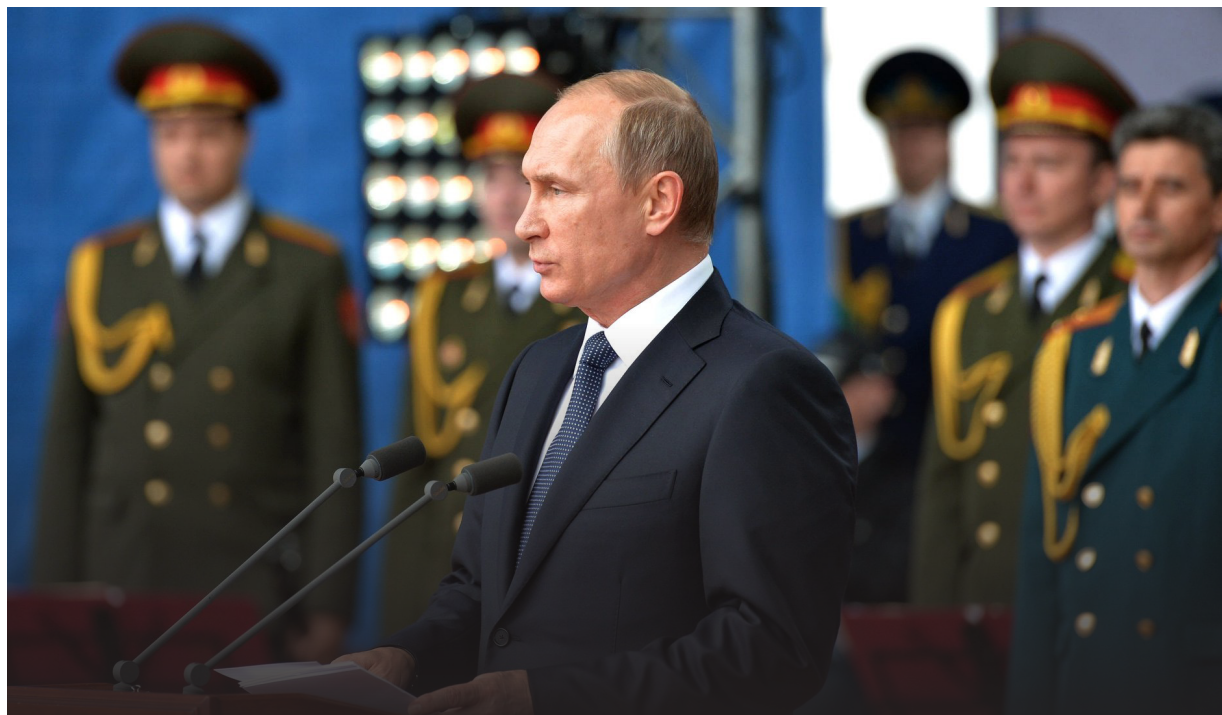


Solidarity

& Workers' Liberty



For social ownership of the banks and industry



Pic: CC BY 4.0 bit.ly/p-army

RUSSIA: HANDS OFF UKRAINE!

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Russia: hands off Ukraine!



If Russia invades Ukraine – as looks increasingly likely – it will be a continuation and escalation of the regional-imperialist project pursued by Putin since he came to power in 2000. It will constitute an assault on Ukraine's right to national self-determination.

Over the past two decades Putin has coupled increasingly authoritarian domestic policies, aimed at stifling any display of internal opposition to his rule, with an expansionist and imperialist foreign policy, aimed at bringing neighbouring ex-USSR independent states back into Russia's sphere of influence.

A fivefold increase in the price of oil and gas – Russia's main exports – in the early years of his rule allowed Putin to massively increase spending on Russia's military forces, lay the foundations for a "strong" (i.e. authoritarian) state, and take on the role of a regional economic superpower.

Since then Russian troops have engaged in full-scale military conflicts in Chechnya, Dagestan, other regions of the North Caucasus, and Georgia (as well as, further afield, Syria). Russia has also intervened, in different ways, to support local regimes loyal to Moscow – such as in Belarus and, more recently, in Kazakhstan.

Expansion

Russia now has over a dozen military bases outside of its borders, on the territories of ex-USSR states. It is building military bases in Madagascar, Eritrea, Sudan, Mozambique and the Central African Republic.

Within this framework of Russia returning to a role akin to its nineteenth-century role of "the gendarme of Europe" (i.e. a reactionary autocracy which crushed popular uprisings in order to maintain its domination of neighbouring states), Ukraine has had a particular significance.

It was home to Russia's only warm-water port (Sevastopol, leased to Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union). It was the country through which Russia exported over a third of its gas exports. And, as in Soviet times, exports of coal and heavy-industry output from the Donbass played a key role in the Russian economy.

Coupled with its military and economic importance, Ukraine was also a country which Putin believed had no reason to exist as an independent state.

According to Putin, Russians and Ukrainians are really one people, currently separated as a result of various historical misfortunes, and Lenin was

seriously wrong to have supported the creation of an independent Ukraine state.

This is a view repeatedly expressed by Putin over the years, but especially so more recently – such as in the Russian "Direct Line" television programme of June 2021, and in a subsequent long "historical" essay published the following month.

Russian imperialist expansion and a refusal to recognise Ukraine's right to exist provide the context for Putin's approach to Ukraine in recent years.

After Ukraine's "Orange Revolution" of 2004 – which forced a re-run of that year's presidential election, resulting in the pro-Russian Yanukovich being defeated by the pro-Western Yushchenko – Putin began to provide financial support and training for Yanukovich's Party of the Regions, and for other pro-Russian organisations.

Partly due to that support, Yanukovich won the 2010 presidential election. But his decision in late 2013 to opt for an economic treaty with Russia, reversing his previous position of signing one with the EU, triggered mass protests throughout Ukraine, forcing him to flee the country in early 2014.

Crimea

The adoption of a pro-Western orientation by Ukraine, coupled with the ousting of a pro-Russian president by a popular uprising – which might set an example for Russia! – was anathema to Putin.

Putin's response was swift and brutal. Russia annexed Crimea, ensuring its control over Sevastopol, and encouraged, planned, armed and financed fake "popular" uprisings in the Donbass, backed up by Russian troops on the ground when they were at risk of defeat.

The Crimea and Sevastopol were quickly declared "federal subjects", i.e. part of Russia itself. The Donetsk and Lugansk "people's republics" have been pulled through a slower process of integration, e.g. introduction of the rouble, issuing of Russian passports, and contesting of local (heavily-controlled) "elections" by Russian political parties.

The consequences of Russian military aggression against Ukraine to date have been 14,000 deaths and 1.9 million internally displaced Ukrainians – refugees from the fighting, or driven out of their homes. Another four million Ukrainians have left the country to find work abroad.

In the Crimea and the "people's republics" the last eight years have been



ones of political repression, economic and ecological decline, and a blurring of any distinction between politicians and organised criminality.

Why Putin chose late 2021 to ramp up the threat of a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine is unclear. It may be that, following the Taliban's seizure of power in Afghanistan, he sees the West as weak and unwilling to push back.

That would fit in with Putin's overall view of the West: He sees it as in long-term decline, hollowed out from within by its acceptance of LGBT+ rights, feminism, and multiculturalism. This social conservatism provides a bridge between Putin and parties of the far right in Europe, a bridge which also acts as a conduit for financial support.

"Fascist coup?"

A very different explanation for the ramping-up of military tensions between Russia and Ukraine can be found in the pages of the Morning Star and on the website of the Stop the War Coalition. But it is an explanation which is completely wrong.

They have revived the 2014 narrative of a "fascist coup" in Ukraine, neo-Nazi terror, "anti-fascist" uprisings, and an aggressive NATO which is intent on securing Ukrainian membership and which has already stationed troops in the country.

But Ukraine first raised the issue of NATO membership in 2008. Fourteen years later it is still not a member (although it has the status of "Enhanced Opportunities Partner"). Far from "inventing" the risk of a Russian invasion to pull in Ukraine, NATO has deliberately kept Ukraine at arm's length.

NATO troops stationed in Ukraine? About a hundred members of the Florida National Guard, stationed near the border with Poland, who provide training to Ukrainian troops.

More troops belonging to NATO countries stationed in Ukraine? The UK has sent 30 (thirty) soldiers as additional trainers. But a hundred Florida National Guardsmen and 30 British sol-

diers are not a serious military presence.

The US has threatened sanctions if Russia invades, but not troops. Tory Defence Minister Ben Wallace has been equally explicit: "Ukraine is not a member of NATO, so it's highly unlikely anyone is going to send troops into Ukraine to challenge Russia. We shouldn't kid people on that we would."

The *Morning Star* and Stop the War Coalition narrative is so far removed from reality that if Russia invaded

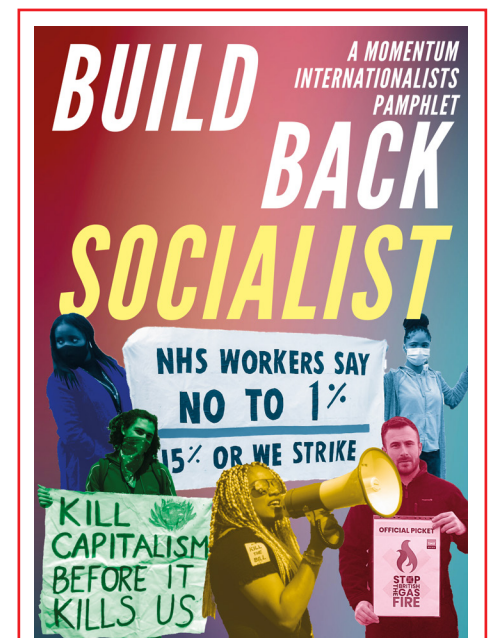
Ukraine tomorrow, they would be calling a picket of the US Embassy in London.

NATO

Socialists oppose the existence of NATO. Our answer to the threat of international conflict is not the creation of bigger and better armed blocs by the Big Powers, nor reliance on or appeals to such blocs, but the mobilisation of the working classes against their own ruling classes.

Military conflict does not suspend the need for class struggle but makes it more vital than ever.

That is why socialists must now campaign for: Russian Hands off Ukraine! Defend Ukraine's Right to National Self-Determination! Solidarity with the Workers' and Socialist Movements in Ukraine and Russia! □



Social inequality has deepened the Covid pandemic; the pandemic has deepened inequality. This new pamphlet, from Momentum Internationalists, offers ideas for the labour movement to regroup and fight back on socialist lines. □

momentuminternationalists.org

Sudan: anti-coup movement keeps surging

By Mohan Sen

The fifteenth round of mass demonstrations against the military coup in Sudan took place on 24 January. At least 76 people have been killed by the army since the 25 October coup, and over 2,000 wounded.

There is a kind of stalemate in which the coup regime is able to maintain its position and carry out extremely brutal repression, but the anti-coup movement keeps surging up too.

Last week, after seven people were killed during demonstrations on 17 January, the Khartoum State Coordination of local “[resistance committees](#)” called a two-day [general strike](#), participated in by a wide range of professional and workers’ organisations.

Doctors, very important to the democracy struggle and to monitoring and exposing the regime’s repression, took strike action targeting military-run facilities and non-essential services in other facilities.

Many reports suggest the resistance committees are playing an increasingly important role. On 7 January Sudanese

activist Marine Alneel told left US media outlet Democracy Now!:

“We’re seeing on a lot of international media outlets that these protests are being called for by the Forces of Freedom and Change or the Sudanese Professionals Association [who were central in earlier battles for democracy but have lost influence], that is far from the reality. In reality, the entities that are leading this movement are the neighbourhood resistance committees, which have developed mainly in 2019 to help organise the protests in neighbourhoods, in different neighbourhoods, and are now the leading entity announcing the protests and are actually the voice of the people.”

An interesting [article](#) focused on the resistance committees by the SWP’s Middle East expert, Anne Alexander, cites the existence of over 5,000 such bodies, widely spread across the country.



The role of grassroots popular organisations and independent unions in Sudan’s democracy struggle poses big questions about what kind of movement it will take to defeat the military, and where that movement goes next if the coup is defeated.

We must do our best to learn more while we make solidarity.

Among the many activists arrested by the coup regime in the last week is longstanding women’s rights campaigner Amira Osman. Under Omar al-Bashir’s military-Islamist regime, in 2013, Osman was arrested for refusing to wear a hijab; in 2002 she was convicted and fined for wearing trousers. After Bashir’s overthrow in 2019, the transitional government repealed the law used against Osman and other women, though

other legal restrictions remain.

Women have played a prominent role in the struggle against the coup, and the military has used rape and sexual assault against female protesters. If the military wins, an Islamist-influenced regime seems likely.

