

Solidarity

& Workers' Liberty



For social ownership of the banks and industry

UP THE STRIKES! DOWN WITH THE TORIES!



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Up the strikes! Down with the Tories!



Editorial

Many of the strikes now underway or due soon are directly against the Tory government as employer.

We think it was wrong for the RCN nurses' union to say it would call off strikes if the government just agreed to talk about pay – talking won't win anything unless there is action behind it – but the government refused even to make that gesture. NHS workers, ultra-stressed by cumulative erosion of NHS budgets, are allotted 4%, way below inflation, and the Tories as yet won't even talk about more.

The Tories don't deny that they intervened in rail industry talks to insist the employers reduced the pay offer and added strings. Since the lockdowns, the Train Operating Companies are essentially only management contractors, with revenues and financial risks held by the government.

According to journalist [Philip Inman](#), using figures from the Institute of Fiscal Studies, a pay rise across the public sector matching the Consumer Price

Index at 10.1% would cost the government just £8.5 billion (if we factor in the government recouping some of the rise through income tax and VAT on workers' spending).

If the rise were 17%, clawing back some of the real-wage loss of recent years, that suggests the cost would be about £17 billion.

Total government spending is about £1,000 billion a year. Even more to the point, the total flowing to the rich (including for capital investment by the firms they own) is about £1,200 billion, if you count in the salaries of the ultra-high-paid, which are more like allocations from property income than ordinary labour income. At the peak, top bosses' pay went up 23% in 2022. The bosses of the top 100 companies on the Stock Exchange took an average of £3.9 million, with a record level of bonuses.

Or again: the government will spend £100 billion in 2023 on debt payments to rich people and firms who hold government bonds (IOUs). It is spending £6.5 billion just on tidying up the energy retailer Bulb so that another retailer, Octopus, can take it over as a profitable concern. It is spending over

£60 billion, just up to April, on an energy bill relief scheme which does give some help, but is full of gaps for the worst-off, especially on pre-payment meters, and simultaneously works to keep the most profitable energy firms still ultra-profitable:

one [estimate](#) is £170 billion extra profit in 2023-4. (Public ownership of the whole energy industry, allowing supply at average rather than "marginal" cost, and a free basic quota of energy for each household, would give fairer and environmentally-better bill relief.)

The government, and the wealthy class they represent, are not short of resources to accommodate pay rises.

They oppose pay rises for the same reason that they starve the NHS of resources and push for more and more privatisation of health care.

They have inflation, mostly as a result of supply blockages after lock-

downs compounding with a release of stored-up spending power of the better-off after those lockdowns, plus Brexit. Unpredictable inflation is both-ersome, particularly for financial capitalists.

They aim to reduce inflation by engineering an economic recession (they hope a mild one) with minimum damage to profits. That means pressing down wages and social spending, and enabling the profiteers to come out of the recession with the balance tilted further in their favour.

It is a class battle. It can be won by working-class solidarity. □



Exploitation and how to end it



Socialism vs capitalism

By Martin Thomas

Capitalist exploitation is not a misfortune only of worse-off workers. It is the common structural situation of all wage-workers, even relatively well-paid ones.

Karl Marx put it like this in his *Grundrisse*, an early draft for *Capital*.

"The exchange between capital and labour... splits into two processes which are not only formally but also qualitatively different, and even contradictory:

"(1) The worker sells their commodity [i.e. their labour-power, their creative capacity]... for a specific sum

of money... (2) The capitalist obtains labour itself.. the productive force... which thereby becomes... a force belonging to capital itself...

"Instead of... considering the workers to owe a debt to capital for the fact that they are alive at all, and can repeat certain life processes every day as soon as they have eaten and slept enough – these white-washing sycophants of bourgeois economics should rather have fixed their attention on the fact that, after constantly repeated labour, they always have only their living, direct labour itself to exchange...

Impoverish

"The workers cannot become rich in this exchange, since, in exchange for his labour capacity as a fixed, available magnitude, they surrender its creative power, like Esau their

birthright for a mess of pottage. Rather, they necessarily impoverish themselves... because the creative power of their labour establishes itself as the power of capital, as an alien power confronting them. They divest themselves of labour as the force productive of wealth; capital appropriates it, as such...

"The productivity of their labour, their labour in general, in so far as it is not a capacity but a motion, real labour, comes to confront the workers as an alien power; capital, inversely, realises itself through the appropriation of alien labour.

"The workers emerge not only not richer, but emerge rather poorer from the process that they entered. For not only have they produced the conditions of necessary labour as conditions belonging to capital; but also the value-creat-

ing possibility, the realisation which lies as a possibility within them, now likewise exists as surplus value, surplus product, in a word as capital, as master over living labour capacity, as value endowed with its own might and will, confronting them in his abstract, objectless, purely subjective poverty.

Alien

"They have produced not only the alien wealth and their own poverty, but also the relation of this wealth as independent, self-sufficient wealth, relative to themselves as the poverty which this wealth consumes, and from which wealth thereby draws new vital spirits into itself, and realises itself anew.

"After production, [labour capacity] has become poorer by the life forces expended, but otherwise begins the drudgery anew..."

All this applies directly to workers in private industry producing goods and services for the market.

Marx argued that workers ultimately paid out of the surplus created by capitalistically-productive labour are exploited too, because they are clawed into the same social relations. Their employers make them work longer and more intensely than required to cover their collective costs, and they have the output of their labour annexed and controlled by an alien wealthy class.

Socialism abolishes exploitation by establishing collective democratic control over production, so that workers' efforts are made in good, democratically-controlled conditions, and go into producing for human needs, rather being confiscated by profiteers or privileged state authorities. □

The strikes must take on politics

By Ollie Moore

Thousands-strong rallies of fire fighters and postal workers organised by the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) and Communication Workers' Union (CWU) on 5 and 9 December brought the energy and solidarity of those unions' disputes together in a concerted and visible way.

Both workers and supporters will have been buoyed by the collective show of strength. In addition to workers being brought together from across the country, the images of thousands of fire fighters in uniform packing Westminster Methodist Central Hall, and over 15,000 postal workers in bright pink CWU tabards filling Parliament Square, send a stark visual message to employers and government.

More of such events, at both local and national level, are needed as part of the ongoing strike movement. With nurses striking for the first time on 15 and 20 December, and ambulance workers striking shortly after, there is a particular need for the wider labour movement to rally round NHS workers, and put their strikes at the centre of a movement of working-class resistance to renationalise and rebuild the NHS.

Despite some union leaders occasionally bemoaning the "politicisation"

of disputes, preferring to insist that they are only "industrial relations matters", this strike wave has been profoundly political from the start. It is a movement that poses questions that can only be resolved via political change.

With the NHS in what this paper and others have called its worst ever crisis, this question, perhaps more than any other, draws out the political implications of the strike wave as a whole: what kind of society do we want to live in? One where profit and the markets rule, and workers' wages can be screwed down, and jobs cut, if it suits the bosses' bottom line – or one in which human need comes first?

The very existence of an institution like the NHS is an embryonic suggestion of the latter. Karl Marx called parliamentary reforms that put legal limits on the working day pieces of the "political economy of the working-class" carved out of capitalism; gains that proved that capital was not invincible, that economic life could be made to answer to a higher power than that of profit. Socialised healthcare is something similar. With the workers who provide it now going into industrial battle to improve the conditions in which they work – and by extension, the quality of the service they provide – their strikes have a po-



15,000 CWU Royal Mail strikers joined a rally in Parliament Square on 9 December

litical resonance for the entire working class well beyond the immediate dynamics of an "industrial relations matter" between a group of workers and their employers.

Britain's harsh anti-union laws, potential additions to which are discussed elsewhere in this paper, prevent unions from striking legally for explicit political demands, and from striking in solidar-

ity with other workers. Even if we are not yet ready to straightforwardly defy those laws, we have significant opportunities to test their limits. Striking unions in other sectors should declare themselves in full solidarity with NHS workers' struggles, and make clear that their own members' actions dovetail with NHS workers' strikes in pointing the way to a different kind of society. □

Strikes

Since 20 October: Quorn factory workers in Billingham (Unite) on indefinite strike

5-18 December: Workers at housing charity Shelter (Unite) strike

12-16 December: Mizkan Euro food factory workers in Rochdale (Unite) strike

12-23 December: Hinduja Global Solutions workers in Liverpool (PCS) strike

From 13 December, various dates through December and January: Rolling action by Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency and Rural Payments Agency workers (PCS) – details bit.ly/pcs-firstwave

13-15 December: Network Rail workers (RMT) strike

14-15 December: Royal Mail workers (CWU) strike

14 December: Uber drivers in Bristol (ADCU) strike

15 December: Nurses (RCN) strike

16-17 December: Bus drivers at six Abellio garages in south/west London (Unite) strike

16-17 December: Workers at

various mainline Train Operating Companies (RMT) strike

16-17 December: Workers at Avanti West Coast (TSSA) strike

16-18 December: Network Rail workers (RMT) strike

16 and 18 December: Eurostar security guards (RMT) strike

17 December: Rail workers at Network Rail and several Train Operating Companies (TSSA) strike

Various days between **19-31 December:** DWP workers in four centres in Liverpool and Doncaster (PCS) strike

20 December: Nurses (RCN) strike

21 December: Ambulance workers in various trusts (GMB, Unison, and Unite) strike

21 December: Workers at the Asylum Support and Immigration Resource Team charity in Birmingham (UVW) strike

22-23 December: Eurostar security guards (RMT) strike

22-23 December: Rail cleaners (RMT) strike

23-24 December: Royal Mail workers (CWU) strike

23-31 December (excluding 27 December): Home Office workers in passport control at London Heathrow, London Gatwick, Manchester, Birmingham, Cardiff and Glasgow airports, and the port of Newhaven, (PCS) to strike

24-27 December: Network Rail workers (RMT) strike

28 December: Ambulance workers in nine NHS trusts (GMB) strike

31 December: Rail cleaners (RMT) strike

3-4 January: Workers at various mainline Train Operating Companies (RMT) strike

3-5 January: Network Rail workers (RMT) strike

6-7 January: Workers at various mainline Train Operating Companies (RMT) strike

6-8 January: Network Rail workers (RMT) strike

10-12 January: Teachers at Truro and Penwith College (UCU and NEU) strike

11-12 January: Teachers on the Isle of Man (NASUWT) strike

15-16 February: Teachers on the Isle of Man (NASUWT) strike □

Ballots

5 December-23 January: Firefighters (FBU) ballot for action over pay

Until 9 January: Teachers (NASUWT) ballot for action over pay

From 9 January: Junior doctors (BMA) ballot for action over pay

Until 13 January: Teachers and school support staff (NEU) ballot □

Solidarity 658

Solidarity 658 will be printed on 11 January. We're skipping some weeks, if only because of the practical difficulties of distributing the paper effectively around Xmas. This issue is likely to reach some readers late because of Royal Mail strikes. □

AWL conference 29-30 April

Workers' Liberty conference will be 29-30 April. □



Upcoming meetings

Our meetings are open to all, and unless otherwise stated those below are online over zoom. We have many local (in-person) meetings, see [online](https://workersliberty.org/online).

