

# Solidarity

& Workers' Liberty



For social ownership of the banks and industry

# MYANMAR: SOLIDARITY AGAINST THE COUP



Garment workers protest the  
coup.  
See page 2

## India: free Nodeep Kaur!

Farmers' protest and anti-Modi rebellion grow.

Page 8

## Workers' control, not reliance on HSE

Official safety watchdog classifies Covid as not "serious" risk.

Page 10

## Hong Kong union leader on trial

Lee Cheuk-yan and others in court in first of a series of trials.

Page 5

## Trump, social media, conspiracy theories

Debate and coverage on the USA, the far right and social media, and more

Pages 12-17 and 19

# Myanmar: solidarity against the coup

## “” Editorial

The Burmese military is stepping up repression to secure the coup it launched on 1 February, but facing strong resistance – mass street protests (in their eleventh consecutive day as we go to press) plus widespread strikes and workers’ actions.

In the last three days armoured military vehicles have appeared on the streets of some cities. Water cannons, rubber bullets and perhaps live rounds have been used against protesters. There is an intermittent internet blackout, prominent social media activists have been arrested and prosecuted, and new laws introduced to limit the flow of news and information.

The coup-regime has suspended laws limiting the state’s ability to spy on communications, detain suspects, and search homes and private premises; and amended Myanmar’s penal code to impose a maximum 20-year prison term for those who agitate against the government or military, or obstruct the work of the military or security agencies.

Last week the military raided the home of Moe Sandar Myint, leader of the Federation of Garment Workers Myanmar. She has gone on the run, surfacing to lead protests and then disappearing again. Moe Sandar Myint and the FGWM have played a central role in mobilising the anti-coup movement, as have other unions and groups of organised workers.

The distinct and distinctive role of workers and workers’ action in Myanmar’s anti-coup movement is noteworthy and inspiring – and calls for solidarity.

Under the slogan “Civil Disobedience Movement”, evidently very large numbers of workers have struck against the coup, including health workers, teachers, civil servants, firefighters (now targeted for mass arrests), electricity workers, bank workers, rail workers, and crucially garment workers.

Myanmar’s garment sector, which employs 700,000 workers, is central to its economy, growing from 7% to more than 30% of exports in the last decade. From 2019, garment workers waged a series of strikes and campaigns for better conditions and the right to organise, falling back during the pandemic but building up organisation and energy now unleashed in the anti-coup struggle (see Jacobin’s interview with Moe Sandar Myint shortly before the coup: [bit.ly/msminterview](https://bit.ly/msminterview)).

Garment workers’ unions have called on corporations using Burmese suppliers to publicly condemn the coup and break any links with enterprises owned and controlled by the military: [bit.ly/myagarment](https://bit.ly/myagarment)

A restored National League for Democracy government will not necessarily improve workers’ situation. The NLD was in power from 2015 and promoted neo-liberal policies.

It has been widely suggested that an important factor

motivating the coup was fear that the re-elected NLD would tackle the big concentrations of economic power vested in army-owned corporations. These corporations have themselves benefited from privatisation of more “ordinary” state assets: but the dominant model of “reform” is further privatisation.

We don’t know enough to go into detail, but it is clear that to benefit from and shape a restored democracy, Myanmar’s workers need strong unions and workplace organisation, but also their own *political voice*. Worker-driven struggles against authoritarian regimes in other countries, for instance South Africa and Egypt, have highlighted this problem.

The democracy protests have also demonstrated a degree of unity and solidarity between Myanmar’s many ethnic and religious communities, with minority peoples opposing the reconsolidation of a viciously Bamar- (the majority ethnic group) and Buddhist-chauvinist regime. Yet the NLD government of Aung San Suu Kyi did not challenge and even covered for the military’s sectarian policies, including its genocide against the mainly-Muslim Rohingya people in Rakhine state.

Many are calling on the US and other governments for economic sanctions which target the military’s economic empire. Our focus should be on solidarity with Myanmar’s workers’ movement – first of all, spreading the word about what it is doing, and organising as much solidarity as we can get from our labour movement. □

- For a useful resource with regular updates from the workers’ movement, see [@AndrewTSaks](https://twitter.com/AndrewTSaks), from Myanmar-based US union activist Andrew Saks • See also the Civil Disobedience Movement [@cvdom21](https://twitter.com/cvdom21) and “independent journalism” site Frontier Myanmar [@FrontierMM](https://twitter.com/FrontierMM)



## Upcoming meetings

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

**Thursday 18 February, 4-6pm:** Tubeworker Bulletin meeting: The history of socialist workplace bulletins  
**Monday 1 March 7:30-9pm:** Why is there no labour party in the USA?

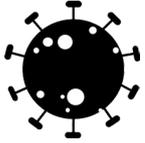
### Plus

**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](https://workersliberty.org/events)

# Social care: only a full public system will do!



## Covid-19

By Sacha Ismail

Recent Covid data has underlined the alarming state of social care in the UK. Yet the biggest union of social care workers, Unison, has responded by allying with the very people overseeing this dire situation.

Not that far off a quarter of the UK's virus-connected deaths so far, over 26,000, have been in care homes. That includes over 7,000 this year.

Meanwhile between March and December there were 79 deaths per 100,000 social care workers, as opposed to 31.4 among workers in general (among women, 35.9 vs 16.8). Among frontline care home and home care workers, the figures were 109.9 for men and 47.1 for women.

At the start of the pandemic probably a majority of care workers got only Statutory Sick Pay or none at all; and widespread evidence suggests that the money allocated by the government for infection-control measures which are supposed to fund full isolation pay has not filtered down anywhere near adequately.

Yet the government has revealed that only two thirds of social care workers have taken up the chance to be vaccinated. Among NHS workers, the figure is 80%. To contrast, over 90% of over-70s and 97% of over 75s have had the vaccine. The National Care Forum of "not-for-profit" social care employers says that take-up is even worse, only a minority, among certain groups of care workers, including those in support living and home care services.

Data from parts of the health and care systems suggests that take-up of the vaccine is significantly lower among some BAME workers than among their white colleagues. University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust says that 70.9% of its white staff have come forward, compared with 58.5% of South Asian and 36.8% of black staff.

That is part of a wider problem of unequal take-up of vaccination, which require a range of policies to address.

However, while both NHS and social care workers are disproportionately BAME, the social care workforce is marginally less diverse, 79% white as opposed to 78%. It seems likely that social care workers' greater reluctance to get vaccinated is related to the significantly worse conditions and morale of the care workforce.

It may be that this is another case of those who most need vaccination feeling most reluctant or unable to get it.

These problems, like the wider crises convulsing social care, cannot be effectively addressed without rolling back the waves of privatisation, fragmentation, underfunding and precarious working conditions that have engulfed the sector over decades.

As Nottingham East MP Nadia Whittome put it last year, when she was sacked from her care job for speaking out about PPE shortages, the crises in care "require... deep change in how our health and social care systems are run... a huge injection of public money, and a model based on democratic public ownership".

Labour conference 2019 called for a publicly-owned care system, but Starmer's leadership has ignored the policy.

Now Unison's new general secretary Christine McAnea has written on *LabourList* (4 February) calling for a "national care service" - but making it very clear that she does not mean public ownership.

McAnea's article plugs a "Future Social Care Coalition" which Unison has set up with "employers, providers, social care charities and politicians from across political divides". The website of the "campaign" ([futuresocialcarecoalition.org](http://futuresocialcarecoalition.org)) confirms that it is dominated by social care employers and a spate of Tory and right-wing Labour politicians.

In other words, Unison is helping privatised care providers agitate for more subsidies from the government, while also helping protect them against any push for public ownership. Naturally the Future Social Care Coalition will not advocate serious changes for care workers either, beyond some vague comments about better pay and "parity of esteem" with NHS workers.

There needs to be a serious campaign for public ownership, NHS-level pay and conditions for care workers, and a thorough transformation of social care. And to start on that we must denounce what McAnea and the Union leadership are doing.

Unison organisations and activists in particular should make a fuss, demanding their union withdraws from Future Social Care and instead launches campaigning for public ownership, with clear demands for care workers. □

• Reclaim Social Care campaign for public ownership: [reclaimsocialcare.uk](http://reclaimsocialcare.uk) • Our briefing on social care and public ownership: [bit.ly/socialcarearticle](http://bit.ly/socialcarearticle) • Safe and Equal campaign for decent sick and isolation pay: [safeandequal.org](http://safeandequal.org)

# Chinese state still has a defender in British media



## Antidoto

By Jim Denham

On February 4, Ofcom, the media watchdog, revoked the UK broadcast licence of China Global Television Network (CGTN), the Chinese state's English-language television channel. The grounds were that it is controlled by the Chinese Communist Party and not the licence-holder, Star China Media Limited. That the licence-holder has editorial oversight of the channel's output is a legal requirement.

Fiona Edwards, of the "No Cold War" international organising committee, responded in the *Morning Star* (6-7 February) that the decision was "an outrageous act of censorship which reveals that the West's claim to be the global champion of 'free speech' is utterly hypocritical."

The paper's editorial (same date) also took the free speech angle, claiming that the ruling "is likely to have to have consequences for media outlets far smaller and more vulnerable [than CGTN]."

Leaving aside the sheer chutzpah of these uncritical supporters of the Chinese state and Chinese Communist Party invoking "free speech" as an argument, it might seem that the editorial has a strong point when it argues that "banning [CGTN] on these grounds is pure hypocrisy from a regulator that upholds the BBC's laughable claims of impartiality."

But is the BBC really no more independent of its government than the Chinese state broadcaster? Tom Mills is a sharp critic of the BBC and author of a highly critical book *The BBC: The Myth of a Public Service* (Verso). He describes the BBC as "a broadcaster with an ambiguous kind of independence that in some cases has enjoyed substantive freedom, but which has always been kept under some degree of political control, and often enormous political pressure."

Does this mean it's independent? "Well, really the BBC's not so different to various state institutions that are afforded operational autonomy but ultimately answerable to ministers or to parliament through various mechanisms, such as the police or the Bank of England", says Mills (interview, *Open Democracy*, 25 January 2017).

For the sake of argument let's accept what he says: it's still a million miles from the direct control over the media operated by the Chinese state.

Of course the Chinese ruling class wasted no time in hitting back: the *Morning Star* of 8 February reported that "A new report has accused the BBC of peddling anti-China propaganda, saying that analysis of its reporting of Xin-

jiang stories has revealed news manipulation by the state broadcaster."

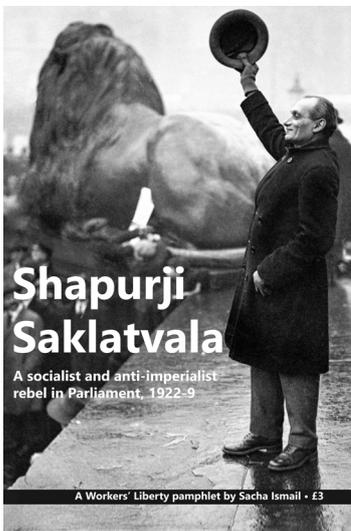
Xinjiang is the province in China where the treatment of the Uyghur mostly-Muslim population is widely recognised (for instance, by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Amnesty International and Anti-Slavery International) as amounting to racial persecution and probably genocide. And, just to be clear, by "state broadcaster" the *Morning Star* means the BBC.