Many Sudanese activists have commented on the coup which seized power in Burkina Faso on Sunday (23 January). This follows 2021 coups in Mali, Chad

and Guinea – as well as of course in Myanmar. The outcome in Sudan may have much wider consequences for the spread of authoritarianism, particularly if it is a powerful popular movement with strong working-class elements that defeats the coup.

Foreign governments that do not straightforwardly support Sudan’s military – as Russia and regional powers including Saudi Arabia, UAE and Israel do – continue to hedge their bets and promote accommodation to the coup. On 17 January, as the military slaughtered protesters, Germany called for “all stakeholders [!] to refrain from the use of excessive force during demonstrations”. □

- Sign this statement of solidarity: bit.ly/su-sol
- Pass a motion in your union branch, Labour Party etc
- Take a solidarity photo and put on social media; tweet with #SudanCoup and #SudanRevolution

Omicron: brake rush back to workplaces



Covid-19

By Rhodri Evans

Probably as a “populist” ploy to save Boris Johnson’s job, or failing that to make things easier for his successor, the government has announced the end from 27 January of all mask mandates, of all requirements to show NHS Covid passes, and of work-from-home guidance.

Civil service bosses are pushing for return to offices. How far and fast that will go, and whether other bosses will do likewise, remains to be seen.

Work-from-home has many downsides, not least for union organisation; but unions can and should resist hasty return-to-work, at least until new risk assessments and safety adjustments are done for the more-transmissible Omicron variant.

The fall in case-count which

started in early January has paused since 16 January. Hospital admissions are still decreasing, but slowly.

The count of deaths “within 28 days of a positive Covid test” has levelled off (at the equivalent of 90-odd thousand a year) after declining mid-January; the count of deaths “with Covid on the death certificate” has never risen much in the Omicron wave, but remains high (equivalent of about 50,000 a year).

The indications from other countries where Omicron hit early (South Africa, Netherlands, Norway) are that the government’s haste will probably slow the ebbing of Omicron, rather than unleash a big new surge. But current rates show the virus still far from settling down to be “like flu” or to be a worrisome but stable background factor.

The chance of dying from Covid if you catch it is now much reduced for the vaccinated. It is in the same league as the chance of dying when you get flu (in a bad flu sea-

son). But that is not negligible.

Omicron-Covid is different from flu in being much more transmissible, being highly transmissible before you get symptoms, and often producing few or no symptoms. And, with high rates of Omicron spreading across the world, there will be a new variant soon.

All that mandates vigilance. *Solidarity* does not call for indefinite full lockdowns, or for long school closures like Uganda (22 months) and some other countries.

We oppose the *hasty* lifting of curbs, and call for long-term social measures to help curb the virus:

- Full isolation and sick pay for all
- Boost the NHS and social care
- Workers’ control of workplace safety
- A crash housing programme
- Requisition Big Pharma to rapidly produce and distribute jabs worldwide. □



Upcoming meetings

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

Sunday 30 January, 2pm: “Striking Women: Struggles and Strategies of South Asian Women Workers from Grunwick to Gate Gourmet” – London Socialist Feminist Reading Group

Wednesday 2 February, 2pm: What is democratic centralism? – SOAS Workers’ Liberty

Sunday 13 February 11am: How to stop the next pandemic – Ecosocialist reading group

Sunday 13 February 6:30pm: Divisions in Ireland, 100 years on – Workers’ Liberty online forum

Sunday 13 March 11am: Green bans – Ecosocialist reading group

For our calendars of events, updated details, zoom links, more meetings and resources, see workersliberty.org/events or scan QR code □



Campism runs up against reality



Antidoto

By Jim Denham

The *Morning Star* divides the world into two camps, labelled “progressive” and “imperialist”. From that all else flows.

In any international dispute or crisis, the paper’s stance is determined by which camp the participants fall into. Usually, this is easy: China, Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua are all “progressive” and in the case of the first two, “socialist”. Despite the tremendous anti-imperialist opportunities opened up by Brexit (so the MS thinks), the UK has yet to break free and establish an independent foreign policy.

Until recently, Russia was a bit of a problem, especially as the Russian Communist Party doesn’t like Putin. But as China and Russia have developed friendly relations, a similar geo-political outlook and increasingly close economic relations, the MS sees Russia more as in the “progressive” camp.

Obviously, such imperialistic (sometimes “western”) concepts as “human rights” (the words usually surrounded by quotation-marks), independent

trade unions and free elections do not figure in these calculations.

So, for most of the time the job of the *Morning Star*’s International Editor Steve Sweeney is a pretty easy one: recycling the press releases and statements of regimes and organisations that fall into the “progressive” camp and describing the other side as warmongers or (in the case of Ukraine), “fascists.”

Sometimes, situations don’t immediately fit neatly into the scheme. The Belarus crisis of 2020-21 caused the *Morning Star* some initial problems. Once the Kremlin came out for Alexander Lukashenko, however, the choice was made for the MS. The plight of the migrants driven to the Polish border by Lukashenko’s forces added an anti-EU dimension that the paper milked for all it was worth.

A new and equally complex situation arose as Kazakhstan erupted into chaos in early January, with massive protests against food and energy price hikes, and protesters demanding free elections. There was also vicious in-fighting between factions around the former president Nursultan Nazarbayev and around around his chosen successor Kasseyim-Jomart Tokayev (as far as can be judged, both equally brutal and corrupt).



The *Morning Star*, in an editorial on 10 January, acknowledged that “the collective property of the Kazakh people has been appropriated, with great wealth concentrated in the hands of a corrupt plutocracy distinguished by conspicuous consumption... these people naturally have a weather eye open to any threat to their newly acquired wealth and consequently have much of it invested in the City of London and the luxury property market.”

If that wasn’t bad enough, the editorial noted that after a 2011 demonstration for higher wages was put down with “deadly force” by the regime, then-president Nazarbayev hired none other than Tony Blair to “polish the country’s international image.” Not much chance, then, of Kazakhstan fitting into the “progressive” camp, you’d have thought.

Except for one little problem – or maybe two. At the request of Tokayev, Russia (via its Collective Security Treaty Organisation, the CSTO) sent in troops and tanks, dubbed a “peacekeeping mission”. That seems to have spurred Beijing to come out in support for Tokayev, with President Xi publicly praising efforts to put down the protests.

The Chinese government its state-run media pledged support for the Russian mission and called for deeper coordination with Moscow in Central Asia and globally.

This threw the *Morning Star* into total confusion. Its 10 January editorial, having started out by denouncing the brutality and corruption of the Kazakh regime, closed by repeating the claims of the regime, echoed by China and Russia, of Islamist plots and US plans for a so-called “colour revolution”.

The editorial ended in almost incomprehensible incoherence: “Unless it becomes clear that the organised working class is driving these events, its full interests are not likely to be completely served in a situation in which external forces appear more invested in the stability of the government than any other outcome.”

And if you can work out what that means, you’re doing better than me. □

Has someone kidnapped Eric Lee?



Letter

I read last week’s “Eric Lee” column and was increasingly alarmed. Eric Lee has clearly been seized by a gang of ultra-left maniacs, or maybe some stone throwing anarchists, and they’ve taken over producing his column. Because the real Eric Lee could never have written, “No one is working harder to get Trump back into the White House than the leadership of the Democrats.” And that, “the ‘moderate’ Joe Biden was supposed to ... bridge the partisan divide... Things didn’t work out that way.”

And last week “Eric” even noted, “Biden’s failure to enact one bit of legislation that unions desperately need... The kind of spectacular growth unions saw under FDR in the 1930s is not being repeated under Biden.”

This can’t possibly be the same Eric Lee who wrote an impassioned polemic against me arguing for a Biden vote (*Solidarity* 568, 21 October 2020, just before the US Presidential election). This real Eric Lee wrote, “Biden needs the support of the unions. He

and the Democrats will benefit from a much stronger trade union movement, and if he wins the PRO Act will become law. Trade unionists in America understand this... their support for Biden is unanimous.”

And the real Eric Lee, back in 2020 eagerly claimed that it was really important to vote Democrat because, “The passage of [the pro-union PRO Act] will do much to revitalise the American labour movement, by recruiting millions of new members in a way that hasn’t happened since the 1930s.”

The real Eric Lee was guaranteeing the passing of the PRO Act under a Biden administration and mass recruitment to the labour movement. Some of us thought that was probably nonsense, designed to encourage the gullible, and were even rude enough to say so.

Nevertheless, Eric Lee has the right to his freedom and to present right-wing polemics in *Solidarity*. Whoever is holding Eric Lee must release him immediately! □

Mark Osborn,
South London

Converting TV to the US model?

By Len Glover

The Minister of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Nadine Dorries, has proposed scrapping the BBC licence fee. She backtracked quickly, but maybe not for long. The BBC charter is up for renewal in 2027.

Dorries talked demagogically about old age pensioners not longer being “carted off to jail” for not paying their TV licence (but in fact the government itself confirmed last January, no-one was in prison for non-payment).

Even the strongest of the BBC’s supporters would agree that the Corporation needs to change to adapt to online streaming, pay-on demand, channels such as Sky, and the end of the old BBC/ITV duopoly.

The best guess, though, is that the Tories want some form of advertisement-supported programming, with all the attendant problems of threats to independence, reluctance to screen anything controversial, unwillingness to try new programmes and genres. Anyone who has ever watched US TV for any length of time will know about the ubiquitous “Now for a word from our sponsors...”

One alternative to the licence fee is a digital income tax. In Finland, a public broadcasting tax of 2.5% is levied on taxable income above 14,000 euros and up to a maximum of 163 euros p.a.

Oversight

Most important is that the BBC’s funding, in whatever form, is overseen and regulated by an independent body with full consultation rights viewers’ organisations. Trade union reps from Bectu and other organisations must have a seat at the table.

There are two main complementary tasks, to fight the Tories’ neo-liberal onslaught on the BBC and the media in general and to put forward concrete proposals for the BBC to adapt, as I discussed in *Solidarity* 536: see also the Media Reform Coalition (mediareform.org.uk) and petition on the Bectu union website (bit.ly/bec-b).

We must save public service broadcasting but at the same time it must also become more open, democratic, accountable and representative of the people who pay for it. □

Strife on Mars: the sexy M&M controversy



**Women's
Fightback**

By Katy Dollar

Fox News has opened up a new front in the culture war. Tucker Carlson has criticised the recent M&M redesign, noting that “the brown M&M has, quote, ‘transitioned from high stilettos to lower block heels’ ... [L]ess sexy. That’s progress.”

Mars announced that they would be introducing a more “inclusive” redesign of the mascots, announcing the changes as part of a “global commitment to creating a world where everyone feels they belong and society is inclusive.”

Red is learning to be a better friend and Orange is learning to cope with his anxiety. But most of the attention is di-

rected at the femme green and brown M&Ms.

Instead of wearing her signature knee highs, Green sports a pair of trainers that showcase her “effortless confidence” and “empowerment as a strong female”. The brown M&M now wears a pair of pumps that are at a “sensible” height.

The sexual world of M&Ms is a murky place before you even factor in Tucker Carlson. Clearly our anthropomorphised confectionery have a sexual side – they flirt with each other and with humans. But Red’s attempts at romance have spectacularly backfired. There are two separate ads where he is caught in bed with a woman, only to discover his sexual partner wants to eat him. In one ad, the green M&M lies on a bed covered in rose petals and tiny M&Ms, a femme chocolate starring in a pastiche of women in chocolate commercials,

eating herself. Meta. Green is often depicted stripping off for “photoshoots” (like for Sports Illustrated) and “video”. Sadly the marketing team have not decided a consistent line on whether her green sugar shell is her clothes or her skin, so these have body horror overtones.

Stereotypes

Portrayals of women in advertisements have a significant impact on the maintenance of gender stereotypes in society. The Green M&M swimsuit issues of *Sports Illustrated*, the hyper-sexualised lady chocolates, are all part of that. But clearly Mars are not motivated by “empowerment” or making an “inclusive world”.

The marketing campaign was clearly designed to provoke an anti-woke backlash. Shock Marketing tactics reliant on right-wing outrage are increasingly common. Controversial activities

will spark interest in a wide population of readers and word will spread more rapidly than the traffic that typical news stories achieve. M&Ms have been debated on TV, newspapers and each of the major social media platforms.

In 2021, *Time* magazine said Carlson “may be the most powerful conservative in America”. When he says M&Ms have been hijacked by woke liberal elite and at the same time strongly implies he wants to fuck your chocolate treats. Mars have hit the publicity sweet spot where outrage meets piss-take. □

From Munich to Geneva



Eric Lee

By Eric Lee

This week I wasted two hours of my life on a terrible new film called *Munich: The Edge of War*. It is based on a best-selling novel by Robert Harris.