Thursday 15 December, 3pm: Tubeworker and Off The Rails (bulletins) host Marilee Taylor, an activist with Railroad Workers United – a USA rank and file network

Thursday 15 December, 7.30pm: North London Workers' Liberty: Strike waves in British history. Menard Hall, EC1V 3SW

Sunday 8 January, 11am: The Lucas Plan – reading group

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



The Morning Star on human rights



By Jim Denham

Credit where it's due: the *Morning Star* was one of the few media outlets to note that Saturday 10 December was Human Rights Day. The paper marked it with an editorial and articles by Jeremy Corbyn and Vijay Prashad.

Corbyn's piece rightly draws attention to the British government's moves to withdraw from the European Court of Human Rights and the European Convention of Human Rights, noting that "this campaign has been frothing on the front bench for years, but it really gathered momentum after an interim judgement from the ECHR prevented an unnamed asylum-seeker from being removed to Rwanda."

What Corbyn's piece does not point out is that although the ECHR and the Convention are nothing to do with the EU, the Tory right wing's unrelenting attacks on them are a logical extension of the entire anti-EU campaign and something that many people predicted would happen if Brexit succeeded. Indeed, the *Morning Star* itself has carried many articles denouncing not just the EU but the very concept of supra-

national judicial bodies. The article by Vijay Prashad (an Indian historian and commentator whose politics seem to be an amalgam of Stalinism and Third Worldism) is of interest because it is a criticism of the very concept of human rights as most people would understand it.

Prashad argues that the predominant idea of human rights is a "Western" concept based upon "legal abstractions"; that at the UN "Western states – led by the United States" insisted that human rights "must not include the right to work or the right to food or indeed the right to education" and the USSR and others "argued that these social rights must form part of the bedrock of the concept of human rights... The Western states insisted that 'human rights' must only include political rights... but not social rights, while the Soviets refused to allow political rights without social rights."

That edition's editorial backs Prashad: "'Human rights' have often been a propaganda tool for leading imperialist countries to attack developing nations, especially those which do not fall into line with US wishes."

Prashad closes with the rhetorical question: "What does it mean for a person in abject poverty to be told that they have the right to vote, when that

right to vote will not translate into their transcendence from the indignity of poverty?"

In fact the Stalinist states did not guarantee the "social rights" they claimed. High school education in the USSR incurred fees from 1940 to 1956; health care was de facto paid-for in the USSR because bribes were necessary to get anything much. Besides that, Prashad's idea that the right to vote is meaningless for poor people does not derive from Marx as he claims.

In an early [article](#), Marx declares: "the proletariat is not prepared to let itself be treated as *canaille* [rabble] and it needs its courage, confidence, pride, and independence even more than it needs its daily bread". In *The German Ideology* he objects to capitalism as "indifferent to the intercourse of individuals as individuals" and his idea of communism "corresponds to the development of individuals into complete individuals." From his early articles right up to his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* Marx repeatedly champions universal suffrage, the right to assembly and association, freedom of the press and public education uncensored by the state as rights that must be won in order for communism to be achieved.

People schooled in the bureaucratic caricature "Marxism" of the Stalinist tra-

dition find it hard to understand this.

The day before Prashad's article appeared, the *Morning Star* carried the following, approving, description (by Jenny Clegg) of "democratic oversight and legal practices" in China:

"China operates a system of consultation and participation involving other democratic parties through the peoples' congresses, workers' congresses in enterprises, and community-level and voluntary organisations. This is a controlled approach to democracy: opening the door too quickly is seen as risking ill-conceived laws and poor decisions creating disorder leading to demoralisation and thereby undermining public motivation in democratic participation."

No better encapsulation of the Stalinist approach to human rights, democracy, and the law, can be imagined. Of course, workers who've experienced the limited but real rights and freedoms that exist under bourgeois democracy will be – rightly – repelled by any such version of "socialism". □

• JD acknowledges the late Bob Fine's book *Democracy and the Rule of Law* (Pluto Press 1984) and the article 'Was Marx truly against human rights?' by Justine Lacroix and Jean-Yves Pranchere (*Revue Francaise De Science Politique* Vol 62, Issue 3, 2012).

On the streets to oppose anti-strike laws!

By Ollie Moore

The Tories' Transport Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill is already making its way through Parliament, and Rishi Sunak has promised "tough new laws" to extend legislative restrictions on workers' ability to take action.

There has been no official announcement about what new laws, but much talk about extending the outright ban on strikes which currently applies to the military, police, and prison guards to other sectors, possibly including the NHS and the fire service.

Senior Tories, including former Transport Secretary Grant Shapps and former Prime Minister Liz Truss, have previously announced detailed proposals for a comprehensive tranche of new laws. These included extending the notice period for industrial action, forcing unions to re-ballot after every round of action, and legally compelling unions to put every



new offer from employers to a referendum of their members.

The labour movement cannot wait for Sunak to develop his plans and formulate them into legislation. We must mobilise now, aim to force this shaky government to drop the plans, or at the least build up the awareness and confidence to confront and defy the laws if passed and compel a new Labour government to repeal

them.

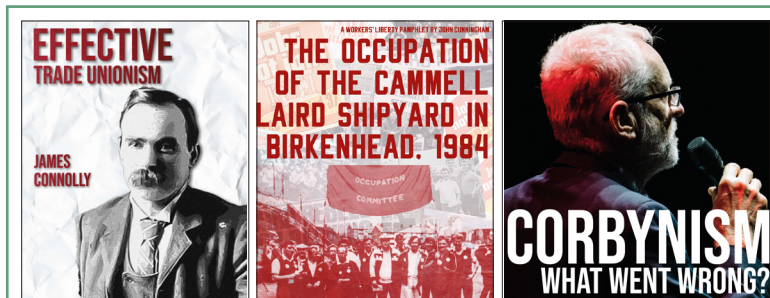
Unite general secretary Sharon Graham responded to the threats by saying "if they [the Tories] put more hurdles in our way, we'll jump over them." This dismissive bombast is unhelpful. It implies the anti-strike laws are of little consequence, and that the labour movement can respond simply by meeting whatever new conditions are set. And being

able to "jump over hurdles" hardly helps if the "hurdle" is, in fact, the brick wall of an outright ban.

So far, a small protest by the RMT and a demonstration called jointly by the [Free Our Unions](#) campaign and Earth Strike UK are the only on-the-streets actions against new anti-union laws since the Minimum Service Levels Bill was announced. The Campaign for Trade Union Freedom and Institute of Employment Rights, both with significant institutional backing across the labour movement, held a conference attended by around

80 people on 3 December, but no immediate practical activity was proposed or discussed.

Free Our Unions will hold an organising meeting on 19 December at 7pm to discuss plans for activity, focusing on how rank-and-file trade unionists can agitate within our unions for the unions themselves to organise action on the issue. With Labour leader Keir Starmer and Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves evasive on whether Labour would repeal Sunak's proposed laws, the fight urgently needs to be taken up inside the Labour Party too. □



Limited-time xmas offer covering recent British labour movement history, £10. workersliberty.org/uk-history-xmas-22

Dorothy Pitman Hughes, 1938-2022



Women's Fightback

By Katy Dollar

Dorothy Pitman Hughes, a pioneering black feminist, child welfare advocate, and community activist has died at 84. She will be remembered for her tour with Gloria Steinem in the 1970s which gave us one of the most iconic photos of the second-wave feminist movement. The photo, now in the National Portrait Gallery of the US, shows the two raising their fists in the Black Power salute.

Where Steinem came to feminism from journalism, Hughes came from grassroots activism, and pushed liberal feminism to look at the experience of working class black women.

She was brought up in Lumpkin, Georgia. When she was ten years old, her father was beaten and left for dead on the family's doorstep. The family assumed Ku Klux Klan members did it.

She moved from Georgia to New York City in 1957, when she was nineteen. She began her life of activism raising bail money for civil rights protesters. In the late 1960s, needing care for her own children, she organized a multiracial cooperative day care center on the West Side, the West 80th Community Childcare Center, which would be profiled by *New York* magazine

columnist Steinem. As well as offering child care, the centre offered job training, advocacy training and welfare support. Hughes organised the first shelter for battered women in New York City and co-founded the New York City Agency for Child Development to broaden childcare services in the city.

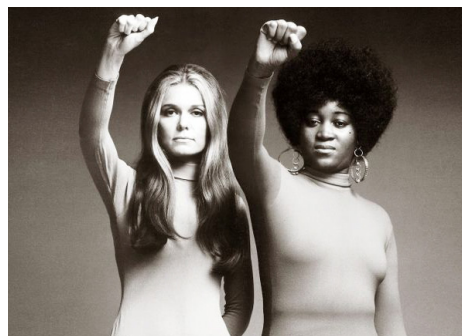
In 1972, she was a signer of the Ms. campaign "We Have Had Abortions" which called for an end to "archaic laws" limiting reproductive freedom.

Hughes defined herself as a feminist, but her feminism centred needs of working class women: safe homes, food, and child care. She never became a socialist feminist. She railed against "classism" but never looked to abolish class society.

The contradiction played out in her actions and advocacy. She said: "If women could go to banks, the whole face of Harlem would change", suggesting black-women-owned businesses were the way out of Harlem's problems.

At first she was a vocal supporter and beneficiary of the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone (UMEZ), a federal program instituted by the Clinton administration in 1994 designating \$300 million for the economic development (read gentrification) of Harlem. Later she criticised it for bringing only low-wage work and benefiting large corporations rather than local people.

Dorothy Pitman Hughes played a big part in building the liberal feminism



dominant in the US today. That is not simply to be dismissed. It is a movement that has brought many gains, including abortion rights, now under attack. Along with other black feminists she forced the women's movement to move from an outlook that centred middle-class white women in the struggle for women's liberation.

But liberal feminism limits women, black and white, in the fight for liberation. The liberation of women can only happen with the emancipation of humanity as a whole, through the socialist transformation of society. That transformation can only happen through working-class struggle, with women playing a full and equal role.

By working to organise food, child care, and shelter from abuse, Dorothy Pitman Hughes saved the lives of many women. Socialist feminists have a vision of a world where all that is a right for everyone, and human need rules, not the logic of profit – where we are not just papering over the cracks, even with strong paper. □

Starmer snubs BAME members

By Mohan Sen

In 2018 the Labour Party's [democracy review](#) proposed creating new democratic structures for Labour members of colour, including a conference and national committee; and, at 2021 Labour conference, plans for that were adopted almost unanimously. After recent issues of anti-black and anti-Muslim racism in the party, as discussed in the [Forde report](#), you'd think this would be a priority.

Instead, as part of its drive against democracy, Starmer's leadership has got the party National Executive Committee to suspend the idea of such democratic structures for "BAME" members (and disabled ones). The party will also tack a diminished women's conference onto next year's main party conference instead of holding a proper one. In addition to general dislike of democracy, the fear, no doubt, is that "equalities" structures could provide footholds for the left.

The NEC agreed to maintain the existing structure of "BAME Labour", a "socialist society" that members have to pay to join separately. That would be ridiculous enough, but BAME Labour is inactive, undemocratic and secretive. Membership applications do not seem to result in anything beyond payment; and no one knows – or admits – where the money goes. BAME Labour's [website](#) does not even indicate who runs the "organisation". It seems to be there purely in order to be able to say that BAME Labour exists.

It also manages to write out of history Labour's first MP of colour, [Shapurji Saklatvala](#), and his radical Liberal predecessor [Dadabhai Naoroji](#), with its vapid blurb claiming that "the first four black MPs" – meaning black as in "BAME" – were elected in 1987!

