LABOUR AFTER BATLEY AND SPEN

By Mohan Sen

We are glad Labour’s Kim Leadbeater won the by-election in Batley and Spen, West Yorkshire, on 1 July. But Keir Starmer’s triumphalist rhetoric (“Labour is back… a fantastic victory”) is divorced from reality.

Labour won 35.3% to the Tories’ 34.4%, its lowest ever percentage in the constituency. In 2017 it won 55.5% and in 2019 42.7%. On this basis the party would lose dozens of seats in a general election.

The trend of Labour losing ground in by-elections continues, despite the Tories’ decade in government and grim Covid record. It may even be that Labour held on partly because some right-wing voters migrated to foul demagogue George Galloway.

Galloway, previously MP in neighbouring Bradford West, pitched to right-wing voters with attacks on Labour’s supposed “wokeness” and right-wing messages on crime and Brexit. In 2017 15.4% supported candidates pitching to the right of the Tories, and this time the four far-right candidates got tiny votes, while the Tories slipped a little.

A few leftish Labour voters, of various backgrounds, may have voted Galloway out of frustration. And Galloway pitched to Muslim voters with a mix of identity politics, international issues including Palestine and Kashmir, and hostility to LGBT rights.

Galloway’s populist mix of right- and “left-wing” stances, chameleon-like political shifting, and willingness to say different and contradictory things to different people served him well. Fresh from running a Scottish election campaign headed by a Tory landowner and advocating a Tory vote where it did not stand, he still had a subtext claiming he stood for “a new working-class politics!”

A lot of media coverage focused on Muslim voters. Solidarity has attacked the idea that all Muslims alienated from Labour are motivated by right-wing positions on issues like LGBT rights. Starmer’s pandering to the Hindu right over Kashmir, which became an issue in the by-election, is a real problem: many Muslims in Batley are of Indian background. (Galloway’s denial of the genocide against the Uyghur people is an even bigger problem!)

However, to pretend that anti-LGBT views are no more prevalent among Muslims than among the wider population is absurd. The issues need untangling honestly and sensitively.

Those who stood up to Galloway’s attacks on trans rights, his homophobic dogwhistles, and anti-LGBT campaigning by his supporters, should be congratulated. The Muslim women in the constituency who spoke out against the right-wing Muslim men attacking Labour deserve solidarity, not airbrushing from the record.

This adds to our pleasure at Labour’s victory over Galloway and the Tories. But Labour did not stand in any sense for working-class politics in the by-election. It did not even stand for strongly democratic liberalism. Its disarray on Kashmir and anti-Semitism, and unwillingness to raise opportune issues from the Uyghurs to migrants’ rights to the Police Bill all highlighted the party leadership’s lack of democratic ideals.

Labour once again had very little to say about what it positively stands for. It did poorly because few feel enthusiastic about it. Labour will be “back” only when the Labour left re-groups and pushes the party to take up working-class demands. □
The Tory government is setting England on course for a gamble with Covid-19. The labour movement is not well-placed to second-guess scientists. But we must step up our fight for the social measures we’ve long been campaigning for, and which are known to alleviate the spread of Covid.

On 1 July the editor of the British Medical Journal (BMJ) responded to the appointment of Sajid Javid as health minister with a list of demands. Those included:

- Proper financial support for those who need to isolate.
- Invest in ventilation.
- Make FFP3 masks mandatory for all staff treating patients with suspected or confirmed covid.
- Share vaccines with the world.
- Funding for recruitment, training, and retention of healthcare staff.
- A long term settlement for health and social care… enough to tackle waiting lists, long term symptoms of covid... (and) preparing for the next pandemic.

The BMJ also called for action on “social inequalities and poor underlying health” which, it said, had been “a major cause of the UK’s high rates of death and illness during the pandemic”. Reversing cuts, making good uncrowded housing available to all, establishing workers’ rights against zero-hours contracts, under which workers get no income at all if they self-isolate because of infection – all those battles are also central to the battle to curb the virus.

The BMJ added a demand to “abandon mass asymptomatic testing. The UK’s testing strategy adopted a poorly performing [lateral-flow] test and has used it badly, squandering precious funds.”

For ourselves, we emphasise that rebuilding the NHS must include back the NHS workers’ 15% pay-rise demand, and add:

- Requisition Big Pharma! Know-how and facilities should be taken into public hands and made available worldwide for an emergency vaccine production and distribution drive.
- Take social care into the public sector, with workers on NHS-level pay and conditions.

In workplaces, we add:

- Workers’ control over workplace safety, on the model of the workplace safety committees won by the Chicago Teachers’ Union, with union majorities.
- Continue work-from-home until unions have agreed precautions in the workplace.

The TUC has criticised the government for withdrawing workplace safety rules, but said nothing about what to do if the government does withdraw them. Socialists will press unions to insist that employers continue existing precautions, as a minimum, and strengthen them on issues like ventilation.

The Tories claim that vaccination has “severed” the link between infections and hospitalisations and deaths. Untrue. The high rates of vaccination reached in Britain mean that, per thousand infections, we now expect one death rather than ten, but there are still deaths.

The Tories claim that their plan to lift all legal restrictions from 19 July shifts the balance to “personal responsibility”. But under their scheme the employer who crams workers into a crowded indoor space without masks or good ventilation, and forces sick workers to come into work for lack of sick pay, will not be held “responsible” at all – unless unions call them to book.

The title of the book by Walter Lever quoted in Solidarity 599 is Jerusalem is Called Liberty, not Jerusalem Your Name is Liberty.

“Definitely misguided... a bit absurd”

By Martin Thomas

Some scientists very critical of the Tories, like Allyson Pollock and Alasdair Munro, are cautious about condemning the 19 July restriction-easing decisions. Whatever we do, Covid will continue to swirl around the world on one level or another for a long time. Lockdowns have social and medical costs, cannot be continued forever, and may even make later virus surges worse. Sustainable long-term mitigation will be reached only by vaccinating and revaccinating the elderly and vulnerable, and developing and refreshing broad immunity among the younger by getting the virus, probably, several times over life, but mildly (as is usual in younger cases). Arguably the risk of death if infected with Covid-19 in well-vaccinated Britain now is comparable to that if infected with flu (though estimates for the risk from flu vary a lot from one study to another, and one flu wave to another).

Yet even Munro says that “some of [the Tories’ scheme] is definitely misguided. On the “argument put forward for July 19th UK reopening [so as] to bring infections forward [and] reduce [the] winter wave”, he cites Adam Kucharski: “the idea that we could tailor a pandemic to get ‘better sized future waves’ is a bit absurd”. We know too little to make such schemes valid.

Even though “zero Covid” is unrealistic, slowing the spread of the virus until vaccination is more complete, hospitals have a chance to rebuild capacity and reduce the backlog of non-Covid treatments, and vaccination is spread worldwide, makes sense. On the evidence, restrictions cramping life only slightly, combined with mass vaccination and good social measures, can slow the spread seriously (at least, now, curb the rise of hospitalisations).

World Covid deaths are running at a higher rate than the peak of April 2020, and now show a new increase, following on a new rise in the infection count from late June. The rise will probably accelerate as the Delta variant spreads across the world.

Even if new deaths in Britain can be limited, and a new peak of infections proves short-lived – two big ifs – it will surely harm medical efforts on a world scale to turn Britain into a giant export hub for the Delta variants, and maybe trickier variants evolved faster in a high-infection wave.

Make unions fight for workplace safety!

By Colin Foster

On 3 July Rachel Reeves and Keir Starmer launched their new economic Big Idea: “ask every public body to give more contracts to British firms big and small”. So far this feeble Big Idea (only “asking”) has been saved from the derision which overwhelmed the “I’m backing Britain” campaign of then Labour prime minister Harold Wilson in 1968, but only by attracting little comment of any sort.

In any case, what is a “British” firm? One owned by a British boss? What if most of its production chain is overseas? Yet a non-British-owned firm has most of its workforce in Britain?

Should we expect other countries to “buy local” similarly, and cut down their contracts with “British” firms (however defined)? So British workers producing export goods should sacrifice their jobs in the cause of economic nationalism?

The way to more and better jobs is expansion of public services, publicly-owned enterprise for emissions-reduction and climate adaptation, and a shorter standard working week (four days, 32 hours) without loss of pay.
Ethiopia, democracy, and minority rights

By Luca Brusco

Tigrayan forces retook Mekelle, the region’s capital, on 28 June, seven months after Abiy Ahmed, Ethiopia’s prime minister, occupied the city with federal troops.

Initially, the government claimed it had complete control over Tigray province, and that it was just mopping up sporadic resistance. Evidently not, but contradictory accounts make it difficult to ascertain what exactly is happening. This reversal of Tigray’s fortunes came after initial losses following a brutal invasion by both Ethiopian federal forces and the Eritrean army.

The invaders committed severe and numerous human right violations. Eritrean troops murdered hundreds of civilians in the city of Axum. There have been dozens of such massacres, and some attributed to militias linked to the Tigray People’s Liberation Front.

Mass rape by Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Amhara soldiers as a weapon of war has also been widely documented. When Abiy Ahmed was questioned about the sexual violence in Tigray, he replied: “The women in Tigray? These women have only been penetrated by men, whereas our soldiers were penetrated by a knife.”

The UN Security Council has convened a meeting on a famine that is now affecting over 400,000 people. A further 1.8 million people are also in danger of starving, and more than two million people have been displaced.

History

In order to make sense of the current conflict, we must look at the region’s history. Eritrea, on the coast, became an Italian colony in the 1880s, while Ethiopia (which had previously ruled much of Eritrea) defeated Italian troops in 1895 and remained independent other than in a brief period of Italian rule in 1936-41.

After World War 2, the United Nations decided Ethiopia and Eritrea should be federated under the Ethiopian crown. Emperor Haile Selassie soon made Amharic the official language in place of Arabic and Tigrinya, imposed censorship, and subdued Eritrea into the empire. In 1974, after popular protests, a military coup ousted the emperor. Mengistu Mariam came into power, aligned himself with the USSR, and pushed a Stalinist-type state-led economic development policy (with only modest economic results). Mengistu cracked down on the revolutionary student organisations, who were sympathetic to Eritrea’s struggle for independence.

The Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front

Mengistu would launch fifteen offensives against the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front. Finally, he was ousted in 1991 by the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), allied with the Eritreans, and Eritrea achieved independence.

