

Solidarity

& Workers' Liberty



For social ownership of the banks and industry

STOP TORY OFFSHORE ASYLUM PLOY

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The ideas that Starmer wants to ban

Putin launches new onslaught in eastern Ukraine



The rapid Russian retreat from positions north of Kyiv has revealed the brutality of the occupation, as mutilated bodies are found in mass graves, and the stories of Ukrainian survivors are heard.

The Ukrainian government states that 900 civilian corpses have been found, so far, in the areas vacated by Russia.

As the Russians shift their armies and prepare a new major offensive it is becoming clearer what their current war plan is: seize, occupy and aim to annex vast tracts of Eastern Ukraine.

We know what that occupation will look like because we have seen it on small-scale following the occupations of Luhansk and Donbas after 2014. These areas are ruled by Moscow-loyal gangsters, where half the population has been driven out, the economies have been wrecked, and trade unionists and political opposition have been terrorised.

One part of the occupation plan appears close to completion. Starved, bombed, facing 14,000 Russian troops, and running out of ammunition, the resolute Ukrainian 36th Marine Brigade, defending the southern port of Mariupol, seem close to being overrun. If Russia does manage to take Mariupol it will complete a land corridor between Crimea, annexed in 2014, with occupied Donbas.

The capture of Mariupol seems likely also to open up a sea route to supply Russian forces in occupied southern Ukraine through the town's port.

The brutal Russian imperialist expansion is creating major shifts in the attitudes of the peoples of Eastern Europe and their governments.

Germany has pledged to set up a special fund of €100bn to be spent on their military and has agreed to set aside more than 2% of Germany's GDP to its armed forces. Germany has long resisted US pressure to significantly increase defence spending, but Vladimir Putin managed to shift the German government within days of invading Ukraine.

69% of German voters support the government's proposal to increase military spending, up from 39% in 2018.

Sweden has been neutral since 1813, but opinion has shifted towards joining NATO. 51% of Swedes are now in favour of NATO membership, up from



Mariupol

Pic: @MEA_Ukraine

42% in January. 27% are now against.

Sweden has sent weapons to Ukraine. Although Sweden looks less likely than Finland immediately to join NATO, the Swedish Social Democrats are reviewing their anti-membership position.

Finland has a 1,300km border with Russia. It was a Russian colony from 1809 to 1917, and lost territory to Russia in wars between 1939 and 1944. Russia had a naval base in Finland until 1956, and since then Finland has been neutral.

The latest poll in Finland shows 68% of Finns in favour of NATO membership and only 12% against. This is a very sharp shift in opinion towards membership within three months.

There is also a parliamentary majority in Finland for NATO membership. Social Democrat Prime Minister Sanna Marin and President Sauli Niinisto have been visiting NATO member countries in recent weeks lobbying for support for an application. Tytti Tuppurainen, Finland's Europe Minister, commented that, "The people of Finland seem to have already made up their mind" adding that a decision soon was "highly likely."

NATO has a summit in Madrid in June.

Some say that Putin has only reacted defensively to the Baltic states, Poland, etc. joining NATO. In fact the expansion of NATO has been driven, and is now being driven even faster, by Putin's military actions since 1999-2000, not by

a push by the USA to rope in otherwise reluctant states.

Vladimir Putin ally, Dmitry Medvedev, has threatened a "nuclear Baltic" should Finland join NATO, and suggested Russia would "strengthen" its long border with Finland. The Lithuanian government has stated that Russia already has nuclear weapons in its enclave on the Baltic, Kaliningrad, which sits between Lithuania and Poland, separate from the bulk of Russia.

But Russian threats continue.

Vladimir Dzhubarov, a parliamentary member of Putin's United Russia party, said Finland joining NATO could lead to "the destruction of their country".

The reasons for the shifts in government stances and public opinion in Finland and Sweden is not pressure from the US, but Putin's imperialist terror in Ukraine. The populations of Scandinavia and Eastern Europe are not becoming irrational, or seeking to conquer or overpower Russia: they are increasingly scared.

Threat

The threat from Putin's Russia is obviously real. And the populations of Sweden and Finland know that Ukraine would possibly not have been invaded by Russia if the country had been a NATO member. They can see no obvious alternative to NATO.

Workers' Liberty opposes NATO. But membership of NATO or not is a matter for the peoples of Europe to decide, not for Putin to determine by violence and threats of war.

Workers' Liberty understands the danger and real possibility of the war escalating and spreading. It is possible that the nature of the current war will be transformed from a war of self-defence by Ukraine, into a conflict between big-power blocs which use Ukraine, as well as, perhaps, Finland or the Baltic states or Poland as a battle ground.

A Finnish decision in the next few weeks to join NATO could be one possible trigger which extends the war. Other possibilities include a Russian decision to use nuclear or chemical weapons in Ukraine.

If the war becomes some type of world war fought out on Ukrainian soil we will shift our position to opposing both sides in the war.

However, both Putin and NATO have strong motives for not escalating into world war. Right now we relate to the war that actually exists in front of us, something some of the left (*Socialist*

Worker, the pro-China *Morning Star*) seem incapable of doing. Reality for these groups is obscured by dogma. This is a war where NATO is not fighting and is resolutely refusing to admit Ukraine to membership. Despite this these sections of the left continue to fixate on the question of NATO, perversely seeing Putin's attack on Ukraine as a conflict between Russia and NATO.

Workers' Liberty supports Ukraine's fight to defend its national rights. We believe Ukraine has the right to defend itself and, consequently, the right to ask the West for arms. We are fighting inside the workers' movement for support for this policy.

And Workers' Liberty will continue to advocate working-class solidarity with the trade unions and socialist left in Ukraine. We will continue to combat the left that does not back Ukraine and point out that the left groups and individuals which will not back Ukraine's war of self-defence are mostly the same people who think Venezuela and Cuba are socialist or anti-imperialist, Brexit is good, and that Israel should be demonised or destroyed. They do so because their ideological framework has been corrupted by Stalinism.

Workers' Liberty exists to put democracy and workers' power back at the centre of Marxist politics. Help us, join us. □



Covid hospitalisation rates are now edging down, as the BA.2 surge declines. But they remain quite high. In any case new variants are certain to come in due course, and may well be fiercer than Omicron. We seek to make the labour movement fight for the social measures necessary to underpin curbing Covid:

- a sustained public-health testing-and-surveillance system
- good sick pay for all
- restore NHS funding and repeal privatisation
- requisition private hospitals to augment NHS resources
- bring social care into the public sector with NHS-level pay and conditions for staff
- workers' control of workplace safety (especially ventilation)
- requisition Big Pharma, especially its patents and technical know-how, to speed vaccine production and delivery world-wide. □

Our schedule

We skipped a week on 13 April because of Easter and because of staff sickness. This issue is printed a day later than usual because of the Workers' Liberty conference on 23-24 April, and *Solidarity* 633 will be printed on 4 May. Then we are back to our usual schedule. □

Union convoy to Ukraine

By Colin Foster

A first trade-union convoy to Ukraine will set off from an international union-network conference in Dijon, France, on the weekend 23-24 April.

The left-wing French union confederation Solidaires (France has several different "TUCs") says that the convoy will

be run by Solidaires with the left-wing union confederation CSP Conlutas from Brazil and a left-wing union grouping in Poland, [OZZ Employee Initiative](#). "Our comrades from SUD rail [the rail unit of Solidaires] continue to play a leading role... Our aim is to get our initiative known as distinctly trade-union even if

it uses, via the SNCF [French railways] and civil protection the same transportation as some NGOs".

The Dijon conference includes many more groups, with, from Britain, IWGB, UVW, RMT, Liverpool Trades Council, and Liverpool UCU.

Solidaires says that this first convoy

aims to bring a first load of material aid, to meet Ukrainian trade unionists in person, and get their views on what to seek in future convoys.

All the French union confederations, including CGT, CFDT, FO, and FSU, have signed up for a further convoy in May. □

Out-Torying the Tories?

By Mohan Sen

As Just Stop Oil activists protested at oil refineries and on tankers to demand the UK end new fossil-fuel investment, shadow secretary of state for justice Steve Reed called for the Tories to repress more harshly.

"Motorists were already being hammered by prices at the pump, and now mil-

lions can't even access fuel", spewed the MP for Croydon North on 11 April. "The Conservatives need to stop standing idly by and put an end to this disruption that is causing misery for motorists."

A formal statement from the party called for a nationwide injunction to "simplify police operations by enabling them to more easily make arrests".

Labour National Executive

member Mish Rahman rightly called this "shameful", particularly when "the Tory government is already passing authoritarian legislation to curb our democratic rights".

"This draconian move is a slap in the face for young people and all those concerned about the climate crisis".

This shameful stance should make the labour movement wake up and seriously con-

sider how much a Starmer government would break from even the worst of the Tories' right-wing policies, unless the unions shape up and pull Labour into line.

Last month, when Manchester Labour MP Graham Stringer agreed to speak alongside Nigel Farage at a rally to oppose action on climate change, the Labour leadership signalled publicly that it

was not bothered about either that issue or Farage's wider nationalist, anti-migrant politics, but rather his stance on Russia and NATO.

And Starmer has made it very clear he intends to ignore the left-wing policies on climate change agreed by Labour conference – including, even in the midst of the fuel bills crisis, public ownership of energy. □

Johnson out, Tories out!

By Sacha Ismail

On 19 April Britain Elects predicted that if a general election were held that day the Tories would lose 109 seats, with Labour the biggest party on 302 (you need about 320 seats for a majority).

National polls conducted since Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak were fined over breaking Covid restrictions and the scandal broke over Sunak's wife's tax status give Labour an average lead of 7.5%.

But that's thin with the Tories at a peak of disarray. Labour's weak stand can still save the Tories, maybe opening the way for further Tory shifts to the right under a new leader. And then Boundary Commission changes can help the Tories before a general election.

"Starmerism" is offering little other than the message that the Tories are "incompetent". In the midst of the fuel bills spike, Starmer has doubled-down on opposition to public ownership of energy – in violation of what the last two Labour conferences agreed. He even refuses to advocate the abolition of the "non-domiciled" status which Sunak's wife and so many other rich people in the UK have used to avoid paying tax. He has tried to attack the

Tories from the right on policing and the right to protest.

For the upcoming local elections, the party is saying nothing about refunding and restoring local government – and that goes for the bulk of its left as well as the leadership.

The labour movement should campaign not just for Johnson to resign, but for a general election to oust the Tories and win a Labour government. But without a serious fight to insist the party carries out the pro-working class policies called for by Labour conference and the conferences of most unions, that will produce not real progress, but a Blair government mark 2 – this time in worse circumstances. □

Mobilise for 18 June

The TUC has called a demonstration for Saturday 18 June in London to say: "Every worker – public and private sector – needs a real pay rise in 2022". Together with building for industrial action sector by sector, activists will be mobilising for this march: bit.ly/tuc18j □

Fire up the pay fight!

By Sacha Ismail

With sharply rising inflation, real wages are predicted to fall 3.6% this year. For the poorest quarter of households, the fall in incomes will be more like 6% on average.

Real incomes are due to fall next year too, and not grow much after that. On current trends, real wages in 2026-7 will be just £18 a week higher than in 2008. If pre-economic crisis trends had continued, that figure would be £240 – a difference of over £11,500 a year!

