PCS: WHEN “CONTINUE CAMPAIGN” MEANS DUMP IT

By a PCS member

The electronic membership ballot of PCS (civil service union) members, called by the Left Unity (LU) faction national leadership, on the fate of our national campaign for a 2022 10% consolidated pay rise, with a national living wage underpin of £15 per hour, and enhanced job security, is rumbling towards its conclusion on 31 August. PCS is not balloting on an offer from the Government because it has never received one, despite pretending that it has. Instead, members are being asked, “Do you agree with the PCS strategy to continue the campaign?”

Those same members have repeatedly, in record numbers, endorsed the demands of the national campaign and voted for all out and selective strike action. On 23 May 2023, PCS Annual Delegate Conference (ADC) voted for the leadership's motion to continue national and selective strike action until we win our demands. But now, under a ton of bullshit, the LU leadership is asking members to endorse its dumping of our national campaign, and their own ADC motion. All under the Orwellian slogan of “Vote Yes to continue the campaign”!

Within six working days of the end of ADC the LU leadership was publicly abandoning the dispute. It subsequently stopped strikes in support of our national demands. It has stated that, if the ballot returns a majority “Yes” vote, it will halt the levy which has funded selective action.

The leadership has issued a misleading ballot question; a misleading ballot insert; and a swathe of email, on-line and video propaganda. It has inserted, on the electronic ballot form, its own Orwellian slogan (“Vote Yes to continue the campaign”) and more propaganda. Grim even by right wing trade union standards.

The LU leadership’s ballot tactics have caused enormous confusion. Members have asked whether, if they want to continue the campaign but oppose the leadership’s actions, a “No” vote means an end to the campaign because “Yes” supposedly means continuing it.

The leadership has claimed that it is “pausing” – not ending – our strikes so that PCS representatives in the civil service delegated pay bargaining units may enter the 2023/24 pay round to get the best possible deals for members... without any strike leverage and when the Government is again insisting, through its pay remit guidance, on below inflation awards.

This “best possible deal” nonsense is based on the leadership’s claim, to support ending strikes, that the below-inflation pay remit is a significant government concession.

After this “bargaining” without leverage, the LU leadership will review the outcomes of the 2023-24 pay round. But they already know in broad terms what the outcomes will be – below-inflation awards for thousands of members. It is already happening.

LU members of the National Executive based in the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) have voted, as DWP PCS Executive members, to reject DWP management’s 2023/24 below-inflation pay offer. Yet those same NEC members are still pushing the line of “pausing the action” to see the pay outcomes.

• AGS election: see p.15
**Stop profit drive frying the planet!**

*Editorial*

In its pursuit of profit, capitalism is frying and boiling our planet.

The uncontrolled wildfires burning through July and August—from Hawaii to Greece, from western Canada to Tenerife—not only symbolise runaway climate change, but give a warning of worse to come.

The eight hottest years on record are the last eight. 2023 is set to beat them. We haven’t yet reached the key threshold of 1.5 Celsius above pre-industrial temperatures. As we race towards and most likely past it, the events of this summer will start to look minor.

Events like the new uncontrolled wildfires are only part of the wider accelerating process of climate change. Heatwaves are raging in many parts of the world. The oceans are heating up. Beyond the most dramatic events and change, many environments all over the planet in which working people live and try to make a living are deteriorating rapidly.

And: as the need for more radical action to curb emissions and mitigate coming disasters becomes ever clearer, capitalists and the governments that serve them—instead of pushing policies that undermine their existing climate plans.

The very mainstream International Energy Agency, an inter-governmental agency run by countries including the UK, has called for a stop to new oil, gas and coal projects to meet global climate goals. Instead many capitalist governments, and new UK’s too, are engaged in a new dash for fossil fuels.

Only a brief one, they say. But there is no time for pauses in the needed energy transition: humanity has already lost far too much time. The commitments and plans governments and corporations are busy undermining were already inadequate.

Only the organised workers’ movement has the anti-capitalist potential, strategic capacity and power to force a major shift of course. The workers’ movement can overthrow the capitalists and reorganise economies and societies on the basis of collective ownership, production for need not profit, and thoroughgoing democracy (socialism). More immediately, as the movement gathers strength for that, it can push back hard against the logic and drives of capitalism, imposing elements of democratic collectivist social reorganisation.

To realise the workers’ movement’s potential to fight climate change, and transform society generally, it too needs to be transformed. In the UK that is illustrated starkly by the movement’s response to the government’s outrageous climate policies.

Sunak and co. have chosen the midst of the summer conflagration to announce a hundred new licenses for oil and gas projects in the North Sea and that they want to “max out” the UK’s fossil fuel reserves. Shocking as it is, the decision is of a piece with the Tories’ other policies, from expanding aviation to opening the UK’s first new coal mine in 30 years.

(Secondary here, but certainly of note, is that two months before Sunak’s North Sea announcement Infosys—the firm in which his wife owns a £400 million stake—did a £1.1 billion deal with BP.)

The response from the UK labour movement has been poor.

Most trade unions, including North Sea union RMT, have stayed silent. Another North Sea union, Unite, has put out a statement that evades comment on the issue of the new licenses, or seems to nod towards supporting the policy. The third union in the industry, the GMB, has gone further, denouncing the Labour Party for saying it will end new licenses when it comes to office.

The problem with Labour’s policy is not that it will stop new licenses, but that it promises to “honour” whatever licenses the Tories issue now. Starmer says he wants to provide stability so corporations can “invest.” But investment in fossil fuels is precisely the problem here!

**Rosebank**

The Scottish National Party has gone even further, with the Scottish government declaring positively in favour of opening the huge new Rosebank oilfield off Shetland. The Scottish Greens, opposed to Rosebank, are nonetheless remaining in the government.

Honour to civil service union PCS, whose Environment, Food and Rural Affairs group has issued a statement on behalf of the union denouncing the Tories’ stance and calling for it to be reversed. (See also the statement from aviation workers’ group Safe Landing, which has members in several unions.)

Trade unionists serious about fighting climate change should agitate at the TUC Congress in September (10-13th, Liverpool); trade unionists and Labour members at Labour conference (8-11 October, Liverpool). We need to build up initiatives like the new Grassroots Climate Justice Caucus that is raising these issues in Unite, and spread them across the labour movement.

Beyond that, trade unionists need to gear up to defend workers in the climate crisis. This summer we have had reports of workers dying in the heatwaves (for instance in Italy) and simultaneously authorities moving to weaken protections like breaks for water (for instance in the US). We must prepare for urgent workplace actions for workers to defend our health and lives. In the UK part of that is fighting the anti-union laws, designed to make such emergency action (as well as political strikes about issues such as climate change) extremely difficult.

We should argue and wherever possible organise for the spread of green or climate reps in workplaces (not long ago more numerous than they are now).

Beyond the immediate and imminent defensive struggles, in the workplace and in society, we need the most concrete possible plans, from workplaces upwards, to accelerate the suppression of emissions while radically reshaping the climate transition in working-class interests. That means transition plans developed by workers’ organisations independently of employers and governments (while making demands on them), with the greatest possible participation of workers in developing them.

The “Our Power” demands for transition in the North Sea developed by climate NGOs in discussion with workers deserve attention and discussion. So does Safe Landing’s call for “workers assemblies” to develop ideas for workers’ plans. More powerful historical examples, for instance from the UK in the 70s, can help too.

We want an economy based on comprehensive public ownership and democratic control of production and wealth. Even short of that, however, demands for public ownership of key industries and services are essential for tackling climate change. As with reversing the expansion of fossil fuel exploitation, abolishing the anti-strike laws and other progressive demands, the labour movement will have to fight to impose them—including against a Labour government.

**Wildfires**

The wildfires and other horrors making UK news headlines this summer made them in part because they took place in the richer “Global North.” In “Global South” countries near the Equator, mostly poorer, the impact of climate change is already sharper—particularly for poorer people in those countries. As things get worse, that inequality will worsen too.

There are reports the UK government plans to cancel or cut the measly funding it has allocated to help poorer countries tackle climate change and adapt to its impacts. When the UK labour movement fails to seriously fight climate change, e.g. by refusing to oppose the Tories’ fossil-fuel arson, it bespeaks the working class here—but even more so the working class and poor in poorer countries. “Internationalism” must be more than a word.

Working-class climate transition plans must demand heavy redistribution of resources both within and between countries. We must fight the raising of borders, for the welcoming of climate and other refugees and for the maximum freedom of movement, into the UK and globally.

**Aug-Sep schedule**

Solidarity is skipping some weeks in August, and, because of staff difficulties, some in Sept too. No.683 will be 6 Sep; no.684, 20 Sep. Back to usual schedule soon.
Behind the Bibby Stockholm scandal

By Ben Tausz

The government has botched the roll-out of its scheme to warehouse asylum seekers on cramped ships while they await decisions on their applications. But there is little to celebrate in the Tories’ incompetence.

The Illegal Migration Act is now law. British and European border regimes have drowned yet more people attempting sea crossings. Despite significant public revulsion at the Conservative’s anti-migrant agenda, the Labour frontbench continues to endorse its basic principles, offering little better than more efficient implementation. Extra-parliamentary opposition remains on the back foot: laudable direct action and legal work obstruct specific raids and deportations, and plans for individual detention sites, but we have not mustered an offensive that could turn the political tide.

Over recent weeks, a string of difficulties hit the barge plan. First, port authorities turned away two of the three vessels obtained for accommodation. Weeks later than intended, the Bibby Stockholm barge anchored at Portland in Dorset.

Safety issues forced further delays in moving people onto the ship. The Fire Brigades Union called the ship “a potential deathtrap”. Local councillors found neither lifejackets nor proper provision to safely evacuate the 500 people the government plans to pack into 222 single cabins.

Then, it emerged that torture victims, people traumatised in disasters at sea, and at least one tuberculosis patient were among those selected to be moved onboard – breaking the government’s own regulations. Some secured legal reprieves.

Finally, despite warnings that cramped quarters would allow infectious diseases to spread rapidly, the government moved the first few people onboard on 7 August. The same day, contractors received an alert about deadly legionella bacteria in the boat’s water supply. But those onboard were not informed or evacuated for four days. Yet ministers continue to insist that “teething issues” won’t stop the scheme.

A successful pilot has demonstrated an alternative approach, but Suella Braverman refused to expand it. The scheme offered migrants living in Bedfordshire legal advice, clothing, mental health support, language classes and GP registration. It won praise from the UN refugee agency and cut costs by more than half compared to detention.

Instead, Braverman is sticking to the strategy of the recently passed Illegal Migration Act (IMA). She intends to spend billions expanding detention facilities for people identified for deportation, and detention-like housing in ships, disused barracks, and marquees on abandoned military bases for asylum applicants.

The Refugee Council projects that in the first three years of the IMA, there will be around 250,000 arrivals denied any right to have an asylum case heard, for the crime of having travelled irregularly and not via non-existent legal routes.

Theoretically, and atrociously, the IMA requires the government to deport them all. Yet in practice, even if the legal ruling against the government’s Rwanda removal scheme is overturned, they would struggle to deport more than a minority of this number.

Most will likely remain in indefinite limbo, with no right to support themselves through work or social security. Most will either be imprisoned in pre-removal detention, stuck in detention-like accommodation, or choose to slip underground. The law will push this last group toward hyper-exploiting illicit employers, while withholding any recourse to already-inadequate “modern slavery” protections.

What motivates this strategy? Ministers claim moving to ships saves money. This wouldn’t excuse the policy, but it doesn’t even appear true. One NGO report estimates that switching from hotels to boats might cut costs by 0.08% at most. The authors argue, reasonably, that it would be more cost effective to employ additional workers to address the record backlog of asylum applications.

The immigration minister has implied that the government deliberately allowed the backlog to build, suggesting that the prospect of waiting years for a decision (or, for post-IMA arrivals, no right to appeal at all), stuck in these conditions, deters refugees from travelling here.

Yet the government knows perfectly well serious evidence does not support the claim that escalating maltreatment can deter people fleeing persecution, poverty and destruction, who are already willing to run the life-threatening gauntlets created en route by UK and European border policies.

More likely, it is performative cruelty for culture war purposes, to stoke racism, incite resentment, and consolidate the Tories’ core base. Lee Anderson’s comment that asylum applicants objecting to conditions on the barge should “f**k off back to France”, and the intensifying demonisation of immigration lawyers, reflect this.

The Conservatives aim to aggravate divisions among workers, for example linking public sector wage concessions to higher NHS and visa fees for migrants (rightly condemned by over 60 trade unions and migrant organisations – but why have union leaders not called protests?). They have certainly succeeded in leading a cowardly, triangulating Labour leadership ever further right.

Detaining people targeted for deportation, and warehousing asylum applicants in fenced-off boats and camps while banning them from working, serve another purpose in border policy: preventing integration.

If those people could live, work, and put down roots side-by-side with locals, it would be harder to stoke and maintain divisions, and easier for them to resist maltreatment and deportation – and to win allies for that resistance. This calculation has motivated choicest expand immigration detention since Major and Blair’s administrations.

Against the escalating assault on migrants, our responsibility is to build working-class solidarity. We demand free movement, sanctuary, and equality for all.

Instead of meagre Home Office payments and life in detention centres, barges, camps or even hotels, refugees must be allowed to live in the community, with equal rights to work and social security. As Portland’s Labour mayor Carralyn Parkes rightly said, “human beings belong in communities”. There is a housing crisis, but the solution is not to pit working-class locals and migrants against one another. We must fight together to seize and socialise the abundance of vacant homes owned by capitalists and landlords, and to aggressively tax the rich to build good council housing for all.

At Labour Party conference, support the Labour Campaign for Free Movement to challenge Starmer’s policies in favour of a socialist, internationalist alternative.

Upcoming meetings

Workers’ Liberty meetings are open to all, and unless otherwise stated those below are online over zoom. We have many local (in-person) meetings, see online.

Friday-Sunday, 25-28 August: AWL Summer Camp, Surrey

Saturday 2 September, 12pm: Pro-choice demonstration, Home Office, 2 Marsham Street, London SW1P 4DF
1pm: March for Choice counter-demonstration to March for Life, Millicent Fawcett Statue, Parliament Square, London SW1P 3JX

Sunday 10 September, 11am: Ecocmsialist study group

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

By Jim Denham

During Solidarity’s August hiatus, your columnist has dutifully kept reading the Morning Star (so you don’t have to). Below, you will find some highlights. The fact that I reproduce this stuff does not mean that I approve. Far from it.

Griffiths in China

Communist Party of Britain general secretary Robert Griffiths has “had the honour” of leading a delegation to China, and the MS has published no less than four gripping reports from him. He tells us that: “Our hosts’ intention was to explain China’s path of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’.” In the course of his visit, comrade Griffiths met and lunched with government ministers, members of the Communist Youth League (one of whom was a “member of China’s growing Uighur community”), the vice-president of a car company and the deputy chair of the All-China Federation of Trades Unions (ACFTU), “the only union body recognised by employers and the state”. The deputy chair “was unapologetic about the ACFTU policy of raising productivity and avoiding strikes wherever possible.” After all, “many millions of its members continue to benefit from China’s phenomenal economic growth.”

McKenzie on Niger

At first, the paper’s International editor, former Unison bureaucrat Roger McKenzie, seems to have had some doubts about the military coup, reporting (28 July) that “President Mohamed Bazoum, elected in 2021 in Niger’s first peaceful, democratic transfer of power… reportedly has the backing of several political parties [who] issued a statement calling the coup attempt ‘suicidal and anti-republican madness’.” But by 10 August comrade McKenzie was 100% behind the coup, describing it in glowing terms as an example of “the general uprising in West Africa against the former colonial ruler France”, which has prompted McKenzie to re-read the “brilliant” Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth, and to sympathise with “people who live under the boot of oppression using force to remove the iron heel of their oppressor” – which is evidently how he now regards the coup.

Don’t vote Labour...