But, as Alex de Waal writes: “There are many different ethnic groups in [Ethiopia], especially in the frontier zones of the nineteenth century imperial expansion. The empire placed them in a hierarchy with the Amhara at its zenith; next their historic partners and rivals in state-building, the Tigrayans; below them the largest group, the Oromo; and lastly, a host of others considered slaves or potential slaves. Some had previously had their own principalities; others were stateless peoples or pastoral nomads”.

As Eritrea declared independence, the TPLF formed a coalition of ethnically based parties called the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front, which won power in Ethiopia.

The country adopted a constitution that guaranteed the rights of Ethiopia’s ethnic groups to self-determination and self-administration in their respective regions.

A short lived peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea followed, until war broke out in 1998 over disputed territory. Ethiopia won, but Eritrea remained independent.

In September 2001, Isaias Afwerki, the president of Eritrea (and now Abiy Ahmed’s partner in the ethnic cleansing in Tigray), suffocated what remained of civil society there, and established a totalitarian government with no constitution, rights, or free press.

The TPLF Split

Alex de Waal writes further: “The TPLF didn’t recover from the war, either. Despite winning, Ethiopia’s ruling party was riven by infighting, eventually resolved in favor of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi [former leader of the TPLF], who expelled most of the veteran leadership and allowed the grassroots mobilisation to wither away.”

“Today, leaders in Ethiopia claim that there was a TPLF clique dominating the country for almost thirty years, enriching Tigray at the expense of everyone else. The reality is more complicated. After the TPLF split, Tigrayan Abiy Ahmed stayed on at the helm of the army and security, but Meles shifted his political base to the Amhara and Oromo parties within the EPRDF. Tigray, previously among the poorest regions, merely caught up with other regions on the indicators for development. Meles’s strategy was less revolutionary, more conventionally authoritarian”. It did, however, bring faster economic growth after a slump through the 1990s.

Abiy Ahmed, of Oromo background, was elevated into power in April 2018, after the government lifted the state of emergency following protests in 2016-2017, led by Oromo democracy activists. He made peace with Eritrea in 2019, signing a peace agreement with Isaias in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, without disclosing its contents, and he received a Nobel Peace Prize shortly after.

He dissolved the EPRDF and created his civic-nationalist Prosperity Party in December 2019. The TPLF refused to dissolve, and become the Tigrayan wing of the newly formed party. The TPLF then went ahead with elections, despite Abiy postponing them, allegedly due to the pandemic. Abiy would soon arrest the leaders of the Oromo democracy movement, and dissolve their parties.

Shortly after, allegedly in response to TPLF attacks on Ethiopian Northern Command headquarters, Abiy attacked Tigray with his Ethiopian allies.

The future of the conflict is unclear. After the TPLF retook Mekelle, it issued a statement demanding the full withdrawal of Eritrean troops, as well as the fighters from the neighboring Amhara region. The statement expressed willingness to accept a ceasefire declared by the Ethiopian government, if there were ironclad guarantees of no further invasions, but also demanded further conditions.

The TPLF also seeks to hold Isaias Afwerki and Abiy Ahmed to account for the destruction caused during the invasion.

Elections

On 11 July Ethiopia held elections, delayed twice already. Abiy Ahmed declared a landslide victory, but the elections did not include Tigray, which represents 38 seats in the national parliament out of 547. Many in Oromia, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Amhara were also unable to participate, and 64 constituencies will have to wait until 6 September for a promised second round of elections.

“Far from supplying legitimacy to the government and stability to the country, the election – boycotted by opposition parties and undertaken amid a war – is likely to pull Ethiopia further apart, to calamitous effect”, writes Tseadale Lemma in a New York Times op-ed.

Three new pamphlets

Solidarity readers should check out three new pamphlets.

Was “Corbynism” defeated only by the power of the ruling class and sabotage from the Labour right? Or were these powers able to defeat Corbynism because of the movement’s political limitations and failure to grow beyond them? Workers’ Liberty’s new pamphlet Corbynsim: What Went Wrong? surveys the rise and fall of the “Corbyn movement” and draws out lessons for the kind of socialist politics the left and labour movement need: workersliberty.org/product/49

Another new AwL pamphlet, The Occupation of the Cammell Laird Shipyard in Birkenhead, 1984, seeks to spread the story of the workplace occupation by ship-building workers at the height of Thatcherism, and their defiance even after they were evicted and jailed. This is a struggle which still reverberates in labour movement battles and working-class politics in Merseyside and beyond: workersliberty.org/product/50

And the pamphlet Build Back Socialist, produced by Momentum Internationalists, sketches out the kind of demands and campaigns the Labour and trade union left need to regroup and start to make an impact. It gives ideas for how, as move into a new stage of the pandemic, we can attack deepening poverty and inequality and radically reshape society: momentuminternationalists.org
The Morning Star’s not-so-secret support for Galloway

By Jim Denham

The Morning Star appeared to welcome Labour’s victory (albeit a narrow one) in Batley and Spen: “Labour activists are breathing a sigh of relief... The result is a welcome sign that Tony advances across northern England are not unstoppable... it also shows the importance of locally rooted politics...” I say “appeared to welcome” the result because those words come from an editorial published in the 3-4 July edition — two days after the result. Before then, there was nothing to indicate that the paper was supporting Labour and a lot to suggest that it didn’t.

In fact, even that editorial went on to defend the only candidate that the paper had previously expressed any support for: “[O]ver a fifth of the votes went to George Galloway standing for the Workers Party — whom Labour appears to have been at greater pains to delegitimise than they were the Tories. There were some very unpleasant incidents during the [campaign]...” “Whether any candidate is responsible is less clear... the dismissal of 8,000 mostly ex-Labour voters (and potentially a great many more in other parts of the country) as having backed ‘intimidation and hatred’ — though the term might fairly be applied to the Conservatives, it is clear that Labour is referring to Galloway — turns a deaf ear to the reasons it has lost these voters and implies their concerns are illegitimate.”

The unmistakable conclusion is that it might have been better if Galloway had succeeded in his avowed aim: to ensure Labour lost and — given that Galloway himself could not win — to hand victory to the Tories.

An article by one Beck Robertson in the 29 June edition was more explicit: “George Galloway’s campaign... shows left-wing politics can unify a diverse collective of working-class voters... As Galloway’s apparent progress demonstrates, by going grassroots, to voters in their communities — the left can build a movement.”

But it took the Morning Star regular and fanatical Brexiteer Nick Wright (formerly of the Stalinist Straight Left group that operated within both the CP and the Labour Party) to spell it out, in a paean to Galloway entitled “Galloway’s challenge to Labour won’t be going away quickly” (8 July). Wright — against all the evidence — blamed Labour for “an extensive dirty tricks campaign against Galloway” and stated: “Galloway owes the present Labour leadership nothing but contempt. In a constituency which registered a 60 per cent vote for Brexit his ceaseless criticism of Starmer’s politics was allied to the sympathetic hearing he deservedly won from British Muslims”. Wright conveniently ignored the many Muslims — women especially — who went on record objecting to Galloway’s cynical use of the “Muslim vote”.

The Morning Star, shamedfully, had nothing to say about Galloway’s homophobic campaign (clearly aimed at Labour’s Kim Leadbeater, who is gay), including speaking at a “Freedom of Speech” event organised in the constituency by various extreme right wingers including Lawrence Fox, where Galloway explained he didn’t want primary school children taught “that there’s 99 genders, that men can become women.”

In the same speech, Galloway said he did not want children taught “how to masturbate” or “about anal sex” and “parents chest feeding their children.”

In a leaflet aimed at the Muslim community, Galloway wrote that “I will demand parental involvement in the school curriculum. I don’t want my children to be taught in a moral vacuum” — a clear anti-LGBT worldview.

The same leaflet, bizarrely, also described Keir Starmer as “the top supporter of Israel”. On the ground, Galloway’s supporters made a point of mentioning that Keir Starmer’s wife is Jewish.

This despicable Red-Brown figure used homophobia and antisemitism (sometimes dressed up as “support” for the Palestinian cause, but more often just anti-Israeli sloganning) against Labour and the Labour candidate. Although he blustered about winning, Galloway knew that a big vote for him would give the constituency to the Tories, and gloried in that. But you would never know any of that from the Morning Star, whose only mentions of Galloway during and after the campaign, have been supportive — because, at heart, the paper and the Communist Party of Britain, to a very large extent, agree with him.

Complexities of vaccine policy

Unite, Unison and GMB leaders’ opposition to compulsory vaccination for care home workers, echoed by Ali Treacher’s article (Solidarity 598), has me in two minds. At the very least, it’s more complicated than presented.

It is undoubtedly a cynical and hypocritical move by a government that has demonstrated extreme disdain for the lives of both workers and care home residents, refusing the most obvious and far more important measures like universal 100% sick pay. However, that hypocrisy doesn’t mean the labour movement should necessarily campaign against the policy itself, or its extension to NHS workers.

We know that vaccination, like masks and other transmission-reducing measures, is not a choice with consequences limited to the individual. It’s a question of social solidarity — each person’s protection relies not only on our own choices, but those of others too. Can we really uphold the individual’s right to refuse well-evidenced vaccines, at the expense of the right to safety for those around them? Should we also resist many NHS trusts’ existing requirements of Hepatitis B vaccination for certain jobs?

Treacher rightly highlights that the policy primarily hits lower-paid, working-class women. But on the other hand, the risk falls most heavily on the most disadvantaged of their clients — and their co-workers.

The strongest case against government compulsion is that it might backfire by pouring fuel on hesitators’ fears. As Treacher says, if it leads to mass resignations, those in need of care will be even worse off. Education is surely the most important tool.

Evidence for population-wide compulsion is poor. But for job-specific compulsion, there is cause for scepticism about claims like the GMB’s announcement that “more than a third of our members in social care would consider packing their jobs in”. Care home operator Barchester already made vaccination compulsory for its employees (with medical exemptions). Coupled with a big push on education and reassurance, it achieved 99% vaccination, far higher than the wider workforce, and only about 0.67% resigned — balanced by applicants attracted by greater workplace safety. Some redeployment may also be feasible.

We can’t assume that a government edict would produce the same results as an employer policy. Further analysis is needed, and the scales of evidence might still tip against compulsion. But at the very least, this is a complex issue, involving competing freedoms and deserving of more nuance, and greater consideration of the mutual responsibilities involved in vaccination, than the big unions’ leaders are offering.

A Unison member, London
What we mean by socialist feminism

By Kelly Rogers

Excerpt from a speech at Ideas for Freedom, 10-11 July 2021

In Workers’ Liberty, we believe that the liberation of women can only happen with the emancipation of humanity as a whole, through the socialist transformation of society through class struggle.