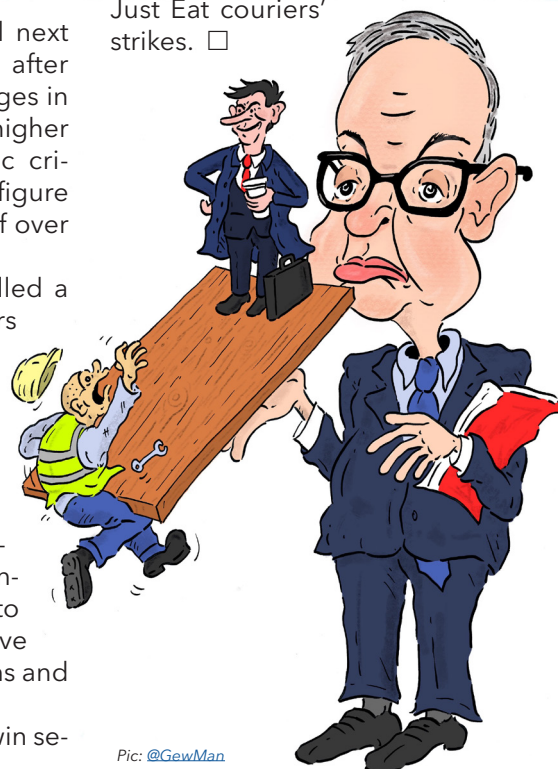
And the lost money has fuelled a boom in the wealth of employers and the rich. In 2021, pay for CEOs of big (FTSE 100) companies increased by 34%, to a median of £4.1 million, as they regained bonuses less available in more-lockdown times.

Strikes are becoming more numerous, but from a low base. Unions have missed opportunities to rebuild since the 1990s, and have been pushed back by lockdowns and work-from-home.

Serious battles on pay could win se-

rious ground, and generate chances to renew union activist networks.

We need to rally the largest possible numbers of people and widest sections of the labour movement around disputes like Just Eat couriers' strikes. □



Oppose the invasion but don't fight it?



Antidoto

By Jim Denham

Outside of the foetid recesses inhabited by red-brown figures like George Galloway and Chris Williamson, few political figures in Britain openly support Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Even Putin's admirer Nigel Farage has been keeping a low profile since the invasion.

Much more numerous – particularly on the left – are those who claim to oppose the invasion but also oppose Ukraine obtaining arms with which to fight the invaders. This is the stance of the Stop the War Coalition, the Communist Party of Britain / *Morning Star* and the SWP / *Socialist Worker*.

The argument comes in various forms, e.g.:

- "... it is vital that socialists point to the dangers in flooding a warzone with arms, especially when this replaces any

attempt to stop the war through negotiations, which are taking place" (*Morning Star* editorial, 9-10 April)

- "The key question for anyone wanting to see an end to this war is how to bring about peace. That will not be done by escalating the conflict or by demanding further and more extensive weapons..." (Alex Kenny of the NEU, *Morning Star* 11 April)

- "This demonstration [the 9 April Stand up for Ukraine march in London] for more arms leads to support for endless escalation and more war horrors. It is a path towards potential conflict between nuclear-armed powers" (Nick Clark, *Socialist Worker* website, 12 April)

- "Stop the War opposes Russia's war and Nato's expansion and the pouring of weapons into Ukraine which is threatening to prolong the conflict" (Lindsey German, Stop the War Coalition, quoted in the *Morning Star*, 13 April)

- "Zelensky wants a settlement but is being pressed by the US to continue the war... it is the height of chauvinist irresponsibility to advocate the self-evi-

dently deceitful picture that a Ukrainian victory is in sight..." (John McNally, in the *Morning Star* of 16-17 April, apparently unaware of Zelensky's continual complaints that NATO countries are not sending enough weapons!).

Pacifists?

An innocent reader could be forgiven for thinking that all these people are pacifists seeking only to prevent further conflict by means of a fair negotiated settlement that Mr Putin (with his oft-mentioned "legitimate concerns") would be only too happy to have a good old chin-wag about (note the *Morning Star's* disingenuous claim that "negotiations ... are taking place").

In fact, these people are only "pacifists" in the sense that a minority section of the Peace Pledge Union were pacifists in World War 2: they argued that Germany should be permitted to "absorb" France, Poland, the Low Countries and the Balkans. That might well have ended that war, for a while anyway.

The veteran Lebanese-born Marxist Gilbert Achcar puts in very well in a

recent article (bit.ly/g-achc): "Today ... those who advocate 'peace' while opposing the Ukrainians' right to acquire weapons for their defence are counterposing peace to fighting. In other words, they are wishing for the capitulation of Ukraine – for which 'peace' could have resulted if the Ukrainians had not been armed and hence not been able to defend their country? We could have been writing 'Order prevails in Kyiv!' today but that would have been the New Order forced by Moscow on the Ukrainian nation under the most deceitful pretext of 'denazification'."

The American Marxist and retired union militant John Reimann, who blogs at [Oakland Socialist](https://oaklandsocialist.com), puts things even more bluntly: "The defeat of Putin will be a gain for the working class in Ukraine, in Russia and round the world. That defeat can only happen militarily. For that, Ukraine needs arms and the only source of those arms is the NATO nations... opposition to the West sending arms to Ukraine means in practice calling for the victory of Putin's invasion. There is no way around it." □

Russian uni pushed back on student expulsions

By Michael Baker

In St Petersburg State University (SPBSU), after 46 students were handed expulsions for taking part in anti-war protests, a Student Day of Solidarity was organised for 14 April. The day before the Student Day of Solidarity, the university administration announced a reversal of all expulsions, giving no reason for the move. Discussions are continuing both on how to build the anti-war presence in SPBSU, and how to help transfer this successful tactic to other institutions where students face expulsions.

Flower

The Feminist Antiwar Resistance have announced that over 850 flower memorials have been placed in public settings across the country, in honour of Ukrainian civilians killed during the invasion.

The editors of the Russian dissident student journal DOXA, who had been under house arrest for over a year awaiting trial, were sentenced on 12 April.

The judge followed the prosecutor's recommendation of two years of "corrective labour". What this means in practice is still unclear. The

best guess is that this entails a 20% fine on all salary earned for the next two years if the editors have a permanent place of employment (the judge explicitly rejected the request to include the house arrest as part of their sentence), or being assigned a place of work by the government if unemployed.

The defendants themselves are still not clear on the specifics of the sentence, but this looks like a cautious cause for celebration. A long prison sentence was a definite possibility.

Things look considerably worse for artist Sasha Skolichenko, who is in pre-trial detention facing a sentence of between five and ten years in prison. Skolichenko is accused of swapping the price labels in her local supermarket, inserting cards with statistics about the number of deaths in Ukraine, particularly the mas-

sacre in Bucha and the missile strike in Kramatorsk.

Skolichenko has coeliac disease, a severe intolerance for gluten which her detention centre does not accommodate for. She has already had a seizure as a result, and there are urgent calls for her to be released.

Drivers

Drivers who work for Yandex.Taxi, Russia's largest taxi service, announced a country-wide single-day strike over pay on Monday, 18 April. With prices for rides going as low as 46 rubles (currently around £0.43), drivers are unable to make a living unless the company raises fees for all rides. The action is not directly linked to the war, but the economic impact of war and sanctions will see workplace actions become more and more central to the country's labour movement, most likely driven by migrant workers

forced into the lowest-paying jobs and the free trade unions that have been trying to organise them for the last few years. The ruble is still (since late March) back to its pre-invasion exchange rate with the dollar, but we don't know how long that will last.

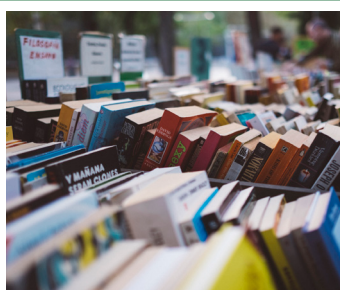
[A brilliant article](#) in English on migrant workers in Russia came out this week, by Kamila Eshaliyeva for openDemocracy. It is essential reading, and I hope it helps draw attention to the effect of sanctions on migrant workers in Russia, and the economies of those countries dependent on remittances from workers in Russia.

The Russian resistance to the war seemed to lull a couple of weeks after the invasion when protests became more heavily policed, but stories are now piling up of new and varying methods of resistance, including ways of spreading awareness to the general population, campaigns to oppose the arrest and mistreatment of anti-war activists, and fights for better pay and working conditions in precarious workplaces.

Solidarity with Russian anti-war activists and the Russian labour movement! □

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. □



Activist Agenda

The Uyghur Solidarity Campaign will be on the streets again on Wednesday 27 April, from 6pm at the Apple shop, 235 Regent St, London W1B 2EL, to protest against the use of Uyghur forced labour in multinationals' supply chains.

The Labour Campaign for Free Movement has finalised its composited motion with Waltham Forest Momentum to be voted on in [Momentum's "Policy Primary"](#), 20-27 April, for texts to be backed by Momentum to go to Labour Party conference in September.

Motions

Three of the twenty texts submitted were promoted by Labour Left Internationalists: on public ownership of energy, on policing, and the LCFM submission on free movement. LLI is [calling](#) for Momentum members to vote for those, as offering crisp commitments on the Labour leadership and having a reasonable chance of being passed at the conference. □

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

Junket for bosses, pay cut for workers

By Michael Elms

At the same time as many of its drivers are striking against penury due to over-hiring (meaning more competition for piece-rate work among spuriously self-employed drivers), rising fuel costs, a cost-of-living crisis and pay cuts, JustEat has hit the headlines for spending 15 million euros on a blow-out ski holiday for some head office staff. 5,400 white-collar employees and managers of JustEat were taken to Arosa, a Swiss mountain resort.

Shareholders have complained as well as drivers, since the junket follows several months of very poor share price performance. A flunky for JustEat CEO Jitse Groen offered this laughable ex-

cuse: "[w]e understand these are challenging times, but exactly because of this, it is even more important to organise Snow Fest and show our employees we value them and their hard work". The appreciation for hard work doesn't extend to the couriers who deliver the company's food and who made Groen those millions.

Food delivery drivers are striking across the UK against a pay cut imposed by Stuart Delivery, a same-day logistics firm subcontracted by JustEat. In 2021 drivers were hit with a 24% cut in the base rate of pay, and launched what has become the largest and longest-running strike action in the history of the UK gig economy. Strikes and union organisation have now spread

to well over a dozen towns and cities across the UK.

This is a strategically important moment for the UK labour movement. If the drivers – organised through the IWGB union – can score a win in this dispute, or cohere stable, lasting organisation, then it opens the way for the unionisation of great swathes of the "gig economy", going far beyond JustEat and Stuart, and stretching into UberEats, Deliveroo, and even out beyond food delivery and into other parts of the sector altogether. Winning this dispute is key to "civilising the industry".

This dramatic and important dispute is the product of a two-year-long campaign of organisation which was sparked by the Sheffield branch

of Workers' Liberty. As Ramadan approaches its end and many drivers are preparing for Eid, daily strike pickets are being paused in West Yorkshire and Sheffield. Drivers are preparing a series of national discussions to review the strike strategy and find new ways of co-ordinating their action and exerting pressure on the company. After 100 days of strike action, and now that union organisation has consolidated in several regions, different tactics are called for. *Solidarity* will cover the new tactics employed by drivers as they re-organise after Eid.

The IWGB is a small, new and under-resourced union. It urgently needs help to build its strike fund. You can donate here: tinyurl.com/StuartStrike □

Secure housing for Ukrainian refugees



By Katy Dollar

The UN refugee agency has called on the UK government to intervene to stop single British men from being matched up with lone Ukrainian women fleeing the Russian invasion.

Following claims that men are using the Homes for Ukraine scheme to target the vulnerable, the United Nations high commissioner for refugees (UNHCR) called for a more appropriate matching process in a statement:

"[The] UNHCR believes that a more appropriate matching process could be put in place by ensuring that women and women with children are matched with families or couples, rather than with single men."

"Matching done without the appropriate oversight may lead to increasing the risks women may face, in addition to the trauma of displacement, family separation and violence already experienced," a spokesperson said.

Under the government's Homes for Ukraine scheme, refugees and hosts must

match independently, leaving tens of thousands of people using private social media groups to connect.

The housing scheme is a step back from Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, run through local authorities.

The *Times* reported that a journalist posing as a 22-year-old Ukrainian woman from Kyiv found that within minutes of posting a message on the largest Facebook group for UK hosts she was inundated with inappropriate messages.

Some men lied about having several bedrooms in their one-

bed homes while another proposed sharing a bed, writing: "I have a large bed. We could sleep together." Another sent a voice note that said: "I am ready to help you and maybe you can help me also."

