

Solidarity

& Workers' Liberty



For social ownership of the banks and industry

DEFEAT MINIMUM SERVICE LAW



We need open defiance

TUC "Protect the right to strike" protest,
Cheltenham, 27 January

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Israel-Gaza, 115 days on

Thousands face death despite talk of military scale-down

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The road to Bolshevism

Tracing the movements from which Vladimir Ulyanov (Lenin) came

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Playbook for dictatorship

Trump says he will be a dictator "on day one", and others set plans

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Minimum Service: we need open defiance



Editorial

Train drivers' union Aslef has, by calling an additional five-day strike, forced LNER, the only Train Operating Company which threatened to issue "work notices" against the union's pay strikes between 30 Jan and 5 Feb, under the Tories' new Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act, to back down from that threat.

Aslef's success provides unions with one clear tactic for confronting bosses' attempts to use anti-strike laws to undermine industrial action. But it will not be a silver bullet. What happens if further strike dates fail to produce a climb-down? What if the original plan is for an indefinite or long strike, or for the maximum the workers feel confident enough for?

At some point, unions will be directly confronted with the question of whether they will take the "reasonable steps" the law requires of them to "ensure" their members comply with work notices. Yes or no: defy or comply?

RMT rail union general secretary Mick Lynch told the rally after the TUC's

Right to Strike march in Cheltenham on 27 January that "the policy of the TUC is for non-compliance." Rank-and-file trade union activists must still fight within their unions to make that a reality.

The government's guidance on what constitutes the "reasonable steps" unions must take says: "Unions should send an individual communication to each member identified in a work notice to encourage them to comply with that notice and not to strike."

Unions may try to duck direct defiance by issuing a "neutral" pro forma letter simply informing members that they have been named in a work notice and explaining that, if they now strike, they will lose automatic protection from unfair dismissal. Unions might then claim, if challenged by employers or the state, that this represents "encouragement to comply", whilst giving a nod-and-a-wink to the members named that if they, as individuals, choose to defy the work notice, the union will support them if they face disciplinary action.

This scheme effectively devolves the question of defiance down to the individual level. Where a union has complied with the law, workers named in work notices should be supported in defying them as individuals. But defiance will be much stronger and more

effective if it is undertaken by the union itself as a collective organisation.

A union which refuses to take "reasonable steps" to get members to break their own strike will probably be taken to court by the boss issuing a "work notice" and then face an injunction against the whole strike. Defying the injunction is "contempt of court", with unlimited fines.

The union must then decide to persist with its strike – calling out all members, including those named in work notices – or call it off. A union in that situation would need to call on the solidarity of the wider movement, including appealing to other unions to join it on strike (officially in they have a ballot mandate at the same workplace, unofficially if need be).

Union officials, who tend to see the union as "bricks and mortar" (offices, bank accounts, payroll), will not want to put union finances at risk. Theoretically, if a union really does face a choice between backing down and being fined out of existence, a tactical retreat might be justified. But no union deciding whether to comply can know in advance what fine the court may impose. Also, it's unlikely that the first fines will be ruinous. (In Australia, where unions have often been fined for "unlawful" strikes, the fines have worn



down strike-readiness through cumulative effect, rather than one individual fine destroying a union).

We should seek to win our unions to a stance of open defiance, rather than instant retreat at the first sign of danger.

The Aslef experience also raises an important question about strike tactics in general.

Throughout its dispute with Train Operating Companies, Aslef leaders have told activists calling for a more intense pace of action that sustained strikes were pointless as they wouldn't win anything, and that a slow-and-steady trickle of 24-hour strikes every few weeks or months would eventually grind the bosses down. Months, even years, of "trickle" have passed with no significantly improved offer from the employers.

Now the union has finally called sustained action, and its immediate aim – to force the withdrawal of the threat to issue work notice – was immediately achieved. Where does this leave Aslef leaders' insistence that sustained strikes don't work? □

Socialism is not about "good old days"



Socialism vs
Capitalism

By Martin Thomas

French Trotskyists used to talk of "miserabilism" as a fault to be avoided.

The then-mass French Communist Party, into the 1960s, had insisted that workers' living standards in Western Europe were always going down, down, down. One sub-section of the French Trotskyists, even, long held it as dogma that "the productive forces" were continuously declining.

Such sob-stuff is not true. And it amounts to telling workers both that all their organising, strikes, and protests could not avail, and that the old Marxist idea of capitalist devel-

opment creating the basis for socialism is losing grip.

Our comrades sought instead to encourage a spirit of pride in the achievements of the labour movement and of confidence about what could be built on the technological achievements of capitalism.

Even in Frederick Engels's *Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, famous for its denunciations of the Manchester slums, he had also stressed how the workers had "founded on their own hook numbers of schools and reading-rooms for the advancement of education..."

"I have often heard working-people, whose fustian jackets scarcely held together, speak upon geological, astronomical, and other subjects, with more knowledge than most 'cultivated' bourgeois in Germany possess... The ep-

och-making products of modern philosophical, political, and poetical literature are read by working-men almost exclusively..."

The workers were not cringing in exhaustion and yearning for olden days. They had won the means to buy books, to discuss, to study. Dancing and singing were also common at the events of the strongest socialist current in England at the time, the Owenites.

Yet "miserabilism" of various forms remains a problem. In my experience, anyway, the worker in a workplace who complains most is unlikely to be a socialist or even a good trade unionist. The best socialist and trade-unionist is the one who appreciates our achievements to date, and knows the difference between minor irritations and major oppressions.

In an example of a different sort, I recently re-read a Marxist book from the 1970s on environmental politics, Harry Rothman's *Murderous Providence*.

Scientists knew about the greenhouse effect but could not assess its climate-change consequences. They knew about air pollution from burning fossil fuels (worse then than now) and feared exhaustion of fossil-fuel reserves. Generally, they had been keen on nuclear power as a safe alternative, sustainable at least for a long time.

But an anti-technology, or technology-sceptic, mood was rising among environmentalists.

Rothman conceded to it. What about the radiation dangers, he asked. Yes, US monitors had laid down a limit on radiation which was about a

tenth of what people may get from the Earth's crust anyway. But maybe corners would be cut in the expansion which Rothman then expected, to nuclear power generating 60% of electricity in the USA by 2000. So, he said, go slow.

In fact, if the big nuclear-power expansion had happened, in the USA and elsewhere, we would have much more leeway on climate change now. The fossil-fuel power stations which Rothman was implicitly endorsing (since workers would still want electricity for their homes) also brought many more dangers day-to-day than nuclear.

A rule of thinking the worst about any capitalist innovation often leads implicitly to supporting a worse old way. Conservatism is still conservatism even if dressed up as anti-capitalism. □

Build alliances for ceasefire and peace

By Ira Berkovic

Palestinian socialist activist Sally Abed, one of the leaders of Standing Together, has rightly said: “Whatever the ICJ verdict says, it cannot change the unfathomable, catastrophic dehumanisation and massacres in the context of decades of systematic, violent oppression. It is up to us, the people on the ground, to lead the fight and build the power for change.”

From the point of view of its own stated objectives, the Gaza war is going badly for the Israeli government. 22 January saw the highest number of Israeli Defence Force (IDF) casualties since the war began, with 24 killed in a single day.

Israel claims to have killed around 9,000 Hamas fighters. That is less than one-third of Hamas’s estimated total, and only about a third of the total killings in the onslaught, the rest being civilians and mostly children and women.

Hamas’s tunnel network is reported as substantially still intact, despite the devastation of Gazan infrastructure which has turned much of the enclave into an uninhabitable wasteland. At least 132 hostages remain in captivity, and at least 25 have been killed, including at least three by IDF fire.

A less “intensive” phase of the war, involving a scaling back of aerial and tank bombardments in favour of ground patrols by small groups of IDF troops, will likely see even more Israeli casualties, as such patrols will be vulnerable to attacks by Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad fighters.

This is surely part of the reason for the intensification of public division

within the Israeli government over military strategy. Minister-without-portfolio and former military chief-of-staff Gadi Eisenkot, a non-voting participant in Israel’s small five-person war cabinet, has recently said, “Those who talk about an absolute defeat [of Hamas] do not tell the truth [...] A strategic achievement was not reached [...] We did not demolish the Hamas organisation.” Eisenkot has said the priority should be freeing hostages, and has called for elections “in the next few months”.

Elections that ousted Netanyahu would be positive. A post-Netanyahu government is unlikely to include the worst elements of the far right, such as Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich. But, on the question of Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians, Netanyahu’s likely replacement as Prime Minister, Benny Gantz, a voting member of the current war cabinet, differs from him mainly in tone, and sometimes not even in that, rather than in fundamental policies.

Israel says it has cleared a 500m-1km “perimeter” inside the Gaza border, and says it will enforce that after the war. It could only do that with a permanent military presence inside Gaza, a form of re-occupation. This stance represents more open conflict between Israel and the USA, which has said it “does not want to see the territory of Gaza reduced in any way.”

The USA has continued to press Israel to accept a postwar roadmap towards a Palestinian state, involving a local government in Gaza based on a revamped Palestinian Authority, possibly with some involvement from neighbouring Arab states. Israel continues to express

outright opposition to any form of Palestinian state, or even meaningful sovereignty.

In the wider region, the Houthis have continued their campaign of drone attacks against ships using Red Sea shipping routes. Many of the targeted vessels have no connection to Israel at all. The disruption to trade harms not only richer countries, but poorer ones too, including Sudan and Eritrea, for whom almost all trade passes through the Red Sea, and Egypt, which loses Suez Canal fees. The attacks are not acts of anti-imperialist solidarity with the Palestinians, but the pursuit of a reactionary political project by an ally of a rival imperialism, that of Iran.

Yet the decision of the US, UK, and other states to bomb targets in Yemen in response increases the risk of a wider full-scale regional or even global war.

In Britain, the Labour leadership is cautiously signalling a more critical stance. Shadow Foreign Secretary David Lammy has [said](#) he supports a “sustainable ceasefire” and a “humanitarian truce”. Previously, Labour frontbenchers have generally avoided calling for a “ceasefire”, however qualified. Yet shadow minister Emily Thornberry – someone who has spoken at Palestine solidarity protests in the past – blustered and evaded when challenged in her local Labour Party on 24 January as to why she does not say plainly she is for a ceasefire.

An initial ruling from the International Court of Justice in the case brought by South Africa rebuked Israel, insisting that it punish genocidal rhetoric and allow humanitarian aid into Gaza, although stopping short of directly or



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• workersliberty.org/2-i-p

dering it to cease its military operation. While the rebuke has rhetorical and moral weight, the court has no power. A more direct ruling against Russia’s war on Ukraine in 2022 had no effect whatsoever. □

Full ceasefire now! Free the hostages! Peace! Two states! Equal rights!

UK Friends of Standing Together

Standing Together, Israel’s fastest-growing grassroots movement over recent years, unites Jews and Palestinians within Israel to fight for an equal and just society, for peace, and against the occupation.

UKFoST promotes their work in the UK: for peace, justice, and equality for Israelis and Palestinians – Jews and Arabs – including an equal right to self-determination, and for the full equality of Palestinian citizens of Israel.

UKFoST promotes the benefits of joint struggle by Jews and Palestinians to this end. □

• ukfost.co.uk
• [@omdimbeyachaduk](https://twitter.com/omdimbeyachaduk)

Solidarity, not boycotts

By Ollie Moore

The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI), one of the organisations at the centre of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, has issued a [call](#) for a global boycott and no-platforming of Standing Together, a left-wing social movement in Israel, several of the leaders of which are Palestinian.

This means a boycott of one of the main anti-war voices

in Israeli society. The prime beneficiaries can only be the right-wing government and the settler movement.

Nothing about Standing Together’s activity “normalises” Israeli occupation and war policies, as PACBI claims. Standing Together has [mobilised](#) thousands for demonstrations against Israel’s war, speaking clearly about the horrors it is inflicting on the people of Gaza, and its activists have consistently supported [mobili-](#)

[sations](#) against settler violence in the West Bank.

True, Standing Together does not promote the view that progress is only possible via Israel somehow being undone (abolished, dissolved, overrun, conquered, whatever) rather than reformed, however radically. PACBI’s criticisms of Standing Together’s activity are a mixture of distortions and outright falsehoods, and it must be this political difference, alluded to but not made

explicit, that is the real source of the call to boycott and isolate it. Standing Together leaders have explicitly [criticised](#) the “genocidal rhetoric” of Israeli leaders. Some of its activists do [refer](#) to “settler-colonialism” and “apartheid”, though the movement’s official communications use simpler and less freighted terms like “settler” and “occupation”. For PACBI, it seems, however much you mobilise against the Israeli government, you are

fit only for boycott unless you subscribe to one particular political perspective and use that perspective’s language.