As part of the fight for Labour democracy, the left must keep pushing for democratic structures for members of colours and other oppressed groups, and push for our unions to make a serious fuss. □

New India solidarity group launched

By Sacha Ismail

About 50 people attended the formal launch of the [India Labour Solidarity](#) campaign in London on 6 December.

ILS was set up in the summer – its first activity was leafleting at Labour Party conference in September – to "promote solidarity between workers and their trade union and labour movements in the UK and India".

The meeting was chaired by Praveen Kolluguri, a Communication Workers' Union member in the telecoms sector who is BAME officer of Kingston and Surbiton Labour Party in South London and on the Labour Campaign for Free Movement national committee.

It attracted people from a wide range of left-wing backgrounds. ILS seeks to organise across the labour movement and left in the UK (and beyond), includ-

ing but not just in the Labour Party, and above all in trade unions. At the same time, it seeks to cooperate as closely as possible with other organisations, in the first instance in the UK, organising solidarity with struggles in India.

Praveen explained the context of the growing links between the UK and Indian capitalist classes and right-wing political establishments, the very difficult circumstances facing our comrades in India, and the great need and potential for international links and solidarity.

He also raised the question of how class struggle interacts with different forms of oppression, particularly the south Asian origin system of caste. ILS deliberately chose 6 December, the day that marks the contribution of B R Ambedkar (1891-56), the prominent Indian campaigner against caste

oppression and for workers' rights. The date was also chosen to stand in [solidarity](#) with India's Muslims, under assault by right-wing Hindu nationalism, by marking the destruction of the centuries-old Babri mosque in Ayodhya by far-right activists on 6 December 1992.

The meeting heard from two Indian and two British labour movement activists: Indian trade unionists [Nodeep Kaur](#) (from the Mazdoor Adhikar Sangathan workers' association in Kundli, Haryana) and Bilal Khan (from the Kamgar Sanrakshan Samaan Sangh union in Mumbai); CWU activist and current TUC President Maria Exall; and Nottingham East's Labour MP [Nadia Whittome](#), who is also of Indian heritage.

Both Nodeep and Bilal's unions organise among precarious workers; both discussed their campaigns, and how these relate to

other social struggles and to the wider political context of the right-wing offensive in India. Maria focused on the common interests, potential solidarity and potentially common struggles of workers in India and the UK, particularly in the context of a likely "free trade agreement". Nadia called forcefully for the British labour movement, including in the Labour Party, to wake up to the need for solidarity.

Despite the time taken by translation back and forth, there was lots of very good discussion.

India Labour Solidarity is discussing various activities and campaigns, as well as holding meetings in other cities. It will be holding an online organising meeting on Sunday 8 January at 6pm and invites people to come and get involved (email indialaboursolidarity@gmail.com). □

• More: bit.ly/inlabsol



Activist Agenda

Labour Left internationalists is circulating a range of suggested wordings for use in motions to Labour Parties, many of them adaptable for use in union branches too. They include texts on exclusions and bans (updated for the Mayer and Egan exclusions), the current strikes, public ownership of energy, Labour conference decisions, the monarchy, Iran, free movement, and the Sunak-Hunt budget. □

• More at workersliberty.org/agenda

New coal can still be stopped



Environment

By Stuart Jordan

Even by its own standards, it is difficult to see why the government has given permission for a new coal mine near Whitehaven in West Cumbria.

The mine is set to extract 2.8 million tonnes of coking coal a year and has been promoted under the silly slogan: "great coal, great steel, Great Britain". But British steel-makers say it's got high sulphur content and they cannot use it. Over 90% will be exported. Even here there is a shrinking market, as Europe shifts to electric arc furnaces and renewable energy.

Michael Gove justified his decision with the brazenly denialist claim that

the mine will "have an overall neutral effect on climate change", based on the emissions involved in extraction, which the private mining company say they will offset, and ignoring the emissions when the coal is burnt! The government's own Climate Change Commission predicts that the mine will actually produce 220 million tonnes of CO₂ over its 25-year life time.

220 million tonnes CO₂ is small as part of nearly 38 billion tonnes a year produced by human activity. But any addition is precisely the opposite of what is now required. The "safe operating zone" for atmospheric carbon is 350 ppm. We are now at 415 ppm and rising. In place of a plan to decommission fossil-fuel infrastructure and draw down carbon, the government is accelerating us all towards hothouse Earth.

This decision is even a break from the most richer nations' shift away from

coal towards supposedly cleaner gas, towards a harder denialism that jettisons even the appearance of responsible environmental policy.

The only "good reason" for the mine is to provide jobs. The mine is supposed to provide 500 new jobs for locals. But, given a choice, who wants to spend their working life in a coal mine? Job creation would be better achieved through investment in renewables or ecological restoration. Wind turbine manufacturers are currently laying off workers for lack of government contracts, and the industry is contracting.

There is one obvious reason the government agreed to the mine: some very rich individuals want it to happen. West Cumbrian Mining Ltd is actually a front for multi-billion dollar private equity firm, EMR Capital, based in the Cayman Islands tax haven. EMR Capital profits from mining operations all over

the world and its base in a tax haven makes it very difficult for governments to hold it to social and environmental obligations.

The mine can be stopped. The plan is so deranged that there is already considerable opposition, including from prominent Tory backbenchers. The mine will extract from underneath the Irish Sea and so still requires regulatory approval from the Marine Management Organisation. Some NGOs are considering a legal challenge. Labour opposes the mine and so a general election may also halt extraction plans.

Locals are organising this weekend for protests and hope for a mobilisation on a scale equal to Preston New Road, which eventually won a ban on fracking. Such grassroots mobilisation can build the movement for more rational alternative to unrestrained capitalist ecocide. □

Unite scandal: give members the facts

By Ann Field

Unite has forwarded two internal reports on the construction costs of the union's conference and education centre in Birmingham to the police. The original estimated construction cost was £57 million, and the final cost £100 million.

According to the [media coverage](#), the two reports – one written by a KC, and one by an accountancy firm – reveal "potentiality criminality" in overcharging on a number of the construction contracts.

The escalating costs first became a media story in late 2020.

In January 2021 a special meeting of Unite's national Executive Council (EC) adopted a statement dismissing allegations of financial wrongdoing as a "disgraceful smear campaign".

In December 2021 the union's new General Secretary, Sharon Graham, commissioned two independent investigations. In April 2022 police raided Unite's head offices as part of a bribery, fraud and money-laundering investigation into the contracts for the construction of the centre. We [wrote](#): "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? 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?"

The same questions also need to be asked now.

No statement has been issued to Unite members about the decision to hand over the reports to the police. The only source of information for the union's members is still the media.

In response to a request from the police the Unite bureaucracy has decided not to release the contents of the two reports to the union's members, or even to members of

Unite's EC. Meanwhile, the triennial elections for the union's EC are due in mid-2023. There is a "Sharon Graham" slate. Candidates wishing to be added to it must just include the words "I voted for Sharon Graham for General Secretary and support her manifesto" in their election statement.

The slate will include sitting members of the EC who back in January 2021 dismissed concerns as "a disgraceful smear campaign" but are now "[shocked](#)" by evidence of financial wrongdoing.

In fact, the person compiling the list is himself one such individual. □



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The "minimum service" law in France

By Michael Elms

The "minimum service law", first introduced by President Sarkozy in 2007, obliges transport workers to make an "individual declaration of intent" (also known as a DII) 48 hours before a strike. The purpose of these declarations is to allow employers to know exactly how their roster will be affected by a strike, and organise scabbing accordingly. The law says that bosses can punish workers who refuse to make a "DII" and then strike anyway. In some instances workers can get away with refusing to make an "DII" – one rail worker activist told *Solidarity* of such a case in a rail strike in Chatillon in 2019, when management decided not to punish non-declaring strikers when the workers took a collective decision to defy the law. "But it is always a matter of the balance of forces, of course."

Most unions, including the left-led SUD union, encourage strikers to make their "DII" as a matter of course.

In hospitals, on strike days, some strikers can be "assigned" to work by the hospital hierarchy in order to maintain a minimum staffing level.

This is not the same as militarisation of work but it is effectively the hospital or-

dering strikers back to work, backed up by the law. But the process for doing it is complicated – workers need to be served papers signed by the top managers, certain timeframes need to be observed, and so on.

In 2017, workers at a Toulouse hospital thwarted management attempts to "assign" workers by insisting on the rules being followed precisely. They demanded that the papers be signed individually by the head of the local hospital, be hand-delivered by the proper legal agents within the legal timeframe, and strikers arranged to be out of their house in the morning so that papers could not be served on them.

In other cases, as in Brittany 2022, a confident hospital management has attempted to break a strike by "assigning" a large number of strikers, and by playing fast and loose with the letter of the law. As on the rails: these legal methods of strike-breaking and "minimum service" provision are only as effective as the confidence, organisation, and fighting spirit of either side permits.

But the French laws give us a good idea of some methods that Sunak's Tories will be considering. □

• More: bit.ly/min-ser

Afghanistan 15 months on

By Dan Katz

It is now 15 months since the withdrawal of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan and the chaotic final departure of Western military transport planes from Kabul airport.

The American government under Donald Trump had made an agreement to leave, signed with the militarised, opposition Islamist organisation, the Taliban (and without the participation of the US-backed government of Afghanistan), in Doha, Qatar, in early 2020.

Terrified people – many of whom who had worked for the Western militaries, NGOs or embassies – attempted to get out on the final planes. Tens of thousands were abandoned and left to face the new fundamentalist government. The Taliban had overrun the capital in mid-August 2021 as the Afghan National Security Forces collapsed and the government under Ashraf Ghani gave up and dissolved.

The *Observer* of 4 December 2022 reports that “not a single person has been accepted and evacuated from Afghanistan under the Home Office’s Afghan citizens’ resettlement scheme (ACRS)” which opened in January 2022. This fact illustrates our Tory government’s racist indifference to those Afghans that worked with the UK, and were left in the country, and are now at serious risk from the Taliban. In early September 2021 the Home Office had pledged to resettle 5,000 Afghans, in the first year, under the ACRS.

In violation of the US-Taliban Doha deal al-Qaeda was again operating in Afghanistan, under Taliban protection.

The withdrawal brought to an end a 20-year long Western occupation and war against Islamists in Afghanistan. The US had invaded following al-Qaeda’s 9/11 attacks on America in 2001. Their intention was to destroy al-Qaeda’s organisation and find its leader, Osama bin Laden.

The Taliban became a visible force after 1994, and took over the Afghan capital, Kabul, in 1996 following fighting between Mujahedeen factions. The USSR fought Western-backed Islamists in Afghanistan for most of the 1980s and left the country – already, before the war began, one of the poorest and most backward in the world – ruined. Taliban victory in most (not all) of Afghanistan closed a period of Islamist-dominated fighting after the USSR withdrawal.

In 1996 some in Western governments hoped the Taliban would at least bring stability. It was a vicious theocratic dictatorship, targeting women in particular. In the early 1990s the US estimated that 70% of schoolteachers, 50%



of government workers and university students, and 40% of doctors in Kabul were women. The Taliban closed the women’s university and forced nearly all women to quit their jobs. After 1998, girls over the age of eight were prohibited from attending school.

In most hospitals, male physicians could only examine a female patient if she were fully clothed. 16 out of every 100 women died giving birth.

50,000 women who had lost husbands and other male relatives during the long war against Russian occupation had no source of income. Many were reduced to selling their possessions and begging in the streets.