The "new report" cited comes, so it turns out, from the *Global Times*, a news outlet that operates as the sensationalist, "tabloid" manifestation of the Chinese Communist Party's main mouthpiece the *People's Daily*. It specialises in aggressive attacks that get it noticed, and quoted, by foreign media around the world as the unofficial "voice" of Beijing, even as the Party's official statements are more circumspect.

The report, we're told "raises concerns at a lack of professionalism by consistently commissioning anti-communist Adrian Zenz as an 'expert' to comment on Xinjiang region, using his reports to make allegations of a genocide against the Uyghur population."

The denunciation of Zenz as an "anti-communist" (which he is: but does that make his meticulously sourced research invalid?) is the only response that the Chinese state and its apologists can ever come out with, ignoring the numerous other sources of damning information, including eye witnesses.

So it would seem that the Chinese state and Chinese Communist Party have lost one outlet for its propaganda in the UK, but can still rely upon the *Morning Star* to defend genocide in Xinjiang and to defame human rights campaigners and truth tellers. □



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A Workers' Liberty pamphlet by Sacha Ismail • £3

# HK faces wave of trials

By Ralph Peters

On 16 February, Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions general secretary Lee Cheuk-yan went into court for his trial for alleged “unauthorised assembly” on 18 August 2019.

He said: “Let’s uphold the fundamental rights, freedoms and democracy. As 2021 is the year of the Ox, I wish everyone to be as strong as an ox and persistence for democracy...”

“It should be the police, the Department of Justice and the Hong Kong government to be put on trial, because they deprived us of the right to assembly and demonstration, which is protected constitutionally”.

The 18 August 2019 protest, against police brutality and for the “five demands” of the democracy movement, was joined by maybe 1.7 million people.

Nine pro-democrats are on trial alongside Lee Cheuk-Yan, and the case is expected to take 10 days

The others include 81 year old moderate Martin Lee. Also on trial is maverick billionaire Jimmy Lai who both

hates Xi Jinping and is hated by him.

International solidarity with Lee has been called for by the International Trade Union Confederation [ITUC] and backed up by the UK-based [solidarity campaign](#). 38 MPs and peers and many trade unionists have [signed](#) a statement of solidarity.

Charges are expected soon of the 55 arrested for taking part in the democratic primaries, and to be under the National Security Law. It was announced last week that trials under the NSL will not have juries. Anyone being convicted will face ten years’ jail or more.

International solidarity will be vital. □

• See campaign video at [bit.ly/s-hk-u](https://bit.ly/s-hk-u)



# The China-capitalist-Tory nexus

By Pete Radcliff

UK-based banks HSBC and Standard Chartered have come under attack for their collaboration with the governments of Hong Kong and China.

Consider also Jardine Matheson, one of the top 200 trading companies in the world, with assets of £49 billion and a turnover of £40 billion. They own a significant proportion of Hong Kong’s very expensive real estate.

Soon after the imposition of the National Security Law [NSL], Jardine Matheson put full-page advertisements in pro-Beijing Chinese newspapers *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Po* in support of the NSL, declaring that “the rule of law” and “One Country, Two Systems” principles were underpinning “continuous stability and prosperity for Hong Kong.”

The company was set up to flood China with opium. After a sizeable amount of its opium was confiscated and destroyed by the Chinese in 1839, the co-founder William Jardine came back to Britain.

Offering detailed battle plans, he persuaded Foreign Minister Palmerston and prime minister Wellington to organise an attack in 1841 on the Chinese coastline to protect the opium trade. The bombardment [forced China](#) to surrender the island of Hong Kong in the Treaty of Nanking as a military base to protect the renewed opium trade. The main shareholders now are the Keswick family, descendants of Jardine’s family. Henry Keswick, chair of the company until 2018, is the former owner of *The Spectator*. He has extensive interests in China and has met regularly with senior Chinese CCP politicians, for example in

a high profile meeting with Vice-Premier Wang Yang in 2015.

In the 2017 General Election Henry Keswick and his wife Tessa donated £100,000 to the Tories’ election fund. In the previous year, they had given £20,000 to the Leave EU campaign. Tessa Keswick used to work for Ken Clarke when he was a Tory minister.

Now the Tories pretend to oppose the Chinese government’s attacks on democracy in Hong Kong... □



## Activist agenda

The Labour Campaign for Free Movement is celebrating a victory: the Home Office backing down from plans to house up to 200 asylum seekers in prefab accommodation next to Yarl’s Wood detention centre.

Their “official” reason is that anticipated extra demand to house asylum seekers never materialised. But...

Students at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) are moving a motion to their student union general meeting to campaign in solidarity with the Uyghurs: more at the [Uyghur Solidarity Campaign](#) website. □

All campaign links and info, and suggested wordings for labour-movement motions, at [workersliberty.org/agenda](https://workersliberty.org/agenda)

# Defend NEU activists, stop the victimisations!

By Pat Markey

When trying to keep your workplace safe during the pandemic, when what you do could save lives, how would you expect your boss to respond? Maybe with some appreciation or a grudging “thank you”?

Unfortunately, in far too many cases it is that union reps are facing bullying and harassment for trade union activity during the pandemic. [Louise Lewis](#) of Kirklees National Education Union [NEU], [John Boken](#) of Shropshire NEU, Tracy McGuire of Darlington NEU, and [Kirstie Paton](#) of Greenwich NEU are just four of the activists who are currently facing [victimisation](#) for supporting staff and for

raising safety issues during the pandemic.

The NEU needs to act urgently in defence of these union activists, supporting local defence campaigns, helping to link up the campaigns so we can provide mutual support, and seeking to rouse the membership to take whatever action is necessary to force the employer to back off.

We might not expect the boss to thank us for saving lives, but neither should we put up with bullying and victimisation. □

• Pat Markey is secretary of Northampton District NEU, writing here in a personal capacity

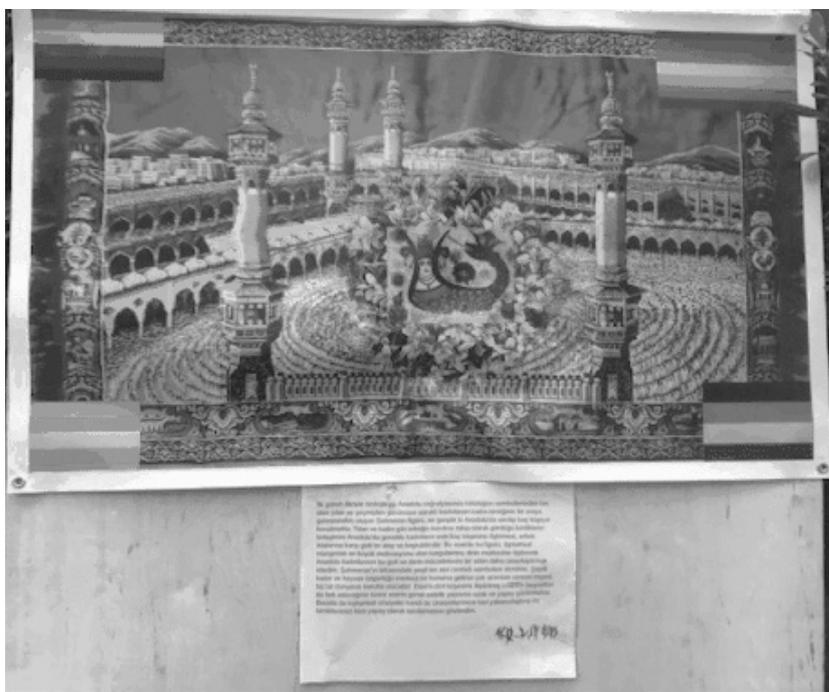
## Turkish government attacks LGBTI+ activists

By Pete Boggs

The protests at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul have continued: at the beginning of this year, President Erdoğan appointed a puppet rector against the wishes of students and university workers.

Much of the recent “culture war” around the protests has focused on LGBTI+ people. During an art show at the university, a piece of art showed the Kaaba (the large black cube in Mecca which is the final destination of the Hajj) alongside a rainbow flag. Students involved in this were arrested, and the Minister of the Interior Süleyman Soylu called them “four LGBT perverts” on Twitter. The state also shut down Boğaziçi University’s LGBTI+ Studies Club (Turkish LGBTI+ organisations have issued a [statement](#)).

Although homophobia has not been as foundational to Turkish right-wing populism as it has to similar movements elsewhere, the illiberal turn of the AKP in power has seen attacks on Turkey’s LGBTI+ people. The Istanbul Pride parade has been banned since 2016, and attempts



to hold it have been faced with police violence.

The Turkish government has a strategy against things it finds culturally or politically unpalatable that will be familiar to people in Britain: to present it as part of a broader conflict between “our” Turkey and “theirs”. There is every chance that students who put up this poster intended to be provocative (and good for them if they did!), but the way in which this

has been seized on is the action of a government in a much weaker position than it has been previously.

This last-ditch reliance on cultural touchstones was central to the reversion of the Hagia Sophia to a mosque last year, which the AKP had often hinted at but saved up for a rainy day. The Hagia Sophia is admittedly somewhat of a grander spectacle than our own farces about “Fairytale of New York” or the Last Night of the Proms.

Alongside the LGBTI+ community, the professor Ayşe Buğra has also been a favourite target of Erdoğan’s at Boğaziçi University. In a speech attacking protesters where he said LGBT did not exist in Turkey, he invoked another familiar trope, calling Buğra the “representative of [George] Soros”.

Buğra’s husband, a Turkish capitalist who is in jail for his liberal activism, had previously worked for Soros’s Open Society Foundation before it was driven out of Turkey, but Soros’s name is used by Erdoğan as a symbolic stand-in for encroaching foreign liberalism as it has all over the world. □

### More online

#### The labour movement and Covid

Speech from discussion with Emma Runswick of ZeroCovid at the Workers’ Liberty Zoom forum of 14 February  
[bit.ly/cov-lm](https://bit.ly/cov-lm)

# Making buildings safe in future

By Jon Wharnsby

Jon Wharnsby, North East London area secretary for the Fire Brigades Union, spoke to Solidarity.

Under the cover of resolving the issue of dangerous cladding, the Tories are hitting working-class people twice over. On one hand, there's an arbitrary limit of 18m [on the height of buildings for which grants will be given for fixing the cladding], and home-owners in buildings below that will have to take out thousands in government loans. On the other hand they're paying out £3.5bn to companies to do the work on taller buildings, so we're all paying as tax-payers too.