The working class is the vast majority of people – immensely diverse, but united by our dependency on waged labour to survive. Men and women both have this dependent relationship to waged labour, but it is differentiated by women’s historic and current role in childbearing, our ability to stitch together childcare, and the gendered division of labour that influences the availability, price and type of wage labour men and women do.

Misogyny, racism, xenophobia, homophobia – etc. – suit the interests of capital because:

- They provide the basis for extreme exploitation of minority groups: for example, the driving down of wages and conditions for women workers, migrant workers.
- They undermine working-class solidarity and resistance. If you’re busy hating your neighbour, you forget how much you ought to hate your boss.

Women’s oppression also provides the grist for some aspects of homophobia and transphobia. These have other roots as well, but a thread that runs through is an ideology around gender conformity: rigid ideas about gender presentation and what it means to “be a woman”; strict gender roles in the nuclear family.

The family is a central focus for us. It is currently, and has historically been: a key instrument for capitalist accumulation: helping to depress wages and ensure the reproduction of workers’ labour power. The things we do to keep our families and communities going are done for free – or by very low-wage workers, like nannies.

The family has also always, of course, been the site of gendered oppression and immiseration: the gendered division of labour, bullying and domestic violence, isolation and loneliness. But the family, despite its flaws – and there are many – remains a means by which working-class families can not just survive but find degrees of real fulfillment and pleasure in their daily lives.

So as socialist feminists, we’re interested in expanding the fulfilling and pleasurable aspects of familial relationships – giving people opportunities to nurture the relationships that are important to them – and eradicating unhealthy power dynamics in families, between partners, between parents and children, etc.

By overthrowing class society, and cutting the roots of oppression, we can create the conditions for the liberation of all of humanity. In a society based on democracy and solidarity it will be possible to work to end all forms of oppression and exploitation. Likewise, building a common socialist project that is feminist – will create a organised working class that is fighting fit: empowered and working in common cause.

In other words, without the abolition of class exploitation, there can be no end to women’s oppression. But without a mass movement of organised, mobilised women fighting for liberation, there can be no socialist revolution.

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Cuba: Time for real solidarity from the British left

By Eric Lee

If you’re a British trade unionist or a member of the Labour Party, where might you go to find news about Cuba? An obvious choice is the Morning Star, a newspaper largely funded by trade unions, which regularly runs articles about the island nation. Another is the website of the trade union-backed Cuba Solidarity Campaign (CSC).

You would learn that in recent weeks Cuba has developed its very own Covid vaccine that is over 90% effective with three doses. You’d also learn that the Biden administration continues with the vicious U.S. embargo, which is one of the reasons why Cuba needs to develop its own medicines. And Cuba famously has a good health care system, a model one in fact.

You’d also learn that the island would be opening an LGBT-friendly hotel for the first time. Its owner is quoted in the Morning Star as saying that the opening of the hotel “is a sign of the evolution of a Cuban society that is making progress in inclusion and support for the rights of historically marginalised groups.” This is of course good news, especially considering that the Communist Party was not always particularly friendly to LGBT people. (That’s putting it politely: for a long time, Cuban leaders like Che Guevara were quite homophobic, and LGBT people were brutally persecuted.)

Those two news stories, and several more about that American blockade, are pretty much the whole story – according to the Morning Star and the CSC.

Neither is reporting the news from Cuba that dominates the pages of the Guardian, the New York Times and pretty much every other mainstream news source this week. And that news is pretty remarkable. One wonders why the campaigners and journalists at what is described as “a lone socialist voice in a sea of corporate media” have missed the story.

And the story is this: for the first time in more than thirty years, ordinary Cubans have poured into the streets to protest government policies. Demonstrations have taken place all over the island – demonstrations that never happened before, in which young people are playing a leading role. The demonstrators are furious that the Cuban economy is in crisis, that electricity only works for a few hours a day, and that people have to queue up to buy essentials.

As the Guardian reported, “The protests began in the morning, in the town of San Antonio de los Baños in the west of the island, and in the city of Palma Soriano in the east. In both cases protesters numbered in the hundreds. With millions of Cubans now with mobile internet on their phones, news of the protests quickly swept to Havana. By early afternoon, thousands marched through central Havana, chanting ‘homeland and life’ and ‘freedom’.”

There are videos online of protestors chanting “we are not afraid.” It’s inspiring stuff.

The Cuban government was not pleased. Police officers, both uniformed and plainclothes, arrested hundreds of demonstrators. According to one report, some younger protestors “tore up paving slabs and hurled them at police” who retaliated with “pepper spray and beat protesters with truncheons.”

One Cuban activist, Carolina Barrero, told the New York Times that this “is the most massive popular demonstration to protest the government that we have experienced in Cuba since ’59” – referring to the year Castro came to power.

The labour movement and the left would normally support mass protests of this type. But not this time, at least not here in Britain. Here, unlike in Cuba itself, the regime still has a revolutionary aura attached to it, and there’s that US boycott again – have we mentioned that?

Maybe what we need is a Cuban Solidarity Campaign that’s in solidarity with the Cuban people, including the ones now in the streets, rather than solidarity with the dictatorship.

- Eric Lee is the founder editor of LabourStart, writing here in a personal opinion column.

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Free the protesters! We reprint this extract from the Comunistas blog. A supporter of that blog, Frank García Hernández, is one of those who has been arrested in the recent Cuban protests. He was the organiser of a conference on Trotsky in Havana in 2019. “This note from the Comunistas blog does not seek to analyse the situation in Cuba. It seeks to denounce the violent detention of the protesters, to denounce the fact that this time the repressive forces of the State put themselves in the opposite place, that they repressed Cubans, that they used pepper spray and all available resources…” This note is a claim for the freedom of all those detained and especially for Frank García Hernández, a Cuban historian and Marxist. For Leonardo Romero Negrín, a young socialist: “For Maykel González Vivero, director of Tremenda Nota, a fringe magazine. For Marcos Antonio Pérez Fernández, a minor, a high school student.

“Comunistas appeals to the solidarity of the international Marxist community and also to the conscience of the Cuban government. This time it is about a people that needs answers and dialogue.”

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Events and campaigns: workersliberty.org/meetings

youtube.com/c/WorkersLibertyUK

workersliberty.org/audio
Understanding what was at stake in the GMB General Secretary election

By GMB comrades

This discussion article has been sent to us by a group of GMB activists and officers who have worked with Workers’ Liberty

Dale Street’s article on the GMB General Secretary election (Solidarity 596) is testament to the author’s outstanding talent for missing the wood for the trees. To paraphrase Eric Morecambe: “He has all the right knowledge, but not necessarily in the right order.”

To help Solidarity readers make sense of the GMB election we want to take a step back from the matters Dale focuses on and instead look at the big picture.

The first point to grasp, is that for anyone in the GMB with an ounce of militant class consciousness it was as plain as day that Gary Smith stood out head and shoulders above the other candidates. This came through very clearly in both the candidate debates and in the election addresses.

Gary Smith could point to a record of challenging collaboration and institutionalised corruption while transforming GMB Scotland into a effective, dynamic and growing region of the union. This isn’t a question of Gary Smith being right or wrong, it is as plain as day that Gary Smith stood out head and shoulders above the other candidates.

Gary Smith could also count on the support from the best organised and most militant sections of the GMB and from the overwhelming majority of the best workplace activists. From British Gas, across the utilities, in manufacturing, engineering construction, education, local government, retail, logistics, the gig economy and the NHS, whatever the sector, wherever there was any degree of independent workplace organisation there was clear majority support for Gary Smith.

Contrast

In contrast, Rehana Azam as Public Services National Secretary has presided over years of deep pay cuts for GMB members in the sector and falling membership. She has no identifiable programme for fighting back and little depth of support even in the sector she purportedly leads.

A big part of her election message was to talk of her great achievements securing £2 billion of deep pay cuts for GMB members in the sector and falling membership. She has no identifiable programme for fighting back and little depth of support even in the sector she purportedly leads.

Yes you read that right. Not surprisingly this rang hollow with GMB members on the frontline. She had mistaken her own warm feelings about rubbing shoulders with Ministers and top civil servants at the height of the crisis last spring, with the reality in the workplace. To people who’ve had a real terms 15% pay cut, or worked through the pandemic without proper PPE, her claims undermined her credibility. In the end the only sector in which Rehana got overwhelming support was amongst GMB branches for employees of other unions.

So if the reasons for supporting Gary Smith against Rehana Azam are clear, what about the other candidate?

Dale Street describes Giovanna Holt as the only candidate with a proven track record of taking on bullying and misogyny in the GMB. Unfortunately he provides no evidence for this claim, which is a problem as we don’t know of any evidence for it either. So until Dale puts his evidence on the table we’re just left with an assertion.

Identity Politics

He then goes on to imply that Gary Smith should’ve stepped aside anyway because he’s a white male Regional Secretary. Unfortunately for Dale the majority of class conscious activists in the GMB, including the majority of women and black activists, don’t buy identity politics.

They can see that it’s true that Gary Smith is a white male and that he was a Regional Secretary. However, he was a Regional Secretary who smashed up corrupt union organisation and launched the biggest strike for women’s equal pay in history, a strike which included GMB members taking unlawful solidarity strike action and the union facing down legal threats from the employer. He was a white male Regional Secretary who led the cultural transformation of GMB Scotland into a fighting union far more representative of the membership, and with inspiring women leaders at lay and officer levels.

Activists can also see that as General Secretary he has already taken aim at the gravy-train-riding committee-jockey culture that sustains patronage and bullying, backs up dictatorial Regional Secretaries, and excludes women and black workers. He has singled out the national “hospitality” budget which reached £2 million under Tim Roach as something to be cut. He has demanded that Regional secretaries justify every penny of expenditure in relation to how it helps build the union.

He wants to cut the pipeline that fuels the culture of cronyism. He has pledged to make it cheaper for people to be GMB members, and as a first step he has frozen subs for 2021-22. And he has already made significant changes (doubling childcare support) to make it easier for working-class women to take on officer roles.

Work to do

The best activists also know that there is a huge amount of work ahead in GMB. Despite the fact it is holding up much better than Unite, GMB paying membership is at an all-time low. Gary Smith has made reversing this trend, rather than managing decline, the core of his platform. He has also spelt out that the way to reverse the trend is to drop partnership and embrace militant organising with a focus on exploiting tight labour markets to win on pay.

Gary Smith was the class struggle choice in the GMB election and socialists should celebrate his victory. If you can’t see that then god help you.

