD's calculation that deference to the military would allow them to continue civilian rule proved false

Solidarity with the Rohingya and other persecuted minorities, with Myanmar's democrats, and with its labour movement against this coup! □

• For updates from the international trade union movement on Myanmar, including in response to the coup, see bit.ly/lis-my

Drive for Labour conference

By Michael Elms

Internationalists in Labour are beginning a drive to get internationalist, socialist policy put to Labour's national conference this autumn (25-29 September).

[Momentum Internationalists](#) (MI) will be supporting motions on solidarity with the Hong Kong democracy movement and the Uyghur Muslims targeted by Beijing's ethnic cleansing drive. We will be backing a motion from the Free Our Unions campaign that raises the alarm about the government's plans to impose anti-strike "minimum service requirements" in the UK transport sector, makes the case for trade union freedom in the UK, and stresses

the need to remove legal bans on industrial action to win on broader issues like climate change and racism.

Labour Campaign for Free Movement will be putting policy on fighting to win back and extend migrants' rights following the government's Brexit rollback of freedom of movement, which MI will also be backing. Young Labour Internationalists will be moving motions calling for a rule change which would permit Labour's youth wing to have its own autonomous annual conference.

Momentum Internationalists will also be putting a motion about inequality and unemployment in the wake of the pandemic.

The deadline for local Labour Parties to submit motions is usually a few weeks before the start of Conference, but many local Labour Parties decide what motion they will be submitting much earlier, often around June.

Momentum's leadership has announced that it will permit Momentum members to vote on what Momentum recommendations for motions to be taken to Labour Party Conference. Given that the new leading group does not permit local groups to send motions to Momentum's national executive, this is a turn-up for the books, and good.

Hopefully, Momentum's procedure for choosing conference motions will be the open, democratic debate which is so sorely needed. □

• MI held a discussion on the EHRC report, antisemitism, and Labour on 28 January, with about 100 attending. Speakers were David Renton and Jill Mountford; there were many and varying contributions "from the floor", in one of few open and reasoned debates to have happened within the Labour left on this issue. MI will be holding forums and debates on the last Thursday of every month: check out momentuminternationalists.org. □

Stansted 15 victory

By Mohan Sen

The dropping of counter-terror charges against the fifteen activists who blocked the takeoff of a flight deporting people to Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone in 2017 is a victory for determined campaigning and for solidarity.

After four years of struggle, the Stansted 15 point out that "for many people caught up in the UK immigration system the ordeal lasts much, much longer. In the middle of a global pandemic the government is still locking people in detention centres and brutally forcing people onto secret night flights, often to places they don't know..."

They have called for donations to the Care4Calais fundraiser for migrants held in Napier barracks, bit.ly/c4-c □

Don't look to Coyne to clear it up

By Ann Field

Courtesy of *The Times* newspaper, Gerard Coyne is back in the limelight. Coyne stood for Unite General Secretary in the 2017 contest. Cheered on by the media, he ran a foul, racist-scapegoating, muckraking campaign, with large amounts of venom directed at the then Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn.

Having stood on a platform of "cleaning up" Unite, Coyne was then sacked for misuse of data during his election campaign. His claim for unfair dismissal was thrown out by an Employment Tribunal. In recent weeks he has re-surfaced and been offered up by *The Times* as the authoritative voice of moral integrity in Unite!

Articles in the newspaper have highlighted the spiralling costs of the construction of Unite's Conference Centre in Birmingham, which also houses a hotel, training centre, and the union's regional offices.

Originally estimated in 2012 at £7 million, the cost had increased to £50 million by 2016, and now stands at £95 million.

The contract for the Centre's construction was awarded to the Flanagan Group, a company used by Unite on a number of other contracts over the years. According to *The Times*, Paul Flanagan, who owns the Group, is "a close associate" of Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey.

Flanagan is currently under criminal investigation for alleged bribery, along with Liverpool's (former) Mayor Joe Anderson, Anderson's son, and former Militant member Derek Hatton.

Immoral

The Times did admit, however: "None of the Unite contracts awarded to the Flanagan Group is connected to the Merseyside police inquiry, and there is no suggestion of criminal wrongdoing in the union's dealings (with the Flanagan Group)."

Enter, at this point in the articles, Gerard Coyne, to inject an element of moral gravitas: the Centre was "an appalling waste of members' money", Unite needed "fundamental change" and should "embrace transparency".

Disgust at Coyne's sanctimonious cant is 101% justified. But that legitimate disgust should not obscure the fact that the press release issued by Unite after the emergency Unite Executive Council meeting held to discuss the cost of constructing the Centre (29 January) left a number of questions outstanding:

- What was the original process for awarding the contract, and what was the process for selecting the reported

40 sub-contractors (and who are they)?