There will be levy on developers but it will only cover a fraction of the money given out, and over many years, so once again it's a massive state handout to private companies - in many cases the same companies that created the problem. As with the banking crisis in 2008, it's socialism for the capitalists.

Obviously the FBU wants dangerous cladding removed immediately. Speaking for myself, however, I think this should involve forcing companies to foot the bill to remove the flammable cladding they supplied, all of it, not doling out public funds to a failed industry. Imagine if there was a terrorist incident in this country and we found out that a builder's merchant had been complicit in providing the materials used, and done their best to cover it up. There'd be cries for capital punishment to be brought back, probably. The Grenfell Tower inquiry showed that companies knowingly installed flammable cladding, that promoted spread of the fire, with lethal consequences and yet...

It's come out that property developers who've used dangerous cladding have given £2.5m to the Tories and

£50,000 directly to Johnson. They've invested well there.

In the case of Grenfell, that block had seen other fires over the years, they were contained. Those blocks built in the 50s, 60s and 70s were designed to be compartmentalised in the event of a fire. It was only when Grenfell was "refurbished" that the problem was created. There's been a fire at a neighbouring block since and it was also contained, allowing it to be controlled. The difference is that block hadn't been refurbished! The underlying problem is deregulation of building safety. When New Labour reorganised the fire and rescue service, the basic responsibility was shifted from the fire service to the owners and managers of buildings. The fire service can still intervene but essentially in extreme circumstances. We need to reassert something like the post-war system of proper public regulation, with fire authorities making these key decisions on safety, and meaningful national standards.

The wider reality is that all systems of regulation in this country are deliberately toothless and inadequate, deliberately designed to let private companies off the hook. Look at the banks, look at the HSE [Health and Safety Executive] failing to act on thousands of Covid safety complaints.

Now, in terms of firefighters in London, we're facing proposals that would require firefighters to do and risk more, instead of sorting out issues of building safety. Instead the focus should be placed on making these buildings safe to live in and not catastrophically fail like Grenfell Tower. The wider labour movement should keep the spotlight on the issues I've raised here. But more widely we can only tackle them by fighting the Tories - and more widely still fighting the free-market, anti-working class politics they stand for. Blairism showed that just getting rid of the Tories is not enough. People in the Labour Party need to challenge Tory-lite politics.

• Jon recommends listening to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry podcast: [bit.ly/inq-g-t](https://bit.ly/inq-g-t)

## Coal-mine backtrack



### Environment

By Abel Harvie-Clark

Cumbria's Labour county council has announced that it will reconsider the development of a [new deep coal mine](#). A spokesperson for the council said this was due to the official Climate Change Committee's advice in December 2020 with regards to the UK's sixth carbon budget. It does not take a rocket scientist to work out that digging coal to burn, whether for electricity or steel-making, is not a good way to reduce carbon emissions. Whilst the current trend might look like it is going against new coal, the inconsistency and lack of alternative economic opportunity undermines any climate ambition. □

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- Public meetings
- Fighting racism: pamphlets and more
- Solidarność: The workers' movement and the re-birth of Poland in 1980-81
- Environmental pamphlet and meetings

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# India: free Nodeep Kaur!

By Mohan Sen

The Modi government's repression against Indian farmers' protests (*Solidarity* 581, [bit.ly/indfarmprot](http://bit.ly/indfarmprot)) could signal the Hindu-nationalist regime's panic-stricken weakening and decline, or the onset of an even more consolidated authoritarianism.

The repression is harsh and escalating.

Over two hundred farmers have died as a result of protracted living in protest camps over the winter. A smaller number have been directly killed, including a 27-year-old who lost control of his tractor after it was hit by a bullet when troops attacked the peaceful mass protest in Delhi on India's Republic Day (26 January).

The regime and its large networks of fascistic supporters have unleashed a tidal wave of denunciation and witch-hunting against the farmers, calling them terrorists and Sikh-separatists (a high proportion of those protesting are Sikh).

People criticising or exposing the regime are routinely denounced as "anti-national" or "leftist", and often now also as traitors and terrorists - and subjected to witch-hunting and worse. A recent controversy between the government and YouTube involved the former defending the continued circulation of a video from its supporters calling for journalists to be hanged.

Critical and independent-minded journalists have become a target for legal repression. Following the Republic Day events, six prominent journalists who reported on them, including opposition MP Shashi Tharoor, have had legal proceedings initiated against them for charges including sedition.

There have been numerous arrests, not just of farmer activists but of their supporters - joining many other activists imprisoned in India for challenging the regime and big business. The arrest of two young women from different parts of the social spectrum dramatises what is happening now.

Disha Ravi, a 21 year-old climate activist, was arrested on 13 February.

Ravi had been an organiser of "Fridays for Future India", coordinating student climate strikes in the southern city of Bengaluru. She became prominent internationally. Part of her motivation, she told the media, was seeing her grandparents, who are farmers, struggle with the effects of climate change.

After Greta Thunberg tweeted in support of the farm-

ers' protests, the regime and its supporters claimed a global conspiracy "against India", and police began investigations into those connected to the "toolkit" (campaign briefing) Thunberg had promoted. Ravi was the first arrest; now warrants are out for two of other climate activists, Nikita Jacob and Shantanu Muluk.

"We live in a country where dissent is suppressed", Ravi had said previously. "Only a government that puts profit over people would consider asking for clean air, clean water and a liveable planet, an act of terrorism."

23-year-old labour activist Nodeep Kaur, a member of the Mazdoor Adhikar Sangathan (Association for the Empowerment of Labourers) union, was arrested on 12 January and has been in custody since then.

From a poor, Dalit ("lowest", most oppressed caste), Sikh background in Punjab, until December last year Kaur worked in a bulb-making factory in Haryana, like Punjab a centre of the farmers' movement, on the border with the Delhi region. When she decided to join the protests, she was fired without pay. In and alongside the farmers' struggle she been central to a campaign raising workers' issues including non-payment of salaries and harassment by employers.

Kaur is accused of multiple crimes including attempted murder, assault, rioting, intimidation, trespass and extortion, because of her role leading workers' protests against employers. In fact it was the employers' thugs who used intimidation and violence against the workers.

She has been refused bail, and her sister Rajveer says she has been tortured and sexually assaulted in jail. Her case and treatment were raised on Twitter by Kamala Harris' niece Meena, prompting a wave of vicious denunciation and conspiracy-theorising by Hindu nationalists. In general, however, Kaur has not had the same kind of international attention as the more recently arrested Disha Ravi.

India's Campaign Against State Repression, a student union-led network, has said: "The targeting of a young Dalit woman who dared to raise her voice for the rightful demands of the workers has been met with the most cruel, misogynistic barbarity of the men in uniform who have resorted to sexual violence. The impunity of the police stands firmly on a Brahmanical, patriarchal, Hindutva ground."

Rajveer quotes Nodeep as saying: "If farmers and labourers unite, the government is in trouble!" □



## 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](http://workersliberty.org/anti-racist-resources) □

# Forde Inquiry is stalled

By Colin Foster

On 11 February the Labour Party's National Executive [NEC] was told that the report of the inquiry led by lawyer Martin Forde into the 860-page internal report on Labour's HQ workings leaked in May 2020 would be indefinitely postponed.

Forde said in a letter that the government Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) "has indicated it is making inquiries" about the "security breaches" involved, and "the publication of our report could prejudice those inquiries".

This is a setback. The Labour Party will not be able to act in unity until we know whether allegations in the leaked document are true and any wrongdoing is dealt with.

Nothing like this has ever happened before, because the documentation in the leaked report would not have existed before the age of social media; the ICO has been going only since 1998; and the current regulations it works with, GDPR, have been in force only since May 2018.

On the face of it there is reason to believe that there was a conspiracy to corrupt the Labour Party, and that there was racism in Labour Party HQ.

We don't know how long the ICO inquiry will take, and we should seek better answers on why the ICO inquiry rules out Forde reporting even incompletely. Nine Black Labour MPs, including shadow cabinet member Marsha de Cordova, have already protested. The ICO is inquiring into the leak, not the content of what was leaked, and Forde is supposed to be inquiring into things said in the leaked report and whether they are true.

Bad politics or politically corrupt behaviour do not necessarily involve a breach of the Data Protection Act, and a careless breach of the Data Protection Act need not in-



Marsha de Cordova MP

volve bad politics.

It looks like what Labour Party HQ did in compiling the report was legal; the leaking of it was not. Both questions are distinct from political misdeeds which may be revealed by the report. □

# Non-meeting in Bristol West

By a Bristol West Labour Party member

After Labour suspended some members of the Executive of Bristol West Constituency Labour Party, and cancelling our December Annual General Meeting [AGM], regional office staff ran that AGM on 11 February.

We had to login before 7pm, so they could verify our membership. Ballots were then sent out by email. There was no discussion, no speeches by candidates, no way to interact with or see the other participants. It was in no meaningful sense a meeting.

We stared at a blank screen, refreshing our emails, while ballots came through in dribs and drabs. Broken up only by a talking head apologising for delays, pushing back the voting deadline. My ballot came through at 10.30; the deadline was extended to 11.30.

The left candidate for secretary was ruled ineligible. Of a reported 543 members in attendance approximately 100 didn't vote, either giving up as the hours wore by, or never receiving a ballot. The left lost every position, by roughly the same margin.

The left would have probably lost anyway: our popular MP, and her staff, were reportedly mobilising hard for the right slate. The incumbent left did organise, but only really around elections. The left slate was decided with little democracy and even less politics.

After losing in one of the UK's biggest constituencies, and facing a similar picture across Bristol, much of the left here is demoralised. Outwards facing campaigning on crucial issues, such as isolation pay, is a necessary part of the answer. □

# Workers' control, not reliance on HSE

By Gerry Bates

The official Health and Safety Executive has had 179,873 Covid-related cases since the start of the pandemic, but has brought not a single prosecution against an employer.

It has issued only 218 "enforcement notices" ("please fix this within 21 days" type things). HSE inspectors are pretty much unable to halt work activities because the HSE classifies the virus only as a "significant" risk, not a "serious" one.

Back in the spring 2020 lockdown, the HSE stopped workplace inspections altogether (until 20 May 2020), with the mind-spinning rationale that the workplaces it might inspect were too dangerous for its inspectors to enter.

Before that, from 2009-10 to 2016, successive Tory cuts had reduced the HSE's budget by 46%, and its number of inspectors by over a third.

Disputes like the PCS civil service union's at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) in Swansea show that workers are being put at risk by inadequate workplace measures, and by people who could well work from home being pressed to go in, as well as by infected workmates without full isolation pay being "economically conscripted" into work.

Workers can only defend themselves by organising, evaluating the risks with expert advice, insisting on work-

ers' control over workplace precautions, and using legal rights to refuse unsafe work areas (like Section 44 of the Employment Protection Act 1996) where necessary. □

## When we don't know



### Letters

As the World Health Organisation puts it, "No substantive data are available related to impact of [the AstraZeneca vaccine] on transmission or viral shedding". Or other vaccines.