Palestinian activist Hamze Awawde put it clearly on [social media](#) recently, stating that whilst he is “not against the idea of boycott” in general, “BDS is so counterproductive and their actions strategically only serve the right wing in Israel.” □

• Response from Standing Together: bit.ly/st-resp

Wagenknecht's link with far-right organiser



By Jim Denham

On 10 January, the investigative outlet *Correctiv* revealed details of a "private encounter" last November, at which politicians of Germany's far-right AfD, neo-Nazi activists, and some supposedly "respectable" Christian Democrats and business people, discussed a "masterplan" for mass deportations of foreign nationals and foreign-born German citizens. According to *Correctiv*'s report, a leading AfD parliamentarian spoke about the need to change the "streetscape" of towns and cities by putting foreign-owned restaurants "under pressure".

The reaction to this report has been dramatic: over a million people are estimated to have protested in towns and cities throughout Germany and a major rally is planned for 3 February in Berlin, at which a human chain will be formed around the Reichstag, symbolising a "firewall" against neo-Nazism.

Now it has emerged that the organiser of the far-right "private encounter" was a wealthy retired dentist, one Gernot Mörig, a man with a long history of far-right activism ... and a long-stand-

ing personal connection with the supposedly "left wing" German politician Sahra Wagenknecht involving (as she has now admitted) "several emails" and at least one dinner.

The politician's claim that she knew nothing about Mörig's politics seems extraordinary, given that he once led the neo-Nazi Association of Homeland Faithful Youth.

I wonder whether we'll read about this in the *Morning Star*.

The MS has had a long-running enthusiasm for Wagenknecht, and that continues unabated, for the time being at least.

Regular MS contributor and leading Communist Party of Britain member Nick Wright's enthusiasm for Ms Wagenknecht verges upon infatuation. When she and her supporters broke from Die Linke (the Left Party) last year, Nick could scarcely contain himself: "Capitalising on Wagenknecht's great personal popularity ... the new formation is called the Sahra Wagenknecht alliance – for Reason and Fairness", he wrote (MS 26 Oct 2023), going on to enthuse "Wagenknecht is a brilliant leader with a real connection to millions of voters, but the source of the division in Die Linke was not her personality (though resentment and envy was palpable) but in Die Linke's drift away from its working class orientation." (It might be added that this alleged "drift"

appears to be concern for issues like LGBT and other "minority" rights).

As well as the breathless admirer Wright, the paper's editor Ben Chacko is also an enthusiast. He has run at least two lengthy and entirely uncritical interviews with Wagenknecht's sidekick Sevin Dagdelen, supposedly a foreign policy specialist. Certainly, she makes no secret of her hostility to Ukraine, which (in the MS of 19 December 2023) she describes carrying out "fascist assassinations" and "comparable in history to the Pinochet regime in Chile." She makes no criticism whatsoever of Putin or the Russian government, but on other occasions has expressed sympathy for the supposed "reasons" for the invasion.

In her most recent interview with Chacko (23 January), Dagdelen expresses sympathy with right wing protesting farmers and people who oppose "Covid measures" while criticising "a left which paints the [far-right] AfD as the only right-wing threat."

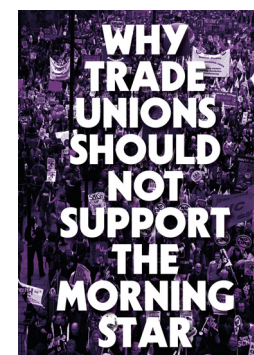
The MS's Berlin-based correspondent, Victor Grossman is also impressed by Wagenknecht and her new party: Wageknecht is (he wrote in the MS of 25 January), a "wonderful orator and unbeatable debater ... remarkably popular even in wide circles of conservative West Germany ... she also stressed the fight for German workers' gains (while dismissing gender de-

bates as a distraction by professional or academic sectors of Die Linke). At last, said many: a party they could join with heart and soul."

Even in the MS there have been tiny hints that Wagenknecht and her friends might have a downside. Despite his optimism, Grossman notes (in passing) that Wagenknecht "sometimes seemed to close ... to AfD words and thoughts, with too little loyalty to leftist internationalism."

In a report (20 January on the 2024 Rosa Luxemburg Conference in Berlin, we are told that a leading German Communist Party member "took issue with some [Wagenknecht Alliance] campaigning, saying [they] had used similar language to the right on immigration ..."

Such misgivings may prove to be to be a case of too little, too late. □



This short pamphlet making the case against trade union support for the *Morning Star* £3 (inc. post) □ bit.ly/shop-wl

What the "Rustin" film leaves out



Colman Domingo has just been nominated to win an Oscar for best actor. I hope he wins – and not just because he did an excellent job playing American civil rights leader Bayard Rustin in the recent film made about his life. I hope he wins and uses his platform, when the eyes of America and much of the world will be on him, to speak about who Bayard Rustin was, and his legacy.

Anyone making a film about the life of Rustin, or any other prominent individual, is forced to make choices. Not everything can go into a

movie lasting at most a couple of hours. Choices are made. In the case of *Rustin*, a decision was taken to show the run-up to the historic 1963 March on Washington, which Bayard Rustin largely organised. The film shows how important an influence Rustin was on Dr Martin Luther King Jr. That demonstration was a work of genius and the film shows how Rustin, given precious little time, pulled off one of the most successful protests in history.

Director George C Wolf and writers Julian Breece and Dustin Lance Black chose to focus attention on a few aspects of Bayard Rustin's life during those few years. They neglected others. And the

treatment of some of the characters in the film is, perhaps necessarily, superficial.

One of those is simply called "Tom", but it is obviously Tom Kahn, a leading figure in the democratic Left of that time and afterwards. Kahn was a brilliant thinker and writer and eventually went on to play an important role in the American labour movement. He was also gay. In the movie *Rustin* he is only gay. He's a good-lucking young gay man who becomes jealous of Rustin falling for another guy. That's how most viewers will remember his character, not ever having heard of Tom Kahn before.

And to a degree, the same is true of Rustin. Let me clear about this: it's very important

to talk about Bayard Rustin's sexuality, something that was not entirely possible during his lifetime (he died in 1987). But in addition to being a gay man, Rustin was an outstanding thinker and writer, a strategist, a powerful public speaker, and utterly fearless. Those were the things that I noticed during the brief time that I knew him and had the chance to work with him – most notably in fighting against racial segregation in housing at my university.

Bayard Rustin, like his mentor A. Philip Randolph (who fortunately is given a fairly prominent role in the film), was a socialist. Not just someone who casually had some "socialist" beliefs. He was elected a National Chairman of the So-

cialist Party in the early 1970s, briefly co-chairing the organisation with Michael Harrington and Charles Zimmerman. Harrington later resigned, and went on to found the precursor to today's Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Rustin's socialism doesn't get a mention in the film.

It is time to revive the memory of Bayard Rustin – the whole man and everything he stood for. In the film, Colman Domingo says "on the day that I was born black, I was also born a homosexual." He was born that way, and he didn't choose to be black or gay.

But there is also the man he chose to be: civil rights leader, fighter for human rights and democratic socialist. □

Unions should follow Royal College



Women's Fightback

By Katy Dollar

Healthcare staff should not report suspected illegal abortions to the police as prosecutions are never in the public interest, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) has said. The health unions should join the Royal College in issuing advice to health workers against reporting abortions to the police.

Dr Ranee Thakar, the College's president, said "outdated and antiquated" abortion laws meant women were "left vulnerable to criminal investigation."

The comments have provoked a backlash from anti-choice groups and have intensified attention on decriminalisation of abortion.

The RCOG's guidance, announced in partnership with Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare, the British Society

of Abortion Care Providers and the Faculty of Public Health, explains there is no legal obligation to report women who have abortions to police or external agencies. Doing so may breach laws around patient confidentiality and is not in the public interest.

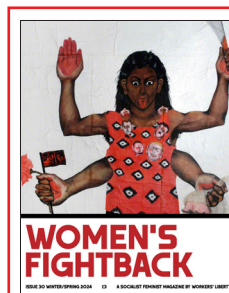
A statement published on the RCOG website said:

"Unless a statute requires it (for example with female genital mutilation), a healthcare [worker] must abide by their professional responsibility to justify any disclosure of confidential patient information or face potential fitness-to-practice proceedings. Where healthcare professionals do involve the police it should be in the patient's best interests or needed to protect others – for example, where there is a risk of death or serious harm."

Reactionary anti-choice groups have been agitating amongst health workers to report suspected later-term abortions to the police. Health unions can play a vital role in standing up for reproductive rights by encouraging a culture against

criminal reporting. Unions must also take up the issue of workers as well as patients at abortion facilities facing harassment and intimidation. Delegates at Unison's national delegate conference 2023 reaffirmed the union's commitment to campaign for the decriminalisation of abortion in England, Scotland and Wales but the union has done little mobilisation for pro-choice demonstrations.

NHS underfunding and privatisation limits reproductive choices. Health unions should lead a campaign for NHS funding, and indict how cuts and privatisation are affecting sexual health and reproductive choices. □



Women's Fightback #30 is out now **£4** (inc. post) □ bit.ly/shop-wl

Catastrophe in Gaza, says Sanders

By Bernie Sanders

Bernie Sanders has forced a vote on directing the US State Department to look into whether Israel is using U.S. equipment or assistance to violate human rights in Gaza. He spoke to Jake Tapper on CNN about it on 14 January.

What is going on in Gaza right now is a horrendous humanitarian catastrophe. 23,000 people have been killed, almost 60,000 have been wounded, and two thirds of the people who have been killed are women and children. 70% of the housing units in Gaza have been destroyed.

If I use the word Dresden, Germany, you think about the horrific destruction during World War Two of that city. What is going on in Gaza now in three months is worse than what took place in Dresden over a two year period. This is a catastrophe.

And now, according to the United Nations, after you have 1.9 million people displaced from their homes, they don't have food, they don't have water, they don't have medical equipment, they don't have fuel. What you are looking at is imminent starvation. Children are starving to death!

My view has been from the beginning that Israel has a right to respond to this horrific

terrorist attack from Hamas. But you do not have a right to go to war against an entire people, women and children.

And the United States Congress has got to act because a lot of this destruction is being done with military weapons supplied by the United States of America.

The resolution that I'm introducing is consistent with the Foreign Assistance Act. That says that if American military assistance is given to any country – Saudi Arabia, Israel, any other country – it has got to be used consistent with human rights, international human rights standards, and American law. In my opinion, that is certainly not the case.

Children

We have a horrific humanitarian catastrophe. We cannot turn our backs on it. Congress has got to start moving to protect children in Palestine.

Sanders also spoke to Chris Hayes on 17 January, the day after the Senate voted 72 to 11 to reject his proposal.

The vote was yesterday was to have the State Department do a study on whether or not Israel was violating international law and human rights. Given the fact that many of the weapons that Israel has used in the last 100 days come from the United States of America,

we certainly have a right to know that.... The humanitarian situation in Gaza now is unbelievably bad. And we're looking at the possibility of hundreds of thousands of children starving. We cannot allow that to happen.

I think there is a huge frustration when we see President Biden appropriately saying that he is concerned about indiscriminate bombing and the humanitarian disaster, and urging Netanyahu and his right wing government to do the right thing. And Netanyahu basically says, screw you: we will do exactly what we want to do and when we want to do it.

It's high time that we told Netanyahu that he's not getting another nickel unless he radically changes his attitude towards the Palestinian people and the nature of his military campaign.

[Hayes: Trucks filled with food, water and medical supplies are lined up waiting to be granted entry into Gaza. Even if all the items on a truck have been pre-approved by Israel to ensure they are not "dual use" items that have a potential military purpose. Israeli authorities can and do still reject some items at an inspection site. And if a single item is rejected, the entire truckload is rejected. How concerned are you and your colleagues about the

spectre of mass starvation?]

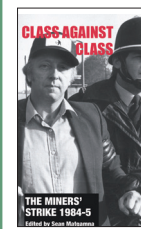
I would hope that we're more than concerned. We are sitting here supplying the national government with the arms they need, and then the process of stopping hundreds of thousands of children... Concerned is too modest a word. We have got to act and we've got to act now.

It is not only the bombing making it impossible for trucks. In addition to that, what Israel has done at the border has made it extremely difficult for trucks to get through. The bottom line here is we cannot turn our backs on the enormity of the suffering that is now taking place in Gaza. We have got to act.

[Hayes: You are a Jewish American. You had family that was killed by Hitler... You were in Israel on a kibbutz in your youth...]

I would hope that no matter what my religious background is, I would respond accordingly. If this was taking place in Italy or in Ireland, I would feel the same way.

But I have to tell you, having spent months in Israel as a kid, knowing the history of anti-semitism and the Holocaust, for me to see a right wing Israeli government create this kind of misery in Gaza is extraordinarily upsetting. □



The Miners Strike 1984-5. Class Against Class. **£12** (inc. post) □ bit.ly/shop-wl



Activist Agenda

On Sunday 28 January, Labour Left Internationalists (LLI) organised a socialist round-table to discuss plans and mutual aid in the run-up to a general election and a possible new Labour government. Speakers came from Keep Our NHS Public, Labour Campaign for Council Housing, Free Our Unions, and Workers Against the CCP (WAC), and comrades active in UK Friends of Standing Together and in the Nottingham campaign against council cuts talked about their activity. A short report will soon be on the LLIweb-site.