Office doesn’t equal power

Letter

I agree with Eric Lee (Solidarity 599) that trying to win public elections should be a part of socialist activity. Workers’ Liberty has in print a pamphlet, How to Fight Elections, based on our comrade Lol Duffy’s campaign as Labour candidate in Wallasey in 1987.

But Eric’s article switches to and fro between “power” and “elected office” as if they are the same thing. They’re not.

In fact, a dogmatic over-valueation of seeking electoral office can lead to socialists adapting to the constraints of office, sacrificing real political power from agitation in workplaces and neighbourhoods.

Momentum urges Labour leftists to get elected as Labour councillors. In anything like the current balance of forces, a leftist elected councillor will have zero political power (as distinct from, maybe, capacity to help constituents with individual grievances), and will gain little of what Lol Duffy would have got if he’d won Wallasey in 1987, a public platform for socialist agitation.

By getting mired in councillor positions, they are more likely to lose than to gain political clout.

Martin Thomas, Islington

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Our fight-for-freedom weekend

By Gerry Bates

Just over 200 people took part in ideas for Freedom on 8-11 July, including our Thursday night film showing of Dear Comrades and our Friday evening “Battersea vs the British Empire” walking tour.

The film showing was solely online, and the walking tour solely in person, but the weekend was “hybrid”, run simultaneously in person and online. Some people came in person (and we took care about restricting numbers in rooms, having seats distanced, asking for face-coverings, having bookstalls and snacks outdoors rather than indoors); some people listened to and contributed to sessions online. Each session had both an in-person chair and a Zoom chair.

We’d never done an event like this before, and as far as we know we’re the first socialist group in Britain to do one. (The SWP, for example, did their “Marxism festival” this year online-only.)

It was hard work, especially after some of the key people who had been working on the technical arrangements had to go into self-isolation in the days before, and one on the Saturday morning. But we pulled it off. Many participants, online or in-person, have congratulated our “techies” on their work.

The weekend had 30 sessions. Too many to report here, and the selection here of those mentioned is sadly fairly much to report here, and the selection.

The opening debate in the main hall (while other sessions ran simultaneously in smaller rooms) was between Ruth Cashman of Workers’ Liberty and John Strawson (once a leading activist in the International Marxist Group, now a law professor) on whether socialist revolution is possible or even desirable. It ranged over the nature of democratic revolutions, the question of who are the most consistent fighters for reforms, and the ecological emergency. It gave participants a useful introduction to who we are and why we are Marxists.

In the next main-hall debate on Saturday Anita Downs from Workers’ Liberty took issue with Frances Foley from Compass over the idea that Labour should unite with the Lib-Dems, SNP, etc. to form an electoral coalition to oust the Tories, a “Progressive Alliance”.

The same issue re-emerged in a Sunday main-hall session, where Alan Simpson, Michael Chessum, and Martin Thomas from “Workers’ Liberty” debated the lessons of Labour’s Corbyn era. Simpson said that Jeremy Corbyn had been “brought down by his friends” in the “Leader’s Office”. Chessum argued that the Corbyn phase of the Labour left was more “Labourite” and electoralist than previous ones; his conclusion was that leftists should back a “Progressive Alliance” to get proportional representation, so as then to facilitate a split in the Labour which would create a party of the left (but not necessarily revolutionary left) in Britain analogous to those in Spain, France, Germany, etc.

Thomas dissented. A key limitation on Corbyn Labour was the grip of Stalinism at the “top”. Better outcomes would have been possible if the anti-Stalinist class-struggle left had done our work better over the years before 2015 and been stronger in 2015. A broad half-reformist-half-revolutionary party may sometimes be useful terrain for Marxist activity, but is no substitute for Marxist politics. Epidemiology professor George Davey Smith spoke on what we know and do not know about SARS-CoV-2, notably about lessons from the four previous coronaviruses which have become endemic.

The discussion of free speech with Cath Fletcher and Shiva Mahbobi of the Campaign to Free Political Prisoners in Iran covered both the brutal attacks on freedom of expression and association in Iran, the Tories’ “culture-war” agitation presented as support for free speech on British university campuses, and a growing culture in the UK inimical to debate and discussion. Paul Hampton’s session on “Why should you read Lenin’s What is to be done?” challenged the Stalinist myths about the book as manual in stone for revolutionary organisation, and the mirror-image bourgeois myth about it being a manual for the Stalinist counter-revolution. In fact the book is instructive on how socialists can be active on all three fronts of the class struggle, economic, political, and ideological, so as to help elemental working-class upsurges develop their full potential rather than being limited by socialist “tailism”.

The session on Myanmar, with speakers over Zoom from the Myanmar workers’ movement Khang Zar Aung and Moe Sandar Myint, found that the movement now calls on supporters abroad to demand that garment brands stop placing orders with Myanmar suppliers, rather than that the brands should call for supplies to guarantee leave, severance pay, etc. for workers.

Bruce Robinson’s session on “Alan Turing and us” generated lively discussion on the interrelation of human intelligence and computerised artificial intelligence.

To repeat, many other sessions produced good feedback: it’s just that this report is limited by our capacity to collect and collate comments, and by space. About 35 people came to the Friday walking tour, “Battersea versus the British Empire”, including a fair number of people who are in touch with a Workers’ Liberty activist here or there but don’t usually come to our events.

It concluded with Kelly Rogers reading out an extract from Battersea’s local labour-movement newspaper, from over a hundred years ago. The words still ring true:

“We preach socialism as the only remedy for the ills and oppression the worker suffers. With the capitalists and politicians, Liberal or Tory or sham Labour, we ask and shall give no quarter. But to the working classes we do appeal, knowing their interests are ours, and by their support alone can we succeed.

“For the workers we have a message of hope: the destruction of this miserable system under which men become machines, and machines masters of men; and the erection of another system, where every man shall enjoy the fruits of his labour and live a long, happy life of wholesome work; joyful leisure and brotherly relations with fellow men.

“Every word is meant for men and for women. Indeed, in many respects socialism offers more to women than to men...”

Against the Taliban surge: and no confidence in “interventions”

As US, British, and other troops quit Afghanistan, predictably the Taliban is surging forward.

The Taliban had been stalling in negotiations for a post-withdrawal settlement, and there had been an increase in sectarian-Islamist attacks on civilians in the cities (some disavowed by the Taliban, but with not much credibility).

Our answer is not to plead with the USA to put its troops back in Afghanistan. US troops had been there for 20 years, and left the Taliban stronger than they were when Northern Alliance forces (with fairly light US support at the time) routed the Taliban in 2001.

Nor is it to plead with Iran, or Turkey, or other neighbouring powers alarmed at the Taliban surge, to take over the job of bolstering the shaky administration in Kabul, as Turkey has tentatively started to do. Equally, it is not to rejoice in the withdrawal as “liberation”. So far as we are able to do anything, it must be to give solidarity to the cities – both to the unofficial militias newly being formed, and to the huge and well-funded but, no less official Afghan government forces – against the Taliban, which threatens to suppress even the most modest individual freedoms.

• More: Solidarity 576
Rayner Lysaght

By Sean Matgamna

Rayner Lysaght died in Dublin on 2 July 2021, at the age of 80. He was one of the earliest and longest serving members of the Mandelite Trotskyist organisation in Ireland, from 1971.

A Welshman of Irish descent, he went to Ireland to study, and stayed; from a well-off background, which his accent and manner never ceased to proclaim, he migrated in his mid 20s to Marxist working class socialism, and there too he stayed, for the remainder of his life.

He claimed descent from distinguished ancestors and was proud of it. From Fergus O’Connor, the leader of the revolutionary wing of Chartism and earlier an O'Connellite, Repeal-the-Act-of-Union MP; from Arthur O'Connor, United Irishman and distinguished Napoleonic soldier; all the way back to the last crowned High King of Ireland, Rory O'Connor, in the mid 12th century.

In a notable style of writing and language, Lysaght himself sought distinction in producing writings on Ireland, the Irish working class and the history of socialism.

As well as many articles on current politics over the years, he published a book in 1970 on the history of the 26 county state, <em>The Republic of Ireland</em>, important articles on the soviets that were briefly thrown up in a few places during the War of Independence (1919-21) and a pamphlet on the soviet that took control of Limerick City in 1919. In his last period, he collected and published writings and memoirs of members of the small Irish Trotskyist group of the 1940s.

Apart from the period 1970-2, when Workers’ Fight, the earliest version of the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty, took a position of critical support of the Ernest Mandel International – I persuaded Peter Graham to that view and Peter persuaded his friend Lysaght – Rayner and I rarely agreed on anything. But over the years, I made a point of inviting him to contribute to discussions in our papers and magazines on aspects of Irish and Irish-British politics and history, and he always did.

Rayner first became involved with Trotskyists in the mid 60s. Peripherally. It was a different political world then. Except for the Healy organisation, the SLL-WRP, the different factions and organisations talked to each other, argued about our differences, and collaborated in certain activities. The most important of these was the solidarity movement we created in support of Vietnam, then being pounded in an unequal conflict with the USA. Lysaght wrote some reports from Dublin for a Labour Party “entrist” magazine, The Week, run by the Mandelites in collaboration with other Labour leftists.

They had a strategy of creating “replacement leaderships” in social democratic parties by putting forward the sort of politics a straight social-democratic left would have, if it existed... Centrally, they advocated workers’ control of industry.

(That approach didn’t prove fruitful, and it gave way, once the anti-Vietnam-war movements took off, to a wildly ultra-left phase. By the 1970 general election, they were calling for the breaking up of Labour Party election meetings.)

IS, what became the SWP, was then a very loose, politically inchoate organisation. Rayner Lysaght was amongst their sympathisers in Ireland.

He joined the Irish Workers’ Group in early 1967 when the IS people in Ireland – Michael Farrell was one of them – joined as part of an agreement between Gerry Lawless and Tony Cliff. The IWG was a not-always-coherent mix of Orthodox Trotskyism, IRA-ism, and God-knows-what-ism. There is much about it on this website, and I won’t describe it here.

In the IWG, Rayner was still a left social-democrat. The left was strong in the Irish Labour Party then, its hopes were high, and Lysaght saw no limit to its potential. He believed that its then leader Brendan Corish “will lead us as far as we want to go”.

When the IWG ruptured into a bitter factional dispute, from October 1967 to March 1968, Lysaght took the side of what we, their opponents, called the “Anti-Trotskyist Coalition”. It included the ostentatiously non-Leninist Irish IS people, some Mandelites, and one or two who were openly evolving into Guevarist urban guerillas, towards the Saor Eire Action Group, which robbed banks.