There are theoretical reasons to *hope* that the vaccines reduce transmission a fair bit. Getting to know definitely will be difficult. Solid studies of transmission require good knowledge about where each new infected person got the virus.

That's why we still don't know *how much* less never-symptomatic people transmit than eventually-symptomatic ones, and how small a factor transmission via surfaces is, rather than through particles in the air (probably much smaller than first thought, but...)

Meanwhile there is agitation for "vaccine passports" and the like. It lacks scientific grounding.

As Zack Muddle ([letters](#), *Solidarity* 581) says, the scientists' committee which decided the vaccination schedule in Britain included health and care workers alongside the old and vulnerable in the priority groups. Health and care workers face *much* more risk than other occupational groups.

The committee cited a secondary argument, as Zack quotes: "Even a small reduction in transmission arising from vaccination would add to the benefits" here, because health and care workers are also at more risk of transmitting to the old and vulnerable.

Note: *even, small, would, add to...* The scientists recognise they *don't know* about reduction in transmission.

Probably by the time two-dose vaccination of groups prioritised for their risk of Covid death or severe illness is complete (a way off yet) we will know more about transmission, and that can be factored into later prioritisation. We don't know yet. □

Martin Thomas, Islington

## Our videos!

Watch Workers' Liberty's videos and playlists, and subscribe to our youtube channel! Many have subtitles. **Playlists include:**

- Socialist Feminism
- Black Lives Matter, videos around the movement and related topics
- Socialist commentary on the Covid-19 crisis
- ABCs of Marxism, an introductory series, still being added to
- An introduction to Marx's Capital, in 19 parts, with Martin Thomas
- Tubeworker/Off The Rails, videos by the producers of the bulletins □

Watch, subscribe, like, comment and share, all at: [youtube.com/c/WorkersLibertyUK](https://youtube.com/c/WorkersLibertyUK)

# New research on mental health

By Todd Hamer

New research into the mental-health toll of the pandemic suggests a divergent effect depending on social status and income. A small minority (8.5% in the study) report improved mental well-being. A larger minority (28.5%) report worsening mental health. The worst off suffer the most.

Richard Bentall and his co-workers [report](#): “the economic threats associated with the pandemic were most linked with [mental illness] symptoms, whereas exposure to the virus seemed to have little effect”. They warn, though, that very few of the people they studied had Covid so badly as to be hospitalised, and the picture may be different for the hospitalised.

Some parts of the study show some overall *improvement* in mental health from early lockdown to late 2020. The researchers suggest that “strong social bonds protect people against stress and, during a crisis [of collective trauma], people often come together to help each other, creating a sense of belonging and a shared identity with neighbours”, in contrast to *individual* traumas which isolate.

Possibly fewer social encounters in the pandemic have brought less status anxiety. The pandemic has also afforded some better-off people, including better-off workers, more time for self-care. The \$4.5 trillion global “wellness” industry is enjoying a boom as locked-down populations use apps and digital technology to build their self-care routines. Whether that genuinely improves people’s well-being is a much larger debate, but it may lead to more self-reporting of improved mental health.

The scant epidemiological research into the world’s



mental health crisis finds a correlation between psychological distress and social inequality. More unequal societies produce more troubled minds.

Those who have carried the greatest burdens during lockdown are also probably experiencing the highest mental distress: key workers, parents, and the poorer sections of society. It is worst for those with little to look forward to when life gets “back to normal”.

Pre-pandemic “normality” was a stressful world where one person in four was suffering from clinical depression, anxiety, psychosis or addiction. It was a world where human potential was squandered, where status, wealth and power were concentrated in the hands of a few, a civilisation that was destroying its own ecological foundations and storing up catastrophe for the young and yet to be born.

Unless the increased status that low paid keyworkers enjoyed during the initial lockdown translates into militant workers’ organisations and a rebirth of working-class power, the pandemic of mental illness is likely to expand rather than decline with moves back to capitalist normality. □

## SOAS starts a fees strike

By Abel Harvie-Clark

Students at SOAS [a university in London centred on the study of Asia, Africa and the Near and Middle East] are refusing to pay fees as leverage to win their demands on the university management.

Close to 1000 students (out of around only 5000 “campus” students, i.e. students who would be on campus in usual conditions, as distinct from those online-only anyway) signed a petition supporting the call for a bailout, pledging solidarity with staff against insecure contracts and “restructuring”, and further demanding that the university does not comply with the government’s Prevent and Hostile Environment policies.

A good relationship between Student Union officers and campus union campaigns has kept the interests of staff and students aligned. Students want better access to library and study facilities, but there is an understanding that this cannot be achieved by jeopardizing the safety and working patterns of workers.

The campaign looks to strengthen this solidarity – if management cuts off online resources for striking stu-

dents, pirate-sharing from staff and also other students will be important to sustain the strike.

The rejection of Hostile Environment is important because the surveillance that the university does on behalf of the Home Office restricts the capacity of international students to participate in campaigns and action. Students have pointed out the hypocrisy of SOAS’s anti-colonial branding.

Negotiations are set to begin this week between the strike committee and management.

Whilst he is unwilling to show face at initial discussion, newly installed director Adam Habib has experience of dealing with fee strikes. Habib was vice-chancellor at University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg during the Fees Must Fall campaign, and called cops to campus, who beat up protesting students.

Habib’s first response to the student petition was more concerned with our “tone” than addressing the demands. SOAS students are clear and committed in their demands to reorganise HE, and the need for collective action, not just politeness, to achieve this. □

# Regulating social media

By Matt Cooper

Two previous articles in *Solidarity* (579 and 580) have examined censorship on social media. I argued that social media is a breeding ground for right-wing and far-right ideas. The current moves by both states and the social media corporations mainly aim to check right-wing incitement and misinformation, and it is difficult to oppose such moves as Twitter banning Trump.

But then what?

Many on the left see unrestricted access for all to the social-media megaphones as a free speech issue, on the supposition that the left will be the main targets of censorship. But in fact the issue now is the far right. Its anti-vaxxism and low-level "denialisms" may ease the transition from right-wing populism to more hardened right-wing ideas, with social media as a nursery for weaponised misinformation.

So some left-wing writers sometimes additionally demand "no platform" for fascists. The demand here is not for mobilising to stop fascists dominating the streets, but for the corporations or state to ban content. The agency is out of the antifascist movement's control.

Demands that social media corporations do not let far-right incitement use their platforms are not necessarily wrong, but they beg the question of who and how.

Much of the current regulation of social media is self-regulation. That has driven some of the far right to the precarious margins of the internet. Facebook's current "community guidelines" outlaw the organised political violence of the right while permitting the community self-defence favoured by the left (although Facebook has sometimes removed some antifascists from its platforms).

Where mass movements that challenge established power have emerged (pro-democracy movements and Black Lives Matter), those who have pulled the plug on them have been not been the social media platforms but states. Whether mass workers' movements are treated with equal indulgence by these corporations is a question yet to be tested. Particularly in authoritarian states, the current social-media self-regulation is probably, pragmatically, the least-worst option.

## The elusive online "commons"

The (nebulous) idea of "the commons" is used in an attempt to avoid the problems of state ownership and private property. In our current class societies, the idea of resources could be owned by no-one or everyone is utopian. If something like "the commons" exists, it exists only by state action.

The internet may appear to be such a "commons", but the physical infrastructure is mainly privately owned by telecoms companies and ISPs. Equal access for content providers to that infrastructure (net neutrality) is underpinned by state regulation. Consumers pay for access at commercial rates.



Other aspects of providing content over the internet are fully commercialised, particularly the servers which run and deliver the content. As seen with Parler, if the hosting services refuse to host an internet application, it has problems.

## No route for non-profit

There are a few examples of possible "commons" in tech. The free operating system Linux started off as something like "commons", but has become a joint venture by major tech firms to create a common resource for their commercial operations, and so is hardly a model here. A better example is Wikipedia (which is not-for-profit, reliant on donations, and carries no advertising). Its existence is based on its content being provided for free, the core of it by a relatively small group of experts in their fields, often academics.

Could a non-profit social media platform analogous to Wikipedia emerge? The accepted wisdom is that it would be impossible to launch something like Wikipedia now, because it would start too small to be noticed and never gain the critical mass to compete. Maybe an ethical not-for-profit Facebook, driven by its users and not profit, is possible, but don't hold your breath.

## State Ownership

The quickest route to "the commons" could be state ownership, but that is a very different proposition.

The state is not a neutral body, but an instrument of class rule. Some state activities are delivered at arm's length. A degree of independence is afforded to the BBC and state education in the UK, but the key word here is "degree". The BBC is not truly independent, as recent appointments to its board show. Its senior personnel and mindset are those of the more liberal and consensual side of the British state. Recent government interventions on the history curriculum and talk of banning anti-capitalist material from schools shows the movable limits to independence in education.

In the wider world this would be even more problematic. Social media platforms are banned in China, Iran and elsewhere, often being replaced with tame local clones effectively under state control. That may soon happen to Twitter in India.

What else? Short of a reinvigorated workers' movement

Continued on page 13

# Gun clubs, churches, unions

By Martin Thomas

As Matt Cooper describes (Solidarity 579 and 580), social media has been a prime vehicle for the far right. So much so that mainstream bourgeois institutions want curbs.

How do we find an answer from the left? I don't know. A further bit of diagnosis may help us along the way, though.

Why do so many people *believe* such off-the-wall ideas? As Matt reports, false conspiracy theories and "secret scandal" stories spread faster on social media than truth because they are more emotive and more adhesive to "continuous partial attention".

But why are they then believed *enough* to motivate people to storm the Capitol? Everyone knows that "I read it on Facebook" carries no more authority than "someone down the pub told me". And you have to *choose* the far-right stories on social media, rather than hearing them regardless as you may do in a pub.

The US political scientist [Eitan Hersh](#) is a conservative Democrat who criticises most Democrats as too left-wing. But some of his observations are instructive.

*Continued from page 12*

imposing itself on social media, only state regulation remains. That has many of the same pitfalls as state ownership. The UK government is putting *Daily Mail* editor-in-chief Paul Dacre in charge of Ofcom, the official regulator of broadcasting. A left-wing government would find itself clashing with such institutions of class power.

Nonetheless, as with other issues, there are demands on the state that the labour movement can mobilise around, for example:

- that social media companies stop gathering data on their users and targeting them with content and advertising
- banning of the egregious elements of the attention machine, particularly the like button
- giving users, individually and collectively, more control over the nature of social media that they use.

One particularly important demand is that "dark advertising" be banned in politics (that is, the ability to target one group of users with one message that will not be seen by others).

I see no easy answers here. We can't rely on the state, but demands on the state to regulate social media like those above would enlarge rather than cramp democracy. The social media companies are not our allies, but in some parts of the world they give voice to the otherwise voiceless.