Now the problem with Robert Harris’ novels is that they are often not very good. I know this because I have read most of them. He usually starts with an intriguing idea and then goes off to have a nap. Or something. The books are disappointing. One of the silliest revolved around the revelation that Soviet dictator Josef Stalin secretly had... a child! But of course Stalin had several children, none of whom featured in this story. A minor point.

Harris’ novel *Munich* tells the story of two young men, one German and one English, who were friends at Oxford. In 1938, they team up to prevent the outbreak of the Second World War by stopping Chamberlain from signing an accord with Hitler. (Spoiler alert: they failed;

the Second World War did happen.) The story of Chamberlain’s doomed attempt to reach a peace agreement with the Nazi dictator is well known. It remains widely criticised to this day not only for the British prime minister’s naïveté, but also for the fact that the fate of Czechoslovakia was being decided at a conference at which the Czechoslovaks were not present. They were not invited.

Chamberlain has become the poster boy for disastrous policies – of which appeasement was one – and his example was cited by a former Tory minister last week who

was angry at Boris Johnson.

The problem with the Netflix film was not only that the plot was idiotic, and the acting wooden (except for consistently good performance by Jeremy Irons), but the timing.

Timing

Because this film premiered during the week that the Americans and Russians were meeting in Geneva to discuss the future of Ukraine. With no Ukrainians anywhere in sight.

The fate of Ukraine, like the fate of Czechoslovakia eight decades ago, was being decided by others. And not only Ukraine: Putin is demanding that countries like Georgia be blocked from Nato membership, and that actual Nato members like Bulgaria and Romania lose any protection that the alliance may have given them. Poland, the Baltic states and others are watching Putin’s next moves with understandable concern.

The film ends, as you would expect, with a title card summing up what happened next. I imagined that it would mention that the gift of Czechoslovakia did not suppress Hitler’s appetite for aggression, leading

eventually to the catastrophe of another world war. That didn’t happen. Instead, the producers decided to put this on our screens, summing things up:

“The extra time brought by the Munich agreement enabled Britain and her allies to prepare for war and ultimately led to Germany’s defeat.”

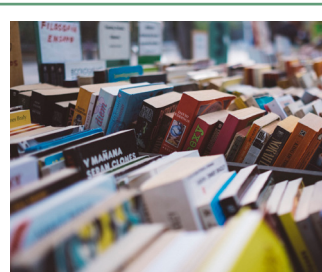
In other words, appeasement was part of the process that led to victory. Well done, Mr. Chamberlain.

In reality, the “extra time” gave all sides, not just the good guys, time to prepare for war. The Nazis prepared rather better than the rest.

Last week I watched the American and Russia diplomats convening in Geneva’s Hotel President Wilson to decide the future not only of Ukraine, but of all the countries Vladimir Putin believes belong under Russian domination.

I was not alone in thinking about the Munich conference of 1938 and its real results – and not the dangerous and dishonest message of this film. □

• Eric Lee is the founder editor of Labour Start, writing here in a personal opinion column



Second hand books!

Workers’ Liberty is selling hundreds of second hand-books – politics, but also fiction, history and much more. Visit bit.ly/2h-books for the current stock and prices, and to order. □

Hasty and dilettante?



Letter

Paul Vernadsky’s letter ([Solidarity 620](#)) on my [review](#) of the RS21 climate pamphlet contains just one substantive criticism: he objects to the use of one word in an article which is 2,000 words in the full, online, [version](#). He extrapolates from there to the suggestion that my review (of a book that he even hasn’t read) is “[un]serious” and a “hasty, dilettante, and unconvincing evaluation”. I hope the irony is not lost on anyone. To try and move us on to a serious discussion of the substantive issues I plan an article for a forthcoming issue reviewing the use of the concept of “metabolism” in climate politics more broadly. □

Stuart Jordan,
South London



Activist Agenda

On 5 February, the Uyghur Solidarity Campaign’s regular 5th-of-the-month protest at the Chinese Embassy (Portland Place, London W1B 1JL) will coincide with the 25th anniversary of the Ghulja Massacre, a violent suppression of Uyghur protest in the city of Ghulja, in east Turkestan, in 1997, and (almost) with the Beijing government’s showcase opening of the Winter Olympics.

Labour Left Internationalists is organising for the Labour Party women’s conference on 19-20 March (deadline for delegates and motions 11 Feb), with a priority suggestion for a motion on the police and other adaptable text on trans rights and the Borders Bill. □

• Links and info for these and other campaigns, suggestions for labour movement motions and petitions: workersliberty.org/agenda

Cells, complexity, and chaos



Environment

By Stuart Jordan

Paul Nurse's *What is Life?* is a useful primer in modern biology, especially for Marxists who are trying to get to grips how the word "metabolism" helps illuminate questions of ecology.

He starts with explaining that cells are much more than the basic building block of life. Cells are "the simplest thing that embodies all the signature characteristics of life" (ch 9). Cells, like all lifeforms, are "bounded physical entities separate from, but in communication with, their environments". Each cell is surrounded by a lipid membrane that is two molecules across.

Cells absorb materials and energy from outside the lipid membrane to metabolise complex carbon-based molecules. The increasing complex order within the cell is matched by increasing disorder pumped out as waste. "[This barrier] explains why life-forms can successfully resist the overall drive of the universe towards disorder and chaos" (ch. 3).

Microorganisms (bacteria, archaea, and some fungi and algae) exist as single cells. All the cells in a multicellular organism operate on the same basis.

We tend to think of cells as being

very small but cells take many forms: a hen's egg yolk is one cell, the neuron cells in our spine measure over a metre in length.

The proliferation of complex molecules that takes place within a cell is the basis for the proliferation of complex multicellular life. The similarities in the way that all cells divide and produce ATP (stores of energy) and ribosomes (complex engines of production within the cell) suggest the core information in the genes of all living beings derives from a common ancestor and has been preserved for over three billion years (ch. 6). Nurse offers extremely accessible explanations of evolution by natural selection and the biochemical processes that generate complexity within cells. Interestingly, Nurse draws many parallels between the production of complex carbon polymers in the cell and the way human labour transforms the materials of nature. He describes how enzymes can be coordinated into "complex interactive series" or "metabolic pathways" that are comparable to "assembly lines in a factory".

He describes the cell as "a chemical and physical machine". He even describes how the tiny protein structures that produce ATP ("life's universal energy source") look "a bit like the turbines in electric power stations".

Cells can only carry out this work of complexity generation because they are able to detect and respond to internal and external changes. "It is only

by managing information that the cell can impose order on the extreme complexity of its operations" (ch 6).

A living being's ability to perceive reality imparts an evolutionary advantage, hence the evolution of sense organs. It is worth considering this insight in light of Engels' now widely accepted notion of gene-culture coevolution. The increased dexterity of the human hand and hence the manipulation of nature, meant our ancestors "arrived at the point where they had something to say to each other. Necessity created the organ; the undeveloped larynx of the ape was slowly but surely transformed... to pronounce one articulate sound after another." (*Transition from Ape to Man*) There was an evolutionary advantage from imparting knowledge to others.

Social metabolism

Since then, our species' social metabolism has greatly enhanced our ability to perceive reality through the development of specialist sensing technology and scientific technique. The discovery of the manifold uses of things is the work of history, but capitalism's technological dynamism and the perfecting of the scientific method has radically expanded our understanding of reality. We are now able to perceive the microscopic, the astronomical, the movements of the biosphere. We can uncover the secrets of the deep past and make accurate predictions about

the future. As Nobel Prize winning physiologist Baruch Bloom says "the mysteries of nature and our desire to know them are without bounds".

In the penultimate chapter, Nurse turns his attention to what modern biology has discovered about our current epoch of planetary ecocide. Like many scientists, he lacks the social science to indict capitalism for this ecocide, but his list of horrors including species extinction, climate change and soil degradation should give any thoughtful reader pause to consider the profound social transformations we need to tackle these problems.

His commentary points to the socio-political limits that capitalist priorities impose on knowledge generation. We do not, for instance, know why we are witnessing a rapid decline in insect population or what the implications are for human civilisation. Human and technological resources have been diverted elsewhere.

Nurse's book inspires wonder at the complexity of life and our ability to understand it. But ultimately there is a note of tragedy. The capitalist social metabolism that has allowed us to uncover these mysteries of nature also prevents us from acting on that knowledge.

This contradiction will only be resolved by "staring at reality squarely". By popularising the insights of 21st century biology, Nurse helps us in this task. □

"Falling membership is good", says Rachel Reeves

By Colin Foster

In a tirade to the *Financial Times* (19 January), shadow chancellor Rachel Reeves has declared: "Membership in my constituency [Leeds West] is falling and that's a good thing". The people leaving, she told the FT, "should never have joined the Labour party. They never shared our values".

Queried about this in Leeds West, Reeves responded by slamming members (presumably the remaining members, majority right-wing at the Leeds West meeting) for not turning out sufficiently to campaign for the May local government elections.

Polls now show Labour around 10% ahead of the Tories. This increases pressure on Labour's leaders to consolidate by campaigning for solid policies, rather than just deploring "competence".

Yet Reeves has hyped up Keir Starmer's oft-repeated claim that Labour is "pro-business", and denounced free

movement. Starmer's officials are bringing to Labour's National Executive plans to deprive local parties of say in "longlisting" nominees for [parliamentary selections](#), and delete the requirement that all nominees from affiliated unions must be longlisted.

Longlists would be decided by regional and national officials instead.

A locally-based Selection Committee would then decide the shortlist to go to hustings (and those Selection Committees, which currently do longlisting too, already carry a National Executive representative with right of veto). But the move opens a wide way for officialdom to exclude candidates with local support from even being considered. For the Hartlepool by-election in May 2021, officials drew up a longlist of just one candidate.

The plan has been defended on the grounds that it speeds selection procedures and will be better for women, but the reduction of democratic control does neither.

The January National Executive was promised sight of the Forde Inquiry findings on the 850-page ["leaked report"](#) of April 2020 on Labour HQ misdeeds. That might have put the Labour right wing on the back foot. But circulation of the findings has been delayed yet further.

Reeves has promised to curb public spending (though allowing for "climate investment") and has [repudiated](#) "a big swathe of" (or any?) nationalisation.

However, James Meadway (economic adviser to John McDonnell to 2019; previously Socialist Workers Party then Counterfire) has [praised](#) Reeves's economics as a positive move showing "the impact that Corbynism [has] had on Labour's economic thinking". The best bit, he says, is about ["the everyday economy"](#).

This "everyday economy", for Reeves, is "schools, nurseries, care homes, warehouses, food processing centres, supermarkets, hotels, restaurants and hospitals, utilities, broadband... our

public service infrastructure", so the non-everyday (?) would be manufacturing, agriculture, extractive industries, and finance. (How food-processing and restaurants get into "everyday" while other processing industries are out, I don't know). Her argument seems to be that economic policy has focused too much on boosting shiny high-tech manufacturing, and neglected infrastructure.

So she's for better workers' rights in those infrastructural sectors? For better NHS pay? For taking social care into the public sector? Nothing about that.

Her key idea is more "local procurement" (presumably by councils: but where do they get the money to procure those supplies?). In Brexit mode, Meadway praises this as "post-EU" advance.

Labour's conferences 2019 and 2021 passed much economic and workers' rights policy, inadequate in our view but a better start. Demand Labour's leaders respect conference policy! □

Corbynism, pacts, and “left parties”



Debate

By Martin Thomas

Over the last few months we’ve carried [reviews](#), critical to one degree or another, of my booklet *Corbynism: What Went Wrong?*, and a [response](#) by me to some of the reviews.

Unrepresented so far are the criticisms voiced by Michael Chessum in two debates with me on the booklet, at our Ideas for Freedom weekend event in July 2021 and at Sun and Socialism in August 2021. Michael’s views will be published in his own book on Corbynism, *This Is Only The Beginning*, but are not available in writing yet.

Here, from the in-person debates, I offer a first sketch of his criticisms (as I understand them, no doubt imperfectly), and a response. Michael’s book will be published [later in 2022](#). Michael sees my argument about the pivotal role of the Stalinist-hued Leader’s Office in the running-aground of Corbynism as misplaced. Central, he contends, is that the Corbyn left was “the most Labourite” of Labour lefts over the decades, in the sense of being the most narrowly focused on electoralism and hopes of gains through Parliament.

In the time between the crash of 2008-9 and Corbyn’s leadership victory of 2015, strong “social movements” had developed. Those were diffused and neutralised through absorption into Corbyn Labourism.

Proportional representation

Our best hope for advance in the coming years is the creation of a sizeable left-of-Labour party like the various left parties of Western Europe, which can give the left an audible voice in politics. To get that, we need to win proportional representation in parliamentary elections. Immediately, therefore, we should favour a temporary “Progressive Alliance” between Labour and the Lib-Dems, a one-off pact to get a coalition to legislate PR. After that, regular political competition can resume.