On Saturday 17 February, from 2pm, WAC is protesting outside the Apple Store at Covent Garden, London WC2E 8HB.

Demands: End Uyghur forced labour in Apple supply chains • End Apple's collaboration with CCP censorship • Union rights for factory workers in China • Decent conditions and union recognition for UK Apple workers

Investigations have repeatedly linked the factories that build Apple's products to the Chinese state's forced labour programmes for the persecuted Uyghur people. In

Even outside the forced labour programmes, Chinese workers are banned from forming free trade unions.

To maintain a cosy business relationship with the Chinese state, Apple helps its censorship regime. In 2019 the company removed access to an app that Hong Kong democracy activists had used to organise during protests. In 2022, it curbed the AirDrop feature that activists had used to spread dissident messages.

• Info for campaigns, template motions, etc.: workersliberty.org/agenda

From the Sahara to algal blooms



Environment

By Stuart Jordan

The *Devil's Element: Phosphorus and a World Out of Balance* by Dan Egan documents the history of humanity's relationship with one of the essential building blocks of life and one of our most important natural resources.

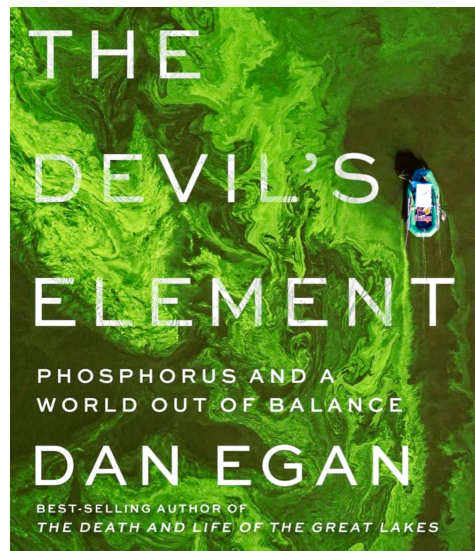
Phosphorus in its pure form is extremely reactive and combusts at around room temperature. It was first discovered by German alchemist Hennig Brandt in 1669, who stumbled upon it after conducting elaborate experiments involving boiling gallons of his own urine. Egan charts its use in war and detergent through to the irreplaceable role it now plays in feeding the world's eight billion people.

Phosphorus is in every living cell. It provides the "rails" of DNA's double helices. It is also an essential ingredient of cell membranes, without which there would be no barrier separating a living organism from its environment. Without phosphorus there would be no life on Earth.

For the last 3.5 billion years, life has depended on the slow seeping of phosphorus from the erosion of igneous rocks. Rainwater gradually washes phosphate nutrients from the land to the sea, where it eventually drops to the sea floor and becomes unavailable for life. Along the way, it is repeatedly metabolised into the bodies of living organisms, whose waste and dead remains are recycled through the soil, waterways and oceans.

Some of the phosphorus returns to the land from the oceans, with movements of migratory fish and sea birds (see ch.5, *The Tragedy of the Commodity*, by Longo, Clausen and Clark, for analysis of how capitalist fishing has disrupted this process). Other processes also maintain a supply of phosphorus for terrestrial life.

NASA recently found that about 22,000 tonnes of phosphorus blows across the Atlantic in dust clouds, replenishing the Amazon rainforest which loses a similar amount every year in run-off. In pre-capitalist times,



this recycling and the slow erosion of rocks provided sufficient phosphorus for terrestrial life to survive and thrive for billions of years. But in the last two centuries human activity has severely disrupted this process.

As an essential element of life, phosphorus must be available in soil for us to grow crops. Long before the discoveries of modern soil science, farmers knew they had to feed the soil in order to maintain annual yields. The manuring of fields is referenced in Homer's *Odyssey*.

It was not until chemist Justus von Liebig discovered his "law of the minimum" that we understood the science behind this practice. Liebig realised that growth is dependent on the least available resource. In particular, there must be sufficient nitrogen, potassium and phosphorus to maintain yields. If any of those elements are lacking, it becomes the limiting factor.

In precapitalist times, food and fibre was mostly consumed near to where it was grown and human wastes and other phosphorus-rich organic matter were easily returned to the soil. But as capitalism began concentrating people in industrial towns, phosphorus and other nutrients increasingly flowed from the soils of the countryside to urban cesspools and sewers.

The continued growth of cities and the exponential growth of the human population has meant that since the early 19th century there has been an ever-growing demand for phosphorus resources. In search of replacement organic matter, British farmers first turned to the battlefields of the Napoleonic wars. The bones of dead soldiers were shipped to England, where three bone grinding factories churned out a crude fertiliser.

By the 1860s, there were "not enough dead to sustain the living" and farmers turned to the mountains of bird droppings that had accumulated on the rain-starved islands of Peru. Guano was extracted by the indentured labour of Chinese workers, who were worked

into an early grave. Between 1840-1880 13 million tonnes of guano was shipped to Britain before that phosphorus source was also exhausted.

A further source of phosphorus was then found by Victorian palaeontologist, Mary Anning, in fossilised dinosaur excrement, before geologists discovered richer deposits in the sedimentary rocks of dried-up sea beds.

At particular locations on the Earth's surface, geologic uplift made this rock accessible for human mining operations. Known phosphorus reserves are unevenly distributed. 80% of the world's phosphorus mines are found in Western Sahara and Morocco.

These resources were first exploited by imperial Spain which built the conveyor belt that transports phosphorus from the Sahara to ships in the Atlantic. This conveyor belt is still operational and can be seen from space. When the Spanish ended their rule in 1975, Morocco moved to occupy Western Sahara, expelling hundreds of thousands of Saharawis. An estimated 125,000 Saharawis still live as refugees in tent cities in Algeria. The Moroccan monarchy holds a near monopoly over an essential resource for the world's food supply. The reserves in Western Sahara and elsewhere are the work of archaic metabolisms, which over millions of years concentrated dispersed phosphorus atoms in their bodies. Like fossil fuels, these phosphorus rich deposits are accumulations of millions of years of solar energy. They are irreplaceable in human timescales. The best estimates are that there are 3-400 years of available resources left. But as Egan points out, this is literally the best guess. Capitalist mining firms are reluc-

tant to invest in the expensive work of geological surveys while there are sufficient known reserves to hold up their share prices. In this way, the profit motive blocks more complete foresight.

During its journey from mine to the cells of eight billion humans, 80% of mined phosphorus leaks back into the environment. Much of the fertiliser spread on fields runs off instead of entering crops. But even the phosphorus that actually enters plant crops then passes through humans or our domesticated animals and is still ultimately bound for rivers.

These growing accumulations of phosphorus waste enter our waterways, lakes and seas energising cyanobacterial "algal" blooms. As these blooms die, they suck oxygen from the water, creating hypoxic dead zones.

Egan documents efforts by governments to recycle some of these waste streams. He also documents the efforts of farmers and other capitalists to frustrate state intervention. He demonstrates how capitalist farmers treat maximum exploitation of the land without regard for environmental consequences as the natural state of being, with the public having to subsidise any deviation from this norm.

Although Egan makes no reference to Marx, and the book draws no political conclusions, he describes the history and scientific discoveries that led Marx to write his famous "metabolic rift" passage in *Capital* volume three. *The Devil's Element* is a timely reminder that the ecological problems that Marx was grappling with in 19th century Britain have not gone away but have escalated to planetary proportions. □



Upcoming meetings

Workers' Liberty meetings are open to all. Unless otherwise stated those below are online over zoom. [See online](#) for local (in-person) meetings.

Saturday 3 February, 11.30am: Dayschool: Transforming the labour movement, Brixton Library, Chaplin House, Brixton Oval, London SW2 1JQ

Tuesday 6 February, 6.30pm: Socialist chat, The Lost Wanderer, 46 Leazes Park Road, Newcastle, NE1 4PG

Wednesday 7 February, 7pm: The rise of the Israeli right, New Cross Learning, 283-285 New Cross Road, London, SE14 6AS

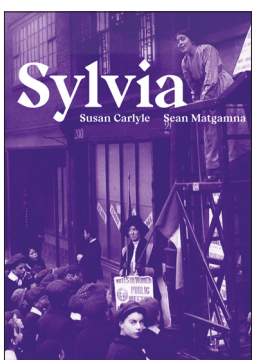
Monday 12 February, 7.15pm: Confronting antisemitism on the left: arguments for socialists

Tuesday 13 February, 6.30pm: Workers' struggle in the UK, The Lost Wanderer, 46 Leazes Park Road, Newcastle, NE1 4PG

Thursday 15 February, 3pm: Tubeworker monthly meeting

Sunday 18 February, 11.30am: Women In Revolt! exhibition outing: email womensfightback@workersliberty.org by Fri 2 Feb to book

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



The story of Sylvia Pankhurst including her working-class organising in the East End of London. £4 (inc. post) □ bit.ly/shop-wl



Yes, the day will come



Book review

By Dan Katz

Interesting, isn't it, that the same thought is often conveyed in different languages, by oppressed people living through difficult times, across the world.

Battling Apartheid, the South African poet, Mongane Wally Serote, put it most elegantly:

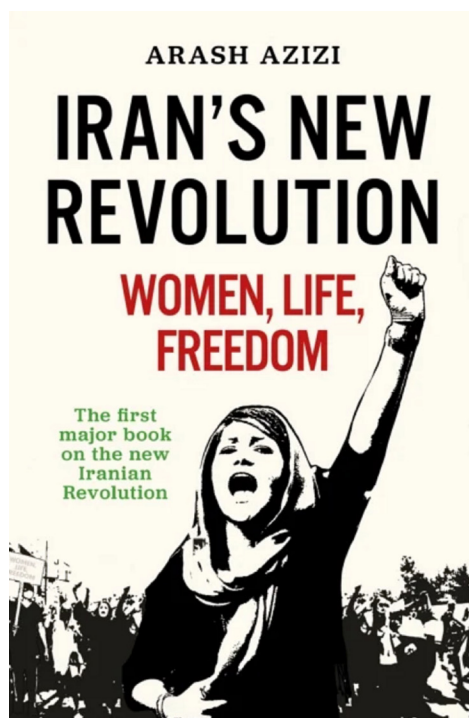
It is a dry white season
dark leaves don't last, their brief lives
dry out
and with a broken heart they
dive down gently headed for the earth
not even bleeding.

it is a dry white season brother...
indeed, it is a dry white season, but seasons come to pass.

The Irish have *Tiocfaidh ár lá* (Our day will come).

Strange

And Arash Azizi, who has written a short, readable, useful book, *What Iranians Want*, quotes something similar from actress Taraneh Alidsooti, arrested by the Iranian clerical-fascist dictatorship for posting a photo of herself, without a hijab, holding a sign reading Women, Life Freedom. The words come from Taraneh's character in the Iranian TV



series, *Shahrazad*: "...we are passing through a strange phase of history... This door will open. The night will end, and the sun will rise again. Be patient."

Except Iranians are no longer patient. When Taraneh was jailed, briefly, in December 2022, in Tehran's hell-hole prison, Evin, actors and directors demonstrated outside. Across the country, in the wake of the killing of Mahsa Jina Amini by Iran's religious police enforcers, many tens of thousands

were protesting on the streets in a vast show of brave opposition against a regime which even aims to regulate tiny details of how Iranians live.

The people, in their big majority, now hate the regime and see clearly that compromise is hardly possible, as the Islamists double-down and crack-down on opposition.

Every year there are new protest movements in Iran, despite the repression.

Last year important strikes and protests took place amongst oil workers. Teachers continue to organise and fight; pensioners demonstrate for free health care and against their immiseration. A 50% inflation rate is bringing mass poverty to Iran.

Foreign policy

Iran's rulers are not "normal" politicians, who are malleable and "pragmatic". They fight for their bigoted, reactionary ideas when they can, intervening and spending the equivalent of billions of pounds abroad, in Gaza, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and Syria. Azizi makes the important point that many Iranians are opposed – from various perspectives – to Iran's foreign policy. Beginning in 2017, pensioners raised the slogan, "Leave Syria alone and think of us!" More recently, appalling the regime, who see it as an attack on their ideological roots, demonstrators have shouted, "Neither Gaza, nor Lebanon, I give my

life for Iran!" Iran is now heading for rigged-elections for a pseudo parliament. Voting is on 1 March. The ruling ultra-conservative clerical faction have barred almost all opposition from the ballot, including very many regime supporters. Now, even former president Hassan Rouhani, has been ruled-out.

New movements

The regime's base in narrow and rests on the support of the thugs from the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC). The dictator, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, is now 84 years-old and may be manoeuvring to pass power on to his son, Mojtaba.