Women were forced to wear the burqa and could only travel with male relatives. Makeup and nail polish were banned. Women caught with unrelated men were flogged; adulterers could be stoned to death.

Now the Taliban is back in power.

Taliban

The Taliban largely works through what remains of inherited state institutions, but the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, the Human Rights Commissions and the Afghan parliament have all been abolished.

There is effectively no functioning judiciary or legal system. The Taliban have reconstituted the Ministry of Vice and Virtue, which polices Taliban-dictated morals. Women are now expected to cover their entire bodies when in public and be accompanied by a man.

As the US left August 2021 it cut off Afghanistan’s Central Bank from the international banking system and froze \$7bn of Afghan state funds. That immediately led to an acute liquidity crisis

and a lack of bank notes. In addition, 80% of the Afghan economy rested on aid money. Most of that ended in August 2021.

As the Taliban took power 70% of media outlets closed and others self-censored; the Taliban arrested at least 32 journalists in Kabul.

The World Bank predicts real GDP will contract by 30-35 percent between 2021 and 2022. Basic goods have increased in price by around 50% since July 2021, and the UN estimates that 95% of the population is eating too little, despite the markets being full of food. The blunt and brutal Western sanctions are falling hard on the poorest and most vulnerable and on women and children in particular.

Afghanistan is now gripped by an acute humanitarian crisis. In January 2020 the UN estimated that 59%, or 24.4m people are in “humanitarian need”. More than half of all children under five are malnourished. A million children are “acutely malnourished”.

Most women have been dismissed from their jobs and secondary education has effectively ended for girls. After 2 September 2021, brave Afghan women carried out demonstrations in several cities to protest against Taliban policies violating women’s rights. In Herat, Taliban fighters whipped protesters and fired weapons indiscriminately to disperse the crowd, killing two men and injuring others.

Richard Bennett, the UN’s special rapporteur on Afghanistan, recently called the country, “the worst country in the world to be a woman or a girl”.

In a public statement issued on 14 November, Haibatullah Akhonzada, the Taliban’s supreme leader, ordered judges to fully enforce “Islamic law”, including public executions, stoning, flogging, and amputation of limbs. Public floggings were a regular feature of the previous Taliban regime, and have resumed.

Taliban official Abdul Rahim Rashid states: “I estimate that up to 80 people have been whipped since we took over Afghanistan”. On Thursday 8 December 27 men and women were whipped in public, in a football stadium, on charges including adultery, theft, drug use and

being a woman and running away from home.

On Wednesday 7 December public executions restarted. A man was executed by the father of his alleged victim.

One year after seizing power no government had officially recognised the Taliban. The British state refused recognition because of the abuse of the “rights of women and girls and [the Taliban’s] relationship with foreign militant groups and terrorist networks.”

The leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was killed by a US drone strike on 31 July 2022 while living in an apartment in central Kabul. He was living in a safe house apparently protected by senior Taliban.

Afghanistan has also seen a rise in attacks by the Islamic State affiliate, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), which has been targeting Shia and other minorities as well as Taliban leaders. The ISKP have killed medics vaccinating against polio, and killed 170 civilians in a suicide bombing at Kabul airport in August 2021. □



Action on Covid-19

Many are warning that China’s unavoidable easing of Covid curbs may bring a big death toll, because of China’s poor vaccination level, poor health care, and low levels of immunity from previous infection. The curb-exit may in fact turn out less dramatic because China has grossly under-reported previous levels of infection, Covid-deaths (and deaths from other ailments speeded by lockdowns). We don’t know. In Britain, Covid has started its expected winter resurgence since mid-November, as yet more mildly than France, but with the NHS already overwhelmed. We need:

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



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What comes after



Interview

By Simon Mohun

Simon Mohun, an economist who has done much work to analyse recent developments using Marx's concept of capitalistically-unproductive labour, and emeritus professor of economics at Queen Mary University of London, talked with Martin Thomas

When we talked in 2009, I said that the financial crisis of 2008 marked the end of neoliberalism. I think I was right about that.

I was far too sanguine in thinking that neoliberal economics and neoliberal politics would run on parallel tracks. Politically, there's been very little difference. But the economic model is bust, and that manifests itself in a whole number of ways, typically low growth rates, very low productivity rates. The 1980 to 2008 era has gone.

In the Conservative Party, people are casting around to try to think what to do now, and nobody's really got any coherent idea. So we get Liz Truss. There is a fair constituency in on the right wing of the Conservative Party for her sort of agenda. Equally, there are currents in the Conservative Party who think it's insane for a variety of reasons.

We live in interesting times. But it's hard to get a purchase on serious alternatives.

In the 1970s and the early 1980s, Thatcherism was a reaction to the social democratic consensus of the Golden Age. It was clear what they were fighting against and broadly speaking it was clear that they wanted a return to free market economics.

Now there isn't anything obvious to return to. What about some sort of moderate social democracy? But Keir Starmer isn't really offering that. And in fact we can't simply return to the 1945-80 period – the world market conditions that underpinned post-War social democracy have long gone.

This is some sort of period of capitalist transition. But transition to what, I really don't know.

Here is the difficulty as I see it. Suppose we could wave a magic wand and we had a socialist regime of some sort with democratic popular participation. We don't really know in any convincing detail how that economy would work. We can say workers' control and wave our hands. But then how many loaves of bread should there be in Newcastle

on Wednesday morning? And who's going to produce them and how are they going to get there? And are you really going to have workers in bakeries going in early in order to have a meeting to decide?

One of the reasons I think socialists have relatively little traction in popular debates is while there is a lot of sensible talk about reforms to the existing structure in terms of taxation and generating more equality, there's no overarching vision.

Without a coherent big picture as to what you want to achieve, it's very difficult to have coherent views about fiscal rules. I don't have any answers on that.

It seems to me the issues you're raising arise more from the arguments of the 1920s and 30s than from recent decades, issues about the difficulty of planning replacing markets in the generation and processing of information. I think the right-wingers of the 1920s and 30s, like von Mises and Hayek, had some valid points, and we can't yet see when in the future and how we could do without markets, and some of the bad effects of markets.

But we do know that Hayek was wrong in his further argument that even partial displacement of markets, as with the NHS, would lead to ruin and totalitarianism. An extension of public ownership and democracy so that there is public democratic control over the main directions of investment is certainly possible.

There wouldn't be meetings to decide how many loaves go to Newcastle next Wednesday. But even back in the mass socialist movement before the First World War, no socialist thought that they could supersede the market from one day to the next.

We can cut off exploitation and the flow of excess incomes to the rich. We can expand public services and the "caring economy". We can eliminate poverty.

We can have workers' control in the sense of workers in each workplace deciding how the work is done, within the broad overall plan, and electing our managers.

How then to deal with the risk of inflation, I don't know. But since capitalist governments don't know at the moment, I'm not deterred by that.

All that is of the sort of what Marx wrote about on the Paris Commune: "not expect miracles... but to set free the elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois soci-

ety itself is pregnant". But put it all together, and you have a much more radical alternative than the "broad left" view of the 1970s, the alternative economic strategy, which was fundamentally a sort of siege economy...

Surely still some distance from the free association of producers?

But a lot closer, even if we don't how quickly we will be able to go further. Of course, it all depends on creating a working-class-based democracy in an operational sense and not just a formal sense, and creating a culture of collective responsibility. But the labour movement in its best days has already shown that is possible.

And the plan is a lot more precise than Thatcher's was in 1979, when she didn't even foresee mass privatisation, which became her most "successful" policy, and instead focused on monetarism, which the Tories quietly abandoned after two years as obvious nonsense.

It's true that the Thatcherites didn't have a clear blueprint. A lot was improvised. But they had an ideological mindset against the "golden age" consensus, and they were willing to contemplate almost anything that went that way.

But in your scheme – would there be fiscal rules? Would you finance govern-

ment expenditure through taxes? And would you contemplate borrowing?

Government borrowing is a whole other issue because it presumes a class of rich people who buy the government bonds (and in 2023 are going to receive in debt payments almost as much as the total NHS budget). If you don't have very rich people around to buy the bonds, then... The system of financing government spending through debt comes not from any abstract law, but is a "sticky" legacy from monarchies in the 17th century which fought wars, didn't have an adequate tax system, and so had to borrow from the rich.

But now the financial system works in terms of debt, and not just through the banks. In the US now, half of all debt traded in the money markets is non-bank debt (corporate bonds, hedge funds, and so on). Money-market deals require collateral for security. And the safest collateral is government debt. The management of government debt is central to how the financial system works.

I get that, and I don't know the answer. But I do know that in a whole era in Britain and lots of other countries between the start of the Second World War and the 1960s or 70s, there was a regime of "financial repression", of deliberate tamping-down of high finance. That "repression" is possible. Maybe the most far-reaching measure of Thatcherism was the scrapping of exchange controls and the opening-up of world financial markets.

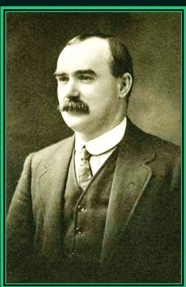
Yes, globalisation and financialisation were two key elements of neoliberalism.

I think that the general story of inflation being a response to excess demand is broadly correct, and what broadly explains the low inflation regime of the 1990s and the noughties is the entry of China and other areas into the world market, of so many workers and points of supply into the world capitalist system. The inflationary upsurge of the last year or so, I think, is largely to do with China's insane Covid policies and supply shocks as the world economy is came out of the lockdowns.

Inflation is very bad for finance because it distributes resources from lenders to borrowers., whereas industrial companies don't mind it so much.

We have vast amounts of dealing in money markets, and government securities being used as collateral there.

Liam McNulty



James Connolly
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er neoliberalism?

Behind that, income distribution has changed. In Britain, for example, the percentage of pre-tax national income taken by the top 1% has almost doubled between 1980 and the latest year for which data are available, 2020. If you could wave a magic wand and restrict the top 1% share of national income to what it was in 1980, that would free up £55 billion, which, curiously, is the same number as Liz Truss's "budget black hole".

The much-expended lending and borrowing activity isn't from rich individuals to firms for new buildings and equipment, as in the story of economics textbooks. That physical investment is largely self-financed from profit.

It is a financial system that is continually churning, with complicated transactions involving enormous sums of money.

With a regime of drastic "financial repression", the top 1% wouldn't be able to do that stuff any more, and that wouldn't stop productive investment.

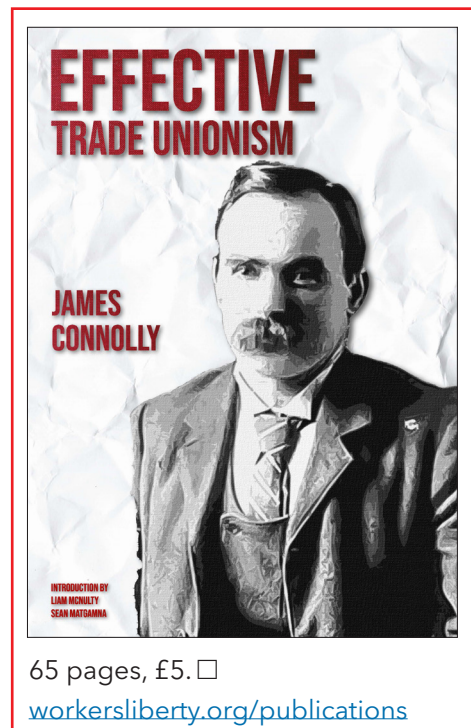
But the system is so complicated now that the law of unintended consequences would surely kick in.

