Labour: call a Special Conference!

Seamus Milne, Andrew Murray, Karie Murphy — key figures in the unelected “Leader’s Office” of the Labour Party. Milne and Murray are longstanding Stalinists, Murphy is a former aide for Tom Watson and close to the Unite union leadership.

Labour and Brexit

Where are the ‘Three Ms’ taking us?

The Tory government is floundering, seeking to square the circle for a Brexit deal.

They are scratching around for a formula which both avoids a “hard border” in Ireland, and placates the Tory right who want no link to EU standards and rules after Brexit and don’t care about Ireland.

Yet, as the Tories lurch from chaos to crisis and back again, the Labour leadership has dropped its call for an early general election, and abandoned even the lip-service it gave to the demand for a new public vote on Brexit.

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Renew Labour!
L4SE conference set for 9 March
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Labour: call a Special Conference!


**Schools should teach LGBT rights**

By Simon Nelson

In protests by some parents at the Parkfield Community School in Birmingham against the “No Outsiders” project, a number of parents say their religious freedom is threatened by the commitment of the Assistant Headteacher to teach LGBT rights.

The 400 parents, predominantly Muslims, who have signed the petition titled “No Outsiders” go beyond the idea of treating LGBT people with respect and is not appropriate for young children.

Andrew Moffat, the teacher in question, has long been an advocate of LGBT education in schools. He has written a book, Challenging Homophobia in Primary Schools. He resigned from a previous school in 2013 when Christian and Muslim parents objected to a similar scheme.

The parents’ protests were said to be backed by a Labour councilor. It appears it took the threat of disciplinary action from the Birmingham Council Labour Group for the councillor to say he had “overstepped the mark”.

For a group of parents to stop their children being taught about LGBT equality because it goes against the religious beliefs that some of them choose to promote to their children goes beyond the rights of religious freedom.

For the children to learn about different relationships, and read literature with same-sex couples and trans characters is part of a rounded education. It provides support for LGBT students.

Some parents have withdrawn their children from the school. Similar threats have been made amongst some sections of the Haredi Jewish community, particularly in North London, who say they will home-school their children if they are forced to teach about LGBT equality.

Fatima Shah, who has led the protests, has said that, “Children are being told it’s OK to be gay, yet 98% of children at this school are Muslim. It’s a Muslim community. He said all parents are on board with it, but the reality is, no parents are on board with it.”

The idea that Muslim children are not LGBT is what drives this opposition, and teaching unions, and the labour movement should stand up for schools being welcoming and safe spaces for LGBT students and school workers. The objection that children will become “confused” by these ideas is nonsensical.

Lots of things are confusing as you grow up. Being confused and trying to understand things, learning, asking questions are all an important part of childhood and life. The use of “confusion” is a cover for the children wondering about the contrast between certain religious beliefs and the beliefs of their parents, their own feelings and what the school is teaching.

Nor is this question, as some of the protesters say, of teaching about homosexuality crowding out maths, science and English.

In fact some of the lessons are in effect English lessons, only reading and using books that have LGBT characters.

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**Health-anuary**

By Martin Thomas

For January 2019, 4.2 million people said they would join “Dry January,” a pledge to drop alcohol for the month.

The Alcohol Change UK group, which organised “Dry January,” says that (even if some of those 4.2 million had lapses) this year’s response was the biggest ever, and hugely up on January 2013, when the project started with just 4,000 signing up.

“Veganuary” had 250,000 people adopting a vegan diet for the month, more than its total for all its previous Januaries combined, 2014 to 2018.

84% of January-vegans and maybe 70% of all vegans are female (2018 stats), although vegetarians are nearly 50% male. “Dry January” also seems to draw many more women than vegans.

In the Observer of 3 February, the writer Linda Grant ranted against “Dry January” that it was “boring” and “what I missed was a sense of variety, that days could be different from one another”.

If your way of avoiding seriousness is to booze more or differently from one day to another, then you certainly should go “dry”.

Temperance was a big strand in the early British labour movement. A temperance union was formed in 1850 by the advice of a vegan comrade in Sheffield and was affiliated to the National Union of Friendly Societies.

One of the likely deportees is Owen Haisley, who has lived in the UK since he was four years old. He was told he could keep in touch with his three British-born children “via Skype”.

Over 10,000 people a year are forcibly deported under a system which the Home Affairs Select Committee describes as “inhumane”.

One of these is Stansted 15, Emma Hughes, mother to a five-week old baby. It is at the whim of the judge whether she will be separated from her baby.

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**Working week gets longer**

By Rhodri Evans

Average work hours per week are now increasing, for almost the first time since the early 19th century.

