

Solidarity

& Workers' Liberty



For social ownership of the banks and industry

GREEN ENERGY: We need it now

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Make unions commit Labour to green and renewable energy!

Labour leader Keir Starmer's 8 February U-turn on Labour's £28 billion flagship green investment pledge has been justified on the grounds that it is incompatible with servicing the national debt. He wants to be seen to be scrabbling around after every last penny, lest the Tories label him imprudent.

The national debt, with interest payments around £100 billion a year, is a genuine problem. Much of the debt is held outside the UK, so couldn't be

quelled even by full public ownership of high finance in the UK, and even a workers' government might want to retain links with the international credit system.

Labour's environmental policy was always very inadequate and limited, but £28 billion was still an improvement on the Tory's current £10 billion green investment fund. The Starmer U-turn cuts £13 billion from the policy, leaving just £5 billion in new money. £13 billion is in the realms of a rounding error for the

UK government with its over £1 trillion budget.

In any case, even if you do not take the energy industry into public ownership (thus securing its super-profits and winning the capacity to plan democratically); even if you do not reduce the debt interest payments by public ownership of UK high finance, as a government could – it is entirely possible to raise £13 billion by even modest increased taxes on the rich and big business. Just a mild wealth tax and other

tweaks would raise [£37 billion](#).

So why drop the pledge? It is difficult to believe that flip-flopping on popular commitments will attract votes on a general election year. Who is attracted to weak and vacillating leaders? More likely it seems that the purpose of the U-turn is to signal to big business and to (vaguely perceived but feared) "socially conservative" voters that Starmer is absolutely committed to honouring the blank cheques Johnson's government wrote during the pandemic.

As if to hammer this message home, Labour has not ditched the entire green policy. The original green investment plan combined state subsidies for private landlords and capitalists for "green" initiatives with an ambitious home insulation scheme that would benefit working-class people with draughty homes and high energy bills as well as reducing emissions. Starmer's U-turn cuts the home insulation programme, leaving only "socialism for the rich" state subsidies.

The thin layer of Blairites (pink Thatcherites) who currently occupy the Labour leader's office may genuinely believe "there is no alternative" to "socialism for the rich". But their policy is not popular within the broader labour movement.

Starmer's U-turn has shown he will bend under pressure. The task ahead is to organise sufficient working-class pressure to make Labour serve workers' interests with the same energy and conviction as the Tory's and the Starmer leadership serve the capitalist class. □

Why do "fiscal rules" squeeze so tight?

Before paying the Tory debt it's worth asking how it was accrued and who should foot the bill.

The debt ballooned during 2020-2023 with the government borrowing an additional £400 billion while the country moved in and out of lockdowns. Total debt is now around £2.2 trillion. Tory Britain was both one of the most profligate spenders during the pandemic and achieved some of the worst outcomes. Despite the spending splurge there was surprisingly little spent on effective infection control. The Tory's top priority was to protect the income and class privilege of the rich.

£80 billion was given directly to business owners in cheap loans. A further £70 billion was spent in furlough payments so that the bosses were

freed from having to pay their workers' wages. Over £12 billion was frittered away on dodgy PPE contracts. £29.5 billion given to hyperexploitative firms to run an ineffective track and trace system.

"Quantitative easing"

The Bank of England "printed" £895 billion in "quantitative easing", cash going to "ease" financial institutions, from which much went directly into the pockets of the idle rich. During the first year of the pandemic, the UK's 177 billionaires added a record £106 billion to their fortunes as the economy contracted by about 10%.

As the stay-at-home rich prospered on taxpayers' money, around 12 million key workers were denied sick pay and so could not isolate. Care homes

and hospitals became major reservoirs of infection. Buildings lacked adequate ventilation or air filtration and workers were refused effective PPE. The boss class's indifferent attitude to keyworker safety was a huge contributing factor to the UK's woeful pandemic response.

The Tory's "socialism for the rich" approach was particularly egregious and ineffective, but it was far from unusual. Between March 2020 and May 2021 central banks injected \$9 trillion into their economies. Much of this was routed, via financial markets, directly into the bank accounts of the super-rich. During this time the world's 2700 billionaires enjoyed their biggest ever surge in wealth. Over \$5 trillion entered their coffers as world output contracted by 4.3%. □

Social provision and market rules



Socialism vs Capitalism

By Martin Thomas

Critical to the replacement of fossil-fuel energy by low-emissions electricity generation (renewables and nuclear) is the expansion of the electricity grid.

Since Thatcher's privatisation, the grid is run by private companies, with the prices they can charge for transmission regulated by an official body, Ofgem.

Ofgem is now considering

its next round of price controls, and says that it will use the companies' "investability" as a criterion.

It will aim to ensure that the companies not only cover their costs, not only make tidy profits, but make profits lush and reliable enough that their share prices keep high and they are "attractive" to financiers looking for lucrative outlets.

The result: high prices for households, and the necessary expansion of the grid slowed and made dependent on whether Ofgem is generous enough to coax the companies into it.

Even under capitalism, it is possible to expand such utilities as the grid under public ownership, without coaxing private profiteers. That is how an electricity grid was first established in the UK, under a Tory-dominated "National Government" in the late 1930s.

Capital

Since the onset of neoliberalism, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, capitalist governments have thought differently. Capitalist firms are larger and more able to operate at such large scale. Governments want to draw in footloose capital from across the world, and utilities are a good offer, since they

have stable markets and prospects. The result with electricity as with water is that provision for the future comes second to the investors' scramble to extract as much loot as they can in the relatively short term.

The same principle is illustrated, oddly, by the fact that Russia's GDP expected growth for 2024 is higher than that for the UK and many West European countries.

"GDP growth" there does not mean welfare or provision for the future. Mostly it means military effort.

Russia can "afford" Putin's war, as the UK could "afford" an electricity grid adequate to

reduce emissions, through an overriding interest prevailing over ordinary market rules.

As the liberal economist John Maynard Keynes put it in 1942: "Anything we can actually do" – i.e. for which the resources are available – "we can afford".

He warned against "the vile doctrine... that every enterprise must justify itself in pounds, shillings and pence of cash income".

Socialism means overcoming that "vile doctrine", not to prosecute war, but to win social provision and social foresight. □

Full ceasefire, peace, two states

By Ira Berkovic

At the time of writing, negotiations between Israel and Hamas, mediated by a variety of third parties, towards a new ceasefire and hostage exchange agreement, were reported to be continuing, despite Israel's rejection of Hamas's latest proposal for the terms of such an agreement. By the time *Solidarity* reaches readers, a ceasefire may have been pushed far into the future by an Israeli assault on Rafah.

The Hamas proposal rejected by Israel was for a four-and-a-half month ceasefire, in which all surviving Israeli hostages held by Hamas would be released in stages, in exchange for the release of 1,500 Palestinians from Israeli jails. Under the proposal, negotiations towards a permanent ceasefire would continue during the truce, with Israel withdrawing its troops from Gaza.

The USA, Israel's most important international ally, is pressing strongly for an agreement, and has rebuked Israel for its planned Rafah offensive, which the US says would be a "disaster". Domestic dissent is also growing; new opinion polling from the Israeli Democracy Institute shows that about 71% of

Israelis want elections to take place earlier than the mandatory November 2026 date.

Of those, there is a split between a slight majority which wants elections to take place only after the end of the current war, and a large minority which wants elections within three months. A majority of Palestinian citizens of Israel questioned as part of the polling favour elections as soon as possible. 71% of respondents identifying themselves as "left-wing", and 42% of those calling themselves "centrist", were for immediate elections.

The line that there is no "partner for peace" on the Palestinian side has taken its toll. 51% of Israelis polled oppose the establishment of a Palestinian state as part of a postwar political settlement, with 36% supporting it and the rest unsure. But only a political framework which guarantees both peoples an equal right to self-determination, including the right to national statehood, can provide the basis for a long-term peace. Only a demonstrated will by Israel, which holds all the cards at present, thanks to its military strength, to seek such a political settlement, can create the conditions for the recomposition of forces among the Palestinians seeking "two states".

There is growing dissent on Israel's far right. Demonstrations by far-right political activists aligned with the set-

tlar movement to block the transport of aid into Gaza have grown in size and number. Ironically, Netanyahu's far-right allies may bring down his government by withdrawing from the coalition in protest at a ceasefire agreement and what they see as too high a level of aid.

An increase in aid is urgently needed, given the mounting health crises in Gaza which could ultimately kill more than the bombs and bullets. Many Gazans are at risk of starvation and/or death from preventable diseases, rapidly spreading due to the devastation of healthcare and sanitation infrastructure. Even if their pressure fails to restrain Israel from an assault on Rafah, international governments must step up their own aid provision efforts, including by restoring and increasing funding to UNRWA, the only on-the-ground agency with anything like the capacity to receive and distribute aid supplies.

The aid operation must also include massive infrastructure rebuilding projects, including providing safe, liveable temporary housing for internal refugees whilst their towns and cities are rebuilt. Reconstruction efforts must be speeded to allow displaced Gazans to return to their homes.

In the wider region, conflict between

the US and paramilitary proxies and allies of Iran continues. A recent US drone strike in Baghdad killed Abu Bakr al-Saadi, a leader of the Iran-backed Kataib Hezbollah militia which has been attacking US military bases in Iraq and Syria.

But the militias, armies, and states are not the only forces in the region.

Increasing anti-war agitation in Israel is coming nearer to being able to constrain the Netanyahu regime, and struggles by workers, women, and youth in Iran could threaten Iran's rulers. On 10 February, the 49th anniversary of the 1979 Islamic counter-revolution that installed the current state, protestors chanted "Death to the dictator" and "Down with the Islamic Republic."

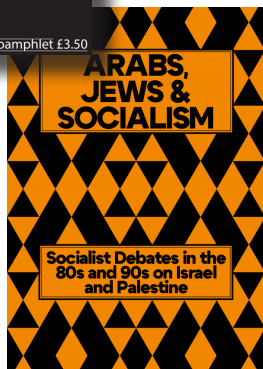
Internationally, socialists and labour movement activists must maintain pressure on our own governments to press Israel to pull back, including by withdrawing military aid, and to massively increase humanitarian aid to Gaza. Beyond this, we must continue to carry out our duty of solidarity to left-wing and trade union forces throughout the region fighting for freedom, democracy, and equality, and in particular to the Jewish-Arab social movement Standing Together within Israel. □



Two nations Two states

Socialists and Israel/Palestine

a workers' liberty pamphlet £3.50



Socialist Debates in the
80s and 90s on Israel
and Palestine

Buy "Two Nations Two States" and "Arabs, Jews & Socialism" discounted together for £ 6.50. Individual prices online. □

• workersliberty.org/2-i-p

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



Upcoming meetings

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

Thursday 15 February, 3pm: Tubeworker – The fight for in-house employment

Thursday 15 February, 7pm: Free Our Unions – The fight for the right to strike, with Matt Wrack (FBU)

Sunday 18 February, 7pm: Ecosocialist study group – Growth and limits #2

Monday 19 February, 7pm: Why the miners' strike still matters, Leeds University Union, Lifton Place, Woodhouse, LS2 9JZ

Tuesday 20 February, 6.30pm: Socialist Chat, The Lost Wanderer, 46 Leazes Park Road, Newcastle, NE1 4PG

Wednesday 21 February, 7pm: Putin and the anti-war movement, Marchmont Community Centre, Marchmont Street, London, WC1N 1AB

Wednesday 21 February, 7pm: Socialist Feminist Reading Group: Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Towards a Unitary Theory, by Lise Vogel

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



What do they think of Hamas?



Antidoto

By Jim Denham

Morning Star reader Roger Seifert – in a letter published on 30 October 30 last year – complained that the paper “has failed, despite massive coverage, to explain Palestinian politics: the absence of any discussion of what and who Hamas is, what it stands for and how it represents Palestinian interests, is a trend that has been evident in your reporting for several years.”