Probably, but not that firm X wanted to build a new factory, and now can't do it. And there are plenty of unintended consequences with the

current system.

There's a lot of talk today around the issue of fiscal rules. I don't see anything wrong with fiscal rules as such. What's wrong is the idea that a fiscal rule determines the content of your taxation policy. Fiscal rules or the OBR can't determine what the taxes are or who is being taxed.

Britain has a tax system which is very complex, highly regressive, and full of anomalies, like local property taxation



based on 1991 valuation of property, capital gains tax and income tax rates completely unaligned, inheritance tax that the very rich largely (and legally) avoid and so on. But there is now increasing talk about how to tax non-labour incomes, and that's encouraging.

If the Labour Party says it's going to tax the rich more, you'll get a flight of capital.

You might have to contemplate capital controls...

Yes...

And that's probably quite a good thing. It will also be helpful to focus increases in taxation on assets that are immovable: land, property. A straightforward reform, for instance, would be to ensure that local authorities get the development benefit from planning decisions on land.

I know that isn't a magic wand. People respond to changes in tax rate, tax increases, and you'd have to be aware of that and allow for that.

But I think the issue that we started with was that the neoliberal model is broken and its supporters and cheerleaders do not know what to replace it with. That actually remains true, whatever is done about taxes and government expenditure. We have a low-wage, low investment and low-productivity economy with basic services (especially

with respect to health and social care) on the cusp of collapse. What is potentially a problem with the reforms we talked about earlier is that neoliberalism over the years has so whittled away at the capacity of the state that even the most basic administrative activities have become problematic. □

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The return of the 24 hour general strike



Eye on the left

By Rhodri Evans

After many years, the "24 hour general strike" slogan has returned to left debates, advocated by the Socialist Party (*The Socialist*, 7 December 2022 and some previous issues).

It used to be a regular theme of the SP's forerunner, Militant, almost a cure-all, and that past colours SP's advocacy now.

There is more to it now. If it means calling on the many unions in dispute to coordinate strikes – 1 February is in the air as a possible date – then that's good, much better than the current picture of even unions

in the same industry usually not fixing common strike days.

A day of joint strikes, with delegations visiting each others' picket lines, joint demonstrations and rallies, etc., will have more impact than scattered action. It will be especially helpful for NHS workers, who are limited by the need for emergency cover, and can't hit profits directly anyway, to see hundreds of thousands of workers striking the same day and explicitly supporting them.

A coordinated day will provide a focus for street action on the urgent working-class concerns which underpin the current strike wave but find no expression in its "official" demands – concerns for restoring the NHS, for benefit and pension increases, for push-

ing back anti-strike laws, etc. It could stimulate unofficial walk-outs to join in, and encourage all workers to intensify action.

But the SP's usage still bears the marks of its origins. Sometimes the SP proposes the "24 hour general strike" as the "answer" if the Tories enforce new anti-strike laws, sometimes as a sufficient action to "terrify" the government and the bosses.

It refers to the joint-union public sector pensions strike of 30 November 2011 as a model. It fails to recall that 30 November (the second and last action in that campaign, the first being 30 June 2011) ended rather than boosted the battle.

On 16 Dec (soon after 30 Nov), some union leaders, probably scared by the idea that they might now have to

come up with something bigger than 30 Nov, accepted meagre sops to end the campaign. The remaining unions, including PCS, then led by the SP and its allies, didn't sign up to the sops, but called [only](#) token and delayed further action, so the campaign collapsed.

The issues were (1) that to have effect 24 hour protest strikes must lead on to more (2) the need for rank-and-file organisation and control. The 2011 campaign failed because it was mostly about waiting for days to be named "from above". The SP says little about building strike committees and assemblies now. In the slogan's heyday, "24 hour general strike" was an expression of the foolish confidence of the SP's forerunner, Militant, in the

supposed inexorable advance of the "world revolution" and the labour movement. More and more countries (Burma, Syria, even Portugal) were becoming alleged "workers' states" (of a USSR sort) by nationalising industry.

The labour movement in Britain was so strong that it could not seriously be pushed back. All experiences would inexorably contribute to "the Marxists" winning hegemony over the labour-movement apparatus. And then such steps as a 24 hour general strike and an Enabling Act passed through Parliament would topple the capitalists.

The whole perspective was shattered from the end of the 1980s, but the SP has never thought that through, and so strands persist. □

The story of Ireland's

By Sacha Ismail

In 2012 an amateur historian in the small town of Tuam in Galway (in the west of Ireland) published an article in a local journal about the deaths of children at the Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home. Catherine Corless, then in her late 50s, had quite recently gained an interest in local history through attending an evening course. She was in the process of becoming what Irish Taoiseach (prime minister) Micheál Martin would call a "tireless crusader for dignity and truth".

The home had been run by by the Bon Secours ("Good Help") Sisters order of Catholic nuns, who also operated a hospital in the town. Today, in 2022, organisations connected to this order still run health facilities in Ireland and the US covering more than ten million people.

The Mother and Baby Home operated from 1925 – the building was a workhouse under the Irish Poor Laws, and a British barracks during Ireland's war of independence – to 1961, when its dilapidated state led to its closure. In 1975 two boys playing on its site found a hole or chamber full of children's skeletons. There was local speculation, encouraged by the police, that these were victims of the 1840s [Great Famine](#). The number of bodies was assumed to be small. The chamber was resealed shortly after its discovery.

Following the publication of Corless' original article – for which the Bon Secours order had essentially refused to provide any information – she deepened her research. At her own expense she got a health sector civil servant to retrieve the names of children whose death certificates listed the home as place of death. *There were 796.*

Cross-referencing the names with those in local graveyards revealed only two had been buried in any of them. Corless' research led her to conclude that the only possible location of the missing bodies was in the site discovered in 1975; maps showed that this was the home's septic tank. There were no records of any burials there.

Initially approaches to the media produced very limited results, but Corless kept going. She campaigned for a plaque to be installed with the names of the dead children, and got more coverage. In May 2014 the *Irish Mail on Sunday* published an article about the "mass grave", and the story gained international attention.

The next month the Irish government ordered the creation of a national commission of investigation into the



Nuns and children at Bessborough House in Cork, where over 900 children died

Church's mother and baby homes. In 2016 it began excavations of the Tuam site and in 2017 it confirmed that "significant quantities of human remains" had been found. In 2019 the commission would conclude that 802 children died at the home during its 36 years.

Thousands

Around 56,000 mothers and 57,000 children lived in the fourteen Church-run and four state-run "mother and baby" homes the commission investigated, between the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922 and the closure of the last one in 1998 (when Ireland's population was still just 3.7 million.)

These were prisons for young women who got pregnant outside of marriage. Coming disproportionately from poor and marginalised backgrounds, often they had no one to defend them against the Church; sometimes they were effectively seized despite their families' objections; sometimes they were willingly handed over. The commission concluded that Ireland's proportion of unmarried mothers imprisoned in institutions was probably "the highest in the world".

The Coalition of Mother And Baby Home Survivors would describe "physical abuse... women were made to scrub floors and stairs and treated as slave labour and were also treated appallingly while in childbirth by denial of doctors, medical equipment and pain-killing drugs... mothers and children in the homes suffered gross breaches of their human rights..."

In many cases mothers and children were separated early on. Those who left the system were typically not allowed to take their child unless they paid, and of course the vast majority could not pay. Some mothers remained in the system most of their lives. Inmates included girls as young as 12 and women as old as 89.

Over 9,000 children and babies were confirmed to have died in the eighteen institutions investigated – one in seven, an infant mortality rate twice that of the general population. Institutions had horrendous peaks: in 1947 an inspection of the Tuam home found 12 of 31 children examined "emaciated and not thriving"; and in the 1940s the children's death rate fluctuated around 25 to 35%.

Malnutrition was a major cause of death. This despite the fact the state gave the church substantial amounts of money to "care for" inmates.

Extreme cruelty became normalised among the Catholic nuns who ran the homes. This included serious physical violence: someone born in the Tuam home who later spoke to the BBC described "blood streaming from the head" of another child kicked repeatedly.

The deeper issue was a general dehumanisation. One mother who testified to the commission described how "all of our things [were] confiscated, we had no clothes and no money... From time to time we were allowed outside, but always escorted by the nuns. They marched us around like soldiers." Some women and girls were renamed.

Many who grew up in towns with mother and baby homes – including Catherine Corless herself, looking at back at her childhood – recalled how beaten down the children seemed when allowed out in the wider world, and how many ordinary people saw them as a species apart. As one former child inmate put it to the BBC: "We were less than human."

The Church engaged in trafficking: five homes in particular, including Tuam's, were major centres for illegal foreign adoptions, with many children sent to the US. Figures for the number trafficked from Tuam range from several dozen to a thousand.

And in at least 13 cases between 1930 and 1973 children in the homes were used in medical experiments, for vaccines, with no "consent" except from the Church. The commission concluded that in several other respects, too, these experiments breached the "Nuremberg Code" established in war-crimes trials after the Second World War.

These homes were part of an interlocking system of carceral institutions the Church ran for what it saw as moral undesirables – a much wider system in which those considered deviant swelled a disappeared and abused population.

"Magdalene laundries" incarcerated women and girls from the very broad category of "fallen women", in various ways perceived as challenging conservative Catholic morality. "Orphanages" (sic) or "industrial schools" held difficult or just deprived working-class children. The latter in particular were important in the epidemic of physical and sexual abuse, mainly of boys, by Catholic priests, long covered up by the Church. Both the other categories involved large-scale forced labour, and both operated revolving doors with mothers and baby homes, creating decades-long or even life-long cycles of abuse. A mass grave of women held in a Magdalene laundry has also been found.

The numbers in these institutions were very large, particularly relative to Ireland's small size, maybe equivalent to hundreds of thousands in the UK today.

Summary

One [socialist summary's](#) materialist explanation of this nightmare is to the point, but seems to underplay the political and ideological dimensions of the Church's role:

"The Irish constitution in 1937 enshrined the special role of the Catholic Church... The Church was rewarded for playing the role of the ideological cop in Irish society by an accumulation of institutional power. It got control of hospitals and schools..."

"The cosy cartel of the Church and state provided not just an ideological role. It saved the state from providing even limited social welfare and the church got influence along with large amounts of hard cash..."

"Children in industrial schools were used as slave labour in farms, laundries and even a rosary bead factory."

Secular capitalist states and care systems also produce and engage in abuse, as British history demonstrates in abundance. The labour movement

hidden mass graves



must challenge all forms of unaccountable power and all forms of oppression and exploitation. But the fusion or intertwining of religious and political power can produce particularly horrific results, because of the reactionary nature of dominant religious morality and the unaccountable and undemocratic character of religious institutions. The victims are not just victims, but branded as sinners.

The commission investigating mother and baby homes produced five interim reports before its final one in January 2021, in addition to ones commissioned directly by Irish government departments.

The facts and testimony in these reports were further blows to the authority of the Catholic Church in Ireland.

However, survivors' groups, feminists and socialists – and many others – sharply criticised the final report and the government's response, and it is easy to see why. Its executive summary said:

"It must be acknowledge that the institutions under investigation provided a refugee – a harsh refuge in some

cases – when families provided no refuge at all."

It claimed that "responsibility for that harsh treatment rests mainly with the fathers of their children and their own immediate families".