A research report from the Resolution Foundation finds: “Since the early 19th century there has been, at least outside of working, a pretty steady decline in average hours worked. From the Second World War until the financial crisis average hours worked declined by an average of 12 minutes a year.

“In the decade since they have been flat, and average hours have actually risen recently”.

The decline was more like 20 minutes per year from 1945 to the early 1970s. That was the period when it became standard for workers to have two days off a week. It was already common for Saturday to be a half-day, and full two-day weekends had been common in the USA since the early 20th century.

In the neoliberal era after the early 1970s, with unions weakened, the decline slowed to five or 10 minutes a year. The Resolution Foundation researchers reckon the most likely explanation for the recent rise in hours is that, with lower real hourly wage rates (and benefits), people are working longer to keep household income at least up to 2008 levels (which they have done).

There has also been a big rise, to record levels, in the percentage of the working-age population in jobs.

The statistics tell our unions that they have a strong basis for battles to increase wages and working hours – a “tight” labour market in many sectors – but they are failing to wage those battles.

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**Radical Readers:**

**Black Boy**

By Richard Wright

Black Boy is a memoir by African-American Communist Richard Wright. Radical Readers in Space will be meeting via online video-call to discuss it on Thursday 28 February.

The book is a memoir of Wright’s youth as a black kid in the American South, written from a Marxist point of view. Please take a moment to share and RT the event page very widely.

bit.ly/r-rw-bb

There’ll be a regular stream of content coming out on the page in the weeks leading up to the meeting. There’s an autobiography of Black Boy at bit.ly/bb-rw-ak

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The Marxist Social Democratic Federation and British Socialist Party scorned temperance more than the moralistic and religiously-forced Independent Labour Party; yet Trotsky, too, in the 1920s, would make open “propaganda against alcohol”.

Even today, the statistics show hard-up students spending an average of £60 a month on “entertainment”, mostly alcohol. It is a good thing that spending is decreasing.

Between 2003 and 2015, non-drinkers among 16-24s rose from 18% to 29%. The number who, in a snapshot, hadn’t drunk alcohol over the previous week rose from 35% to 50%. Binge-drinkers fell from 27% to 18% (bit.ly/nhs-al).

If socialist dry-January people contribute the money they’ve saved from alcohol to our Workers’ Liberty fund drive, it is too.

I wasn’t aware of “Dry January” or “Veganuary” until they ended, but by coincidence I’d decided in mid-January to go vegan.

I was pushed into going vegan by the advice of a vegan comrade on how it can practically help the planet and more fundamentally by the influence of a former school student of mine, a quiet and undemonstrative vegan in defiance of pressures from her family.

She’s also a brilliant mathematician and an admirably determined character. There’s a lesson here for socialists: our ability to convince workmates depends not just on our speeches about socialist politics, but also on us showing in other areas that we are thoughtful, honest, reliable people, so that they’ll think it worthwhile listening to us on issues where they start with a blur.

Socialist organisations need to unite the activists willing to promote socialism, without being distracted or divided by lifestyle arguments.

But we’re more likely to have an environment conducive to that if the successes of “dry Jan” and “Veganuary” continue.
**Venezuela: risk of invasion**

By Eduardo Tovar

Over the weekend 2-3 February, thousands of protestors gathered in rival demonstrations on the streets of Venezuela’s capital, Caracas.

Juan Guaidó, who declared himself interim President on 23 January, continues to gather support for removing Nicolás Maduro. Guaidó has announced further opposition rallies for Wednesday 6 February and Saturday 9 February. The latter date is the last day of the ultimatum to Maduro set by several leading European states, including France.

On 31 January Guaidó gave a speech outlining his “national plan” for Venezuela, in which he promised to coordinate humanitarian assistance, restoring public services, and holding free elections.

In the same speech, he claimed that members of the Special Action Forces came to threaten him at his apartment building. The US, Brazil, and others continue to back Guaidó’s power grab. White House national security adviser John Bolton was recently spotted carrying a notepad that read “5,000 troops to Colombia”, which borders Venezuela.

Nonetheless, Maduro remains resolute. He has offered to hold early new elections to the National Assembly, which this re-elected National Assembly would revert to the government-controlled Constituent Assembly, which has the authority to rewrite the Venezuelan Constitution.

Guaidó has refused to rule out accepting US military support. Still, for now Maduro still seems to have the upper hand in this power-struggle.

As I reported in Solidarity 493, Guaidó’s self-declaration as President is a gambit to drive a wedge between Maduro and the Venezuelan top brass. Although Jonathan Velasco, the Venezuelan ambassador to Iraq, has declared his support for Guaidó, so far only one high-ranking military officer seems to have defected, namely Gen. Esteban YanezRodríguez of the Venezuelan air force’s high command. I say “seems” because the video purporting to feature Yanez is edited and yet to be independently authenticated.