I don’t know whether Richard Rudkin represents the current thinking of the MS/CPB, but they obviously think his views warrant a full page in the paper (7 August). Here’s a sample: “A Labour vote will be endorsing a leader that has stood by while his MPs have labelled the left as ‘cranks, Trots and anti-Semites,’ all because they refused to accept the mainstream media narrative that another way, other than inflicting austerity on the poorest in society, was not possible, while refusing to remain silent on their support for Palestinians.”

“A Labour vote will be endorsing a party that will protect Israel from criticism, which will keep the bedroom tax, which has no money for the NHS but will find money for war. A government that refuses to nationalise energy and water despite people struggling to keep warm in the winter.”

Fourth woman faces illegal abortion charge

Women’s Fightback

By Katy Dollar

Another woman due for trial in a UK court next year for carrying out an abortion. “It is clear that prosecutors are taking a much more aggressive stand against women with unexplained pregnancy loss or who are suspected of having an illegal abortion”, Jonathan Lord, co-chair of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, told The Times. There had been only three such trials in the previous 160 years.

Pandemic

Bethany Cox faces charges of child destruction and procuring her own miscarriage when she was just 19 years old, using the abortion pill misoprostol. The accusation relates to period of the pandemic when sexual health and abortion services were far more difficult to access. Both charges carry a potential sentence of up to life in prison. Under the old Offences against the Person Act 1861, which made it an offence for a woman to unlawfully procure her own abortion in England and Wales. Abortion in some circumstances was legalised by Parliament in 1967, but the 1861 law was not repealed, so can be invoked past the term limit or without approval by two doctors. Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK where abortion has been decriminalised (when the Northern Ireland Executive Formation Act was passed in 2019). Lack of services there mean it is still hard for many to access abortion.

Cox is the fourth woman in eight months to appear in front of a UK judge on similar charges. It seems there is a turn to prosecute women for exercising rights over their own bodies.

In July, Carla Foster, a mother who was jailed for procuring an illegal abortion in the pandemic was freed by the Court of Appeal, with her prison sentence reduced and suspended. Even many mainstream and right wing sources have called for legal reform. Caroline Nokes MP, the Conservative chair of the women and equalities committee, said in reaction to the initial sentencing of Foster that there was “a case for Parliament” to look at the issue in detail.

Last December, the Crown Prosecution Service dropped the case against another mother who was charged with taking misoprostol while pregnant, a year after successfully delivering her baby via C-section. The judge had told the prosecutors that he was “flabbergasted” the case was being brought and “there can be no conceivable public interest in pursuing it”.

In November, 23 year-old Sophie Hett is due to stand trial with her partner Elliot Benham, also 23, at Gloucester Crown Court. Both have pleaded not guilty to the joint charges which include illegally procuring drugs from India to cause a miscarriage and concealing the birth of a child.

CPS

The Crown Prosecution Service has said that although these “exceptionally rare cases are complex and traumatic”, its prosecutors have a duty to ensure the laws set by Parliament are considered and applied. Whilst abortion is criminalised, prosecutions like this will continue to be a risk. Until the right to abortion on demand is granted, unsafe or illegal abortions will continue.

The labour movement must mobilise for reproductive freedoms. PCS London Region has joined many individual trade union branches in supporting and mobilising for the Abortion Rights demonstration on 2 September (1pm from the Millicent Fawcett statue, Parliament Square). Feminist Fightback is also demonstrating the same day, noon at the Home Office, 2 Marsham St.
Azerbaijan: new unions emerge

By Eric Lee

In places where existing trade unions fail to organise workers, new unions will often emerge to fill the gap. And those new unions will sometimes be the subject of state repression as a result.

This is what appears to be happening today in Azerbaijan.

The existing trade unions in the oil-rich former Soviet republic are strongly tied to the regime. The news on their website consists primarily of support for whatever the regime wants and says, and opposition to Azerbaijan’s traditional enemy, Armenia.

Meanwhile a new union has come into existence to organise workers the traditional unions won’t touch. It’s called the Workers’ Table Trade Unions Confederation and its chairman, Afadin Mammadov, was detained on 1 August on charges of disobeying police orders. Azerbaijani police detained another member of the confederation, Elvin Mustafayev, on drug charges three days later. And most recently, union activist Aykhan Israfilov was detained on 11 August and remanded into four months of pre-trial detention.

The three men and their union have been involved in ongoing protests by delivery couriers — workers that traditional unions in many countries have not successfully organised.

The men are also members of Democracy 1918 (D-18), a political movement aimed at challenging the leadership of President Ilham Aliyev. Aliyev has been the country’s leader for twenty years. According to one report, D-18, which primarily campaigns for democratic reforms, “has also raised ethnic and gender issues that were ignored by the traditional opposition forces, and has dared to question the regime’s intractable hostility to Armenia”.

It has also taken up the cause of the country’s sex workers. According to one independent media source, “D-18 is organising autonomous trade unions. These unions are mostly focused on the service sector, largely targeting delivery businesses and taxi companies. Their union is 90% composed of food couriers who recently went on a strike against Wolt, the most popular delivery app in Bakı. The union is now working on involving more workers, especially in supermarkets”.

A similar struggle is taking place in neighbouring Georgia, where Wolt couriers participated in the LabourStart Global Solidarity Conference in Tbilisi at the end of April.

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan’s national trade union centre, known as AHİK, is so close to the Aliyev regime that the home page of its website features the current Twitter feed of the country’s president. This sentence on the AHİK website is typical: “It was thanks to Mr. Ilham Aliyev’s tireless activity and decisive speeches that the Armenian aggression was exposed in the Council of Europe, and an objective opinion was formed in the Western world about Karabakh, an inseparable part of Azerbaijan, about the conflict”.

In such a situation, one cannot expect the regime to welcome the creation of an alternative trade union movement – especially one with links to the political opposition. If convicted, Israfilov and Mustafayev could face between five to 12 years in prison. It is not clear whether the confederation’s chairman, Mammadov, is facing a prison term as well.

According to a report on the independent news website OC Media, “the three labour activists were taking part in a series of demonstrations organised by delivery couriers. They were protesting a new traffic law. The draft law, titled ‘On Traffic’, was adopted by the Azerbaijani Parliament last December, obliging drivers of scooters and motorcycles with an engine capacity of at least 50km/h to obtain a special category driver’s licence”.

D-18’s general secretary Samir Sultanov has insisted that Israfilov and Mammadov were arrested for their work promoting democracy and labour rights in Azerbaijan.

“Azerbaijan is one of the few countries in the world not surveyed by the International Trade Union Confederation for its annual Global Rights Index, though it is not clear why. The ITUC has not yet issued a statement on the arrests in Azerbaijan, where the regime-linked AHİK federation remains its affiliate.  • Eric Lee is the founder editor of LabourStart, writing here in a personal opinion column.

Sarah Jane Baker on hunger strike

By Rhodri Evans

Sarah Jane Baker is now on a hunger and liquid strike in Wandsworth prison.

As well as being charged under the Public Order Act 1986 (for violent language, for which she has publicly apologised, in a speech at Trans Pride), Sarah has had her parole revoked for serious transphobic assaults herself. She is now on 24 hour suicide watch, and in segregation, since she began her hunger strike.

Her hearing on 17 August fell down because the authorities organised neither transport from jail to court nor a video link.

The court dates are now 22 August, 10am, Westminster Magistrates Court, and 31 August, 10am City of London Magistrates Court. There will be demonstrations outside the courts.

The first reaction of police and probation authorities to her speech was not to return her to jail, but they changed their minds in the context of Daily Mail articles and a tweet from Suela Braverman. Sarah did commit violent crimes 30 years ago. She was never violent to women, and has not been violent in the nearly four years since she was released, despite being the victim of serious transphobic assaults herself.

Free Sarah Jane Baker! More info (and Tou.Tyr. Crowdfunder, etc.): freesarahjanebaker.com

Strikes

From 27 June: Workers at St Mungo’s homeless charity (Unite) on indefinite strike over pay and conditions

From 3 July: Brighton university workers (UCU) strike against redundancies

From 24 July: Camden traffic wardens (Unison) on indefinite strike over pay

24-25 August: NHS consultants (BMA) strike

25-29 August: First South bus drivers (Unite) strike

26 August and 2 September: Rail workers at multiple Train Operating Companies (RMT) strike

30 August, 6 September, 13 September: GH London ground handlers at Luton Airport (Unite) strike

1 September: Train drivers at multiple Train Operating Companies (Aslef) strike

19-20 September: NHS consultants (BMA) strike

More strikes: see bit.ly/group

Ballots

19 June-31 August: Junior doctors (BMA) re-ballot

3-31 August: Civil servants in England and Wales (PCS) ballot on pay offer
Inflation: causes and socialist responses

By Martin Thomas

Wage rises are not the cause of inflation. But in many capitalist financial regimes, they can feed into and augment inflation. When the Tories and the Bank of England say they want smaller pay rises to help curb inflation, they really do: only they mean, curbing inflation at the expense of the working class.

General inflation does not come from capitalists suddenly being greedier for profit, despite many leftish commentators currently saying it does. Sometimes some capitalists may be able to use an inflationary surge to redress their profit margins, but that is not the same thing. Those were the main ideas I put to the Ideas for Freedom workshop session this year on socialists and inflation, but the discussion was very hurried at the end.

In Capital, Marx sometimes seems to take wages as a given (set by the "value of labour-power", the "living-wage" level in a particular society). A closer look, though, shows that is an "assumption for the sake of argument".

Living wage

Capitalists constantly strive to push pay below "living-wage" levels. There is no automatic balancing mechanism. The actual balancing mechanism is worker resistance, either organised and open through unions and strikes, or (less effectively) through exit from the workforce, high labour turnover, slowdowns on the job, etc.

The "living-wage" level itself has, as Marx puts it, "in contradistinction to other commodities... a historical and moral element", and can be pushed up or down over time. And some workers get higher pay, partly for "economic" reasons (longer training), partly for other reasons. "The distinction between skilled and unskilled labour rests in part on pure illusion, or... traditional convention; in part on... some groups of the working class [being unable to] exact equally with the rest the value of their labour-power" (Marx).

Anyway, wage-setting always depends on class struggle in one form or another, as the setting of other prices depends on class struggle in one form or another, as the setting of other prices pend on class struggle in one form or another. "The distinction between skilled and unskilled labour rests in part on pure illusion, or... traditional convention; in part on... some groups of the working class [being unable to] exact equally with the rest the value of their labour-power" (Marx).

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The wage system is not set up to give the working class a good, stable living, and doesn’t do so. We mitigate it, and develop the organisation needed to change the whole system, by fighting for wage rises and by demands like escalator clauses bringing monthly wage increases in line with inflation.

When there is general inflation (as set off recently, for example, by supply bottlenecks from the Covid lockdowns and the Ukraine war), then capitalists can sometimes (so Isabella Weber has argued) seize on the process to recoup profit levels diminished by the economic shocks. An example is the container shipping company Maersk’s big profits in 2021 and 2022, after lean years in 2015-20. They can also seize the occasion to up top bosses’ individual payouts: FTSE CEO pay up 16% in 2021-2.

But capitalists’ selling prices have neither the “historical and moral element” incorporated in wages, nor the tendency to be pushed below value-determined levels that wages have. General price rises are not initiated by surges of capitalist greed. Capitalists are always greedy. As Marx put it: “The will of the capitalist is certainly to take as much as possible. What we have to do is not to talk about his will, but to enquire into his power, the limits of that power, and the character of those limits”.

Wartime

There is no “socialist” way of curbing inflation via working-class pressure on capitalist governments. The British government, guided by Keynes, developed some measures to keep inflation in World War Two lower (51% 1939-45) than in World War One (103% 1914-18), which included sharp taxes on the rich; but no capitalist government will do comparable measures outside war-time. Capitalist government measures which curb inflation are usually as hurtful for workers as the inflation was in the first place. (Indeed, the sober fact from Russia 1917-22 is that even a workers’ government can find it hard to curb inflation, though a workers’ government will, as the Bolsheviks did in 1917-22, ease the hurt by free distribution of many essentials).

The wage system is not set up to give the working class a good, stable living, and doesn’t do so. We mitigate it, and develop the organisation needed to change the whole system, by fighting for wage rises and by demands like escalator clauses bringing monthly wage rises in line with inflation.

We seek to replace the wages system by collective ownership and workers’ control, and progressively by the socialist rule of “from each according to their ability; to each according to their need”. □
Building a new revolutionary party in France

By Skapin

Skapin, a member of the new Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA) and of the Etincelle grouping, talked to Michael Elms. The old NPA, which in practice tended to be a loose association of different tendencies and groupings, split in December 2022. There are now two NPAs: the NPA (L’Anticapitaliste), with what was the biggest of the tendencies in the old NPA, around Olivier Besancenot and others, and the "new" NPA (Révolutionnaires), with Etincelle and a number of other groups which used to be minorities in the old NPA, such as Anticapitalisme et Révolution (A&R).

The main challenge now is that the groups that make up the new NPA were minority tendencies in the old NPA, and now have to make a positive common policy of our own. What we have proposed as a policy is not to tailor the reformist left. We said that it is possible to survive without the reformist left, and that our role is to rebuild a revolutionary party.

We have been proposing a policy in the movement, a policy which is different from that of the trade union leadership. La France Insoumise (LFI) is proposing perspectives which are all to do with electoral politics, such as the referendum idea. Our problem is that we have inherited a party which was built by the LCR and has some of their approaches, which are not necessarily ours. We need to adapt this party and turn it more towards creating an implantation in the working class. On that we are all in agreement, across all the different tendencies in the NPA currently.

We are not starting from zero, we are working with people who have been active with the NPA up to this point, and we are taking all their views into account. We are trying to move beyond the division between different tendencies, and we want to have the NPA organise in a more united way. There are things that we can undertake together, such as workplace bulletins and activities among young people, as the whole NPA.

What is the current activity of the NPA?

S: Since the split, our main activity has revolved around the mobilisation against the pensions reform. We have been building the mobilisation. We have been working on setting up co-ordinations between different industrial sectors, and in the youth movement, building up the student movement.

We have had a hand in creating a national coordination of the student movement, which drew in delegations from 40 universities every week for a number of weeks. There was a major rally on the evening of the use of Article 49-3. There were lots of people there, and in other cities too.

We have been trying to politicise the situation through running public meetings during the movement. We ran two in Paris. There were a lot of people there, and in other cities too. We have been trying to reorganise our own structures as the NPA. We have been putting a lot of effort into education: we held a residential educational school for our young members. We are currently organising our summer event, for the end of August. We have just launched our newspaper. These are the activities which have taken up the greater part of our time.

Will the Etincelle workplace bulletins be taken over by the new NPA?

S: A&R also run workplace bulletins too, and they are a bit different to ours. Currently we are trying to pass the bulletins over into the hands of the NPA. We already have some bulletins which we run with other NPA comrades, and we don't necessarily put the Etincelle logo on them. But the issue is that lots of the readers of our workplace bulletins know us as Etincelle. So getting rid of that logo might confuse people.

There are more and more people getting involved in those bulletins. There's another organisational issue which is that the NPA prefers to set up its branches by town or neighbourhood. But we prefer to organise our branches around the workplaces which we are intervening into.

In a town where there is a large Etincelle group, do they meet as the NPA? Or as Etincelle, or as both? Is not the logic of the situation that Etincelle is going to dissolve itself into the NPA?

S: It depends. In Lyon there are a lot of Etincelle members, and the Etincelle groups have become NPA branches. But we continue to organise by industrial sector. In Toulouse there is one big local branch which has brought together comrades from different tendencies into one organisation. The objective is to transform rather than to maintain separate Etincelle groups.

We will retain a political leading group of our own – we are not dissolving ourselves as a current – but our objective now is to propose activities to everyone and involve everyone in what we are doing.

Do you intend to retain the old multi-tendency structure of the NPA as it had existed since 2009? What do you think of that structure?