The state has a hold on 80% of the economy, often run at arm's-length by regime cronies through a network of 2000 registered semi-governmental enterprises, which are often exempt from taxes. Corruption scandals are regularly revealed, despite the state's attempts to cover them up.

There will be new mass movements in opposition to the Iranian clerics. That is certain. Arash Azizi, a socialist writer, helps us understand the concrete issues and attitudes that exist inside the country. He walks us through the main axes of opposition (women's rights, workers' struggles, environmental action, free speech, minorities and refugee struggles). This new book is an informative read. □

"Boycott Germany" is a nonsense

By Dale Street

French writer and Nobel prize winner Annie Ernaux, US academic and writer Judith Butler, and deputy director of the French National Museum of Modern Art Catherine David are the most prominent of the 1,500 signatories to have put their names to the "[Strike Germany](#)" statement to date.

"Strike Germany" was launched in early January. It calls for a boycott of German cultural institutions. "Ambiguous in conflating criticism of the state of Israel with antisemitism", so the statement claims, the IHRA definition of antisemitism "effectively censors criticism of the state of Israel and anti-Zionist perspectives from the German cultural sphere... [has created] a repressive climate sanctioned by the IHRA's ambiguity."

"Cultural institutions operate

with the understanding that in Germany there is no space for solidarity with Palestine, under the threat of losing funding."

In fact there is little new in the themes taken up by the "Strike Germany" statement and its core claim that bogus accusations of antisemitism are being used to stifle criticism of Israel in Germany's cultural sphere.

In 2022, for example, in the German equivalent of the British controversy about the [Mear One](#) mural, there was uproar about the [documenta fifteen](#) art display in Kassel. Despite claims to the contrary, four works in the display clearly incorporated antisemitic themes.

These included a soldier-like figure depicted as a pig, wearing a scarf with a Star of David and a helmet with the word "Mossad", while another figure with Orthodox-Jewish sidelocks wore a black hat

bearing the logo of the SS and was portrayed with fangs, bloodshot eyes and smoking a cigar.

As an article on the German website [BellTower](#) puts it:

"The appeal does not even make an attempt at balance. Not a word about the massive increase in antisemitism since 7 October. No condemnation of the Hamas terror. The appeal divides the world into Good and Evil.

Nadir

"On the one side: Israel, the German *raison d'état* and its culture of remembrance, the cultural institutions, racism and censorship. On the other side: artistic freedom, international solidarity, the anti-imperialist liberation movements..."

"It [the statement] is the latest nadir of a cultural branch which likes to see itself as progressive and enlightened but

again and again shows a blind spot for antisemitism."

According to [Uffa Jensen](#) (Berlin University Centre for Research on Antisemitism): "We have to speak, and not boycott. The appeal's blunt attack on the German remembrance culture is completely wrong and inappropriate. In order to understand the problems of the Middle East conflict, we need a free debate and exchange [of ideas]."

Whether the "Strike Germany" call for a boycott will have much impact is an open question.

Ernaux's literary agents have confirmed that her books will continue to be sold in Germany and that her plays will continue to be performed there. It seems that the same applies to Butler's books.

Butler herself had already decided to boycott Germany even before she signed up to

"Strike Germany". In November of last year she told [Die Zeit](#) newspaper that she would not be taking part in public events in Germany because felt herself treated with contempt and crudely caricatured on earlier visits.

But on 20 January supporters of "Strike Germany" in New York [disrupted](#) a symposium organised by the Goethe Institute in memory of the Black anti-racist filmmaker Skip Norman.

The pogrom of 7 October and the Israeli response have given rise to many strange forms of "solidarity" with Palestinians (which do not actually constitute solidarity in any meaningful sense of the word). Despite the crowded field, "Strike Germany" has managed to stake a place amongst the worst of them. □

• Abridged. More: bit.ly/boyccg

The road to Bo

The beginning of Russian Marxism

By Sean Matgamna

First of a series of articles around the 100th anniversary around the death of Vladimir Ulyanov (Lenin), on 21 January 1924

The October Revolution of 1917 seemed to many observers to be an attempt to stand Marxism on its head.

Those who said that included George Valentinovich Plekhanov and Pavel Borisovich Axelrod, the founders of the Russian Marxist movement, and Karl Kautsky, the most authoritative Marxist of the Second International (1889-1914).

To others, who supported it, it seemed to have succeeded in turning on its head the Marxism long dominant in some labour movements. Antonio Gramsci greeted it as "The Revolution Against Das Kapital" (the title of an article he wrote). Another supporter, the American Max Eastman, told American readers that it was a "syndicalist" revolution, a revolution made by the Russian equivalent of the American anarcho-syndicalist trade union movement, the Industrial Workers of the World.

To some, the young Gramsci for example, what the Bolsheviks and the workers they led had done showed

them to be the opposite of the Marxist Social Democratic parties of the West, the German Social Democracy for example.

He did not just mean the opposite of the "Social Democrats" who had supported their own governments in the war that broke out in August 1914. He had in mind the whole history of the West and Central European Social Democratic movement and its culture.

Denunciations of the Bolsheviks as not Marxists, not like the "respectable" Marxists of Germany, had long been common in Russia, in the mouths of ex-socialists turned liberal, such as for example Peter Struve, one of the founders of the Russian movement in the 1890s.

Struve, who died in 1944, identified Stalin with Lenin, and thought even the Nazis an acceptable alternative. But the objections before World War One were no mere quibble.

At the very foundation of Marxism was its assertion that in contrast to what it called utopian, or romantic, socialism, it was "scientific".

To the utopian, "socialism" was a good idea, or a collection of good ideas, in Saint Simon, Fourier, Robert Owen, and others. Socialism and socialist principles could have emerged at any time in history. Once they had been discovered, the task was to preach the principles of socialism.

Not so for Max and Engels. Human history is the history of class society. From the time it became possible to force the product of enslaved labour above what the captive human labour would consume, the exploitation of labour was necessary, even progressive as the productivity of human labour was inched upward in class societies dominated by scarcity. There was objectively no alternative.

Only with capitalism does the possibility of producing abundance in the basic means of life become possible (though the principles under which capitalism produces stand in the way).

Backward, recently serf, Russia was nowhere near the possibility of socialism in that sense. That was no pettifogging objection, either in 1917 or in 1870, to socialism in Russia.

The Bolsheviks emphatically agreed. The workers' movement was able to

take power in Russia. The country was ripe for that, but not remotely ripe for socialism. Europe was ripe, however. The European revolution would come very soon, and make good Russian deficiencies. Russia would then be a backward part of a socialist Europe.

The Bolshevik party was dogmatically, if not mechanically, Marxist. It was fiercely determined to vindicate Marxism. It repudiated none of the basic truths of Marxism about a high level of capitalist industrial development being the precondition for working-class socialism. It reinterpreted them, but it did not repudiate.

How did it come to take power in October 1917 in an empire covering one-sixth of the globe, embracing many peoples and nationalities, the most backward of whom were primitive herdsmen and the most advanced, the metal workers in the giant industrial plants in places like St Petersburg?

Russian Marxism began in 1883, when in Geneva G V Plekhanov, Vera Zasulich, Pavel Axelrod, Lev Deutsch and others founded the Group for the Emancipation of Labour.

That organisation arose out of a split in the populist [1] organisation Zemlya i Volya (Land and Freedom).

The populists believed in a socialist revolution in which the peasants would rise up and throw off their rulers, Tsar, landlords and capitalists. They tried to rouse and organise the peasantry to do that.

The founders of the Group for the Emancipation of Labour had rejected in 1879 the turn of the Zemlya i Volya majority towards a systematic terrorist war on Tsarism.

Narodnaya Volya (People's Will), the terrorist group formed by the former Zemlya i Volya majority, killed Tsar Alexander II in 1881. Then their organisation had been shattered by the savage reaction that followed. Five of their leaders were hanged in public for killing the Tsar. Karl Marx was full of admiration for Sophia Perovskaya and her comrades: "sterling people through and through, sans pose melodramatique [without melodramatic posturing], simple, matter-of-fact, heroic".

The founders of Russian Marxism had been flesh of the populist movement and bone of its bone. The heroic Vera

Zasulich had been a pioneer of terrorism – a terrorism, with her as with the other populists, which targeted rulers and high officials, not innocent people.

In July 1877, Boyoliubov, a political prisoner who failed to stand when the Governor of St Petersburg visited the prison – General F F Trepov – was publicly whipped.

Vera Zasulich, daughter of a small landowner, was then aged 25. A revolutionary from the age of 16, she had already spent four years in jail and exile. When she heard of the ill-treatment of the prisoner Boyoliubov she was outraged and, acting entirely on her own, she shot General Trepov dead. She then surrendered to the authorities.

At her trial she acknowledged that she had shot Trepov. Nonetheless, in a demonstration of political solidarity, the jury found her not guilty, and the crowd in the court prevented her re-arrest and allowed her to escape. She went abroad. The government immediately put an end to jury trials for political cases.

Georgi Valentinovich Plekhanov, born in 1856, was a scion of a military family of Tartar descent, had by the age of 19 become a hunted underground organiser of Zemlya i Volya (Land and Freedom). Pavel Axelrod had joined the populists in the early 1870s. He came from the poorest of the poor and illiterate Jews, and got an education by

Timeline

- 1814:** Russian occupation of Paris
- 1825:** The Decembrist officers' revolt
- 1853-6:** Crimean war
- 1861:** Abolition of serfdom in the Russian empire
- 1861:** Alexander Herzen calls on intellectuals to go "to the people"
- 1874-5:** First and second waves of "going to the people"
- 1879:** Split in Zemlya i Volya
- 1881:** Killing of Tsar Alexander II and hanging of five conspirators
- 1881-2:** First big anti-Jewish pogroms in Tsarist empire: beginning of mass antisemitism
- 1883:** Foundation of Emancipation of Labour Group



Sophia Perovskaya

Populism

a series of accidents and superhuman exertions.

Even those of the younger generation who would adhere to the Marxism of Plekhanov were not free of ties to populism.

Trotsky, born in 1879, was briefly a populist before, at the age of 18, becoming a Marxist. Lenin (Vladimir Ulyanov), born in 1870, had personal ties of the most tragic sort to the populists.

His brother Alexander was hanged, together with others, for plotting to kill Tsar Alexander III. That was in May 1887, when Vladimir Ulyanov was 17. The fate of his brother helped to turn Lenin into a revolutionary, and also helped convince him, after an initial attraction to the terrorist populists, to seek a better way than the heroic but inadequate road of throwing bullets and bombs at individual high Tsarist officials.

"The execution of his brother", wrote Trotsky, "awakened bitter hostility toward the hangmen. The future revolutionary had been planted in the personality of the youth... But an initial impulse was needed. And this was provided by the unexpected death of his brother. The first political thoughts of Vladimir must inevitably have arisen out of a twofold need: to avenge Sasha [his brother Alexander] and to refute by action Sasha's distrust [Alexander never talked to Vladimir about politics]. Why, in that case, did Vladimir take the road of Marxism and not of terror, ask the official biographers. They answer with unanimous references to his 'genius'.

"In reality, not only the answer but the question itself is sheer invention. Vladimir... chose Marxism only after several years, after much intellectual labour; moreover, even after that, he continued for a long time to favour terror..."

On trial for his life, Alexander Ulyanov had explained to the court what drove him and populist intellectuals like him. They saw their role as that of being enlighteners of the people. Their teacher Peter Lavrov argued that "critically thinking individuals" owed a debt to society and should discharge it by fighting for a better, socialist, order. But: "Our intelligentsia is physically so weak and so unorganised that it is incapable of waging an open struggle at present and can only defend its right to think and to participate intelligently in public life through a terrorist form of struggle... Among the Russian people one will always find a dozen persons who are so dedicated in their ideals and take their country's plight so much

to heart that they readily sacrifice their lives for the cause..." They were determined to bring Russia under the rule of reason.

Alexander Ulyanov was 21 years old when they hanged him.

For 50 years before 1917 the many-sided populist movement to which Alexander Ulyanov belonged dominated Russian revolutionary politics. The story of Russian Marxism and of the Russian revolution is incomprehensible without knowing the great pre-Marxist Russian revolutionary populist movement, which was the soil on which it took root and grew.

Advantages

One of the great advantages of the Russian Marxists when they came to organise was the existence in Russia of a sizeable layer of those who readily accepted that they should devote their lives to the transformation of society. That tradition – expressed in the words of Alexander Ulyanov, facing the Tsar's hangman – begins in the populist movement, and animated Russian Marxism in its turn.

Plekhanov's biographer quotes Axelrod, then a follower of Bakunin's collectivist-anarchist strand of populism. What was a Russian revolutionary then?

"He who wishes to work for the people must abandon the university, fore-swear his previous condition, his family, and turn his back even upon science and art. All connections linking him with the upper classes of society must be severed, all of his bridges burned behind him; in a word, he must voluntarily cut himself off from any possible retreat. The propagandist must, so to speak, transform his whole inner essence, so as to feel at one with the lowest strata of the people, not only ideologically but also in everyday manner of life".