With some polls indicating that as many as 81% of Venezuelans want Maduro to relinquish power and Maduro continuing to keep control via the military, we stand by our assessment of Maduro’s regime as Bonapartist authoritarianism. Although both major sides in Venezuela are backed by imperialist powers – the US in Guaidó’s case, and Russia and China in Maduro’s case – the Venezuelan people would suffer even worse if the sabre-rattling becomes an actual military intervention.

In short, we want Maduro to go, but it matters who ousted him. Unfortunately, the Venezuelan working class is not presently in a position to oust Maduro by its own power.

We will keep supporting efforts to build an independent, class-struggle left in Venezuela, while opposing any imperialist intervention.

**Brexit and unreasonable**

By Colm Foster

Steve Richards is a routine political pundit, probably (in his 2017 book *The Rise of the Outsiders*, for example) a bit less hostile to Jeremy Corbyn than most of his type.

In the *Financial Times* on 1 February, for example, where he was acid about Corbyn, and with some justice: “Like Mrs May, [Jeremy Corbyn] asserts rather than explains, repeatedly declaring that he supports ‘a customs union’, ‘a close alignment with the single market’ and ‘workers’ rights’. Why is this his position? What does he mean by these terms? In some media interviews Corbyn may have no choice but to limit himself to summary phrases. Yet he, or his office, could arrange longer printed-up speech texts, op-eds, or such as back-up – and they don’t.

Reasoned argument is missing just because the position asserted does not come from reasoned argument. It comes from “triangulation”, the desire to find a formula acceptable to a wide range of lobbies and groups.

In principle politics, the procedure is to work out what’s right, then seek to convince people of it. In triangulation-politics, the procedure is to guess what people would like to hear, and then find something blurred enough to fit both what they want to hear and what you reckon acceptable and workable.

Another new twist is Jeremy Corbyn echoing some of the criticism from the Tory right and the DUP of the “backstop”. After his talks with Theresa May on 30 January he said it was unacceptable that the UK could not quit the “backstop” unilaterally. Does he really think it wrong that Britain should agree an open-ended guarantee against a new “hard border” in Ireland? Condescending, manipulative, splitting-the-difference politics can never build a socialist movement capable of enabling the working class to mobilise for its own emancipation.

**More rail, less carbon**

**Climate**

By Mike Zubrowski

New evidence backs up the need for a socialist, environmentalist transport policy. Meanwhile, Transport For London (TfL) and London Mayor Sadiq Khan continue to pursue regressive market-based “environmental” policies, which will likely make no reduction in emissions.

A report by the International Energy Agency (IEA) released at the end of January makes the case for “aggressive” expansion of railways across the world, to reduce net transport emissions.

Rail is the most efficient motorised method for passengers to travel, and much more so than cars and planes. In freight, it comes second only to shipping, and only just.

Diesel and electricity account for roughly half of rail energy use each, and rail’s global energy use has remained roughly stable in recent years. When electricity is predominately from coal-fired power plants is Germany’s. In the last weekend of January, the German coal commission published its plan for how to phase out coal.

Water held underground in soil or between rocks, “groundwater”, is the world’s largest source of freshwater and is relied on by over two billion people. Climate change will impact the way rain and moisture soak into the soil and “recharge” the groundwater.

As well as impacting water supplies, changes to moisture could push soil past a “tipping point”, from a net absorber of CO2 to a net emitter, according to a different study by Nature, thus creating a positive feedback loop driving further climate change.

Internationally, socialists and the labour movement must seek to limit climate change as much as possible.

But we must also seek to mitigate its impacts, in this case through taking the sourcing, transportation and distribution of fresh water into collective democratic control, and ensuring everyone has adequate access.

**ENDING COAL**

The world’s largest coal-fired power plants are Germany’s. In the last weekend of January, the German coal commission published its plan for how to phase out coal.

However, it falls seriously short of even the Paris agreement, starting reductions of CO2 emissions only after 2030, and emitting 1.3 billion tons over the “below 2C pathway” limit.

**WATER SHORTAGES**

A study by the science journal *Nature* forecasts that climate change will impact half of the world’s aquifers over the next 100 years. Water held underground in soil or between rocks, “groundwater”, is the world’s largest source of freshwater and is relied on by over two billion people. Climate change will impact the way rain and moisture soak into the soil and “recharge” the groundwater.

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But we must also seek to mitigate its impacts, in this case through taking the sourcing, transportation and distribution of fresh water into collective democratic control, and ensuring everyone has adequate access.

**Minicab drivers protest over the congestion charge**

In Solidarity 493, the name “Roberto Fiore” was printed by mistake as “Roberto Fico”.