Until such a time as social media is controlled by the workers' movement and the broader community of its users, we have to work within these parameters. □

Right-wing Republicans in the USA do more in-person politics, "in the gun clubs and the churches", than the left broadly defined. Much of the rise of the Republican far-right, which has been working through since the late 1970s, happened before the explosion of social media, and through plebeian, grass-roots, in-person politics, or so Thomas Frank's several books on it indicate.

Maybe since 2008 (the era since the great economic crash, also of explosive social-media expansion, also of smartphone-universalisation) it is still a matter of talk "in the gun clubs and the churches" taking people to social-media stories (which then help to consolidate them ideologically), more than of social media taking them to real-life far-rightism.

In the USA, at least, so Hersh argues, the slippage is more of *the left* (broadly defined), rather than the far right, relying on social media. And that doesn't work well, says Hersh, because "online politics is all about provocation and signalling outrage. But changing people's minds... requires empathy and face-to-face engagement".

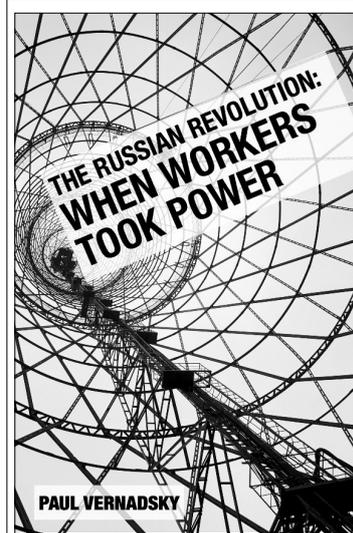
"We used to think more about grassroots organising focused on unions, for example", adds Hersh, "but unions have collapsed while churches have gotten disproportionately Republican".

Too many leftists, says Hersh, fool themselves that they're politically effective when in fact they are "political hobbyists", part of a froth of "consultant-driven activism".

They may do a lot of "signing online petitions", and "many of us think we're politically active – but in fact, we're doing little more than signalling who we are to other people" in a fairly small circle.

"It's not harder to go to a community meeting once a week today than it was 30 years ago, but it feels harder relative to the alternative" (an alternative which now *appears* "politically active", which staying home and chatting never did before).

If Hersh has even a bit of the truth, then a big part of the answer to the power of social media on the right may be less reliance on social media by the left. □



## Featured book

The 1917 Russian revolution was the greatest event in political history so far – the first time working class people took political power and held it for years. Yet the real history, uncovered here, is buried under myths: both anti-socialist and Stalinist. 374 pages, £12. See also the video [Who was Lenin?](#)

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# Crisis? What crisis?



## Debate

By **Barrie Hardy**

Diamonds are apparently forever, yet the same can't be said of political systems. Lenin said he'd never see the end of Tsarism mere weeks before the Russian Revolution broke out. Similarly few imagined at the start of 1989 that the USSR would collapse so swiftly, though some supposed leftists still haven't come to terms with it.

Likewise the political project known as the United States of America won't be around forever. Though close to being finished off during the Civil War, the USA emerged in the 20th century as the world's predominant imperialist superpower. Nevertheless, the Civil War continues to cast its long shadow over America today.

There is now a Bill before the Texas State Legislature calling for a referendum on whether or not that state should secede from the Union – *Texit!* Texas Republican Party Chairman Allen West also suggests “law-abiding states (sic!) should bond together and form a Union of States that would abide by the Constitution.” They had something like that in 1861. It was called the Confederacy!

I'm not going to join Mark Osborn (*Solidarity 581*) in the “What's the worst crisis in American history?” game, but he makes a major error downplaying the extent of the political and social crisis the USA is still in. His assertion that it's “obvious” Trump has been seriously defeated needs substantial qualification.

Yes, Trump lost the election. Things would be a lot worse if he had held on to the presidency. But he has been wildly successful in establishing dominance of a major political party – the GOP. He's got a get out of jail card from the Senate after his second impeachment. And he has got maybe a third of the population believing that the elected government is not elected at all, only installed by a “deep state” coup.

Old guard Republicans in the Senate are eclipsed by a new intake of rabid Trumpites in the House of Representatives. Marjorie Taylor Greene under “normal circumstances” would be dismissed as the conspiracy-promoting nut she is with all her talk of Jewish lasers in space. This person has supported the assassination of elected representatives. Yet at a closed meeting of the GOP she received a standing ovation!

In the mid 1950s, veteran Trotskyist James Cannon warned against people “who will not recognise incipient American fascism until it obliges them by assuming the ‘classic’ European form.” It's doubtful Trump has ever read much or understood much of fascist ‘ideology’. Denial of electoral defeat, attacks on ‘the lying press’, support for fascist formations, etc. make him a good candidate for



White supremacist protesters in Charlottesville, Virginia

the fascist appellation, though. And, his commensurate opportunism fits firmly into the mould of would-be fascist autocrat.

Opportunism is a significant characteristic of aspiring fascist leaders. Mussolini made it up as he went along – more often seen in bowler hat, suit and tie in the early years of his regime than full fascist regalia. He took three years in government before turning Italy into a one party state. In other fascist regimes such as Franco's, the actual fascist parties served as auxiliaries to the aspiring autocrat.

Mark's assertion that “the US ruling class opposes the Trump movement” is also questionable. Just which class did Trump represent when he was President? It's like the Lexiter nonsense about “the ruling class” as a unit opposing Brexit. Sections of the ruling class supported Trump. Some still do. In the future more will if the USA descends into chaos.

Mark has a touching regard bordering on the sentimental for American “traditions of free speech and individual liberty”. These same “traditions” are also upheld by Trump and co, only for them “free speech” is the right to incite, and “individual liberty” is to be armed to the teeth with assault weapons.

We shouldn't neglect “local traditions and conditions”. In Republican controlled states, though, these things boil down to widespread voter suppression, and there'll be more of that in the next four years make no mistake.

Such vote-rigging methods could also lead to Trump or another like him winning the Presidency in 2024 – again against the wishes of the majority of American voters.

To achieve that there will be attempts to make the country ungovernable. Already we are seeing some of the participants in the invasion of the Capitol being treated with leniency by Trump-appointed judges. A rolling campaign of far-right terrorism is in the offing. States where the Republicans hold power – largely those in the former Confederacy – will come into conflict with the Federal government.

We need to support independent working class action and show solidarity with the American left. We also need to recognise the seriousness of the enduring crisis there and the real danger of the American form fascism is taking. We can also do without the characterisation that thinking this way somehow makes you a member of the Joe Biden fan club! □

# Democrats will only tinker



## Debate

By Stephen Wood

In his letter to *Solidarity* 580, Barrie Hardy delves a little further into some of the wider differences that have been discussed in *Solidarity* in the run-up to the 2020 US Presidential election. I want to pick up one in particular.

Barrie says that I make a wrong-headed claim by dismissing Biden's or the Democrats' desire for democratic reform. I think what Biden has said and the record of the Democrats is proof that any such commitment is cynical rather than real.

As Howie Hawkins said in his interview in *Solidarity* 567, the US election process is entirely in the hands of the Democrats and Republicans. The parties of federal and state government have massive power over the conduct of an election. In Wisconsin it was the Democrats who worked to get the Green Party removed from the ballot.

And we don't have to go back much further to see what kind of democratic reform the Democrats are actually interested in. Obama promised to stop voter suppression. There was even talk he would challenge the electoral college, good – but he didn't. Even the most liberal of Democrats ambitions make *no mention* of challenging the electoral college.

Biden has portrayed himself as the great negotiator who can build coalitions, "work across the aisle", and triangulate better than anyone else. He wants us to forget his most enduring collaboration was with the segregationist (and former Democrat) Strom Thurmond.

And he was still prepared to push these credentials in the run-up to the election against a Republican party more reactionary, right-wing, and in hock to a gangster leadership. The idea of cross-party collaboration is perhaps at its most fraught.

But even if Biden does go it alone, is he going to call his supporters into the streets to pass the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act? All the evidence suggests the Democrats strongly oppose doing that, *even when* an election is being fraudulently taken from them.

Sarada Peri, a former Obama speechwriter, wrote in *The Atlantic*, "The rhetorical promise of democracy is inspiring; the nitty-gritty of bringing it to life, less so. It is easy to put off the work, the unsexy details, of ensuring that government functions and voters are heard. There is always another crisis to solve or another policy to chase. But unless our leaders prioritise that work, we are in danger of remaining a hobbled, impotent, perpetually imperfect union."

That seems pretty apt, but Peri believes that the perpetually imperfect union is something that the Democrats could only reform if people played fair. I would argue, even if there were able to, they have little interest in any-



Strom Thurmond and Joe Biden

thing beyond the kind of tinkering that reverses some of the worst of Trump's excesses.

Stacey Abrams, a Democrat in the Georgia House of Representatives, has written a *plea in the Washington Post* for reform to protect democracy in light of the events of 6 January. She cites the importance of DC statehood because it would mean the National Guard could be called in. While Chelsea Manning cannot look to the Democrats to protect her as a whistle blower, they do want to make sure that other protesters would not get the soft touch treatment of the 6 January rioters.

### Further

And to go back further? You don't have to argue that perhaps Democrat Mayor Daley was over exuberant in his use of the Chicago Police to smash the demonstrations at the DNC convention in 1968. You can look at provisions in the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act 1968 which Johnson passed alongside his other "Great Society" programs. This vastly increased the money going to federal and state law enforcement agencies, allowing them to buy more helicopters, gas masks, riot equipment, grenades and other projectile weapons. Later, Joe Biden himself would be the architect of the Crime Bill 1994 under Clinton.

Before that, alongside Strom Thurmond, he pushed the Comprehensive Control Act 1984. Two years later, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which he helped write, and its follow up Act of the same name in 1988. What all those bits of legislation had in common was increasing prison sentences and giving more power to crime agencies to arrest people on suspicion of drug possession and trafficking. The 1986 Act extended the mandatory sentences for possession of crack cocaine while leaving powdered cocaine untouched. That alone helped to fuel the huge racial disparities in incarceration.

If Biden now champions the For the People Act and the John Lewis Act, he is mostly undoing his own work as a legislator, because one of the provisions of such acts is to award back former convicted felons their voting rights. That is utterly cynical electioneering.

Measures that counteract voter suppression are all well and good but the Democrats are doing it to shore up their position, not out of respect for democratic reform. □

# The USA in the light of the impeachment hearing



## Debate

By Thomas Carolan

To an outsider, or to this outsider, anyway, the most striking thing about American political life is the saturation-level, all-pervasive, complacent chauvinism.

It's almost innocent-seeming, almost endearing, like the boasting of a five year old. The Stars and Stripes everywhere. The custom of always, in public life, referring to any state that has to be mentioned as "the great state of Wyoming", or whatever.

And the ancestor worship! Everything about the creaking, labyrinthine, 230-year-old constitution is as sacred as it is perfect. It is the best in the world. It is not a real democracy at all, but an archaic pluto-democracy, yet to tens of millions of Americans theirs is the best democracy in the best of all possible political worlds.