Seifert went on: “[Hamas’] basic ideology now consists of the denial of rights to women, gay citizens, those of different ethnicities and religions, to trade unionists and socialists. We cannot support such organisations.”

He was right to be concerned. In an editorial on 11 October the MS had noticeably refused to condemn the Hamas pogrom of a few days before, comparing it to anti-colonial struggles like those of the Mau Mau in Kenya and the FLN in Algeria and ignoring the obvious point that brutal methods were within national liberation struggles with broadly democratic aims – unlike the clerical fascists of Hamas.

Seifert was also right to note the lack of any clear analysis of what Hamas is and what its practice and stated ideology amounts to. But on 6 December the paper made it clear what it thought

Hamas is *not*: in an editorial headed “No, Hamas are not Nazis” the paper argued that while the Nazis “sought imperial domination of Europe in its entirety”, Hamas [just] “seeks the liberation of Palestine.”

The “liberation” which Hamas seeks is not liberal, but the subjection, expulsion, or slaughter of all the “Zionists”, i.e. Israeli Jews. The MS argument ignores Hamas’s origins in the Muslim Brotherhood, an organisation that had well-documented financial and ideological links to Nazi Germany. It would “exempt” all and any clerical-fascist movements because, to be sure, none have had all the drive and intensity and strength of the Nazis.

The same editorial also contains the claim that “Despite its religious rhetoric, [Hamas] does not demand the death or expulsion of all Jewish people from Israel/Palestine, and it certainly does not aim at the murder of any Jews elsewhere.” Whoever wrote that has clearly not read Hamas’ founding charter.

Uncritical

Matters seem to have reached a head with the publication on 8 January of an uncritical review of a book of Hamas propaganda (*Hamas: From Resistance To Regime*) including claims that Hamas guarantees women’s rights, calls for equal rights for all Palestinians “no matter what their faith or politics,” was elected “in the most democratic and free elections many observers had ever monitored,” and that they make

their decisions by means of “democratic centralism”.

This nonsense was too much for Roger Seifert, who together with Steve Silver and Mary Davis, wrote a letter to the paper, published on 12 January. The letter is highly critical not only of the book review, but also of the overall thrust of the paper’s coverage of Hamas and the war in Gaza:

“We despaired at the uncritical tone of the review and the failure to mention the evidence about Hamas currently: it remains a religious far-right group determined to impose its own version of the Koran on the Palestinians with or without their consent [...] Hamas denies the right of what it calls the ‘Israeli entity’ to exist: in the words of former Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal: ‘We shall not waive an inch of Palestinian home soil, no matter what the recent pressures are and no matter how long the occupation’.”

The letter concludes “Hamas opposes everything socialists stand for, yet the paper provided an uncritical offering of this type. It is shameful, and gives succour to those who use the conflict to support racial hatred in the form of anti-semitism.”

I suspect the only reason that the letter was even published was because all three of the signatories are long-standing members and/or supporters of the Communist Party of Britain. I say good luck to them, but I think they may be wasting their time: the *Morning Star* and the CPB have officially labelled

Hamas as “anti-imperialist” and the 7 October pogrom as to be (to quote their editorial of 11 October) “the violence of the oppressed” – and, therefore, justified. □



Corrections

Posie Parker

As originally posted, our article on David Miller in *Solidarity* 698 said: “... Posie Parker, who has organised street protests alongside neo-Nazis”. The report which we linked to didn’t say, and we didn’t intend to imply, that Parker organised that protest *with* neo-Nazis, or *invited* them to it, only that *neo-Nazis appeared alongside Parker’s group at it* (18 March 2023). Parker (from her other name Kellie-Jay Keen) emailed us threatening legal action and attaching an apology she secured from *The Independent*. We reaffirm what *The Independent* wrote: Parker did not stage a Nazi salute, did not *invite* the neo-Nazis, did not *endorse* them. We refer readers to the following articles reporting on 18 March 2023: bit.ly/g-180323, bit.ly/a-180323, bit.ly/p-180323, bit.ly/n-180323, as well as the one we originally linked to: bit.ly/r-180323. □

“Someday this war’s gonna end”



Eric Lee

One of the great speeches in Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* is made by Robert Duvall, playing a somewhat insane US Army colonel in Vietnam. After delivering his oft-quoted “I love the smell of napalm in the morning” speech, he tells the young Martin Sheen that sadly, “someday this war’s gonna end”.

Someday the war in Gaza is going to end, and not a moment too soon. According to current rumours coming out of Israel, Netanyahu is telling his top officers that everything needs to be wrapped up before the start of Ramadan [10 March]. In other words, regardless of what actually happens on the ground in southern

Gaza, the Israelis will be declaring victory sometime in March.

They could have done so at any time in the last four months, saving countless thousands of lives of Palestinians and Israelis, and bringing home the Israeli hostages alive. That they have delayed for so long is unforgivable.

And when the war is over, we know a few things will almost certainly happen.

In Gaza, a much-weakened Hamas will continue to rule. Even if Israel succeeds in killing or capturing every single Hamas fighter, they have done almost nothing to destroy the organisation’s political leadership abroad. Hamas has clearly won the propaganda war, portraying the people of Gaza as innocent victims of an Israeli thirst for blood. Many Gazans will see the Hamas leaders as

defiant heroes. Some – probably not many – will see Hamas the way Germans saw the Nazi leadership after the Second World War, as those responsible for the catastrophe.

At the moment it seems like the Palestinian Authority, based in the West Bank, has no credibility in Gaza. Maybe the Hamas military leadership in Gaza, who reportedly have been the most enthusiastic about accepting the proposed cease-fire deal, will have learned something from the disaster they unleashed on 7 October. Maybe they will think twice about doing that again.

In Israel, we can expect something different. The latest public opinion polls show that Netanyahu’s coalition government will be defeated in the next elections. And not just defeated, but overwhelmingly rejected by Israeli voters. Likud,

Netanyahu’s party, may receive fewer than 20 seats in the 120-seat Knesset. A government of the centre-left headed by Benny Gantz is more than likely. The “left” part of that coalition will be very small, as it looks like the Labour Party will not receive enough votes to enter the Knesset for the first time in its history. Meretz looks likely to win enough votes – barely – to get in. While it won’t be the government we’d like to see, it will be infinitely superior to the current one.

A chastened, bruised Hamas still running Gaza, and an Israeli government run by Gantz, who was happy to sit in coalition with Netanyahu, is not the best outcome. But it provides everyone with some breathing space, and a time to heal.

For the Palestinians, it’s time to think seriously about their future, about what they need

to do to get the idea of two-state solution back on track. It’s almost impossible to imagine that happening without a real opposition to Hamas emerging.

As for the Israelis, the surviving hostages will come home, and Netanyahu will likely wind up in a prison cell. But they too need to learn some lessons from this war – among them, something which the Israeli left and peace camp has been saying for decades: there is no military solution to the conflict.

As we can already see how this is going to turn out, at least in the short run, it’s time to tell the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships that further fighting is pointless. They must end the war now. End it – and then let’s move on to the next chapter. □

• Eric Lee is founder editor of LabourStart, writing here in a personal opinion column.

Union sets plan on sexual harassment



Women's Fightback

By an FBU member

On 7 February, the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) published the [results](#) of an independent inquiry which it commissioned into sexual harassment in the union, alongside an initial action plan signed off by the Executive Council. The headline finding is shocking: 30 percent of FBU women members have experienced sexual harassment by fellow members in a union context.

The inquiry surveyed all women and BME FBU members, as well as a random selection of white men. The work was supported by the FBU's National Women's Committee.

The report was commissioned following a series of scandals in other unions. In 2020, KC Karon Monaghan found that "bullying, misogyny, cronyism and sexual harassment are endemic within the GMB." In 2022, KC Helena Kennedy found that the leadership of the TSSA had "enabled [sexist] behaviours through wilful blindness, power hoarding and poor practices".

That the investigation was instigated proactively by the union's leadership is a good thing. As Matt Wrack said in the

union's video update, it was clear that the FBU "is not immune".

Misogyny is a problem across the movement; and it is a well-known persistent issue in the Fire and Rescue Service. The London Fire Brigade's Independent Culture Review, published in 2022, gave a sobering insight into that. The scale of the problem in the union also suggests it has been something of an open secret, and a serious attempt to tackle misogyny and sexual harassment is long overdue.

The report's findings include:

- 30% of women in the union had experienced sexual harassment in an FBU context, compared to 5% of men.
- 30% of perpetrators were officials of some kind (13.4% branch level and 16.3% brigade/area level)
- 15% of women had experienced sexual harassment in the past year.
- In 93% of cases, the perpetrator of sexual harassment was a man.
- Only one in ten of women who had experienced sexual harassment reported it to the union and many felt there would be negative consequences for them if they did.
- The most common environment for sexual harassment to take place is socials following FBU events, and almost one in ten women respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that they are "less willing to participate in FBU ac-

tivities because of fears of sexual harassment". Fewer than one in a hundred of male respondents agreed with the same statement.

Unlike the inquiries into GMB and TSSA, the inquiry did not find any allegations of sexual misconduct against any national-level officials.

The Executive Council has agreed an initial action plan based on the recommendations of the inquiry, including compulsory education for all officials from Brigade level upwards. Further actions will be decided by the union's equalities sub-committee.

This report is a positive start. It is important now that the union does not let the issue drop off the agenda. Since the #MeToo movement kicked off in 2017, the internal culture in our unions has had greater scrutiny. But so far the change has been surface level at best.

We know from experience that pressure will come from more conservative elements in the union to minimise the issue; to dismiss misogyny as banter or claim it is distracting from "real" industrial issues. But a truly democratic union will ensure participation from all its members.

It's down to the members committed to an equal, democratic and effective union, as well as the union's leadership, to see that real strides forwards are made to tackle misogyny in the FBU. □

• #MeTU: metu.uk



Activist Agenda

About Left Internationalists (LLI) has circulated suggestions for submissions for the big Labour left group Momentum's convention on 10 March. The convention is online only, and limited to debating the next top campaign, some "strategic priorities", and constitutional amendments. LLI proposes in-person conferences able to vote on policy; "tax the rich to rebuild NHS" as campaign; "reverse Brexit" and housing as strategic priorities. Any Momentum member can make submissions, but they must be by 18 Feb. □

• Links, template motions, etc. at workersliberty.org/agenda

"Free Fares London" campaign launches



Environment

By Owen Flood

On Saturday 10 February the Stop Silvertown Tunnel Coalition met to discuss a campaign for free public transport in London. Over 50 people attended the meeting from a range of different campaigning organisations and unions.

The provisional name of "Free Fares London" was decided for the campaign, and a steering committee was elected to carry out jobs between general meetings. Campaign ideas and actions were discussed, including a presence at the next London Assembly on 7 March. There was a consensus to make more links with transport unions in order to grow the campaign and make links with the wider labour movement.

The Stop Silvertown Coali-

tion is a campaigning group set-up to oppose the proposed Silvertown Tunnel, a road construction project in south London that has been opposed by Newham Council and Greenwich Council.

The campaign for free public transport comes as a positive alternative to building new road infrastructure in the city. In order to seriously tackle air pollution and the climate crisis, we need free public transport not road tunnels. Currently public transport in London is free for those over 66. Campaigning has also won free bus and tram travel for under-18s.

The London Free Fares campaign takes inspiration from successful and partially successful campaigns and policies for free public transport in parts of Europe. Cities in Germany, France, and Estonia have trialled free public transport or severely reducing fares.

When free public transport was introduced in the French city of Dunkirk in 2018, 48% of new public transport users

reported that they regularly used it instead of cars. In Luxembourg public transport was made free in March 2020. Since then car use has fallen by 11% and public transport use has increased by 25%.

While free public transport on its own is not enough to eliminate or severely reduce car use, if it is combined with more funding for increased routes and frequency it can do a lot to curb it. And we should support free public transport regardless, as a right to be guaranteed for all.