Some form of proportional (or more proportional) representation (maybe via STV in multi-member constituencies, as in many countries, to keep open accountability of MPs to local parties) is indeed more democratic than First Past The Post (FPTP). To advocate a pact with the Lib-Dems, and focus on PR as the central issue in the next general election, is another matter.

Michael has been a critic of Corbynism from the left. Oddly, though, he now points to a right-ish, or at least less-left, option in the Labour spec-

trum: support for a pact with the Lib-Dems. As with old-fashioned Communist Party schemes in some countries (though with different motives!), direct socialist and working-class politics are projected as coming into their own at a later “stage”, after the first “stage” is “completed” (PR for Michael, “advanced democracy” or such for the old CPs).

Imagine, however, a posture in the next general election. On the NHS, on anti-union laws and worker rights, and on much more, we’d say: we have proposals on these issues, but they must wait! For now, the priority is pushing a Labour-Lib-Dem pact on PR issue to victory.

Ed Davey, the current Lib-Dem leader, was a contributor to the free-market Lib-Dem Orange Book in 2004, and a loyal minister in the Tory-Lib-Dem coalition government of 2010-5. Even with Starmer, it will take a further push of Labour to the right, and advice to the unions and the Labour membership to hold back, to cement that PR-focused pact with the Lib-Dems.

Compliance

And then it may well not “work”. Many Labour voters will not be persuaded by a PR focus to rally to the Lib-Dems, and many Lib-Dem voters will not comply with a “pact” recommendation to go Labour.

FPTP makes progress more difficult for small parties, especially for small parties which have a wide geographic spread, to “take off”. But it is only one of many factors. The SNP went from 2% of Scotland’s Westminster vote in 1964 to 30% in 1974 and then a landslide victory in 2015 within an FPTP system. France Insoumise has done all right electorally without a PR system.

Parties like France Insoumise and Die Linke build on political constituencies developed by large old Communist Parties such as Britain never had. The Socialist Party in the Netherlands or the PTB in Belgium have done relatively well through the work of large Maoist groups which shifted to social democracy (rather than to the Greens as in Germany) and could take over ground established by Communist Parties which had dissolved or faded.

If such a “left party” could be developed in Britain, then it would represent the worst wing of Corbynism, not the best. It would rally the more electoralist, reformist, nationalistic, and populist strands of the Corbynite movement. It would probably have scant democracy. France Insoumise, for example, has no actual membership, only subscribers to an e-mail list built up around its leader, Jean-Luc Mélenchon. A case can be made that Marxists in Germany, for example, while they are few in number,

may do best to develop themselves as a wing inside Die Linke; but probably a Die-Linke-type “left party” in Britain any time soon would (like Arthur Scargill’s SLP, the best attempt at such so far) offer a narrower scope for Marxist intervention than a Labour Party, even in poor condition, which nonetheless retained links with the unions.

Part of Michael’s case in our July debate was that the revolutionary left had failed, in an epoch-defining way, in 2008-15. Thus his focusing his hopes on other factors: in the future, a possible “left party”; in the past, the 2010-15 “social movements”.

In 2008-15, large-scale “molecular” discontent with neoliberal capitalism developed, an important chunk of which was crystallised by the Corbyn movement. Yet the working-class battles of those years (Vestas, Visteon, public-sector pensions, etc.) never rose to the level of making a revitalised workers’ movement figure to new young radicals as the central agency for large social change, on a scale greater than what NGOs, sporadic street protests, or electoralism could achieve. That wasn’t the whole explanation for the limits of AWL specifically or the revolutionary left more broadly in those years – our own slownesses and slacknesses played a part, too – but it was part of it. In any case, to see the failure of the revolutionary left to break through in one particular short span of years as reason to give up on the whole project is arbitrary. If that could be decisive, why not give up already in 2008, when we had already had 160 years since the Communist Manifesto? Or 1958? Or 1938?...

2010

After the 2008 crash Die Linke in Germany declined from 11.9% of the vote in 2009 to 9.2% in 2017 (and 4.9% in 2021); and, despite Michael, “social movements” in Britain did poorly too.

In 2010-11 there were local campaigns against council cuts, and campus and street action against university fees and the scrapping of the Education Maintenance Allowance. In 2011 there were two one-day public-sector strikes over pensions, and the Occupy protests. All those brought hope, but they failed to cohere into ongoing movements (except perhaps the National Campaign against Fees and Cuts in universities: and even that was much faded by 2015).

“Molecular” discontent remained, was expressed in several large street protests like the People’s Assembly march of June 2015, and would feed into Corbynism. The feeding-in was not the subordination of a previously militant socialistic movement into electoralism: it was the rallying of “molecular”

impulses into an organised form.

The rallying was “Labourite”? Susan Jackson ([Solidarity 620](#)) says it was “not even Labourist”, and I guess she could cite the NGO-ist tilt of it, but I’d say that criticism gives too much credit to “old” Labourism. I’d say: of course it was Labourite. It could not be otherwise given the background of the previous years and indeed decades. The question was, how much could it develop beyond “Labourism” and transform from within the labour movement’s political culture and lack of democracy?

The answer was: a bit, but less than we could have hoped, because the Leader’s Office of Seamus Milne, and its allies like the Unite union political department, piped radical impulses in dead-end directions.

Rebuilding live Labour youth and student movements, turning local Labour Parties to engagement with working-class struggles in a way that would help revitalisation in the unions, formulating solid political answers on Brexit and antisemitism, would all have been difficult anyway; but were crucially thwarted by the specific Stalinist influence, not just by “Labourism” as a general historic force.

From the indictment of the role of Stalinism follows an active conclusion: the need, even in the present period of backwash, to build an internationalist and democratic socialist wing in the labour movement. In the next opening-up of political opportunities the residues and legacies of Stalinism – stronger than we’d thought, but still not so powerful as to defy contest! – must not be allowed to gain centre-stage in the left. □



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The socialists who deny Ukraine's rights

By Sacha Ismail

On 24 January, after almost two months of silence since the new Russian threats to Ukraine began, the "International Marxist Tendency" website, run by the Socialist Appeal group and its co-thinkers, published an [article](#) by Jack Halinski-Fitzpatrick with the title "Will Russia invade Ukraine?"

As we'll see, Halinski-Fitzpatrick's article is blander, less overtly pro-Russian, than what SA has put out in the past. But in a way it is worse: in 3,677 words, it does not give even a sentence to nod towards Ukraine's national rights, its right to self-determination or anything similar – or to opposing the threat of Russian action against Ukraine.

There is a back story. In 2013-14, during the upheavals in Ukraine which led to the overthrow of its pro-Russian government and Russian military intervention in the east of the country, there was an upsurge of pro-Russian politics on the British left. Various self-described Trotskyists cooperated with Stalinists to set up "Solidarity with the Anti-Fascist Resistance in Ukraine" (SARU), a [campaign](#) of apology for pro-Russian nationalist forces.

Perhaps the most enthusiastic "Trotskyist" backers of Putin's camp in Ukraine were Socialist Appeal.

Alan Woods

In a [video](#) put out by SA in May that year, the group's most prominent leader, Alan Woods, described the Russian nationalist struggle in eastern Ukraine in glowing terms:

"It's a popular mass insurrection of the people fighting for their rights... a revolutionary movement of the working class. This is a genuine mass movement of the workers of eastern Ukraine against fascism and in defence of their own interests... a magnificent movement of the working class... It's a revolutionary popular movement the West is trying to destroy..."

At the June 2014 [meeting](#) which launched SARU, Woods struck the [same note](#):

"What you have in the Eastern and Southern parts of Ukraine... is fundamentally a movement of the industrial working class... who are fighting to defend their interests against this monstrous offensive of fascism..."

In reality, regardless of some workers rallying to the pro-Russian separatist movement in eastern Ukraine, this was a [reactionary](#), Russia-backed and Russia-dominated nationalist movement from the start – with a strong far-right component. Consistently exaggerating the strength of the Ukrainian nationalist far right, SA has consistently downplayed the role of the Russian-nationalist far right in eastern Ukraine.

At the same time as lauding the

pro-Russian rebels, Woods went a long way to justify Russia's role:

"... the main villains of the piece are not Putin, of course, it's the west. Russia is in that sense acting out of self-defence... What the Russians are saying in effect is so far and no further... Russia was quite happy to leave things as they were... [The West] was treading on Russia's toes... Putin doesn't want to intervene... If however there are serious atrocities..." (May 2014 video)

It was apparently not Russia but the Western imperialists who tried to "grab Ukraine"; the solution Russia sought to impose was not ideal but not so bad:

"The West has been defeated in their attempt to grab Ukraine... The only winner will be Putin and the Russians... They will impose a federal solution, Ukraine can be independent, but it must be divided up into different autonomous groups, to defend the interests of the Russian population in the East. That will mean a weak government in Kiev, under the control of the Russians... The other possibility is not very nice, a very sanguinary solution..."

At the June 2014 SARU meeting Woods went even further:

"With 40,000 troops on the border they [Russia] have done nothing, while people in the East are being bombed and forced into submission... It's not my business to criticise the Russian oligarchy, but if it were my business to criticise, it's not because the Russians are intervening too much. It's because they're not intervening at all!"

This as Russia annexed Crimea and engineered a war in eastern Ukraine which has since cost 14,000 lives.

Part of Russia

Woods produced a more socialist-sounding version of one of Putin's [key arguments](#) about Ukraine, that it is essentially part of Russia:

"It is criminal when you think about it. The Ukrainian and the Russian workers have always been united, they've always been brothers and sisters. They speak a similar language, they've got a common history, common language, common religion – for centuries, perhaps for thousands of years... therefore we stand for class unity." (May 2014 video)

"I've got some experience of both Russia and Ukraine, I know these people – for the whole of their history, there were firm fraternal bonds, fraternal links, between the workers of Ukraine and the rest of the Soviet Union, and particularly Russia and Ukraine..." (June 2014 SARU meeting)

The history of Russian oppression



in Ukraine – going back hundreds of years and as recent as 1991, even if you don't count Russia's recent intervention in and threats against the country – is not so much ignored as glossed up.

Contrast this to [Trotsky's attitude](#):

"The Second International, expressing the interests of the labour bureaucracy and aristocracy of the imperialist states, completely ignored the Ukrainian question... Hence the constant opportunist attempts [even among revolutionaries] to shy away from this question, to suppress it, to pass over it in silence, or to postpone it to an indefinite future."

"The Bolshevik party, not without difficulty and only gradually under the constant pressure of Lenin, was able to acquire a correct approach to the Ukrainian question. The right to self-determination, that is, to separation, was extended by Lenin equally to the Poles and to the Ukrainians... Every inclination to evade or postpone the problem of an oppressed nationality he regarded as a manifestation of Great Russian chauvinism."

Lenin

Lenin wrote:

"What Ireland has become for England, Ukraine has become for Russia... Unfortunately some of our comrades have become imperial Russian patriots... We Muscovites are enslaved not only because we allow ourselves to be oppressed, but because we allow others to be oppressed..."

Behind all this is the Socialist Appeal/Militant tradition's softness on [Stalinism](#). In the June 2014 SARU speech Woods made this very clear:

"... when the Soviet Union fell, there was not a single atom of progressive nature... Say what you like about the old Soviet Union. People had jobs, people had houses, people had health, in Ukraine also... the tragedy of the people of Ukraine is identical to the tragedy of the people of Russia... the problem is the abolition of the planned economy..."

"Not a single atom..." The fact there

are now trade unions – yes weak and legally restricted, as in the UK – rather than just state labour fronts in Ukraine and even in Russia is irrelevant. The same for the fact of Ukraine and other nations oppressed by the Russian-dominated USSR gaining independence.

Woods does criticise Putin's regime – sometimes quite sharply. But the political framework makes the criticism largely platonic.

Later in 2014, and in the years since, SA has toned down the message, but continued to pursue the same basic political line.

The draft theses on Ukraine for the International Marxist Tendency (IMT), published in July 2014, declare: "The tasks of Marxists in this complicated situation are clear. First of all we stand against the Kiev government". While there was more criticism of the Russian nationalists in eastern Ukraine than in Alan Woods' speeches, they were treated as confused or inadequate comrades in a common struggle.

Majority

Once again, while criticising Putin in a general way, SA/IMT defended Russia's role – declaring airily, for instance, that "the annexation [of Crimea] did reflect the will of the majority of the people in Crimea which rejected the new authorities in Kiev and looked towards Russia with hope."

In [February 2015](#), the IMT website enthusiastically presented reactionary, misogynistic Russian-nationalist [warlord](#) Alexander Mozgovoy as an advocate "of a class war of the people against the oligarchs".