All that was there, ridiculously, in Donald Trump's second impeachment trial before the Senate – in the speeches of the prosecutors.

The prosecutors did a devastating job of indicting the man who was president, and a would-be king, until a month ago. He had refused to vacate the office from which the electorate had rejected him. He had done his best and his worst to subvert the results of the 4 November election, to disenfranchise the 81 million Americans who had voted for Joe Biden.

He had campaigned, for a year before the election, against the election as such and against the whole electoral system. He claimed he could lose only if the election was fraudulent. If he lost the election, it would be no valid election. The choice of the electors would be no valid choice.

He had lied about the election, and then about its outcome, with a stupendous Goebbelsian campaign, and he persuaded about three quarters of those who voted for him that Joe Biden was not the president-elect, and Trump himself was still president, the real and legitimate president.

He had mobilised thousands of his dupes on 6 January and directed an armed insurrectionary mob to take over the Capitol and stop the final ceremony in the process of installing Joe Biden. He had tried to entrench himself as a ruler irrespective of elections and above elections. That, on top of trying to act in office, not as a president, but as a king.

If the revered Constitution had been democratic then Trump, who got three million fewer votes than Hillary Clinton in 2016, would never have been president at all. The 2016 outcome encouraged him to try for a repeat

denial of the will of the electorate in 2020.

The indictment of Trump was also the indictment of the undemocratic nature of the system that had in the first place brought the loser in the popular vote to be president of the United States.

Trump's attempt to legally subvert the election by such devices as trying to have states chose members of the Electoral College who would ignore the popular vote for Joe Biden and give their Electoral College votes to Trump – what was that but an attempt to do deliberately what had been done by the reigning system in 2016 (as in 2000, putting the loser in the popular vote, George Bush, into office).

The dire state of American democracy was again thrown up on the screen by the impeachment trial. The prosecution presented devastating and incontrovertible evidence against Trump. Republican leader Mitch McConnell agreed with the case against Trump. He stood up in the Senate and said so. But only after he and the senators he might have influenced had voted to acquit Trump.

Most of the 43 out of 50 Republican senators who voted to acquit Trump did so for fear of retaliation by Trump and the Trumpists in their own states, fear of their ejection from office. They voted to acquit a man whom they knew who tried to subvert the Constitution they all say they adore.

They set a precedent that can be taken as licence by future and smarter presidents to behave as Trump has got away with behaving.

Immediately after the events of 6 January, some 130 members of the House of Representatives had voted to do what those who invaded the Capitol had tried to make them do: oppose the ceremonial ratification of the results of the election. Tens of millions of Republican voters are left believing that Trump won the election, that Joe Biden is not the legitimate president, that the whole system is corrupt and in the hands of "enemies of the American people".

They have control of one of the two main parties. In the right-wing militias – in fact, right wing anarchists, many of them – Trump has his own army. Almost all the elements of a fascism or a quasi-fascism exist for Trump to command.

Mussolini's Fascist Party was not a party until late 1921, less than a year before it took power, though the elements that created that party had already existed for some years.

The elements of a fascist or fascistic party heave and roll around Trump, bearing him aloft, in the Republican Party and beyond it now. The unknown here is, will they coalesce further?

There are precedents for those who want to believe they won't. The Boulanger movement in France in the

*Continued on page 17*

# Covid: the science and social context of testing

By Martin Thomas

Testing, especially rapid testing, was the subject of the third of the "Covid: known unknowns" webinars, held on 11 February 2021.

These [webinars](#) are organised by the British Medical Journal in cooperation with George Davey Smith at Bristol University and the Integrative Epidemiology Unit there. George Davey Smith has also discussed the pandemic a couple of times directly with *Solidarity*, in [July](#) and in [November](#) 2020.

*Continued from page 16*

late 1880s was powerful and threatening, a precursor of fascism, but it collapsed quickly when General Boulanger fled and then shot himself.

The nearest precedent I know to Trump and the Republican Party now is to be found in 1930s Ireland. Cumann na nGaedheal, the party that won the civil war in 1922-3 and had ruled the 26 Counties for a decade, was voted out at the start of 1932.

The De Valera party, Fianna Fail, the losers in the civil war, formed the government, at first with Labour support in the Dail.

Cumann na nGaedheal vacated office peacefully. The Republicans harried them physically, under the cry "no free speech for traitors". De Valera entered into an economic war with Britain that threatened the interests of their supporters, the big farmers and ranchers.

Cumann na nGaedheal, the second party in the Dail and recently the government, organised the Blueshirt movement, advocated a corporate state, became a mass clerical-fascist party.

When De Valera demonstrated that he could and would handle the physical force Republicans, when the Blueshirt Duce Eoin O'Duffy proved erratic and irresponsible, they split. A small part went with O'Duffy, hardened fascists. The majority became Fine Gael, and reverted to being one of the two big Dail parties in a stable parliamentary system.

Something like that may – perhaps is likely to – happen with the Republican Party. But other things are possible too. US leftists would be foolish indeed to trust complacently to a "Fine Gael" outcome of the present turmoil in and around the Republican Party.

As against the complacent ethno-chauvinist myths that saturate and smother politics in the USA, socialists should seize the chance to campaign for direct, that is real, democracy and work to bury the decayed old plutocratic system before which so many Americans genuflect. □

The first webinar was a broad survey of "known unknowns"; the second was on Covid and schools; the next two, on 25 February and 11 March, will be about vaccines and "Zero Covid". Recordings from them are available online at [bit.ly/c-k-u](https://bit.ly/c-k-u)

Aside from discussing technical data on test accuracy, the 11 February webinar looked at the social context of testing and, as one contributor put it, "testing as done" vs "testing as imagined".

Research reported in the webinar indicates that in Britain currently 57% of those with Covid symptoms don't go for tests (often because, for lack of isolation pay, they fear they can't afford to self-isolate if they test positive). Up to 40% of the contacts of those who test positive are not reached, and a large proportion of contacts who are reached don't self-isolate. The UK has very high levels of testing, but, because of poor isolation pay and other factors, very poor anti-Covid effects from it.

With current levels of accuracy in rapid-result (lateral-flow) tests, they probably give more "false negatives" (infectious people falsely "reassured") than newly-discovered infections. The tests seem pretty good now at giving few "false positives". They can be improved, and from the scientists most sceptical about the current use of tests, a chief call was for *improved tests*.

The big advantage of rapid-result tests is that, although people who get Covid with no symptoms ever (many children, for example) probably transmit infection much less, those who *will eventually* get symptoms are most infectious in a span *including the days just before they develop symptoms*. As much as 50% of transmission may be from people who are *not yet* symptomatic.

If you get a test result two or three days after developing symptoms then having a test, then probably you've already done all the transmitting infection you'll ever do.

The webinar didn't discuss particular workplace regimes of rapid-testing all staff, say twice a week, in detail; but the balance of its evidence suggested to me that these are useful and can become more so with improvements in the tests. One estimate given was that good regular rapid-testing prevents one transmission per five quarantine-days, while a local lockdown prevents one per *thousand* quarantine-days; another, that it can avert 88% of transmissions.

One-off or sporadic mass population-wide rapid-testing, as done for example in Slovakia on 31 October and 1 November 2020, looks much more like ineffectual theatre. That Slovakian mass-testing bout was hailed at the time as a success, but Slovakia's Covid death rate has since the start of 2021 been mostly higher, often much higher, than neighbouring Czechia's, Hungary's, or Poland's. □

# What we owe to Ernie Tate

By Martin Thomas

Ernie Tate, who died from cancer on 5 February at the age of 86, was once well-known among revolutionary socialists across the world as the central figure of “the Tate affair”.

He was an active Trotskyist from his early 20s, in Canada. He moved to London in 1965-9, and that was where the “Tate affair” happened, in 1966. Back in Canada, he quit the organised Trotskyist movement about 1980, but remained active on the broader left until his last years. I last met him in 2015, at a conference at the University of East Anglia. An obituary by John Riddell gives more of the story: [bit.ly/jr-et](http://bit.ly/jr-et)

The “Tate affair”? On 17 November 1966 he was selling a pamphlet published by the Socialist Workers Party [SWP] USA (no relation to the SWP in Britain) outside a public meeting at Caxton Hall, London, of the Socialist Labour League, then Britain’s, indeed probably the world’s, biggest and most active revolutionary socialist group. He was beaten up by SLL members.

The SLL, led by Gerry Healy, had long been known for a bullying internal regime, and for high-pitched ranting against other groups. But even the SLL didn’t deny that it was a norm for groups to sell their literature at each others’ meetings.

In Britain even the Communist Party rarely used violence against left-wing political opponents. Generally, and certainly among those who considered themselves anti-Stalinist, free circulation of critical literature was the norm.

Tate was part of a small socialist collective, the International Group, British affiliate of the “United Secretariat of the Fourth International”. “United” meant it was a new alliance of the SWP-USA and its co-thinker groups, like the group Ernie Tate had joined in Canada, with the co-thinkers of figures like Ernest Mandel in Belgium and Pierre Frank and Alain Krivine in France. Before realigning with Mandel and the others, the SWP-USA had been linked to the SLL. They parted ways in the early 1960s, and the SWP-USA prompted Tate, and others like Alan Harris (who has also died recently), to move to London from Canada to help build the International Group (and win influence in it for specifically SWP-USA-type ideas).

Although the International Group was generally low-profile, with the help of the SWP-USA it launched an

energetic and loud campaign against the attack on Tate. Healy’s SLL was not easily abashed, but it was pushed into organising a special conference which discussed the attack, circulating a voluminous bulletin to explain it to its members, and initiating libel cases against *Peace News* and the *Socialist Leader*.

Tate got a result. The SLL would degenerate much further before it collapsed and scattered in 1985, and its internal regime probably became even worse, but it never again used violence against other leftists selling literature at its public meetings.

In 1993, eight years after the Healy group dispersed, there was [another incident](#) similar to the “Tate affair”. British SWPers beat up Mark Sandell, a Workers’ Liberty activist, for circulating a petition outside the SWP’s summer school about the mobbing and bullying and exclusion of another Workers’ Liberty person.

We protested as Tate and his comrades did in 1966. Democratic norms had less grip on the broad left than they had had in 1966, and it was harder to get a response. Unlike the SLL in 1966, the SWP was able to stonewall, making no reply at all. But the protest “worked”. The SWP did nothing similar for 25 years after 1993, until in 2018 they [trashed](#) a Workers’ Liberty stall outside their summer school (but without injuring *people*).

We still need people with the courage and resilience to uphold democratic norms against bullying which Ernie Tate showed in 1966.