This government's treatment of Ukrainian and Afghan refugees and all those crossing the Channel illustrates the inhumanity of its immigration policy. The Nationality and Borders Bill is an appalling assault on the right to asylum.

Safe and secure housing for all has always been a key transitional demand for working class women. This is especially important for women with fewer support networks, including newly arrived migrants. The government should provide appropriate housing for all refugees. The cost of living crisis is driving an increase in homelessness. We need mass council house building and purchase. [Hundreds of thousands](#) of homes are empty whilst many have no safe and secure housing.

In the midst of barbaric anti-migrant policies from the Tories, the left must confidently campaign for migrant rights. □

Vote Labour on 5 May

By Keith Road

The campaign for the 5 May local elections is lacklustre in many areas. Even lifelong Labour activists are dispirited, with Starmer's push to the right. Despite "partygate", the cost of living spike, and their heavy lid on public sector pay, the Tories could even come out of these elections OK.

As Luke Akehurst documents on [LabourList](#), the seats contested now were last contested in 2018, when Labour did particularly well. (And as Akehurst does not mention, that was due to Corbynism's popularity then, before its economic-equalising message got drowned by equivocation on Brexit and antisemitism).

Austerity

To revive, Labour should be providing answers to twelve years of austerity and the slashing of services. Instead many councils are offering more of the same, continuing to raise little protest about the false promise of "levelling-up". On the Labour left, Momentum talks up leftish shreds and specks in Labour councils' records, and "community wealth-building" which at best gives the "dented shield" a shinier gloss. Even the modest demand for central government to restore all the funding cut since 2010 is entirely absent.

But Labour still has a mem-

bership of some hundreds of thousands, still predominantly on the left, and affiliated unions which are wary of Starmer. The Blairites are increasing their control, but they have not yet won. That potential activist base and the continued support of the majority of the trade unions makes Labour an important place for socialists to argue our case.

Greens

Oddly, given wide hostility to the Tories and disillusion with Labour, the Greens are on only 4 to 5% in the polls, down on around 7% in mid-December 2021. The Green Party played little part in the protests around COP26.

Though on paper they have policies likely to appeal to many 2017 and 2019 Labour voters, their record in local government, sometimes in coalition with the Tories, is no better than Labour and sometimes worse: ask Leeds or Brighton bin workers whether the Green Party is on their side.

Workers' Liberty activists work alongside Green Party members in campaigns and welcome the fact that some of them are serious class-struggle socialists but the Green Party itself provides no alternative to Labour and is not itself a part of the labour movement. □

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2-3 JULY 2022

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Climate activists join refinery workers' picket



Environment

By Zack Muddle

Over a dozen of us took an Extinction Rebellion Trade Unionists (XRTU) delegation to support the strike and lively picket line of Fawley Oil Refinery workers, from 6am on Friday 8 April.

With inflation predicted by some to be as high as 9.8%, the 2.5% pay offer by bosses to Fawley oil refinery workers is a huge real-value pay cut. There are two entrances to the plant. Around 60 workers and a handful of other supporters were at the main one; 40 at the other.

The picket line was lively, and had a high turnout from workers employed at the three contractors in dispute. Older workers told me it was the first strike for years or decades at the refinery; for many younger workers it was their first strike ever.

Our short-notice XRTU delegation comprised activists from across the country, and drew other XR activists besides. That the picket line started before sunrise, in the arse end of nowhere, and on a weekday, limited who could participate. Many were members of unions, but few currently workers organising in workplaces: young people in Unite Community, retirees, or people in less usual types of work.

Our reception was generally good, better than most in the delegation expected. Some workers were a little stand-offish at first; but our arriving early with enthusiasm, percussion, and solidarity broke the ice.

We learned much from them. Many

things are created from crude oil, on site, beyond fuels. We heard criticisms of the wasteful continued use of "flaring" of excess gas. Several workers told me that they sympathised with XR, that they recognised the importance of tackling climate change, but that they need the work. Some even seemed positive about blockades of oil refineries – "we get the day off!"

They learned from us. Why we were there, and what role we saw refinery workers as having in a transition. Far from being there to end their jobs, as a leaflet we distributed said:

"At the same time as this attack to key workers, Exxon, who own Fawley, reported a fourth-quarter profit of \$8.87 billion, its largest in seven years, on the back of high energy prices. Exxon's CEO receives a salary of over \$23 million.

"The bosses profiting from driving global warming do so off the back of exploiting their workers.

"To halt catastrophic climate breakdown fossil fuels must be rapidly replaced with green energy, heating, and transport infrastructure: with job and pay guarantees for all workers. Last year's summer of wildfires and hurri-

canes was an early warning of potential devastating impacts to human well-being and the planet.

"This necessary transition is expensive. Bosses, pursuing profits, will not chose to do so in their own right. Neither will the governments which serve them. It is down to workers, who make their profit, who make society run, to bring about the necessary change. It is us, as workers, who have power and skills needed to make it happen.

"Oil refinery workers, including the Fawley strikers, will be central to the transition. The better organised they are against their bosses, the more potential and power they have to bring about a change from fossil to green energy.

"Supporting this strike is an environmental issue, as well as an issue of working class and trade union solidarity!"

Several workers signed a [petition](#), "Fight climate change – Expropriate the banks!" A few bought Workers' Liberty's [climate pamphlet](#) or *Solidarity*.

Workers on the picket lines were unsure of exactly how much disruption their strike was causing. As some workers provide safety critical services,

strike action likely lead to [shutdowns](#) across the plant. Fawley helps supply a sixth of petrol stations nationwide and all airports.

Around the same time, XR and Just Stop Oil were [blockading](#) oil refineries across the country, leading to the shutdown of at least one terminal and probably more.

Those direct actions help to underscore the urgency in tackling climate change, and phasing out fossil fuels as a matter of urgency. Their [demand](#), "an immediate end to all new fossil fuel investments", is a good one. Recognising that workers are the key to halting climate change, we advocate an orientation to them in all ecological actions.

Yet we shouldn't be [too downbeat](#) about this direct action which somewhat sidesteps workers. It is severely strategically limited, but this high profile, brave, and bold activism encouraged helped create some openings. Without it, would our delegation have happened? Would it have drawn as many XRTU and wider XR activists? Would it have garnered as much coverage, and generated as much discussion, across [XR](#)? I do not know, but I suspect not.

While the XR/JSO action was comparable to or maybe surpassed the one day strike in disruption, the potential of the latter far outstrips the former. The wider and more targeted disruption caused by the flurry of workers [refusing](#) to process Russian oil gives just a taste. Workers' action on climate change has not just more power, but far more potential to build a large and enduring mass movement, than heroic actions of a small minority ready to get arrested.

This was the first action as XRTU, following our official launch the weekend before: but is far from the last. □



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P&O defies jobs protests and law

By Jamie Southwaite

Nautilus and RMT, unions representing seafarers sacked en masse by P&O Ferries, are continuing protests at ports in Liverpool, Dover, Hull, and Cairnryan in Scotland. A further protest is planned outside the London headquarters of DP World, P&O's parent company, on Thursday 21 April.

One of P&O's vessels, the Spirit of Britain, was detained after a two-day inspection by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency revealed deficiencies in a number of key safety areas. Several other P&O vessels have been detained recently, which unions say confirms that vessels crewed by inadequate-

ly-trained agency seafarers are not safe to sail.

All but one of the sacked workers have now signed up to P&O's retrospective severance terms, which include payouts but also a commitment not to take legal action against P&O. One sacked worker is pursuing a legal claim for unfair dismissal.

Although there have been some embryonic solidarity actions by dockers in Rotterdam and in Hull, where workers have briefly refused to handle P&O vessels, the scale of action necessary to force real concessions from P&O has not been organised – or even meaningfully called for. Although it is difficult for unions to openly call for unoffi-

cial – i.e., unlawful – action, some union statements have tilted beyond caution into a cross-class orientation: "We are gathering support from all political parties, passengers, commercial hauliers, the wider trade union movement, and businesses across the supply chain in this continuing battle for justice" (RMT).

It may now be too late for the kind of action needed to force reinstatement. But unions can still reach out to other workers in ports to discuss solidarity, as well as exposing the injustice which allows employers to break the law with no more than a possible fine which they think "worth it", but blocks workers' action to stop that law-breaking. □



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France: grim choices on 24 April

By Colin Foster

The second round on 24 April 2022 of the French presidential election will, as in 2017, be a run-off between Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen.

The first round was Macron 28%, Le Pen 23%, both scores slightly up on 2017. In 2017 Macron won the second round easily (66%-34%), but this time polling predicts a tight run-off.

Marine Le Pen's movement, now called the Rassemblement National (National Rally), is a continuation of the street-fascist groups of her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, in the 1970s. Marine Le Pen (and her father before her) have worked to soften and sanitise the image of the party, but the French left still sees it as a special far-right danger.

Since 2017 Macron has oriented more to the right of his election-winning coalition than to the (relative) left; but any variant of Macron was

likely to augment Le Pen's audience – unless the left was able to rebuild itself as the alternative to Macron. That task remains.

Philippe Poutou, of the far-left NPA, went down from 1.1% of the vote in 2017 to 0.8% this time; Arthaud, from a bit more than 0.6% in 2017 to a bit less.

Other left electorates collapsed: the Socialist Party got 1.7%, the French Communist Party 2.3%. Abstention was very high among the young.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a former Socialist Party minister, got 22% as against 20% in 2017. But that brings limited comfort. Mélenchon's "La France Insoumise" is not a party but a "sign-up for emails" operation. He operates as an individual demagogue, with a strong nationalist tinge.

Thus the election results reveal a France where the organised and semi-organised left, in the broad sense, has shrivelled.

The SP and CP and Greens call for a Macron vote on the second round. Poutou and the NPA, and Mélenchon, exclaim "not a single vote for Le Pen" (but not "not a single vote for Macron"). Lutte Ouvrière and the left website APLS explicitly call on voters to make no choice on 24 April.

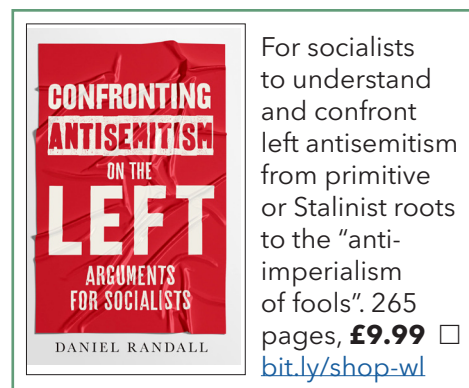
The Rassemblement National hasn't grown with Le Pen's electoral scores. It has about 20,000 members. It won only 8 seats out of 577 in the National Assembly in 2017. It has only 800-odd municipal councillors out of over 220,000 across French local authorities with more than 1000 inhabitants.

That leaves Le Pen, if she wins on 24 April, more weakly placed to grind forward authoritarian policies than Erdogan in Turkey, Orban in Hungary, or Modi in India, all of whom came to office as leaders of large and well-rooted parties.

But the French presidency (estab-

lished by a constitution imposed after a soft military coup in 1958) is exceptionally strong, with powers to push through legislation over the head of parliament. And Le Pen as president can probably get a coalition with sections of the old mainstream right, Les Républicains, whose vote collapsed on 10 April, and of the Macronists. □

• More: bit.ly/fr220410



An active tactic, or shrugging?



By Martin Thomas

In 2017-8 Workers' Liberty debated what tactics would have been best in the second round of that French presidential election. We had promoted the revolutionary-left candidates in the first round. A majority concluded by favouring those French leftists who had voted for Macron against Le Pen on the second round, coupling that with a push to mobilise the left against Macron.

To my mind the same arguments hold. The options, poor in 2017, are poorer. They will be made better only by active politics, not by shrugging and saying, as Lutte Ouvrière does, that it's plague or cholera (so it's all the same, we die either way).

In 2002, when Marine Le Pen's father Jean-Marie Le Pen got into the run-off (against veteran right-winger Jacques Chirac), there were huge street demonstrations against Le Pen between the rounds (and he got only 1% more in the run-off than on the first vote). This time, [few and small](#)

demonstrations; and in one poll 30% of Mélenchon's voters say they will positively back Le Pen in the run-off (34% Macron, 36% abstain).