Axelrod, who lived up to this idea, would have a great moral authority among the first Marxists, with the young Trotsky for example.

When Plekhanov was 20 and an organiser of Zemlya i Volya, he would reply to his mother, who feared for his safety, that his activism came from what she had taught him of truth and justice. She replied: "But you will perish."

Plekhanov responded: but what if everyone should come to think as he did? What if they really did rouse the people?

Populism was, despite its name, a movement of educated young people, typically the daughters and sons

of landowners and high state officials. Populism was a response to a fundamental contradiction at the heart of the Russian ruling classes, subject in one degree or another to the intellectual influence of Western Europe.

The Russian state, when Russia began to import ideas and technology and later capital from the West, was an all-powerful autocracy resting on a society where most of the peasants were serfs. Serfs went with an estate and could, like the estate, be sold, or even lost at the gaming table, by the landlord. A story of Russian nobles gaming away thousands of people, their serfs, represented that Russia to many in the West.

Serfdom was not abolished in Russia until 1861 (which, nonetheless, was two years earlier than Black slaves in the Southern States at war with the government in Washington were declared free by the US Congress). Amongst the serfs, land was still held in common by village communities, an institution known as the mir.

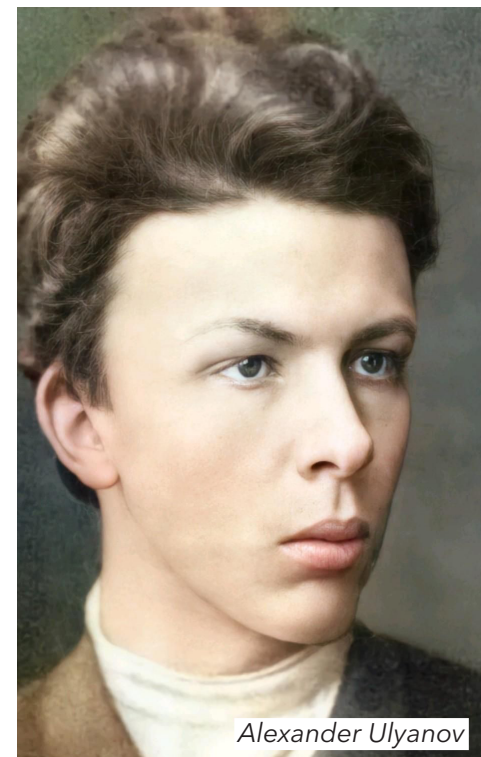
In the course of freeing the serfs – who would pay money for their freedom for many decades – much land was taken from their village communities and transferred to the landlords in compensation for the freedom of their serfs. Down to the 1917 Revolution this would be a bitter grievance of the recent ex-serf communities.

Agitation about breaking up the lords' estate and dividing it among the peasants would be central to Russian revolutionary politics until it was achieved in one way in 1917 and after.

But Russia, which was a deeply archaic state living in isolation, also existed in contact and competition with Western Europe. The state had no choice but to try to keep abreast of Western military technology. It was not wholly archaic. Around 1700 Tsar Peter ("The Great") drove Russia to heroic efforts to learn technology and civilisation from the West. He founded St Petersburg as a window looking westwards.

Russia knew enlightened monarchy – Catherine "The Great" was in contact with the most advanced thinkers of Western Europe in the late 18th century – with the French philosopher, Voltaire, for example, one of those who created the Enlightenment and prepared the way for the French Revolution.

War with Bonaparte's France drew Russian armies into Western Europe. They occupied Paris in 1814. This contact generated in layers of educated Russians – people whose social posi-



Alexander Ulyanov

tion rested on a vast submerged serf population – the desire for modernisation and for emulation of the West. It created a half-Westernised ruling class – whose ideas and aspirations were starkly at odds with their social position and with the reality of Russian absolute monarchy and a serf population.

In 1825, a conspiracy of westernising army officers, the "Decembrists", was crushed. Hopes for an enlightened Tsar waxed and waned, and they were always more or less disappointed.

The Crimean war of 1853-6, in which Russia confronted Britain and France, the most advanced countries in Europe then, and suffered shattering defeats, made reform urgent for the ruling class, and led to the abolition of serfdom.

But the country still stifled under Tsarist absolutism. The masses of peasants were still crushed by poverty, ignorance and debt. Many thinking Russians of the educated upper classes felt these contradictions intensely. They felt themselves persecuted.

Lenin's sister tells of the effect on Lenin of reading a story by Chekhov. An intelligent but indolent doctor who feels he can't change anything starts to have long talks with a mental patient under his care. He is overheard saying to the patient that they are the only two people in the town able to think and speak freely about serious matters. The doctor is himself incarcerated and subjected to the brutalities he had tolerated for others.

Vladimir Ulyanov was badly shaken and told his sister that he had the feeling that "I myself was locked up in the madhouse". That is what Russia seemed to be, to the enlightened of the Russian intelligentsia.

The impasse led to layers of the children of the half-westernised ruling classes and others lower down the social scale – or Jews outside it – to create populism. The prestigious intellectual Alexander Herzen, in his magazine *The Bell*, called in 1861 for the students to "go to the people" to educate and

continued on page 10 →

→ from page 11

rouse them for the work of creating a better social order.

That “going to the people” would begin in the 1870s.

What better order? Socialism. One of the most important aspects of Russia was that it imported not only technology and technological ideas from the west, but also ideas about society. The enlightened Russians saw the west and disliked much that they saw – especially the urban hell-holes, such as Manchester, in which the industrial wealth of the west was produced.

Honest and sincere people that they were, they saw clearly that the destruction of the old order of kings and noblemen in Europe had given way there not to emancipation but only to a change in the system of exploitation and oppression. They did not want the old order in Russia to give way to anything like the “new order” of the bourgeoisie that ruled in the West. They wanted socialism, not capitalism, to replace Russian landlord and Tsar.

Thus they imported socialism of varying sorts into Russia, changing it to fit their conditions. All the leading intellectuals, though they were not Marxists in our sense, were to some degree influenced by the writings of Marx and Engels. Michael Bakunin, the collectivist-anarchist and Marx’s opponent in the First International, translated the Communist Manifesto into Russian in 1869. Russian was one of the first languages into which the first volume of Marx’s *Capital* (1867) was translated, in 1875.

It was socialism that the enlightened intellectual youth went “to the people” to preach.

But it was a special Russian socialism. There were different trends in populism, but they all hoped that the system of village communal land ownership, the mir, could be the basis of a distinctively Russian socialism that could avoid the horrors of capitalism and its industrialisation which in their eyes blighted the peoples of western Europe.

Marx himself especially loathed the Tsarist system and thought of it as the pillar of reaction throughout Europe, and did not rule out that this “Russian socialism” was on certain conditions a possibility. He included the idea in the last preface he and Engels penned for the Communist Manifesto, in the 1882 edition.

Russian Marxism would, nevertheless, as we will see, have to fight that idea of a special Russian road to socialism in its first efforts to establish itself.

Populism went through a number of phases, associated with the changing influence of different populist thinkers.

They wanted to stimulate a great peasant self-rousing or awakening that would lead to the overthrow of the social and political order. Intellectuals, students, the enlightened and the critical-minded would initiate that awakening by “going to the people”.

This first phase took place under the

influence of Peter Lavrov, who believed that before there could be socialist revolution there would have to be a period of preparing the peasants by way of propaganda and educative work. The Lavrovites at first recruited and organised students – in foreign countries with Russian students, as well as in Russia – to go among the peasants; and then, in 1874-76, they went.

Summer

In the summer of 1874 hundreds of upper-class, educated youth and students moved out of the urban centres. Abandoning their studies, they dressed as peasants dressed, and moved around the countryside preaching revolution to the real peasants.

Mainly they met with incomprehension, occasionally violent rejection. The socialism they talked of was meaningless to the peasants.

The peasants were still loyal to the idea of the Tsar as the benevolent father of his people. That idea of the Tsar would still, 30 years later, dominate among the workers marching in St Petersburg on Bloody Sunday, 9 January 1905, whose slaughter (over a thousand of them) by the Tsar’s soldiers would trigger the 1905 revolution.

Mostly, the peasants beat the students or turned them over to the police. Here and there some students were allowed to settle and try to live the life of peasants. They would sooner or later come back to where they had started, demoralised and defeated in their endeavours to rouse “the people”.

In the first two months of “going to the people” in 1874, 770 such young people were arrested, trying to make revolutionary a class that was too backward and too downtrodden for anything like the enlightenment they had in mind.

That first phase, ending in crushing defeat, gave way to the second. Some of the students noticed that the peasants did respond to the idea that the landlords’ land should be divided and distributed among the cultivators.

The second wave would have as its guiding spirit not Lavrov but the collectivist-anarchist Michael Bakunin (who was Russian). Survivors and new recruits, learning from the experience of 1874-76, turned to the work of creating a tightly-knit, centralised conspiratorial organisation.

Its goal would not be general preparatory propaganda and education as in 1874-6. They would abandon general socialist propaganda and appeal to the peasants’ feelings about the land and the landlords. They would concentrate on the demand for the redistribution of the land. This came to be known as “The Black Redistribution”.

They would call for and try to stimulate immediate peasant risings.

In this phase the new organisation was called Zemlya i Volya – Land and Freedom. George Plekhanov, who became active in late 1875, joined Zemlya i Volya in 1876.

But Zemlya i Volya failed too in its at-

tempt to rouse the peasants. It failed to stir up the revolutionary disorder that Bakuninism demanded.[2]

But already the industrial proletariat was stirring, and Zemlya i Volya also worked among the proletariat. Plekhanov had to go on the run in December 1876 after speaking at an illegal demonstration over a jailed striking worker outside Kazan Cathedral in St Petersburg, revered by the Russian traditionalists.

The workers unfurled a red flag with “Zemlya i Volya” written on it, and chanted: “Hail to the socialist revolution! Hail to Land and Freedom!”

These workers still had many familial and other links with the peasantry. But they were learning to struggle as a working class. For example, two thousand struck at a new textile mill in 1878. Police and Cossack troops attacked them but after two weeks they won some concessions. Zemlya i Volya (Land and Freedom) developed some groups in factories.

In late 1878 and early 1879, a wave of working class action broke out in St Petersburg. Some of the workers turned for help to “the students”. Georgi Plekhanov, in his capacity as a Zemlya i Volya (Land and Freedom) organiser, wrote a manifesto for distribution in St Petersburg’s factories calling for solidarity and money for the strikers.

The second, Zemlya i Volya, version of “going to the people” had failed just as comprehensively as had the first. There was only one case of them stimulating a response in even a few hundred of the peasants – and that was the result of a fraud, an illuminating fraud.

Populists

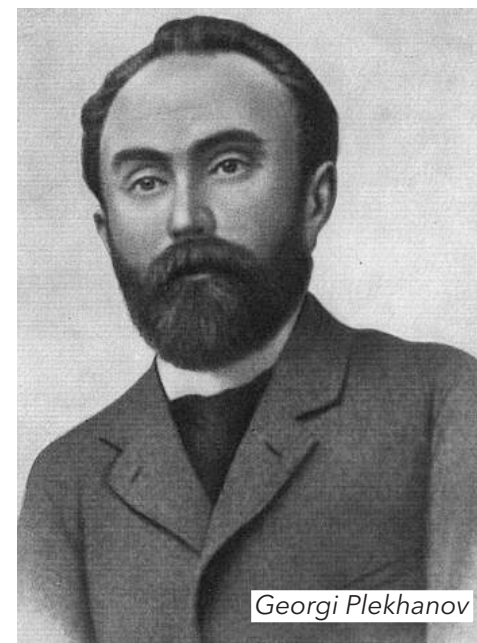
The populists circulated a manifesto in which the Tsar was made to call on the peasants to come out against the landlords and officials in support of the Tsar! The future Marxist Axelrod was involved in this affair. Plekhanov came out firmly against the use of such methods.

Before the 1870s had ended, the truth was unavoidable. Zemlya i Volya (Land and Freedom) was a failure too. They had believed that quick success would follow from their agitation. Now they had to face their failure, explain it, and decide what to do next.

Where the first “going to the people” was raw and naive on every level, Zemlya i Volya (Land and Freedom) was a tightly knit, centralised and armed organisation that had risen out of that first failure. Its members defended themselves against the police, guns in hand. Failure made Zemlya i Volya (Land and Freedom) seek another road.

From general propaganda inspired by Lavrov they had gone to agitation for immediate insurrection inspired by Michael Bakunin. Now they would take the road of terror against the Tsar and his officials.

It made them redefine their aims. In fact, at this point they took the first steps towards becoming liberals. The gun and the bomb would be used to



Georgi Plekhanov

force the Tsar to grant a constitution.

From the spring of 1879 Zemlya i Volya (Land and Freedom) began to divide between advocates of terror by an elite minority – who proposed a drive by Zemlya i Volya to kill the Tsar – and advocates of a continued “going to the people”.