I met Rayner Lysaght for the first time at the start of January 1968. He appeared one evening at Rachel Lever’s and my door in Manchester, a tall man of striking appearance, looking a bit like King Henry VIII in Hans Holbein’s well-known portrait.

I recorded the visit of one of the key Dublin IWG figures for people on our side of the dispute, describing him as sincere and honest, but vulnerable to Gerry Lawless’s shameless flattery. I was not wrong, on any of the three points.

Lysaght’s background and education had not trained him to disqualify himself out of modesty. He let Lawless and his friends make him, after six or nine months involvement, National Secretary of the IWG, though, by that point, there wasn’t much to be national secretary of.

At the IWG conference at Moran’s Hotel in Dublin on 17 March 1968, he voted with those who chose to split the organisation.

Lysaght, with Peter Graham, was in Derry on 5 October 1968, when the RUC batoned peaceful demonstrators before a world audience enlisted by the TV cameras. And ignited Northern Ireland. Peter Graham wrote me this account of his and Lysaght’s experience there:

“Lysaght and myself were up in Derry on the now famous Saturday [5 October] i.e. when the R.U.C. batoned demonstrators and passers-by indiscriminately. On the previous Saturday I was at a Civil Rights Committee in Derry. The majority of the committee was, as Eamonn McCann described it, a bunch of middle-aged, middle-class and middle-of-the-road fools. On that committee the only radicals were Cyril Toman, Mike Farrell, other IS people from Belfast and from Derry, Eamonn himself. The Chief Marshal wanted the prerogative to beat marchers if they deviated from the straight and narrow as defined by him.

"On the march itself the only ones in a position to do any beating were the cops. They blocked us at the top of Duke St. with big police vans and three lines of baton-waving cops in front and two lines behind. When the crowd first tried to break the cordon it was viciously driven back, then some people spoke off a chair to the demonstrators (about 800 of them, only half of them men capable of fighting the
police, of which there was 500). Eddie McAteer (Nationalist Party) was booed down and would not be listened to because earlier in the week he said ‘the Nationalist Party would not participate as a party though members from the Party could participate as individuals, we want to keep the politicians out of the Civil Rights Affair’.

“Betty Sinclair, of the NICP was also booed when she suggested we go home. The next speaker was Eamonn. He had absolute silence. ‘I was bound over to the peace this morning and I am not going to ask anyone to break that cord but if anyone goes to break it I won’t say or do anything to stop him’. With that the crowd rushed the cops and the rest is history – we were beaten back down the road into the batons of two more lines of cops.”

Peter had news too of the remnant IWG:

“The IWG has just had its AGM, with Lawless and all, a very subdued Lawless indeed, about 12 people were there, including Chris Gray IS. I haven’t less indeed, about 12 people were there, including Chris Gray IS. I haven’t the faintest idea of what went on”.

The rump IWG formed out of the “Anti-Trotskist Coalition” disbanded some time around October 1968, just at the time that the Six Counties began to implode. It had what seemed to those of us who had parted from it in March that year, an appropriate political burial ceremony.

Six Counties Home Secretary William Craig, who was responsible for setting the police on the demonstrators in Derry, denounced the IWG in the Six Counties parliament at Stormont, reading out passages from its Manifesto. Rory McShane, recently elected by the IWG conference its national Chair, and prominent in Queens University student politics, responded to Craig by denying that the organisation existed, or ever had existed.

A little after the demise of the IWG, Lysaght applied to join the League for a Workers’ Republic, the organisation of those he had opposed in the IWG faction fight. In its way it was an attempt at reunion. Paul Gillespie, another of the IS Irish people, tried to join at the same time. The smug and unforgiving citizens who led the organisation refused to have either of them.

The leading group in the LWR — Paddy Healy, Carol Coulter, Basil Miller — had begun to orientate to Gerry Healy’s SLL (later the WRP). If you ignored the politics and the rampant sectarianism, it was impressively large and vigorous. Peter Graham and Rayner Lysaght saw the Gerry Healy-Pierre Lambert “International Committee” as hopelessly irrational, dishonest and, frequently, vicious and destructive, and went for “critical support” for the Mandel Fourth International.

Irish politics was a world in flux. The Stalinists of the Official Republican movement had a private army, the Official IRA, and they might, we feared, use it against Trotskyists – as Stalinists had in Greece, Vietnam and many other countries, killing hundreds of people. Peter Graham and some others went for military training with the Saor Eire Action Group.

Rayner Lysaght debates Sean Matgamna

Peter joined Saor Eire, and took part in the last two bank robberies carried out by that organisation, in the second of which an unarmed garda, Richard Fallon, was shot dead.

Any of the older or more experienced comrades who approved Peter joining Saor Eire would deserve severe condemnation. I worked closely with him. I thought having military training a good idea, in the circumstances; but I knew nothing of his involvement in Saor Eire until afterwards. He turned up at a Workers’ Fight aggregate meeting in Manchester, his beard shaved off as a disguise (he could regrow a full beard in less than a week), psychologically a bit battered.

The hue and cry over the death of Richard Fallon led Peter, though he was not on the wanted list of Saor Eire people the gardai put out, to move to England, for about a year. For some of that time, he worked as a printer at the Mandelite print shop in King’s Cross.

Peter had supported Lysaght’s and Gillespie’s attempts to join the LWR. Rayner Lysaght, on the fringes of the LWR, and Peter Graham within it, came together to resist the drift of the LWR leaders towards the SLL and its “International Committee.”

The LWR suffered two splits. First, in mid-1970, a group split to join the Gerry Healy organisation; later, in 1971, a dozen people around Peter Graham and Rayner Lysaght split off. All of them were youngsters. Graham was 25 when he died. (Soon the LWR would join the France-based Lambertists, recently estranged political and organisational sibling of the SLL. It lasted until the mid-1980s).

Peter returned to Ireland in the late summer of 1971. On the 25 October he was found in the flat he shared with Lysaght, shot dead by other Saor Eire members. Lysaght found his body.

Peter Graham’s death left the small faction, and Lysaght, politically orphaned, quickly to become an Irish clone of the British Mandelite organisation.

Peter had been a very critical supporter of the International. They believed that the Provisional IRA war could or would somehow “grow over” into an Irish working-class socialist revolution – the “permanent revolution in Ireland”. Peter Graham rejected that proposition.

I spent an afternoon with him, ten days, perhaps, before he was killed, in a heated dispute over his continuing involvement with Saor Eire, and he never took refuge in the easy rationalisation that what he was doing was all, somehow, part of the Irish socialist revolution, as, according to the “perspective” of “permanent revolution”, it was. He knew better. There were many things he did not live long enough to learn, but he knew that for the palpable nonsense that it was.

After Peter Graham’s death, Rayner soon forgot the critical part of support for the Mandel international. If Peter Graham had not died, things most likely would have gone differently.

My detailed knowledge of the Irish Mandelite organisation, and of Rayner Lysaght’s activity, ceased with Peter’s death. Lysaght remained a Mandelite, going through the many political shifts that ensued. When his early mentor Gerry Lawless dropped out of revolutionary socialist politics, in 1976, and went over to the Labour Party left (he would become a Hackney local councillor!) Lysaght stayed, resisting Lawless’ attempt to pull him down with him.


More at the Ireland “theory, debate, history” page on our website: bit.ly/ireland

See also parts five (bit.ly/dialog-5) and six (bit.ly/dialog-6) of an “imaginary dialogue”: a teasing-out of the issues on Ireland and permanent revolution based on the debate in Socialist Organiser in 1983, to which Rayner Lysaght contributed, with Lysaght’s argument presented in the name of a fictional character but largely in his own words.

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Sharon Graham, Unite and the parliamentary overturning of the strike-suppressing Taff Vale legal judgement and strong trade union freedoms, opening the way for an upsurge of industrial struggles. Since then industrial and political struggles have often been closely intertwined — though often not enough. In the 1970s, spectacular and for a while spectacularly successful industrial struggles, which went as far as bringing down the Heath government, ran into the sand because they lacked an adequate labour movement political expression.

• That while their core job is to help workers organise, in the first instance in the workplace, and fight for their rights as workers, trade unions should campaign on “big political” questions including climate change, racism and migrants’ rights and international solidarity, and more broadly to transform society in workers’ interests. The Fire Brigades Union is an industrially-focused union much better rooted in fire and rescue service workplaces than Unite currently is in the majority of workplaces where it has members; but it also takes up and campaigns on wider political questions (though in fact it should do so more strongly, consistently and energetically).

• That political connections, e.g. in the Labour Party, can provide important platforms, support and leverage in industrial struggles. More broadly, working-class struggle, certainly struggle which goes beyond small-scale and defensive, needs demands beyond workplace or industry-specific ones, i.e. political demands. Current pressing “political industrial” issues include repealing the anti-union laws, improving sick pay, raising the minimum wage, extending the furlough and self-employment support schemes, banning “fire and rehire”, defending and extending collective bargaining, increasing benefits and ending draconian conditionality, reversing cuts and refunding public services, ensuring meaningful public-sector pay rises, undoing privatisation and outsourcing in the NHS and elsewhere, and reorganising social care as a publicly-owned service. Both as campaigning goals and policies implemented, such demands can boost industrial struggles.

• That these considerations suggest not less but more and certainly stronger and more determined — as well as better, more mass-based and class struggle-focused — activity by Unite in Labour.

Workers’ policies

In Graham’s “workers’ politics” document she repeatedly declares what she will and won’t do, with relatively little suggestion of a democratic process to debate and commit the union to a new political strategy. The top-down approach this suggests is an issue in her campaign more generally, despite “bottom up”, “workers’ rhetoric.”

Ironically, then, Graham makes no proposals for what Unite should demand politically. It would have been easy to set out some priorities briefly, as I do above. Beyond opposing attacks on terms and conditions (and implicitly further council cuts), the document includes no policies at all. In fact it says very little about the general political and social situation, including hardly mentioning the pandemic.

It proposes a “democratically agreed Workers’ Manifesto”. Agreed how? Graham does say “the democratic processes of Unite will decide upon our policy agenda”. But Unite has regular policy conferences which in recent years have agreed many left-wing policies (the next one is in July). Many of these democratically-agreed policies are ignored, not campaigned for, by the Unite apparatus.

Instead of highlighting this problem, and suggesting which Unite policies or other demands are important, Graham says: “we simply must be more than policy proposals and demands.” Yes: but more, not less than... We should demand democratically-agreed union policies are “recognised” by the leadership and apparatus and argued and campaigned for — in workplaces, and more widely.