**Corrections**
Brexit can still be stopped

By Martin Thomas

Brexit can still be stopped. The first step, though, is to halt an emerging mood of re-treat among anti-Brexit people.

"People switch off from responding to every depressing political twist and turn of Brexit", one activist wrote to us this week.

Another: "people in my local [anti-Brexit] group feel down after Jeremy Corbyn's responses on 28 and 29 January". Yet others have said: "Face facts. Brexit is going to go through. No amount of agitation now will make much difference. The task now is to prepare the left for after Brexit".

Versions of the same sentiment appear among the not-politically-active — "of course Brexit is wrong, but it's too complicated, I can't deal with it" — and among the defer-to-Corbyn types — "only the mainstream media is really bothered about Brexit. We should focus on other social issues".

This phase gives a textbook example of how a minority ruling class rules in a formally-democratic political system. Working-class people "switch off", persuaded that the media is really bothered about Brexit. We prepare the left for after Brexit.

The job of socialists is to overcome this inertia and resignation. Sometimes we lose. By definition, as long as capitalism remains stable, mostly we lose. But in the case of Brexit all the improbabilities remain still open.

May may eventually get enough of the DUP and Tory right to settle for some minor fudge on the backstop that she can get a tweaked deal through with help from some Labour rebels.

But the EU will give her little — very little indeed, before 14 February, maybe a little more as the "cliff-edge" approaches. The logic is clear: a "backstop", by definition, can fall as soon as a working alternative is available, but only then.

Moreover, a significant number of the Tory right are positively happy with "no deal".

The problem with May doing a deal with the Labour front bench through warmer words on workers' rights and a lasting customs union is not lack of common ground, but that neither side really wants to do such a deal.

For May to get a deal by defying the Tory back benches by instead wooing the Labour front bench would mean splitting the Tory party. Conversely, Labour's Leader's Office want to appear to be "seeking unity" and "not blocking Brexit", but they do not want to end up taking responsibility for May's formula and risking a Labour split.

A no-deal Brexit is now more probable. Yet the Tory government will do a lot to avoid becoming seen as the team who caused a no-deal crash-out because they were incompetent to make a deal.

Jeremy Corbyn dropped talk of an early general election, let alone a referendum, in his response to May on 29 January.

It will be hard for him avoid re-raising them if May fails to fix something on 14 February, as she almost certainly will.

In short, there will be continued turmoil and disarray at the top, at least up to 29 March, and very likely longer. A postponement of Article 50 is quite likely, but will not end the turmoil or resolve the impasse.

The Labour leadership is still under diverse pressures.

All the outcomes are improbable, but one of them has to happen, so we can be sure that an improbable outcome will happen.

The improbable outcome of a complete impasse in Parliament which leads to an early general election, or a new public vote, is still on the cards.

Labour-focussed campaigning is especially vital in keeping that option open.

The curious incident of the Stalinists who didn’t bark

By Jim Denham

In possibly his most famous Sherlock Holmes short story, Silver Blaze, Conan Doyle introduced the idea of the "negative fact".

Gregory (Scotland Yard detective): "Is there any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention?"

Holmes: "To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."

Gregory: "The dog did nothing in the night-time."

Holmes: "That was the curious incident."

Holmes drew a conclusion from an expected fact (the dog barking) that did not occur.

On Tuesday 29 January the Commons held a series of big votes on Brexit. Probably the most important was Yvette Cooper’s amendment creating procedures to keep Britain in the EU beyond 29 March in the event that no deal is reached by the end of the month. Corbyn’s office had come out in support of this, albeit very late in the day.

Fourteen Labour MPs defied the Labour whip and voted with the Tories, and a series of shadow ministers went missing for the crucial vote.

An amendment pushing what is sometimes charitably referred to as Labour’s Brexit “policy” was then roundly defeated, but May’s plan for resolving on their agreement on the Irish backstop was passed — with support from seven Labour MPs.

Corbyn’s office denied giving MPs from Leave seats a “nod or a wink” that it was OK to rebel, but also made clear that shadow ministers who helped save Theresa May’s plan will not be sacked.

Big news, you’d think — especially for the Morning Star, a publication that has carried a lengthy report of the Communist Party’s call for “a People’s Brexit” and an admiring an extension to Article 50 (i.e. the Cooper amendment).

That was to be the last editorial comment we’d see that week (or, indeed, up to the day I am writing, 4 February). Thursday’s Morning Star came and went with no comment. And Friday’s. And Saturday’s. And Monday’s.

Can it be that the editorial team simply can’t work out whether or not to applaud the step towards no-deal and MPs’ “standing up to” Brussels? Or is it just that the Labour “rebels” included that old Morning Star favourite Dennis Skinner, and they’re not going to criticise him, whatever he does?