The demand for free public transport goes further than what any major British political party or union proposes. Labour (under Corbyn) and the Greens in both their manifestos have committed to affordable transport but do not go as far as pledging free public transport. The same is true of the main transport unions, RMT and Unite.

At the meeting no specific proposal on how to fund free public transport was decided

on. However a number of ideas were raised including: payroll tax, land value capture, revenue raised from commercial or luxury property, road charging, increased fuel duty, a moratorium of further road building and channelling that money to public transport, and wealth taxes as well as further measures to curb tax evasion. In general, we would advocate funding measures

that channel more from the rich than the poorer in society – road-charging, for example, would be more of a burden on many not very well-off.

We encourage activists and readers to get involved in the campaign. The next meeting is still to be announced. Please watch this space as well as the Stop Silvertown Tunnel website for updates. □

No run for mayor

By Martin Thomas

Contrary to media speculation, Jeremy Corbyn is not going to run for London Mayor. The poll is on 2 May; Sadiq Khan is the Labour candidate. The possibility, however, remains open of the local Labour Party defying the Labour leadership and selecting Corbyn (who is still a Labour member, though denied the Labour whip in

Parliament) as its candidate in Islington North in the coming parliamentary election. *Solidarity* has supported the wide protest against Islington North being denied a democratic choice, but [has argued](#) against courting exclusion by a "local independent" contest. The result would not be a building-block for a new and better party, but a further episode in the dispersion of the Corbyn-era Labour Left. □



A hero? Better a democratic leader



Book review

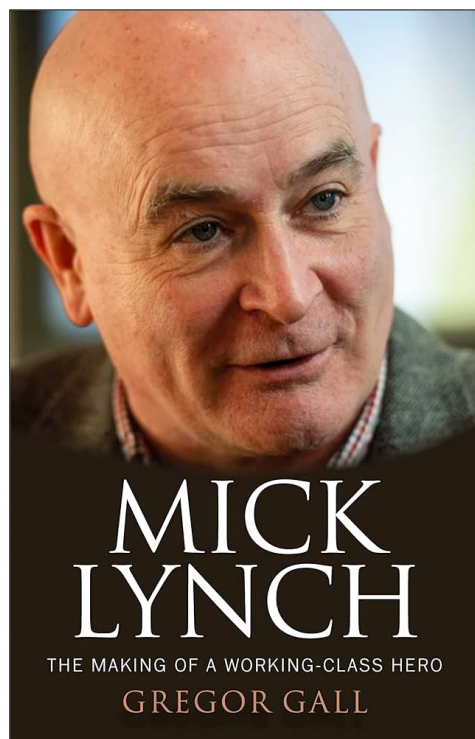
By a railworker

At the end of June 2022 I was jubilant, having just taken part in three days of national strike as part of the RMT union's campaign to defend jobs, pay and conditions on Train Operating Companies (TOCs) and Network Rail (NR).

It was a similar feeling for many of the strikers. And we weren't alone. We had taken heart from the disruption we'd caused and the passing public's positive response, and a far larger group of people had learnt about our dispute by gleefully watching hostile interviewers being taken down by our General Secretary (GS) Mick Lynch.

Gregor Gall, who published a biography of Bob Crow in 2017, describes and analyses all that in his new book *Mick Lynch – The Making of a Working-Class Hero*. The book is both "biographical and sociological", a story of how Lynch became GS intertwined with a discussion of working class "power, material interests and ideology".

As Gall notes "... it was a particular peculiarity of the period in Britain that Lynch was first and most frequently called a working-class hero ... [when] a small handful of television interviews in late June 2022 were the foundation for this designation." It was also a measure of how far the labour movement's



aspirations and expectations have diminished.

Those three days of action and the initial interviews turned out to be the high points of a campaign that ended in November 2023, when RMT members in Train Operating Companies, following Network Rail workers, accepted below-inflation pay deals with more attacks to come.

It was clear by the start of 2023 that the leadership wanted out of the dispute. Eventually that feeling permeated the membership, and reduced the chance of being able to escalate the action. None of the deals put to members was ever recommended by the leadership. Cancelling strikes at short notice and at best doing them as a stop-start effort, eroded confidence.

Maybe against such an intransigent opponent as this government, and with reduced impact after Network Rail settled in March 2023, there was nothing else we could have done? Lynch could "have made moves to win support to establish a strike fund to sustain prolonged strike action" and tried harder to get coordinated action with other unions, as Gall proposes. Another suggestion, that TOC and NR workers could have been levied to finance industrial action by signallers, the RMT group of rail workers with most power, is worth considering.

Workers on the rail and beyond need to evaluate the strike wave. Gall's book will be a useful aid for that. It will be lost on Lynch who refused to be interviewed for the book, whilst accepting many other such requests both before and after. Indeed, in its efforts to mute the book's message, the union has issued a cease-and-desist request to the publishers to stop them contacting RMT members with a discount offer. Lynch himself has said "If I get the chance, [I like] to read a few books", but obviously not this one.

And this leads to Gall's consideration of what he calls his subject's "anti-intellectual workerism". I find it hard to believe that Lynch, who has a degree in history from LSE, is anti-intellectual. It is wholly possible that he puts on an act to maintain his claim that "What I am... is in the mainstream of where our members are". More likely, it is a lazy shorthand for dismissing his critics on the left.

Dismiss

In attempting to dismiss his critics' relevance and the need for new ideas he says "working class people educate each other all of the time". How effective is it to rely on that "spontaneous" education when so many working-class people voted for the Tories against Corbyn's Labour Party in 2019?

It is difficult, from Gall's description, to tell where Lynch stands: he wants and can see the benefit of a Labour government. "It is in the class interests of our people ... even if they just turn around some of the most egregious things that the Tories are doing ..." That seems reasonable, though with a distinct lack of ambition. Then Lynch says he wouldn't join the party; reminding me of the people who won't join a union but will happily take the benefits it achieves.

Summing up on the dispute, Gall says that the "government [was] engaged in a major reforming confrontation" defining that as "... a stage-managed conflict which seeks to radically reset the bal-

ance of power in industrial relations in favour of management."

He argues, in these situations, that industrial power needed to be augmented by "... political power through a political party" adding that the RMT "... had not resolved the issue of how to exercise political influence on the scale that was required". "Ultimately, this explains why the 2022-3 dispute with Network Rail, TOCs and the Conservative government could not be won on sufficiently favourable terms for the RMT."

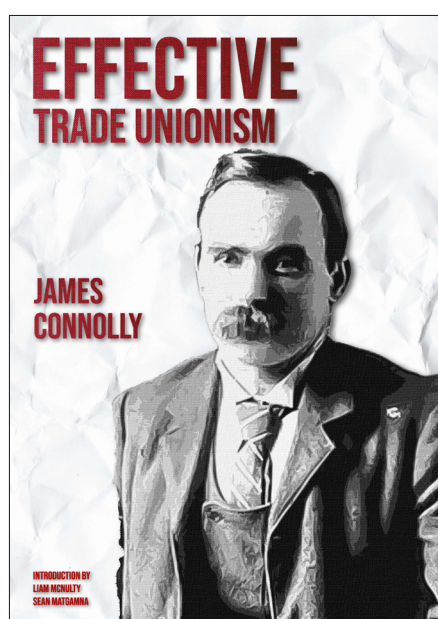
In that section he clearly asks us to consider that a better outcome might have been obtained if the RMT had been affiliated to Labour but then uses the unhelpful phrase "political je ne sais pas" to describe what that benefit might have been. Clearly the RMT could have used the structures of the Labour Party, and sought an alliance with other striking affiliated unions and the hundreds of thousands of sympathetic Labour Party and union members, to add weight in our efforts to get a better deal, and not just for RMT members, or at best to fatally damage the Tories.

On other political matters Gall gets it right with his negative characterisation of Lexit, social democratic reformism and the bureaucratic operation of the union – all of which Lynch supports.

In terms of his overall effect during the strike wave Gall says "Some may have been inspired into activity and greater activity by Lynch ... but it is likely that many more will have continued to look skywards for representation and prosecution of their views and interests by others."

Gall counters with a line from the Redskins "Take no heroes, only inspiration". Another lyric from one of Lynch's favourite bands, The Three Johns, encapsulates our thinking better:

Don't put your faith in him above
In Beirut or Liverpool, Berlin or Tehran
If you're not asking for the
Whole wide world, what are you asking for? □



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A half-story of the miners' strike



TV review

By John Cunningham

Some aspects of the Channel 4 documentary on the 1984-5 miners' strike, *The Battle for Britain*, are worth paying attention to. It includes interviews with former striking miners, who give straightforward, honest and hard-hitting accounts of what happened to them and, in particular, their appalling treatment at the hands of the police.

The contrast is stark with the accounts from miners who worked through the strike: they seem blissfully unaware of the broader issues of the strike. They offer a fixation with the idea of "intimidation" as driving the strike, but little in the way of evidence is offered.

A couple of policemen are interviewed, but as often in these instances, there is little that lifts their contributions beyond the level of platitudinous drivel. The "official" political input is provided mainly by the intensely boring Robin Butler CVO, KCB, GCB, KG, a stuffy career civil servant who was Thatcher's Private Secretary during the strike. As befits a former Head Boy at Harrow he is a master of the cliché, but says nothing of substance.

The episode centred around Orgreave showed where the real intimidation lay. The police engineered a trap for the strikers and arrested 95 miners, who were then charged with riot,

which potentially carries a long prison sentence.

The court cases that followed in Sheffield clearly demonstrated that the police arrests and supposed "evidence" were utter fabrications. All 95 were acquitted and the charges withdrawn.

Channel Four chose not to mention the case, in 2012, where an ex-miner was charged with an actual crime and found guilty. Neil Greatrex stole funds from a retired miners' home, was found guilty, and received a prison sentence. Greatrex worked throughout the strike and was a leading figure in the establishment of that pathetic travesty of a trade union, the so-called UDM (Union of Democratic Miners).

The programme omits what happened to the working miners who continued in the industry when the strike was over. Did their loyalty to Margaret Thatcher save their jobs? Roland Taylor, one of the working miners who features prominently in the programme, describes how, after the strike, he was invited (via an anonymous phone call) to a "drink" in London where Margaret Thatcher turned up.

Sherry

Well, I hope he enjoyed his glass of sherry, because his pit, Shirebrook in North Derbyshire (which features prominently in the programme), was closed in 1994. The "loyalty" of the UDM was repaid by the closure of all Nottinghamshire mines. The last pit in Nottinghamshire to close was Thoresby in July 2015. Other pits such as Shireoaks closed as early as 1990.

The miners who worked through the strike, in Nottinghamshire and elsewhere, ended up no different from those who stayed loyal to the union. Their reward for betraying their union and their community was to be flushed down the toilet, along with everybody else.

Much heralded, and timed for the 40th anniversary of the most important strike in British history, the Channel 4 series promises much but delivers little. Much of the treatment is superficial. There is almost no attempt at contextualisation and the historical background is paltry.

For example, why did the Nottinghamshire coalfield prove so resistant to joining the strike, though about 20% of the 32,000 workforce did join, and there were Women's Support Groups and other supporters from the area. The only answer given by the documentary – and repeated ad nauseam – is that "intimidation" explains the success of the strike elsewhere.

In fact, in the initial weeks of the strike, striking miners went into Nottingham to meet miners going to work and talk to them, with the result that many turned back. Support for the strike was clearly growing. The Thatcher government was rattled. It responded by mobilising thousands of police from up and down the country and eventually "sealed off" the Nottinghamshire coalfield.

There are many, many omissions from the documentary. Ian McGregor, the manager of the National Coal Board (formerly of the British Steel Corporation), imported by Thatcher from the USA gets no mention. Cortonwood colliery in South Yorkshire, whose threatened closure was the initial spark for the strike, is ignored. Thatcher's whole closure programme gets a brief mention, but there are no details and the NUM's response is omitted.