Graham says that “in the public eye we have been reduced to a brief blizzard of policy proposals”, counterposing “a sustainable, living movement for change”. This sounds a bit like Labour right-wingers suggesting that the problem with the party’s 2019 manifesto was too many and too ambitious policies. In fact it was that left-wing policies were announced, from above, at the last minute, not developed democratically in the movement and actually argued and campaigned for over years.

Graham argues for “working with local people on practical projects in communities and doing this on a large scale. Why can’t we deliver foodbanks or help find solutions for childcare if needed?”… Why can’t we provide spaces for community groups that have nowhere to meet because of austerity?” These are good ideas — if connected to political campaigning with positive and transformative demands, not an alternative to it.

In terms of what Unite does currently, consider the vital issue of sick and isolation pay. Unite’s nationally-led political “campaigning” on this has been little more than a few press releases, making a vague call to raise sick pay but not even flagging up the TUC’s demand for a £320 a week minimum (or any other demands).

If the leading officers of Unite, with its large apparatus, extensive connections and high profile — and most importantly, its many hundreds of thousands of members — wanted to organise a serious campaign on sick pay they certainly could. The limited but real campaigning against “fire and rehire” shows that. Even a Unite-only, fairly top-down campaign could have a big

Anti-racist resources

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impact — and a broad campaign mobilising large numbers of members and others much more so.

Or take the issue of repealing the anti-strike laws. Unite’s 2018 policy conference passed clear policy. The top leadership and the apparatus have ignored it, in fact working in the wider movement to effectively oppose this demand.

In general, despite Unite’s left-wing reputation, it has hard to think what particularly left-wing policies it has argued, let alone campaigned, for in the last year. Since the pandemic hit, Unite has, for all its justifiable negativity towards Sturmer, been among the unions most strongly praising the government’s concessions on issues like furlough.

Under Corbyn, although Unite was part of the left-wing bloc in Labour, its most determined policy interventions were to prevent the party from adopting a preference for the police on airport expansion and nuclear weapons. It was weak on party democracy: it opposed open parliamentary selections, in violation of a policy conference decision.

Contrast Unite and the far smaller FBU. Unite did back the left-wing “Socialist Green New Deal” composite at the 2019 Labour conference. But the FBU submitted crucial policy to the debate and took the lead, alongside left-wing Labour activists, in campaigning around this. It actively supported open selections. It campaigns for repealing the anti-union laws. It is the only union that has campaigned for public ownership of the banks and financial system. (Again, I would say the FBU should do more.)

Graham’s failure to criticise any of this, her failure to make any real proposals for policies or campaigning — her campaign does not mention sick pay or the anti-union laws! — and the implication that Unite has proposed too many policies all point in the wrong direction. Graham says she wants to “move beyond internal Labour politics” because “we have tried our political project in Labour — it has failed.” Failed permanently? What went wrong? Is there really nothing left to fight for in Labour? She argues against getting “consumed by the internal war within Labour” — which sounds sensible and sort of radical, until you pause and realise she is effectively arguing for Unite to step aside from challenging Labour’s right-wing leadership, and therefore from fighting within the party for left policies and struggles. Of course, working-class interests and not factional battles per se should be the focus. But to suggest those interests can be promoted politically is unclear, and further away from some degree of “factionalism” is misleading.

At present debate is, in part because of arguments from Graham and Howard Beckett, focuses on how much money Unite gives Labour. Actually fighting in the party (and more broadly) for Unite policies and working-class politics is rarely discussed.

“There will always be questions over the Labour link, and I am not proposing here to break it. I think that there are other, more important things to focus on.” Again the implication is that Unite should step further away from fighting for local worker’s policies and politics in Labour — when in fact it has done too little of that.

If Unite is going to remain affiliated to Labour, surely it should use those positions and connections to fight for “workers’ policies,” including its own democratically agreed policies? Perhaps there are “other, more important things to focus on”. But isn’t such use of the Labour link one important thing?

Graham rightly argues to fight Labour councils attacking workers. Shouldn’t the Labour link be used to exert pressure and mobilise support in such struggles as well? More widely, the logic of Graham’s position appears to be that we should fight Labour councils over particular cuts, but not push for Labour to campaign against cuts and to restore funding.

Steve Turner’s approach to the Labour Party and political representation and campaigning is far from radical. He suggests Unite is too critical of Labour mayors and councils in its industrial campaigns. But even Turner’s inconsistent/hypocritical and politically timid advocacy of maintaining the link and using it to push for leftist policies and politics is superior to Graham’s disinter-

est in the fight in Labour and flirtation with disaffiliation.

Given all these problems with Graham’s approach, statements like “They [Labour] are there to drive the issues of working people — they need to remember that. They are supposed to be the political wing of the labour movement” become somewhat meaningless.

Political strategy

Those who disagree that struggle in Labour is an important mechanism for building up working-class politics still need to address how such politics should be built. That Graham is not doing this is illustrated by the graphic at the end of her document. It shows Labour, Green, Lib Dem and UKIP candidates pledging to exclude the NHS from the new defunct TTIP trade deal, with a tick by each — but a cross by the Tory, who did not make the pledge.

Is this the sort of thing meant by “a pro-active, non-sectarian platform that sits outside of electoral politics”? Whatever you think about this as a single-issue campaigning tactic, it is not a model for developing working-class and socialist politics.

A genuine radical “workers” criticism of how Unite operates politically should argue something like this:

As part of rebuilding the union as an effective instrument for workers and working-class people to organise and fight for their interests, Unite needs to implement its existing political strategy (“Winning Labour for working people, winning working people for Labour”) more consistently, sincerely and energetically, while updating and developing it further. It should undertake strong, pro-active campaigning for clear, radical pro-working class policies (such as…) and working-class political representation. It should consistently fight for democratically-agreed union policies in Labour; fight for party democratisation; fight for Labour support for working-class struggles; promote socialist workplace and community working-class activists as candidates; and educate Unite branches and members and mobilise them in the party at every level around these goals.

Graham’s stance of backing candidates who have been reps is marred by insisting that Unite should only back current or former reps. So not Jeremy Corbyn (who was an employed union official but as far as I know never a rep) in 2015 and 2016? And not Tony Benn for deputy leader in 1980? But a Blairite who has worked for an MP for twenty years but was previously briefly a union rep (or perhaps is a “union rep” in the MP’s office or similar) is worth considering?

This posing of things is quite telling. We need many more MPs and councillors when elected or not long before are workplace or community activists. But Graham’s formulation about people who “have been” union reps — however far in the past, whatever they have done since? — surely reflects her own position in the movement. She emphasises the fact she got involved in the union through workplace organising. That is much better than Howard Beckett, who has never been a workplace activist or rep. But Graham has now been an unelected full-time union employee for decades.

I don’t know how much she’s paid, but it seems safe to assume a lot. Unsurprisingly perhaps then, she proposes nothing like the demand for MPs to take only a worker’s wage. After all, it can be applied to union officials too.

There are elements in the “workers’ politics” document pointing more in the right direction — for instance affirming that Unite’s structures should decide the policies it pushes. But they are buried in a mass of omission, ambiguity, posturing and regressive positions. Graham’s overall approach should be subjected to sustained and sharp socialist criticism.
Angelo del Boca, the honest historian of Italian colonialism

By Hugh Edwards

On 6 July, at the age of 96, Angelo Del Boca died, the most honest and fearless historian of Italian colonialism and its crimes.

He was a lifelong socialist, a former partisan fighter and journalist. As a historian, his work was concentrated on the demolition of the presumed “humane and generous” character of Italy’s imperialist adventures. He was rewarded by the open and fierce hostility not just of the country’s reaction ary Right but also of the intellectual and historiographical currents of social-democrats and Stalinists for ever in the search for a “progressive” patri mony.

The myth of the Italians as anthropologically decent, incapable by nature of violence and abuse of power against other people, was born with the onset of Italy’s colonial adventures in Africa, when it conquered Eritrea in the late 19th century. It was continued by Mussolini’s fascists who followed the route and methods pioneered by its predecessor, while adding its own contributions to the horror. Bourgeois historiography, conservative and progressive, still remains incapable of recognising the responsibility and culpability of the Italian State and its military hierarchy for the crimes of its colonial past.

Today amidst the ever-rising mood of Italian nationalism, with tricolour-waving, mass spontaneous outbursts of anthem singing, army generals presiding over vaccination centres, and the murderous toll of racism growing apace, ENI, the huge state energy company is returning to challenge Turkey and France in Libya. Italian troops police the Sahel against the hungry and desperate in flight from hunger and repression. All that compels us to render homage to Angelo Del Boca and his testimony for the truth, needed more than ever in the battles ahead both in Italy and elsewhere.

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The occupation of the Cammell Laird shipyard in Birkenhead, 1984

Workers’ Liberty has published this pamphlet to remember the brave workers who occupied their shipyard to try and save not just their own jobs but the jobs of future generations.

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member the brave workers who occupied their ship-
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Otto Rühle’s abridged version of Capital, putting aside current factual material, illustrations, polemics, is a good lead-in for the full book.

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131 pages, £6
Critical vote for Sharon Graham

By Ollie Moore

Following discussion and voting in our caucus of members active in Unite and on our elected committees, Workers’ Liberty will support a vote for Sharon Graham in the election for general secretary of the Unite union, against Steve Turner and Gerard Coyne.

Our position has developed over a number of months. A consistent thread has been an acknowledgment of the threat posed by right-wing candidate Gerard Coyne, whose model of conservative, officer-led, service-provision unionism would be a significant setback for Unite. Another consistent thread was the consensus that Howard Beckett, who recently withdrew from the election in favour of Turner, represented the worst elements of the existing McCluskey regime and should not be supported by left-wing, rank-and-file activists who want a more democratic, radical union.

The election will be conducted on a First Past the Post basis, a far-from-maximally-democratic voting method that years of “left” leadership have failed to change. Workers’ Liberty supported calls for a single left candidate, even whilst acknowledging that the means to achieve such a candidate — essentially, back room talks brokered by McCluskey — were far from ideal. With discussions aimed at securing a single candidacy having resulted in the withdrawal of only one of the three left candidates, we revisited our discussions about the merits of the remaining two.

Sharon Graham’s platform emphasises rebuilding Unite’s strength at workplace level, especially through the building of combine committees of shop stewards. If this approach were enacted and developed, it could lead to the development of a new layer of rank-and-file reps and activists capable of catalysing and winning struggles. Graham’s warmer talk about militancy and organisation is linked to no programme for democratising Unite. However, her campaign has won support from a number of leading reps, including in the construction sector, the only section of Unite where anything approaching genuinely independent rank-and-file organisation has been retained or developed. Those reps see the warmer talk as more than just talk.