Plekhanov, a member of the leading committee of Zemlya i Volya, was the leading opponent of the turn to terror. The motives of his opposition to the proposed new turn were complex.

Zemlya i Volya, following Bakunin, had rejected political action, aiming to rouse up society against the state and against the Tsar’s governing caste.

But terror was a turn to a form of political action. Still a Bakunist, Georgi Plekhanov was against any turn to politics. And he said he could not imagine a revolution that did not involve the masses of the people.

It must be “mass terror” by the people against the rulers, not individual terror against state officials, insisted Plekhanov.

At the conference of Zemlya i Volya (Land and Freedom) in the spring of 1878, the majority opposed terror. A year later the advocates of terror would be a majority. In April 1879 an attempt on the Tsar’s life produced mass repression by the Tsarist authorities. A dozen prisoners were hanged by the Tsarists.

In June 1879, at a congress of Zemlya i Volya – two dozen strong, held in the open, on a wooded island in the centre of a river – the majority voted for a systematic resort to terror. Significantly one of Plekhanov’s arguments against drawing sweeping conclusions – for minority not mass action, and for the winning of a political constitution, not a socialist revolution – was that they had had some success with factory workers on the basis of their old politics.

Georgi Plekhanov, isolated at the congress, walked away. He was not yet a Marxist, but he was close to it. □

[1] Populist meaning looking to all the working people, peasants and workers, together. In Russia there were then few wage-labour proletarians.

[2] Maoism in the 1960s and 70s is the parallel that comes to mind.

USA: a blueprint for dictatorship

By Tom Harrison

The far right have a plan to remake America. They have written it down and you can Google it! Trump has [said](#) he will be dictator on day one.

The Heritage Foundation is promoting [Project 2025](#), described as a plan "to reshape the federal government to support the agenda of Donald Trump." Effectively, it's a blueprint for dictatorship.

A massive purge of the civil service is envisioned, including trawls through social media accounts to weed out heretics. Grounds for sacking include participation in diversity, equality and inclusion programmes. Experience and expertise are also deemed reason for dismissal. Such staffers will be replaced by eager young Trumpers fully competent to complete their tasks once they've completed a rudimentary online training course.

The FBI and Department of Justice will be major targets of the purge. Anyone involved in investigations of Trump will automatically get the heave-ho. Henceforth, those agencies will operate as instruments of vengeance aimed at enemies of Trump.

Nor is the media immune from any of this. The President will assume dictatorial powers over the Federal Communications Commission, so the wisecracking talk show hosts in New York and LA might also need to find alternative employment.

Trump's re-election isn't a foregone

conclusion by any means and it's certainly something socialists can't wish on the American working people. Allowances must always be made for the unexpected. But this time next year Donald Trump could either be in jail or back in the White House.

His nomination as Republican Party presidential candidate looks a foregone conclusion as other contenders for that dubious honour have fallen by the wayside. Ron DeSantis can go back to Florida to ban history books, but it's doubtful if he will be in any of them! Ironically, Nikki Haley, Trump's only remaining opponent, has been attacked by Trump supporters as an "election denier".

With Trump on the ballot come November, the American people are presented with the prospect of voting for a person who has already been adjudged a rapist and fraudster by trials in civil courts. The latest of these, the second E Jean Carroll defamation case, landed Trump with a massive \$83.3 million damages bill. Since Trump has hitherto enjoyed a life of entitlement he doesn't think he'll pay any of it, neither does he expect he's going to prison. The damages total will probably be matched by the money he'll gift from deluded followers.

It has taken the courage of an eighty year old woman to hold Trump accountable for his actions, which the various agencies of the bourgeois state have so far failed to do. The civil trials are precursors to the four criminal

ones Trump faces. His hope is that they will be strung out and delayed long enough for him to win the presidential election, and then all his legal woes will magically disappear courtesy of presidential powers.

There is nothing in Trump's increasingly deranged speeches at rallies that provide any programme on the problems facing the American working class. It's all about him. The Trump campaign is a ragbag of grievance, victimhood and vengeance propagated by a thoroughly corrupt individual who has succeeded in enthralling millions of Americans in the belief that he is their persecuted champion.

Trump's fondness for dictators – Xi, Putin, Kim Jong Un – invariably involves the fact that they are presidents for life. In his scheme of things he doesn't include the notion that subject peoples might have other ideas.

A 77-year old Trump, given his physical and mental health condition, seems unlikely go much beyond a four year term even if he is re-elected. The point, however, is that conservative forces – which in American terms means the far right – would seize upon his second term as an opportunity to establish permanent rule for the Republican Party post Trump.

The Republican Party has only won the popular vote once since 1988. If it wasn't for the grossly undemocratic Electoral College, they'd have occupied the White House for only four instead of twelve years since then. The

two big US parties always used to be ramshackle coalitions, with some Republicans more liberal and progressive than most Democrats, and many Democrats overtly right-wing and racist. Now the Republicans have been formed into line behind Trump, to stand for the unfettered operation of the mega-corporations with absolutely no regard for workers' rights or the environment.

Trump often expresses his admiration for Victor Orban, who is successfully undermining democratic norms aiming to turn Hungary into a far right authoritarian state. In the US, conservative activists are keen to implement their own version to cement in their racial and political dominance which demographic trends in the electorate would undermine if left unchecked. The dark money is betting on a Trump comeback.

A lot of what the Heritage Foundation proposes such as the closing of government departments such as Education are akin to loony libertarian notions currently being propagated by the head-case president of Argentina, Javier Milei. These people hate the idea of state involvement and intend to massively attack the various forms of social welfare government provides.

Those of us who were around at the time of Watergate, when another rogue Republican sought to undermine democratic norms, less drastically, consoled ourselves that Nixon wouldn't get away with it because the majority of American people weren't stupid. Let's hope that's still the case in November. □

Too weak against US-UK bombings



Letter

The title of the [Solidarity 696](#) article "Yemen: Oppose Houthi attacks! No support for US-UK bombing!" is too weak on the Western intervention.

The Houthis are a despicable theocratic regime that persecutes religious minorities, locks up 13-year-olds for being gay, steals aid, takes hostages, and uses them as human shields. Nobody with

any human decency, let alone the left, should support them. Their attacks on shipping are, in part, a cynical PR ploy to strengthen their support in Yemen and gain recruits. The attacks should be opposed. But we can agitate against the pro-Houthi left without weakening our line on the US-UK bombing.

Escalating

The main risk is an escalating regional war. The Houthis are part of Iran's network of allies. Their attacks are part of

a wider strategy, coordinated by Iran, to deter the US and Israel from expanding the war against Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran considers its allies and proxies as essential to its own defence, in place of its decaying traditional army and woeful domestic situation. Iran might be willing to give up Hamas in return for drawing Israel into a quagmire in Gaza, but they are not willing to give up Hezbollah or the Houthis without escalation.

The US-UK bombings and the increasing militarisation of

the Red Sea dramatically increased the risk of this war. The Saudi-backed government of Yemen has called for arms with which to resume the Yemen civil war. That war already claimed the lives of 377,000 people by 2022. A return to full-scale fighting would be catastrophic for a country already on the brink of another humanitarian disaster.

The Houthis survived twenty-five thousand airstrikes from the Saudi coalition. Their military infrastructure is numerous and decentralised,

they are adept in the use of missiles. The US-UK bombings will not stop the attacks on international shipping and only strengthen the Houthi's internal position in Yemen.

Our job as a socialist organisation is not to work out how to protect international shipping. The US-UK bombing is bad, it will have disastrous effects across the region. We should oppose the bombing, not just give "no support" to it. □

Kayden Jones, Sheffield

Still rejoicing at the pogrom?



Eye on the left

By Martin Thomas

Socialist Worker's [coverage](#) of their annual conference at the turn of the year records that someone queried their [headline](#) calling on readers to "rejoice" at the 7 October Hamas atrocity.

We aren't told whether the critic also took up SW's claims that Hamas took no hostages, only prisoners of war, and attacked only military targets. Or its failure to report the multiple rapes on 7 October.

SW reports the response from the platform: it was about "recognis[ing] something transformative has happened. We rejoice in anyone who humbles imperialism".

At the time SW equated the Hamas

atrocities with the Vietnamese Stalinists' Tet offensive of 1968. Then, the NLF took Radio Saigon and a section of the US embassy for a while. It incurred huge casualties, but broke the will of the USA to continue.

7 October was no more to be "rejoiced" at than the Daesh victories in Iraq and Syria in 2014. Or, on a smaller scale, the 7 July 2005 Tube and bus bombings in London.

That last one was closer to home, and SW did not "rejoice" at all, pleading that it was unfair to target London because it is an "anti-war city". SW believes that workers in Britain – or in such "settler" societies as the USA, Australia, Argentina – are, despite all the histories, a force for socialism.

But in SW of [16 January](#) Sophie Squire dismisses "Israeli workers as a class".

In Israel, Squire claims, workers are not exploited. On the contrary, they are

subsidised by capitalists. "Israel's imperialist backers and Western corporations pour money in... A portion of that goes to workers".

Israeli workers also "secure some of the profits from the robbery of Palestinians". How, is not clear. Squire herself points to high unemployment among Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank: they are not producing much surplus value for Palestinian capitalists. Not much for Israeli capitalists either. And which of those capitalists hands over the surplus value to Israeli workers?

Squire writes out Palestinian citizens of Israel. Some 20% of the population, they are 40% of "Israeli workers" in the health sector, and a majority in construction.

Israeli workers are not pampered exploiters. They produce surplus value, like workers in Britain, for their "own" capitalists. They are exploited, all of them, including the Jewish work-

ers who on average have better jobs than the Palestinian. (The Jewish-Arab wage gap in Israel is large, but about the same as [between](#) Britain's best-off major "ethnic" section, "white Irish", and worst-off, "Pakistani"). Israeli workers are better off than workers in poorer countries, but also worse off on average than workers in Britain.

They are not automatically enlightened, any more than other workers are, but Jewish and Palestinian workers frequently have solidarity between themselves in struggle in Israel, they are more organised than any other working class in the region, and they can be won to justice for the Palestinians in the occupied territories as British workers were eventually won to justice for the peoples of the British empire.

Or is SW's message: workers of the world unite... unless you are Jewish, in which case we will "rejoice" at you being massacred? □



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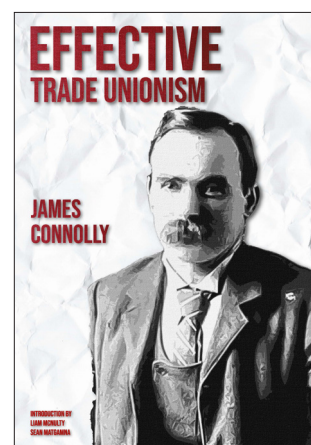
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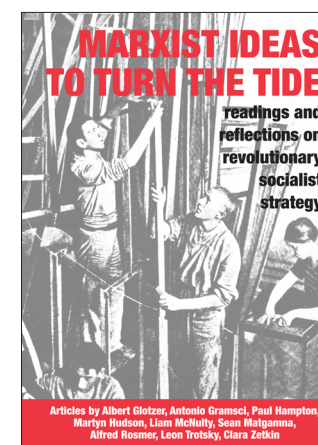
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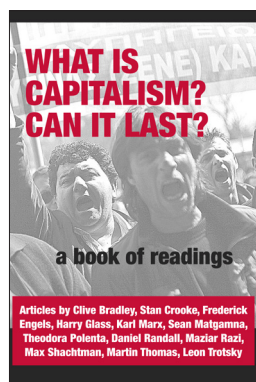
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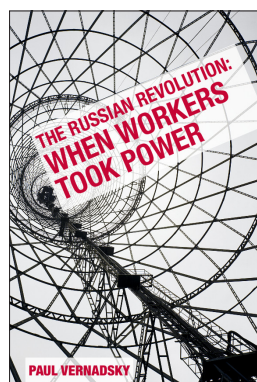
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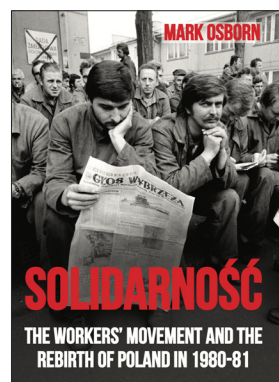
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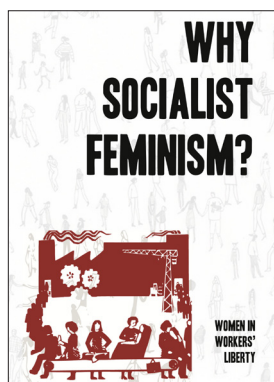
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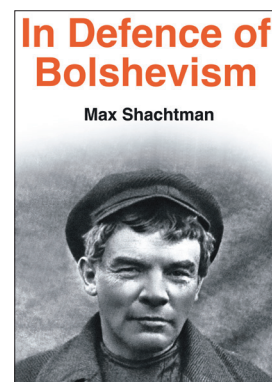
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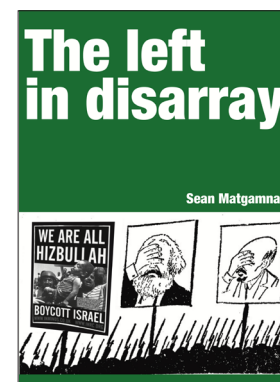
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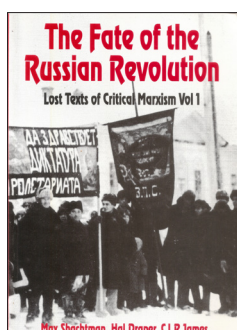
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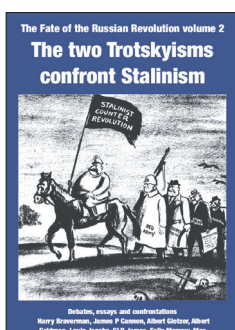
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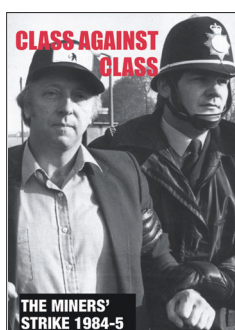
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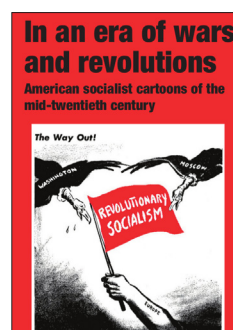
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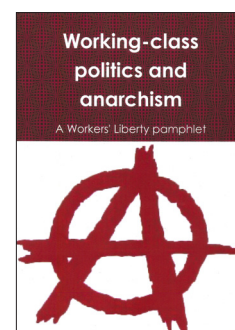
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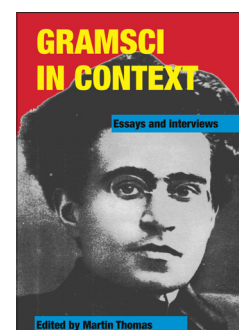
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Suburbs, sprawl, and organising