S: In the NPA, it's true that the different tendencies don't really collaborate a lot. Each gets on with its own activities and they don't discuss a lot between one another. Things kind of got stuck for a long time in a sort of parliamentary struggle between the different tendencies.

We want to change that. And currently, there is an effort by all the different groupings to work on building something together, to discuss, to share experiences: to work together, and not in competition. We don't know where things are going to wind up, we are going one step at a time, but we want to collaborate on building structures that will allow us to do what is necessary. So we are starting from what is necessary.

What is the other NPA doing currently? And what are your relations with them?

S: We don't currently have much of a relationship with them and there aren't a lot of towns where both NPAs have committees. There are a few places where joint branches exist, where the majority comrades were really against a split, and where everyone has decided to keep meeting together to retain good relations.

In my local branch in Ivry, the comrades weren't meeting together even before the split. In general there isn't much of a relationship. Discussions are pretty summary; there are some negotiations over sharing out assets. But not real political discussions.

What are they up to? It's hard to say. I suppose they are participating in the movement.
Putin jails more dissidents

By Michael Baker

Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny has had his jail sentence extended by 19 years, in one of Russia’s strictest and most infamous penal colonies.

Navalny was arrested in January 2021 and first sentenced to 11.5 years on charges he disputed. The new charges, including inciting violence, rehabilitating “Nazism” (i.e. supporting the victory of Ukraine) and “inciting children to dangerous acts”, are just as disputable.

This is a clear case of Putin jailing a political opponent to quell the Russian opposition movement, and if Putin or his cronies are still in charge in 19 years’ time, and Navalny has managed to survive that long, then there is little doubt that he will be handed another extension to keep him in there for life.

The past few months have been a period of tightening laws and a series of extensions to keep him in there for life. Navalny has had his jail sentence extended by 19 years, in one of Russia’s Putin jails more dissidents

In 1923 the German army was not yet fully reconstituted, under its very aristocratic officer corps, from its disarray of 1918. Its later self would be: it served the Nazis well until a few (brave, though very right-wing) officers rebelled ineffectually after seeing certain defeat in 1944.

The army was, however, significantly reconstituted. Over October 1923 it was able, on orders from the Social Democratic president Ebert, and with little resistance, to remove the elected left Social-Democrat government in Saxony. The left Social Democrats had included Communist Party (CP) ministers. They had licensed workers’ militias as a counter to the threat of a German equivalent of Mussolini’s March on Rome a year earlier, as openly advocated by Bavaria’s rule-by-decree leader at the time.

The German CP in 1923 had an organised military wing, which the Bolsheviks did not have in 1917. But no-one was so off-beam as to think that this small force could overwhelm the army by a “coup”. Neither Trotsky, nor the CP leadership, nor even Zinoviev, planned a “coup”.

**General strike**

The CP aimed for a general strike (paralysing army movements and, as in 1920) against army repression in Saxony, and for that to trigger a general uprising and a transfer of power to the factory councils where they reckoned they had a majority. When the left Social Democrats in Saxony refused the general strike, the CP called off the plan. Hamburg rose, apparently, through miscommunication.

In the Left Opposition Radek argued at the time that the CP’s plan had never been real- istic. Trotsky argued that it had been made unrealistic by the irresolute signals from Stalin in Moscow over previous months to the already cautious CP leadership. No-one in that debate saw the plan as a “coup”.

Germany in 1923, despite Eric, did not have even a passable stable democracy where sensible revolutionaries should buckle down to years of bit-by-bit peaceful activism. As it happened, the Berlin government, under right-wing monarchist Chancellor Gustav Stresemann, was able to stabilise the economy in 1924 with US aid, and a sort of parliamentary democracy survived in Germany until 1930 and Brüning’s “decree-laws”. As it happened. The CP was unable to give German workers in October 1923 confidence for a rising. That lack of confidence does not mean the workers were happy with the status quo, or content to hope quietly that Stresemann would manage to stabilise the currency, fend off the French, and quell his own monarchist impulses, and that right-wing coup efforts would be botched as badly as Hitler’s and Ludendorff’s attempt in Munich.□

Martin Thomas, London

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**Letter**

Eric Lee (Solidarity 681) is right, to think, that to say that the Bolsheviks thought the 1917 workers’ revolution had to spread to more advanced countries or be crushed. He is right, also, that the defeat of the German working class in October 1923 – the last defeat in the series of revolutionary surges that followed November 1918 in Germany – had far-reaching effects. But he weaves into his argument (1) the assertion that the 1917 revolution was a “coup” and (2) the claim that October 1923 was planned as another “coup”.

On 1917 I will refer only to Max Shachtman’s polemic of 1957.

**Correction**

The author’s original words in the article “Free Sarah Jane Baker” (Solidarity 661) were that Sarah Jane’s words were “not helpful, and she has publicly apologised for it...” □

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Neither “October” was a coup

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Martin Thomas, London
Students plan for the new term

By Sam Myerson

The Student Cost of Living Campaign held its summer activist weekend in Sheffield on 12-13 August. The event brought together students from across the UK to discuss broader politics of the student movement and specific campaigning tactics.

In two days of discussions and organising for the coming academic term, sessions covered history of the student movement; the National Union of Students (NUS), internationalism, queue liberation, rent strikes, and a plenary discussion of the campaign’s activities. Although the event was small, the sessions were lively. The important discussions on internationalism in the student movement had a specific focus on the students and involvement in the recent “White Paper” wave of demonstrations.

We discussed the need to support the right of Ukrainians to self determination, and the organising of students there under the banner of Pryama Diya (“Direct Action”). The session also discussed the need for solidarity with the Palestinians. The work of Palestine Action against arms dealers was raised as an example, and we talked about the need to look to the Palestinian community in Israel, the wider protest movement that has emerged there, and the organising within it under the banner of Standing Together.

We talked about the history of rent strikes with reference to the work done by students during the pandemic to secure rebates, reductions, and improvement of conditions, and to the historic rent strikes in Glasgow in 1915 organised by Mary Barbour and others. We committed to put work into building for rent strikes in the coming academic year, and recognised that there is a need to link local rent strikes to a national campaign.

University management have increasingly turned to surveillance and intimidation tactics against student activists. Joined up campaigning makes it more difficult for them to ignore or intimidate students out of activity.

We will work against university management’s increasing turn to security and surveillance, as opposed to engagement, when students take action on campuses. The recent attacks on student activists in Manchester and Sheffield were central in that discussion. The campaign has launched a pro forma for students to submit Subject Access Requests and build a picture of the levels of surveillance in place. The right of students to organise on campus is important; and has been pushed back significantly over the last decade.

The campaign plenary agreed that it would produce a briefing on the upcoming NUS elections as a tool to engage with the wider student left, organised and not, and work to build a student left that can win demands on the cost of living and face up to the crisis in universities.

We are aiming to produce another campaign bulletin for freshers’ weeks (late Sep and early Oct), with an online organising call on 9 September focusing on the work for freshers’ and building for a second SCOL conference in the autumn or winter.

Big-power manoeuvres behind Niger coup

By Simon Nelson

The coup in Niger on 28 July has caused further instability across the Sahel, after coups in the last three years in neighbouring Burkina Faso, Mali and Guinea.

President Bazoum had been elected in 2021 in the first peaceful transition of power since the 1960s and the country’s fifth coup in that time. General Tchiani from the presidential guard has seized control, he says, because of Bazoum’s failure to deal with the Islamist violence, rising inflation, hunger and an ongoing economic downturn. Bazoum’s supporters have said Tchiani was likely to be deposed and this is the immediate cause for the coup.

Niger has a population of 25 million and by several metrics is one of the poorest countries in the world. Three million people live in acute poverty and hunger. But it is rich in deposits of coal and gold, and the world’s seventh largest producer of the uranium which France and other European states want for their nuclear energy programmes.

Only 5% of the Nigerien working population is in trade unions. The Democratic Confederation of Workers in Niger, the largest union, demanded a reinstatement of the civilian government. The Trade Union Action Unit (UAS Niger) has issued statements supporting the coup.

Ecowas, the Economic Community of West African States, quickly threatened to send troops to restore Bazoum, and immediately imposed economic sanctions. Those involved in the coup have also faced personal sanctions and the threat of arrest should they leave. Nigeria, the largest state in Ecowas, cut electricity to Niger.

Niger relies on its larger neighbours for electricity (70% comes from Nigeria), goods, and aid. The EU has also suspended financial support for education, economic growth and governance. About 45% of the Nigerien economy is aid distribution.

The African Union, and the majority of northern and southern African states, have said they do not support military action in Niger, and invasion now looks unlikely. When the threat of invasion by Ecowas members was at its height, in early August, Mali and Burkina Faso said they would join in a defence of the Nigerien military. They would also consider troops crossing their own borders a declaration of war. Niger also faces opposition to military action by senators in the north, where the population is majority Muslim and Hausa. Niger’s second largest ethnic group is Hausa.

France and the USA have the most to lose from the coup, though the US has so far refused to call it a coup (doing so would automatically terminate financial and military aid). The CIA operates a drone base in northern Niger, 1,000 US troops and 1,500 French are based in the country.

Anti-French sentiment was relatively easy to whip up as part of the coup. France has long been unpopular across the Sahel in its former colonies. In 2021 France was forced out of Mali by the Islamist insurgency and transferred its troops into Niger. A big part of all Islamist violence in Africa is in the Sahel, by groups linked to Daesh and Al-Qaeda. The campaign against the Islamists has stalled: the French military has been largely unsuccessful and civilians have been killed in French drone strikes. But Bazoum’s supporters and France, the USA, and the European Union say that security was improving under Bazoum and things are worse in Mali and Burkina Faso under military rule.

Tchiani’s coup did not have the immediate support of the entire armed forces. There were civilian protests just after the takeover, but they were quickly suppressed and, if Bazoum is to be believed, many of protesters are now in prison.

Most protests in Niamey have supported the coup, and many have displayed Russian flags.

Russia has officially denounced the coup but the Wagner group chief Yevgeny Prigozhin has hailed it as Niger claiming its independence from the former colonial power. Wagner already has significant interests in Mali and Burkina Faso. The Malian army contains a number of Russian mercenaries. Wagner is not yet directly linked to Niger. But if as expected the coup leaders expel the US and French troops, then Wagner may seize the opportunity.

The Wagner Group has been implicated in atrocities in Mali. In late March 2022, in the town of Moura, 300 men were rounded up and shot. In Burkina Faso, the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP), believed to have Wagner support, has carried out massacres and targeted executions. These atrocities largely target men of the Fulani people, a large ethnic-linguistic group spread across the whole region, mostly Muslim, and blanket-labelled as “terrorists”. Wagner in Burkina Faso are apparently paid via a gold mine awarded to them. In Sudan, Wagner controls mineral resources leaving the country.

Putin met with African leaders in St. Petersburg in July in an attempt to persuade them to support or not object to the war in Ukraine. Prigozhin was also there. Putin has promised free grain to Mali, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Somalia, Eritrea and Zimbabwe, some of Russia’s best allies in Africa, just as Russia withdrew from the Black Sea grain deal, generating a price spike and hunger in countries not in the Russian orbit, like the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Russia is trying to use any prospects of a famine in parts of Africa to pressure the West and Ukraine’s supporters into making concessions.

The labour movement in Britain must condemn the coup and oppose invasion by Ecowas or its western supporters. That also means condemning Russian manoeuvres via Wagner. Nigeriens deserve democratic elections without any foreign interference.
By Dan Katz

On Tuesday 15 August Stan Jensen, the chief of staff to NATO secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg, said, “I think that a solution could be for Ukraine to give up territory and get NATO membership in return.” Jensen said that NATO members were discussing how the war might end.

The Ukrainian state under Zelensky has, in the past, considered territorial concessions to halt the war. At the start of the full-scale invasion Ukraine appeared close to defeat and suggested, alongside giving up Crimea, it might also agree to shelve its plan to join NATO. That was before the retreat of Russian forces from north of Kyiv (April 2022), and Ukrainian counterattacks in Kharkiv (September, re-gaining 12,000 sq km) and Kherson (November, 5,000 sq km). The Ukrainian victories changed expectations. Now Ukraine is mobilised, better armed, more confident.

So Mykhailo Podolyak, a senior Ukrainian official, replied furiously to Jensen: “Trading territory for a NATO umbrella? It is ridiculous. That means deliberately choosing the defeat of democracy, encouraging a global criminal, preserving the Russian regime, destroying international law and passing the war on to other generations.”

A poll conducted in late May and early June 2023 by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology shows 84% of Ukrainians are opposed to making any territorial concessions to Russia, even if that means a much longer war. So Podolyak was speaking for the big majority of Ukrainians.

Jenssen later apologised for his remarks. Nevertheless, the US and European powers surely are examining ways in which this war might be ended, and Jensen’s “solution” looks a plausible suggestion from the perspective of Western ruling classes. This war is expensive, disconcerting and full of uncertainties for the Western elites. They would like the war to end. The question is, how and with what consequences?

Ten weeks into Ukraine’s counteroffensive, which has gained little ground so far, those in the West that want to settle the war soon are being strengthened.

CNN polling (4 August) shows 55% of Americans opposed to more US funding for Ukraine (although other polls show more support for Ukraine). As the far right AfD gain in Germany, support for Ukraine is slipping. And in September, according to recent surveys, Slovakia may well elect a pro-Russia government.

It is one thing for Ukraine itself to calculate it must make concessions to Russian imperialism to avoid an even worse situation, and another for the Western powers to force Ukraine into a compromise with Russia.

Minsk II

In 2015, following the Russian intervention into Donbas and annexation of Crimea, France and Germany forced Ukraine into the lousy, pro-Russian Minsk II agreement. The EU states wanted peace, and to continue trading with Putin’s Russia. They sacrificed Ukraine for what they thought was a stable relationship with Putin’s Russia.

And the West has leverage because it can cut economic, political and military support for Ukraine.

If the US had really wanted the Ukrainians to make big gains against Russia this summer then they would have handed Ukraine long-range missiles, F-16 fighter planes, and donated adequate numbers of modern tanks, promptly. The US is engaged in a political balancing act.

The West did not want this war. It scares them. They want to stop Russia from fear of what a victorious Putin might do next. Moldova, the Baltic States and Poland are even more vulnerable if Russia wins this war.

But the US and EU leaders are simultaneously concerned about the possibility of a Russian defeat, which might lead to Putin using nuclear weapons, or to Putin escalating or spreading the war, as a last resort in order to try to save his regime. They fear the fall of Putin because they rightly worry who might replace him. And they fear direct Chinese involvement, backing and arming Russia.

The Western powers eventually found it expedient to hand over more weapons to Ukraine, early in 2023. Some effective tanks were donated. But the US had allowed Russia plenty of time to construct vast minefields and fortifications to defend its occupation in southern Ukraine and Donbas. So now the going is slow for Ukraine. Many Ukrainian troops are now dying as a result of those Western calculations.

Putin calculates he might even eventually win in Ukraine by wearing down Western resolve, or perhaps a Trump government in the US might end support for Ukraine. Putin hopes time is on his side.

However, Putin’s original aims have all failed.

Rather than stopping NATO’s expansion the Russian invasion of February 2022 led to the biggest expansion of NATO since 2007. With new and vast popular support, on 4 April 2023, Finland joined NATO, bringing NATO territory to within 60km of St Petersburg. Germany increased arms spending by €100mn. Poland bought HIMARS rocket launchers from the US and planes and 180 tanks from South Korea.

The war not only failed to “demilitarise Ukraine” as Putin had demanded but had achieved the exact opposite: a million Ukrainians were fighting Russia by late 2022, using some sophisticated Western weapon systems.

Donbas

Putin’s promise to protect the Russian speakers of Donbas “amounted to killing tens of thousands of them”, writes Owen Matthews in Overreach, concluding, “92% of the buildings in Mariupol were destroyed or damaged during the Russian assault... In Severodonetsk and Lysychansk it was 90.5... Five million refugees fled the immediate war zone for safer parts of Ukraine and Europe... strongly suggesting a powerful desire not to be ‘liberated’ by Moscow.”