In 2016 the Labour left group Momentum held the first of its The World Transformed fringe events at Labour Party conference. As it opened, we turned up with a Workers’ Liberty stall in the street outside, and soon, as I remember, the Socialist Party arrived too. The event organisers “instructed” us that we must pack up and move away. We refused point-blank, and eventually they let it go. But they tried; and meanwhile the *Morning Star* was billed as a sponsor of the event, and on free distribution inside it.

The struggle continues. □

## Confronting anti-union laws

Free Our Unions Zoom meeting: Tuesday 2 March, 6:30pm

On Zoom: details [bit.ly/fou-2m](http://bit.ly/fou-2m)

Speakers • Gerry Carroll MLA on the “Trade Union Freedom Bill” in the Northern Ireland Assembly • Mark Porter, Unite convenor at Rolls Royce Barnoldswick • Michelle Rodgers, National President of the RMT union • also invited: A striker from the UVM Sage care home dispute in north London. □

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- Left Antisemitism: What it is and How to Fight it
- Arabs, Jews, and Socialism: Socialist Debates on Israel/Palestine □

More: [workersliberty.org/publications](http://workersliberty.org/publications)

# “Pre-bunking” and debunking conspiracy theories

By Jay Dawkey

Readers of the “Diary of a Tube Worker” in *Solidarity* will have noticed that since the beginning of the pandemic I have spent a lot of my time arguing against Covid-19 conspiracy theories in my workplace. More recently the shift is to anti-vaxx conspiracies and vaccine-hesitancy.

I don’t think I have been entirely successful in my endeavour. I have been a known sceptic about “nonsense” since I started on the job, being the first to say vocally, I don’t believe in any God, I don’t take notice of any horoscopes, I don’t believe in juju or ghosts, etc.

I don’t think I am wrong in being strident about what I think in the workplace, but the prevalence of the conspiracy theories and vaccine-hesitancy has led me to read more into how best to tackle them.

## Fight conspiracies but remain sceptical!

I find most of what is written by mainstream academics and researchers on this fairly compelling, but with one major caveat. Much of their material is produced to try and reinforce trust in institutions, in government, in science, etc. In an era of fake news and some younger people more likely to believe their peers than scrutinised news sources, that is not an unreasonable goal.

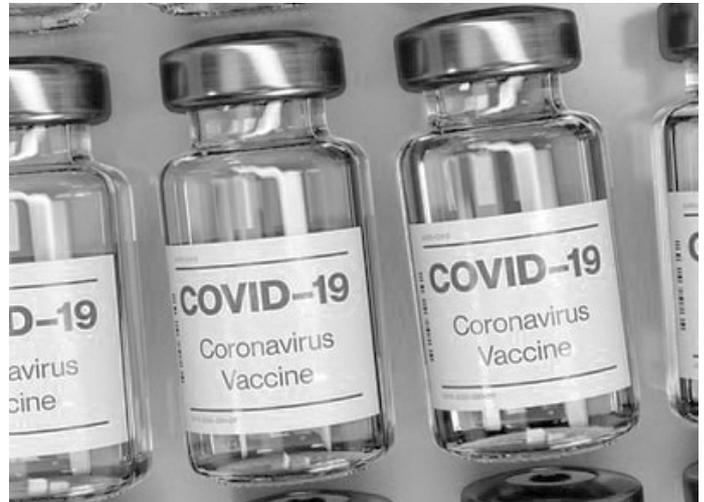
But we do want to maintain a healthy scepticism about established institutions. We are in favour of asking questions and challenging established wisdom. We do not want to throw out the baby with the bathwater. It’s true that the tobacco industry funded fake doctors to tell us smoking wasn’t bad for us. The oil and other polluting industries pumped vast sums of money into climate change denial. Volkswagen faked the level of emissions from its cars

Those conspiracies by big business, often backed by governments and bought “experts”, aimed in their own way to make people question the veracity of information they are getting. The Phillip Morris corporation knew that it wouldn’t convince everyone who smoked that their illnesses had no relation to smoking, but it could make enough people suspend judgement.

## How best to tackle conspiracies

The authors of *The Debunking Handbook 2020* hold that “pre-bunking” and prior inoculation against conspiracy theories are more effective than “debunking”. They have slightly revised their views since their first edition in 2012.

In that first edition, Stephan Lewandowsky and the 15 other authors were much more cautious about the idea of starting with a particular conspiracy theory and repeating as a useful starting point to “debunking” it. Repetition of information is an important factor in taking it onboard, and so repeating a falsehood, even as a preliminary to



debunking, may make us more likely to understand and trust the falsehood than to absorb brand new information in the debunking.

In the 2020 edition the authors are more relaxed about the risk of repeating conspiracies to those who believe them in order to disprove them, but they still see dangers there. “While debunking conspiracy theories can be effective with the general public, it is much more challenging with people who believe the conspiracy theories. Rather than basing their beliefs on external evidence, conspiracy theorists’ belief system speaks mainly to itself, and each belief serves as evidence for every other belief.

“As a consequence, when conspiracy theorists encounter debunkings on Facebook, they end up commenting and liking conspiracist content within their echo chambers even more...

“Conspiracy theorists also have an outsized influence despite their small numbers. An analysis of over two million comments on the subreddit site [r/conspiracy](https://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy) found that while only 5% of posters exhibited conspiratorial thinking, they were responsible for 64% of all comments. The most active author wrote 896,337 words.”

I will return in the next article to the challenges of arguing with already-engaged conspiracy theorists. I will mention just one issue here: what Lewandowsky terms a “motivated rejection of science”.

Some people reject science not just because they believe they know better. The rejection is the foundation for something else. A lot of my colleagues at work based their attitudes on suspicions about the “real” motivations of governments across the world to encourage widespread vaccination.

Also, it is much easier to maintain a belief that the vaccination is actively harmful or ineffective if you question how dangerous Covid-19 really is, or what causes it. □

# Big issues, clumsy film



## Film review

Apsi Witana reviews *Funny Boy*

Deepa Mehta's coming-of-age tale of a gay Tamil boy growing up in 1970s Sri Lanka, and in the post-1983 civil war between the country's Tamil minority and ruling Sinhalese majority, is an ambitious one, aiming to wrangle with some heavy politicised themes.

It opens with a group of children from wealthy families playing happily, amongst them an eight year old Arjie playing dress-up as a bride with makeup.

The tense family dynamic is established instantly by Arjie's father's disapproval of Arjie. He warns his wife against encouraging this "nonsense". He is set up as the oppressive patriarchal figure, seeking to stamp out any queer or feminine proclivities in his son. At the father's behest, Arjie's mother steers him towards masculine hobbies like cricket.

Arjie finds an ally in his aunt Radha, a free-spirited and liberal young woman who has returned from college in Toronto. She is betrothed to a Canadian Tamil in an arranged marriage, one that she is visibly unhappy with. Now ethnic divisions are introduced – Arjie's grandmother explains to Arjie that Radha's fiancé is Tamil, "like us".

Radha encourages Arjie's creativity, bringing him to audition for an amateur musical with her. But she is set up as somewhat a caricature character, recounting tales of drinking in bars with her gay friends and sassily scolding an admirer that she's "not the traditional type". She begins to fall for a Sinhalese man, and we are treated to some more melodramatic conflict between their families.

A sudden and unexpected violent event which leaves Radha injured drives home the danger and fear of terrorism.

### Soapy and cartoonish scripting

The soap-style writing is continued to cartoonish effect when the narrative jumps to a teenage Arjie, with corridor bullying straight out of the corniest high school drama. His burgeoning romance with a Sinhalese boy starts promisingly, but doesn't develop into anything more than stilted dialogue and heavy-handed queer signifiers – singing "Smalltown Boy" and idolising Annie Lennox posters.

Tensions arise when Arjie's father takes in family friend Jegan, an ex-Tamil Tiger with whom Arjie's mother inexplicably begins to become more politically aligned, in a rather shoehorned attempt at creating conflict.

The film does well in touching on wealth inequality, demonstrating how the family is at first protected from harm because of their class. A local Tamil butcher urges Arjie's grandmother to speak in Sinhalese to him, telling him she's rich and will be fine, but he is poor and stuck

here. In a later scene, Arjie's mother is able to skip to the front of the line at a prison, bribing the officers so she can visit Jegan.

It's a shame that this class commentary is told with the poor characters as mere dishevelled set-pieces whilst the narrative focuses on telling the story of the rich family. (To be fair to Mehta, she is restricted here by the source material).

*Funny Boy* fails to interweave the interpersonal story with the political backdrop story. The scene-by-scene transitions are disjointed and tonally confusing, not helped by some oddly jarring shot choices. Instead, it feels as if they are told side-by-side, with no room to breathe or be explored. Arjie's romance feels rushed, and the climax of violence at the film's close almost appears out of nowhere.

The film has drawn strong criticism from Tamil audiences for casting no Tamils. The director has replied that the original Tamil cast had to be dropped from the project due to visa complications and a fear of the gay subject matter. Tamil language sections were redubbed, though into Indian Tamil and not Sri Lankan Tamil.

Despite the real difficulties, the optics of telling a Tamil story which deals with the erasure and oppression of Tamil identity whilst effectively erasing Tamil representation and language cannot be ignored. It's not surprising the film is being accused of hypocrisy.

### Strong themes, missed potential

The story has potential and high aims, but the soapy dialogue and hammy delivery detract. It is also difficult to truly invest in the characters when their relationships are barely developed – the only hint we get of a character arc is Arjie's bullying older brother displaying a hint of reluctance and a crisis of conscience later in the film.

We see a backdrop of violence and bombings, but without context or framing for the audience. The film appears to deliver only a bland liberal message: "war is bad, why are people fighting, we are all the same", or just "it's sad that people are killing each other over ethnicity".

*Funny Boy* perhaps fails in setting its goal too high, attempting to condense too many complex issues into one film, and almost trivialising by clumsy writing that spoon-feeds emotion. □



## “What we stand for

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

See [workersliberty.org/about](http://workersliberty.org/about) – if you agree, join us! □



# School cleaners docked pay

By Ollie Moore

The United Voices of the World union is asking supporters to email the headteacher of La Retraite Roman Catholic Girls' School in south west London, and the boss of the company to which it outsources cleaning, to protest at the withdrawal of pay from 13 cleaners at the school.

The cleaners exercised their rights under Section 44 of the 1996 Employment Rights Act to refuse unsafe work. UVW says that after weeks of pressure, cleaners resumed work on 8 February. Ecocleen, the outsourced cleaning contractor, had agreed to implement "improved supply of PPE and hand gel, staggered start and finish times, alternate working days to reduce the number of cleaners on site at any given time, temperature checks at the start of their shifts, and the abolishment of the requirement for cleaners to sign in and out in the same small, cramped room as one another using one single telephone which put them at high risk of transmitting Covid-19 to one an-

other." The union's model letter states: "Following the closure of school to all but vulnerable children and those of key workers after the second more contagious and deadly variant of Covid-19 began to push the UK towards the highest death rates and infection rates in the world, Ecocleen [the outsourced contractor] failed to make any material adjustments to the cleaners' working patterns and practices and expected them to carry on as normal leaving them exposed to unforgivably high risks of contracting Covid-19."