By Daniel Randall

In his latest [Substack newsletter](#), US socialist and labour-movement writer and activist Eric Blanc writes about the challenges posed for workplace organisation by the fact that many more workers live over wider areas than in the past.

He notes that the average American today commutes 20.5 miles to work each way – a 27 percent commute time increase since 1980 (the first year the US Census began tracking the figure). Britain gives the same picture for average work-commute distances. 1890-99: 2.23 miles; 1930-39: 4.34 miles; 1999-98: 9.07 miles; 2019: 11.5 miles.

This means that union organising efforts can no longer rely on making use of social and community infrastructure around a workplace – for example, bars or other social spaces workers might attend collectively after work. Blanc sees this diffusion as part of a broader diffusion and decentralisation of work.

He writes: “US labour’s big breakthrough in the 1930s was rooted in a centralised political economy far different from our own. Industries tended to be clustered in a relative handful of regions and cities. Workers tended to be concentrated in dense working-class neighborhoods adjacent to their jobs. In the largest corporations, though not necessarily elsewhere, jobs tended to be in massive factories. And due to the tightly bound nature of their assembly line and production systems, strikes by even a minority of well-positioned workers could relatively easily shut down their factory and dependent production chains.”

The problems Blanc points to are real. Workers at my own employer, London Underground, live all over London and beyond, and by no means necessarily in any proximity to the station, depot, or office they work at. Trying to get workmates who live in Essex to come into London for picket lines at Oxford Circus station on strike days has certainly been challenging (especially as, obviously, there’s no Tube running). Getting workers to make a journey that could, potentially, take more than an hour to attend a branch meeting on a day off seems a fairly “big ask”.

There are some possible technological mitigations. Although online meetings have many problems relative to in-person activity, meetings of my union branch held online typically attract higher numbers than those held



only in person. But online activity can never replace the in-person, face-to-face interactions that are necessary to build up consciousness and confidence.

Blanc’s basic remedy, to empower rank-and-file workers to do as much organising work on the shop floor as possible, thereby making as much use of possible the time and space when workers are concentrated together more centrally, rather than relying on professional/specialist “organisers” or union officials to launch organising drives from outside, also seems right to me.

Blanc also takes issue with the thesis of Kim Moody’s 2017 book *On New Terrain*, which argues for a focus on logistics and distribution as the key arteries of the contemporary capital-

ist economy. Here, too, Blanc argues, things are more decentralised than they appear, with employers easily and quickly able to reroute supply chains to a different “node” in the system if one warehouse is obstructed by a strike. I think Blanc may bend the stick slightly too far here, but his critique of Moody is worth considering.

In general, the kind of interrogation Blanc is attempting, combining big-picture analysis of the shape of contemporary capitalism with more granular inquiry into how workplace composition and changing social trends impacts on the way workers relate to each other, and the consequent implications for workplace organisation, is exactly what the labour movement as a whole needs to undertake. □



For socialists to understand and confront left antisemitism from primitive or Stalinist roots to the “anti-imperialism of fools”. 265 pages, £9.99 □ bit.ly/shop-wl

La Follette: no glory and no analogy



Letter

In his *Solidarity* 696 column Eric Lee cited the La Follette presidential bid of 1924 as a model of “progressive coalition politics” relevant as “the real possibility of another Trump presidency” looms.

Even with the warmest assessment of La Follette (which I don’t have: see below), I don’t see it. Who would be the La Follette of today, the slightly-left “third party” candidate whom socialists can use to get a boost?

John Anderson (a liberal Republican) in 1980, Theodore Roosevelt (Progressive) in 1912, or at a stretch Ralph Nader (Green, 2000), are the only possible analogues. I can’t imagine Eric means so-

cialists could have ridden to glory with any of them, or sees an equivalent today.

In most of US history until recent years, both big US parties were broad spectrums with little unity. In La Follette’s era, left-ish variants were more likely to be Republican than Democrat.

La Follette had been a Republican (first House of Reps, then Governor of Wisconsin, then Senator) for 40 years. He became aligned with Theodore Roosevelt’s Progressive wing. He made his 1924 bid because both Republicans and Democrats nominated conservative candidates that year.

The conservative Republican candidate, Calvin Coolidge, won by a landslide. Talk of a party being formed out of the La Follette campaign soon evaporated. The aged La

Follette died in 1925. His son, a co-thinker, succeeded him as senator, but on the Republican ticket, plus a minor experiment in 1934-8 with a Wisconsin-only Progressive Party.

The Socialist Party supported La Follette Sr out of desperation, I think, after a sharp decline, which the La Follette experiment did not reverse: from over 100,000 members in 1919 to 14,000 in 1921 and 8,000 in 1928. It revived (modestly) only after a left turn in the early 1930s.

The Communist Party was not then yet fully Stalinised, but Stalin-Zinoviev talk of “worker-farmer parties” and “blocs of four classes” threw it in confusion.

James P Cannon summed up later:

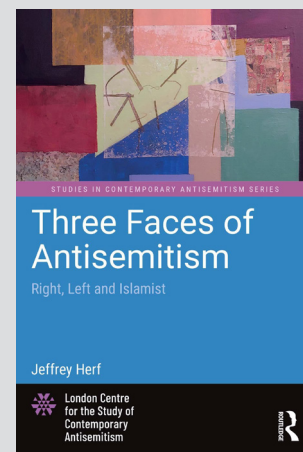
“The cold fact is that the party which had proclaimed itself at its inception as a revo-

lutionary party of the working class, and had adopted a corresponding program, became, for a period in 1924, the advocate of a ‘third party’ of capitalism, and offered to support, under certain conditions, the presidential candidacy of the petty-bourgeois demagogue La Follette....

“The bewildered party disgraced itself in this affair, and all the prominent leaders without exception, myself included, were in it up to our necks, with no excuse save that of ignorance and no reason except perhaps the foolhardy ambition to outwit ourselves”.

The CP tried to form a “real” Farmer-Labour Party to outdo La Follette and, when that predictably failed, ran a last-minute candidate of its own, doing very badly.

Martin Thomas, London



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“ What we stand for

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Independent working-class representation in politics
- A workers' government, based on and accountable to the labour movement
- A workers' charter of trade union rights – to organise, strike, picket effectively, and take solidarity action
- Taxing the rich to fund good public services, homes, education and jobs for all
- Workers' control of major industries and finance for a rapid transition to a green society
- A workers' movement that fights all forms of oppression
- Full equality for women, and social provision to free women from domestic labour. Reproductive 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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Training in hit-and-miss mode



Diary of a trackworker

By Matt Shaw

Training on the railway was always a hit and miss affair. "Basic track safety" and "lookout duties" were given a high priority, but then you were left to almost beg for the more technical courses which were needed to progress up the promotion ladder.

In my early days on the track, promotion was quite hard to come by as it was basically "dead men's shoes". People had to literally die before any vacancies came up and the attitude from management was why bother, we'll give you the training when the need arises.

Not being a careerist myself, I started at the bottom and retired at the bottom, but even I could see the folly of not training staff who were keen. Of the six guys I started with, three had gone

within two years, and another swapped disciplines in the next year.

The union at that time, early 1980s, was not very aggressive in trying to get things like that moving. Resolutions were either ignored or kicked into the long grass of a union AGM.

When privatisation came along, the neglect of training was shown up as ridiculous. The management "let go" a lot of old hands with years of practical experience on a huge variety of equipment of different ages, from just after the First World War to solid state interlocking (the next big thing in signalling systems at that time).

For example, there was a type of interlocking called "geographic", which was not common round Sheffield. Only three guys had a fully working knowledge. One was a supervisor. He'd been promoted during privatisation. Another was a drunk whom we had to keep a check on. The third was let go in redundancy as "he earned more than the director with all the overtime he did". A couple of the younger guys had been

requesting the course, but had repeatedly been told that the budget was not there.

Guess what, inside of three weeks after the redundancies went through, there was a major fault around Rotherham (a geographic interlocking area) with none of the staff on duty competent to deal with it. The two guys who did have the knowledge were both out of the country on holidays.

The nearest competent staff were from Derby. It took them a couple of hours just to get there.

After that, management finally bit the bullet and started to shell out for training, both short-term and long-term, with staff sent on courses before they required it for a promotion.

Shortly before my retirement, there was a move back towards short-term thinking by a flood of newcomers in higher management who will not listen to the staff, supervisors, or even some engineers, whose experience will be ignored at the peril to the travelling public. □

Amazon faces more strikes after Sutton Coldfield action

By Ollie Moore

Workers at a new Amazon fulfilment centre in Sutton Coldfield, Birmingham, struck on 25 January, demanding a £15/hour minimum wage and other improvements to terms and conditions.

Although the GMB union's membership at the site represents only a small minority of the workforce, the strike has an outsized symbolic significance. Previously GMB's campaign of strikes in Amazon has been centred on the BHX4 warehouse in Coventry, where it has its

largest membership base (plus one strike at a site in Rugeley, Staffordshire). Even a minority strike at a new site can be an important beacon for spreading organising and action to other workplaces.

GMB activists say around 100 workers at the Birmingham site took part in picketing across two shifts, and that the strike has doubled the union's membership in the workplace. And more strikes are expected at BHX4, after workers voted by a 99.4% majority to renew their industrial action mandate.

The renewal of the man-

date is no small feat in itself, given Amazon's efforts to undermine the union, and challenges within the workforce such as the large range of languages. The GMB produced material in Tigrinya, Romanian, English, Gujarati, Polish, French, Romanian, Portuguese, Italian and Punjabi as part of the strike ballot campaign.

The GMB has made efforts to organise workers at large Amazon sites in Swansea and Doncaster. Its campaign of strikes in Coventry has already won victories: it bounced Amazon into making hundreds of temporary

workers permanent. Amazon aimed to undermine the union's recognition claim, but inadvertently encouraged many of the formerly-temporary workers to join the union.

Amazon has also instituted several incremental pay increases, something it claims is unconnected to the strikes but which it would have had little incentive to do otherwise. But for the workers to win their major demands, or get near, spreading organisation into other large sites is vital. The strike at Sutton Coldfield is a platform to build from. □

The Seven Samurai



Kino Eye

By John Cunningham

One of the great films of all time, Akira Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai* put Japanese cinema "on the map", though equally talented directors such as Kenji Mizoguchi were unjustly sidelined.

The basic story is well-known: a destitute group of villagers, plagued by bandits who steal their harvest, turn

in desperation to a group of Samurai warriors, one of whom, Kikuchiyo (popular Japanese actor Toshiro Mifune) lies about being part of this elite body. They are paid (in rice!) to protect the village, but the arrangement is not without its tensions.

Contrary to the enduring popular image, the Samurai had a bad reputation and were distrusted by the rural population. Trust prevails in the end and the Samurai train the villagers in combat techniques.