They published a few more things over the years since, but continually ignoring, downplaying or justifying Russian intervention. □



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American nightmare revisited?

By Barrie Hardy

Millions of Americans thought Donald Trump's defeat in the 2020 election was the end of a bad dream. Now he looks set to return to office in 2024 with a rampant far right authoritarian agenda. Many of the obstacles to that have been stymied by the USA's anachronistic constitution. The major opposition party is now effectively opposed to democratic government.

The ogre in this nightmare is under serious investigation for tax, insurance and bank fraud. Some have even suggested he will be wearing an orange suit to match his complexion and do some jail time. If only! There have been so many false dawns in this respect. Trump is a master at delaying legal reckonings and dodging criminal consequences. He is also adept at paying off his legal fees by suckering his supporters for donations. His "election defence fund", built round his stolen election lie, raked in over \$30 million.

The refusal to accept genuine election results has spread like runaway infection through the Republican Party. A recent special election (by-election) in Florida for a vacant seat in the US Congress had the Democrat Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick win with an 80% share of the vote. Her Republican opponent Jason Mariner refused to concede. His attitude illustrates that the GOP is ready to reject any electoral outcome if they don't win.

Gerrymandering

Although Trump's own Homeland Security officials declared that the 2020 election he lost "was the most secure in American history", the same cannot be expected of the next one. In those states Republicans control, the boundaries are being further gerrymandered to their party advantage as is a process of replacing election officials with party hacks, the aim being to cement Republican rule in perpetuity.

The current Biden administration has singularly failed to tackle the steady drift towards authoritarian rule. He mistakenly believed that beating Trump would see a return to "normal" in American politics, with the President being able to cut bipartisan deals in Congress.

The received wisdom in the immediate aftermath of the 6 January attempted insurrection was that it provided the longed-for chance for Re-



Pic: CC BY 2.0 bit.ly/6JANTRUMP

The storming of the Capitol on 6 Jan 2021

publicans to ditch Trump for leaders prepared to operate some kind of consensus politics. It hasn't turned out that way.

Republicans who condemned the Capitol attack in January 2021 have backtracked since and tied their future political careers firmly to Trump's wagon. The Trumpist alliance of opportunists, older right-wing Republicans, and QAnon and militia types, has held together rather than fracturing or dissolving.

Impasse

A political system which held together for a century and a half is now in a state of impasse. A significant proof of this is Biden's failure to get legislation through the Senate protecting voting rights. His party has control of both chambers of Congress, but can't get legislation through because of the notorious "filibuster", where a supermajority of 60% is needed to pass things into law. Nor can he even abolish the filibuster. Similar fates befell proposals to increase the minimum wage to \$15 and a far reaching bill to tackle climate change.

Several efforts failed due to opposition from two right-wing Democrat senators, Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema (and the effective disappearance of "liberal Republicans": for decades there were always some willing to help Democrats vote through reforms, as there were always "conservative Democrats" to resist them). Manchin and Sinema highlight the degree to which

corporate capitalist interests are represented in the Democrat party. Manchin, a West Virginia senator, has long standing ties with the coal industry in that state, with holdings in a coal brokerage firm he founded worth several million dollars. His opposition to clean energy laws was hardly surprising.

The filibuster can block any legislation challenging corporate interests. It means that Biden can get no significant bills into law to improve the economic position of workers or advance trade union rights. Then after November 2022, the Republicans are likely to win a majority in the Senate, and maybe in the House too, in the midterm elections.

"Workers' party?"

The Biden administration's inability to deliver anything of substance for working people will throw wavering voters back to Trump. Republicans are now proclaiming themselves as "the workers' party". In the mind boggling confusion of modern America, this has traction.

In a country where race and ethnicity have historically shaped voting more than class, the fears of white American workers who feel "left behind" with the decline of traditional industries with relatively well-paid jobs are directed by Trumpists in a determinedly racist direction. At his most recent rally in Arizona, Trump trotted out the lie that "white people" in New York "had to go to the back of the line" to get covid jabs. (At the same time, he has been

able to keep the support of the millions who oppose vaccinations).

The playing up of racist themes has led some academics to suggest that the USA is on the brink of civil war. They argue that such wars are started when a previously dominant group feels under threat. For sure, the dominant mind set and actions of the Republican Party is to maintain what is essentially a form of white minority rule.

Others say that the dog of white supremacist reaction has failed to bark. Yet the 6 January attack on the Capitol was a huge marker of the determination of reactionary forces to upend democracy. There was little else similar during the Trump years, with the exception of the storming of the Michigan State House in April 2020 and the plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer later in 2020. In the next few years such right wing terrorist escapades will probably become more commonplace.

The current situation in America faces socialists there with intractable problems. Bernie Sanders, a leader of the democratic socialist forces, has called for a grassroots movement to counter the right. Yet the call as yet is extremely vague. Socialists need to urgently debate how best to map a way forward to deal with the impending crisis. □

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20,000 days: a history of life expectancy



Book review

By Les Hearn

Throughout history, life expectancy (LE) has been around 30 years, sometimes lower, e.g. with the adoption of agriculture, plague, or cramming the new industrial working class into slums (described in Engels' *Condition of the Working Class in England*; he called their accelerated deaths "social murder"). Marx predicted increasing immiseration of the working class relative to the ruling class so it is doubtful whether he could have predicted what would actually happen to all classes, LE more than doubling in under 200 years, an average extra 20,000 days of life.

Though the rich usually lived longer, average LE remained constant until about 1720. Then the aristocracy's LE started increasing, followed from about 1850 by everyone else. Since then, LE in Britain has more than doubled to over 80. The book *Extra Life: A Short History of Living Longer* (Stephen Johnson) and the [BBC/PBS documentary](#) of the same name (presenters David Olusoga, Stephen Johnson) show how improvements in our lives have caused this astounding development.

This increase is due not to evolution – the oldest in our hunter-gatherer ancestors were of a similar age to our present-day elders (and fitter) – but more to reducing infant (and only secondarily adult) mortality. The innovations extending LE can be summarised as improved nutrition, public health measures, and medical interventions.

Johnson estimates lives saved by such innovations in terms of millions, hundreds of millions and billions.

Innovations

The innovations which saved "millions" include AIDS cocktails (combinations of anti-HIV drugs), anaesthesia, angioplasty (unblocking coronary arteries), antimalarial drugs, CPR, insulin, kidney dialysis, oral rehydration therapy (ORT: to treat diarrhoea, a major child killer), pacemakers, radiology, refrigeration, and seatbelts. The "hundreds of millions" innovations include antibiotics, bifurcated needles (simplifying smallpox vaccination), blood transfusions, drinking water chlorination, and milk pasteurisation. And the "billions" comprise artificial fertilisers, toilets and sewers, and vaccines.

Programme 1 in the TV series deals with vaccination, starting with smallpox. A scourge for at least 3,000 years, smallpox had 30% mortality, higher among babies, with survivors "pock-marked" or disabled. In the 20th cen-

tury, smallpox killed four times as many as died in both world wars..

The last smallpox death occurred in 1978. The last "wild" case, in 1977, was a Somali who had refused the vaccine. He survived. Smallpox was eradicated by global cooperation; following that, LE in low-income countries rose from 42 to over 60. Vaccination for many diseases has saved billions of lives.

Effective medical drugs contributed much to increasing LE. Previously, as programme 2 shows, many medical "cures" comprised actual poisons. Johnson and Olusoga (J&O) cite Duffield's Concentrated Medicinal Fluid Extract, containing belladonna, arsenic and mercury. Others contained lead, antimony, radium (!), benzene, strychnine, or some combination. While these likely lowered LE in patients, effective drugs such as penicillin probably increased it by about 30 years.

Before World War 2, bacterial infections were the most common cause of deaths (e.g. of my grandfather, aged 30, and my mother-in-law's two toddler siblings) but are now largely survivable, thanks to the discovery of penicillin, the international wartime collaboration which helped make it widely available, and other antibiotics.

Drug cocktails

J&O retell the 1941 story of policeman Albert Alexander, dying from an infection caused by a scratch from a rose thorn. Temporarily recovering with penicillin treatment, he relapsed and died when the then-scarce drug ran out.

Later, drugs that inhibit viruses were developed, including "cocktails" of antiretroviral drugs that have prolonged the lives of millions of people with HIV. In 2020, the RECOVERY Trial found that dexamethasone, a cheap anti-inflammatory, increased survival from serious Covid infections, so far saving a million lives worldwide (though hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin have no effect).

These breakthroughs are from publicly funded initiatives: as J&O highlight, antibacterial and antiviral R&D



require large investments with no guaranteed return. Now, basic scientists are using AI to bypass drug companies to discover antibiotics to replace those against which resistance has developed.

One crucial innovation J&O highlight is the use of data in epidemiology. Indeed, without data, we would have no idea of LEs and what people die of. This branch of medicine was virtually invented by Dr John Snow, who analysed the pattern of cholera cases in Soho in 1854, identifying the Broad Street pump, with sewage-contaminated drinking water, as their origin. Cholera in the 19th century could kill within two days by diarrhoeal dehydration (death rates nowadays are far lower, thanks to ORT). Evidence of its spread by contaminated drinking water encouraged the building of the still-operational Victorian sewer system.

Despite that, a further outbreak of cholera occurred in East London in 1866, killing over 5,500: in a triumph of data analysis, medical statistician William Farr used information about cholera cases to identify the East Lon-

don Waterworks Co as the source, with a specific reservoir polluted by waste from a faulty WC in a house whose occupants had cholera.

Recently, epidemiological data have revealed health inequalities, including significant differences in survival from Covid amongst white, black and Asian communities in East London. This is not genetic but environmental: living conditions, types and conditions of work, the effects of racism. This disparity is no surprise: 125 years ago, black sociologist and socialist W E B Du Bois meticulously collected data on deprivation among the black population of Philadelphia, whose child mortality was twice that of whites.

Other examples include the scandal of lead from petrol affecting poor urban children's development. Herbert Needleman measured lead in children's baby teeth in the 1970s, linking this to cognitive impairment. It took decades to phase out leaded petrol, against resistance from the lead industry.

Lastly, J&O look at the effects of hygiene behaviour. In the 1800s, with filthy streets, no running water, and no knowledge of germs, the importance of hygiene was not realised. One pioneer, Ignaz Semmelweis, found that, of two wards in the 1840s Vienna maternity hospital, the doctor-run one had a far higher death rate from puerperal fever than the midwife-run one. He observed doctors going from dissections in the pathology laboratory to the labour ward and deduced they were passing something on their hands.

Hand-washing

Hand-washing reduced deaths by 90% but the medical establishment rejected Semmelweis's proposal to make this routine. He was sacked.

Florence Nightingale analysed deaths of soldiers in Crimean War field hospitals, showing that most died from infections. Increased sanitary precautions (such as washing hands) reduced deaths by 99%. This evidence for the germ theory encouraged hygienic practices, adopted in surgery by the 1890s and then spreading to the general population. More frequent washing helped reduce infections, increasing LE by 20 years in the early 20th century. Soap destroys bacteria and viruses, explaining the reduction in many infections with the increase in hand-washing during the Covid pandemic.

LE has not always risen: there have been dips due to world wars, the 1918 influenza pandemic and the Covid pandemic, but overall we have gained some 20,000 days over our fairly recent ancestors. This book and documentary series show how. □



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Omicron and the anti-vax swirl



By Martin Thomas

Several thousands joined an anti-vax protest in London on 22 January. Another protest, in Washington DC on 23 January, was also thousands.

Streets were blocked in Bolivia on 21 January. 70,000 marched across Germany on 18 January. France has had regular weekend anti-vax protests for many months, often totalling 100,000 marchers across the country.

Many hundreds marched in Manchester on 22 January and stormed the Arndale shopping centre.

Steve Chapman reports from Sheffield on 22 January:

"Around 250 people gathered... The main group of people involved have been regularly out on the streets, running stalls, giving out their free newspaper *The Light*. From what I can see the main advertising contributor to this paper for a while was David Icke.

"The group has links to the Workers of England Union which is linked to the [far-right] English Democrats, and a faux union called the National Employees' Union which has been making attempts to recruit NHS workers through the campaign...

"The core group has become bolder, and more confrontational with passers by who don't agree or are wearing masks".

Far-right

This anti-vax swirl is a sub-soil for the growth of far-right movements, even when leading figures in it have a sort of leftist history (Piers Corbyn in Britain).

The "freedom" they assert is a free-market sort of freedom, the atomistic freedom to cut your own deal however much it may hurt or endanger those around you. They are not protesting against the Police Bill or the Borders Bill.