Although Graham is very much a candidate of the bureaucracy, she represents a break from the existing regime. The continuation of that regime, represented by Steve Turner’s campaign, is preferable to the right-wing alternative posed by Coyne, but the fact it is a lesser evil compared to Coyne does not detract from the need to challenge it. It has become increasingly autocratic, officer-led, and locked into a bureaucratic machine-politics approach, inside the union and out. Elected a woman to the most senior position in a major union that has been traditionally male-dominated, and which has a poor track record of dealing with allegations of sexism, would also be significant.

Graham’s platform also has weaknesses. She has used her opponents’ perceived focus on politics and engagement with the Labour Party to denounce them as “the Westminster brigade”, counterposing her emphasis on “the workplace” to their alleged focus on “Westminster” — as if industrial struggles in the workplace can be abstracted from wider political and social issues, including what goes on within “official” politics, including in Westminster. While saying she opposes Unite disaffiliating from the Labour Party, she says she wants to de-prioritise engagement with it.

Some of the criticisms Graham makes of the way Unite has engaged with Labour are merited, but the answer is more and better engagement — on a democratic basis, with the union consistently asserting its own policies and mobilising its members in efforts of democratic reform within the party — not a de-prioritisation of engagement with Labour by its largest affiliate (see pages 10-11).

A vote for Steve Turner is a vote for the status quo in Unite — and, now that the Turner ticket has become the Turner/Beckett ticket, a vote that licenses the worst elements of that status quo: fake-left posturing masking egotistical careerism, backroom manoeuvring, and Stalinist-lite politics.

We support a critical vote for Sharon Graham as an alternative to that, whilst emphasising the need for genuine rank-and-file organisation in Unite that aims at the fundamental democratic transformation of the union.

More: bit.ly/unite-gs

Activist Agenda

The Uyghur Solidarity Campaign, with the Hong Kong campaign LMSHKUK and the Labour Campaign for Free Movement and others, has called a protest at the Home Office (Marsham Street, London SW1P 4DF) for 7pm on Thursday 29 July: bit.ly/3ho29ju

It will denounce the Tories’ new immigration proposals, and demand safe haven and equality for democracy activists currently fleeing Hong Kong and for all refugees. The trial of 47 Hong Kong people charged with “subversion” under the new National Security Law, including leading trade unionists, has been postponed further to 23 September.

Free Our Unions has a Zoom meeting on Tuesday 20 July, 7pm, about “1871 and the fight for free trade unions”: bit.ly/1871meetth

Momentum Internationalists is promoting its “Build Back Fairer” motion (bit.ly/3j0motions), and others, as many Constituency Labour Parties decide at their July meetings what they will send to September’s Labour Party conference.

Links and info for these campaigns, and wording for labour movement motions on many issues, at workersliberty.org/agenda

Chance to shift Unison’s Labour Link to the left

By Ruth Cashman

Nominations for the Labour Link Committee of the public services union Unison close on 14 July, and voting will be 7 September to 13 October.

Labour Link works directly within the Labour Party and should take Unison’s policies into the party. In reality, historically, Unison has failed to push members’ priorities in the Labour Party.

These elections come at an important time, just after the right wing in Unison have lost control of the National Executive Committee (NEC) for the first time ever. In principle the newly elected leftwing majority on the NEC can provide up to twelve of the twenty-three voting members of the Unison National Labour Link Committee.

We want to win a Labour government based on mass working-class mobilisation and accountable to the labour movement — a government which serves our class as the Tories in power have served the rich, and reshapes society in the interests of people, not profit. Labour is moving to the right at a time we most a fightback.

Unison must defend the left wing policies of 2017-2019 whilst fighting for policies — a pandemic-proof society through investment and wealth redistribution. Covid-19 has shown the public how crucial public sector workers are, our union must be bold and confident in its political demands and campaigns.

These should include:
• a nationalised and well paid social care service
• abolish all anti union laws
• pay rises across public services
• an end to austerity, with funding returned to 2010 levels.

Events and campaigns: workersliberty.org/meetings

youtube.com/c/WorkersLibertyUK

workersliberty.org/audio

13
What we stand for

Today one class, the working class, lives by selling its labour power to another, the capitalist class, which owns the means of production.

Capitalists' control over the economy and their relentless drive to increase their wealth causes poverty, unemployment, blighting of lives by overwork; imperialism, environmental destruction and much else.

The working class must unite to struggle against the accumulated wealth and power of the capitalists, in the workplace and wider society.

The Alliance for Workers' Liberty wants socialist revolution: collective ownership of industry and services, workers' control, and a democracy much fuller than the present system, with elected representatives recallable at any time and an end to bureaucrats' and managers' privileges.

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

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

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

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

• workersliberty.org/joinawl

Sheffield Archaeology: a cut with a “global impact”

By a student

A student involved with the Sheffield University Save Archaeology Campaign spoke to Solidarity.

Back in February, a few students were emailed, asking us to attend an "informal chat" with the Deputy Vice Chancellor (VC). Only a few of us were chosen and around a dozen or more of us turned up. She asked us for negative views as well as positive views about the department — she only received positive views.

At a follow-up meeting, the Deputy VC laid out the conclusions from this "consultation": they would close the Department of Archaeology and move two of its "areas of strength" into other departments. These include Cultural Heritage and Osteoarchaeology — which strictly speaking includes Human Osteology and Zooarchaeological (animal) studies. Sheffield holds the largest collection of zooarchaeological remains in the country, but we don’t know if Zooarchaeology is a part of what management is calling "Osteoarchaeology" or what will happen to the collection if not. But the rest of the Department would go.

Why is the university doing this? Management says: the department is in debt; recruitment is becoming more difficult and there is a “decline in interest" nationally. But for the last ten years, vacancies have been going unfilled. We have gone from 25 full-time staff in 2010 to 10 full-time staff in 2020. The holes have been plugged with part-time staff, and many programmes can no longer be run.

This closure will lead to the loss of research in the field. We undertake research locally and globally. We study climate change; the effects of urbanisation; of pollution; of colonialism. But we will also lose a touchstone in the local community. The department goes into schools and teaches about local history. It goes into communities and acquires historical accounts of what the community used to look like. That captures a changing image of society and helps newcomers to orientate themselves. Sheffield City Council asked to meet with university management to discuss this loss, but management refused to meet with them.

A petition is at about 45,000 signatures. We have received 2,200 letters so far. But there are only 7,000 archaeologists within Britain. We have had two rallies, addressed by [former Lord Mayor] Magid Magid and archaeology TV personality Chloe Duckworth. Next, for coronavirus reasons, we plan an online, international event.

Management essentially told us: yes, this might mean the end of your research, the end of your PhD: but we don’t care. One of our members has been working very hard to create a strong Zooarchaeology centre in Lebanon, and organising for students to come and train here before going out to do that work for Lebanon. And the entire basis for this person’s whole focus and whole future career has crumbled. But management doesn’t understand such things: they just see it in terms of moving a few students around, they don’t see the human impact. □

• Abridged. More: bit.ly/archeay

Waiting for asylum

Kino Eye

By John Cunningham

There’s been much coverage recently in Solidarity about migration and about the excellent news of victory for the campaign to stop Osime Brown being deported.

The film Last Resort, directed by Pawel Pawlikowski and released in 2000, tells the tale of a Russian woman, Tanya (Dina Korzum), and her son Artyom (Artyom Strelnikov) who arrive in the UK expecting to meet Tanya’s “fiance” at the airport. He is a fake, and never shows up.

Tanya claims asylum and she is sent by the authorities to Stonehaven, a dilapidated south-east seaside resort which doubles up as a makeshift detention centre, dreary in the depths of an English winter.

Tanya is offered work in a porn film (she refuses). The local fish and chip shop owner cheats her. But eventually she is befriended by Alfie (Paddy Considine) the manager of an amusement arcade, an ex-con with a hidden past.

Having put her trust in another man who has betrayed her, can Tanya trust Alfie? She feels trapped. Processing the asylum claim seems to go on for ever. In the meantime Tanya and her son wait… □

We made the £20,000 target!

The Ideas for Freedom weekend, 10-11 July, marked the end of our latest fund-raising drive, to raise £20,000 to help us return to the streets as Covid restrictions ease and to prepare for a future office move. In total we raised £20,709. Thanks to John, Colin, Linda, Harold, Jean, John, Liam, Tony, Duncan, Mark, Chris, Tyronne, Ali, Dave, Nik, Anita, John, Andrew, Camila, Michael, Omar, and Stephen. □

Join Workers’ Liberty!

Want to be part of an organised long-haul collective effort to spread the socialist ideas you read in Solidarity, and to link together activities in diverse campaigns and conflicts around that consistent socialist thread? Then take some copies of Solidarity to sell each week, and contact us to discuss joining Workers’ Liberty, the group that produces and sustains this paper. Check it out and contact us via workersliberty.org/joinawl

Caption: Alfie, Artyom and Tanya

Tanya’s "fiancé" at the airport. He is a fake, and never shows up.
BEIS strike from 19 July

Our outsourced worker members at the government Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) will strike for three days, from 19 July. These are workers who’ve had to come into work throughout the pandemic, despite the buildings they service being mostly empty. They’re fighting for increased pay, a bonus for having worked through lockdown, and annual leave entitlement owed from last year.

On 14 July we’ll get the result of our ballot of cleaners and toilet attendants in Royal Parks, who’re resisting potential job cuts and who want party of terms with those who work direct for the Parks. We’re confident of a good result in that ballot, and will discuss what action to take with members. In the Ministry of Justice, we’re waiting for an improved offer from the contractor OCS, which employs security guards. And in the Cabinet Office, our security guard members, employed by Mitie, will decide whether to move to a ballot following Mitie’s next offer.

One of the issues there is Mitie’s refusal to withdraw a threat to use “fire and rehire” tactics. That’s an issue we’re pushing on elsewhere in the civil service. Along with other unions organising in the civil service in Scotland, we’ve written to Nicola Sturgeon demanding the Scottish government commits to writing a clause into its procurement policy that it will not contract to any company unless it commits not using fire and rehire. Nicola Sturgeon personally replies when written to by the unions, but this letter received a bland response from a civil servant. This is a government that claims to be progressive and pro-trade-union, but won’t, as an employer, take the step of banning fire and rehire. We’re making similar demands of the Labour government in Wales and of the Labour administration in City Hall in London.