The abstentions, and the number of broadly-left voters favouring Le Pen, express a spirit of passivity, shrugging, demoralisation – a weaker spirit on the left than in 2002, not a stronger. (Then, the far left got over 10% in the first round).

So, Le Pen promises to systematically install "national priority" for access to jobs and social housing; to quasi-ban immigration; to remove the right to citizenship from birth in France; to ban the hijab completely from public spaces; to curtail "political" trade unionism, etc.? Ah, but Macron is bad too. And Le Pen has some social demagoguery... Nothing to choose.

Instead we should seek the most active, independent intervention by the working-class left possible in the circumstances: use the Macron ballot to defeat Le Pen in the quasi-referendum on 24 April; vote far-left and left in the 12-19 June legislative election; mobilise on the streets and in the workplaces for migrant and workers' rights; rebuild the left! □

Best call for a blank vote



By Katy Dollar

In 2017 we debated what tactics in the second round of that French presidential election. A narrow majority supported supporting liberal centrist Macron. The comrades who led that turn stated it was an exception. The minority argued it would open a door to further opportunism.

In the debates around the 2020 US Presidential election, Martin Thomas, who'd initially proposed the Macron line, tried to generalise the French mistake into a universal method: that of backing the better bourgeois candidate where there is a recognisable difference and no left candidate or working class party has a serious chance.

We are now five years on. Again Macron faces Le Pen, but this time his lead is much smaller. The "President of the Rich" has intensified the attacks on the working class and petty bourgeoisie. Sadly, it has been national-

ism and populism that have grown out of his unpopularity and the fightback.

Macron is undoubtedly the lesser evil. The second round offers French voters a choice between racist, nationalist populism with a direct link to fascist organisation and globalising, neo-liberal capitalism.

Not neutral

We are not "neutral" in that clash. One represents a greater immediate danger to our class. But we do not give political confidence to the politics of global capitalism. It is not a coincidence that the FN vote has grown under the Macron Presidency. Our job as socialists is to guide the class to organise itself independently from, and in opposition to, all factions of the capitalist class, to gain confidence in its own strength, and to look to its own efforts to build a new world. To give cover to Macron does the very opposite.

Were we in France what would we do? Clearly not going round haranguing people planning to vote for Macron, but convincing class-conscious workers the necessity of relying

on our own forces, of organising and of building a programme to win those dismayed with neoliberal policies to the left. The best way to do that in this election is to call for a blank vote.

An enthusiastic blank vote campaign could well have cost Le Pen more votes than Macron, for example the 30% of Mélenchon's voters say they will positively back Le Pen in the second round. Crucially it would plant a flag for no trust in capital and its politicians.

Left

This is not to say large abstention in the coming second round would show a large and politically healthy left. In fact, it would more likely indicate growing disillusionment and apathy. The French left must have the organisation and programme to take the leadership of protest movements against neoliberal attacks. Calling for people to vote for the President who enacted them is not a good start.

The logic of Martin's position is that the time to fight for independent working class politics is when it is already winning. □

Putin and the

By Dan Katz

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991 the Russian state conducted two bloody wars against the small nation of Chechnya.

The first, from 1994-6, ended with a peace treaty following the defeat of Russia's attempt to smash the Chechen national movement. The second, which began with a Russian invasion after October 1999 and ended with Russia declaring the victory of its "counter terrorism operation" in 2009, facilitated Vladimir Putin's rise to power and was important to consolidating his rule.

The two wars were staggeringly violent. From a population of around 800,000 in 1990 there were at least 50,000 Chechen casualties, mainly civilians, as well as, perhaps, 14,000 Russian troops killed.

Putin's Second Chechen war became a model for similar invasions of Georgia, in 2008, and Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. Unlike the First Chechen war, when Russian media was still relatively free, the Second war was shrouded by a purged and cowed state-dominated media.

The *Economist* magazine notes that, "In February 2000, barely a month after Mr Putin assumed Russia's presidency, his riot police and soldiers entered Novye Aldi, a suburb of Grozny, Chechnya's capital, and went from house to house murdering civilians... sweeps like this became known as zachistka or 'mopping up' operations. Between 56 and 82 civilians were killed and at least six women were raped.

"The European Court of Human Rights found the Russian state guilty in that case, as well as others. But in Russia the crimes were never prosecuted, giving a sense of immunity to the armed forces."

The similarities with the crimes committed by Putin's army in the villages north of Kyiv, in Ukraine, a few weeks ago, is obvious. Putin and his military have had a consistent pattern of behaviour, two decades long.

Writing in the *Guardian* (13 April), Lana Estemirova, daughter of the extraordinarily brave, murdered, Chechnya-based human rights activist Natalya Estemirova, commented, "Chechnya today serves as a grotesque miniature of what Vladimir Putin wants to achieve in Ukraine... a subdued place with its population broken and terrorised into submission by the brutality of its regime friendly leadership... Before the bombing of Mariupol's maternity hos-



Pic: @18airborne Corps

First Chechen War

pital there was the bombing of Grozny maternity hospital and a crowded market which killed 100-120 people in 1999. Before Bucha and Irpin, there was Samashki, where on 7 April 1995... soldiers shot civilians, raped women, set homes on fire. At least 103 were murdered that day... Too many massacres, too many broken lives to count."

Anna Politkovskaya, a journalist for *Novaya Gazeta*, and, like Natalya Estemirova, the victim of a political assassination, in 2006, was one of the few independent Russian journalists to cover the Second Chechen war. Politkovskaya witnessed a crowd of Chechens fighting for food aid and wrote, "How could this have happened, in front of the whole world? ... As soon as you enter the dormitory of the old cement factory in Chiri-Yurt, which has been turned into a refugee settlement, you hear wailing. A protracted half-animal monotone evoking the farthest reaches of despair." This war was characterised by arbitrary arrest, torture, murder, mutilation, rape and terror as Russian forces battered Chechnya into submission. And, "who is to blame for this national disgrace?" asks Politkovskaya. "Of course the greatest blame falls on Putin." (Anna Politkovskaya, *A Small Corner of Hell*).

Western governments tended to turn a blind eye to Putin's crimes in Chechnya, preferring to do business with Russia, and not wanting quibbles about civil liberties and national rights to obstruct trade. France and Germany behaved in exactly this way after Putin carved out parts of Eastern Ukraine in 2014, forcing Ukraine to sign the Minsk Agreements because Western Europe would rather have stable relations with Putin's Russia than stick up for Ukraine's rights.

After the Al Qaeda attacks on the US on 11 September 2001 Putin re-packaged his Chechen war as a fight against Islamist militancy and he was accepted by the Bush-led US as a participant in the War on Terror.

The bourgeois governments were not the only Westerners who failed to act against Putin. The socialist left was shameful too.

Protest

On Saturday 5 February 2000, during the second siege of Grozny, Workers' Liberty was central to organising a protest march against Russian atrocities and for Russian troop withdrawal. Only 200 marchers joined us to protest in central London. Tony Benn and Jeremy Corbyn spoke to a rally in Trafalgar Square. The general attitude of the left was that imperialism was something America and its allies did; Russia was somehow different, even on our side.

Chechnya is now a republic in the Russian Federation with a population of around 1.2mn. It is run by the gangster-thug Ramzan Kadyrov, "Putin's little dragon", as Politkovskaya called him. Kadyrov may well have been behind Politkovskaya's murder.

Kadyrov has sent Chechen fighters, loyal to him, to fight for Putin in Ukraine. He claims to be fighting now in Mariupol, and to have 1,000 Chechen Kadyrovtsy with him. This notorious militia also fought for Putin in Syria.

The ethnic Russian population, which was once significant in Chechnya, is now negligible. There are significant Chechen diaspora communities in Turkey and Western Europe, as well as Russia itself.

Chechnya was claimed by the Russian Tsars in the sixteenth century, and the Russian state has been in direct

conflict with the Chechens on and off since 1784. It is a territory – with mountains and forests, its people organised by clans which fiercely value their independence – that has always proved difficult to conquer and hold.

The Caucasian war of Tsarist subjugation took place in phases after 1817-8 and ended for the Chechens with the formal annexation of Chechnya into the Russian empire in 1859.

The Chechen people continued to rebel. Under Stalin's rule the entire Chechen people was forcibly seized and dispersed in a single night. On 23 February 1944, 480,000 Chechens were deported in Operation Lentil. Up to 200,000 died in what Chechens call the Ardakh, or Exodus. The Chechens were scattered and resettled across Siberia and Kazakhstan and were only allowed to return in 1956, following Stalin's death.

During Mikhail Gorbachev's rule Chechens began to campaign for national freedom. The Chechen All-National Congress, led by a former Soviet general Dzhokhar Dudayev, shaped the movement. When the attempt at a Stalinist coup took place in the Soviet Union, in August 1991, Dudayev overthrew the Soviet administration in Grozny, declared independence and called elections in October, which he won.

Gorbachev abolished the USSR at the end of 1991 but Chechnya remained formally part of the newly created Russian Federation.

Dudayev advocated secession from the new Russia. Russian leader Boris Yeltsin declared the election void, and sent MVD VV (Ministry of Internal Affairs Interior) troops who tried to arrest Dudayev. When the Russian troops landed at Khankala airbase they were surrounded by a much bigger Chechen force. Yeltsin backed down and his soldiers were allowed to leave by bus.

In 1992 Ingushetia separated itself out from Chechnya and accepted incorporation into the Russian Federation. Chechnya refused, adopted a flag and a national anthem, although with no international recognition.

Dudayev ran the Chechen administration badly. Mafia gangs thrived and the state bank was run as a major criminal enterprise. The economy tanked. And Yeltsin could not accept the Chechens' refusal to submit; Chechnya was a possible bad example that others might follow.

At the end of 1994 Russian-organised Chechen forces supplemented by

Chechen Wars



Russian troops began incursions into Chechnya. They were defeated easily and Russia escalated. On 28 November 1994 Russian planes destroyed the small Chechen air force and Russian troops invaded, heading for Grozny. Grozny was defended by 9,000 fighters, organised by Aslan Maskhadov. The Russian first wave contained only 6,000 troops and their attack began on 31 December.

The Russian forces were badly organised and morale was poor. When the 1st Battalion of the 131st Independent Motor Rifle Brigade reached the central railway station they were trapped, ambushed and wiped out. It took the Russians three more weeks to overrun most of Grozny, although fighting continued in the south of the city for many weeks. Grozny was partly destroyed and many thousands of civilians were killed.

Soon 55,000 Russian troops were in Chechnya, including new elite units. The Russians demanded immediate capitulation in negotiations with Maskhadov, although they were unable to end Chechen resistance. The Chechen fighting units fragmented and some turned to forms of terror which led to some spectacular actions.

In June 1995, Shamil Basayev, who would later become famous as an Islamic radical, led 194 men into the southern Russian town of Budyonnovsk where they took 1,800 people, including 150 children, hostage at the local hospital. Basayev demanded an end to Russian operations in Chechnya. Russian forces tried to storm the hospital and failed. Eventually the Russians – effectively – accepted the Chechen demands. Basayev was allowed to return to Chechnya with his remaining fighters (he had lost only 12 men), leaving Budyonnovsk partially destroyed. Scores of others were also killed,

mainly civilians caught up in fighting by two sides which gave little thought to civilian lives.

600 fighters under Salman Raduyev attacked the Russian stronghold of Gudermes and fought for two weeks. In January 1996 Raduyev then led 200 Chechens into Dagestan where he took 1,000 hostages at a hospital. Again, the Russians let the Chechen fighters leave. But just short of the border the Russians attacked the Chechen militants who then dug in at a local village, taking more hostages. For three days Russian special forces attempted to take the village, suffering heavy losses. Having failed to destroy Raduyev's militia the Russians bombed the village, killing many civilians and justifying themselves by claiming all the hostages were already dead. After eight days the remaining Chechen fighters broke out through Russian lines.