There is no mention of the murky connections of Roger Windsor, an National Union of Mineworkers executive officer. (After many charges and counter-charges, former MI5 chief Stella Rimington chose her words carefully. "It would be correct to say that he, Roger Windsor, was never an agent in any sense of the word that you can possibly imagine and that MI5 did not run agents in the National Union of Mineworkers... That's not to say that the police or Special Branch ... might not have been doing some of those things".)

This dish of cold left overs is all the more surprising because during the strike Channel Four, along with some foreign news services, was one of the few media outlets trusted by the striking miners. At the so-called Battle of Orgreave, Channel Four's footage showed clearly that the pickets began throwing stones etc. at the police in



response to being charged down by mounted police. The BBC reversed this footage and made it appear that the mounted police charge was in response to stone throwing (which could hardly be described as intense).

Many years later the BBC "apologised", claiming a "mistake" in the editing process. In *The Battle for Britain* Channel Four, despite having got it right in 1984, has itself reversed the footage! □

The strange case of David Hart

The Channel Four documentary spends a large part of the third episode recounting the story (or myth) of David Hart who, it is claimed by some, played a major role in advising Margaret Thatcher on the strike and engineering the downfall of the NUM. Hart is one of those individuals, much loved by the media, who are frequently portrayed as a cross between James Bond, the Scarlet Pimpernel and a character from a John Buchan novel. A product of Eton, Hart never had a "proper job", apparently being satisfied with a "playboy" lifestyle and property investments while carousing with the rich and powerful and dreaming up various schemes, some of which, such as engineering a coup in Equatorial Guinea, suggest a fantasist of the first stripe. A warrant was issued for his arrest but nothing came of this. Hart did advise Thatcher about the strike and did travel round Nottinghamshire (in a chauffeur-driven Mercedes according to some reports!) drumming up support for a breakaway union from the NUM and handing out dosh to those he deemed worthy. To what extent he was a key player in the strike, as suggested by Channel Four, is open to question. Even many Tories were distrustful of him (he was once refused a ticket to the Tory Party Annual Conference), as was Roy Lynk, the ultra-dim President of the UDM. Hart died in 2011. Good riddance. □

Better on the strike

Films: *Which Side are you On?* (1984) Documentary. Dir. Ken Loach: bit.ly/w-side

Still the Enemy Within (2014) Documentary. Dir. Owen Gower: bit.ly/e-within

Brassed Off (1996) Dir. Mark Herman. A colliery band struggles to survive after the closure of the pit is announced: bit.ly/b-off

Pride. Dir. Matthew Warchus. Uplifting film about Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners: bit.ly/pride-m

Website: Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign otjc.org.uk

Books, pamphlets: *Class Against Class: The Miners' Strike 1984-5*. Workers' Liberty book

The Enemy Within: The Secret War Against the Miners. Seumas Milne

Marching to the Frontline. Francis Beckett and David Hencke. *Shafted: The Media, the Miners' Strike and the Aftermath*. Edited by Granville Williams. Campaign for Press

and Broadcasting Freedom *Across Frontiers*. Jonathan Saunders. Detailed account of the international solidarity evoked by the miners' strike

Poetry: Any poems by Mogg Williams are worthy of attention: particularly *Of Bread, Gods and Men* (1987) and *Mogg's People* (1985). Although he died long before the strike the poetry of Idris Davies still retains its power and beauty.

Stage: *Close the Coalhouse Door* (1968): Musical written by Alan Plater, songs by Alex Glasgow. Has been revived and updated on a number of occasions. Fine renditions of various songs from it are performed by the Unthanks, a band based in the North East.

The Pitmen Painters (2009): Drama by Lee Hall. Concerns the development of the Ashington group of miners, who became accomplished artists. □



Gramsci's laboratory: "s

By Paul Hampton

Despite his fame, a considerable part of the writings of Antonio Gramsci, a leader of the Italian Communist Party in its revolutionary period of the early 1920s who then wrote *Prison Notebooks* in Mussolini's jails, is not available in English.

Joseph Buttigieg's English translation of *Prison Notebooks* 1 to 8 was published in three volumes by Columbia University Press in 1992, 1996 and 2007, but Buttigieg died in 2019, and it is not clear when the remaining *Notebooks* may be fully translated.

However, another volume from the *Notebooks* has been published in English: *Antonio Gramsci, Subaltern Social Groups: A Critical Edition of Prison Notebook 25*. It adds significantly to our knowledge of this remarkable classical Marxist.

The book, edited and translated by Buttigieg and Marcus Green, provides a valuable overview of the publication of Gramsci's prison notebooks, new and revised translations, and insight into the later appropriation of Gramsci by the "subaltern studies" strand of postcolonial theory.

Gramsci philology

Gramsci was a founder of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in 1921. After Mussolini's fascists seized power, Gramsci led the PCI and was elected to parliament in 1924. He was arrested in November 1926 and sentenced to 20 years in prison. He was released shortly before his death on 27 April 1937.

Gramsci's original manuscripts consist of 33 notebooks, amounting to 2,848 handwritten pages: four notebooks of translations and language exercises, eight miscellaneous notebooks consisting mostly of first drafts of notes, four mixed notebooks partitioned into distinct sections and 17 monothematic notebooks, or what he described as "special notebooks," which include second drafts of notes organised according to specific topics.

Gramsci devoted a "special notebook" to the topic of subaltern social

groups, inscribing *On the Margins of History* (The History of Subaltern Social Groups) on the title page. This is the notebook newly translated into English.

The first Italian editions of Gramsci's notes took the form of six thematically organised volumes, published by Einaudi between 1948 and 1951. Edited by Felice Platone under direct supervision of the Stalinist apparatchik Palmiro Togliatti, they presented Gramsci as the Stalinised PCI wanted.

Platone assembled six of the eight notes from the special notebook on subaltern social groups, along with twenty notes on a range of topics from nine other notebooks and placed them together in the appendix of the volume titled *Il Risorgimento*. Green argues this meant "Gramsci's treatment of subaltern groups had secondary importance, was exclusively connected to the Italian Risorgimento [the 19th-century movement for a unified Italian state], and was not necessarily a recurring theme and independent category of analysis".

The Platone edition served as the primary source for initial English translations of Gramsci's prison notebooks. A slim volume, *The Modern Prince and Other Writings*, edited by Louis Marks (1957) put out by the publishers of the Communist Party USA, was the first anthology of Gramsci's writings to appear in English. Marks translated the Italian subalterno as "subordinate," instead of "subaltern," obscuring Gramsci's category.

The most widely known anthology of Gramsci's prison writings in English appeared in 1971 as *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (again published by the CP's International Publishers/Lawrence and Wishart, though Hoare was close to Trotskyism). This text also "broadly speaking, followed the lines laid down in [Platone's] Einaudi edition". In 1995 Derek Boothman published *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*.

In 1975, Gramsci's complete prison notebooks appeared in print for the first time in Italian. The *Quaderni del*

Proclamation of the Abolition of Slavery in the French Colonies, 27 April 1848, by François Auguste Biard



carcere was edited by Valentino Gerratana (Einaudi, 1975), in coordination with the Gramsci Institute. Gerratana reproduced Gramsci's eight miscellaneous, four mixed, and 17 thematic special notebooks in the chronological order of their composition, as well as providing detailed descriptions of Gramsci's four translation notebooks. Gerratana numbered the notebooks in sequential order from 1 to 29.

The Gerratana edition, for the first time, provided a complete reproduction of the special notebook *On the Margins of History* (The History of Subaltern Social Groups), Notebook 25 in his chronological sequencing. However Gramsci's treatment of subaltern social groups and classes largely went unnoticed. The thematic index of the Gerratana edition did not include entries for subaltern social groups or subaltern classes.

Gerratana's critical edition has become the authoritative text. It served as the model for critical editions of the prison notebooks in French, German and Spanish, as well as Buttigieg's three volumes.

Subaltern social groups

Gramsci started Notebook 25 in July or August 1934 and composed the last note in the first months of 1935. This new, complete translation of Notebook 25 shows the text itself is quite limited. It consists of just 15 pages in the book, eight paragraphs on various topics: □1 Davide Lazzaretti; □2 Methodological criteria; □3 Adriano Tilgher, Homo faber; □4 Some general notes on the historical development of subaltern social groups in the Middle Ages and in Rome; □5 Methodological criteria; □6 The slaves in Rome; □7 Indirect sources. "Utopias" and so-called "philosophical novels"; and □8 Scientism and residues of late Romanticism.

In □2, Gramsci states: "Subaltern groups are always subject to the ini-

tiatives of the dominant groups even when they rebel and rise up; only 'permanent' victory breaks their subordination, but not immediately. In fact, even when they seem triumphant, subaltern groups are only in an anxious defensive state."

Gramsci used the term "subaltern classes" (classi subalterne) for the first time in Notebook 3, □14, likely written in June 1930. The phrase appears elsewhere in Notebook 3 and later in Notebook 4, written from June 1930 to May 1933. He referred to slaves, plebeians, common people, the proto-proletariat of the medieval communes, peasants and the modern industrial proletariat as subaltern classes.

After June 1930, the phrase "subaltern classes" (and later "subaltern social groups") became a permanent element of Gramsci's lexicon, overlapping with other lines of inquiry. However, Gramsci never provided a precise definition of "subaltern", "subaltern social groups" or "subaltern classes" in the prison notebooks. Green argues that Gramsci did not conceive them as a single or homogenous entity, which is why he consistently referred to them in the plural.

Gramsci used the word "class" in earlier texts and replaced it with "social group" in texts after mid-1932. Gerratana argued that this change in terminology was likely due to Gramsci's "increased vigilance against prison surveillance" and not the "replacement of the Marxist concept of class struggle with the sociological methodology of the dynamics of 'social groups'."

Green points out that Gramsci clearly did not disguise all references to "class" in the prison notebooks after mid-1932. In some instances, the variants of "subaltern classes" and "subaltern social groups" appear as overlapping categories. Green believes the change in terminology pointed to a greater emphasis on the heterogeneous nature of

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Subaltern social groups”



subalterns, stressing the problematic issue of the categories of “people”, “classes” and “social groups”.

Notebook 25 in context

This book also contains extracts from earlier notebooks, where Gramsci refers to subaltern classes, providing more than 100 pages of translations in the same format as the Buttigieg volumes. There are far too many insights to quote in a short review – read the book to get the full flavour. Two themes – political parties and methodology, suggest Gramsci was still working within the early Comintern paradigm when he was writing about subaltern social groups.

On political parties, Gramsci observed in Notebook 3, □48 that “‘pure’ spontaneity does not exist in history”. He argued: “The elements of ‘conscious leadership’ in the ‘most spontaneous’ of movements cannot be ascertained simply because they have left no verifiable document. One may say that the element of spontaneity is therefore characteristic of the ‘history of subaltern classes’.”

In Notebook 9, □68, Gramsci defined bureaucratic centralism as “indicative of the formation of a small privileged group that seeks to perpetuate its privileges by controlling and even stifling the emergence of oppositional forces at the base, even if those forces have the same interests as the dominant group”. Somewhat cryptically, he stated, “democratic centralism is an elastic form that lends itself to many ‘incarnations’”.

In Notebook 10, □41 Gramsci contrasted faulty conceptions of ideology, treating ideas as “mere illusions, a deception they are subject to”. For Marxism, “ideologies are anything but arbitrary; they are real historical facts that one must fight against and unmask as instruments of domination”.

In Notebook 10, □12 Gramsci stated:

“Parties are the elaborators of the new integral and all-encompassing intellectual corps; that is, the parties are the crucibles of the unification of theory and practice, understood as a real historical process.” He argued that “there is always a segment of the mass, including the subaltern mass, that is in a position of leadership and responsibility, and the philosophy of that segment always precedes the philosophy of the whole, not only as a theoretical anticipation but as an actual necessity”.

In Notebook 15, □66 Gramsci observed that “it is possible to have an old generation with antiquated ideas alongside a generation with infantile ideas, a situation, in other words, in which the intermediate historical link – that is, the generation that could have educated the young – is missing”.