Then Taoiseach Enda Kenny's speech in response to the report struck a similar note. The response of leftish TD (MP) Catherine Connolly, whose constituency is near Tuam, seems worth quoting at length:

"A shocking discovery, according to everyone, and particularly to yourself, Taoiseach. But this is something that Galway has been aware of for a long time, highlighted by Catherine Corless back in 2014, in her painstaking and self-funded research. By the witnesses, the many, many women who went before the commission of inquiry into child [sexual] abuse which culminated in the Ryan Report, as far back as 2009... So none of this is shocking to the survivors.

Shocking

"What is shocking to the survivors, and to me, is the carefully crafted words that you've come into the chamber with. And, in particular, that you say 'no nuns broke into our homes to kidnap our children', 'we gave them up to what we convinced ourselves was the nuns' care' and so on."

Connolly also told the Dáil: "It was not the stories that upset me. It is the narrative that is being put on those stories by the powers that be. The extracts of their testimony, what jumps out is the complete absence of any knowledge on sexuality. Not to mention sexual



Catherine Corless with list of Tuam children

abuse and rape. Then you look at the conclusions drawn by the commission, and they tell us that there was no evidence that women were forced to enter mother and baby homes. That for me is extraordinary..."

Survivors' groups in particular have been sharply critical of many aspects of the process and outcomes. A representative for the Tuam Home Survivors Network commented: "The Taoiseach has said this, that we did this to ourselves, but in reality we didn't because the Church and the State, it was run by men, there was no semblance of understanding or compassion."

The Irish First Mothers Groups said: "The official inquiry into mother and baby homes has absolved both the Church and State of any systemic responsibility for what it admits is the effective incarceration of pregnant mothers."

In November 2021 the Irish government announced a compensation scheme for survivors.

The accumulation of revelations about the Church's inhumanity and violence gave new impetus to the decline of its support and authority in the Republic of Ireland, as it became more widely known and discussed that the Church was responsible not only for widespread cruelty and oppression, not even just for mass child sexual abuse, but for what amounted to mass

enslavement and the murder of thousands of children.

In fact, Ireland over the last half century has seen not just gradual secularisation, but a moral revolt against theocratic depravity.

As brave people in many countries battle right-wing religious authoritarianism – and in Iran rise up against theocratic dictatorship – we should recall this theocracy that not long ago existed close to home, and the horrors it inflicted. We should recall the struggle against it as a front

in the battle against "carceral states" characterised by mass imprisonment as well as against religious authoritarianism.

A century ago, in 1919-21, a war of independence ended British rule in 26 of the 32 counties of Ireland. Becoming a "Free State" nominally still within the empire in 1921, 26-counties Ireland pushed over three decades towards greater independence and formally became a republic in 1949. But the same process by which the country achieved full independence created a viciously reactionary regime dominated by the Catholic Church.

Is comparison to Iran overblown? Governments in 26-counties Ireland were not actually staffed by clerics; there were no laws, enforceable by special police, about what women could wear. Ireland's labour movement was not suppressed; it was a parliamentary democracy; and it did not take an actual revolution to marginalise the power of the Church. But in terms of decades-long day-to-day social control the comparison is valid.

And of course the Catholic Church, unlike the Shia hierarchy in Iran, is an international organisation. In the same decade it re-emerged into global public glare how it had inflicted similar violence in other places: notably against indigenous people in [Canada](#). □

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Worker-led conversion, not just shrinking



Letter

Stuart Jordan (*Solidarity* 656) contends that “capitalist work... needs to stop”.

Capitalism itself needs to stop: not through piecemeal reductions in work under capitalism, but through collective social revolution.

We stand in solidarity with the rail strikes. Yet in their direct impact, they surely increase car usage, and net carbon emissions. In the medium term, rail workers may fight for more rail, more work on the rails, against airport expansion – to ecological advan-

tage. And, as Stuart suggests, workers’ power built through strikes is key to the fight to replace capitalism.

“Work is always a physical movement of matter, the creation and distribution of use-values from the materials of the Earth.” Much work, from healthcare to entertainment, creates services, not physical objects. That does require a physical movement of matter, and resources, but the same is true of all activities.

I was considering not individual “carbon footprints” but collective impacts, a collective political approach.

We need to fight for a conscious redirection of the human activities that we per-

form: from chasing profit under the bosses’ orders, to chasing social and ecological well-being as a democratic collective.

We shouldn’t limit ourselves to simply clawing back a little bit of our time from direct capitalist control for individual leisure. We must take full control of production.

Many sectors are environmentally destructive. Others are vital for greening and adaptation. We should fight for worker-led conversion, not (simply) shrinking. Pulling a sickie is not an ecological boon; nor is a society-wide recession. □

Zack Muddle,
Bristol

The immediate and the fundamental



Letter

We’re for Britain rejoining the EU. But Ben Tausz (*Solidarity* 656) is wrong to say that means we shouldn’t raise the more immediate demands for rejoining the Customs Union and Single Market (thus restoring free movement).

Single Market, free movement, Customs Union are lesser demands, but “immediate”, at least this side of the Tories’ mooted bonfire of EU-inherited regulations. A UK decision to return to EU regulations would require

less “bourgeois deal-making” than the Tories’ (and Starmer’s) plan to negotiate new trade relations. It would be a step forward in general, and immediately would resolve the Northern Ireland Protocol impasse and expand many individual freedoms for millions.

The “rejoin EU” demand is not wrong, but cannot be “immediate”, and is inescapably more tied into (long, intricate) “bourgeois deal-making”. It should overshadow neither more immediate demands, nor our more general longer-term demand, a Socialist United States of Europe. □

Martin Thomas,
London



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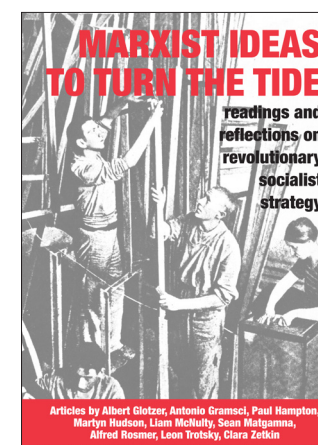
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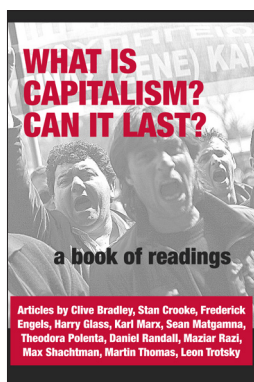
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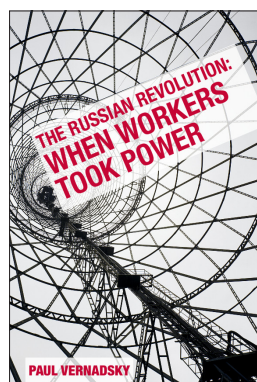
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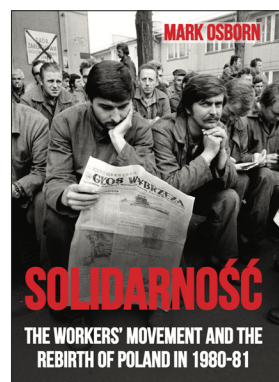
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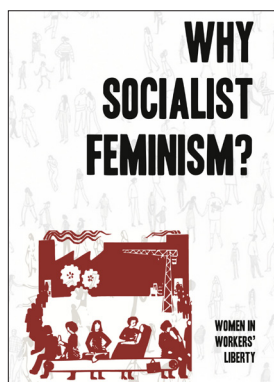
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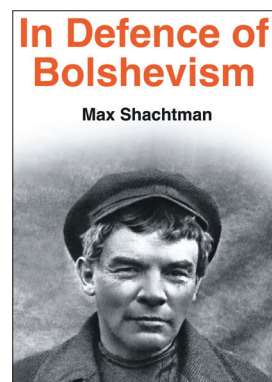
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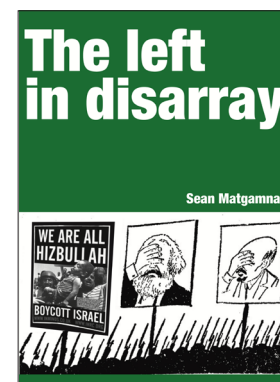
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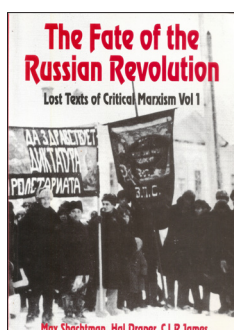
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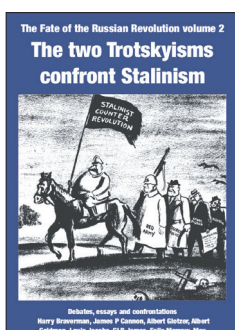
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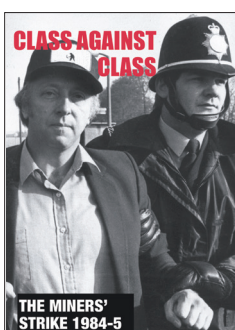
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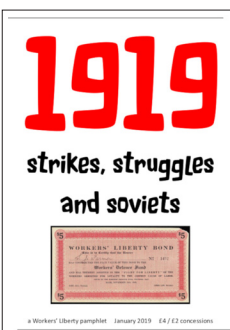
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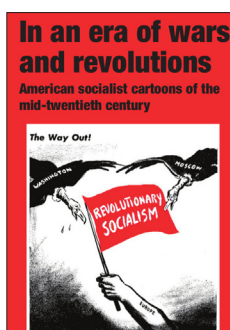
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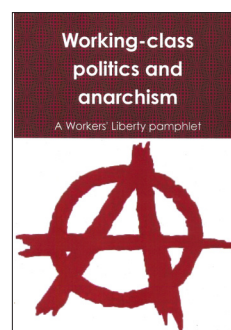
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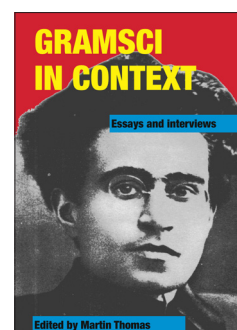
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Support and spread the NHS strikes!



By Alice Hazel

The Tories have run the NHS into the ground in order to pave the way for further privatisation. Waiting lists are soaring, staff are leaving, and there are 132,000 vacancies in NHS England alone. The system is chronically underfunded, with patients' safety in jeopardy.

Strikes are planned on 15 and 20 Dec by the RCN, on the 21st by Unison, GMB and Unite ambulance worker branches, and on 28th again by the GMB. They are the first significant strikes in the health service for 20 years.

These strikes need to be the start of a co-ordinated industrial and political campaign by the trade union move-

ment. Instead, our union leaders are already making some pretty stupid decisions. Each union leadership seems hell bent on setting its own strike dates, ignoring opportunities to coordinate and thereby strengthen our strikes. In Scotland, where the RCN just delivered a thunderous strike vote, all the union leadership teams have called off strikes and Unison and Unite have accepted a rubbish below-inflation pay offer. The RCN leadership have said they will call off the strikes for talks on pay.

In contrast to this timidity at the top of the unions, health workers have had enough. We are in a strong position to build the action through these strike days and into the New Year and to win.

The strikes must go ahead unless an above-inflation pay rise is offered. Talks are not enough to call off strikes. All the branches that met the threshold should be involved in the strike. Re-ballots should begin in the areas that

voted for action but that didn't meet the thresholds.