Maskhadov

In April 1996 Dzhokhar Dudayev was killed by a Russian missile, apparently homing in on his telephone signal.

By mid-1996 the Russians had begun to believe they had won. However, in August 1996 Aslan Maskhadov organised a strike against Grozny. 1,500 fighters infiltrated the capital and on 6 August they took over much of Grozny. More Chechen fighters joined the insurgents and a week later they still held much of Grozny as most non-combatants fled. The attack shifted the balance of power inside the Russian state. Many among the army leadership, especially Afghanistan war veterans, wanted to settle and end the war. That's what happened.

That settlement uneasily froze Chechnya's status within the Russian Federation, but with de facto independence. Maskhadov, a secular nationalist, was elected President and attempted to make the peace work. Militias were incorporated into the state structures, but warlords maintained their hold and built local fiefdoms. Jihadist influence grew, and some militant leaders clearly declared their aim to be an Islamic state across the North Caucasus, rather than Chechen independence. Maskhadov introduced sharia law with the intention of undercutting the Islamists; but the Islamists were merely encouraged.

Basayev attempted to spread the war into neighbouring Dagestan in the summer of 1999. Aslan Maskhadov condemned the action, but could not prevent it.



Putin became head of the spy agency, FSB, in 1998, prime minister in August 1999, and, as Boris Yeltsin stepped down, acting President at the end of 1999. Putin, always an authoritarian nationalist, intended to make Russia a major power again.

In the run-up to Putin's Chechen war a series of mysterious bomb explosions took place in blocks of Russian flats. The bombs were blamed on the Chechens and provided part of the excuse Russia used to invade again. However, the FSB were caught planting a similar bomb in Ryazan, subsequently explaining that they had been involved in a training exercise.

Putin's forces were much better prepared for the subjugation of Chechnya. Putin declared Maskhadov's government illegitimate. The Russian state then carefully moved, in stages, through Chechnya towards Grozny. 40,000 civilians and 2,500 fighters were left in the ruins of Grozny to face the third Russian attack on the capital. The main assault began on 15 January 2000. The Chechens began to fragment, nationalists from Islamists, as their forces left the city in small groups at the end of January, suffering hundreds of casualties.

Russia declared Grozny liberated on 6 February. Only 21,000 of the original 400,000 population remained in the devastated town. South of Grozny, in the large village of Komsomolskoye, the Russians cornered 500 fighters. The village was completely obliterated as the attackers used aircraft and thermobaric missiles to destroy it at the cost of 550 Chechen lives, including very many civilians. Later, Anna Politkovskaya visited Komsomolskoye, and declared it to be "a village that no longer exists... looking like the set of a horror film."

What remained of the opposition took an increasingly Islamist character, acting against Maskhadov, and making attacks on Russian civilians. In October 2002 forty Islamists took 850 hostages at the Dubrovka Theatre in Moscow.

The Russians pumped in gas and sent special forces into the theatre. All the Islamists were killed along with 179 hostages. In September 2004 32 Islamists took 1100 hostages at School Number One, in Beslan, North Ossetia. As bombs exploded inside the school the building was stormed and 334 hostages died, including 186 children.

The Russian responses to these terrorist actions was characterised by utter disregard for the lives of civilians caught up in the events.

In March 2003 a new constitution was ratified stating that Chechnya is part of the Russian Federation. During the Second Chechen war Putin had been careful to create Chechen proxies: militias and a local leadership which would act for him. Akhmad Kadyrov, a former nationalist fighter who had changed sides, became President. His son, Ramzan, ran his militia, the Kadyrovtsy, and now controls Chechnya. Akhmad Kadyrov was assassinated by Chechen Islamists in 2004.

Aslan Maskhadov spent the Second Chechen war as a guerrilla leader with a \$10mn bounty on his head. He fought the Russian occupation, but condemned attacks on Russian civilians, describing those who occupied the school in Beslan as "madmen". He advocated a negotiated settlement, but in 2005 he was found and killed by Russian forces.

Budanov

On 26 March 2000 Vladimir Putin won the Presidential election in the first round, with 53% of the vote. Later that night one of the most notorious crimes of the Chechen war was committed by Colonel Yuri Budanov. Budanov kidnapped, raped and murdered a 17-year old Chechen, Elsa Kungayeva from the village of Tangi-Chu, south west of Grozny.

Budanov was later killed by Islamists for his crime.

Before Budanov attacked Elsa Kungayeva, abducted in front of her family from her home, he had beaten up Senior Lieutenant Roman Bagreev for refusing to fire heavy cannons at Tangi-Chu, for fun. Bagreev was tied up, thrown in a pit intended for Chechens, covered with lime, then pissed on.

Budanov was the product of Putin's Chechen war and a symbol of Putin's attitude to the Chechens. And Budanov was also a warning for us about the future Putin intended. □

Unions: the potent



Debate

By Gregor Gall

With the cost-of-living crisis in full swing, it would not be illogical to foresee potential for unions to become resurgent again. So, what light do Pluto Press's three books from 2021 shed on the challenges facing unions here?

They are Eve Livingston's *Make Bosses Pay: Why We Need Unions*, Jane Hardy's *Nothing to Lose But Our Chains: Work and Resistance in Twenty-First-Century Britain* and Jane Holgate's *Arise: Power, Strategy and Union Resurgence*. All involved undertaking interviews with activists and those working for unions. Yet they are pitched in different ways. Livingston's is more of a popular, journalistic read. Hardy's has a wider focus than just unions though the central theme concerns generating workplace resistance to the capitalist labour process. And, Holgate's is an extended academically-informed consideration of how and why unions lost their influence and might regain it.

Livingston flags up many of the salient issues – such as arguing for the positive role of unions while simultaneously recognising their decline and hoping for a reversal of this – but without delving too deeply into the array of possible responses and solutions. So, she sits rather uncomfortably between straddling the perspectives that “unions are weakened and not fighting enough” with “there is still evidence of union strength and unions fighting”. She has this in common with Hardy.

Livingston begins by laying out the male, pale, stale and frail stereotype which still has some resonance in order to argue for space for the antithesis (women, people of colour, youth etc). Her call is particularly focussed upon young workers at the bottom end of the labour market to get organised and move from being individualised competitors to collectively-minded union collaborators – and to then rejuvenate unions and stop them from dying out as the more unionised, older workers retire. Her evidence base for this is array of secondary newspaper and web sources, some interviews and some personal experience.

Unfortunately, she did not delve into any critical or academic studies which would have flagged up that there are situations – indeed, sectors and sometimes eras – when cooperation between capital and labour is more

pronounced than conflict. This is because her sympathy with Marxism could be said to be somewhat simplistic and superficial, leading to a low-level of understanding of it. This becomes most evident on the relationships between collective class and individual worker consciousness; reforms, reformism and revolution; and class, unions and work (rather than the means of production, distribution and exchange per se). For example, Livingston's emphasis on the component of solidarity as part of forming group identity obscures their basis, namely, material self-interest. But Marxism is not necessarily needed to examine the short-medium-long-term tensions and compatibilities involved in organising non-union workers while mobilising unionised workers.

The absence of deploying more weighty sources means Livingston makes no examination of key features of labour unionism like economism, sectionalism and the aspiration for socialism, however defined. Or the context of the balance of power, where listing what are deemed to be “inspiring” struggles can only be at best half the story. And, too great an emphasis on the explanatory power of the anti-union laws obscures the more subterranean processes at work.

Low participation

One example of this: the need for understanding why membership participation levels are now historically relatively low, be this of instrumental and-or ideological bents. Indeed, and though not to justify the Trade Union Act 2016, why cannot unions get more than 50% turnout in many cases where the answer is not simply about the problems of postal balloting? Is it the case that neo-liberalism has lowered workers' expectations so much that, when making calculations about whether to fight or not, they decide the likely losses would outweigh any gains? Such weaknesses undermine her progressive conception of unions as member-led organisations which are, consequently, more likely to be not only more democratic and participative but also stronger. Here, Livingston does at least cite Jane McAlevey's critique of advocacy and mobilisation and case for “deep organising”.

Livingston makes sensible but rather unremarkable suggestions for union renewal without convincingly showing how these could be implemented and achieved, other than calling for unions to be bolder or look to some outriders like the IWGB in the guise of what she calls liberatory unionism (also known

as social movement unionism). Calling for unions to be bolder does not adequately address why they are presently not bolder. Examining the outriders does not help understand how their practices can be mainstreamed or scaled up. If social movement unionism is so good, why is it so little practised? The time for mere exhortation has long since elapsed.

Following from this, Livingston unfortunately shares with Hardy a number of flaws. Hope and inspiration are called for without any robust materialist underpinning. The tendency for assertion over analysis based on rigorous evidence is marked. With both, this can be found in the propensity to believe the most marginalised workers are more likely to fight back than others and that “two swallows make a summer” where the underlying thesis of citing examples of individual struggles creates a warm psychological glow but is bereft of intellectual strength.

As Hardy's book is a longer, more considered contribution, many of the aforementioned tendencies can now be more fully explored. The problems begin with the title. Taken from The Communist Manifesto's popularised line of “Workers of the World, Unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains”, it's clear in the short-term workers do potentially have much to lose before they can rid themselves of their capitalist chains, whether that be their jobs or living standards. It is somewhat ironic

that this title is also never explained or justified. This is a signal of what is to come. Hardy accuses those detracting from her analysis as “writ[ing] off the working class”, being inculcated with pessimism, fatalism and defeatism.

Though her goal of socialism is not revealed until the end, it should have been because it provides the framework for understanding much of what precedes it. It's not that the goal of socialism is problematic but rather her conception of it and how it may be achieved are. Within this, the point of striking almost seems to be striking itself because it more than any other process is believed to hold the germs of higher levels of class consciousness (being needed for achieving socialism and to be reified in building union membership and organisation). This is no small leap of faith as it's not self-evident.

Strikes and socialism

First, it's not clear whether strikes which are always sectional (bar general strikes) have this capacity. Second, does it matter if the strikes win or lose or by how much? Third, does the nature of the strike – its demands, length etc – bear upon this capacity? And, is it only strikes and striking that have this capacity? These questions require answers based on careful analysis.

Take, for instance, Hardy's lauding of the 2018 Glasgow equal pay strike. Though involving 8,000 overwhelmingly women workers, it was a mere two days long and was led by UNISON full-time organisers, coming after over a decade of failed other strategies, and has not been conclusive in settling the dispute with further strike threats deployed in 2022. Studies of the period of heightened struggle in the 1970s that Hardy did not consult showed factory or industry class consciousness was the most common product so that actual class consciousness being generated was still some way off. But let's for the sake of argument assume that strikes can generate this capacity. So, how can successful instances be scaled up from? Hardy does not provide any response here beyond platitudes.

This leads on to her de facto maxim: “they've struck and won, and so can you”, and the role of inspiration through recounting a litany of “inspiring” struggles. Workers will seldom engage in struggle just because of inspiration – stimulation to strike is primarily economic self-interest. If strikes can constitute tipping points of inspiration, the (positive) demonstration effect would need to be shown. Hardy does not do

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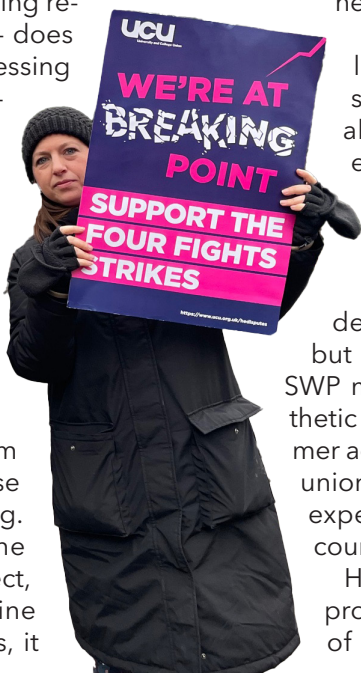
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ial for resurgence

this. Instead, assertion and inferences are relied upon. Equally notable in seeking to explain strike outcomes is the absence of the analysis of (variable) bargaining power, comprising – at base – disruptive capacities, labour market demand and political influence. This would also explain why some workers do not go on strike (and why some win and some do not).