Russia’s defence spending target has doubled to $100bn, or a third of all public expenditure. And the human costs are staggering and accelerating. The US military published estimates of those combatants killed and wounded in the war: “Russia’s military casualties are approaching 300,000, including 120,000 deaths and 170,000 to 180,000 injuries. Ukrainian deaths are close to 70,000, with 100,000 to 120,000 wounded.” (Reuters 18 August).

In March 2022 Putin claimed that the West wants Russia to be a “weak democracy, [the West wants to] violate its territorial integrity; to dismember Russia.” Why the West would want to do that remains unexplained. In fact the West would like a rational, stable partner in Russia.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov claimed in April 2022 that “NATO, in essence, is engaged in a war with Russia through a proxy.” However, if the West had wanted to it could admit Ukraine to NATO and arm it with every weapon it has. The US has not done that.

Following Lavrov, some of the Brit left agree: Ukraine is a proxy for US power. However, the word “proxy” is often used to by these socialists to obscure, rather than clarify the issues. US and EU backing for Ukraine is not sufficient reason to make Ukraine a US or Western proxy.

To be a proxy of the US, Ukraine needs to be fighting on behalf of the US, or in a war instigated by the US. However, Ukraine is fighting for itself, for its existence as an independent entity. It is fighting because it had to, because it was invaded, not because the US demanded it fight Russia.

Russian imperialism invaded Ukraine to abolish Ukraine as a distinct entity and to subordinate it to Russian power. The US and West are not fighting directly in this war. The US did not instigate this war. Putin did. The West has refused Ukraine membership of the EU and NATO, and refused it adequate weapons to defeat Russia, which are not the actions of gung-ho, anything-to-win imperialists seeking to gain territory.

Workers’ Liberty opposes the idea that US is to blame for all the world’s ills. People living in Hong Kong, Tibet, Kyiv, Moscow, and Beijing have “main enemies” nearer home.

The socialist left that puts a cross where American imperialism puts a tick is not independent: implicitly it depends on the US to do all its thinking for it. We need to develop a critical thinking, Marxist movement which independently assesses the world around us and fights for the interests of the international working class.

Join us! Join Workers’ Liberty and help that project. Victory to Ukraine! □
THE “LEGACY” OF JAMES CONNOLLY

By Liam McNulty

A s one study of James Connolly poetically put it, any attempts to discuss the legacy of Ireland’s premier Marxist revolutionary are complicated by the fact that Connolly has become “a vessel into which each man can pour his dream.”

One remarkable thing about these “dreams”, however, is that many neglect what is central and consistent about Connolly – his class-based opposition to capitalism, including his innovative theories and practice of industrial unionism – and often highlight that which is weaker, less stable or more transient in this thinking: the complicated and sometimes ambiguous relationship of his Marxism to Irish history and republicanism, his analysis of Unionism or his attitude towards Catholicism.

Revolutionary industrial unionism

This is unfortunate. Connolly’s contemporaries, the Belfast-born future leader of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) Arthur McManus, wrote that

Connolly was “a man whose whole life was unquestionably devoted very definitely to work in, and on behalf of, the revolutionary working-class movement and whose activities had been so essentially working class, as to have him recognised in many lands as a great revolutionary leader of working class struggle.”

Influenced by the US socialist Daniel De Leon, Connolly embraced a form of revolutionary industrial unionism which saw organisation at the workplace level as the scaffolding of the future Workers’ Republic. From his time as an IWW organiser in New York, he learned firsthand the capacity to disorganise the working class in New York, he learned firsthand the future Workers’ Republic.

De Leon, Connolly embraced a form of struggle.”

And then, in the wake of the ITGWU’s defeat in the Dublin Lock-Out of 1913-14, Connolly also developed a critique of bureaucratic industrial unionism in the British labour movement. From around 1910 onwards, Connolly saw that in Great Britain “amalgamations and federations are being carried out in the main by officials absolutely desirous of preserving the old, cold wine of Craft Unionism being poured into the new bottles of industrial organisation.”

Much of this innovative and insightful contribution to socialist thinking is absent in the “Connollys” which have followed his death.

Claiming Connolly for Catholicism

Rather, until the 1960s, it was Connolly’s nationalism which provided the central reference point, owing in no small part to the dramatic events of his martyrdom as a leader of the 1916 Easter Rising.

Indeed, such was the myth that developed around Connolly that he was subject, in the words of an early biographer, Desmond Ryan, to the “partisan claims on his corpse” by Catholics, republicans and reformist Labourites. Latterly, we can add, too, Stalinists, Trotskyists and populist left republicans.

The process began early, within a year of Connolly’s death, with the publication of James Connolly: A Study of his Work by “Gerald O’Connor” (the pen-name of Gaelic League activist Seán Mac Giolláin), downplaying the importance of Connolly’s socialism to his vision of an independent Ireland.

A few years later, in 1920, Éamon de Valera, then President of the revolutionary Irish Republic, addressed a conference of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and invoked the name of Connolly, “whom many of you knew personally”, on account of Connolly’s involvement in the American labour movement. Though Connolly may have been a socialist, stated De Valera: “Much of what the modern socialist is groping after was already a fact in the social system of ancient Ireland”.

That same year, a more explicit attempt was made to claim Connolly for Catholicism. A priest, Reverend Coffey, wrote a series of articles on Connolly in the Catholic Bulletin. Downplaying Connolly’s Marxism, Coffey sought to claim him for the principles of Catholic social teaching, based on the teachings of Pope Leo XIII in his 1891 encyclical Rerum novarum (1891) and developed by writers such as G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. Viewing property as a social principle which underlay the Brehon laws of our ancestors’. Though Connolly stood for socialism, she wrote, “it was the socialism of James Connolly and of nobody else”.

This downplays the extent to which Connolly was formed in the context of an international movement. His particular synthesis of socialist propaganda, industrial unionism, labour representation and insurrectionism may have been unique, but its elements owed much to Hyndman, De Leon, Hardie and others.

These attempts accentuate two particular sides of Connolly – his attempt to construe socialism as a modern-day realisation of an extinct communal, Gaelic social order and his denial that socialism necessitates any fundamental philosophical break with religion – to the point that they can rightly be dismissed as tendentious caricatures.

What must be admitted, however, is that Connolly’s thought developed over time, often in contradictory ways. Much of his writing was agitational, geared towards very specific audiences or controversies which are not always obvious without an understanding of the context. Moreover, there are some real ambiguities in his thinking, making it impossible to construct more or less plausible and mutually contradictory Connollys by freezing particular elements in time, cherry-picking quotes or accentuating themes in a partial manner.

The lack of any definite Collective Works of Connolly, and the sloppy or dishonest way that his writings have been published in the past, only add to the problem. Workers’ Liberty is re-dressing this, with its “Unexpurgated Connolly” series. Previous efforts along similar lines have been made by Aindrias Ó Cathasaigh and Red Banner.

continued on page 12,13, 14→
and Irish historian Conor McCabe is currently rendering a tremendous service by collating a complete picture of Connolly's writings from the original sources.

**Labourism**

Setting aside the more outlandish claims on Connolly, it is perhaps the distortions with the most grains of truth which are the more deceptive. The Irish Labour Party, for example, is always quick to trace its lineage to the movement moved by Connolly at the 1912 conference of the Irish Trade Union Congress (ITUC) "that the independent representation of labour upon all public boards be, and is hereby included among the objectives of this congress. Connolly's political wing subsequently evolved into the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress (ILPTUC), which became simply "the Irish Labour Party" in 1930.

Former Labour Party TD Joanna Tuffy went so far as to say that it was Connolly's "first work to set up a party." What that elides, however, is Labour's disavowal of the Workers' Republic (i.e. of Connolly's true life's work) in 1939, at the urging of the Catholic hierarchy operating through the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), its eschewing of left-wing radicalism and its willingness to prop up governments led by Ireland's right-wing party Fine Gael. Such factors led American historian Emmet Larkin to describe it, with some justice, in 1964 as "the most opportunistically conservative Labour Party anywhere in the known world."

**Left-republicanism**

One other key way that Connolly has been institutionalised in the twentieth century is to legitimate a turn to social agitation, and away from purely apolitical militiamism, on behalf of various movements within Irish republicanism. Some of this builds on real ambiguities in Connolly's thought. Connolly's famous phrase that "The Cause of Ireland is the Cause of Labour, the Cause of Labour is the Cause of Ireland" was intended to mean that the national revolution and the social revolution would flow together, under the leadership of the Irish working class. This was because, in Connolly's view, the conquest of Ireland was political and it was social; capitalism was essentially a foreign imposition which destroyed an old communist Gaelic social order and in which Connolly had been raised. The resultant Republican Congress was hobbled by a split from its very inception, with delegates dividing between Peadar O'Donnell, Frank Ryan and George Gilmore proposing for a populist cross-class "front" to form a "republic" and Rody Connolly and Michael Price proposing a political party to fight for a "workers' republic."

Gilmore who was deeply involved in the project, described the Republican Congress as an effort to set "the republican-minded people of Ireland... on what can be called a Tone-Connolly approach to their emancipation."

Thus the 1912 Connolly was fused with the 18th century bourgeois revolutionary Wolfe Tone; the implication being that Tone appealed to the "men of no property." Tone made that appeal, however, as a purely external adjunct to the bourgeois revolutionaries; not as the key revolutionary agent of social transformation. That is crucial, all-defining, difference. The Republican Congress adopted an inaugural statement: "We believe that a republic of a united Ireland will never be achieved except through a struggle which uproots Capitalism on its way. We cannot conceive of a free Ireland with a subject working-class; we cannot conceive of a subject Ireland with a free working class."

The latter is a paraphrase of Connolly. The first sentence, however, achieving a republic of a united Ireland "through a struggle which uproots Capitalism on its way" was Connolly's, as we know. It would not be only whispered among intimates ... The thought of revolution was the exclusive possession of a few remnants of the secret societies of a past generation, and was never mentioned by Connolly except with heads closely together and eyes fearfully glancing around; the Socialists broke through this ridiculous secrecy, and in hundreds of speeches in the most public places of the metropolis, as well as in scores of thousands of papers scattered far and wide through the country, announced their purpose to muster all the forces of labour for a revolutionary reconstruction of society and the incidental destruction of the British Empire.

The "incidental destruction of the British Empire" is just that, incidental, or happening as a result of the muddling of "the forces of labour for a revolutionary reconstruction of society."

**Stalinism**

Since the publication of C. Desmond Greaves's biography of Connolly in the 1960s, Connolly's socialism has been more widely recognised. As Peter Graham, a Trotskyist later involved in the armed left-republican group Saor Éire. recalled (in Workers' Fight, No. 7, June 1968), following the half-century of the Rising: "The writings of James Connolly, which prior to then had been read little, and then only by the older 'hands', began to be read more widely. The younger generation found through his writings that he was not quite as the Christian Brothers in school taught — only the 7th leader of 1916. They found in his writings Connolly the revolutionary, the worker, the union organiser and Marxist."

However, Greaves assimilated Connolly into the Popular Frontist politics of the Communist Party of Great Britain. He was the main ideologist of the Connolly Association, which the CPGB used to attract Irish workers in Britain to Stalinism by accommodating itself to bourgeois Irish nationalism. The Stalinists had form with Connolly. The British Communists even went so far as to publish a selection of Connolly's writings on the war in early 1941, at a time when Stalinist Russia (and therefore the CPGB) was in an alliance with Nazi Germany. The collection did not, however, remain in print for very long.

The Nazis invaded Russia on 22 June 1941 and soon afterwards the book was pulled by its publisher, Lawrence & Wishart, as the Stalinists rolled full square behind Churchill.

Though much more scholarly, and including valuable primary research, Greaves' influential biography The Life and Times of James Connolly (1961) was nevertheless part and parcel of the CP ideological project. As a national hero in Ireland, Connolly was a useful vessel for transmitting "Marxism-Leninism" into Ireland, even at the expense of a proper understanding of his thought.

These writings were hugely influential, however, in the turn in republican politics in the 1960s. Greaves headed the Connolly Association, linked to the CPGB, and Association members Anthony Coughlan and Roy Johnston would become close with the leadership of the IRA around Cathal Goulding.

This sets the stage for the third attempt by republicans — the first being Mellows and the second efforts of O'Donnell and Gilmore in the 1930s — to use Connolly to legitimate a turn away from narrow militarism towards social agitation.

In 1969, at the Easter commemorations, Goulding said: "today there is a place in our organisation for every man who believes in the goal of Connolly, the goal of the Workers' Republic." As well as Greaves, Gilmore made a return, arguing in his mid-60s pamphlet "Labour and the Republican Movement" that "if there is to be any future for the Irish people as a free people, it must depend upon a return by organised Labour to the politics of James Connolly."

A review appeared in May 1967 in Irish Militant, which was the paper of the Irish Workers Group. In it, the pointed comment was made: "Being a republican first and a socialist second, he concludes that Republicanism, to succeed, needs Labour. No doubt this is true: but for us the question must be, does the working class need Republicanism?"

**Official and Provisional IRA**

It was these attempts to embrace wider social agitation and political action which led into the famous split in 1969/70 between the Official IRA and the Provisionals.

Predictably, Connolly was used to justify the politicisation of what became the Officials. Not that the Provos would give Connolly up, however. Even the most explicit anti-communists, Daithí O'Connnell and Seán Mac Stíofáin, would claim Connolly. They were at pains, like Markievicz fifty years before, to argue his socialism was specifically of the Irish homegrown variety.
Thus, O’Connell argued: “Those who propagate an alien social philosophy are doing a disservice to the Irish nation. They forget that within Ireland, North and South, are the brains and talent to fashion a society suitable for our own people. Let us never forget that James Connolly admired Tone because he imitated nobody; let us be true disciples of Connolly by striving for the originality of thought which he himself attained in his day. Connolly found his inspiration in the Republican philosophy.

The implications is, of course, that a German philosopher by the name of Karl Marx had nothing to do with Connolly.

Provisional Sinn Fein had a policy of Eire Nua, New Ireland, based on a hodgepodge of nationalisation, co-operatives and Catholic social credit theory. It nodded to the pantheon of Wolfe Tone, James Fintan Lalor, James Connolly and Patrick Pearse, and commented that: “It is significant that all these men, though influenced by the revolutionary movements of their times, visualised for a free Ireland a form of society based in its fundamentals on the old Gaelic system – an economy of owner workers grouped into co-operatives for particular functions of agriculture and industry.”

Connolly’s attempts to root Marxism in an Irish soil, therefore, are used by Irish radicals to create a peculiarly “indigenous” species of social republicanism without reference to Marxist socialism or any other “foreign” influences.

A crucial context for the Provisionals’ attempt to create a specifically Irish “socialism” was, of course, the increasing embrace of USSR Stalinism by the Officials and their political wing, Sinn Fein – the Workers’ Party (latterly just the Workers’ Party).

The Officials’ Easter statement of 1975 assured its imprisoned supporters that they “may draw comfort from the knowledge that we are in the strength of the revolution” and remain committed to the ideals of Tone and Connolly.” In the very same issue of The United Irishman paper which the statement appears, it is also heralded that in Eastern Bloc Romania poverty was now “only a memory.”

The party’s 1978 publication The Irish Industrial Revolution, with its emphasis on developing the state sector and central planning, was promoted as “[t]he first study of its kind since James Connolly’s Labour in Irish History.”

As the Introduction states, it “sets forth a plan for the construction of a modern urban society, resting on a powerful, modern industrial base which is to be built by the application of the hand and brain of the Irish working class, aided by modern technology and working through the form of State companies, to the processing of our great natural resources, our land, forests, minerals, gas and oil.”

In its promotion of top-down state-led economic development, it owed much more to Stalin than to Connolly.

The Officials would have been better to recall Connolly’s famous warning that “state ownership and control is not necessarily Socialism – if it were, then the Army, the Navy, the Police, the Post Office, the Bakers, the Inquirers, and the Hangmen, all would all be Socialist functionaries, as they are State officials.”