Then there’s the suggestion (raised by the New Statesman’s Stephen Bush as long ago as October last year) that close Morning Star associate Andrew Murray — who works part-time as Len McCluskey’s chief of staff at Unite and part-time in Corbyn’s office — argued at a Team Corbyn strategy meeting that the Labour Party should vote for Theresa May’s deal.

Perhaps the Morning Star realises that in the end Corbyn is going to upset someone: the so-called “constructive ambiguity” of promising to deliver Brexit while not completely ruling out a second referendum to reverse it cannot hold forever. You can’t please all of the people all of the time.

Given that the paper is ultimately controlled by the Communist Party of Britain, it’s worth noting the CPB’s policy on Brexit (as outlined in the paper on 28 January):

“The pro-EU ‘Tory minority regime’ and the EU Commission could not be trusted to reach any withdrawal agreement that did not serve the interests of big business and the capitalist class.”

“Locking Britain into the EU Customs Union would make any such agreement even worse”, Robert Griffiths explains, “because it would outlaw import regulation to protect strategic industries such as steel, while also impeding a mutually beneficial fair trade policy with developing countries.”

The CP executive called for a ‘People’s Brexit’ to leave the EU, its Single Market [and] Customs Union.”

As that policy is in direct contradiction to Labour’s call for a new, permanent customs union and the “closest possible alignment” with the single market, maybe the Morning Star’s editorial team decided their best bet was to say... nothing.

As Holmes would say: “When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”
Continued from front page

Labour’s shift was symbolised, and expressed, by Jeremy Corbyn’s meeting with Theresa May, the day after the Commons votes on 29 January, to discuss Labour issues.

To meet May with him, Corbyn took his backroom “director of strategy” Seumas Milne and “chief of staff” Karie Murphy, plus the chief whip, the old Labour right-winger Nick Brown. He sidelined shadow Brexit secretary Keir Starmer and shadow chancellor John McDonnell.

Starmer is no left-winger, but has favoured a new public vote and even (on 5 February) free movement. McDonnell has said that a new public vote is “inevitable” and that he would vote Remain.

Milne, Murphy, and their close associate Andrew Murray, were not elected to their high posts by the labour movement on the basis of their activity in the movement.

Milne and Murray were members of Straight Left, the ultra-Stalinist fragment of the old Communist Party, in the early 1980s. Their world-view remains much the same.

Murphy comes more from an old Labour-right background — she used to work for Labour deputy leader Tom Watson — but has always sided with Milne and Murray.

Solidarity vehemently opposes Milne’s and Murray’s world-view. We want to deal with it by open debate and discussion in the labour movement rather than by bans or proscriptions.

But Milne’s and Murray’s influence at the top of the Labour Party (and their well-paid jobs: over £100,000 a year for Milne) come not at all from them having won debates and established their standing through activity in the ranks of the labour movement.

Before 2015 Murray worked for the Morning Star as a journalist, and then (no thanks to any activity in the union as a rank-and-filer) in different unelected-official posts in the Unite union. Milne was a senior journalist for the Guardian.

When Jeremy Corbyn won the Labour leadership in 2015, it was by a surge of scattered social revolt at the base, not by the triumph of a long-organised and well-formed Labour left. Corbyn cast around in the top circles of bourgeois society for “experts” to run his “Leader’s Office”, and ended up with Milne, Murray, and another old Straight-Lefter, Steve Howell, followed later.

Labour’s policy on Brexit should be decided by democratic debate, not by office cabals.

Labour should call a special one-day or half-day conference on Brexit, as demanded by the rail union TSSA and groups such as Labour for a Socialist Europe.

That special conference would be the best way to marginalise those in the anti-Brexit section of the old Labour right who are whispering speculations about a split to team up with pro-Remain Tories (and maybe the Lib Dems) to form a new “centre” party.

The reversal of the economic integration, the lowering of borders, and the limited social levelling-up achieved in the EU would be a step back, not forward. The EU’s bureaucratic and neoliberal shape should be changed by cross-Europe labour movement struggle, not used as an excuse to move to equally bureaucratic and neoliberal, but more walled-off, nation-states.

Labour should take its stand on those truths, and campaign to win a majority for them, not dither and “triangulate”.

Since 29 January the Labour leadership has offered no more than mild demur to the eleven shadow ministers who abstained on the Cooper amendment which would have empowered Parliament to stop a “no-deal” Brexit.

It has complained only in a muttered about the 14 Labour MPs, mostly right-wingers, who voted against the Cooper amendment, and the few who voted for the (right-wing Tory) Brandy amendment.

It looks unlikely that the Labour leadership will actually do a full-scale deal on a Brexit formula with Theresa May. The backlash against such a deal with Tory and Labour sides, would be too much.