- The union's press release refers to the Unite Protocol (which requires contractors to recognise a union, pay nationally agreed rates of pay, etc.) as a reason for the hike in costs. But surely the Protocol should have been included in the original contract specification, and therefore cannot have been a cause of additional costs?

- If, as appears to be the case, the Unite Executive Committee was not kept informed of the spiralling costs of the project, then why not?

- What is the role of Blackhorse HCC Ltd., mentioned in a number of the *Times* articles in connection with the construction of the Centre? (Blackhorse HCC Ltd. is one of four companies whose directors are Len McCluskey and the same four members of the Unite's Executive Council.)

Basic democracy and accountability mean that Unite members have a right to a full explanation of the processes and costs here.

The last person on planet earth to be entrusted with obtaining such an explanation is Gerard Coyne. □

Time for solidarity

By Luke Hardy

A number of disputes are ongoing or brewing involving the big union Unite, and should get solidarity.

Scaffolders at British Steel plant in Scunthorpe employed by contractor Brand Energy struck over pay on 25 January, with six days announced.

The workers are fighting to be paid in line with the National Agreement for the Engineering Construction Industry (NAECI). Their current pay is £2 an hour below NAECI rates.

Unite members at Eddie Stobart Logistics in Warrington have started an overtime ban over the employer renegeing on the agreement reached following previous action, a 2020 pay freeze, and refusal to allow Unite to attend meetings relating to pay.

Workers for Babcock Aerospace at RAF Leeming, near Northallerton in North Yorkshire, struck at the end of January and plan more dates in February over a £5,000 pay disparity.

Workers at DHL Supply Chain in Liverpool are planning further strikes over low pay and victimisation of workers.

Go North West Buses in Manchester is trying to force workers to sign new contracts with worse terms and conditions, including sick pay. They are also threatening to use fire and rehire if the workers don't sign up. Unite is balloting for industrial action.

More than 100 Unite members at glassmaker Pilkington's sites in St Helens will be balloted for strike action because the company has refused to implement a pay rise agreed with Unite in 2019 and due March 2020. □

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Seeking unity against pay freeze

By Ollie Moore

Chancellor Rishi Sunak announced in November that pay would be frozen for the 2021-2 round for 1.3 million public sector workers.

The freeze does not include NHS staff, who mobilised on the streets in July-September 2020 demanding a 15% rise, and will surely remobilise when their official [Pay Review Board reports](#) in May, or sooner.

The freeze also will not apply fully to the 2.1 million public sector workers earning below £24,000 per year, who will get an increase "of at least £250", according to Sunak.

In local government, the majority union, Unison, accepted a settlement for 2020/2021 in August 2020 that included a basic 2.75% pay increase. Activists are now looking towards the next settlement (review date 1 April). They want Unison to coordinate with other local government unions for a substantial flat-rate increase.

In education, Gavin Williamson, the minister responsible, wrote to the head of the School Teachers' Review Body (STRB) in December 2020, saying: "If we carried on with blanket, across the board rises, the existing gap between public sector reward and the private sector would widen significantly. Therefore, it is right to temporarily pause pay awards for the majority of the public sector as we assess the impact Covid-19 has had on the wider economy and labour market." The STRB's next report is [due in early May](#).

Civil service workers' pay is negotiated separately for each department and "agency", and with differing pay

review dates. The main civil service workers' union, PCS, is working for across-the-board coordination against the pay freeze, starting with "three [online] fair pay days... at the end of January, February and March".

In transport, the Train Operating Companies (TOCs) are technically private companies with the power to set their own pay policies, but rail minister Chris Heaton-Harris wrote to TOCs on 29 January to state that there is "no budget" for increased subsidies to finance pay increases. A statement from the government's Rail Delivery Group said: "It would be unfair to increase the burden on taxpayers by funding rail industry pay rises, and we would only consider increases in exceptional circumstances."

The rank-and-file-led campaign in the NHS for 15% has set an inspiring model; and some sectoral disputes, or disputes against individual TOCs in the rail sector, may be successful in winning increases. But forcing employers and government back at a national level will require a coordinated campaign.

To stand any chance of pushing the union leaders to act, rank-and-file militants across all affected unions must urgently begin agitating for that approach. □

Care workers out again from 4 Feb

By Gerry Bates

Care workers at the Sage care home in North London will strike again on 4-8 February. The workers are demanding pay increases to £12/hour, and parity with NHS workers on terms and conditions such as sick pay and annual leave. The workers are also demanding recognition of their union, United Voices of the World (UVW).