We need to build confidence for workers to stand in solidarity with each other and not cross picket lines. We need to publicise to members of all unions the advice that Aslef gives its members: "An employer cannot dismiss you for taking part in industrial action for the first 12 weeks of action... you have the same protections if you refuse to cross the picket line of another union who is taking action with your employer – as long as their action is following a lawful ballot."

Our unions should be encouraging us to stand together like this. We need to ensure our unions back members that take action on this basis. Health workers might choose to dual-card (i.e. join a second union) for the period of the strike to ensure we have full support from a union with a mandate for strike action.

Unions should not agree blanket derogations for whole services. If strike committees offer too many derogations it undermines our strike. Instead the union should issue a list of workplaces it expects to see closed on strike days (administrative offices, community team hubs, training centres, etc) and offer derogations only when our pickets confirm that those workplaces are closed. If they are open, then that demonstrates management have sufficient staff to cover the life and limb service and can redeploy.

Particularly skilled and irreplaceable workers in some specialist critical care areas may need to be derogated to save life and limb, but that is very different from wholesale derogations in every area.

Strikes in the New Year need to be co-ordinated across the unions. And should be escalated quickly from single days to more sustained action. □

Royal Mail: it's an existential fight

By a postal worker

A postal worker and CWU rep spoke to Solidarity

My branch sent two coaches, a mini-bus, and several people on a train to the 9 December strike rally in London. Everyone thought it was a brilliant day.

You're never sure exactly how much direct impact these set-piece protests and rallies have, but it was certainly uplifting, and if people come back to the workplace buzzing from the day, it'll have a positive effect. Obviously in terms of winning the dispute, the basic groundwork in the workplace is more important than publicity, but the rally got a lot of good publicity for the cause.

My sense of the overall mood in the dispute is that it is now one of grim determination. People see this is an existential fight, a fight for the survival of the job as we know it, and the survival of the service we provide. People who are old enough to remember previous strikes are saying this is different in terms of what's on the line. Workers closer to retirement are saying very clearly that they're fighting not for their own future, but for the future of the job.

I don't know what the answer is in terms of what level of action would win the dispute. In

one sense, indefinite action seems like a possible next step, but many people feel that, if we were going to pursue that, we should've done it from the beginning, and the stop-start strategy has made it harder to take that kind of action. It might still be necessary to do that, but it will be difficult to deliver.

Class war

We're dealing with a totally brazen management, who are very much taking a class-war approach to what's going on. That's true across the strike wave, not just in Royal Mail. We certainly need to prepare for the possibility Royal Mail will simply impose the changes to terms and conditions by executive action.

Amongst reps, we have always had a view to coordination with other unions. It's the obvious thing to do, this is a class-wide movement and if workers are going to win, we'll win together. Locally, the Trades Council is well-meaning, but it's questionable how much connection there is with what unions are doing in workplaces on the ground.

There was a local rally on the day of the recent UCU strike, with speakers from other unions, including myself. I'm also involved in an effort to organise a local left network of trade unionists active in different

unions, which will also seek to coordinate efforts within local Labour Parties to mobilise support for the strikes. □



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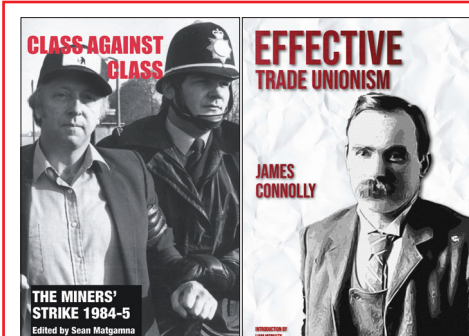
Organising in workplaces and localities

In every working-class battle, organisation at workplace and local level is essential as well as organisation from union offices and paid officials, and maybe a necessary counterweight to officials' in-built tendency to see their own negotiating skills as central and workers' action as a backdrop.

That works at different levels. Workplace strike committees are so indispensable in some areas, given the lack of regular workplace union structures, that the union officials themselves move to create them, as the RCN has done among nurses. In other places where there are regular workplace union structures, and workers are used to disputes being run by those, it is harder to get support for the idea, especially

when strikes are only one or two or three days at a time. But, even if formed as ad hoc expanded versions of regular workplace union structures, they are valuable in drawing in new activists from and for the strikes, and even more so if they are cross-union.

Cross-union strike committees in cities or boroughs, essentially liaison committees between the strike-organising structures in different workplaces, can organise mutual support on picket lines and in other ways. They can interlink with (without being subordinated to) broader strike solidarity committees, sponsored by Trades Councils, Labour Parties, etc., which bring in supporters outside the workplaces in dispute, students, etc., and are emerging in some areas. □



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Snow, frost, and crowds



Diary of a Tubeworker

By Jay Dawkey

The cold weather hit just as we saw that we'd got over the line in the rebalot for our dispute over jobs, cuts and pensions. The big majority for action bolstered people, but the turnout bothered some.

"How can so many people not vote?" "What do they think they are playing at?" "We have to address this in the future".

We do need to get better engagement and involvement in the union, but we also have to recognise the anti-union laws are designed to stop us getting over the line. Any time we do that, we've beaten them back a little bit.

We have to now look at the action needed in the New Year to reverse the cuts to stations that are already being

imposed, plus the impending cuts to maintenance and what is yet to come for our pensions and for drivers.

But the more immediate problem is the freezing weather. I'm hoping it just stays cold rather than getting worse. As the weekend started, it was frosty, but everything seemed to be running as it should. Town was very busy, as it has been since December started, particularly as Winter Wonderland, Xmas shopping and the lights draw people in.

It now seems as busy as before the pandemic. I am forever opening my doors again as everyone tries to cram at the last minute, or tries to pack themselves, with their shopping and big winter coats, all into one car when others are less full.

On Sunday evening (11th), things took a turn for the worse. As I came out of the tunnel, visibility had got a lot worse, and not just because it was dark. Snow was steadily falling. The fog

repeaters for the signals became more important.

A reminder was played over the radio every hour or so for drivers: trains with de-icing equipment should have it turned on so the de-icer is applied to the rails and the sleet brushes do what they can to keep them clear.

We already have a special train running back and forth putting sandite down for the leaf-fall. The stuff only lasts four hours, so the job has to be done pretty much continually.

At first I assumed driving in the snow would be just like the rain, with more wheel slide and extra time and care for braking. In fact, while it was coming down, it didn't make much difference. The next day, the snow stuck around and froze overnight, causing some closures and suspensions. I was glad to be off shift. □

The story of the migrant Elias



Kino Eye

By John Cunningham

One of Costas Gavras' later films, *Eden is West* (2009), recounts the journey of Elias (Ricardo Scamarcio), a migrant of unknown origins, through Europe to the streets of Paris.

Somewhere in the Mediterranean his crowded boat is chased by the coastguards. In desperation Elias dives overboard and washes up on a Greek beach at what turns out to be a holiday resort cum nudist camp for the rich. Elias adapts to survive, stealing a camp worker's uniform from a washing line and pretending to be a cleaner.

The police begin to look for him and the holiday resort manager even makes this into a "game" – the first guest who



spots the "fugitive" wins a prize! Elias befriends an entertainer-magician at the camp, Nick Nickleby (Ulrich Tukur), who invites him to visit when or if, he ever gets to Paris. After many mishaps, including one incident where he is mistaken for a Gypsy, he makes it to Paris without being caught, despite his inability to speak French.

After much searching he runs into Nick Nickleby on the street. The outcome of their reunion is not what Elias expected. □

John Molyneux, 1948-2002

By Martin Thomas

John Molyneux, who died aged 74 on 10 December 2022, was perhaps the last of the actual 1968 generation still prominent in the Socialist Workers Party, SWP (or, rather, near it: since retiring in 2010 he had been in the Irish offshoot, SWN).

In IS (as the SWP was then called) he first became prominent as part of the Southampton IS branch which in 1970 allied de facto with the Trotskyist Tendency (forerunner of the AWL) in opposing the IS's August 1969 shift from tinny (as we saw it) sloganising about troops out of Ireland to mealy-mouthed but unmistakable support for British troops on the streets as a protection against the mobilised Loyalists.

All his life Molyneux remained at some critical distance from the IS-SWP leadership, and reasonable in his tone of polemic; but he soon became the model "loyal oppositionist".

He was never in the SWP "centre", working instead as a lecturer at Portsmouth University and local activist. He wrote frequently and often at book length. At times such as the Respect fiasco of 2004-7 or the "Comrade Delta" scandal of 2013, he provided a loyalist voice in its most reasonable tones and with the authority of a known critic.

He was clearly a talented and committed socialist, but must have decided at some point that his political judgement was not sure enough to stray more than limitedly from the IS-SWP Cliff-then-Callinicos orthodoxy. □

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Stepping up the rail disputes



Off The Rails

The rejection of a meagre pay offer by RMT members on Network Rail has renewed the rail strikes.

The strikes continue through December. Beyond that, Aslef members at Train Operating Companies and RMT members on London Underground have voted to renew their industrial action mandates. Cleaners have won their ballots in a majority of companies. TSSA members at some TOCs strike on 17 December.

Shorten

Rail workers will need to dig in; but not aim for disputes that drag on and on. Rather, shorten the disputes by taking action that can win. Given the attitude of the employers and the government, it looks increasingly likely that prolonged or even indefinite strikes will be

necessary. In prolonged or indefinite strikes, even higher-paid members will begin to feel the pinch. The question of hardship payments and strike pay will become more urgent.

In some unions, there's an unhelpfully macho attitude towards hardship payments. Some activists insist "striking should be a sacrifice", and suggest hardship payments are an indication of weakness (or, worse, in an echo of the propaganda of the bosses and the tabloids, a "bribe" for members to strike).

Striking does involve sacrifice, but the point isn't to make sacrifices as a noble gesture. The point is to win. If we

can help members take action that can win by supporting them with strike pay, why wouldn't we do it?

Unite has won a growing number of its current pay disputes by calling sustained or indefinite action, with members receiving around £70 per day in strike pay. As the second largest union in the country, Unite has more resources than RMT, Aslef, or TSSA, but the rail unions need to look at what more they can do.

Strike funds

The step RMT nationally took in releasing £500k from the national dispute fund to branches was a good one. Unfortunately some branches have made the process of claiming from the fund unnecessarily bureaucratic and difficult to navigate, so money is sat in branch accounts gathering dust.

The principle was the right one, and it should be extended. The National Executive Committee (NEC) should regularly report to all branches how much money is in the national dispute fund,

and explore whether further allocations can be made.

Levy

We also need to explore the feasibility of a levy of additional union dues. The PCS union has just enacted a levy amongst its members involved in the national dispute, increasing monthly union dues by up to £5, with the increase ring-fenced for its strike fund, so the union can pay full strike pay to all members striking in December.

The idea of the union increasing dues will jar with some members, especially after it agreed to freeze the basic subs rates for the next year for the cost-of-living crisis.

But we are in the fight of our lives here. If we win our disputes, members will recoup the losses via increased pay settlements and other gains. Whatever it takes to win!

• Abridged from [Off the Rails](#)

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PCS mulls all-out strike



John Moloney

As part of the decision of our union, PCS, to roll out selective action on a regional basis, the union has announced more strikes involving Home Office and Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) workers throughout December. The Home Office workers taking action include workers who provide passport services at airports, which could lead to significant disruption.