Probably, however, in enthusiastically welcoming East Germany’s industrial development, the Officials did indeed see the Stasi as an organisation of Socialist functionaries.

**Connolly and the Protestant workers**

Next, there is the issue of Connolly and the Protestant working class. It is undoubtedly the case that Connolly hoped for the unity of the Catholic and Protestant working-class. In 1898, he proclaimed that: “To keep the people of Ireland, and especially the workers, divided is the great object of all our politicians, Home Ruler or Unionist. And our great object in this journal [the first iteration of the Irish Republic] will be to unite the workers and to bury, in one common grave, the religious hatreds and jealousies and mutual distrusts upon which oppression has so long depended for security.

The problem, as ever, is how. First of all, Connolly hoped that common economic struggle would overcome the division in the working-class. The episodic unity of Catholic and Protestant workers won by Larkin in the 1907 dockers’ and carter’s strike in Belfast provided a sketch of what this would look like, and Connolly picked up the theme by organising a Non-Sectarian Labour Band for rallies in 1911 and 1912.

The second iteration of Connolly’s position was that the settlement of the Home Rule issue would, finally, remove a major source of working-class division, paving the way for the development of class politics. Writing in a series of articles between March and May 1911 in the Glasgow ILP newspaper Forward, Connolly wrote that the “question of Home Government, the professional advocacy of it, and the professional opposition to it, is the greatest asset in the hands of reaction in Ireland, the never-failing decoy to lure the workers into the bogs of religious hatreds and social stagnation.”

With Home Rule granted, it would “throw the Irish people back upon their own resources, make them realise that the causes of poverty, of lack of progress, of arrested civic and national development, are then to be sought for within and not without…”

It was on this basis of the analysis that Connolly urged the creation of an Irish Labour Party. As “Socialists we are Home Rulers,” he wrote, “but that on the day the Home Rule Government goes into power, the Socialist movement in Ireland will go into Opposition.”

The mass Unionist opposition to Home Rule from 1912 onwards demolished this optimistic scenario. Connolly’s understanding of the nature of Unionism significantly underestimated its roots, its strength, its power. Connolly saw Unionism as the doomed ideology of the declining landowning class. “A real Socialist movement cannot be built by temporising in front of a dying cause as that of the Orange ascendency,” he wrote as late as August 1913, “even though in the paroxysms of its death struggle it assumes the appearance of health.”

Underpinning this view was Connolly’s claim that “there is no economic class in Ireland whose interests as a class are bound up with the Union”, implying that Unionist resistance to Home Rule was simply an anachronism. Its roots, he implied, were therefore shallow: “Only the force of religious bigotry”, Connolly argued, “remains as an asset to Unionism.”

As the British government considered partition, Connolly took the view – common to the Irish labour movement – that no Home Rule would be preferable to Home Rule with partition. At the same time, he dismissed the “wooden guns of Ulster” and even suggested, at a point that the Liberal Government “use its armed forces to make an ascendency clique beaten at the polls recognise the machinery of the law”, i.e. impose Home Rule by force. That was the third iteration.

Fourthly, in embarking on the Easter Rising, Connolly hoped that an intensification of the nationalist struggle would culminate in a political and socially free Ireland, for the “cause of labour is the cause of Ireland, the cause of Ireland is the cause of labour.” The Protestants, as the largest component of “labour” on the island of Ireland, were conspicuously absent as a factor.

This overview has, necessarily, been schematic. These positions evolved, and overlapped, in response to fast-moving events. Subsequent “Connolly’s”, however, have been constructed by a pick and mix method of choosing the iteration of Connolly’s views consistent with the author’s viewpoint.

For Paul Bew, Henry Patterson, and Peter Gibbon – aligned with the Workers Party – Connolly’s analysis of Unionism represented a crude Second International-era understanding of ideology as mere manipulation and must be thrown over completely in favour of an approach informed by French Stalinist Louis Althusser.

The Trotskyist movement in Ireland, however, has retained a positive view of Connolly.

For the late Peter Hadden, the Socialist Party of Ireland’s main theorist in the 1970s, Connolly was the leading spirit of People’s Democracy (the left-wing student-based wing of the Civil Rights Movement which moved, via critical support for the Provisional IRA, towards the “Mandelite” Fourth International). In 1970 he wrote a pamphlet, The Struggle in the North, opening with two quotes from Connolly.

He writes that the “resistance of the Protestant workers will be hard to break down but at the moment they are drift- ing in a vacuum, a prey to Fascism, but at the same time more receptive to socialism than ever before because their allegiance to the Unionist party is finally being destroyed.” Continuing, Farrell argues that: “There is no point in trying to trick the Protestants. It must be made clear that imperialism is the root cause of the problems of Ireland, North and South. But these people can be won if they see that a Socialist Republic is not Rome Rule in disguise and if they are recruited to an organisation of genuine socialists fighting Green Tory gombeen men in the 26 Counties as vigorously as the Orange Tories in the North.”

In its conclusion, Farrell calls for Catholic and Protestant workers “fighting the immediate battles of the...
workers on both sides of the Border”, culminating in the “fight for Connolly’s Socialist Republic.”

This contained a nod to the first Con- nolly, to “unite the workers and to bury, in one common grave, the religious hate and class hatred which were the two red threads” of the sectarian divide.

The key point to get across, then, is that Connolly’s legacy is a complex one. As an agitator and an organiser, his thought was action-oriented and evolved in response to events. He therefore bequeathed different fragments to different movements, especially due to the circumstances of his final months. An engagement with Connolly provides a dose of much-needed inspiration and is a guide to thinking rather than a source of ready-made answers, complete with a quote for every occasion. That is not to say, in closing, that all varieties of Connolly are equally true. Any account which obscures that Connolly was a socialist and a revolutionary Marxist, inspired by the international socialist and syndicalist movement, and not a narrowly Irish figure, is a distortion.

Similarly, Connolly was a remarkably eloquent propagandist for socialism and against the ills and evils of capitalism, not Irish self-determination but an international vision of solidarity.

Indeed, the class struggle ran like a red thread through Connolly’s life, as a socialist and a trade union organiser. Further, he based his vision of socialism on the class struggle, of creating instruments of struggle in the industrial union and ethics of solidarity that would prefigure the future Workers’ Republic. Finally, though Connolly’s analysis of Unionism’s grip on the Protestant working-class can be queried, his commitment to his own particular slave-driver is a healthy instinct, and makes for freedom.

So far, so consistent with the idea that oppressed nationalities can exploit the differences between imperialist blocs in service of their own national liberation. However, Connolly went further. First of all, as Brian Hanley has argued, he “eulogised Germany as a modern, progressive state and ignored or played down the reactionary nature of German imperialism.”

Moreover, he argued that the German Empire was “a homogeneous empire of self-governing peoples” which contrasted favourably and contained “more of the possibilities of freedom and civilisation than Britain’s.” This completely ignored Germany’s colonial dependencies in Africa, and downplayed the German atrocities in Africa which the German Social Democrats had denounced.

In the Workers’ Republic, Connolly published a gushing interview with the Kaiser by the pro-war German Social Democrat Anton Fendrich. In it, the Kaiser described the socialists as “splendid fellows” and Fendrich asserted of the German ruler that “there is no doubt that he understands the aims of the Radical Left in parliament far better and has more sympathies for them than the world knows.”

All of this undercuts the claim that Connolly merely took arms from Germany and went on to political support for the Central Powers. The parallel with Connolly, then, is arguably not with those who take the principled position of combining support for Ukraine’s right to arm itself while offering no positive support to NATO but of those who support both Ukraine and NATO against Russia.

**Conclusion**

The parallels with World War One in 1914 are striking. Then and now it was “the invasion of Belgium but indicated that it was used by Britain to justify its own imperial ambitions.”

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The Kremlin line on the Ukraine war

By Dale Street

Vladimir Kikadze’s Special Opera- tion: The Ukrainian Front of the War Against Russia, published in Moscow earlier this year, is a truly dismal book: 250 pages of speeches and decrees by Vladimir Putin, preceded by 250 pages of adulatory commentary from Kikadze. Written in the style of a Stalinist propaganda tract of the 1930’s, Kikadze’s commentary also doubles up as a pseudo-historical background to the current war. This is covered in snappily titled chapters such as “Anti-Russian Ukraine: From a Puppet of Germany and Austro-Hungary to the American Occupation and the War against Russia (1914-2022)” and “We Trained Nazis”: Judases in Vyshyvankas – Lackeys of the Abwehr, the Gestapo, the SS, the SD, and the CIA of the USA.

Kikadze has something with an obsession with “Judases in vyshyvankas” (traditional Ukrainian shirts) who betray their country for “pieces of silver”. He uses the two expressions repeatedly. It is surely pure coincidence that Ukraine’s president is Jewish. At no point in the book does the author even mention in passing Ukraine’s right to national self-determination. Instead, Kikadze’s sole focus is on Ukrainian nationalism – as defined by Kikadze himself.

For Kikadze, Ukrainian nationalism and the demand for Ukrainian independence can exist only as the far-right nationalism of the viciously anti-Polish and anti-Jewish Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) of the 1930s and 1940s. Its aim, then and now, is defined by Kikadze as: “A Ukro-Nazi empire from the Adriatic to the Pacific … the destruction of Russia from within, in order to re-establish the Rzeczpospolita [Polish Commonwealth of 1569-1795] … the unification of all Slavic territories into a single empire, from the Adriatic to the Pacific, with its capital in Kyiv: a neo-Nazi empire cleansed of Russian speakers.”

The post-independence leaders of Ukrainian nationalism, Kikadze continues, “sold the independence of Ukraine, obtained in 1991 with the assistance of Russia, together with the massive territories gifted to Ukraine by Russia when both were members of a single federation, for foreign pieces of silver.”

“Ukraine, along with the people who were selling it” were bought by “the United States and its satellites in NATO, for the sake of fighting against Russia and destroying it.”

After 1991 Ukrainian history books were also rewritten: “The so-called national historical discourse in Ukraine is artificially fortified first and foremost to the interests of other states, other peoples, transnational profiteers and corrupt domestic Ukrainian elites.”

Then, in 2014, “a neo-Nazi regime seized power as a result of an armed state coup.”

The West

Since then, “the ‘collective West’ has encouraged the militarisation and Nazification of Ukraine” while the “belated followers of the OUN” have driven the country’s impoverished population abroad to seek work: “Ukraine without Ukrainians – this is the real slogan of the Ukrainian authorities and the West which supports them.”

And so, concludes Kikadze, the “Special Military Operation” launched in February of last year became a matter of necessity: to save the people of the Donbas from genocide, and to denazify and demilitarise Ukraine.

Kikadze treats the subsequent annexations of Ukrainian territory – ruled out by Putin when he announced the invasion: “The occupation of Ukrainian territory is no part of our plan” – as a case of Russia simply resuming ownership of lost property.

He quotes Putin’s speech of September 2022 (“the historical lands of Novorossiya”) and his speech of December 2022 (“our former common country”).

He quotes Russian Security Council member Igor Shchtygolev’s speech of 2022 (“The Ukrainian people is, in essence, one people with us”) and Defence Minister Shoigu’s statement of December 2022 (“The Sea of Azov has again become an internal sea of Russia, as it was for 300 years in the history of our country”).

And Kikadze himself refers to “temporarily occupied territories of the Russian Federation”, without defining the parameters of the “occupied territories”.

Kikadze concludes by suggesting a number of steps which he believes would help ensure Russian victory in the war. A change of name would be useful: “More and more people in Russia are saying that there is a need to change the status of the Special Military Operation, which is increasingly taking on the characteristics of a Patriotic, Lib- eratory, Holy War of our people.”

“A short-term militarisation of Russia and its economy” would also have a beneficial effect on the battlefield, along with carpet-bombing Ukrainian positions: Waves of 400 planes at a time, each with loads of 40 rockets with 400-kilogramme warheads.

This would turn Ukrainian positions into “a lunar landscape where nothing would remain – neither life nor any military equipment.”

Given that the creation of an International Tribunal on Ukrainian War Crimes by the United Nations is “extremely unlikely”, Russia itself should create one – with the involvement of “states which have taken an independent position on the Ukrainian question, in particular Syria, Iran and Bolivia.”

But, most important of all, is greater clarity about Russia’s war aim. This should be spelt out as: “The complete liberation of the entire territory of Ukraine from the power of the Kyiv neo-Nazi, criminal, terrorist regime, and from the forces of the foreign military intervention now underway under the leadership of the USA and NATO; the complete dismantling of current neo-Nazi Ukrainian statehood which is the product of the criminal, terrorist quasi-state.”

If such steps are implemented, Russia can look forward to victory with confidence: “Our strength lies in traditional Russian spiritual-moral values. … In the fortress of these values is the strength of the Russian World. This time too, this strength will help Russia to defeat Evil to defeat the enemy of humanity on the Ukrainian front of the war against our homeland.”

Kikadze’s book is a repetitive and vacuous propaganda tract which turns reality, both historical and contemporary, on its head. Even worse, his twisted version of reality is mainstream in Russia today and even included in the school curriculum.

The Kremlin line on the Ukraine war

SPW in PCS: where’s the politics?

By a PCS member

In 2018, the Independent Left, the group in the PCS that AWL comrades are members of, wrote an article called “To SWP comrades: where’s the politics?”. In that posting, IL wrote of the SWP: “Their position is more akin to court politics rather than class politics. They see that the King wants one candidate rather than another. Instead of independently, in terms of their own politics, evaluating the candidates, putting demands on those candidates, or even standing their own candidate in LU, they go along with the King’s preference.”

That was in relation to Left Unity’s candidate for Assistant General Secretary, a candidate who made it clear she would take every penny on offer if elected, in contrast to the IL’s candidate for the AGS position.

Has anything changed since then? Has the SWP thrown off its abase- ment to the union’s General Secretary and struck out to follow its own politics? In a contradictory way, the way they (rightly) advocate a “no” vote in the current pay ballot (3-31 August) shows in fact they are just as much the court jesters as ever.

The ballot effectively is to kill the pay dispute this year. That is clear to everyone. The problem for the SWP is that if they say this obvious fact, it would put them at odds with the Left Unity leadership who claim a yes vote is in fact continuing the dispute.

Instead of being honest, the SWP contort themselves. They claim with a vehemence not shown against the leadership that to argue that a yes vote is the “call off the action” vote “is a distortion and is dishonest”. And the proof? – well, Mark Serwotka has never said that the campaign ends, the proof? – well, Mark Serwotka has never said that the campaign ends, the proof? – well, Mark Serwotka has never said that the campaign ends.

IL said then what remains true in the new election for AGS coming up at the end of 2023 (nominations open 2 September, voting 9 November to 14 December).

“So, comrades, in the election you have a choice; the King’s choice or backing someone who actually will try and strike out to follow its own politics?”

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America braced for Trump trials

By Tom Harrison

Your honour, I have stated in this court that I am opposed to the form of our present government; that I am opposed to the social system in which we live; that I believe in the change of both but by perfectly peaceable and orderly means....

So spoke Eugene V Debs, Socialist Party candidate for the US presidency, on trial for sedition in 1918. Debs had campaigned against conscription in World War I, opposed as he was to the slaughter of millions of working people in what was an inter-imperialist war. He proudly pleaded guilty, was sentenced to ten years and launched his 1920 presidential campaign from Atlanta Federal Penitentiary.

Just over a century later another presidential candidate might be conducting his campaign from prison. Unlike Debs he won’t be pleading guilty. Neither will he be thinking as Debs did of “the men in the mills and factories” or “the women who, for a paltry wage, are compelled to work out their lives.”

Unlike Debs, Trump is no Eugene Debs concerned with the well being of working people. Instead, his interest is completely self serving – to avoid being held accountable for depriving the American people of their democratic rights.