The concept of science

In Notebook 11, □15 Gramsci wrote a length exposition on the concept of science. He observed how apparently “the natural sciences enable us to foresee the evolution of natural processes”, and hence methodology has been thought to be “scientific” only if, and insofar as, it abstractly permits us to “foresee” the future of society. Instead, Gramsci argued: “In reality, the only thing one can foresee ‘scientifically’ is the struggle, but not its concrete moments, which are necessarily the results of opposing forces in continuous movement that can never be reduced to fixed quantities.”

Gramsci is highly critical of Bukharin’s book, *Historical Materialism* (1921), which he referred to as “the popular manual”. “It is, however, the concept of ‘science’ itself as it appears in the Popular Manual that must be critically destroyed. It is taken wholesale from the natural sciences, as if these were science tout court, or science par excellence, as has been determined by positivism.”

Gramsci bluntly defined someone who is not a scientist:

“If he appears to have a poor mastery of his particular criteria; if he lacks a thorough understanding of the concepts he is using; if he is poorly informed about and has a weak understanding of the work that has already been done on the problems he is addressing; if he is not very cautious in his assertions; if he does not proceed in the required manner but is arbitrary and illogical; if, instead of taking into account the gaps that exist in the current state of knowledge, he silently ignores them and contents himself with purely verbal connections or solutions, rather than declaring that he had arrived at provisional positions that can be resumed, developed, etc.”

Gramsci crowned Notebook 11, □15 with a passage similar to others in earlier notebooks, which must be assimilated by every Marxist:

“A broader methodological criterion: namely, it is not very ‘scientific’, or it is simply not ‘very serious’, to choose from among one’s adversaries the most stupid and mediocre ones, or to choose the least essential and the most occasional of their opinions, and then presume to have ‘destroyed’ the enemy ‘completely’ just because one has destroyed a secondary and incidental opinion of his – or to presume to have destroyed an ideology or a doctrine with a demonstration of the theoretical deficiencies of its third- and fourth- rate proponents. Furthermore, ‘one must be fair to one’s enemies’, in the sense that one must make an effort to understand what they really meant to say and not dwell maliciously on the superficial immediate meanings of their expressions. It has to be so, if the proposed goal is to raise the tone and intellectual level of one’s followers, as opposed to the immediate goal of using every means possible to create a desert around oneself. The approach that should be adopted is this: one’s follower has to be able to discuss and uphold his position when debating with capable and intelligent adversaries and not just with unsophisticated and unprepared people who are convinced by ‘authority’ and by ‘emotion’. The possibility of error must be declared and justified without thereby compromising one’s position.”

Subaltern studies

One reason why this Gramsci volume is likely to obtain a wide, global readership is the use made of his term “subaltern social groups” by modern post-colonial theorists. Ranajit Guha and the group of historians who founded the South Asian Subaltern Studies Collective are largely responsible for introducing themes related to the Gramscian concept into current in-

tellectual discussions.

In the first issue of *Subaltern Studies*, published in 1982, Guha credited Gramsci and his notes on subaltern groups as one of the major influences in the founding of the research project. The aim of the collective was to challenge elitist historiography and to illuminate aspects of subaltern history that had been ignored and neglected in the field of South Asian studies. Between 1982 and 2005, the Subaltern Studies Collective published twelve volumes of *Subaltern Studies*.

There is no space to assess these theories here. Vivek Chibber’s book, *Postcolonial Theory and the Spectre of Capital* (2013), makes a sharp Marxist critique of the evolution of subaltern studies away from Enlightenment universalism, class analysis and Marxism.

The publication of Notebook 25 and other relevant passages from his notebooks indicate that Gramsci himself remained preoccupied with Marxist themes, particularly those of developing a working class ideological worldview and building a Marxist political party committed to working class socialism.

From these texts, post-colonial readings that seek to replace working class agency in the struggle for socialism will find no sustenance. Similarly, those who seek to detach Gramsci from his Marxist politics will also find no succour. In fact, Gramsci gives relentless attention to the importance of the Marxist working class political party and the need to fight the ideological front of the class struggle. □

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The Narodniks

The road to Bolshevism

By Sean Matgamna

Third in a series around the anniversary of the death of Vladimir Ulyanov (Lenin) in 1924

Franco Venturi (in his book *Roots of Revolution*) quotes a police report on the state of things in the St Petersburg working class after the impact of the populists (Narodniks).

Timeline

1861: Abolition of serfdom. Alexander Herzen, from exile, calls on intellectuals to “go to the people”. First major populist (Narodnik) group, Zemlya i Volya (Land and Freedom), 1861-4.

1872-3: The “Chaikovists” build the first populist workers’ groups in Petersburg.

1874-5: First and second waves of young radicals “going to the people”.

1875: Union of Workers of Southern Russia formed.

1876: Second Zemlya i Volya group: “Bakuninist”, aims to spark immediate mass rebellion for socialism.

1878-80: North Russian Workers’ Union formed.

1879: Zemlya i Volya splits. Majority, called Narodnaya Volya (People’s Will), goes for “terrorism” (assassination of top officials) with first aim of winning a constitution. Minority, Chornyi Peredel (Black Redistribution), upholds old approach.

1879-81: A second Workers’ Union of South Russia formed; again crushed.

March 1881: Narodnaya Volya people kill the Tsar. They are hanged. Intense repression crushes Narodnaya Volya.

April 1881: First of a wave of pogroms.

1883: Plekhanov, Axelrod, and other former leaders of Chornyi Peredel, now in exile in Switzerland, form Group for the Emancipation of Labour, with a new perspective. §

“The gross, vulgar methods employed by factory employers are becoming intolerable to the workers. They have obviously realised that a factory is not conceivable without their labour... Without workers [the employers] can do nothing.

“A realisation of this has now given rise to that spirit of solidarity among the workers which has so often been noted these days.

“Two or three years ago the employers’ affairs were no better than they are at present. Then, too, it often happened that the workers did not receive their wages on time. Yet then everything went smoothly. The cunning employer flattered his workers and said good-naturedly that he could not pay them at the right time, and they withdrew in silence, and next day turned up quite normally for work.

“But now as soon as even the most popular employer holds back wages for only three or four days, the crowd begins to murmur and curse, and strikes often break out. Even in the workshops where money for wages can never be lacking – as this is a State industry – the spirit of opposition to be found among the workmen has appeared on a scale utterly unknown before. There have been cases of work stopping because the men were not satisfied with an insufficient wage or because of oppression exercised by the management of the workshops.

“All this, taken as a whole, clearly betrays the influence of the propagandists, who have been able to sow among the workers hatred for their employers and the belief that the forces of labour are being exploited”.

The first

It was not in St Petersburg but in Odessa, in the south, on the Black Sea, that the first distinct working-class organisation in the Russian empire emerged. 30,000 of Odessa’s 200,000 population were proletarians. The story began with the work of a populist, E Zaslavsky, which lasted nine months (in 1875) before he was arrested.

He was a noble, but not rich. In 1872-3 he had anticipated the mass movement of 1874 from the towns to the peasants, and gone out to “the people” on his own. He came back disabused and convinced that the “people” to work with were the urban proletariat. He

moved in the opposite direction to the majority of the populists at that time.

Zaslavsky was a believer in Lavrov’s policy of long-term work through propaganda, and not the Bakuninist one of trying to foment immediate revolt. He circulated Lavrov’s émigré paper, *Vpered* (Forward). In 1873 he became a teacher in an existing small group of populists who worked around the Bellino-Vendrich factory, which had about 500 workers.

He tried to teach political economy and working-class history, but abandoned that for simply reading aloud Chernyshevsky’s didactic novel *What Is To Be Done?* (Vladimir Ulyanov, Lenin, would later appropriate the title for his 1902 pamphlet).

The group printed and distributed illegal leaflets, and helped workers form a library and start a communal bath.

350 workers in the factory set up a credit union. The activity of organising the workers in this mutual-aid bank eventually led to the creation of a workers’ organisation of 200 members. They had a structured leadership, an entrance fee, a subscription, and regular meetings. This was the nucleus of the Union of Workers of Southern Russia (as it was called, “Southern Russia” then being taken to include Ukraine). It spread to other factories across Odessa.

What was the “Union of Workers of Southern Russia”? A trade union? A political party? A mutual aid society? It was all of them!

Venturi: “It emphasised its distinctive working-class nature. This led to moves to exclude non-workers, and soon there was internal war between Bakuninists and others that led to a split. But the organisation survived.”

What did it do? It made propaganda, held classes, fought the working-class struggle on wages and conditions. It supported strikes, for example at the Bellino-Vendrich factory and at the Gullier-Blanchard factory. It published a manifesto on those struggles that was distributed in the towns along the Black Sea coast. Virtually everything the union did was, of course, still illegal. In late 1875 it was virtually destroyed by police action. Some of its organisers got ten years hard labour. Zaslavsky got ten years. He went half-mad in jail, and died there of TB in 1878.

From then on the Bakuninists pre-

dominated in attempts to revive the Union.

Pavel Axelrod, one of the future consistent Marxists, was still a Zemlya i Volya Bakuninist, but already working-class oriented and heavily influenced by the workers’ movement in the West. He desired, as he put it, to “let the voice of the working classes be heard”. He had been working in Kiev since 1872, and there, in 1879, he started the “Workers’ Union of South Russia”, deliberately reviving the name of the Odessa organisation of 1875.

That union soon disintegrated when Axelrod, who after the June 1879 split in Zemlya i Volya was now with Plekhanov in Black Redistribution, went to St Petersburg. In terms of the history of the Russian working-class movement, it was however very important. Its programme was an eclectic hybrid of Bakuninist and Western social-democratic approaches.

Axelrod was in transition to West European style social democratic politics in which the proletariat, not, as in populist socialism, the peasantry, was central. The union’s goal was to be an anarchist stateless society, but it advocated immediate democratic freedom in Russia. It advocated palliatives and reforms, such as the reduction of hours of work. It had a variant of the minimum-maximum programme, split between short-term reform objectives and longer-term aims, such as was typical of the Western Social Democrats at that time, with an anarchist rather than a Marxian socialist “maximum” programme and eventual goal.

The Workers’ Union was restarted in Kiev in 1880 by two young populists of a different political bent, Nikolai Shchedrin and Elizaveta Kovalskaya, who believed in vigorous economic terrorism – the use in the towns of the sort of violence against exploiters and officials which Zemlya i Volya (Land and Freedom) had advocated and used in the countryside.

Shchedrin took work in a railway centre, and soon a dozen railworkers formed the nucleus of the revived organisation. And it spread. The Ukrainians in the organisation objected to recruiting Jewish workers – “they killed Christ”. The organisers had to fight such attitudes, and they did.

The following year an anti-Jewish pogrom was started – Jewish quar-

bour movement



Five Narodnaya Volya (NV, People's Will) people hanged for killing the Tsar in 1881. From right: Timofey Mikhailov was a worker, a boilermaker, from a peasant family, active in NV since 1880. Nikolai Kibalchich had become active as a student in the early 1870s, and had previously been jailed for three years for lending a banned book. He was NV's explosives expert. Sofia Perovskaya, from an upper-class family, had also been active since the early 1870s, and had been jailed twice before 1881. Andrei Zhelyabov, Perovskaya's husband, was another veteran from the early 1870s: Vladimir Ulyanov (Lenin) would later, in *What Is To Be Done?*, cite him as a model of "sparkling energy", hoping that sharp political organising by Russian Marxists, in place of a ramshackle "circle spirit", would develop "Social-Democratic Zhelyabovs from among our revolutionaries". Nikolai Rysakov was a student who joined NV only in 1881; he gave information to the police after being arrested for killing the Tsar, and Zhelyabov and Perovskaya shunned him on tumbril and the gallows. The five were also pictured in *Solidarity* 698. □

ters were attacked, people maimed and killed, and women raped, with the police and soldiers looking on or participating. Shchedrin was already in jail, but the workers he had educated, whose antisemitism he had confronted, put out a leaflet urging the people to fight their exploiters and not the "poor Jews".