When they denounce what Florian Philippot (leader of a splinter from Marine Le Pen's Ralliement National, and of many of the protests in France) calls the "covid-globalists", it is plebeian opposition to the ruling class, caricatured. It is not opposition to the ruling class at close quarters, by battle against the boss in the workplace. Rather, often a yearning for a saviour-figure (maybe a retired general) to defeat distant and hidden ruling cabals of "conspirators" (often deemed to be Jewish).

There is little chance of winning over the hard core who go on the protests. There are wider circles of people inclined to quarter-sympathise: we meet workmates who are not at all far-right,



but wary or doubtful about vaccines, or inclined to wonder about "things we're not being told" on Covid.

They must be won over by the left giving perspectives of a different freedom, integrated with mutual aid, workers' control, and democracy.

Part of the background, also, seems to be resentment against scientists and experts from people done down by an obstacle-race education system obsessed with the formal credentials used so much today as "signals" for the employer in sifting labour-power. We need to propose a more open education system, and a labour movement which educates its membership in a comradely way with lively discussion rather than leaving workers victim to fake-education on social media.

That's a long haul. We have some time. This far-right surge remains diffuse, with (despite Sheffield) generally little week-to-week organisation or clear positive goals. In France the Ralliement National is the strongest far-right organisation. It keeps a distance from the protests. Its politicians ruefully admit to the media that they have a problem: half their support are with the anti-vaxers, more or less, but the other half are for more vaccines, more Covid curbs.

Trump booed

The Washington protest was smaller than predicted, and neither Trump nor any of the prominent shadow-Trump (de Santis, Hawley, Cruz) was there. The leading politician there was Robert F Kennedy Jr, turned anti-vaxer but with a long leftist Democratic Party background. Trump himself was booed (mildly) by a right-wing audience recently for saying that he had had a booster jab.

In the USA the right has a solid base in week-to-week in-person politics, through local Republican Party units (consolidated by wave after wave of right-wing surges over four decades)

and linked groups like gun clubs and evangelical churches. It has been able to hold together since 2016 despite all its internal contradictions.

Despite all our weaknesses, the left and the labour movement in other countries still have a stronger week-to-week organised base than the far right. We have to renew that base, to cut against the far right, and to rally those alarmed by its rise.

The street protests are in fact anti-vax as such, even when they are presented as only against vaccine mandates. Genuine unions organising in the NHS have also opposed the sacking of non-vaccinated workers there (due from April): those unions support vaccination and have surely not been on the marches.

Solidarity sees arguments of practical advisability against vax mandates like the Tories plan to impose on health workers, though not of principle.

Being vaccinated is as much a protection (and, as with other vaccines, not an absolute but rather a relative one) for those you meet and may infect (and then in turn for those met by the ones you meet) as for yourself. NHS workers, obviously, meet and work with people who are in poor health in non-Covid ways (and thus vulnerable). The NHS already mandates hepatitis B jabs in

some sectors. Many countries have long required yellow fever jabs for travellers. Childhood vaccinations are compulsory in France, Italy, all states of the USA and elsewhere. The vaccine, or "vaccine or negative test", passes required for nightclubs, cafés, and bars in many countries do not block civil liberties, have raised vax rates, and have [pushed down](#) vax refusal.

But the highest rates of childhood vaccinations are in countries where they are not compulsory, notably Sweden and Portugal (where the combination of relatively strong health care with a history where infectious diseases until decades ago hit hard, so people are less complacent about them than elsewhere in Western Europe, may be a factor). This is a question of effectiveness, not of guarantees which can be gained by this or that rule.

NHS workers

Effort to facilitate and persuade NHS workers may get similar results to compulsion, and with fewer harmful effects like people losing jobs and understaffed hospitals losing workers. The hold-outs will almost certainly have gone through Covid infection and have some immunity from that. A schedule on which the mandate comes into effect (in April) only when the government has dropped other Covid curbs, maybe even by then the requirement for self-isolation, makes no sense.

The Tories' current push to end work-from-home quickly makes no sense either. Long-term work-from-home has many downsides, and especially for workers' solidarity and trade-union organisation. But Omicron hospitalisations are declining only slowly, and deaths only levelling off, still at a rate equivalent to 96,000 a year.

Well-calibrated measures to push the curve down quicker in the coming weeks are still in order, as well as the long-term measures (better sick pay, boosted NHS and care, improved building ventilation, workers' control of workplace safety). □

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UCU debates action restart

By a UCU member

As *Solidarity* goes to press on 25 January, activists in the University and College Union (UCU) have been told that action will begin "in February" and "will involve strikes in different regions and devolved nations on different dates, as well as UK-wide strike dates. The action will also progress to a marking and assessment boycott should employers refuse to budge."

This decision by the union's Higher Education Committee has surprised many branch representatives. The option of rolling regional action was not put to the Branch Delegates' Meeting (BDM), where branches with live ballots were consulted on a series of options for action. The BDM was organised not as a voting meeting but with a focus-group approach of break-out rooms. However, analysis of the Google Docs from the BDM shows that 95.1% of branches at the USS BDM explicitly



expressed support for escalation and 82.9% expressed the view that the two disputes must be kept together. At the meeting on the Four Fights, 81.4% of delegates explicitly expressed support for escalation; 67.1% expressed the view that 4FF and USS disputes should

be kept together.

Activists are now waiting to see if the leadership will honour these views when the full strategy for action is published. An open letter to the Higher Education Committee on the subject can be signed at bit.ly/hec-l

Hospital strike postponed

By Ollie Moore

A strike by outsourced security guards at Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH) in central London, due to begin on 19 January, was postponed. The workers are fighting for parity with NHS terms and conditions on issues like sick pay, holiday entitlement, and pensions. Their union, United Voices of the World, tweeted: "The guards have made the good faith decision [to postpone their strike] following last minute news that the GOSH board of Trustees are preparing a package of improvements to their terms and conditions. The guards are clear that if these improvements are not presented within the next two weeks, their six-week strike will go ahead from 3 February". More background to the dispute, including details of how to donate to the workers' strike fund: bit.ly/gosh-s



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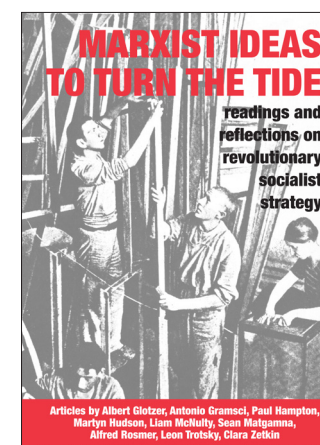
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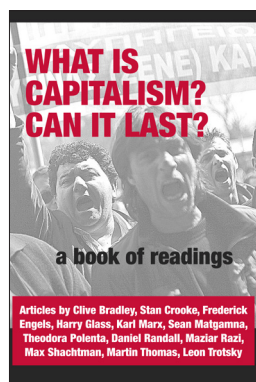
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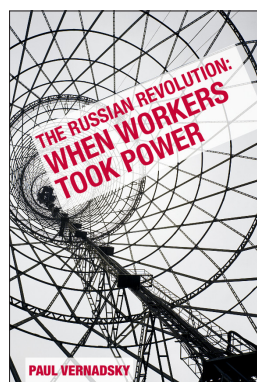
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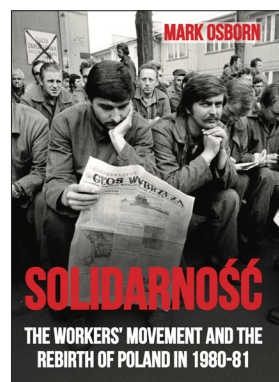
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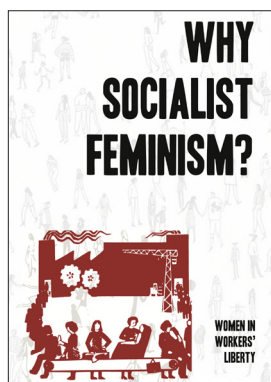
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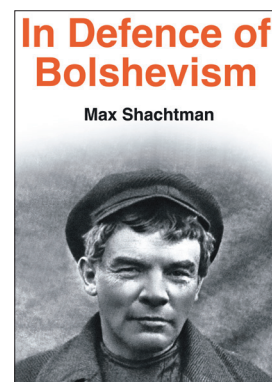
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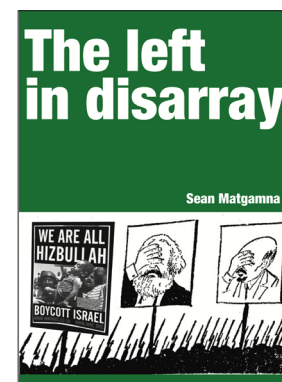
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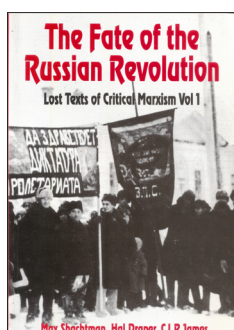
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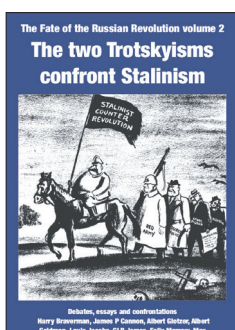
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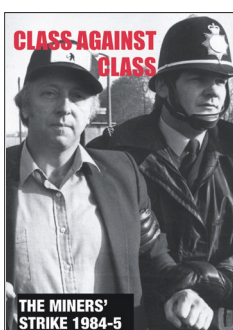
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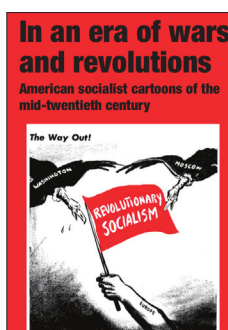
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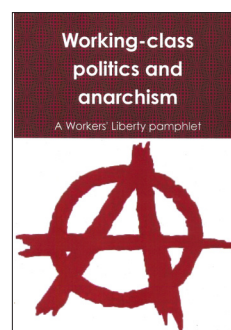
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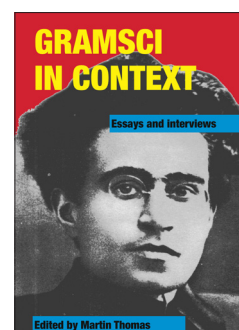
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Turning round Unison after the pay setback

By a Unison member

This spring brings the nomination stage for the [Time for Real Change](#) candidates for service group national executives in the Unison public services union (Health, Local Government, Higher Education, Community, Energy and Transport sectors). Branch nominations opened on 10 January and branches can meet any time up to 11 February to nominate. Members will vote from 28 April to 25 May.

TFRC is standing a significant number of candidates, with a real chance of breakthroughs in these sectors and improvements in some regions like mine (Northern).

Democracy

But national elections in themselves won't transform Unison. We need to widen democracy and open up discussion of strategy to a branch and membership level. We need to confront some hard questions about how our unions resources are used, what is needed to overcome the anti-union laws, and how to engage our members to turn things around.

We [failed](#) in the local government ballot for strikes over the April 2021 pay round, which closed on 14 January, to hit the 50% turnout threshold required under the Tory law of 2016. Over 70% of members who voted supported strikes, but turnout was only 14.5%.

We need to start moving now on the pay settlement due in April 2022, and do that in a way that learns lessons from the 2021-2 campaign.

The campaign, if it you could really even call it a campaign, failed to galvanise members; maybe even failed to galvanise shop stewards and the activist left.

It is unclear what the strategy was. In my region (Northern), we get no reports backs from our national local government representatives, no consultation with branch members other than those who are on regional committees. And so members felt no connection with the campaign.

What were we being asked to do? The usual one day strikes that feel unlikely to win? Longer all out strikes? Selective action by smaller groups of members? There was no information or discussion on that.

I asked in my branch whether it was an aggregated ballot (i.e. so we had to hit the 50% threshold overall, rather than it being disaggregated like UCU's recent ballot, so if some branches hit it they could strike first even if others didn't). At first, my branch officers didn't know. In fact it was aggregated, and reaching 50% across the whole workforce, including less active branches, was always unlikely.

Campaign...?

Where were the campaign materials? Where was the media and social media campaign? How were we to reach members and what was the message? What was the plan to reach the perhaps 50% of members who in local government who are still home-working?

Then the ballot was held over Christmas



mas (5 Dec to 14 Jan). Many councils like mine almost shut down for two weeks over Xmas. Schools staff are perhaps more than a quarter of local government members, and indeed the last week of term is not an ideal time in schools either. The union HQ was closed and the staff off for Christmas, and there were Christmas delays with the post.

And then this dispute was over the pay rise we were due in April 2021. The ballot ended mid January. Probably the soonest action could have taken if we had beaten the turnout threshold would be late February. It was hard for members to believe the union had a plan for action sufficient to move the employers on April 2021 pay before we would be on to the April 2022 pay date.