The resulting confrontation, in a blinding rain storm, is without doubt one of the great scenes of world cin-



ema. Soaked to the skin and utterly exhausted, the victorious Samurai watch as the villagers begin to prepare the next harvest. The Samurai leader, Kambei (Takashi Shimura) turns to one of the survivors saying: "The victory belongs to those peasants. Not to us".

One of the most popular Japanese films ever, it inspired the Western *The Magnificent Seven* and even outsold *Godzilla* at the box office! □

• To view *The Seven Samurai*: bit.ly/7-sam



Fight now on next year's pay



Tube unions remain in negotiations with the company over how to distribute the £30 million of additional funding secured thanks to RMT's threatened week of action from 5-11 January.

Various proposals are in circulation, some involving a higher percentage pay rise, others increasing the base percentage rise only slightly whilst adding an additional flat-rate, tiered by grade. RMT is rightly pushing for a final settlement based on the latter model, to ensure the lower-paid grades – i.e., the people who need a pay rise most – benefit more.

Tubeworker has argued that we should name additional strike dates to focus management's minds. We can't let them drag the negotiations on forever. A formal offer is promised this week, but if it doesn't materialise, what then?

There's also the question of next year's pay round to consider. The current negotiations are over 2023-4 pay, as our previous four-year pay settlement, finally implemented with back-pay in mid-2020 and covering 2019-2023, expired last April. But this April, 2024, we'll be due another pay rise. Every day that goes by without one means our pay falls behind inflation.

Rather than looking at each pay round in isolation, we need to calculate the total value lost from our pay thanks to high inflation, and submit a pay claim demanding full pay restoration. We might not win the full demand, but we should start by setting our sights high.

The view that workers' pay should keep pace with inflation rather than having its real-terms value continually eroded only seems like a radical proposition because we live in a society where the established orthodoxy is that wage cuts due to high inflation are just a fact of life, like bad weather.

The strike wave of 2022-3 began to push back against that orthodoxy. We need to continue that push back and demand pay restoration. □

LNER shows escalation can push back employer



Off The Rails

Aslef drivers at multiple Train Operating Companies (TOCs) are striking again, one day each between 30 Jan and 5 Feb at different TOCs, and launching an overtime ban.

LNER notified the union of its intention to consult on the issue of work notices to its members under the new Minimum Service Levels legislation.

They were the first and only TOC to do so, and the union responded immediately and forcefully by hitting them with five extra days of strike and three extra days of Rest Day Working ban.

Three days later, and LNER management had withdrawn their intention to carry out this consultation. Aslef withdrew the extra action. Very credible rumours indicate that other TOCs came close to issuing the union similar notice, and backed off from doing so.

resulted very quickly in a humiliating climb-down for employers and the government.

This is very good news, and represents a significant victory for the union. It is unlikely to be the last anyone will hear about Minimum Service Levels, and it has not resulted in any movement from employers on the subject of the dispute itself, but it is worth celebrating.

One side effect of this victory for the union's leadership, though, is that it makes the refusal to go beyond sporadic, monthly one-day strikes look much harder to justify. The main argument against this has been that longer strikes are no more likely shift the government than the short ones, and that it is therefore not worth the risk of financially exhausting the membership.

There are two pieces of incontrovertible evidence:

1. That the current action strategy has produced and is producing nothing in terms of progress towards victory on pay.
2. That an escalation in strike action

Although it does not automatically follow that an escalation of action will result in victory in the entire dispute, there are surely no excuses left not to at least try this. Clearly the employers' side do not feel as confident as many had thought – we need to capitalise on what we just won, and soon. The union needs to start taking the necessary steps toward preparing the membership for a big push. □

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Joint slate agreed in PCS

By a PCS member

The [Independent Left](#) group in the civil service union PCS, which includes supporters of Workers' Liberty, has reached electoral agreement with [Broad Left Network](#) to challenge the ruling Left Unity (LU) group in the 2024 PCS National Executive (NEC) elections, for which nominations have already started and voting is in the spring.

The agreed NEC [slate](#), which includes independents and members of other groups, is predicated on a development of the principled programme that underpinned the IL/BLN joint ticket in last year's Assistant General Secretary and General Secretary elections, which resulted in a decisive AGS victory for John Moloney, IL, and a very narrow GS defeat for Marion Lloyd, BLN. The IL's sustained analysis of the failings of LU was critical in that process.

The 2024 IL/BLN NEC campaign will seek to build on the energy and enthusiasm for change that emerged during the GS/AGS election campaign. Our AGS/GS campaign united an increasing number of people around a programme for rebuild PCS membership levels, for developing a far more democratic and transparent union that is more effective in defence of members' interests, and that is committed to a serious defence and restoration of members' pay.

The combined vote cast for John Moloney and Marion Lloyd was greater than that cast for the LU candidates and provides a firm basis for this year's NEC electoral challenge. LU creaked and cracked last year under the strain of its incompetence, its visibly bureaucratic abuse of the union, its destruction of the 2022 pay dispute, and the continued decline in our real wages in 2023. Large numbers of activists, especially in the former LU stronghold of HMRC, resigned from LU.

The present signs are that LU is leading us into another year of below inflation awards. In December they [admitted](#) that the national pay talks, which they used as a pretext for wrecking the 2022 pay dispute and for passively accepting below inflation awards in 2023, are "highly unlikely" to result in meaningful pay outcomes this year. On the 10 January the Government published a "Civil Service People Plan" that lacked any commitment to address its frank admission that "Civil Service average pay within grades has shown a general downward trend in real terms since 2008, due to below-inflation increases."

Serious activists who want to build a winning PCS should nominate the IL/BLN led list at their AGMs. But to win we will all need to show the same level of commitment and sustained critique that was displayed in the AGS/GS elections. □

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More action in Northern Ireland pay fight

By Micheál MacEoin

An estimated 150,000 workers took part in 24 hours strike in the North of Ireland on 18 January, including nurses, teachers, bus drivers, carers, cleaners and civil servants from 16 unions.

Their core demand was aimed at the British government: to release the £0.6m for public sector pay uplifts which it is holding back as a gambit to pressure the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to end its boycott of Stormont. The party collapsed the Northern Ireland power-sharing regime in February 2022 in protest against the Northern Ireland Protocol.

Around 10,000 joined a rally in Belfast, with demonstrations also held in Derry, Enniskillen and Omagh. Icy weather, and action by road gritters, added to the disruption, though also impacted the size of picket lines in some places.

The action is set to continue. Up to 2,500 bus and rail workers – in Unite, the GMB and SIPTU – will walk out on 1 February. This is the first of a likely four further days of strike in February.

The action is impressive and reflects the extent of the cost of living and public service crises in the North, and widespread anger at the Tory Secretary of State, Chris Heaton-Harris. It is also, as yet, organised and co-ordinated from the top down, by the union leaderships and the Irish Congress of Trades Unions (ICTU). For now, the unions are largely united in their central demand. As always,

there is a danger of fragmentation, especially if concessions are offered falling short of pay parity with workers in the UK.

Already there have been some tensions, with more moderate figures and ICTU disavowing the call for civil disobedience made on the eve of the strike by Patrick Mulholland, the deputy general secretary of Nipsa (and member of Militant Left), who said: “We are faced with a choice – either people die because our health service is not providing a service, or we organise civil disobedience and strikes to push back against them”, giving the examples of blocking roads and occupying buildings.

Key to sustaining and developing action will be for workers to build and develop structures at a workplace level, and networks within their unions, to discuss the way forward for the campaign, its demands and the most effective tactics and strategy to win.

Even if Stormont is restored, workers will have to fight for the money necessary to make up for over a decade of below inflation pay settlements and emergency funding to restore and rebuild broken public services, including an NHS in crisis.

They will soon come up against Stormont’s limited financial powers and its subordination to Westminster, raising the wider need for working-class political representation and a programme for working class power in Ireland. □

Stormont close to recall

By Micheál MacEoin

Around 120 members of the DUP Executive met on the evening of 29 January to agree the outlines of a deal between the party and the British Government to resolve the stand-off over the Windsor Framework and restore the power-sharing executive at Stormont.

The DUP Executive meeting descended into farce at some points, with the “top secret” location being leaked within hours and protestors gathering outside.

More ominously, those in the DUP who oppose Donaldson’s compromise also apparently streamed the audio of the meeting to the loyalist activist Jamie Bryson, who tweeted updates live on Twitter/X. These included: “Meeting now halted. Anger that meeting is being live tweeted” and “DUP meeting descends into mayhem. [Donaldson] saying texts being sent to Jamie Bryson who is giving a blow by blow account to the meeting.”

The government is expected to publish the deal in full on Wednesday 31 Jan, and pass legislation

in Parliament on Thursday 1 Feb. This could then lead to a recall of the Northern Ireland Assembly as early as the weekend 3-4 Feb.

Unlike past attempts to restore power-sharing, this was a bilateral deal with the DUP to the exclusion of the other parties, though it has been reported that Sinn Féin was briefed on the essentials last month.

DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson said the deal would “remove checks on goods moving within the UK and remaining in Northern Ireland, and end Northern Ireland blindly following EU laws”.

In a BBC interview, Donaldson mentioned section 7A of the 2018 Withdrawal Agreement and said this would be amended so dynamic alignment with EU rules would cease.

The balance between spin and reality remains unclear until the legislation has been published. It also remains to be seen how this can be done unilaterally by the UK, and whether the EU is already aware of what has been promised.

Politically, it looks likely that power-sharing will be restored. What this means for the DUP and Unionism is less certain. □

Steel jobs: a workers’ plan needed

By Matt Dunn

Port Talbot steel reps and supporters from Unite the Union were at Parliament on 23 January as an Opposition Day debate heard Labour call for Tata and the Government to hold back from any “irreversible decisions” and pledge to put £3 billion into saving steel production in Wales.

On 19 January Tata UK announced plans to close the blast furnaces at Port Talbot and make up to 2,800 workers redundant. The knock-on effect would be up to 10,000 job losses.

Ieuan Eltham, a Unite shop steward said that these plans, “will decimate Port Talbot and South Wales”. Although the steelworks has already downsized from its peak, when it employed 20,000 in a town of 40,000, it still dominates the town.

And Labour MP Richard Burdon said steel workers had been “sold out by Tata and the Tory Government”.

Zarah Sultana MP pointed out that the Tata Group is “hugely wealthy”, so why has the UK Government offered £500m to Tata with no guarantee on jobs and no public stake to share in any profits generated by investing?

But another steward, Ian Williams, pointed to Unite’s Workers’ Plan for Steel, which was produced with the help of academics and experts

and unanimously endorsed by a meeting of reps, and which paints a picture of a future for steel in the UK – growing capacity, protecting jobs and transitioning to more sustainable production.

A campaign is underway to oppose the job cuts and fight for investment and a public stake in the future of steel.

In the 1980s the UK transitioned from heavy industry to a more service-based economy. It did so, under the leadership of a viciously anti-working class Tory Government. And it did so with complete contempt for the working class communities that existed around those industries. Workplaces were closed. Workers were thrown on the dole in their hundreds of thousands and communities were ripped apart to such a degree that they still haven’t recovered.

In the face of the climate crisis and rapid automation there will be transition on a huge scale in the coming years. The question is will that transition be with workers in the lead or will it be done over their heads?

To ensure that we see a worker-led, just transition we need radical action from trade union members. We should expect and support similar “workers’ plans” and campaigns in other industries in the coming years. Strikes and workplace occupations must form part of any successful strategy. □



Solidarity

For a workers' government



By Ira Berkovic

Statements by Israeli defence minister Yoav Gallant that the "intensive phase" of Israel's assault on northern Gaza is over, and that it will soon end in Khan Younis in the south, will give little succour to the growing numbers of injured Palestinians, and the friends and families of the growing numbers of dead.

Israeli troops remain, and military action could well flare up again. Hamas is far from "destroyed", will hit more Israeli troops as their pace slows, and "permanent war" is its declared aim. Ongoing and worsening crises of homelessness and lack of basic resources, includ-

ing medical supplies, could kill more than the military action itself. [75%](#) of the people of Gaza are homeless. [Over half](#) the buildings have been destroyed or damaged.

Now many countries, including the UK, have suspended aid to the UN's Relief and Works Agency. The suspensions were triggered by allegations that UNRWA staff were involved in the Hamas attacks of 7 October; UNRWA says some staff have been sacked, and that it is carrying out an investigation.

Given Hamas's significant social base and implantation across Gazan society, it is plausible some UNRWA staff may have been Hamas-linked. But to

entirely suspend funding, whilst putting no alternatives in place, will lead to more deaths, and will only serve to worsen the misery on which a reactionary force like Hamas feeds.

With society in Gaza pulverised, no force besides UN agencies is in any position to restore even the minima of civil life there. The big powers should fund the UN agencies, demand a full ceasefire, apply pressure for peace negotiations to lead to a democratic "two states" settlement, with self-determination for both Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews and with equal rights. □

• See inside for more on Gaza