Short of that, though, the current Labour stance could well license enough Labour MPs, in pro-Brexit constituencies, to vote for the Tories and get them through their crisis.

That revolt against the Labour front bench’s plan to abstain on the Tories’ Immigration Bill, on 28 January, forced the front bench at the last minute to switch to opposition.

Neurodiversity, capitalism and discrimination

By Janine Booth

Autistic, dyspraxic, dyslexic and other people with atypical brain wiring have particular experiences under capitalism – with positive and negative aspects, but for many people including distress and disadvantage.

This article looks at the experience of neurodivergent people under capitalism, how socialism might remove distress and discrimination, and how we can achieve that.

CAPITALISM AND NEURODIVERSITY

Capitalism developed society’s productive capacity, enabling it to provide people with goods and services that no previous society had been able to.

But it placed productive resources with private owners, so production increased in a narrow, profit-driven, undemocratic way, creating inequality and distress, and also marginalising neurologically atypical people.

How does capitalism do this?

Rigid organisation of work. Capitalism makes every worker in a production process do the same thing in the same way at the same speed, which does not work well for people who work at a different pace or who see things in a different way. Although there have been many changes since the mills and factories of the nineteenth century, modern workplaces such as call centres, offices and warehouses work in similarly rigid ways. Lack of control over work processes is a key factor in the disadvantage and distress that neurodivergent people experience.

Sensory overload. Many neurodivergent people have unusually high (or low) sensitivities to sensory inputs. An autistic or a dyspraxic person may, for example, be affected more than average by light, sound, smell or texture. Capitalism rapidly intensified the sensory environment, generating much more light and noise than previous societies, particularly in big cities.

Social premium. How confident you are, how easily you get on with people, how well you “fit in”: such social factors are becoming more and more important to your “success” in the capitalist marketplace. This makes it harder for people who find social interaction difficult or stressful, who dislike eye contact or who communicate in atypical ways, which includes many autistic and otherwise neurodivergent people.

Capitalist production has shifted towards service industries, where “soft skills” are valued more highly, and even public services have become commodities in which managers insist that “customers” require service with a smile. For example, railway employees have become less concerned about their staff’s ability to do railway work and more concerned about their ability to say “thank you” and “have a nice day” to people after telling them that their train has been cancelled.

Commodifying neurodiversity. As knowledge of neurological diversity has grown, so capitalists have become aware of a new market for new products. Companies produce and sell software, toys, sensory aids, expensive treatments and more. Some of this is useful, but some of it is not, and some of it is harmful. It promotes the idea that what atypical people need is not acceptance but products.

Profit-driven research. What research there is into autism and other neurodiverse conditions is driven by the companies doing the research, which are driven by developing products that they can sell. Research is very important, but there is a political content to what is driving it.

The awful American charity “Autism Speaks” spends millions of dollars on trying to find a cure for autism rather than providing support services or campaigning for acceptance, and in doing so is harming autistic people by portraying autism as a tragic illness or defect that needs to be eliminated.

Uneven progress. The brain wiring that is now called dyslexia has probably existed for thousands of years, but it did not become a problem and was not labelled “dyslexia” until written language became widespread.

So the reason that dyslexic people have a problem or disability is not because they are faulty, but because society developed written language in a form that does not suit their brain wiring. There is an interesting case of an English man raised in Japan, who grew up bilingual, severely dyslexic in English and not dyslexic at all in Japanese. This shows that his so-called impairment, his disability, is constructed by something that has developed socially i.e., the form that language takes.

Capitalism did something fantastic – it inherited, developed and universalised written language – but it did so in a way that suited the majority neurology and left behind the minority that it does not suit.

How could socialism do better?

Under socialism, production will be planned for need rather than for profit.

Universal design. With collective ownership and democratic planning, we could transform the built environment, applying “Universal Design”. Buildings and outdoor designed spaces can have not only step-free access but also a minimum-distress sensory environment, clear navigation, information in various formats, relaxation spaces, and so on.

Support services. Socialism will provide the support services that neurodivergent people need, and which capitalism does not provide.

Pluralism in communication methods. In our current society, it is “efficient” for a particular capitalist enterprise to insist on communication conformity. For example, a company will exclude dyslexic people by insisting on all reports being in writing, or exclude autistic people by insisting on eye contact in interviews. By contrast, socialism will organise society collectively, rather than in competing units, so can enable people to communicate verbally, visually, or in whichever way suits them.

Democratic and accountable research. Under socialism, we will be able to resource research, and to focus it on better understanding neurological difference in order to reduce disadvantage and distress, with neurodivergent people having a say about the sort of research that is done. Moreover, instead of having lots of separate research departments of separate companies competing with each other, researchers will be able to co-operate and thus achieve much rapid progress.