To communicate to members any sense of seriousness about shifting the April 2021 settlement, action had to be planned for the summer, or autumn at the latest. This demobilising sort of delay has happened before.

We need:

- a long term strategy to update members' contact details and address records and plan how we can communicate with them
- a system for shop stewards to be able to access members' details and contact details to reach them. We were not given access to that information (GDPR was cited). No real way round was found. We were told that union staff members would contact our members instead
- systematic use of texting services (which didn't seem to happen) and big social media campaigns
- engaging members in the strategy from the start, with discussions on strike plans, on how should the ballots be counted (aggregated or disaggregated), and on learning lessons from other unions
- local strike action that can be coordinated and give confidence and test out tactics
- a coordinated branch-level campaign to win the Living Wage for all low-paid workers in councils, and in

outsourced and commissioned services too like adult care

- coordinated action to improve conditions in councils, including the new round of council cuts coming in April 2022 (very unevenly, it seems, across different local authorities).

For the last ten years at least, the leadership of Unison has failed to offer a fight against cuts and austerity or against the decline in our real wages pay (over 25% over the ten years).

8 years

The last time we even went to a formal ballot on pay was 2014. Then we took one day's action. The leadership accepted a tiny improvement and wound up the campaign without consultation. The lack of a formal ballot for eight years is part of it, plus the anti trade union laws which now (since 2016) mean a 50% turnout is needed.

The victory for Time for Real Change candidates in the National Executive elections in June was a step forward, but the new majority is still in its early days. In the autumn we had some victories in Labour Link national committee elections, so we have something like a 50:50 right-left balance there, but no big steps forward yet

We need change throughout the union, pushing the new left National Executive to campaign and organise, but also change at a branch and regional level. □

Barts Trust workers plan two-week strike

By Ollie Moore

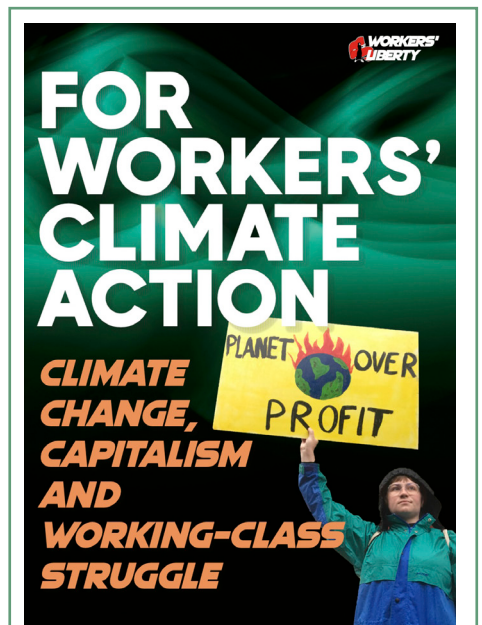
Outsourced workers, including cleaners, porters, security guards, caterers, and others, working in Barts Health NHS Trust in London will strike from 31 January to 13 February.

The strikes will involve workers at St. Barts', Royal London, and Whipps Cross hospitals. The workers, who are

employed by outsourcing giant Serco, are demanding a decent pay rise, after their employer offered 3%, well below current rates of inflation. Serco Group PLC has an annual turnover of nearly £4 billion.

A Unite statement said: "These workers face the same risks as NHS-employed staff but they are paid significantly worse and

treated disgracefully. Barts Health NHS Trust have a golden opportunity to bring these workers, employed by Serco not the NHS, back into NHS employment. It's time to end the injustice of a two-tier workforce. Unite is 100% behind our members' battle against low pay and exploitation." □



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- Workers' control of major industries and finance for a rapid transition to a green society
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- 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

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Havoc, thy name is lease-hire



Diary of a trackworker

By Matt Shaw

This goes back and forth over the years, with every new transport manager reinventing the wheel, no pun intended.

Ideas go something like this:

1. If we buy vans to get workers and equipment to sites on the rail needing work, then they will depreciate; so instead we will lease them and all the costs of repairs, maintenance, and depreciation will fall on the hire company, not us.

2. If we own the vehicles, then we will have more control over costs, and can sell them after we've finished with them, while being able to use them as we see fit and purchase the right style for our requirements.

We are on idea number one (leasing) at the moment, and have been landed with something which is neither suitable or reliable.

The make of van has known design faults, and sure enough after 18 months these foibles are starting to

show. That then leads us onto the mire which is fleet services. These people seem to have been put on earth with the aim to drive anybody who comes into contact with them mad.

Nothing is straight forward. Requests for servicing, repairs, and MoTs take ages to finalise. Wrong addresses for garages. The location of the vans in question not being given to the mobile servicing companies.

Previously, under idea 2 (directly-owned vans), such things were relatively straight forward, with a local garage taking on the work and sorting it out in short order.

Covid has added to the problems, with the use of extra vehicles so that social distancing can be maintained. If looking after six vehicles was a struggle, then double it and the resultant chaos can lead you to start pulling your hair out.

Add in the prospect of a major jobs restructuring, and it's really is one more thing you could do without.

I find other trackworkers agree with me, but tend to shrug: "just another day in paradise". I can't help thinking that with workers' control and an end to the fever of outsourcing and contracting-out, so many problems could be fixed. □



The Lost Prince



Kino Eye

By John Cunningham

Most "royal" films are dross, but an exception is Stephen Poliakoff's *The Lost Prince* (BBC, 2003), which recounts the short life of John, the youngest son of George V and Mary of Teck (the present Queen's grandparents).

John was discovered to be epileptic. He may also have been autistic. Regarded as an embarrassment, he was hidden from public view in a corner of the Sandringham Estate. In the last two years of life he was visited only twice by his mother. His elder brother, later Edward VIII (the one who abdicated), once described him as "more of an animal than anything else". John was deleted from the family "tree" and written out of history.

Despite all the darkness surrounding epilepsy at the time, it needn't have been like that: Dickens, Dostoyevsky, Napoleon, Agatha Christie, Theodore Roosevelt, bluesman Jimmy Reed, Alexander the Great all had or may have had epilepsy and led prominent lives. Even allowing for the fact that epilepsy was little understood at the time (and autism even less), John's treatment by the Royal family was marked by an emotional coldness which frequently lacked any notion of humanity. He died in his sleep in 1919, aged only 13. □

Feminism and "gender wars"



Book review

By Alice Hazel

Finn Mackay introduces *Female Masculinities and the Gender Wars* with the hope that it will inform those who are "stuck in the middle of the gender wars".

The early chapters give a useful overview of the historical background of trans inclusion and exclusion in the feminist movement, including the infamous events of the 1976 Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, seen as the birth of the trans-exclusionary radical feminist movement. There is also a relatively accessible explanation of the debates on the social construction of gender and sex, written from a trans-inclusive queer perspective. Mackay is critical of the litigious and hostile atmosphere that these issues have been debated within and attempts to take the opposing feminist view seriously into account.

The book specifically highlights the voices of butch lesbians. "Gender critical" feminists, such as Julie Bindel and Kathleen Stock, have headlined accusations of "butch flight" and "lesbian erasure", claiming that young lesbians are being lured into trans identities and that lesbians are de-

nied the right to choose whom they have sex with.

Mackay argues that, while being weaponised in the debates, butch lesbians and trans men have largely been excluded. The arguments made here against organisations like Get the L Out and the Lesbian Rights Alliance are important.

The other prominent theme of the book is an attempt to reclaim a trans-inclusive Radical Feminism. Mackay aligns with Radical Feminism, identified in the book as seeking fundamental structural change, against patriarchy and prioritising issues of male violence against women, children and marginalised men. The book presents a defence of this trend against it presents as simplified criticisms from trans activists.

It can also be read as an appeal to second wave feminists to reanalyse their allegiance with the "gender critical" movement, including its links with the Christian right. Viewed that way, it can be helpful for socialist feminists in our current debates within the labour movement.

The book concludes with an acknowledgement of "fence sitting". Mackay condemns "shameful trans panic discourse" and the "sex and gender conservatism" of the anti-trans movement, but frustratingly in the end settles for recognising complexity rather than really attempting to navigate through it. □

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Look again at Section 44



John Moloney

With the withdrawal of Covid restrictions in England, there is increasing rhetoric about an employers' drive to get workers back into offices. It's not entirely clear as yet how that will play out across the civil service and whether departments will be setting quotas for the number of workers they want back. We're meeting the Cabinet Office on Tuesday 25 January to discuss this. The *Daily Mail* is already promoting a narrative that union opposition to workers being forced back into offices is somehow sabotaging the country's recovery. It's clear that the Prime Minister is looking, using those kind of right-wing talking points, to pick fights over returning to the work place to distract from his weak position.

If our members are pressured back to offices, we have a number of possible actions to take. We will look again at Section 44 notices, for example. Where they've been tried previously they've had mixed results, with some civil service departments simply accepting them, and others docking pay. We don't want to rely on individual workers, or small groups, having to take that kind of stand without collective support, so we will be looking for ways to collectivise and coordinate that.

One department where there is already a very explicit back-to-the-office push is the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). Bosses want all workers back in offices by the end of February, with all interviews with claimants due to be conducted face-to-face from Monday 24 January. The departments also wants to scrap many of the Covid measures in place, potentially creating hundreds of super-spreader sites across the UK.

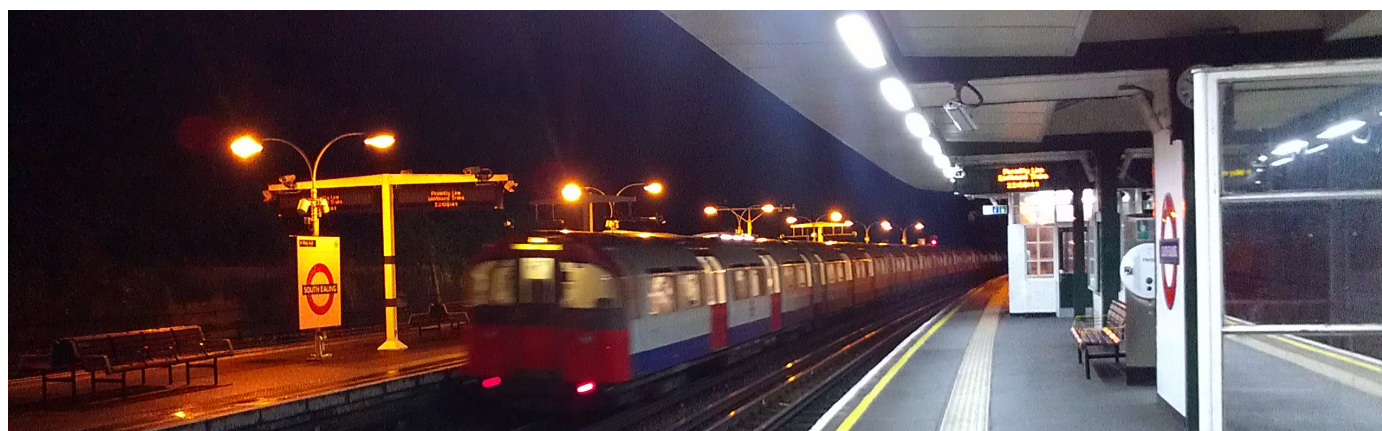
In light of the announced changes, a national reps meeting on Tuesday 25 January to discuss our consultative ballot for action over cost of living, will now be extended to discuss workplace safety issues too.

My own view is that we should move to disputes and ballots wherever possible, combined with Section 44 actions that can allow workers to move at a quicker pace than the anti-strike laws allow.

I am also continuing to focus on improving the union's organisation amongst outsourced workers. Mitie is one of the major outsourced contractors in the civil service, we want to organise across all their contracts. They're rejected cross-contract bargaining, but we want to build up organisation, and potentially take action, to force them to accept it.

A cluster of outsourced contracts in the civil service are up for renewal in 2022, and we'll be pushing for that work to be taken in house. If it's not, as well as disputes we will consider legal challenges based on the claim that outsourcing represents indirect racial and gender discrimination, as it creates a two-tier system with an outsourced workforce with a higher proportion of BAME and women workers having worse terms than the directly-employed workforce, which tends to be majority white and male. □

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



Step up Night Tube strikes!



From Tubeworker

Drivers on the Central and Victoria lines, members of the RMT rail union, are continuing Night Tube strikes every Friday and Saturday.

Strikers are braving cold weather to maintain picket lines at train depots, and big gaps in the service,

especially on the Central line, show the strikes are having an impact.