A previous strike from 15-17 January saw hundreds attend a virtual strike rally on the first day of the strike, with safely-distanced picket lines being held on 16 and 17 January.

UVW members at La Retraite Catholic school in south London are also balloting for strikes, demanding a reversal to cuts in hours, improved safety measures, and full pay for sickness and self-isolation.

UVW's strikes have consistently emphasised the importance of full sickness and isolation pay as an essential infection control measure, as well as a basic workers' right. If workers cannot afford to self-isolate or take time off sick the virus will continue to spread. □

• More on the Sage dispute: bit.ly/uvw-sg • More on the La Retraite dispute: bit.ly/uvw-lar

Victory at BMA

By Zack Muddle

Cleaners outsourced by the British Medical Association have prevented 30 redundancies there. The cleaners, employed by CWS, were [furloughed](#) since the first lockdown, with the BMA topping up the 20% of their salaries not covered by HMRC. In October 2020 the BMA suspended this, citing lost rental and event income. The cleaners' union CAIWU appealed to CWS to continue the furlough arrangement – costing the company just £1,741. CWS instead dismissed the cleaners from 31 January. CAIWU's campaign went public on 26 January, and by the end of next day the BMA had agreed to support continued employment until at least 30 April, instructing CWS to that end. The [cleaners' campaign](#) is now on hold, although they call for BMA in-housing on equal terms from April 31. □

A quiet shift



Diary of a Tube worker

By Jay Dawkey

It's cold and not a lot is happening on a Monday as I start my shift at 5am, at a quieter station than I usually work at. There are passengers, but those travelling to work at that time know what they're doing and don't need help from staff. I sit and wait for someone else to come in and take me off the gateline so I can get a cup of tea. Everyone is tired, waiting to go home while others make their way to work.

By the time the clock winds its way round to 12:30pm and my shift ends, I have probably uttered two sentences at most. I walked round the station twice and wondered what I will have for breakfast or lunch. I am glad to get home. Some shifts, that's what this job is like. □

• Jay Dawkey is a Tube worker

Molotov-Ribbentrop and the Katyn Massacre



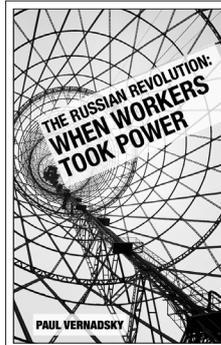
Kino Eye

By John Cunningham

There are probably no films (except documentaries) that directly engage with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. However, its devastating effect on Poland, when the country was carved up between Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union, can be starkly seen in *Katyn* (2007) by Polish director Andrzej Wajda.



As Polish refugees flee eastward from the Nazis they attempt to cross a bridge, only to meet refugees fleeing in the opposite direction from Russian troops. In the mayhem a reservist Polish officer is separated from his family. He joins his unit but is captured by the Nazis and handed over to the Russian army. In early 1940, he and other Polish prisoners, most of them army officers, are taken to the Katyn forest, shot and buried in mass, unmarked graves. In total 22,000 were killed. □



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ABM must pay in full



Tubeworker

It seems [London Tube cleaning contractor] ABM is attempting to weasel out of its commitment to pay all cleaners full pay for periods of sickness and self-isolation.

Managers are instructing workers to apply to their local councils for the £500 self-isolation grant, and saying ABM will top up any remainder, or that they'll only pay if the councils refuse. But delays in the administration of the grant, and turnaround times between informing ABM and payments actually being made, mean there can be periods where cleaners are short paid, putting time-sensitive payments such as rent and bills at risk.

This is unacceptable. ABM must pay in full for sickness and self-isolation, on time, every time. □

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- *Who's Afraid of Margaret Thatcher*, by Ken Livingstone and Tariq Ali

Demands for DVLA



John Moloney

The union held an emergency meeting with senior managers from the Department for Transport on Friday 29 January, to discuss the situation at the DVLA [Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency] complex in Swansea. Thousands of workers are still being compelled to come into the workplace even though the safety measures are totally inadequate.

We've demanded a massive reduction in the number of staff working in the offices; we want that brought down to the bare minimum. The union will meet the department again on 2 February and we'll put their response to a virtual members' meeting the following day. If their proposal isn't satisfactory we will look towards a ballot for industrial action and other actions alongside.