Workers’ control. Having more control over our sensory environment, the hours we work and the pace and method of our work will take a great deal of pressure and hostility away from neurodivergent people. It would make workplaces less distressing and therefore more accessible.

Only sixteen per cent of autistic adults of working age are in full-time employment – not because only sixteen per cent of autistic adults are not suited to working full-time, but because working conditions are so hostile and we have so little control.

Many autistic people struggle with jobs where it is not clear how their work fits in to the overall production process. This is common under capitalism, which does not consider this to be the worker’s concern, and which requires you only to do your bit to produce a product which is taken away from you and sold. Socialism will end this alienation of workers from the products of our labour and reconnect us with the work we do.

The good without the bad. We want socialism to benefit neurodivergent people by combining the advantages of mass production with a renewed scope for diversity and individuality. We don’t want to go back to pre-capitalist societies or to abandon the levels of production that we have now (although there are levels of production that we don’t need, such as weapons, advertising and duplicate products).

We want mass production without everyone having to be the same, sitting next to each other, doing the same thing, producing the same fifteen widgets per hour, meeting the same performance targets. If you want to go off on an obsessive tangent about something then you might actually come up with a real breakthrough, so let’s have a society that allows that.

Co-operative not competitive. Competition is disastrous for many neurodivergent people. Capitalism encourages us to compete over everything. Employers pit workers against each other: who is going to do better in their performance review, who is going to get the bonus, who is going to be employee of the month. Firms compete with each other, making employment insecure. A cooperative economy would remove that level of hostility.

Reduced sensory overload. Democratic, considerate planning could reduce sensory stimuli. A clean, sustainable environment would be better than an assault on your senses. A co-operative rather than competitive economy would reduce the volume of advertising. Imagine a world without adverts and see how much calmer and more pleasant it would be.

Karl Marx said: “from each according to ability, to each according to need.” This is the guiding principle of what we are fighting for: that people contribute to society in the way and to the level that they are able to and receive the support and resources that they need to get on with their lives.
alism, and socialism

FROM CAPITALISM TO SOCIALISM
We have achieved some progress under capitalism.

For example, left-handedness is a neurological variant, and in the not-too-distant past, left-handed people were seriously mistreated. Schools caned kids’ left hands or tied them behind their backs to force them to write with their right hands. But now there are left-handed scissors and guitars, and very few left-handed people would say that they are oppressed, even if things might be a bit awkward at times.

That is an example of how by campaigning, arguing and enlightenment, we can achieve progress within capitalism. But these changes were at low or no cost to capitalists, and even profitable for some.

That is not going to be the case with other disadvantages facing neurodivergent people. Capitalism will not willingly make changes that cost it money or power: it will mean that they are not in charge of “their” workplaces any more, and they will not accept that graciously.

We can make the case for liberation through socialism: we can say to autistic, dyslexic, other neurodivergent people and our allies that yes, we can fight for advances within this society, but we can go beyond this to imagine and fight for a different society. We can do this most effectively if we develop theory, write and discuss seriously about Marxism, autism and neurodiversity, as Workers’ Liberty has started to do.

As knowledge grows about autism, dyslexia and the diversity of human brain structure, it is important to avoid going along with mainstream “neurodiversity awareness” and the employers’ agenda. Bland “awareness” campaigns ask only that people notice the issue a bit more; they do not demand change. We need action not just awareness.

Some employers now acknowledge neurodiversity. For example, left-handed scissors and guitars, and even profitable for some.

We campaign for radical, life-improving demands. The draft Labour Party Autism and Neurodiversity Manifesto, which a group of us have been working on with the support of John McDonnell, has all sorts of progressive policies to address the issues we have mentioned.

We can also discuss what transitional demands would be useful on the issue of neurodiversity – what demands could guide us in the fight that we have now but also prompt people to look at changing society as a whole in order to achieve them thoroughly.

We need to educate and mobilise our movement. Let’s be out there protesting against abuse and discrimination. Activists have protested against US charity Autism Speaks and its negative portrayal of autism, against the Judge Rotenberg Centre and its electric shock treatment of autistic young people, against snake-oil salespeople and their quack cures. And let’s step up our training and educational programmes across the labour and neurodiversity movements.

We will be more effective if we make the left and the labour movement neurodiversity-friendly and more accessible to neurodivergent people.

That means using materials in different formats. We can not just rely on a text-heavy newspaper any more. People may not read it if they are dyslexic; or they may not read huge chunks at a time if they have a shorter attention span than others. Thanks to capitalism, the technology exists where we can easily do things in different formats.