Action is scheduled through June, the full six-month life of the current industrial action ballot. The determination of the strikers is evident. But it seems like the company is digging in; even though the strikes have now cost them more than meeting RMT's demand to withdraw imposed night working, LU clearly believes giving in to the union over this issue would set a dangerous precedent given the wider fights over jobs and pen-

sions.

Continuing to do the same thing if it's not making progress is not a good strategy. The two 24-hour strikes that bookended that last round of Night Tube action had a massive impact; further 24 or 48-hour strikes must be called, across all Night Tube lines (not only the two currently running it). Now RMT has a combine-wide ballot mandate, that could be done in parallel with the wider dispute. □

Strike to stop station job cuts!



From Tubeworker

London Underground (LU) has now given some more detail on which stations it plans to target to cut jobs. Bosses plan to reduce the "welcome function" (i.e. reduce the number of Customer Service Assistants [CSAs] in ticket halls) at the following locations:

Euston; Green Park; King's Cross; London Bridge; Waterloo; Charing Cross; Piccadilly Circus; Oxford Circus; Knightsbridge; Russell Square; Leicester Square; Liverpool Street; Tower Hill; Gloucester Road; South Kensington; Embankment; Camden Town; Tottenham Court Road; Paddington; Bayswater; Heathrow T123; Heathrow T4; Baker Street; Bond Street; Stratford; Marble Arch; Westminster; Earl's Court.

Management also plan to cut jobs by abolishing detainment duties at these stations:

Wembley Park; Willesden Green; West Hampstead; Waterloo; Northolt; Woodford; Newbury Park; Barking; Queen's Park; Harrow & Wealdstone; Stonebridge Park.

Up to 600 jobs could go in total. LU has attempted to mollify us with assurances that no existing mem-

ber of staff will lose their job, suggesting they attempt to manage the cuts via the deletion of vacancies. But however cuts are achieved, they mean increased workload for staff and a worse and less safe service for passengers.

But although LU can make its cuts without compulsory redundancies, it's highly unlikely cuts of this scale could be achieved without displacements, particularly of part-time staff, who will be disproportionately affected. Given part-time roles often have higher concentrations of women workers and workers with caring responsibilities, these cuts could have a discriminatory impact.

There's also an irony in LU's proposal to reduce the "welcome function": it justified its closure of ticket offices under Fit for the Future by saying it would allow staff to be

more visible in ticket halls. We knew it was a sham, given that reducing staffing levels is hardly a way to make us "more visible". But even on LU's own terms, it is now reneging on those claims, by abolishing many of the ticket hall duties they claimed were a "more visible" alternative to ticket office positions.

If LU achieves these cuts on stations, they will move on to other functions and conduct similar exercises, looking for vacancies they can delete. That's why the RMT union must use its ballot mandate and call combine-wide action as soon as possible, to stop these cuts in their tracks. □

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Out with Johnson! Out with Johnson's policies!

By Martin Thomas

Boris Johnson's bubble has burst. Most people accept that the government has had to issue instructions over Covid: self-isolate, test, reduce social contact in various ways, all the rest. All governments have done fairly similar, in one way or another, and varying with different geographical conditions.

Most people even accept that the governments, dealing with a new virus, will be bound to make mis-steps. Even those, like us on *Solidarity*, who are political opponents of all the existing governments, recognise that on Covid it is better that we all follow even flawed rules, to give us all some assurance of what precautions we can expect others to observe.

We all knew that the Tories were blustering and floundering on Covid, but on the whole they got away with it.

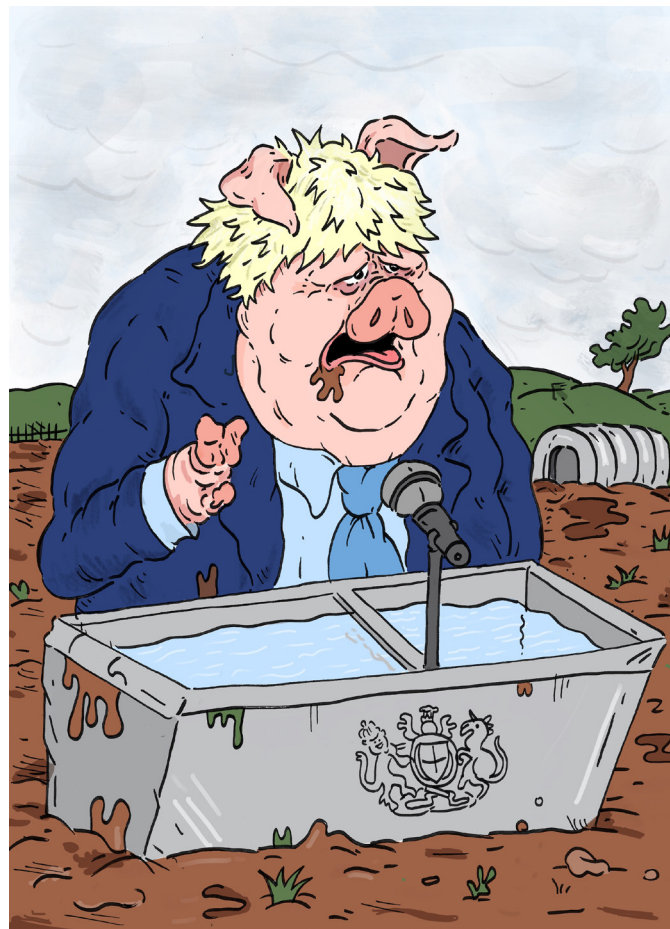
Some cut Johnson slack for "getting Brexit done". Others, for his promises of "levelling up". Yet others, for the furlough and business-support payouts under Covid.

Now the flood of revelations about parties at 10 Downing Street during lockdowns has tipped the balance. What Johnson says about Covid, about levelling up, about Brexit, or about anything else beyond the core Thatcher-tribute programme wrapped up in all his bluster, is what he thinks will serve to show him as "doing something", and what he thinks he can get away with. He wasn't and isn't serious about what he tells us to do. He will tell any lie he can get away with.

The discredit heaping on the whole government from Johnson's ignominy is a boost for the labour movement.

We must use that boost to win solid gains, rather than leave open channels for it to dribble away and the Tories to regain their balance, maybe by replacing Johnson by Sunak or Truss.

- Ramp up the campaigns against the Police Bill and the Borders Bill. The 15 January protests were a step up from what we expected, but there is much ground yet to be made, and little time until the Bills are voted through. Fight to commit Labour to repeal these Bills when returned to office.



Cartoon, with thanks, from George Newman (@gewman)

- Ignite campaigning against the Health and Social Care Bill, which so far has moved on with no big protests.

- RMT, Unite, CWU and other unions made conference decisions last year to call a big demonstration early in 2022 on workers' and union rights. Press the union leaders to name an agreed date and start mobilisation.

- Inflation is already outstripping wages, and is set to do so more and more. Bring forward wage demands. Where settlement dates are in April 2022, start pressing demands and preparing campaigns now.

- Demand the Labour Party leaders speak up for left-wing policies approved by Labour conference 2021, and counterpose them to the Tories.

- Organise the socialists! Pull as many as we can of the people stirred up by the political ferment into sustained week-to-week activity aiming not just at this or that campaign, but at overthrowing capitalism and winning socialism. □

Make unions launch pay offensive!

By Chris Reynolds

The latest Consumer Price Index for inflation is a 5.4% rise from December 2020 to December 2021. Retail Price Index inflation was 7.5%.

The price rises are especially big on basic items which figure large in poorer households' budgets: food, energy. Energy prices are set to rise much higher in 2022, with world-market oil and gas price rises working through. The Resolution Foundation think-tank reckons that 27% of all households will be in "fuel stress" in 2022.

A 2013 shift by the Tory-Lib-Dem government then to "cut



the green crap", supposedly as a cost-saving measures, is feeding through to make it worse, because it has meant less progress on house insulation and on wind power (less subject to price spikes than fossil fuels).

But wages are rising at only about 4% on average, and less for some. (3% for NHS workers and 1.75% for local government workers, though those are settlements for April 2021, not 2022). In April workers will pay 1.25% more in National Insurance, and more in income tax too, because tax-rate thresholds will not rise by inflation.

According to the Resolution Foundation again, April will bring "a broad-based cost of living catastrophe affecting the vast majority of households: soaring energy bills and significant tax rises will see an annual income hit to the typical household of over £1,000... [By the end of the year] we're likely to look back on a 2022 defined by a cost of living crunch".

When faced with high inflation in the past, unions have pressed for, and sometimes won versions of, a "sliding scale of wages" – an agreement that

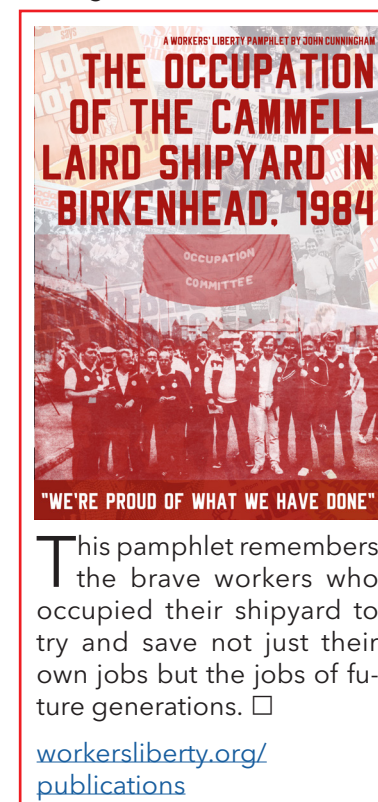
wages will escalate automatically with prices. London Underground workers have a deal giving a rise each April of the Retail Price Index figure for February plus 0.2%, which could be around 8%.

Unions in other sectors need to launch pay offensives, at least for a solid rise this year.

April is the pay settlement date for many workers. Too often unions delay until much later in the year before doing much, leaving workers vulnerable in the meantime and nudging them, later on, to accept a poor deal if only to get the back pay into their pockets. 2022 will be no time for that waiting game. Get the pay demands in now, demand a speedy response, organise action if we don't get it!

The Tories' Trade Union Act 2016 50% turnout rule makes pay strikes across the whole of large public-sector workforces difficult. But good pay rises won by more compact workforces will however increase the pressure on all employers. Disaggregated ballots, as used by the University and College Union currently, can enable less-than-universal action which is still effective.

As these things go under neoliberal capitalism and with heavy anti-union laws, this is a good time for strikes. Unemployment is lower than we feared. Bosses are keen to boost output again. The government is discredited. □



This pamphlet remembers 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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For a workers' government

LEARN FROM THE JUSTEAT STRIKERS!

By Michael Elms

On 23 January over 100 people rallied in Sheffield in support of the ongoing strike by couriers working for Stuart Deliveries and JustEat. These couriers are striking against a 24% cut in their base rate of pay, which JustEat's delivery subcontractor Stuart implemented in late 2021. So far workers have taken more than 30 days of strike action, and the strike has spread from Sheffield into other towns including Sunderland, Blackpool, Huddersfield and Chesterfield.

Alison Brown, a Unison member working in the Yorkshire Ambulance Service, spoke about the things that the rest of the trade union movement can learn from these couriers:

"These workers are the future of our movement. They are taking direct action. Democracy: the way they meet every week to decide how their strike is continuing and the tactics they will use. They are striking to win: this is not a token action but a strike to win, and they will keep going until they've won. Those are the lessons that our trade union movement needs to learn: they are the future."

She was right. With the help of



activists from Workers' Liberty and other socialists in Sheffield, the JustEat couriers, organised in the IWGB union have organised an exceptional, model dispute, with democracy, sacrifice and daring at its core.

The drivers choose their tactics in open meetings each week; they organise their own pickets and author their own slogans. They have elected and re-elected their own local leadership, and the spread of the strike has largely happened thanks to direct links, with Sheffield couriers travelling up and down the country to speak with other groups of workers.

For many unions in the UK, especially in the public sector, strike action is regarded as a form of protest; a way of registering discontent or at the worst creating a bit of a headache for the employer. The JustEat strik-

ers' action is designed to cause the company serious losses, to force them to concede on pay.

Concessions have already been won: a reorganisation of the driver insurance system and paid waiting time in restaurants after 15 minutes was announced by Stuart on 14 January (for a while, the company had paid waiting time after 20 minutes, before abolishing this altogether).

If successful, this dispute will open the way to organising drivers across the whole sector. Drivers in Sheffield repeatedly make clear in their meetings: when we beat Stuart, UberEats is next. Actions like this one – which was launched with the assistance of socialists in Sheffield – need to be replicated across the country, if we are to build the kind of movement needed to turn the tide.

The whole labour movement should make common cause with this struggle. Socialists everywhere should go and make links with local delivery drivers, and discuss with them about joining the movement. Donations for the strike fund are urgently needed and can be made via tinyurl.com/Stuart-Strike □