Trump the racist, sexual-harasser, and racketeer. Trump the con-man, fraudster, liar, conspirator, grifter and thief. He who lies on an industrial scale, false flag, racketeer. Trump the con-man, fraudster so it’s not surprising he

next year, there could be the bizarre situation of the US President conducting government business from the very same penitentiary Debs found himself in a century ago!

The Georgia charges arise out of laws aimed at combating racketeering by organised crime groups. Fitting that bill, Trump has gone into full mobster mode by posting “If you go after me, I’m coming for you” on his ironically named Truth Social platform. It’s a threat that’s been made by little Caesars in countless gangster films since Scarface: The Shame of the Nation came out in 1932. Trump has spent much of his business life rubbing shoulders with mobsters so it’s not surprising he comes out with such language.

Intimidation

Intimidation of all those sitting in judgement on him will be very much to the fore in the coming months. Death threats have already been made against prosecutors and judges. They should have plenty of security. More worrying has been the publication on far-right websites of the names and addresses of members of the Georgia Grand Jury who indicted Trump. That is certainly going to weigh on the minds of other jury members in the four criminal courts Trump will be tried in. Coupled to that we have witness intimidation from Trump himself and extremist MAGA-Donians on various online forums. There have been renewed calls on their part to hang Mike Pence along with calls for “civil war”.

Will Trump be found guilty, though? He certainly thinks he’s done for in Washington DC and wants that trial moved to West Virginia. He’s harking back to the days when Klansmen could literally get away with murder because most of the all male juries were members of the KKK. Trump-friendly judge Aileen Cannon has moved the classified documents case to a Florida district which heavily voted for him. Legal experts say that the case against Trump on that one is crystal clear, but some jurors might not be persuaded by such things as facts!

Trump and his remaining cohort still believe they are going to win the election next year because, rather than in spite of, all this legal exposure. They’ve been busy drawing up a programme to purge the entire state apparatus of anyone not loyal to Trump. Revenge and retribution will be the order of the day. Russ Vought, one of his minions, was quite open about this: “What we are trying to do is identify the pockets of independence and seize them.”

The nonsense of a “deep state” conspiracy against Trump will be the justification for a full-scale purge of federal workers, using an executive order for instant dismissal. Initially this will be aimed at all those involved in investigating Trump since 2016, but will extend down the rank until the government is composed entirely of Trump loyalists.

Weaponised

Under this setup the Department of Justice and FBI will actually become what they are accused by Trumpists of being now – a weaponised arm of the executive intent on persecuting political opponents. For good measure, an Office of Electoral Integrity will be set up to further Trump’s baseless claims of electoral fraud. Expect too that all those prosecuted together with him will get pardons as will the jailed 6 January insurrectionists.

Trump 2 will probably become an authoritarian regime built on election denial and determined to keep MAGA Republicans in permanent government. He’d certainly run again in 2028 and aim to be president for life just like all those dictators he likes so much.

A lot can happen in the year though, including the currently unlikely possibility that the Republicans manage to ditch Trump if he becomes a liability with independent voters. Although two thirds of Americans think the charges against Trump are serious, that isn’t necessarily going to translate itself into votes for Biden, particularly if the main concern of the electorate is the economy. Polls so far this year have shown a Trump v Biden rematch as more or less neck and neck.

The American working class have suffered the historical misfortune of not having a party of labour to stand up for their democratic rights and be of people like Debs all those years ago. They instead face a “choice” between two capitalist parties, both heavily tied to and funded by big business interests. The lack of a significant left alternative when Presidential election time comes around has led many workers to be conned into believing Trump is an anti-establishment figure who will help them out.

Voters

Seventy million people voted for Trump last time round. Not all of them were revolting racist bigots or QAnon conspiracy wing nuts. Many others were attracted to Trump as the great disrupter, mistakenly believing that he would somehow benefit them. Trump’s term in office of course did nothing of the sort. His much vaunted promises to bring industries back to the “rust belt” were empty ones. In different circumstances, some of the Trump voters would have been attracted by the policies of Bernie Sanders, but those in control of the Democrat Party made certain he wouldn’t get to be their candidate.

The left in America has for various historical reasons always been faced with an extremely difficult political environment. Today it urgently needs to counter the lurch towards authoritarian rule. To best build political and economic organisations the working class needs to maintain democratic rights and be of their best defender. Genuine trade unions and representative grassroots organisations are the only reliable ones to complete such a task.
Chile 1970-3: “revolution by half”

By Barrie Hardy

An article from Workers’ Fight (a fore-runner of Solidarity). October 1972, warning against the threat of the military coup which would come on 11 September 1973.

At 8.15 am on 22 October 1970, Rene Schneider, Commander in Chief of the Chilean Army, was traveling to his Santiago office when his car was intercepted by eight vehicles from which several armed men emerged. Breaking the General’s car windows they fired three shots, hitting him in the throat, thorax and right shoulder. Then they made their getaway.

This incident was part of a larger plot by the Chilean right to block the ratification by Congress of Salvador Allende’s electoral victory. Since then four more plots have been discovered in Chile, in which members of the establishment have been implicated.

The plots have taken against a background of increasing violence in the streets and countryside. Last August running battles took place in Santiago between members of the Socialist and Communist parties on the one side, and fascist elements on the other. This was followed by demonstrations by small shopkeepers against Chile’s 33% rate of inflation.

Clashes

On the land, clashes between peasants and the police have escalated, resulting in a few deaths and many injured.

In such a situation the revolutionary left have applied an old maxim from the French Revolution. Referring to Allende, they say “He who makes a revolution by half only ends up by digging his own grave.” “I think that basic works like State and Revolution contain key ideas, but they can’t be used as a catechism.” Allende proclaims that the workers have come to power in Chile. However, Allende’s claim is clearly not reflected in the Chilean Congress, Judiciary and Army, a fact which would indicate that he needs to re-read Lenin’s “catechism”.

Allende did not become President in 1970 by winning an overall majority of votes. He polled 36%, 2% less than when he ran for President in 1964. What did happen was that unlike in 1964 the right fielded two candidates, thus splitting their vote.

Allende’s Presidential victory had to be ratified by Congress, which meant that he had to do a deal with the Christian Democrats. In return for assuming the Presidency, Allende had to support a Bill providing “democratic safeguards”, preventing him from changing the personnel of the Army, courts and administrative apparatus, nor could he alter the political monopoly in the media. Allende’s power became the power only to carry out what the Chilean bourgeoisie would concede.

The Supreme Court has made countless decisions in favour of landowners against the peasants. It has also obstructed the government in its investigations into the circumstances surrounding the death of General Schneider. All Allende can say about the attitude of the Supreme Court is that he is “very worried”. But tampering with the courts would mean “interfering with the democratic process”.

Safety

But what of the army? Allende proclaims that he has “absolute confidence in the loyalty” of the armed forces. Unfortunately this loyalty does not extend to his personal protection, and to safeguard his skin Allende has had to form his own bodyguard from among the ranks of the Socialist Party.

The attitude of the Chilean Communist Party to the army illuminates even more clearly the reformist wishfulness existing in the Popular Unity coalition. “The Army”, explained the C.P.’s general secretary, Luis Corvalan, “is not invulnerable to the new winds blowing in Latin America and penetrating everywhere.”

Allende’s nationalisation of the copper mines is merely an extension of the policy of “Chileanisation” carried out by the previous government. Under President Frei (1964-70), 51% of foreign-owned mines were nationalised.

The real test of Allende’s “socialist” intentions would be shown in his willingness to nationalise the industrial sector. So far he has only done this with 150 out of the 30,500 firms in Chile. And this is as far as the Popular Unity’s programme intends to go.

And the workers in the nationalised mines? Surely, as Allende has talked about the “new man” of “socialist” Chile, the workers should expect to have control over the nationalised sectors at least? “But” Allende says, “... we are not going to hand over a company to the workers just so that they can produce what they want or to let them turn the fact that they control a company which is of vital importance to their country to their own personal advantage in order to demand higher earnings than other people. We are against any policy of that nature.”

Allende insists on mere “participation” of the workers with the state appointed bureaucrats chosen to run these industries. He also talks about the excessive wages of the copper miners (77p a day) and their need to “work more, produce more, sacrifice more.”

The expectation that Generalissimo Allende and such exhortations to sacrifice if Chile bore any resemblance to a workers’ state. But with both the bourgeois state and the prosperous parts of industry remaining intact, workers in Chile are no longer well disposed to listen to appeals for restraint coming from the “Companero Presidente”.

Coming to office, the government granted on average wage rises of 35%. The Chilean rate of inflation prior to this was, surprise surprise, 35%. But now Allende says the Government must “regulate income by law... to facilitate economic development”. The honeymoon between the working class and Allende did not last long.

Land Reform

On land reform too, the Popular Unity has stepped into the shoes of the previous government. Under Frei, 8.7 million acres were expropriated. So far Allende has expropriated 5.7 million.

This policy has only been speeded up because the peasants took over the land following the victory of the P.U. in the elections. The Allende government has actually told many peasants not to continue this process because the government needs time to find the money needed to pay the landowners’ compensation.

This policy of compensation to the big landowners is particularly grotesque since most of the land in Chile was forcibly stolen from the Mapuche Indians in the first place.

In recent months the Government forces have been used against the peasantry to clear them off the land and in one case a police detachment stood by while landowners fired mercilessly on peasant squatters, killing one of their leaders (a member of the Movement of the Revolutionary Left – MIR).

The MIR intends to join the Government once “its concrete political line” ceases to “remain confused”. The MIR doesn’t state in other than very vague terms what criteria are needed for an end to this “confusion” and could indeed fall into the same trap as the SP and CP by participating in what is patently a bourgeois government.

Apart from its work amongst the peasantry, the MIR also needs to develop links with the workers in Chile, who are now disillusioned with Allende. This is now becoming a matter of urgency as demoralisation could set in if they can see no alternative direction.

What the outcome Allende cannot last much longer. His role, rather than to attack the bourgeoisie has been to head off the movement of the masses. He has been holding power out of the goodwill of the Chilean bourgeoisie. That goodwill has now run out. Allende has served his purpose for them.

The Chilean masses can no longer be kept at bay by reformist promises and can only be countered by force. As both classes group themselves for the final struggle (the bourgeoisie, thanks to Allende, better prepared than they had been) Allende’s parliamentary road will prove of little consequence. The “Revolution without rifles” will fade in the sound of gunfire. ■

**War and poverty in Ethiopia**

By Dan Katz

Ethiopia has a population of 126mn and is the second most populous state in Africa, behind Nigeria. The urban population is less than a quarter of the total. The median age is just 19 years old, with a GDP per capita of only $925. Inflation is running at 34% (April 2023).

The Save the Children estimates that over 22mn people face severe food shortages in Ethiopia, and over 4mn children are seriously malnourished. 12mn people in the south, where the rains have failed for the past five years, face famine.

In 2019-20 an enormous plague of locusts devastated Ethiopian agriculture. In 2019 locusts destroyed 350,000tn of cereal crops and more than 1.2mn hectares of pasture. 2020 was even worse (Guardian report, November 2020). Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 immediately ramped up the prices of petrol, grain and fertilisers, all imported by Ethiopia, by 20-30%. The impact of Putin’s ending of the Black Sea grain deal in July 2023 (by which Ukraine had been able to export 32mn tonnes of grain) will also impact on Ethiopia as poor, malnourished populations in the country were recipients of grain bought by the World Food Programme from Ukraine.

However, the worst crisis to hit Ethiopia for decades was the war fought between Tigrayan fighters under the command of the ruling party in the area, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), and the army of the Ethiopian federal government, under the command of the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, in alliance with the Eritrean army.

The combination of government forces attacking Tigray from the north and Eritrean forces invading from the north led to an effective blockade of Tigray.

**War**

The war was fought from November 2020 and did not end until a peace deal brokered by the African Union and signed in South Africa, two years later, on 2 November 2022. Former Nigerian President, Olusegun Obasanjo, the AU’s lead negotiator, estimates that the war killed 600,000 people – more, for example, the numbers killed in 50 years of civil war in Colombia.

Tim Vanden Bempt, an academic from the University of Ghent, thinks 600,000 deaths is probably a roughly accurate figure. He believes “300,000 to 400,000 civilians died during the conflict – from atrocities, starvation and lack of healthcare.” In addition, he suggests unofficial estimates of combatant deaths are probably accurate at 200,000-300,000. (Financial Times, 15 January 2023).

During the war civilian targets, especially in Tigray, were hit, and hunger and rape were used as methods of waging war. Under the peace deal the TPLF agreed to disarm and demobilise. They claim to have now handed over all their heavy weapons. But, despite the agreement to end the conflict, Eritrean soldiers appear still to be in border regions of Tigray. Eritrea was not a formal part of the AU negotiations or the peace deal.

The Sudanese army used the Tigray conflict for its own ends. In an agreement made with Abiy Ahmed, at the start of the Tigray war, in order to more effectively seal off Tigray, Sudan moved 6,000 troops to the Ethiopian border around a contested area, Al Fashaga. Sudan then began ethnically cleansing the area of Tigrayan farmers and, further south, Amhara farmers.

This created problems for Abiy who wanted the border closed to Tigray but needed the backing of the Amhara elite to prosecute the war against Tigray.

From early in the Tigray war Amhara forces overran Western Tigray and began terrorising and ethnically cleansing the area. That western area had been incorporated into the regional Tigray state in the early 1990s, by the Tigray-led Ethiopian regime, which then created a basis for future inter-ethnic conflicts.

The 2007 Ethiopian census recognised over 80 different ethnic groups, the largest being Oromo (34%), Amhara (27%), Tigrayans (6%) and Somali (6%). Approximately two thirds of the population is Christian (Ethiopian Orthodox 44%, with majorities amongst Tigrayans and Amhara populations) and one third are Muslims (including almost all the Somali population).

The Tigrayan region is in the north, bordering Eritrea; the Amhara are in the northwest of the country, south of the Tigrayan region. The Somalis are in the east, bordering Somalia. And the Oromo majority areas are in the west, centre and southwest of Ethiopia.

**Selassie**

With the exception of the Italian fascist occupation of Ethiopia, from 1936-41, Ethiopia was ruled from 1930 to 1974 by Haile Selassie. Selassie presided – weirdly, eccentrically – over a feudalistic state. Selassie federated Ethiopia with Eritrea in 1952, and then annexed Eritrea in 1962 which led to long-running armed resistance.

Selassie was overthrown by the Derg in 1974. The Derg (“Committee”), a viciously authoritarian military-Stalinist grouping, abolished the monarchy and disestablished the Ethiopian Orthodox church, declaring the state “atheist”. The Derg survived, in various forms, using terror. In power until 1991.

The 2007 Ethiopian population census revealed the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), an alliance led by the Tigrayan group, the TPLF. Effectively the TPLF dominated Ethiopian politics from 1991 to 2019 through the EPRDF. Key people at the top of the EPRDF were also from a Tigrayan-Stalinist political background, but ruled Ethiopia in a new and different context after the fall of Eastern European Stalinism.

The central figure in the Derg, Mengistu Haile Mariam, unfortunately came much more repressive, jailing political opponents and journalists. The war against Tigray, 2020-2, was part of Abiy’s drive to eliminate ethnic militias which rival the central military which he controls, and to centralise political power.

In April 2023 Abiy ordered that security forces from Ethiopia’s 11 regions be integrated into the police or national army. That provoked a violent backlash. The 1995 Ethiopian constitution guarantees that “every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession.” However, regional boundaries are contested, and populations overlap.

On 4 August the government declared a six-month State of Emergency in Amhara, as Federal forces fought a local militia, the Fano, previously an ally of Abiy’s during the Tigray war. The central government is attempting to disband the Fano and is using airstrikes and heavy artillery. On Sunday 13 August a government plane bombed an Amhara marketplace killing 26 and wounding at least 55 civilians.

Heavy-handed and violent attempts to centralise political power will only bring more misery to Ethiopia.
Alliances with the soft left?