Narodnaya Volya would back the paper that started the widespread pogroms from 1881 – it was a genuine popular movement of the people, wasn't it? – but that was in the future.

The Workers' Union had 600 members and held mass meetings in the open air, outside the town. The methods of the Union were a mix of elite terror against the exploiters, the Bakuninist Zemlya i Volya policy of calls for immediate revolt, and working-class mass action. The workers were still feeling their way, enshrouded still in the integument of populism and populist methods. Many of them still retained the mentality of peasants, looking for

help to their "little father", the Tsar.

The organisation was strong in the Kiev Arsenal, but they fought there not by mass working-class action but by publishing a manifesto threatening the director of the Arsenal with death if he did not give the workers what they wanted. He did as he was told! The working day was reduced by two hours.

The Union saw it as a central task to create for the workers their own "fighting organisation" – that is, an organisation to wage terrorist guerrilla war as a weapon of the working-class struggle against exploitation.

Theirs was a working-class terrorism. Venturi quotes Axelrod's memoirs to the effect that Narodnaya Volya (the People's Will, the majority of Zemlya i Volya after the 1879 split, the minority in which became Plekhanov's group), with its concentration on killing the Tsar and on winning the support of the upper layers of society, objected to this economic terrorism against the capitalists because it would alienate the bour-

geoisie when they sought its support and money. This, Narodnaya Volya, was the organisation that would become defined by its notionally short-term and tactical aim shared with the liberals, of seeking for a constitution.

Jail

By late 1880 the leaders of the Southern Workers' Union were in jail. Shchedrin paid for his brief activity with a sentence of death, commuted by the Tsar to hard labour for life. He continued to fight in jail, and was again sentenced to death for striking an army officer. Again the sentence was commuted. He went mad and spent the rest of his life in an insane asylum, dying there in 1919. Elizaveta Kovalskaya eventually escaped from jail.

The work of building the Russian labour movement did not come cheap in human cost. Up to the revolution, the typical career of those who built the movement would be to spend a few months or a year at liberty working

underground and then to spend years in jail or Siberian exile. The road to the October Revolution would be paved with the bones and skulls of many thousands of such people.

As Trotsky recounted it, even in a later period: "The movement was as yet utterly devoid of careerism, lived on its faith in the future and on its spirit of self-sacrifice. There were as yet no routine, no set formulae, no theatrical gestures, no ready-made oratorical tricks... Whoever joined an organisation knew that prison followed by exile awaited him within the next few months.

"The measure of ambition was to last as long as possible on the job prior to arrest; to hold oneself steadfast when facing the gendarmes; to ease, as far as possible, the plight of one's comrades; to read, while in prison, as many books as possible; to escape as soon as possible from exile abroad; to acquire wisdom there; and then return to revolutionary activity in Russia". □



Starmmer to blame for Rochdale fiasco

By Rhodri Evans

Keir Starmer's running of the Labour Party is to blame for the fiasco of the Rochdale by-election on 29 February.

Labour has disavowed its candidate, Azhar Ali. It is too near to polling day on 29 February to run another candidate or even to remove Ali's "Labour" designation from ballot papers.

The reactionary demagogue George Galloway now has a good chance, and maybe even the far-right Reform Party's candidate, Simon Danczuk (a former right-wing Labour MP who was sacked by Labour after harassing a 17-year old woman). The Tories got 31% in 2019.

A local Labour activist told us that his guess is that Rochdale Labour people will most probably shrug and turn their efforts to campaigning for the council elections in May. Ali does not live in Rochdale, and has no real local base.

The Green Party candidate has withdrawn his candidacy (though he will still be on the ballot paper) because of anti-Muslim social media posts he

now "regrets". Ali told a Labour Party meeting (Lancashire, not Rochdale, and before he was selected as candidate) that the 7 October Hamas pogrom was deliberately set up by Israel in order to license an attack on Gaza.

Although Ali had been in "Muslims Against Antisemitism", that was a blatant reprise of old antisemitic claims that Jews are the hidden hand behind all evils, and they bring their misfortunes on themselves.

Ever since 2020, the Starmer leadership, under cover of quashing antisemitism, has been suppressing discussion and education on the issue. Probably, even in the shrivelled Starmer Labour Party, there were people in the meeting who saw what was wrong.

But they preferred to keep quiet, to avoid a risk of trouble for themselves, and presumably to hope it wouldn't come out. Then someone leaked the story to the *Mail on Sunday*.

The Labour leaders at first equivocated – though left-wingers like Andy McDonald have been instantly sus-



pended for alleged antisemitism which was really just vapid blather – then disavowed Ali.

If there were a culture of discussion and education in the Labour Party, it wouldn't have happened.

It might not have happened if Labour leaders had allowed a wider choice of candidate, allowing more critical and leftist nominees onto the shortlist instead of limiting it to three right-wing-

ers. The nearest thing to a left-wing option on 29 Feb is a retired vicar, Mark Coleman, standing as an independent with Just Stop Oil support.

Coleman has previously stood for the Greens and tells voters his wife was a Labour councillor.

But Coleman won't stop Galloway or Danczuk, and he is not specially left-wing. □

Jewish students protest at Miller

By Zack Muddle

Around 50 Jewish students protested "against antisemitic hatred in Bristol" on Sunday 11 February. David Miller and Lowkey headlined a panel organised by "[Bristol Palestine Alliance](#)", whose members include Bristol Stop the War, Bristol Palestine Solidarity Campaign, and "[Bristol Muslim Community](#)". The talk's pur-

pose included largely denying the existence of antisemitism, and demonising those who call it out.

Bristol University Jewish Society (JSoc) organised the protest outside the panel, specifically against Miller, though with limited publicity in advance. Their placards denounced Miller's antisemitic remarks that "Jews are [not discriminated](#) against... they

actually discriminate against marginalised groups"; that Jewish students are "[pawns](#)" of Israel; that "Even chicken soup is a Zionist plot... [as Jewish-Muslim] interfaith work... [is] a [Trojan horse](#) for normalising Zionism"; and more.

Abuse

JSoc's former [president](#) said: "While making our message very clear, that we are stand-

ing up against racism against Jews, we were disappointed that people attending the talk were shouting words of abuse at us and demanding that the Jewish students present at the protest answer for Israel's actions in the war. We were not there representing Israel... We were simply there because David Miller has repeatedly expressed opinions riddled with antisemitic tropes."

While opinions in the JSoc surely vary, many are critical of Israel's actions in the war. In late November the society hosted a speaker from Standing Together, the main pro-ceasefire movement in Israel.

Allegations that their criticism of Miller is about defending Israel's actions betray another type of antisemitism. □

"Massacre" too weak a term?



Letter

Ben Tausz ([Solidarity 698](#)) criticises the editorial of [Solidarity 696](#) for saying that "there are good reasons to be wary about insisting Israel's war represents 'a genocide'." He takes those measured words as "inveighing so heavily" against the genocide label.

Our coverage since October 2023 has denounced what we have called "catastrophe", "massacre", "slaughter" of civilians in Gaza; Israel's new targeting policies, licensing attacks likely to kill many civilians for the sake of a possible few Hamas-fighter casualties; the destruction of ordinary civic life in Gaza, risking mass deaths through hunger and disease; the exterminationist rhetoric of far-right Israeli government

ministers, and Netanyahu's efforts to keep them "on board" so as to sustain himself in office.

We use strong and emotive words. The editorial quotes Omer Bartov, who is very measured about his reluctance to use the label "genocide".

Why does Ben think the words too weak, and "inveigh so heavily" for his preferred term, "genocide"?

Assimilation

His references to Chinese government abuse of the Uyghurs, and Putin's announced drive to erase Ukraine as a distinct nation and reconstitute it as just part of Russia, are irrelevant.

"Genocide" there means forced assimilation and destruction of distinct identity. Whatever the misdeeds of Israel, attempts to forcibly Judaise Palestinian Arabs are not among them.

Ben must mean "genocide" in the

other and more common sense, a drive to wipe out a whole people, or that part of a people within the range of fire. Horrific massacres may not be exactly genocides. The editorial referred to the atom-bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, which killed 100,000 to 200,000 (and directly to intimidate Japan, not as "collateral" while aiming at military targets). The US war in Vietnam killed about [200,000](#) people a year at its peak, maybe [two million](#) civilian deaths in all, thanks to bombing with little concern for civilian casualties. Israel's war in Gaza is more like the US in Vietnam (on a smaller scale) than the Armenian genocide of 1915, or the Tutsi genocide of 1994.

On one level it is macabre pedantry to make much of massacre not being "genocide" in the strict sense. Though repeatedly criticising other messages on the Gaza protests, we made no spe-

cial polemic about the "genocide" term until [Solidarity 696](#). But it is not true here that a bit of emotive imprecision does no harm. Not true that the cost of imprecision can be outweighed by the benefit of being with the flow of the sloganising about "genocide" on those protests.

The term "genocide" has been used there from the very start, and indeed on anti-Israel protests for many years. It denotes not a search for precision, but rather the thought that what the USA does (or Russia in Afghanistan, or...) is mere "massacre", but what Israel does (in this or in fact any war) is something else again.

That is not "innocent" searching for the strongest word to protest against killing. It comes from the same flow of thought as "Zionists same sort of thing as Nazis". □

Martin Thomas, London

David Miller's world: "Zionist spies" operate everywhere

By Dale Street

David Miller, a former Professor of Political Sociology at Bristol University, whose recent [Employment Tribunal](#) has brought much comment, believes that Zionism is more powerful than any state in the world: "The sovereignty of every nation in the world is undermined by the Zionist movement's activities."

The Zionist movement, he claims, is seeking world domination: "The enemy we face is trying to impose its will all over the world." There is an ongoing "attempt by the Israelis to impose their will all over the world, and that's what we should recognise."

Miller jumps back and forth between references to the Zionist movement, the Israel lobby, and the state of Israel itself. In his eyes, they are all the same thing.

Like the rest of the world, Britain is a target of the Zionist movement: "There has been a long, long history of Zionist attempts to penetrate this country and to take on and colonise parts of the power structure of this country."

Britain is "in the grip of an assault on its public sphere by the state of Israel and its advocates." This assault has been successful: "An extraordinary Zionist stranglehold" now exists "at the top of industries and governmental organisations" and "over the top of the music industry." There are "Zionist entryists and spies at senior levels in every major British institution."

The Zionist stranglehold has made proper discussion of anti-racism impossible: "Meaningful conversations about anti-Black racism and Islamophobia have been drowned out by a concerted lobbying campaign targeting universities, political parties, the equalities regulator and public institutions all over the country."

This concerted lobbying campaign is run by Israel: "To be clear, this campaign of censorship, which has attacked British universities, political parties and public institutions, is directed by the State of Israel."

Israel has also played an influential role in determining the outcome of recent British elections. It has "tried to dictate (!) the outcome of the past two general elections [2017 and 2019], and, by any yardstick, succeeded to a great extent."

The Zionist movement's influence "was one of the key reasons why Corbyn was sunk. There was such a lack of understanding of Zionism, of the Zionist movement, of the Israel lobby which goes along with that."

With Corbyn out of the way, the Zi-

onist movement has now been able to reassert a controlling influence in the Labour Party:

"We are not going to get a proper investigation [into a leaked Labour Party report] by Starmer or Nandy, who have been in receipt of money from the Zionist movement, from Trevor Chinn. A significant element of support [for Starmer] has come from the Zionist movement."

Miller discovers the corrosive impact of the Zionist movement even in the East London Mosque.

"Israel has sent people in to target that. Interfaith work is a Trojan horse for normalising Zionism in the Muslim community. For example, the East London Mosque unknowingly held a project of making chicken soup with Jewish and Muslim communities coming together."