Linked to this is that one of Hardy's themes is "resistance is possible and continues despite everything". Fair enough – but that is hardly a revelation given the exploitative, oppressive nature of work and employment under capitalism. And, celebrating resistance – as she does – does not help us deal with pressing problems of understanding the presence and absence of resistance and reasons for its successes and failures. Another theme is that inspiration's sister sense is optimism. It would be trite to say that Hardy follows Gramsci's "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will" motto because the former part is missing. Indeed, she follows the "Optimism of the intellect, optimism of the will" line of thought. Nonetheless, it



is worth stopping to ponder whether optimism is rightly the hallmark of a well-grounded and rounded analysis, especially a Marxist one. With Hardy, it becomes a case of "will to power" and voluntarism. And so those that can draw the lessons of optimism and inspiration are essentially only socialists of Hardy's ilk. Workers are never held responsible in any way for their attitudes and behaviours when they do not struggle. Instead, the "union bureaucracy" ordinarily are. Her exposition of this thesis is pedestrian and does not engage with its critics. Trying to refute it would have potentially strengthened her case.

The "rank-and-file", when led by the correct type of socialists, is invoked, being able to lead the "new layers" of workers entering the struggle. In terms of materials used, Hardy – unlike Livingston – does deploy some of the academic and critical literature but over-relies upon those by SWP members or those sympathetic to SWP analysis. For a former academic who did not study unions in Britain as her area of expertise, this is a hazardous course of action.

Holgate takes a different approach, using a broad range of academic work includ-

ing her own. She examines issues of power and processes in a much more open and profound way. She takes her starting points as Hobsbawm's "forward march of labour halted" thesis and the absence of a thorough going concentration upon the component of power in the predominant progressive response to union decline, namely, "union organising". Hobsbawm emphasised that even at the highpoint of class struggle and consciousness weaknesses in the union movement existed (and which would take on a greater significance come the employers' counter-offensive). Holgate's analysis flags up that the turn to "union organising" since the mid-1990s has concentrated more upon membership recruitment rather than building power. This leads to an assessment of the various sources of power (associational, structural, institutional, coalitional, discursive) and how power can be perceived in different ways.

Nuance

Compared to Hardy, Holgate's historical analysis is rightly much more measured, and circumspect about – and nuanced on – strikes and struggles generating class consciousness as she is about why and when workers do and do not engage in struggles. She assesses how union power was built in the laissez faire period so as to get a handle on how to rebuild it in the neo-liberal period; she conducts

cost-benefit analyses of strikes; examines the demonstration effect; and flags up the need for political education. This is accompanied by critically dissecting other responses to union decline (partnership, servicing and mergers), and assessing whether unions are democracies or have tendencies to be top-down oligarchies. In all this, she deploys the work of noted Marxist industrial relations scholars, Richard Hyman and John Kelly.

Yet, there is a lot of back and forth when looking at individual unions and different periods so no overall analytical head of steam is built up. Within this, class remains somewhat poorly theorised, what a transformation of labour unionism would look like and how it would come about (in terms of an agency) are not clearly outlined (other than proposing social movement unionism), the role of the left is unclear, and there's an element of throwing out "the baby with the bathwater" regarding picketing, boycotts ("blackings"), and solidarity action. Nonetheless, Holgate provides a more grounded and rounded analysis of the plight of labour unionism than Livingston or Hardy. But despite seeking to put power at the centre of her analysis, articulating a strategy for union resurgence does not quite come off. □

• Gregor Gall is a visiting professor of industrial relations at the University of Leeds

Mass protests in Sri Lanka

By Sacha Ismail

On 3 April the whole of Sri Lanka's cabinet – except prime minister Mahinda Rajapaksa – resigned in response to mass protests sparked by collapsing living standards and infrastructure. Sri Lanka is ruled by an executive presidency: protesters are now demanding the resignation of president Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Mahinda's brother.

With tourism and migrant remittances collapsing during the pandemic, Sri Lanka has been overwhelmed by its foreign debt and suffered widespread power cuts, rocketing fuel prices and food and other

shortages. The crisis has also been fuelled by neo-liberal policies benefiting the rich, rampant corruption and nepotism, and startling mismanagement. Last year an overnight ban on agrochemical fertilisers hurled the country from self-sufficiency in rice production to spending \$450m on importing rice.

Despite attempts at repression, the demonstrations have continued to spread. The government has lost its parliamentary majority due to defections.

The Rajapaksas retreating in the face of protests is itself startling. As defence minister from 2005 to 2015, Gotabaya

led the crushing of Sri Lanka's Tamil minority and the creation of a militarised regime in which murder, torture and disappearances – not just for Tamils – were normalised. Promoting Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, it is one of the string of right-wing nationalist regimes that has come to power around the world.

Winning election landslides in 2019 and 2020, the government changed the constitution to bolster the presidential regime even further.

"The drift towards militarisation and the weakening of the institutional checks and balances", says the United Nations

Human Rights Council, "have affected the state's ability to effectively tackle the economic crisis".

It seems the protesters, among whom young people are prominent, are demanding not just economic improvements but political changes, including repeal of "anti-terrorism" laws and the abolition of the presidency. Some have raised the slogans of "System change" and "Total system change".

The problem is what "tackling the economic crisis" looks like. The regime is seeking loans from the International Monetary Fund, and bridging

funds from China and India. The trade offs will be even further neo-liberal attacks on the people. There is a line of argument circulating that the crisis was caused by government over-generosity; the regime has used populist and "left-wing" rhetoric.

I haven't yet read of any distinctively labour movement element within the protests. We need to learn more, and make solidarity. □

• "The people want 'system change'!" Online discussion by South Asia Solidarity Group, with speakers in Sri Lanka. 3pm UK time, Sunday 24 April: bit.ly/s220424

Johnson signals threats to trans rights

By Zack Muddle

Speaking on [Sky News, 6 April](#), Boris Johnson doubled-down on his attack on trans rights. Defending a move to permit and legitimise anti-trans conversion therapy, he signalled a wider range of attacks on trans, women's, and children's rights:

- Opposition to Gillick competence
- Possible opposition to young people and children's trans healthcare even with parental consent
- That trans women should be excluded from women's spaces

"Gillick competence" refers, since a court ruling in 1985, to an assessment that an under-16 year old is legally able to consent to their own medical treatment, without needing parental permission or knowledge. "I don't think that it is reasonable for kids [sic] to be deemed so-called 'Gillick competent'" means opposing the right of children to consent even in cases where they would (currently) be deemed Gillick competent.

This right for under-16s was originally won to allow them to access contraception, with only their doctor's discretion needed. It was an important victory in the fight for reproductive rights. More recently, it has been used to permit 12- to 15-year olds to opt for Covid-19 vaccines.

The context here is a dog-whistle to the Bell v Tavistock [cases](#). At stake was a question of whether under-18s (not just under-16s!) could consent to be prescribed (reversible) puberty-blockers. Bell's lawyer declared that "the Gillick-competency test is no longer fit for purpose".

Johnson indicates a willingness to go even further than reversing Gillick competence in "decisions about their gender or irreversible [sic] treatment... I think there should be parental involvement at the very least".

Our decisions about our genders are personal, requiring social support but not necessarily medical support. Not all trans and non-binary people take hormone therapies or undergo surgery: Gillick competence is not relevant. But Johnson's dropping of amendments to the Gender Recognition Act to allow [self-identification](#) left transitioning individuals still facing hurdles constructed on the basis of a narrow medical understanding of transitioning.

Johnson's qualifier "at the very least" suggests young people being deprived of treatment even when they, medical practitioners, and their parents deem it in their best interest. Yet research [finds](#): "Among the positive outcomes of gender transition and related medical treatments for transgender individuals are improved quality of life, greater relationship satisfaction, higher self-esteem and confidence, and reductions in anxiety, depression, suicidality, and

substance use... Regrets following gender transition are extremely rare and have become even rarer as both surgical techniques and social support have improved... a regret rate ranging from 0.3 percent to 3.8 percent."

Sports

Continuing his transphobic spraying, Johnson mused that "I don't think that biological males should be competing in female sporting events." The purported concern is that trans women on average have higher testosterone levels and/or had higher levels of testosterone when they went through puberty than cis women, which, on average, may give them more muscle mass or a larger build than cis women, purportedly giving them an unfair advantage in getting the big prizes.

The extent of the advantage (and even the extent of trans women's participation in elite sports) is wildly overstated. And the focus on elite sports is misplaced. The vast majority of people participating in "female sporting events" are amateurs, often young people, competing in their spare time, as a hobby. For many, this is an important part of their identity, an emotionally and physically beneficial, enjoyable, and social activity. For trans athletes, facing many other personal, mental, and social challenges, this may be particularly important.

Such young amateur athletic trans women are the main victims of attempts to exclude trans women from participation in women's sports. In the USA, since 2020, at least ten states have ef-

fectively [banned](#) trans girls and young women from participating in sports, with bills tabled in dozens more; and significant hurdles in others besides.

Can't trans girls and women just participate in the boys' or men's competition? Such impulses to minimise the real extent of their exclusion fail to appreciate what being trans entails. Trans people's gender identities are constantly unrecognised and challenged by a hostile society. To demand that they misgender themselves, likely causing others to misgender them, at best forcing them to publicly be out as "trans", is cruel and unrealistic. It also reflects a double standard: trans girls and women taking puberty blockers or hormones on average have considerably less testosterone than cis boys and men.

How would a ban on trans girls and women be policed? Do we want a society where women must show a "femininity certificate", have their genitals inspected, or have their chromosomes analysed, to participate in women's sports? Or wind back the clock to make birth certificates immutable, and force their use as in many American schools? Would it apply to people who transitioned before puberty?

In elite sport there are testosterone criteria (overly restrictive, [I'd say](#)), yet for Johnson and other transphobes they are too lax.

At root, the "concern" here flows from and feeds the transphobic beliefs that trans women aren't real women, and even that they deceitfully pretend to be women to gain advantage. After all, many elite athletes have particularities about their genetics, biology, or childhood which gives them much more significant advantages, and no-one calls for their exclusion.

The issue of sports is more complex than others and requires more consideration. Yet its cynical weaponisation in defence of anti-trans conversion therapy and wider transphobia is not serious consideration.

There are many ways sports should and could be reorganised. An expansion and greater emphasis on amateur sports. At least a reduction in the incredibly high stakes of professional sport. Streaming of competitions, or of high-stakes competitions, could – as already sometimes – be by bodyweight, height, or even ability, no less readily than by gender, testosterone, chromosomes, or genitalia.

Spaces

"Women should have spaces – whether it's in hospitals, prisons, changing rooms – which are dedicated to women", continued Johnson. That he meant to imply cis women is clear. The question is not as to whether women-only places exist, but whether trans women should be excluded from them.

Trans women, then, aren't "women"; should be excluded from (cis) women-only spaces in these and more institutions; and given that prisons and changing rooms are generally strictly gender-segregated, they should be put in the men's spaces.

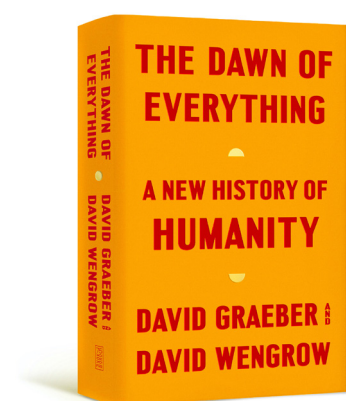
Such a position once again refuses and undermines the social recognition of trans women's chosen gender. It overlooks and disregards that trans women are victims of physical and sexual assault and abuse at high rates, higher even than cis women. It treats violence and abuse as innate characteristics of people born male, presumably biologically, rather than a social phenomena which is mediated through masculinity and other social constructions. It lets the wider driving forces behind the oppression of women off the hook; and it avoids consideration of how to reduce abuse and violence in prisons, where it is institutionalised and fomented, and other institutions.