By Luke Hardy

The threatened expulsion of Neal Lawson, the director of Compass, from the Labour Party has brought about some welcome debate both on the so far called “hard” left of the Labour Party and the so called “soft” left around about how these two trends can work together to fight for pluralism and democracy in the Labour Party.

Jeremy Gilbert in the New Statesman argues for an umbrella organisation where the soft left and hard left can organise together. Alfie Steer argues in an article for Labour Hub that for such an alliance to occur both parts of the left need to transcend factional cleavages and stereotypes and take each other seriously. On the soft left both Lawson himself and MP Jon Cruddas seem open to campaigns on pluralism and democracy.

Socialism

Workers’ Liberty acknowledges there is little way forward for socialism in the Labour Party or broader movement unless revolutionary socialists engage with, win over, or do joint work with forces and layers to our right in the labour movement. This includes the “soft” left in Open Labour or Compass as well as the “hard” left of the Labour Party in CLPD or Momentum; and in fact the hard-soft division, at present anyway, is often notional or arbitrary.

We worked with at least some of the “soft left” (with Open Labour as a grouping, and with individuals) around Brexit, free movement, Ukraine solidarity, Uyghur solidarity, Hong Kong solidarity, and Israel-Palestine solidarity, and sometimes against elements of the self-ascribed “hard” left.

Let’s take the ideas of those we seek to engage more seriously. Who are the “soft” left? What is their political tradition?

It’s difficult to tell. Arguably the majority of Labour Party members are soft left in a broad definition. Especially with so many on the “hard” left of the party quitting in the last few years, and mostly going into political inactivity.

A conventional “hard” left account of the “soft” left is to see them as a purely factional Labour Party phenomenon defined by the split in the Labour left in the early 1980s between the “hard” Bennites and those who would go with Kinnock. However, today’s “soft left” is broader than just the Labour Party and has roots reaching back to the 1960s. It harks back to those who looked for alternatives to the dogma of the “hard left” (then meaning Communist Party people and perhaps some sectarian versions of Orthodox Trotskyism) and the narrowness and conservatism of Cold War Social Democracy.

The alternatives have been various and shifting. Many on the soft left stress alliances with “new social movements” like the environmental or women’s movement. Sometimes that reflects influences from the “Eurocommunism” of the 1970s and 1980s, and they also tend to support alliances with Lib Dems, Scots and Welsh Nationalists, the political tradition of the “progressive alliance”.

The soft left is generally more willing than the Labour right to work with the extra-parliamentary campaigns and forces of the “hard” and revolutionary left. But “softness” often means so-called pragmatism and electoralism trumping the loftier theoretical concerns.

If the soft left is hard to pin down theoretically, it’s even harder to pin down the fuzzy edges of this tendency. However the right-wing edge is probably the people around Ed Miliband, Compass and much of the Green Party. The left-wing fringe of it would probably stretch out to people around Red Pepper or Momentum.

Trade union revival

Many on the “soft” left are open to discussing ideas and reading widely. There has been a growing interest in the beginnings of a trade union revival. Unlike Workers’ Liberty, who see unions as the key mass force of work for the extra-class struggle, the soft left tend to support unions as part of a broader tapestry of progressive organisations. The passion for popular fronts with “progressives” includes forces hostile to unions like Lib Dems and some parts of the Green Party.

These key political differences are obstacles for Jeremy Gilbert’s idea of a generalised alliance embracing the “soft left”, and it is also hard to see what organisational form an alliance could take. The only real precedent is the Centre Left Grassroots Alliance, initiated in 1998 by CLPD and a group called Labour Reform (which included Ann Black, still on the NEC today), and deliberately limited to issues of Labour’s internal democracy and to constructing consensus slates for NEC elections. (The CLGA still exists on paper today, but mainly as a forum for CLPD and Momentum to joust over slate-making).

The “soft left” in the broadest sense includes a majority of party members, but the only real “soft Labour” organisation is the relatively small Open Labour, led by Alex Sobel MP, which runs candidates for internal elections against CLGA.

Open Labour includes some respect-worthy activists. However, its major recent success has been winning chair and secretary in Labour Students, and they have used manoeuvres to do down the Momentum majority on the Labour Students committee over tuition fees, provoking protest from many Labour Clubs.

Local de facto alliances of “hard” and “soft” left in CLPs or around this or that campaign exist. A national alliance against Starmer’s assault on democracy and pluralism in the Labour Party, a bit like the 1998 alliance against Blair’s “Partnership in Power” clampdown (which was only slightly slackened in the later Blair years, only slightly reversed in the Corbyn years), would be good. We published some proposals in 2021.

Workers’ Liberty are open to making common cause with anyone willing to fight for consistent democracy and pro-worker and socialist policies in the party, and issue by issue as well as in generalised alliances. Where we disagree we should be open for discussion and debate that goes beyond shallow stereotypes and factionalism.

If you’re reading this and you’re part of the “soft left” we are talking about, then get in touch with us. Discuss what you think of the article and what Workers’ Liberty is saying in general. □

A letter to some comrades

We may think and say the recall is ridiculously over-severe and advocate release. What do we “solidarise” with her on? The “punch” speech? The original charges of kidnap and torture, and of attempted murder in jail? Our enemies may say that in campaigning for her release we thereby endorse the deeds for which she was jailed. We do not! We are not anarchists. Imprisonment is a monstrous system, but we not say that all sentences are false. We are in on favour of the existing bourgeois state putting down kidnapping (freedom imprisonment). Aren’t we?

Are we for punching in the face, or someone with her convictions the protest? I think Sarah Jane Baker should be released immediately, as I do, we say and campaign for that. We are not in solidarity with the speech that got her parole revoked or on her conviction.

If we say parole was really revoked for reasons other than those stated, say what they were. But you seem to make little of the punch-in-the-face speech. You describe it excusingly. But I understand that the speech had a very large circu- lation on video.

Why do you do that? Surely from someone with her convictions the speech can’t be taken as meaningless, to be indulged.

Events and campaigns: workersliberty.org/events

youtube.com/c/WorkersLibertyUK

workersliberty.org/audio
Wrong on the Driscoll campaign

Letter

Dan Katz (Solidarity 681) is right that socialists should be arguing for people to stay in the Labour Party and fight. He is also right that at the moment “there is currently little prospect of organising a substantial, rational, socialist organisation to the left of Labour”.

Whether Jamie Driscoll “should have stayed in the Labour Party and organised the left to fight Starmer” is at best a moot point. Socialists’ duty is to relate to what is and Driscoll’s campaign for North-East mayor is a reality.

It is to be presumed, although it is not explicitly stated, that Katz thinks socialists should not be involved in Driscoll’s campaign and instead they should keep their powder dry, for risk of losing their party membership cards, and not “exclude themselves from important future battles against the Labour right”. No-one, however, seems to think that there is any plausible chance of there being a successful fight here and now within the party structures to overturn Driscoll being barred, indeed Katz’s article doesn’t even raise the possibility.

In reality, as the recent impressive wave of industrial action has amply demonstrated by its absence of any echo or expression within the party structures, there is very little fight against Starmer and the right within the party.

Whatever about Driscoll as an individual and however minimal his programme is likely to be, the response of the local labour movement is a fight, here and now. A fight against the dictatorial, autocratic and belligerent Starmer leadership.

It is a substantial rank and file revolt – involving many existing Party members, and even possibly some Party organisations – to oppose a naked stitch up and support the popular candidate. This is very different from a small left wing propaganda campaign candidate, although we are not in principle against those either.

Socialists in the area should advocate a critical vote for Driscoll. They should involve themselves in the campaign and argue that supporters should not turn their back on Labour, but should join or rejoin and fight.

It will be necessary to take precautions against the tyrannical Party leadership. Socialists who have not already been expelled should, and should advise others to, avoid using their real names in the campaign. They should avoid being photographed. They should continue to fight against Driscoll’s barring in their Labour Parties and in the affiliated unions.

The alternative of protecting our membership cards at all costs and sidestepping the fight, hoping for a better day in the future, is the politics of defeat. Should Driscoll win, it will be a bloody nose for the Starmerites. It will lead to further questioning of his Thermodidrion regime. It will aid the fight in the Party.

After Livingstone won the London mayor election 2000 as an independent, supported by Workers’ Liberty, he was readmitted to the Party. His campaign was not followed by mass expulsions. More importantly Blair never again over-reached with barring candidates. It is true the Party regime now is worse and less tolerant. However, this is an opportunity to push it back.

The best parts of the left and the labour movement in the region are orientated to that fight through Driscoll’s campaign. To stand on the sidelines, saying “you’ll get expelled” with a weary shrug, is not an option.

David Pendleton, Isle of Wight

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Amazon: not just a number

By Ollie Moore

Amazon workers at two sites struck again in early August, with workers at Rugeley in Staffordshire striking on 3 and 4 August, and workers at the larger BH4X site in Coventry striking on 4 and 5 August. The strikes saw the biggest mass pickets of the dispute so far, with just short of 600 workers on the streets on both Friday and Saturday mornings.

A rally in support of the strike took place at BH4X on 5 August, mobilising several hundred supporters. Amazon took the decision to shut down operations at the site from 3pm on 5 August, meaning workers on the night shift were paid without having to come to work, something some workers jokingly referred to as “getting Amazon to pay the strike pay.”

Some see Amazon’s decision to shut the site, something they have not done previously despite much larger mass pickets on the Friday and Saturday morning shifts, as part of its efforts to convince the police that the pickets represent aggravated trespass. The landlord of the industrial estate where BH4X is located, where Amazon is the biggest tenant, has hired a private security firm, Bryan Lecoeche Ltd, to aid the anti-strike operation. The firm, founded by a former police officer, specialises in activity such as clearing traveller camps. Union activists say there have even been confrontations between private security guards and the police, with the former taking a more confrontational and obstructive attitude towards the pickets.

The most significant development of the rally, in terms of the ongoing development of the dispute, was perhaps not the shutdown but the fact that a new layer of workplace activists came forward to speak openly right outside the gates of the workplace. Speeches were given in both English and the native languages of many migrant workers, reflecting the extremely diverse workforce. These GMB activists are the driving force of the campaign inside the warehouse. Their increased confidence and militancy, and willingness to direct their own dispute, will be crucial to its ultimate success.

At Rugeley, the picket on the first morning of the strike was far more active than the first picket at Coventry back in January. The Rugeley pickets knew what to do because, from March onwards, they had learned from fellow workers at Coventry, both directly and via sharing videos. Workplace leaders at Rugeley such as Teodora Bisog have stepped up to convey the strike’s message to the media. She told local press: “I am here today as I am looking for respect from Amazon for all the workers, as well as a pay increase, and what we have right now is not enough with everything that is going on at the moment.”

“People are having to do 60 hours a week to be able to pay their bills, feed their children and feed themselves, which I don’t think is fair as, to be honest, Amazon wouldn’t be where it is without the workers. We pick items for the customers, pack them, ship them and store them, which is not easy work, especially picking as you walk from one end of the building to the other every single day and, in time, that can affect your health. It is very frustrating to feel like management treat us like we’re just a number and are replaceable and there are people who have been here for years and know more than the management do.”

“I want what’s coming to us to be realised and we want to be just a number and we can think for ourselves and speak for ourselves and we want a pay increase and we want respect.”

The Rugeley pickets were also a lot more vocal than the first pickets at Coventry on the first day. There were chants of “You can stick your broken rocket up your arse”, referencing Amazon boss Jeff Bezos’s space-travel vanity project, and “Stuff Jeff Bezos”, with the latter getting a national TV outing on Good Morning Britain.

GMB activists across a number of Midlands sites will soon meet to discuss next steps, including further strike dates. The campaign at Rugeley has an additional focus, as Amazon announced plans to close the site shortly after GMB began its industrial action ballot. The company intends to transfer all work to a new site in Sutton Coldfield, due to open on 1 October. Although opposition to closure is not part of the formal industrial dispute, GMB members campaigning against it, including by intervening in the redundancy consultation process and putting forward proposals for retaining work at the site.

The union now has around 1,100 members at Coventry, and is growing significantly at Rugeley as a result of the strike. However, spreading the strike to other sites, including the new Sutton Coldfield site but also facilities in other regions beyond the strike’s current base in the Midlands, is widely seen as another crucial element for success. Workers plan to continue and step up their programme of visits to other sites, and will spread organisation to the Sutton Coldfield site via active GMB pickets who plan to transfer there from Coventry and Rugeley.

Fundraising efforts to swell the strike fund will be vital, especially to enable workers to take more sustained action. Union branches and other labour movement bodies wishing to make donations to the strike fund can do so via the union’s Crowdfunder.

More strikes in TOCs dispute

Off The Rails

Rail union RMT has called new strikes in the Train Operating Companies (TOCs) dispute, on 26 August and 2 September.

The message to members announcing the strikes rightly pays tribute to members’ resolve and determination. It’s a huge testament that, over a year into the dispute, and with the employer not budging, we’ve maintained that resolve. All strikes have remained solid and we’ve consistently returned ballot mandates. The announcement of the consultation on ticket office closures has given added impetus to the dispute, and the union has organised an impressive, public-facing campaign with protests, stalls, and leafleting outside stations.

We have no doubt the next strikes will be solid and impactful too. But if we want to win this dispute, we have to seriously discuss what level of action is necessary to do that. The last round of action, in July, saw three 24-hour strikes in relatively quick succession. That felt like a step in the right direction, a return to something more like the three-day strike we began the dispute with in June 2022. But now, after more than a month without strikes, we’re back to just two days of action, with no indication for any escalation beyond these dates.

The union’s message to members highlights the fact that no negotiations have taken place recently and no new offer is on the table. Do we have any evidence to indicate that sporadic strikes, with a month or more in between, will put sufficient pressure on the employer to force them into a new offer? In fact, we have direct evidence to the contrary. That’s the strategy we’ve been pursuing throughout the dispute, and it hasn’t worked.

Given the continuing resolve and determination acknowledged in the union statement, there’s no indication that the dispute is collapsing or that people want to give up. Our only option, then, is to escalate.

We need to follow up the latest announcement with further strikes later in September, extending to at least three days, and convene members’ assemblies across the country to discuss a timetable for action beyond that. There’s little point congratulating ourselves for staying in the fight this long if we don’t at least attempt to do what’s necessary to win.

Troublemakers: Another view

Letter

Share E M Johns’ positive assessment of the “Troublemakers’ Conference” (Solidarity 681). What comes out of the event is still largely yet to be determined.

I did, however, want to add some slightly more critical notes to Johns’ report.

Johns commends the conference’s “avowedly rank-and-file centred orientation”, but I felt that, at points during the day, there was not much clarity on exactly what meant, and whilst debates around its meaning occurred organically and inevitably in the breakout workshops, it would have been good to have more opportunities to directly hammer that out. I think there is also a risk, which will require strong democratic structures to check, of the whole project developing in a “left-NGO” direction, with staffers and professional “organisers” calling the shots. Hopefully the follow-up will acknowledge that risk and seek to develop mechanisms to mitigate it.

A conference participant, London
I today one class, the working class, lives by selling its labour power to another, the capitalist class, which owns the means of production.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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The miracle of the S bend

By Matt Shaw

Having the right “ganger” made all the difference to how the day went in the years when I started as a track-worker on the railway. The two main ones I had were like chalk and cheese.

The first was a train spotter, literally a train spotter, who would do anything to keep the railway running. Such people were often the bane of your life, always wanting to do that bit more than you were paid to do, and being really picky over busy work.

The other was an old hand, ex-navy, full of tales and experience but very unwilling to take advice from youngsters.

Rum

Of the two initially the old hand was preferred, in fact after the first year with him we had a whip round and bought him a bottle of rum. By the following year he had completely flipped out, and according to him we were all out to get him sacked. Happily, he retired before any serious harm.

All the characters I’ve mentioned so far in this column and the previous one were harmless, but there was one guy who was a real danger. He was big and strong. He was not the sharpest knife in the block, and had a quick temper which could flare up over the most minor thing. He’d been seen to pick up a five-foot iron bar and threaten to hit somebody with it.