Meanwhile, UVW has raised nearly £30,000 in a strike fund for care workers in the Sage care home in north London, who struck on 15-17 January and 4-8 February to demand wages of at least £12/hour, and parity with NHS staff on conditions like annual leave and sick pay. Email La Retraite and Ecocleen here: [bit.ly/la-ret](mailto:bit.ly/la-ret). Updates on the Sage campaign here: [bit.ly/uw-sg](http://bit.ly/uw-sg) □

# £10 for a night when app blocks work

By Michael Elms

Valentine's Day 2021 was a busy time for the food delivery trade. Because food delivery couriers working on apps like JustEat, Deliveroo and UberEats are all piece-rate workers, they rely on busy nights to make the bulk of their weekly or monthly earnings.

So it was a big problem for couriers that for a period of several hours on 14 February the Deliveroo rider app was down across at least much of the UK. When they logged in to get work on what should have been one of the best-paid nights of the year, they got a message saying "We'll be back soon". Many found themselves parked up or cycling around freezing streets waiting to be able to earn.

Deliveroo's Rider Support page says that in the event of such an outage, they will make a "goodwill" payment of £10 normally or £15 at "super-peak" times (between the hours of 7 and 9). Exactly how much goodwill is communicated by paying a worker £10 to cover a night's work which ought to have reaped as much as ten times that sum is for the reader to judge.

Deliveroo is set to float on the stock exchange as a

publicly traded company this April. From a January valuation of US\$7bn it is predicted to reach a value of around US\$13bn when it floats.

The piece-rate system and spurious self-employment are throwbacks to Victorian-era exploitative practices. The so-called "gig economy" must be abolished to make way for secure, dignified work for all. □

## Second-hand books

Workers' Liberty is selling hundreds of second hand books, on politics and many other topics. Visit [bit.ly/2h-books](http://bit.ly/2h-books) for the full list, pricing, and to order them.

### Featured this week:

- The Future of Our Schools, by Lois Weiner
- Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities and Changing Men, by Lynne Segal
- Malcolm X Talks to Young People, by Malcolm X
- Swann's Way Vol.1, Marcel Proust
- The Green Room, by Mario Vargas Llosa

# In the cold snap



## Diary of an engineer

By Emma Rickman

February's snow storm is colder and dryer than January's. The snow is fine and the wind is biting, but it doesn't stick to the gritted roads for long. I set my alarm early each morning to check the roads are clear for cycling, then snooze for an extra half hour. I find if I get dressed rapidly and layer up, I can get out the door and on the road before I feel the cold.

The bakers in my back yard start work at midnight, and give me a second heads-up on the roads. "Be careful," M says, "It's clear but it's icy in places - just be careful." At the plant gates, someone has drawn a smiley face in the snow on the roundabout island, which is quickly buried.

Right off the bat we're called to a fault with an Air Cool Condenser (ACC) - one of the huge fans that cools the steam to water after it's been through the turbine. One of the fans is pulling too much current and tripping. Walking across the plant the temperature is constantly changing: warm switch room, cold pump room, warm ACC corridor, icy cooling area.

J touches the bearings on the motor to feel for heat or grinding, L checks the oil pressure on the gearbox - it's high, and the oil is frothy and thick. Beneath us the fan pulls up snow in gusts from outside to cool the steam in the finned pipes high above our heads. I grease the pump and motor bearings, and we speculate: maybe running the fans slowly isn't generating enough heat; the oil is too cold and it's thickening, creating friction in the gearbox, and friction in the bearings. In the end, we instruct the Control Room to start and stop the fan a few times, picking up speed slowly. It doesn't trip again.

I've been trying to teach myself how to listen to gearboxes and motors, the way J and D can feel the bearings stop grinding when they're greased, but I still find it impossible to distinguish the sounds of greased bearings from all the other mechanical noises and vibrations nearby. I apply grease liberally and hope for better hearing.

On the roof of the ACC building is an air conditioning unit which would normally belch steam, but today the spill has created spectacular icicles that reach all the way down the side of the building. Some parts of the plant are particularly sensitive to the cold. One morning a pipe bursts by the effluent pit, exploding water everywhere. Once we've patched it (with lousy PVC pipe fittings) the once-hot water has covered the steel gantry with ice and frozen the acid lines.

J returns to the warm fitters' shop to make a drink and



finds the water frozen in his taps. The water in the women's toilet in the yard freezes in the bowl. Midweek I get a message from an apprentice friend at a steel rolling mill - although there is molten metal in the building next door, his workshop is full of snow.

Thankfully the Control Room is always cosy. The two tallest and friendliest operators - S and P - are on shift together. P hands me and L coffee, and we cup our hands over the mugs and blow to warm up our noses; P laughs: "What have you got there, a secret drink? Looks like you're talking to someone in the mug."

While we run checks on the emissions' gases, S picks up the phone to a wagon driver requesting waste clearing from the tipping apron. S radios the assistants and asks for a tidy-up, and gets a "No worries, I'll get to it" from K. Five minutes later B, K's line manager, comes running to the Control Room in a sweat:

"I just heard the call. I was just down in the tipping apron but I had to go to the toilet, you see. I'll be down there just after I go to the toilet."

B disappears, and everyone in the Control Room looks at each other and laughs.

S: "Don't hear the call, go to the toilet, then help K - come up *here*, tell us *that*, go to toilet and *then* get on the apron! Oh my days." □

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

## £20,000 by 11 July

Thanks to John, Sara and Ali! An additional £90 this week for our fundraiser brings our total to £585, towards our target of £20,000 by 11 July 2021. Look out for more updates and fundraising activity in the coming months, and donate at [workersliberty.org/donate2021](https://workersliberty.org/donate2021)



## John Moloney

On 18 February, we will begin balloting our members at the DVLA [Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency] complex in Swansea for strikes over health and safety concerns. Bosses there have forced workers to work in unsafe conditions, with more than 2,000 workers coming into work. There have been over 500 positive Covid cases at the site since September 2020.

The ballot will close on 11 March. In the meantime, we have written to every member to remind them of their Section 44 rights to refuse unsafe work. We're continuing to press the Department for Transport, the UK government, the Welsh government, and Swansea council over this.

Our demand is that the entire site is immediately evacuated, with workers sent home on full pay. We're prepared to negotiate an agreement for limited numbers of workers to work from the office in order to carry out essential and emergency duties, but the current situation is not acceptable.

During the first lockdown only 250 workers were working on site. There's nothing whatsoever to justify a tenfold increase.

On 15 February, we'll also begin balloting members in 12 courts across the UK. That ballot will run until 5 March. The issues there are similar to Swansea, with workers being compelled to come into the workplace when it's not safe. We want the immediate closure of all courts and tribunals.

That dispute may well spread; from 22 February to 15 March, we're running an indicative vote of members in other courts to determine whether they also want to move to formal ballots.

We also have a live ballot mandate for outsourced workers, employed by the contractor OCS, in the Ministry of Justice. They voted by 91% on a 67.8% turnout to strike over pay and conditions.

In the Department for Work and Pensions, an understanding is in place that should guarantee only 20% of the workforce having to come into the office at any one time. However, there is a risk that this will be undermined by the government's insistence on maintaining "conditional-ity", which sees benefit claimants sanctioned for missing appointments. This creates additional pressure to schedule in-person appointments, which will put both claimants and workers at risk.

In HMRC [Revenue and Customs], a referendum of members on a department-specific pay deal began on 8 February, and will run for three weeks. The offer, which the union is recommending members vote to accept, is for a three-year deal, and does entail pay increases for members. However, these are offset by changes to terms and conditions which have led PCS Independent Left and PCS Rank-and-File activists in the department to conclude that the proposal amounts to selling off conditions in exchange for higher pay.

Those activists are campaigning for a rejection of the offer.

Whatever the outcome of the referendum, it's vital that we continue to argue for a national fightback on pay, including HMRC. If the deal is accepted, we shouldn't allow that to prevent the union from raising additional demands on pay and conditions in that department, as part of a national campaign. □

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



## Kino Eye

By John Cunningham

After last week's article on Saudi women filmmakers, here is a Tunisian film: *The Silences of the Palace* (1994) by female director Moufida Tlatli. It is set in the 1950s, while Tunisia is still a French colony. Alia (Ghalia Lacroix), a cabaret singer revisits the place of her birth - a now deserted palace where her mother was a servant. As she wanders the empty building, she relives scenes from her childhood and particularly the sexual humiliations and drudgery endured by her mother. Due to her wonderful singing Alia breaks away but her visit brings back many poignant and often painful memories. After the Arab Spring of 2011 Moufida Tlatli was appointed Minister of Culture in the provisional government. She died only a few weeks ago (7 Feb): her films are her memorial. □



Moufida Tlatli

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# Solidarity



For a workers' government



## DON'T LET BRITISH GAS OFF THE HOOK

By Ollie Moore

The GMB union called off strikes of British Gas engineers planned for 12-15 February, after British Gas agreed to further negotiations over the terms of a new contract the company plans to introduce.

GMB activists report that British Gas said it would “suspend” its “fire and rehire” threat, according to which any worker who has not signed up to the new contracts by 31 March faces dismissal. The exact meaning of this “suspension” is unclear. In practical terms it may simply mean that, if talks are still ongoing on 31 March, the deadline will be extended to allow them to continue. It clearly does not represent a decisive withdrawal of the threat by the employer.

The decision to call off the strikes came after a vote in an online members’ meeting, which produced a narrow majority in favour of suspending the action. However, the vote amongst some sections of the membership was much closer, with opinion splitting almost down the middle.

Further strikes, planned for 19-22 February and 26 February to 1 March, are currently scheduled to go ahead. That will be reviewed depending on the outcome of the ongoing negotiations.

The decision to suspend the strikes is in some sense

a product of the contemporary orthodoxy of the trade union movement, which sadly grips many rank-and-file reps and activists as well as bureaucrats and officials, that the aim of strikes is to secure negotiations, and that if the employer commits to further talks, strikes should be suspended to “allow” those talks to take place.

The threat of further action on 19-22 February and 26 February to 1 March gives the union some ongoing leverage. Strikes thus far have been solid and effective, leading to a backlog of 170,000 boiler repairs and 200,000 service visits. British Gas will be mindful of that threat. GMB has had the employer on the ropes, and should not now allow their opponent to get up. Those strikes should not be suspended merely for a commitment to continue negotiations, or for only minimal concessions.

GMB’s emphasis throughout the dispute has presented it primarily as a fight against “fire and rehire”, with GMB officers in strikes rallies emphasising that the union has no problem with negotiating changes through the usual means. But the dispute must be a fight against the detrimental changes to workers’ conditions the employer wants to make, not only the means of their introduction. If British Gas does not withdraw the “fire and rehire” threat, *and* drop its plans to cut pay and increase hours, further strikes must take place. □