On pay, a departmental-specific pay offer for workers in HMRC [Revenue and Customs] will be published on Monday 1 December. This offer will increase pay for most HMRC workers, but at the expense of detrimental contractual changes for many staff. It would leave many HMRC workers working longer hours than at present. I believe we need to fight for a national pay settlement covering all departments, and for settlements that are genuine improvements rather than paid for by contract changes. That said, the union will recommend acceptance of the offer in HMRC.

Supporters of the Independent Left network and other groupings such as PCS Rank-and-File, which works with Independent Left, in HMRC will continue to make these arguments, and will campaign for a rejection of the offer.

Picketing is still lawful

From Free Our Unions

Prior to the first day of the Sage care workers' strike on 15 January, legal advice obtained by the United Voices of the World union suggested that picketing may be unlawful under the new lockdown.

After a physical picket line planned for the first day of the strike was called off, picket lines on subsequent strike days happened without obstruction. British Gas workers have also been picketing during their ongoing strikes.

Further legal advice has clarified that picketing remains lawful, and the confusion stemmed from the Crown Prosecution Service including misleading and out-of-date information on their website.

A court action pursued by the Unite union in November had previously established that picketing remains legal under lockdown restrictions. □

Even if the offer is accepted, we should still argue for HMRC workers to be part of any national pay fight. Accepting what's on the table shouldn't preclude members from being part of a wider campaign for further improvements.

In the Department for Work and Pensions, we are moving closer to getting working arrangements that should have 20% of the workforce working in offices at any one time, on a rotating basis. But even if that is agreed, we are likely to need to mobilise to defend and reinforce it very soon against any renewed back-to-work push from government and the employer, who may push to lift restrictions as infection rates fall. In the here and now, whilst waiting for the IT kit and software to be rolled out, we continue to argue for staff to be sent home on full pay.

On Saturday 30 January, I spoke at an online rally organised by Labour Movement Solidarity with Hong Kong, alongside speakers including Lee Cheuk-yan, the General Secretary of the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, the independent union federation on the island. Along with over 50 other democracy activists, Lee faces trial and imprisonment under the draconian "National Security Law" imposed by the Chinese Communist Party. The independent civil servants' union in Hong Kong recently dissolved, after civil servants, who as a norm are deemed to be politically neutral, were forced to swear a loyalty oath to the Chinese state. PCS has passed policy supporting the labour and democracy movements in Hong Kong, and will continue to participate in efforts to make practical solidarity with them. □

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

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Production team: George Wheeler, Martin Thomas (editor), Sacha Ismail, Zack Muddle

Solidarity



For a workers' government

GAS ENGINEERS' BATTLE STEPS UP

By Ollie Moore

British Gas engineers struck for a 12th time on Monday 1 February, as they continue their struggle to force their employer to impose new contracts via a "fire and rehire" threat.

Strikes have remained solid and effective. A statement from the GMB union said that strikes "have now led to a repair backlog of more than 150,000 homes, with 200,000 routine annual boiler service visits cancelled so far this month." Workers have held safely-distanced protests and pickets at sites around the country, including at British Gas's headquarters in Leeds.

The next strikes are due 5-8 February.

Bosses at British Gas, and its parent company Centrica, want all workers to sign new contracts by the end of March. If they don't, the company plans to dismiss them en masse and rehire them on the new terms. The new contracts will lead to a number of detrimental changes, including the equivalent of an overall 15% reduction in the rate of pay for most engineers. The contracts will also mean:

- 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.

The new terms would also see the imposition of an app similar to those used by Amazon and others companies to monitor productivity. It would be used to log any "dead time" during shifts, and workers would then



be expected to make that up.

The House of Commons Business Select Committee has called British Gas CEO Chris O'Shea to appear before the committee on 2 February, along with GMB National Officer Justin Bowden, to discuss British Gas's use of the "fire and rehire" tactic. Numerous other employers, including British Airways, Heathrow Airport, and Tower Hamlets Council have used, or attempted to use, the tactic to drive down workers' terms and conditions.

Despite claiming a situation of economic crisis compels it to make cuts, Centrica has a £27 billion turnover and made £901m profit in the last year. Labour MP Stephen Doughty revealed in Parliament on 28 January that Chris O'Shea had lied about the "fire and rehire" plan, claiming that British Gas had not issued the Section 188 notices of redundancy sent to workers as part of the process, when in fact the notices had been issued in July 2020, before negotiations with the GMB had even begun.

A GMB statement said: "Either Chris O'Shea was in denial about the dysfunctional way he's running the business, or he deliberately lied to a Member of Parliament representing their constituents."

A strike fund for the workers has so far raised £36,750. Donate to the strike fund at bit.ly/gmb-bg □