Our National Executive Committee (NEC) met in early December and revisited the discussion about all-out action. There's a strong feeling that this should be done in coordination with other unions, and there are developing discussions across the labour movement about this. I'm in favour of the widest possible coordination, but I'm also in favour of PCS taking all-out, national action even if coordination can't be achieved. Selective action will not be enough to win our dispute.

In the debate around coordination, we also need to avoid a coordinated strike being a one-off set-piece action. A mass strike, involving all unions with live mandates, would be a good start, but unless it is part of an ongoing programme of action it will just

be a protest. That debate, about what a programme of coordinated action looks like, needs to happen now, so we don't arrive at a one-day strike and then have to ask, "what next?"

Our dispute continues to have a positive impact on union organisation. Membership growth this year has sped up since start of the ballot, with thousands joining since then. We're now at 190,000 members and rising. The number of members being designated as reps and signing up to be workplace union advocates is also increasing, as is the number of people registering to attend union courses. We need to ensure that's an active engagement, with these activists taking responsibility for leading and organising the union in the workplace.

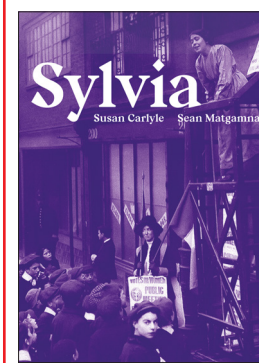
In our upcoming strikes, we need to organise picket lines wherever possible. Where it's not, there need to be local protests and strike rallies members can attend. The strikes have to be an active experience for members, something that makes them feel empowered.

There is a risk that, if the dispute is controlled too rigidly from above, it will have the opposite effect, and lead to members feeling like they're a stage army. Recently, the union committee for Scottish government workers requested approval to take industrial action, and that was turned down. I

argued against that decision; I think the role of union structures should be to facilitate workers taking action. Sometimes groups of members may misjudge matters and want to take industrial action that can't win, or that they can't actually deliver, and you might need to have a discussion about that. But in this context, I think we want to encourage groups of members to come forward with proposals and err on the side of experimenting and testing the water. If that leads to some actions that are less successful, you learn the lessons from that.

As the national dispute goes on, it's vital we continue to support local disputes, especially those that involve members who aren't part of the UK civil service. PCS members at the HGS centre in Liverpool, which provides admin and back-office services to the government's Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS), are striking again from 12-23 December, and I'll be going to Liverpool to support that strike. They're striking to demand a living wage and improved sick pay and annual leave arrangements. They'll be picketing every day from 07:30-11:30, and I'm hopeful the local labour movement will rally round them to support their picket lines. □

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



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Back Ukraine against Russia's war!

By Dan Katz

Ukraine was already a poor country before the latest Russian invasion began on 24 February, with a GDP per head of only \$3,700. In 2022 the World Bank expects GDP to fall by 35%.

Ukraine has been devastated by the needless Russian imperialist war, the brutality of the occupation and the relentless attacks on civilian infrastructure.

By mid-November infrastructure damage was estimated at \$127bn, and by the summer of 2022 various estimates of the total cost of rebuilding Ukraine were upwards of \$350bn.

The UNHCR estimated the number of Ukrainian refugees who are now outside Ukraine at more than 7.8m and the number of internally displaced at 6.5m from an original population of 44m.

The UN has documented 6,500 Ukrainian civilian war deaths and another 10,000 Ukrainians injured. Those figures are certainly underestimates.

On 10 November the US's army chief, Mark Milley, estimated Ukrainian civilian dead at 40,000 and indicated that some 100,000 Ukrainian soldiers had been killed or wounded.

Milley also put the numbers of Russian dead and wounded at 100,000. The Oryx website believes 8,000 pieces of Russian equipment have been destroyed, damaged, abandoned, or captured, including some 1,500 tanks. That is a significant underestimate, as Oryx is only counting equipment losses verified by photographs. Lloyd Austin, US Defence Secretary, describes Russian military losses as "staggering".

Increase

The UK Ministry of Defence stated on 12 December that Russia's federal draft budget has allocated the equivalent of \$143bn to "defence, security and law enforcement" in 2023. "This is more than 30% of Russia's entire budget, a significant increase compared with previous years."

The war has reinforced and strengthened Ukrainian identity. A poll in August showed 85% of the population identifying as Ukrainian, as against 64% before the February invasion.

In mid-October a poll recorded 86% of Ukrainians supporting the war and opposing negotiations with Russia, despite Russian missile attacks against Ukrainian cities.

According to the BBC, by 28 November Russia had hit 200 energy infrastructure targets with missiles. From 10 December Iranian-supplied "kami-

kaze drones" hit Odesa's power supply leaving 1.5m people without power. The damage is so severe that the electricity outage may last three months during a period of sub-zero temperatures. These sustained, deliberate attacks, aimed at demoralising civilian support for Ukraine's war are war crimes committed by Russia.

The occupation has been accompanied by theft, brutality, sexual assaults, disappearances, torture and murder. There are 50,000 suspected war crimes being investigated across Ukraine.

For example, 14,000 objects were looted from Kherson city's art museum during the Russian retreat in November. Animals were taken from Kherson City's zoo. Power lines, radio masts and public building were destroyed. The roads were mined. Ambulances, fire engines, hospital equipment, private cars, computers, televisions and kitchen appliances were also stolen from Kherson. Makeshift prisons and interrogation centres were uncovered.

Such brutality has produced an unpleasant, if predictable, even understandable, reaction amongst Ukrainians. A poll also showed 92% holding a "bad" attitude towards Russia. There is a widespread reaction against all things Russian, with Russian-speaking Ukrainians refusing to speak the language. Odesa, founded in 1794 by Catherine the Great, plans to remove her statue.

In a war that, apparently, is being fought by Russia to stop NATO expansion and Ukraine's incorporation into Europe, the invasion has scared Finland and Sweden into applying for NATO membership and led Germany to massively increase arms spending. Ukraine, previously denied EU membership, can now see a path into the EU. By these metrics Putin's invasion has backfired.

And yet sections of the British left seem unable to react adequately to the situation. The attempts to portray the US and NATO as having a similar role in this war to Russia is ridiculous. Ukraine has the right to resist Russia's attempt to subjugate it, and the right to resist terror attacks by the Russian armed forces and proxies. The calls from some on the British left for "peace" without conditions, to stop the British government helping to arm Ukraine, only help Russian imperialism. If the West stops arming Ukraine it will be overrun by Putin's armies and the population subjected to terror. Why should that be accepted?

Arms and aid to Ukraine! Victory to Ukraine! □



China simmers after November revolt

By Ralph Peters

December 10 was a Global Day of Protest against Apple and their supplier Foxconn over their treatment of up to 300,000 workers at their plants in Zhengzhou, China.

In late October Taiwan-based Foxconn's workers rebelled against effectively held prisoner in the plants for months to maintain production. In the name of "zero Covid", workers were locked in at close quarters with those ill with Covid.

Thousands of workers broke out of the complex. There were fights with security police. New workers recruited to the factories then took action over pay. Foxconn was forced to pay them each 10,000 yuan. iPhone production collapsed, losing Apple \$1 billion a week in sales.

In late November, other protests at China's ultra-lockdowns broke out in more than a dozen cities, intensified by the fire which killed ten people in a locked-down apartment block in Urumqi, capital of Xinjiang. Many of the protests were encouragingly supportive of the Uyghur people of Xinjiang.

On 30 November China announced it would ease Covid curbs, after a letter sent by Foxconn to the Chinese leaders.

On 3 December Apple announced plans to move away from suppliers based in China. Apple and Foxconn are driven by fear of losing profits and sales.

The Global Day of Action saw protests in Sydney, Tokyo, London, New York, Seattle and in other cities. It followed a petition demanding answers from Apple on the abuses of Foxconn workers. In London, there were three protests one after the other, with some overlap: one (above) outside the Apple store on Regent St, initiated by Labour [Solidarity](#) with Hong Kong, with which Workers' Liberty has long been involved; one at the Chinese Embassy, initiated by [China Deviants](#); and another at the Chinese Embassy, by [young feminists](#) from mainland China living in Britain.

China's Covid-curb exit may well be troubled, and comes with an economic crisis. The property market has collapsed. The first half of the 2010s saw more building activity in China than in the US over the whole of the 20th century. Many of those buildings now lie empty.

Even the "middle class" of university-educated Chinese workers and lower-rank officials is now losing out. And, among poorer-paid workers, thousands of drivers largely in the Guangdong province but also in Wuhan, Changsha, Quanzhou, and Wenzhou took action in mid November against a 20% loss in their pay. They work through gig platform, Huolala, with 600,000 drivers.

The protests have abated in December. There have been mass arrests – maybe over one hundred in Guangzhou alone. But the November revolt won't be forgotten. □



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IRAN: PROTESTS DEFY VIOLENCE

By Dan Katz

The clerical-fascist regime in Iran is still unable to crush the mass protest movement which erupted after the killing of 22-year old Mahsa / Jina Amini by the Iranian "morality police" in Tehran, in September.

Women-led protests have demanded the abolition of the law which mandates women to cover their hair. More broadly Iranians are objecting to a barbaric, patriarchal and repressive state which narrowly restricts social life, and widespread poverty. The main slogan is "Women, life, freedom!" Nightly protests continue across the country.

The Iranian state has used enormous violence against the protesters, particularly in areas with minority communities – the Kurdish north west, Baluchi areas in the south east and in the oil and gas producing south east where there is a large Arab minority.

The Human Rights Activists' News Agency, HRANA, estimates that, so far, 475 protesters have been killed by security forces and 18,240 others have been detained.

On Thursday 8 December, Iran hanged 23 year-old Mohsen Shekari, who had been convicted of injuring a security guard with a knife, blocking a

street in Tehran and charged with the vague, capital offence "Enmity against God".

Mohsen was the first protester arrested during these protests to be executed.

Amnesty International condemned Shekari's "grossly unfair sham trial" and fast-tracked execution. After Shekari's death state media produced a confession video in which Shekari appears with a bruised face. Presumably he had been tortured to confess.

Across Tehran rooftops, and late into the night of 8 December, people shouted, "We are all Mohsen" and "Khamenei [the Supreme Leader of Iran] is a murderer".

Amnesty concludes, rightly, that "forced veiling laws violate a whole host of rights, including the rights to equality, privacy and freedom of expression and belief. They also degrade women and girls, stripping them of their dignity, bodily autonomy, and self-worth."

Student organisations called for strikes and protests over the three days, 5 to 7 December. According to the website of the socialist [Shahrokh Zamani campaign](#): "Although many students' organisations and teachers' associations boycotted university and school classes, and lorry owners and drivers showed solid support

for the strike call, there were no significant groups of workers who went on strike in response to this call.

"Shop owners in many cities and towns also joined the action, keeping their shops closed. But the commercial strike was not as widespread as had been expected, probably due to reprisals by the regime (with shops that did not open for business being sealed off)."

There has been an increase in the number of workers' strikes taking place in Iran, but so far the working class has not joined the street protest movement as a class.

The three days of action ended on 7 December (16 Azar) to mark the date of the killing of student protesters, organising against the visit to Iran of the future US president, Richard Nixon, in 1953.

This year students at Allameh Tabataba'i University in Tehran defied the security forces and rallied demanding:

"Bread, work, freedom, optional hijab covering!"

"Students, workers, unite, unite!"

"The students are awake and hate tyranny!"

"We're the workers' children, we stand with them!"

"We don't want a militarised university!" □