The Community Security Trust (CST), which provides training and security for Jewish community organisations, is another front for Israel or the Zionist movement: "The CST exists to run point for a hostile foreign government in the UK... It should be under investigation for its ties with the State of Israel. This is a straightforward story of influence-peddling by a foreign state."

Enemy

According to Miller, "the Zionist movement, and the Israeli government, are the enemy of the Left, the enemy of world peace, and they must be directly targeted." Zionism "has no place in any society." The solution is: "Every single Zionist organisation the world over needs to be ended. Every. Single. One."

Miller believes that he himself has been targeted by the Zionist movement, as part of its drive to take over British universities: "With the rising popularity and effectiveness of the anti-Semitism smear after the Labour Party's capitulation to the tactic, Israel's apologists have been emboldened to intensify their use of it on university campuses. Their campaign of subversion on British campuses [is] on behalf of a violent foreign regime."

University Jewish Societies (JSocs) are the means through which the broader Zionist movement promotes this campaign of subversion: "The JSocs are all part of the Union of Jewish Students and the UJS is a member of the World Union of Jewish Students, which is a direct member of the World Zionist Organisation."

JSoc members campaign to "silence critics of Zionism or the State of Israel on British campuses". They are the pawns of a foreign power: "There is a real question of abuse here – of Jew-

ish students on British campuses being used as political pawns by a violent, racist foreign regime engaged in ethnic cleansing."

The JSoc in Miller's own (former) workplace was part of this Zionist campaign of subversion: "Bristol's JSoc, like all JSocs, operates under the auspices of the Union of Jewish Students (UJS), an Israel lobby group... The UJS and Bristol JSoc have consistently attacked me with a campaign of manufactured hysteria for two years, attempting to have me sacked."

Complaints about Miller lodged by JSoc members were part of "an all-out onslaught by the Israeli government... on the left globally". They were examples of "the significant number of fraudulent antisemitism complaints which have been all too common in the febrile atmosphere encouraged by supporters of the Israeli state."

Such complaints were inherently bad-faith allegations: "Israel and its apologists" employ "the time-honoured tactic of smearing any critic of Israel or Zionism as an anti-Semite."

The purpose of their complaints was: "To give cover to Zionist activists, allowing them to present themselves as part of a benighted ethnic minority facing racism... That's the point of the anti-Semitism smear tactic, not just an incidental consequence."

In any case, claimed Miller in an antisemitic tweet which he posted last August, antisemitism no longer really exists today. Accusations of antisemitism must therefore be bogus: "The facts (sic): 1. Jews are not discriminated against. 2. They are over-represented in Europe, North America and Latin America in positions of cultural, economic and political power. 3. They are therefore, in a position to discriminate against actually marginalised groups."

That tweet cost Miller a lot of support. Individuals and organisations which had previously bought into his claims that he was the heroic victim of a Zionist witch-hunt objected.

"This is straightforward antisemitism," wrote Owen Jones. "Seems like David Miller has outed himself as an antisemite," wrote Michael Rosen. The Jewdas organisation asked: "Perhaps the Jews who are overrepresented in mathematics could calculate the ideal representation of Jews in positions of cultural, political and economic power?"

Miller's claims of a Zionist/Israeli conspiracy to take over the world are 24-carat 21st-century antisemitism: His claims are a revamped version of the world Jewish conspiracy promoted by the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" and the Nazis.

Although Miller talks of Zionists rather than Jews, the actors in his imaginary conspiracy are all Jewish: the Jewish national state, Jewish organisations, and Jewish individuals.

Miller endows them with the attributes of Jews in more traditional antisemitic conspiracy theories. They "penetrate" power structures, they run campaigns of "subversion", they are unpatriotic cosmopolitans, they take orders from a foreign power, they bring down political leaders, they "dictate" the outcome of elections, they are all-powerful, and they use bogus allegations of antisemitism to silence their opponents.

Miller equates Zionism with support (however critical) for, or empathy with, Israel. But well over 90% of Jews see the existence of Israel as part of their identity. By Miller's logic, therefore, most Jews in the world should be "directly targeted".

Because "Zionism has no place in society", Miller advocates an "end [to] every single Zionist organisation the world over". In practice, this would mean not just the physical destruction of Israel but also the elimination of virtually all Jewish communal organisations on planet earth.

Miller's global Zionist conspiracy to achieve world domination is simply an invention of his antisemitic imagination. Commenting on an elaborate diagram from Miller of the supposed Zionist penetration of British power structures, Dave Rich (author of *Everyday Hate*) has written:

"This map is a meaningless mass of names and arrows with no real academic or analytical value. By the time Miller taught it to students in 2019, most of the individuals named on the map had either left their posts or died. The picture of a transnational Jewish or 'Zionist' network using finance and lobbying to subvert public life that Miller paints echoes certain facets of antisemitic conspiracism."

Since his dismissal by Bristol University Miller has found a new platform for his antisemitic conspiracy-mongering.

He now makes regular appearances with ex-MP Chris Williamson on Iran Press TV's *Palestine Declassified* programme, correctly described by *Jewish News* as "a playbook for antisemitic conspiracy theories" and "a horrific show in which every episode contains antisemitic conspiracy theories from first to last." Iran is a state in which antisemitism has been raised to the level of an official government dogma. Miller would feel at home there.

I'll discuss the Employment Tribunal in a second article. □

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- 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
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cations. That day to day income is vital but we also need specific donations and fundraising to improve and build on our work. □

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“Minimum” is 100%?



Diary of a firefighter

By Adrian Noble

Sometimes, the clarion calls in the most inauspicious of places. Little did I know when I crossed the threshold into Cadbury World, already eyeing up the torso-sized bags of misshapen chocolate rejects in the shop, that the glorious crescendo of a mid-week Birmingham trip was to be derailed.

As I get the phone out to find the ticket bought from a janky third-party website, I see that the government has published the Minimum Service Level regulations for fire services.

The level has been set at 73% of fire engines being on the run on strike days. This is utterly farcical. Because of over a decade of austerity and the loss of 20% of firefighter posts, that's not far

off what we can scabble together to crew on any given day.

39 fire engines were sitting empty at stations on Britain's hottest ever day in July 2022. We're talking 85-100% of the workforce being told to cross their picket lines on pain of dismissal. Of course it's what we expected, but it doesn't make me any less raging.

It's in these hallowed halls among the armies of sugar-addled children and the work-experience kid dressed in a curlywurl costume that I crouch over my phone like a goblin and read the document and FBU response and start firing messages off to my station and union branch WhatsApps. I feel a burning desire to organise and make the arguments to my colleagues, but there's little I can do from the West Midlands factory village of Bournville.

I'm going around the Cadbury version of Disney's It's a Small World ride fuming about widespread trade union quietism on the laws (photo on re-

quest). A fellow rep insists that if (sic) the bill ever becomes law, Labour will repeal it no problem. I scream internally as I pile fudge pieces into my chocolate mould at the do-it-yourself station. I can hardly focus on the not-so-subtly racist presentation of the journey of the cocoa bean through European imperialism as I lament Matt Wrack's failure to repeat his call to defy the legislation.

The futility of too much back and forth online is clear, so after a couple of messages making the case for organised and collective non-compliance cross the labour movement, I smash a few Freddos. Happily, when I am back in at work the first few people I speak to about it are clear that they won't be crossing picket lines and they expect the same from everyone else. The challenge will be to mobilise people to actively campaign now and discuss now, so we can put pressure on Labour to hold them to their word and to make sure we are ready if the time comes. □

Days of Heaven



Kino Eye

By John Cunningham

Days of Heaven (1978) was Terence Malick's second film as director. Bill (Richard Gere) is a steelworker in Chicago who kills his boss, unintentionally, in a fight. Along with his lover Abby (Brooke Adams) and his young sister Linda, he flees to Texas, where they become seasonal workers on a large farm. To avoid complications Bill and Abby pose as siblings.

Bill overhears a conversation where, it is said, the farmer has only a year to live. He persuades Abby to pretend to fall in love with the farmer and marry him. She will then inherit the farm when he dies. A neat scheme, but the farmer



doesn't die and becomes increasingly suspicious of Bill.

After a swarm of locusts destroys his crop, the farmer and Bill and confront each other. Bill kills him but as he tries to escape, the police shoot him. Abby inherits the farm but, unsur-

prisingly, nothing works out as planned.

The film is notable for its superb cinematography, by Nestor Almendros. One scene is particularly memorable. The locust swarm is actually a shower of thousands of peanut shells dropped

by a helicopter. The actors walk backwards, and the film is then played in reverse showing the locusts (peanut shells) rising from the fields. □

• To view *Days of Heaven*: bit.ly/d-heav



Food couriers strike 14 Feb

By Michael Elms

On 14 February food delivery couriers are set to strike over pay. The strike is not being organised by a union but by a social media-based group called Delivery Job UK, and it mostly involves couriers working for Deliveroo and Stuart. Some couriers working for other apps are also involved. A strike also took place on 2 February.

The 2 February action saw thousands of couriers, mostly in London, but also in cities across the UK, stopping deliveries. The delivery apps tried to break the strike by offering astronomical fees to those riders who did accept orders. Patchy picketing and protest motorcades around strike hotspots were able to reduce the impact of scabbing and shore up the strike.

The riders are right to strike. Pay for food couriers has been falling since the pandemic. Pay is opaque – an algorithm decides the rate for each job with little or no explanation given. Many couriers work brutally long weeks just



to cover their costs and make something like minimum wage on top. 50-hour weeks are not uncommon, and many work even longer hours than that.

Delivery Job UK appears to be the creation of a group of mostly-Brazilian couriers working in the UK. They have built up a large following among other couriers on social media and over WhatsApp. The internal workings of the group are not clear. Evidently a group of riders have set themselves up as a leadership for a large section of the delivery workforce. Good for them! But the leadership of the strike needs to join up with the broader trade union movement by engaging with the IWGB union, which is the main trade union organising couriers in the UK currently.

The IWGB, likewise, needs to activate itself in order to meet the demands of the hour.

There is a pattern in courier organising in the UK that friendship groups of well-known riders create a kind of executive committee in a given area, and organise a strike when pay is particularly bad. But these networks often lack experience in organising strikes, and they are generally disconnected from the wider socialist and workers' movements. For these reasons, spontaneous couriers' strikes tend to fall apart quickly. The opacity and lack of formal democracy in the leading friendship group often makes it hard to turn over new leaders when the initial organisers burn out or move on. What is happening now appears to be a bigger, more serious version of this long-standing pattern, with all of its problems as well as its strengths. A widespread belief among some couriers that trade unions are scams (often connected to migrant workers' experiences of corrupt labour organisations in other countries, some-

times to do with experience of unions in Britain) does not help.

Socialists around the UK – not just staff or members of the IWGB – need to connect with this round of couriers' strikes and offer our assistance and our organising experience to help couriers form a strong, durable organisation that can win. □

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Junior doctors strike 24-28 Feb

By Sacha Ismail

British Medical Association junior doctors in England fighting for "pay restoration" – a real-terms wage rise this year, and a clear plan to restore their pay to the real-terms level of 2008 – will strike again for [five days](#) this month, from the morning of Saturday 24 February to Wednesday 28 February.

Other trade unionists, activists, and everyone who supports workers' rights and the NHS should join their picket lines and demonstrations, and push for active solidarity from

our unions and organisations.

When their current legal mandate for strikes under the anti-trade-union laws expires at the end of the month, junior doctors will have struck for 39 days over the last year.

The BMA is currently rebalancing for a new mandate, from April to September, with the vote running to 15 March.

This time the ballot is for "Action Short of a Strike" (ASOS) as well strikes. Junior doctors leaders are emphasising that ASOS is not impacted by the new Minimum Service Levels anti-strike law. In their official

communication about ASOS, the BMA junior doctors co-chairs say: "To be clear, this does not mean we won't be calling for full walkouts anymore. However, ASOS is something we can use to our advantage".

They add: "Attempts to restrict our right to strike are pointless... If they want to end this dispute, a credible offer is still the only thing that will work."