New ballot at Swansea DVLA

In our dispute at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) complex in Swansea, we’re making preparations for a new ballot, as the original six-month mandate will expire soon. It’ll be a key test for the dispute; I’m confident our reps and activists on the ground will be able to secure a new mandate for action.

After 19 July, we’re expecting a renewed “back to the workplace” push from bosses. We’re reiterating our demands that no-one be forced back, and return to physical workplaces is voluntary. We want workplace-specific risk assessments carried out by union safety reps, looking at issues such as ventilation. We’re also using the opportunity to strengthen union organisation in specific workplaces. Wherever there are buildings that have multiple departments in them, we want reps from those departments to collaborate and set up building-wide safety committees, rather than only focusing on management in their own department.

Organising the unorganised

On Saturday 10 July, I spoke on a panel on “organising the unorganised” at Workers’ Liberty’s Ideas for Freedom event. Since being elected, much of my work has focused on building union strength amongst the out-sourced workers, historically seen by much of the labour movement as too hard to organise. For me, the focus has to be on organising campaigns and disputes around specific demands, not promoting the union as a service provider or insurance policy.

One of the issues there is Mitie’s refusal to withdraw a threat to use “fire and rehire” tactics. That’s an issue this needs to be made an organising issue. The TUC has a campaign demanding full sick pay but it’s extremely notional. The TUC doesn’t coordinate its affiliates to tackle the outsourcing companies on a company wide basis and there is no pressure on the Labour Party to draft bills, or even to ensure Labour councils pay full pay for sickness and isolation.

Unions won’t grow if we aren’t able to turn issues like that into campaigns used to build organisation in the workplace.

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

Litte choice in CWU elections

By a CWU member

Nominations in the posts and telecoms union CWU closed recently, providing further evidence of the sharp decline in the activist base within the organisation.

Four National Officer posts saw candidates returned unopposed. That includes three that were vacant following the retirement of the previous incumbents. All the new occupants are drawn from the HQ bureaucracy.

This is a sad state of affairs given that five-year elections were agreed by a conference, giving rank and file activists the opportunity to challenge incumbents who had previously been elected for life. Such challenges were a regular occurrence in the postal section of the union in the 1990s and 2000s. They also helped democratise the telecoms group, where, prior to the 1995 UCW-NCU merger, appointments had been the norm.

Just 17 candidates are competing for 13 places for the postal executive.

With no organised left, the names are split between supporters of the current General Secretary Dave Ward and his successor as DGS(P) Terry Pullinger. These factions have no real policy differences, both have embraced partnerships with the employer and have no strategy for rebuilding the union at its grassroots. In telecoms the misnamed Left Activist Network controls things via an alliance between supporters of DGS(TFS) Andy Kerr and the right wing clerical grouping, LAN, which is neither left nor active, was created as a vehicle for Kerr’s election bid after he failed to get the nomination of the Broad Left and then split away from it.

The BL, a shadow of its former self, has a couple of its supporters amongst the candidates for the Telecoms and Financial Services Executive (TFSE) posts but, given the way things stack up, they are very unlikely to be elected.

Cosying up to employers to secure substantial grace and favour facilities and return to physical workplaces is extremely notional. The TUC doesn’t coordinate its affiliates to tackle the outsourcing companies on a company wide basis and there is no pressure on the Labour Party to draft bills, or even to ensure Labour councils pay full pay for sickness and isolation.

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• John Moloney is assistant general secretary of the civil service workers’ union PCS, writing here in a personal capacity.
Tax billionaires to rebuild the NHS!

By Alice Hazel

As lockdown measures are further lifted, the NHS is under huge pressure. Numbers of Covid cases admitted to hospital are rising for a third time, and sickness and isolation levels amongst staff are again increasing.

Unlike last year, this pressure is on top of the provision of “normal” services, where, in turn, demand has escalated because of the pandemic. Waiting lists for consultant-led planned hospital treatment stand at a record high of 5.3 million, despite the restrictions on GP referrals over the last year. Last month was also the busiest ever at emergency departments across the country. The NHS two-week target for urgent cancer referrals has not been met since May 2020. All these delays will lead to serious risks for patients and a further spiralling of pressure as patients’ conditions worsen.

Privatisation

The pressure suits the Tories’ privatising agenda. Unmet demand opens the door to the private sector. The government’s recent £10 million deal with private hospitals was supposedly to address NHS waiting list delays. Some of those desperately needing treatment already scrape together funds, including through the hugely rising numbers of crowd-funding schemes to pay for UK based treatment.

Rationing of care is at the heart of the legal establishment of Integrated Care Systems, proposed in the Health and Care Bill, and provides the potential of creating some type of privately funded insurance scheme for healthcare. While the NHS struggles under the weight of demand the Tories continue on the road to disintegrating the service, with the aim of profiting their class.

Instead, the NHS needs an emergency plan and a massive boost of funds to maintain, restore and improve services. As part of this a publicly owned and funded social care system must be built. Any government serious about meeting health needs would also have to address deep rooted poverty and inequality.

Pay the 15%

A good start would be to address pay in the NHS itself, by giving health workers a 15% pay rise. In fact the government have, to date, still failed to respond to the Pay Review Body recommendation, apparently passed to the government in late June but still not made public.

The government response on pay, when it does come, may still see outcry from health-workers. Although the NHS anniversary protests held on 3 July didn’t mobilise healthworkers on the scale of the 2020 protests, work done to build the events received a good response in many workplaces. The money for a substantial pay rise and funds to restore the NHS exists, but action will be needed to secure a victory.

Activists must continue to make the case for taxing the rich to fund a radical reestablishment of the health and social care services.

Police Bill: restart the fight, drag in the labour movement!

By Sacha Ismail

Protests against the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill (“Police Crackdown Bill”) began again in the week of 5 July, but the Tories have rammed it through the final stage of its passage in the House of Commons. It now goes to the House of Lords.

The Bill passed its third reading in the Commons 365-265. The government rushed through the report stage and the third reading in a single day, prompting complaints even from some Tory MPs.

There might be amendments in the Lords, but to significantly change the shape of the Bill, let alone force its withdrawal, will require many more big protests.

A series of big, lively demonstrations earlier this year fizzled out, and ones this week have been relatively small, hundreds in a few places rather than thousands in many as before.

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller campaigners, whose communities the Bill specifically targets in addition to the general powers of repression and harassment it hands to the police, deserve praise for taking the lead in restarting protests. They rallied again in Parliament Square at 1pm on Wednesday 7 July.

The Labour Party bears a large responsibility for the failure of the anti-Bill movement, so far, to mount further. After flirting with abstaining in the early parliamentary stages, street protests pushed it into voting against. But it has done nothing to mobilise people, not even made a public call or advertised protests.

Neither have most trade unions, despite the specific threat the Bill poses to our rights to strike and picket as well as the right to demonstrate.

While mobilising on the streets through every channel available, and organising locally to build up the Kill the Bill movement, we need to push labour movement organisations at every level to promote, build and mobilise for the struggle.

We should aim to force the Bill’s withdrawal or amendment. Even if we fail in those things, a strong movement that continues to assert the right to protest can, in doing so, make the law unworkable.

We must also argue, particularly in the Labour Party, for a clear commitment to repeal the Bill if it becomes law. And for repeal of older laws and parts of laws which have long restricted the right to protest, organise and strike — the foundation on which the Police Bill builds.

Continue and build up the struggle!
We are glad Labour’s Kim Leadbeater won the by-election in Batley and Spen, West Yorkshire, on 1 July. But Keir Starmer’s triumphalist rhetoric (“Labour is back… a fantastic victory”) is divorced from reality.

Labour won 35.3% to the Tories’ 34.4%, its lowest ever percentage in the constituency. In 2017 it won 55.5% and in 2019 42.7%. On this basis the party would lose dozens of seats in a general election.

The trend of Labour losing ground in by-elections continues, despite the Tories’ decade in government and grim Covid record. It may even be that Labour held on partly because some right-wing voters migrated to foul demagogue George Galloway.

Galloway, previously MP in neighbouring Bradford West, pitched to right-wing voters with attacks on Labour’s supposed “wokeness” and right-wing messages on crime and Brexit. In 2017 15.4% supported candidates pitching to the right of the Tories, and this time the four far-right candidates got tiny votes, while the Tories slipped a little.

A few leftish Labour voters, of various backgrounds, may have voted Galloway out of frustration. And Galloway pitched to Muslim voters with a mix of identity politics, international issues including Palestine and Kashmir, and hostility to LGBT rights.

Galloway’s populist mix of right- and “left-wing” stances, chameleon-like political shifting, and willingness to say different and contradictory things to different people served him well. Fresh from running a Scottish election campaign headed by a Tory landowner and advocating a Tory vote where it did not stand, he still had a subtext claiming he stood for “a new working-class politics”!

A lot of media coverage focused on Muslim voters. Solidarity has attacked the idea that all Muslims alienated from Labour are motivated by right-wing positions on issues like LGBT rights. Starmer’s pandering to the Hindu right over Kashmir, which became an issue in the by-election, is a real problem: many Muslims in Batley are of Indian background. (Galloway’s denial of the genocide against the Uyghur people is an even bigger problem!)

However, to pretend that anti-LGBT views are no more prevalent among Muslims than among the wider population is absurd. The issues need untangling honestly and sensitively.

Those who stood up to Galloway’s attacks on trans rights, his homophobic dogwhistles, and anti-LGBT campaigning by his supporters, should be congratulated. The Muslim women in the constituency who spoke out against the right-wing Muslim men attacking Labour deserve solidarity, not airbrushing from the record.

This adds to our pleasure at Labour’s victory over Galloway and the Tories. But Labour did not stand in any sense for working-class politics in the by-election. It did not even stand for strongly democratic liberalism. Its disarray on Kashmir and inopportune issues from the Uyghurs to migrants’ rights to the Police Bill all highlighted the party leadership’s lack of democratic ideals.

Labour once again had very little to say about what it positively stands for. It did poorly because few feel enthusiastic about it. Labour will be “back” only when the Labour left re-groups and pushes the party to take up working-class demands.

Rayner Lysaght, 1941-2021
A veteran Trotskyist and the ferment of the late 60s and early 70s

Critical vote for Sharon Graham
Unite activists should argue for more political activity, not less

Solidarity with Cuba protesters
Those jailed include Trotskyists and other socialists.

Ideas for Freedom 2021
A first “hybrid” event, run both in-person and online