Conversion therapy

All that was in reply to a question as to whether Johnson or the Tories still may ban anti-trans conversion therapy for trans children. In fact Johnson evaded that question.

Johnson said that "conversion therapy... is utterly abhorrent" when targeting gay people, but then why might it be ok for trans people? Few in the LG-BTIQ community buy his, or the transphobic "LGB alliance"'s, crass attempts to divide our solidarity.

The left and labour movement must argue through the issues, and go on the offensive for trans-inclusivity, self-ID, and an expansion of much-underfunded trans healthcare. Some prominent ostensibly left-wing [people](#) and [organisations](#) peddle transphobic ideas barely distinguishable from Johnson's, giving him ammo for his reactionary culture war. Where they cannot be won around, they must be exposed and (democratically) removed from positions of influence. □



More online

The Dawn of Everything

Differing views on David Graeber's and David Wengrow's book: bit.ly/g-w-debate

Covering for Russian imperialism

Sacha Ismail replies to John McNally's slurs on the 9 April Ukraine protest: bit.ly/mcinal

Strike rally 29 April

Great Ormond strikers fight for parity: bit.ly/g220429

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Speed up on 2022-3 pay!



By a Unison member

The public services union Unison has been consulting on our local government pay claim for April 2022, with the results being fed through to Unison representatives on the National Joint Council alongside other public sec-

tor unions. Members haven't yet been given a timeline for future decisions.

The options given to members were a flat rate claim, or RPI plus 2%

The claim is to be for pay from 1 April 2022, and yet hasn't even been submitted yet. RPI inflation is currently 9.0%, so we have to build confidence in an urgent fight for a serious pay award.

Many Unison members will receive the 1.75% April 2021 pay rise, backdated, in their April pay packets, and

so lose more of it through increased NI contributions payable from 1 April this year.

Unite

Unite, one of the three main unions in local government, along with Unison and GMB, has struck in Northern Ireland authorities demanding local improvements to supplement the 1.75%, and will soon also strike in Hackney council in London.

Unison's national service group elec-

tions run from 28 April to 25 May. Workers' Liberty supporters in Unison are supporting the 60 or so Time for Real Change [candidates](#), of which at least 28 have been elected unopposed.

We have disagreements with the TFRC majority, most recently on their failure to support Ukraine against Russian imperialism, but the slate is the best option for Unison to get a more radical leadership and democratise the union. □

Questions after police raid

By a Unite member

In the first week of April the *Daily Mirror* and *Guardian* carried reports of a police raid on Unite headquarters.

According to the reports, the raid was part of "a major bribery, fraud and money-laundering investigation" involving a Unite employee whose "files, documents and computer" were seized.

The investigation, reports continued,

concerned contracts relating to the union's recently built hotel and conference centre in Birmingham, and contracts relating to services provided to Unite members.

It would be inappropriate (and probably illegal) to speculate on the identity of the Unite employee. But a number of questions certainly need to be answered:

Will Unite's own inquiry into the costs

of the hotel and conference centre be put on hold until the police investigation and possible criminal proceedings are completed?

Despite legal limits on what could be said, shouldn't Unite have put out a statement about the raid rather than leaving members to hear about it from the media?

What steps are being taken by Unite to safeguard materials about union

members and union activities seized during the raid?

Could the police raid have been pre-empted by Unite? By more transparent procedures for recording and checking the union's finances, for example?

Or if fuller answers had been provided to questions about the Birmingham project [report](#) presented to the Unite national Executive Committee special meeting of January 2021? □

Uni disputes: don't postpone!

By a UCU member

Delegates from University and College Union (UCU) branches meet on 20 April to debate next steps in the "Four Fights" dispute on pay, equality, casualisation and workload. The dispute has seen thirteen days of strike action since November, but with the mandate expiring after six months, the union was forced to reballot.

Parallel

A parallel reballot was organised in the dispute over cuts to the USS pension scheme, with a special conference on that issue due on 27 April.

The reballot saw a drop, for both disputes, in the number of branches reaching the turnout threshold for action. In Four Fights 39 branches now have a mandate for action, down from 64. In USS, the total is 27, down from 46. However, some branches – including Exeter and Cardiff – have voted for action for the

first time. In response, General Secretary Jo Grady has argued that the union should hold off on further action until 2023.

This effectively accepts that this year the employers have won, that if there is to be any victory over USS it will now come via legal action, and that pay will continue to fall behind soaring inflation. Grady claims that this will give branches time to increase density, but it is hard to see why people will join a union that appears to be giving up the fight.

Alternative

The alternative is to step up action and hit those universities where branches do have a mandate with strikes, a marking boycott, action to hit clearing and admissions, or a combination of all three. Those branches without a live ballot could focus on public campaigning – for example, disruption to open days – and, importantly, fundraising to ensure strike pay for the

branches that are now carrying the dispute.

It would be bizarre if, having fought to get the vote out, branches are now told to wait a year before taking action in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis.

The experience of the last few months has raised real questions about the ability and willingness of the union leadership to lead a successful dispute. Many decisions in the course of the strikes have left members frustrated, from the failure to include not re-scheduling teaching in the initial ASOS, to the restriction of strike pay to the first eleven days of action (meaning the latest ballot came with no guarantee of strike pay at all), to lack of consultation on when to time action.

If continued action is to be successful it is vital that branches are given autonomy to determine dates and tactics that will hit hardest at the local level. □

Goldsmiths starts marking boycott

By Cathy Nugent

On Monday 4 April Goldsmiths University and College Union (UCU) began a marking and assessment boycott as the latest action in their long-running fight against compulsory redundancies at the college.

On Friday 8 April the Senior Management Team (SMT) sent out compulsory redundancy notices to 16 members of staff in English, History and Professional Services. This, during a period of talks at ACAS between UCU and the SMT! This is just the first (of three) tranches of job cuts in the college plan. The jobs cut include those of the Goldsmiths UCU Co-President, one of the UCUs Treasurers, and both reps of the affected departments. The fight is now, even more, about the college's attempt to break the unions.

UCU and Unison have been

fighting since late summer 2021 against these cuts, which will be accompanied by a radical restructuring – centralisation of admin work and a curriculum review. Since that time the college's deficit – the justification for cuts – has been substantially reduced. UCU argues that: "in terms of recurrent staff savings, the College is already well over" [its target]. But fear of deficit has been hyped up by the management, especially since it entered into a financial agreement (overdraft) with Lloyds and NatWest Banks. This is a brutal clash with managers determined to impose their "right to manage" through sackings, intimidation and falsification of the truth about this dispute, against the workers who have built, over years, everything Goldsmiths provides. More public solidarity efforts will follow soon. □

“What we stand for

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

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- Workers' control of major industries and finance for a rapid transition to a green society
- A workers' movement that fights all forms of oppression
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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

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

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The big vote approaches



Diary of an trackworker

By Matt Shaw

The big vote approaches over our terms and conditions, pay, and redundancies. It's a bit hard to describe how the feeling is running at work as there's a lot of shouting and wishful thinking about redundancies, chances of winning, what effect our being on strike will have.

Behind all of this is a long history of small things which have been let slip. Minor taking on of office duties or supervisory work, lack of support from our "supervisors", allowing ways of

work to be dictated by the office, and a general feeling of "what's the point".

That has all been allowed to fester by a union head office and bureaucracy that has felt very distant.

Local reps, where we have them, also feel a lack of support, both from union head office and in occasions where the workers, through a lack of clear national leadership, have not backed them up.

But the situation is not insurmountable. At last the union leadership has taken some baby steps in turning things around. The phone-banking by head office to try to gauge the feelings, alongside checking of addresses, gives some form of direct contact that has been sadly lacking. The online branch special meetings have opened up the stage to fresh blood as well as reinvigorating older activists and allowing

exchange of ideas between branches when members from other areas attend.

People who previously would not attend any union function now have a feeling of urgency to get involved.

This cross-pollination of ideas needs to be maintained when this dispute finishes so that we never find ourselves so far on the back foot, and that the membership drive the union, not the bureaucracy which has let us down so badly.

We need a recognition that we, the people on the sleeper ends and on the trains, have a much clearer idea of what we can do and how to do it than some remote bod who's never been outside a lecture hall or directors' office.

The big drive now is to get a huge yes vote on a huge turnout. □

NEU conference debates Ukraine

By a school worker

The first in-person National Education Union (NEU) conference since April 2019 committed to build towards a ballot in either summer or autumn term if the School Teachers Review Body comes up with a poor pay award.

An amendment from Lewisham District with a clearer time line, and which more clearly included support staff, was largely gutted by the passing of earlier motions which it was said to contradict, but the speeches and mood of conference suggested that the leadership at least wanted to seem to respond seriously to increasing rank and file pressure on pay. The union will be working with other unions on pay and building for the TUC demonstration on 18 June.

The conference, on 11-14 April, had four emergency motions: on Child Q, Ukraine, the Government's White Paper on Education, and Conversion Therapy.

Three (Child Q, the White Paper and Conversion Therapy) were largely uncontroversial on conference floor, although it took another debate to agree a clear statement of "cops out of schools".

The debate on Ukraine was convoluted. The original emergency motion was

poor. The way it was moved and argued for was terrible.

It had a fake even handedness between Ukraine and Russia, and it had an ill-placed pacifism directed against Ukrainian resistance. It centred on a call for negotiated settlement, not recognising that negotiating with a despot who has invaded your country, unleashing murder, rape, and mass destruction might be problematic, or that Russia has repeatedly stated it won't stop the war for negotiations.

The motion also introduced a red herring with its statement that "the deployment of British and NATO forces in Ukraine would be a dangerous escalation". There is no indication of that happening. In fact the few troops in Ukraine from Britain and other NATO countries were removed before Russia's invasion to avoid them becoming embroiled in the war.

Amendments 1 and 3, if anything worsened the motion. Amendment 2 would have ensured a clear solidarity with Ukraine without equivocation or obfuscation, and placed the union clearly in line with other education unions internationally. Amendment 4 was a well meaning practical solidarity proposal.

Conference, voted narrowly for amendment 1 and

then against amendment 2. But as the argument went on, there was a palpable shift in conference's mood. Strong speeches were waking conference up. When Amendment 3 was lost, people around the "NEU Left" curtailed the debate in favour of a quick vote on the motion.

By this time conference could see what what was going on, and voted down the motion. Over an hour to end up with no policy, but better no policy than a shameful one.

Conference voted strong policy on defending workplace reps, including waiving the requirement for an estimate of over 50% chance of winning legal industrial action before going for resistance. That brought the union in line with Sharon Graham's commitment in Unite.

It improved policy on Support Staff but still fell short of seeking full recruitment and representation rights. (All the speeches against full recruitment and representa-

tion were made by teachers, and all but one by members of the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP)).

The conference supported pushing for a National Contract, but refused to back that with potential balloting for industrial action. Once again, conference refused to back balloting for a boycott of high stakes testing in primary schools and (if Key Stage 3 SATs are reintroduced) in secondaries.

Workers' Liberty produced a 14 page conference bulletin and a two-page special on Ukraine and Support Staff, both of which were widely read and well received. We held a fringe meeting where 30 delegates heard from Ukrainian socialists both in Ukraine and in the UK, as well as a speaker from the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign.

A number of speakers from the floor thanked Workers' Liberty for our role in the conference debate and in defeating a terrible motion. □

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Funnel anger into vote



John Moloney

This week [starting 18 April] the National Executive Committee (NEC) of our union, PCS, has to decide whether the union should later this year head towards a statutory ballot over the cost of living crisis. This is on the back of the consultative vote which gave an overwhelming “yes” to industrial action and in support of the pay claim, but fell short of achieving a 50% turnout.

Now in my opinion, the NEC should agree to move towards a statutory ballot. Firstly, the continuing squeeze on living standards will intensify over the coming months, putting intense pressure on all our members but obviously particularly those in the lowest grades. Rightly members therefore will ask what is the union’s response. The reply should be that we are going to ballot. Members’ fears, anger and anxiety should be funnelled into the vote.