In December new Tory health secretary Victoria Atkins indicated increased willingness to consider a new offer

to the junior doctors; but the government has made no offer and evaded the BMA's proposals for fresh talks, while engaging in nebulous rhetoric about addressing issues other than pay.

Junior doctors' struggle shows no sign of petering out. Junior doctors in Northern Ireland and Wales are entering the fight, with strikes coming up. In England, too, BMA activists indicate morale and willingness to fight remain high. The wider labour movement must help make the dispute a crisis for the government.

A concerted campaign to demand Labour supports the junior doctors and commits to meeting their demands remains necessary.

The UK party leadership, desperate to avoid committing to substantially more money for public services, has tried to ignore the dispute. Meanwhile the Welsh Labour government has made junior doctors there the worst pay offer in the UK. Junior doctors in Wales are planning a three-day strike from 21 February and a four-day strike from 25 March. □

Amazon strikes again at BHX4

By Ollie Moore

Workers at Amazon's BHX4 facility in Coventry will strike again on 13-15 February. Their campaign of strikes to win a £15/hour minimum wage has now seen them take over 30 days of action.

The GMB union's membership at the warehouse now stands at over 1,000. The strike comes after union members recently voted to renew their industrial action mandate for a further six months.

Amazon has upped its anti-union efforts, distributing leaflets within the workplace saying the GMB wants to speak "for" workers whereas Amazon wants to speak "to" them: "You don't have to join a union to have your voice heard. We've got you."

GMB is also fighting for collective bargaining rights. Amazon sabotaged a previous claim for union recognition by artificially inflating the size of the workforce in order to reduce the unionised proportion back below 50%. The ma-

oeuvre entailed making hundreds of previously temporary roles permanent. GMB says it has recruited considerable numbers of the new staff.

January 2024 saw strikes spread to a site beyond BHX4 for only the second time in the campaign, when workers at a site in Sutton Coldfield in Birmingham took action. Building a base and taking action in Amazon warehouses elsewhere remains the most likely path to forcing serious concessions from the company. □

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Ukraine on the back foot

By Dan Katz

On 8 February President Volodymyr Zelenskyy sacked armed forces commander Valerii Zaluzhnyy. Although Zelenskyy and Zaluzhnyy have had disputes on battlefield tactics, the sacking is essentially a destructive political move by Zelenskyy to remove a potential political rival.

Zaluzhnyy's removal will have an impact on the morale of Ukrainian troops. Zaluzhnyy is very popular amongst the army's rank and file.

Zelenskyy is concerned that opinion polls conducted at the end of last year showed that the only potential candidate who might defeat him in a future Presidential election was Zaluzhnyy.

Zaluzhnyy oversaw important, startling defeats of the Russian invasion forces north of Kyiv in April 2022, in Kharkiv in September and, in November 2022, when Kherson city was liberated.

Zaluzhnyy and Zelenskyy had disagreed, apparently, over the battle for Bakhmut, an industrial town in eastern Ukraine, which finally fell to the Russians in May 2023, at tremendous cost. Zelenskyy wanted Bakhmut defended resolutely. Zaluzhnyy thought that the cost to the Ukrainian army was too great to defend a small, destroyed town of little military significance.

The battle for Bakhmut was extraordinarily brutal. Russia, using Wagner mercenaries and convicts alongside regular forces, lost 35-40,000 killed and 95,000 wounded. Ukraine's losses were far smaller, with perhaps 7,000 dead and 15,000 injured.

The fight for Bakhmut was the bloodiest so far in this war, and the fatality-numbers are comparable to major battles in World War 2. The US lost 19,000 troops in the Battle of the Bulge and 7,000 at Guadalcanal.

Zaluzhnyy had also demanded a new draft into the army of 500,000 troops. Zelenskyy opposed a draft on such a scale as something that would be too politically damaging to carry out.

Zaluzhnyy's replacement, Oleksandr Syrsky, was the general in charge of Ukraine's ground forces. Syrsky is clearly competent. However, Zelenskyy believes Syrsky is personally loyal to him and has no interest in opposing him in politics.

Syrsky also agreed with Zelenskyy over the de-

fence of Bakhmut. However, consequently, Syrsky has a reputation in the army for not being concerned enough for his troops' lives.

Ukraine is now on the defensive right across the eastern front and seems about to lose the town of Avdiivka, which sits in a pocket of Ukraine-held territory just north of Donetsk city. Avdiivka is now in ruins and Russian attacks from north and south have gradually threatened Ukraine's supply routes.

Ukraine is running short of air-defence missiles which have left cities poorly protected and have given Russia freedom to bomb Ukrainian front-lines. Russia fires ten artillery shells for every one Ukraine shoots back. The shortages have been caused by far-right Trump supporters in the US Congress who have filibustered and obstructed arms and aid to Ukraine. Although there are now signs that US money and resources will be freed-up and sent to Ukraine, right now Ukraine is suffering serious shortages.

Although the IMF expects 3% growth in Ukraine's GDP this year, following 5% in 2023, GDP is 25% lower now than before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2024.

Although inflation is now down to 5% the country has 20% unemployment alongside shortages of skilled workers in many fields. 8mn people have left Ukraine over the last two years. 100,000 have been drafted into the police, 700,000 into the army and 90,000 into the border force. Russia has occupied 15% of the country – including significant industrial and agricultural areas.

All these factors have impacted on the economy.

Although Ukraine has effectively hit the Russian Black Sea fleet, and created space to resume grain exports by ship, Polish farmers continue to blockade border crossings, complaining of cheap Ukrainian agricultural exports. □

- Ukraine solidarity protests on Saturday 24 February • London. Assemble 1.30 at Speakers' Corner. March to Trafalgar Square. Vigil 4pm-5.30pm • Nottingham. 2pm at Speakers' Corner, King Street. March to Old Market Square • Sheffield. 1pm at St Mary's Church, Bramall Lane • Edinburgh. Noon at 58 Melville St.

N Ireland: new strikes set for 27-29 Feb

By Micheál MacEoin

Following Northern Ireland's huge public sector [strike](#) on 18 January over pay, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions has said that "industrial action will continue" until an offer is made "that workers can accept."

Pay awards for public sector workers have not been made since the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) collapsed the devolved government in October 2022, in protest against post-Brexit trading arrangements.

The Northern Ireland (NI) Assembly and Executive were restored on 3 February, with public sector pay placed high on the agenda of incoming ministers.

ICTU's comments came after a meeting last Monday 5 February, between ICTU assistant general secretary Gerry Murphy and the new Stormont Finance Minister, Sinn Féin's Caoimhe Archibald, ahead of the first meeting of the newly formed Executive.

According to ICTU: "The minister made clear to us that public sector pay was an immediate priority for her and her department. We welcome the minister's commitment to settle these disputes as quickly and comprehensively as possible."

Transport workers, who struck again on Thursday 1 February, say they will now postpone a further strike planned for 15 February. In a joint statement, GMB, Unite and Siptu said that the action provisionally planned for 15 Feb would be put back two weeks, to give time for the new Sinn Féin Infrastructure Minister John O'Dowd to "move quickly and offer workers a pay increase". If a "realistic offer" is not made, the three unions have announced action by bus and rail workers for 72 hours "on a staggered basis after midnight on February 27 to after midnight February 29".

The UK government's £3.3 billion package to tempt the DUP (including £584m to settle the wages dispute) is a one-off, is tied to "revenue-raising" measures (charges for services) and will not stop issues re-occurring in future years.

Last month, the head of the NI Civil Service head Jayne Brady said that an estimated £634m was needed to maintain "broad parity" between civil servants in the North and those in England, Scotland and Wales – a figure higher than the £584m promised by the UK Government.

Indeed, the political economy of the North cau-

tions against any optimism that the restoration of Stormont will provide a lasting "solution" to the crises of public services.

While Stormont controls almost 90% of the budget for public services, it raises less than £1 in every £20 of NI tax revenue.

Limited

Limited tax powers are open to the Scottish and Welsh Governments, but the NI Executive can only really vary rates on businesses and households or introduce punitive direct charges on service-users for water, prescriptions or tuition fees. It is, therefore, in a fiscally subordinate position to the Tories at Westminster which, in its recent decision to amend devolved funding arrangements, has admitted to systematically underfunding the North for over a decade. On 6 February, the Stormont parties, admitting this, united on a motion calling on the UK to give the North the "resources that it needs to deliver effective public services".

At the same time, the "domestic" economy of the North is reliant on public sector wages, especially in health and education (the two biggest-spending departments, with 51% and 18% of overall public spending respectively).

Workers in the North should unite across communities and with workers in the South on the basis of a mutual and democratic arrangement and break the connection with Westminster.

In doing so, they will then find, in James Connolly's words that "the causes of poverty, of lack of progress, of arrested civic and national development, are then to be sought for within and not without, are in their power to remove or perpetuate..." □

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Solidarity

For a workers' government

STOP MASSACRE IN RAFAH

By Ira Berkovic

The Israeli government plans an assault on Rafah, the city in southern Gaza on the Egyptian border, that could kill tens of thousands of civilians, or even more.

Strikes on the city took place overnight on Sunday 11 February, with 52 Palestinians reported killed. Israeli raids succeeded in rescuing two hostages, Fernando Simon Marmar and Louis Har. The rescue of two hostages is, of course, an immense relief for the men themselves and their friends and families.

The best way to ensure the safe return of the remaining people held in Hamas captivity is a ceasefire agreement which includes the return of all of them in return for releasing Palestinian prisoners – not massive assaults on the areas where hostages are held, which risks hostages' lives as much as those of Palestinian residents.

Around half of Gaza's total population is now crammed into Rafah, having been displaced from other parts of the enclave, in some cases multiple times, by Israeli bombing and ground offensives. Conditions of life are abject, with many people living in tents. Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu says an "evacuation plan" is being prepared, but has given no detail of where over one million people are supposed

to evacuate to, beyond a vague reference to areas "that [Israel] has cleared north of Rafah".

Netanyahu said Israeli forces will "provide safe passage", but its conduct of the war so far, including the razing of other cities such as Khan Younis and Gaza City, with high civilian death tolls, inspires no confidence. Ongoing fighting between the Israeli Defence Force and Hamas cells in Khan Younis and Gaza City shows that, even in cities where Israel has wrought untold devastation, Hamas has not been "destroyed" or "dismantled".

Evacuation

In any case, the commencement of strikes on 11 February, without any indication of an evacuation operation, makes Netanyahu's words ring hollow.

Given the damage Israel's war has caused to infrastructure in Gaza, there is nowhere left for refugees to go. In such circumstances, an offensive on Rafah could only be murderously destructive. The Israeli government knows that extreme numbers of civilian casualties are inevitable.

The US and UK governments have both warned against the assault. Netanyahu's insistence that will go ahead reflects Israel's isolation from, and defiance of, even its staunchest allies. Having set itself an unachievable war aim, the total "destruction" of Hamas, Israel's

war has a self-perpetuating logic. Because Hamas cannot be "destroyed", and because Israel's actions will help it win new recruits, Israel's war must continue indefinitely.

Netanyahu also knows that his own political future relies on extending the war. Opinion polls in Israel show he would lose heavily in any postwar election. Palestinian lives are therefore being sacrificed to preserve the political career of a corrupt, would-be despot.

Many Palestinians already see Israel's war as a "second Nakba", a mass displacement of people from their homes. The failure on all sides to offer liveable outcomes for the Palestinian refugees in the immediate aftermath of 1947-9 has created a deep wound in Palestinian national consciousness. The population displaced by this new war must be allowed to return to and rebuild their homes at the earliest possible opportunity, and big-power governments must give substantial aid to UN agencies for a humanitarian effort to reconstruct civilian life in Gaza.

The burgeoning anti-war movement in Israel, which on 18 January put thousands of demonstrators, both Arab and Jewish, on the streets of Tel Aviv, will do its best to increase domestic pressure on Netanyahu to pull back. It needs our support. □