If he had gone through with it, then he’d have been up on a murder charge. On another occasion he had a blazing row with the only man who was still talking to him over the fact that this chap had bought a Guardian rather than a Daily Mirror. Happily, he retired before any serious harm.

We also had a few religious zealots. Among them was a Christian who had some strange mannerisms. It was his faith in miracles that gave the us non-believers a chuckle.

In one of our endless discussions about beliefs he held up the miracle of the S bend to explain that the weekend previous he had been doing some DIY, and removing and refitting an S bend on his sink. After struggling for an hour it seemed hopeless so he went away and prayed, and lo, upon his return he gave it another mighty heave and off it came.

After we had stopped laughing, a long time I might add, we pointed out that his previous efforts had loosened it and a further heave at that point would have got the thing moving. No, it was a miracle. There was proof enough for him.

I could describe even more, but those were some of the ones in my early days. My movements up and down the country have shown that not only Sheffield had an over-abundance of strange people in railway track work. □

Fire Brigade cuts annual leave

By Adrian Noble

I’m off duty and see the news going round WhatsApp. “It’s fucking ridiculous” sums up the widespread response to an announcement that’s gone down like a pint of sick.

For any given shift for a particular station there’s an annual leave allocation; one, sometimes two, can be off at a one appliance station with a watch strength of seven, for a two appliance station with a watch strength of 13 or so it’s two to three. It’s not much and it’s not spread out, as some of the ones in my early days were harmless, but there was one guy who was a real danger. He was big and strong. He was not the sharpest knife in the block, and had a quick temper which could flare up over the most minor thing. He’d been seen to pick up a five-foot iron bar and threaten to hit somebody with it.

If he had gone through with it, then he’d have been up on a murder charge. On another occasion he had a blazing row with the only man who was still talking to him over the fact that this chap had bought a Guardian rather than a Daily Mirror. Happily, he retired before any serious harm.

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UCU: dangers of reballot delay

By a UCU member

The higher education union UCU voted at its congress in May to hold a summer reballot so that a mandate for its long-running industrial action could be renewed before it runs out at the end of September.

Despite overwhelming (98%) support for a reballot “as soon as reasonably practicable” at a recent Branch Delegate Meeting (BDM), and a vote backing up that stance at a Higher Education Committee, the union leadership around Jo Grady have decided to reballot only “over the coming months”, which could mean anything.

A break in our mandate, from the end of September, until a new mandate is won (if it is won) means members will not be legally covered should they wish to continue with the ongoing Marking and Assessment Boycott (MAB). The MAB has been successful in many areas but logically the MAB must now come to an end, the only question is how and when. The union is set to consult on the MAB and probably by e-ballot, a form of consultation that has been used by the leadership to engineer the results it wants.

Any delay in balloting sends a terrifying message to the employers at a time when many of the most “hawkish” University managements have imposed outrageous deductions (up to 100% of pay) over non-completion of marking (a relatively small part of workloads). We need to push the union once more into doing what it has been instructed to do by democratic processes and call the reballot.

There will be further national strike action before the end of September. Along with solidarity for local UCU disputes and solidarity with Unison members in dispute, local branches must make the most of this.

Meanwhile the higher education Service Group of the Unison union, representing mostly admin and ancillary staff, is continuing its campaign for a better pay rise. 22 branches now having a mandate for strike action, the dates for which are currently being chosen. Ideally some of these will coincide with UCU strikes before the end of September, but Unison branches are also thinking about which dates will have the most impact.

More coordination between HE unions is needed – working together, academic and support staff can win more for their members.

Traffic wardens: “Low pay? No way!”

By a Unison rep

Camden traffic wardens’ strike remains solid, entering its fifth week as this issue goes to press. As Solidarity 681 reported, the outsourced workers demand a pay rise from £12.70 per hour to £15.90. They have voted overwhelmingly to stay out continuously until their bosses at NSL pay up.

Strikers describe how work conditions have intensified in recent years. They must now continuously account for their activities via electronic log, and can be called for a “talk” with a manager for going as little as ten minutes without reporting in. One commented on the surveillance: “You feel downgraded. They don’t trust you to do your job!”

The employer and the council have expanded their duties without compensation. For example, they must now confront drivers for engine idling. The wardens already face verbal and physical abuse from members of the public – much of it with a racist edge, for this mainly black and brown workforce – and this exposes them to more.

The wardens have put pressure on Camden Council to pay up by marching on council offices. Recently they travelled to Birmingham to bring their demands to NSL’s parent company, Marston Holdings, in a loud and confident protest.

In mid-August, NSL made a slightly improved offer. The employer hoped to buy three years of peace in exchange for £13.75 this year (only 10p more than their last pitch), increasing to £15.20 by 2025. A packed meeting of the workforce discussed it and, by unanimous show of hands, voted to dismiss it and stay out. Note how this live, collective democracy contrasts with the demobilising, atomising approach of pausing action to hold remote ballots on employers’ weak offers.

Gains

Camden traffic wardens have won successive gains over several years, by organising solidly and taking firm action. Other London boroughs where NSL holds contracts have begun to follow, with Westminster wardens recently securing a pay rise after two weeks on strike. Duncan, a Unison steward, told Solidarity that the struggle needs to spread beyond London, where wages are even poorer – often under £11. And as Solidarity has previously argued, the wardens’ strategy is an example for the wider labour movement too.

So the outcome of this strike has wider significance too. Duncan explained that he believes the bosses will “try and starve us out” and are waiting to see if their resolve breaks at the end of the month, when they would ordinarily get paid.

Maximum solidarity – both in shows of support and donations – is therefore particularly important as September approaches.

Don’t abandon Labour to the right-wingers – fight in branches and CLPs to pressure the Labour-majority councillors.

Visit picket lines 7-10am: Regis Road NW3 3EW Tue/Thu/Fri; 199 Belsize Road NW6 4AA Tue/Wed/Thu; 13-15 Guilford St WC1N 1DW Mon/Tue/Thu. Messages of support: unison@camden.gov.uk. Hardship fund: Camden Unison NSL, sort code 60-83-01, account no 20399018.

The marriage of Maria Braun

By John Cunningham

Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s film The Marriage of Maria Braun (1978) is a comment on the West German “economic miracle”.

1943: In the middle of an air raid Maria (Hanna Schygulla) and Hermann Braun (Klaus Löwitsch) are married. 36 hours later Hermann is sent to the Eastern Front.

1945: Maria searches for Hermann in the ruins of a defeated Germany. He is missing, presumed dead. He unexpectedly returns to find Maria having an affair with Bill, a Black US serviceman. A fight ensues. Maria kills the American, but in court Hermann deliberately takes the blame and goes to prison. Maria becomes a businesswoman as the West German economy starts to recover, and demonstrates she has no scruples, moral or otherwise, about how to achieve success.

Her business partner – and occasional lover – Oswald visits Hermann in prison and they agree that Oswald will pay Hermann a large sum of money if he “disappears” when released.

Hermann moves to Canada but always sends Maria a rose every month. Their reunion is short-lived when he unexpectedly returns to find Maria having an affair with Bill, a Black US serviceman. A fight ensues. Maria kills the American, but in court Hermann deliberately takes the blame and goes to prison. Maria becomes a businesswoman as the West German economy starts to recover, and demonstrates she has no scruples, moral or otherwise, about how to achieve success.

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Hermann moves to Canada but always sends Maria a rose every month. On Oswald’s death Hermann returns to West Germany and to a now very prosperous Maria living in a large mansion. Their reunion is short-lived by a disaster that brings the film to an end.

A French critic wrote that Maria is an allegory of post-war West Germany: “…a character that wears flashy and expensive clothes but has lost her soul.”

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Production team: Martin Thomas (editor), Sara Lee, Sacha Ismail, Dan Katz, Simon Nelson, Zack Muddle
Support doctors’ pay fight

By Sacha Ismail

Doctors, members of the British Medical Association (BMA), are demonstrating more fight over pay than most public-sector workers. Both to show determined action can win workers real improvements, and to shore up our tottering health service, their fight demands active support.

BMA junior doctors in England struck again on 11-15 August for “pay restoration” to real-terms 2008 levels; they are now rebalancing under the anti-union laws for further strikes (till 31 August). Consultants (senior doctors) in England struck on 20-22 July and will strike against 24-26 August. Join the picket lines at hospitals.

A socialist junior doctor activist who spoke to Solidarity just before we went to press said participation on 11-15 August was very high – back to the levels of their first strikes earlier this year, in part because of new doctors joining the strike after graduation, and in part because the legal ruling banning agency staff as strike-breakers has removed a financial incentive for people to provide cover.

There is the possibility of all secondary care doctors in Wales and “SAS” (specialist) doctors in England also moving to strikes.

Junior doctors in Scotland have cancelled their dispute and strike plans after the Scottish government significantly increased their pay offer for this year – to 12.4% (backed to April). With last year’s increase this means a two-year rise of 17.5%, up from 14.5% in the previous offer. The offer was made in early July, and accepted (82% for, on a 71% turnout) in a junior doctors’ ballot between 2 and 16 August.

The deal also commits to above-inflation increases until at least 2026-7 (while leaving the union free to enter dispute); the scrapping of the doctors’ and dentists’ pay review body in favour of direct talks with the Scottish government; and the general aim of real-terms pay restoration; as well as the long-standing specifically Scottish demand of contract negotiation.

The Tories say their offer – an average of 8.8% this year, 13.7% over two years, and that’s it – is “final”. But that’s what the Scottish government said about its previous offer too. (The Scottish Tories have tried to avoid embarrassment by lying that the UK government’s offer is the same as the Scottish one.)

Junior doctors have struck for 17 days since March, a much brisker pace than most all-England or all-UK industrial disputes, and have got a better offer in Scotland. (The second best deal, 12.4% over two years for firefighters, was won with only the threat of strikes.) The question is what level of action it will take to further shift a government that does not care about patients or the state of the NHS.

The stronger and more active solidarity with the doctors’ fight, the better the conditions for socialists and rank-and-file activists in the BMA to win escalated action and greater coordination (between different groups of doctors and with other NHS workers coming into dispute – for instance radiographers).

The idea of “restoring” pay to the real-terms level of before the post-2008 ruling-class offensive is relevant across the economy, and junior doctors should be credited for raising it. One immediate result of their agitation is that motions to the upcoming TUC Congress (10-13 September, Liverpool) from a number of unions advocate the concept.

BMA activists are also discussing an intervention at Labour Party conference (8-11 October, Liverpool). Labour Party organisations and activists should demand the Labour leadership drops its evasion and commits to a deal at least as good as the Scottish one.

Stop Labour backtracking!

By Mohan Sen

Reports suggest the Labour leadership wants to weaken its commitment to ending the use of casualised contracts and bogus self-employment to deny workers basic rights.

The details are vague, partly because the documents from the 22-23 July Labour Party National Policy Forum (NPF) have not been published. Angela Rayner has denied the party is watering down its New Deal for Working People, but has avoided commenting on the actual issues of controversy.

One useful left-wing summary concludes: “We await confirmation that this is the trajectory – but the latest evidence is bleak.”

The general trend of watering down seems indisputable. It underscores the reality of the Starmer leadership’s nonsensical policy about increased public spending. The leadership also dislikes pro-working-class policies with little in the way of spending implications because they would hurt “business”.

Earlier reports suggested weakening of Labour’s commitments on promoting collective bargaining over pay, terms and conditions between employers and trade unions in place of the current widespread system of employer dikat.

We should denounce Starmer and co. for betraying workers’ interests – but beyond denunciation we need an active labour movement campaign. Affiliated unions have been silent since the NPF meeting, except for Unite. But Unite’s criticisms are vague and suggest no actions, it essentially boycotted much of the NPF meeting, and its recent record of fighting for political demands, including in Labour, is poor.

October’s Labour Party conference provides a crucial opportunity to exert pressure on this (and other issues); but it must be the start of a serious campaign.

Crucial is an issue of workers’ rights the discussion of Labour’s NPF debates has barely mentioned at all – repealing the anti-strike laws. Left to itself Starmer’s leadership will go no further than repealing the post-2016 restrictions (at best: even the Corbyn manifesto firmly promised no more than that). We need an organised fight to demand repeal of all anti-trade union laws, in line with union and Labour conference policy.

TUC: calls for action on anti-union laws

By Gerry Bates

The rail union RMT and the fire service union FBU have submitted motions to the upcoming TUC Congress (10-13 September, Liverpool) on the Minimum Service Levels Act, which became law on 20 July and now awaits the government producing “regulations” saying what the compulsory “minimum service” is during strikes in the sectors covered.

Unite, the University and College Union, and the teachers’ union NASUWT have also submitted motions calling for the repeal of anti-union laws. The various motions are likely to be composted.

We encourage readers to lobby their unions’ TUC delegations to support these motions. If passed, we need to ensure they’re enacted!

The RMT motion calls on the TUC to “hold a national march... calling for repeal of the anti-union laws” and “organise a Special Congress”.

The FBU motion cites the Scottish Government’s pledge to issue no “work notices” (to enforce the ruling banning agency staff as strike-breakers) under the Act, and it proposes a call “on Labour-led local authorities, teachers’ union NASUWT and other relevant bodies to refuse to implement” the Act.

The Unite motion calls on the TUC to “call for an incoming ‘Labour government (if elected in the next two years) to repeal all anti-trade union laws within 12 months of gaining office’.”

Full text of motions at the TUC website, and see freeunions.org.
PCS: WHEN “CONTINUE CAMPAIGN” MEANS DUMP IT

By a PCS member

The electronic membership ballot of PCS (civil service union) members, called by the Left Unity (LU) faction national leadership, on the fate of our national campaign for a 2022 10% consolidated pay rise, with a national living wage underpin of £15 per hour, and enhanced job security, is rumbling towards its conclusion on 31 August. PCS is not balloting on an offer from the Government because it has never received one, despite pretending that it has. Instead, members are being asked, “Do you agree with the PCS strategy to continue the campaign?”

Those same members have repeatedly, in record numbers, endorsed the demands of the national campaign and voted for all out and selective strike action. On 23 May 2023, PCS Annual Delegate Conference (ADC) voted for the leadership’s motion to continue national and selective strike action until we win our demands. But now, under a ton of bullshit, the LU leadership is asking members to endorse its dumping of our national campaign, and their own ADC motion, all under the Orwellian slogan of “Vote Yes to continue the campaign”.

Within six working days of the end of ADC the LU leadership was publicly abandoning the dispute. It subsequently stopped strikes in support of our national demands. It has stated that, if the ballot returns a majority “Yes” vote, it will halt the levy which has funded selective action.

The leadership has issued a misleading ballot question; a misleading ballot insert; and a swathe of email, on-line and video propaganda. It has inserted, on the electronic ballot form, its own Orwellian slogan (“Vote Yes to continue the campaign”) and more propaganda. Grim even by right wing trade union standards.

The LU leadership’s ballot tactics have caused enormous confusion. Members have asked whether, if they want to continue the campaign but oppose the leadership’s actions, a “No” vote means an end to the campaign because “Yes” supposedly means continuing it.

The leadership has claimed that it is “pausing” – not ending – our strikes so that PCS representatives in the civil service delegated pay bargaining units may enter the 2023/24 pay round to get the best possible deals for members... without any strike leverage and when the Government is again insisting, through its pay remit guidance, on below inflation awards.

This “best possible deal” nonsense is based on the leadership’s claim, to support ending strikes, that the below-inflation pay remit is a significant government concession.

After this “bargaining” without leverage, the LU leadership will review the outcomes of the 2023-24 pay round. But they already know in broad terms what the outcomes will be – below-inflation awards for thousands of members. It is already happening.

LU members of the National Executive based in the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) have voted, as DWP PCS Executive members, to reject DWP management’s 2023/24 below-inflation pay offer. Yet those same NEC members are still pushing the line of “pausing the action” to see the pay outcomes.

• AGS election: see p.15

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