That means of course getting over the threshold. We should aim though to get well over 50% because the industrial action that we are going to need will have to be considerable if we are going to change the government’s policy. Hopefully other unions will also be fighting over the cost of living but we have to prepare to fight on our own if necessary.

This means we will have to thoroughly engage with our activist base to persuade them that not only is the ballot necessary but that it can be won, and won big, but only they can deliver this. Whilst in many campaigns there is certain element that is “top down”, and that will be the case in this campaign, we have to give activists the space, encouragement and resources to run a proper grass roots campaign at the branch, town and regional level. □

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

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Rail ballot from 26 April



Off The Rails

The rail union RMT will ballot members from 26 April to 24 May on action for the following demands:

- A substantial increase in the rate of pay
- A no-compulsory-redundancy guarantee
- No detrimental changes to working practices and terms and conditions.

It will be a disaggregated ballot across Network Rail and 15 Train Operating Companies (TOCs), so enabling legal strikes in every area which gets sufficient turnout even if the aggregate turnout is not high enough.

Clear, concrete, and ambitious demands will help get ballots over the threshold and engage members in the dispute. The union has not specified what “substantial increase” in pay it is seeking, or whether the dispute relates to 2021/22 or 2022/23, or both. RPI inflation is now 9.0%. Network Rail has applied a pay freeze to workers earning over £24,000, and offered only £250 to those below.

Many TOCs have refused to make any pay offer. RMT should demand a flat-rate increase instead of, or as well, percentage increases, to ensure lower-paid grades benefit most.

No-compulsory-redundancy guarantees where we don’t have them would be a real gain, but it’s unfortunate the union has held back from foregrounding the more radical demand: no job cuts. A job deleted via a voluntary severance scheme is still a cut.

On 15 December 2021, in an email to members, RMT included a fourth demand: “Protect the Railway Pension Scheme – keep it open and affordable for members”. This seems to have been dropped, without explanation, from the RMT’s recent announcement. It’s important we fight on pensions, as well as jobs, pay, and conditions.

With RMT members on London Underground (LU) also in dispute, and set to strike again, there is a possibility for further coordination between LU strikes and strikes on Network Rail/TOCs. This would be perhaps the most significant flexing of industrial muscle in the modern history of the RMT. The first step is ensuring an active campaign to get the vote out. □

John Leach for RMT AGS!

By Workers’ Liberty members in RMT

The rail union RMT will hold an election for one of its Assistant General Secretary positions, after incumbent Steve Hedley retired, citing ill-health. Branch nominations close on 14 May, with voting from 27 June to 1 August.

Workers’ Liberty members active in RMT will back John Leach, currently the union’s Regional Organiser in the London Transport region, which covers Transport for London (TfL) and subsidiary employers. Leach has been London Transport Regional Organiser since 2013, prior to which he worked as a station supervisor on London Underground. He has also been the union’s national president, and served on its National Executive Committee. As Regional Organiser he has helped lead a number of major disputes and campaigns, including several key fights involving outsourced workers.

Leach is so far the only declared candidate.

We backed Leach in the 2021 general secretary election, in which he stood on a platform of empowering rank-and-file members. Leach said in an interview with us: “General Secretaries are mostly and should be elected and they should carry out their manifesto, they aren’t like the CEO of a company. The members put them in place and that is who they

have to be accountable to. We should do what we are told by the membership!”

Although, as another straight white man vying for a senior leadership position in the union, Leach’s election won’t improve diversity, he has a strong record on equalities issues. He has said: “We need to reach out from within to make the union reflect the members. It isn’t about getting some independent advice about how we can make the union more representative but listening to our equalities committees, carrying out what they decide.”

Leach’s candidacy was declared unilaterally. Workers’ Liberty members in RMT have been critical of a culture in the union whereby candidates unilaterally declare their candidacies, rather than candidacies and platforms emerging democratically from discussion amongst networks of activists in the union. We reiterate those criticisms now; notwithstanding this, we hope that Leach’s campaign might contribute to the development of ongoing networks within the union that might provide a forum for discussion of future candidacies, as well as wider platforms for transforming the union.

Workers’ Liberty activists will get involved in John Leach’s campaign to advance a programme for rank-and-file, socialist trade unionism. □

Rail cleaners strike for £15

By Ollie Moore

Cleaners on West Coast, employed by outsourced contractor Atalian Servest, struck again on 9-10 April.

The cleaners have struck several times previously, in the face of a mounting cost-of-living crisis. They earn just £9.68 per hour, below the Living Wage Foundation’s calculations for a real living wage of £9.90 outside of London, and £11.05 in it. Even those levels are probably conservative estimates. RMT is right to have demanded a £15/hour minimum in its strikes across multiple TOCs where cleaners are employed by Churchill.

RMT is also demanding full occupational sick pay. Research by the union found that 91% of cleaners were struggling to make ends meet, and 94% of saying they had to come into work whilst unwell because they could not afford to take time off. Eight Labour MPs, representing constituencies served by West Coast routes, have written to the bosses of both Atalian Servest and West Coast in support of the workers’ demands.

RMT has also called new strikes in its disputes involving Churchill cleaners on Govia Thameslink Railway contracts. Those workers will strike from 27 April to 7 May. The announcement follows negotiations between the union and the company which resulted only in a “derisory” offer. □

One of the Hollywood Ten



Kino Eye

By John Cunningham

The independent film *Salt of the Earth* (1954), about a 1950-2 miners’ strike in New Mexico, is well known to activists in the labour movement.

One of the Hollywood Ten, directed by Welshman Karl Francis in 2000 and shot in Spain, follows *Salt’s* director Herbert Biberman (played by Jeff Goldblum) when he refuses to give evidence at a hearing of the House Un-American Activities Committee in the McCarthy period. He is jailed for six months. On his release he is determined to make a film about the strike.

Since he has been sacked by Warner Brothers, it is a struggle to find finance. Only five professional actors are prepared to work with him, the rest of the cast are mineworkers and local people. The leading actress, Rosaura Revueeltas, is deported to Mexico as an “illegal alien”; Biberman shoots some of the final scenes there and smuggles the film back into the US. Despite an attempt by the FBI to steal the negatives the film gets finished. □



Stop Tory offshore asylum ploy

By Ben Tausz

On 13 April, the government announced a raft of anti-refugee measures, including a deal to remove many asylum seekers from the UK to Rwanda.

It is even worse than a plan to outsource processing of refugees to offshore detention camps. It will deport them to Rwanda to claim asylum there, allowing them no possibility of settling in Britain.

Other announcements include putting operations relating to small refugee boats in the Channel under military command, and a new detention centre to imprison those refugees not removed to Rwanda.

When Denmark floated something similar last year, the African Union [highlighted](#) that rich countries already host only 15% of the world's refugees. Palming off even that small share stinks of imperial arrogance as well as inhumanity.

Australia's imprisonment of refugees in offshore camps while processing their applications placed detention further from scrutiny, and detainees further from support. Conditions were appalling. Physical and sexual abuse, including of children, were [rife](#). Australia has begun winding down the practice.

Israel [tried](#) to deport thousands of Eritrean and Sudanese migrants to Rwanda and Uganda. About 4,000 were "voluntarily" removed. Rwanda and Uganda denied them residency and support. Some were [detained and beaten](#). [Almost all](#) quickly left again, making dangerous journeys. Legal challenges and [protests](#) in Israel successfully blocked further deportations.

Ministers' comments suggest the scheme will initially apply to men arriving unaccompanied by irregular routes, though this is not fixed – [any](#) asylum seeker could face removal. The Conservatives are dog-whistling the widespread myths that single male refugees' claims are bogus, and that such men are inherently dangerous.

Lawyers and NGOs are gearing up to contest the scheme in the courts. Johnson suggests he will respond with demagoguery against "activist lawyers". The government claims it is legal despite the Refugee Convention and even without the Nationality and Borders Bill currently moving through Parliament.

The Labour leadership has spoken against the plans. But it continues to accept the premise that the response to irregular Channel crossings must involve deterring or preventing migrants from attempting to reach Britain. (This is not new – shamefully, Corbyn and Abbott [did so too](#).) In



truth, it is Britain's insistence on blocking safe modes of travel for most refugees that leaves them on irregular routes and in exploitative smugglers' hands.

Labour frontbenchers' objections put too much emphasis on legality, expense, and impracticality, rather than directly challenging the xenophobic bigotry.

Rapid-response protests in London and Glasgow each drew a few hundred supporters on short notice, including Labour MP Nadia Whittome and Scottish Labour MSPs. This is a start, but we will have to escalate significantly to win. Better Labour and trade union leaders would be calling and leading protests.

Speakers in London rightly highlighted the PCS (civil service) union's threats to strike against life-threatening pushbacks targeting boats at sea. If civil service and transport workers here or in Rwanda refuse to implement this plan, it cannot proceed. There are already many [examples](#) of pilots grounding deportation flights.

Both FDA (senior civil servants) and PCS union leaders [condemned](#) the plans. FDA warned that some civil servants might quit rather than implement them. Actually obstructing implementation would require a qualitative leap in persuasion, confidence, and organisation of workers, and likely a confrontation with Britain's anti-union laws. This must become a priority for the migrant rights and labour movements.

We must do what we can to collaborate in solidarity with rights groups, refugees and trade unions in Rwanda, though the violently repressive Kagame government makes resistance difficult and dangerous. Rwandan authorities have [shot and criminalised](#) refugees protesting poor treatment.

As the latest assault in the Conservatives' brutal war on migrants, the Rwanda deportation plan underlines the need to confront their agenda head-on. Victory will require not only direct action and industrial action, but a consistent, persuasive political challenge to bigotry and reaction. □



Opposing Labour's ban on Workers' Liberty

By Colin Foster

As *Solidarity* goes to press on 21 April, work is advancing on initial signatories to a statement by prominent Labour Party people about the ban on Workers' Liberty and on *Solidarity* by the National Executive (NEC) on 29 March.

The signatories say that they will take up the clause in the ban allowing for continued debate with Workers' Liberty – one which the NEC had to put in because well-known Labour right-wingers, as well as a range of people on the Labour left too broad for Starmer to purge, have spoken at Workers' Liberty events or done interviews with *Solidarity*.

Meanwhile the first few letters of "auto-exclusion" have arrived. One cites as damning evidence writing contributed to *Solidarity* six years

ago, as part of a debate, arguing that we must learn from a variety of socialist traditions in the past! But Labour's current rules allow for no due process.

They also give the NEC "absolute discretion" (without accountability) to ban whomever it likes. And they prohibit Constituency Labour Parties passing motions on individual disciplinary cases.

But they do not prohibit motions about the ban, and they can't prohibit anything much in the affiliated unions.

The current purge is more scattergun than anything done before in the Labour Party except the big waves of exclusions between 2015 and early 2017. The ultra-Blairites think they are on a roll and no-one will dare push back. Check out [workersliberty.org](#) for the latest on the campaign. □

New purge in Liverpool Labour

By Mohan Sen

Alan Gibbons, a Labour councillor and well-known local campaigner in Liverpool, and a member of Momentum's National Coordinating Group, has been expelled by Labour for an interview for Socialist Appeal's newspaper in January 2021 – six months before SA was proscribed.

Gibbons has taken a strong and vocal stand in solidarity with Ukraine against Russian imperialism. (Unlike Socialist

Appeal!) He and other Labour councillors in Liverpool who refused to vote for the last council budget were excluded from the Labour whip a while back.

Now they have set up their own group in the council: as they must know, that will get them all expelled from the party (would have done even pre-Starmer). Presumably then they will set up their own local network or party.

The councillors have been studiously moderate, propos-

ing a Salford or North Ayrshire approach more than campaigns to win restored funding from central government.

Starmer's aim is make the left in the Labour Party either quit, or provoke its own expulsion, or become so cautious that it neutralises itself. It is a path taking Labour towards collapse like the French Socialist Party or Dutch Labour Party, and the left towards dispersal. The remaining left must rally the unions to resist! □



Solidarity

For a workers' government

Unions stand with Ukraine demonstration,
London, 9 April. Credit: @ArthurLi



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