We can very easily make short videos about what we want to say about socialism; we can use graphic methods; we can travel around and speak to large and small gatherings; we don’t have to rely on just the printed word any more.

We can also be more socially inclusive.

Of course people form friendship groups in political movements, but let’s be aware that this can leave people out and let’s ensure that people are included in what we do, in our events and activities, even if they don’t banter like others do.

Harassment and bullying exclude neurodivergent and other people. The labour movement has never been immune from these, and I think the problem may be on the increase. If people are treated badly and made to feel bad about themselves, then in the end they burn out or walk away. The culture of respectful comradeship does not exist across our movement in the way that we need it to.

We can also improve the sensory environment at our events: provide a quiet room, tone down the sensory stimulus.

TO SUMMARISE:
Capitalism develops productive resources, but it does so in the interests of the small ruling class that is motivated by making profit and so creates distress and disadvantage for neurodivergergent people.

By reorganising society on a socialist basis, with a democratically-planned economy geared towards human need not private profit, we can start to remove those barriers and problems that capitalism creates and make a more inclusive, less discriminatory society.

We have looked at some of the ways of how to get there – mobilising, developing theory, making our own movement more accessible.

We are beginning to show the potential of achieving liberation through socialism.
By Martin Thomas

In the weeks after the Russian workers’ councils declared themselves the country’s rulers, on 25 October 1917, the Bolshevik (and then Bolsheviki/ Left SR) government had essentially no means to implement its policies other than power and cynegy of its political agitation.

It inherited no functioning state machine. On 12 February 1918 the Soviet government officially decreed the total demobilisation of the army, which was anyway in collapse.

Most government officials at first refused to cooperate. The new People’s Commissars had to scrabble just to find an office, a table, some chairs, some ready cash, to begin even nominal operation.

The Red Army was officially inaugurated on 20 February, but at first it could be built into an actual army only by persuasion and agitation.

The Bolshevik party’s central “machine” consisted essentially of Sverdlov and half a dozen assistants. Their ability to keep strict organisational tabs on party members and units was slight even in St Petersburg and Moscow, let alone in outside areas with which even basic communication was difficult.

The Bolshevik party was a powerful revo-

lutionary factor because of the force of its ideas and its revolutionary will, not because of any special strength of its organisational machine.

Far from the Bolshevik party imposing a centralised structure of its own on the new state, the Bolsheviki party acquired a strong centralised machine only as a by-product of its effects to construct a new state centralised enough to fight a civil war.

“NESTED” INSIDE

Dangerously, and ultimately tragically, the centralisation of the Bolshevik party was “nested” inside the centralisation of the state machine, rather than standing beside it.

But what happened through the constraints of the civil war, not through deficiencies in the Bolsheviks’ ideas of democracy.

Arguably, the tragedy of the civil war could have been diminished if the Bolshevik party in October 1917 had been more stereotypically “Bolshevik” – ruthless, organisational	ly tight, capable of having its own centralised machine apart from and alongside any state centralism.

The “making” of the revolution was not just the actions of 25 October and the vote in the Congress of Soviets to oust the un-elected Provisional Government, but the activities of the first few months through which the new workers’ government won support as a viable administration.

Many of the best-known Bolshevik leaders resented these concessions soon after the revolution in protest at the Bolshevik major-

ity’s refusal to accept the Mensheviks’ and SRs’ conditions for a coalition government. Then they were won round.

In October, the Mensheviks and the SRs had walked out of the Congress of Soviets in protest. Their entry into discussion on a coalition government, even though they posde possible conditions, was a first step back. In April 1918, Martov’s “Menshevik Inter-

ationalists” voted to recognise the Bolsheviki regime as a provisional government.

The first attempt at armed overthrow of the Soviet government was set in motion on 30 October, by General Krasnov who defeated if the Bolsheviki army – and in war you do – mild measures could not work with a population accustomed to it by the large surviving corps of Tsarist officials, the exhaustion and revolu-

tion-weariness of the mass of workers and peasants, and the new layers of merchants and rich peasants who they knew would emerge with NEP.

They were defeated. The party was crushed between the stones of officialdom and mass disillusion, with the assimilation of a part of the party into the officialdom on the one hand, and the “Lenin ley” on the other.

Lenin wrote to Miasnikov in August 1921: “We have many maladies. Mistakes… have greatly aggravated the maladies… sprining from our situation… Want and calamity abound… They have been terribly intensified by the famine of 1921.

“Revive the Soviets; secure the co-opera-

tion of non-Party people; let non-Party people verify the work of Party members: this is absolutely right. No end of work there, and it has hardly been started”.

The work was soon engulfed by Stalin-

ism. That happened, not because the Bol-

sheviki party was too strong, but fundamentaly because history made it impossible for it to be in relation to the pressures of the time – other than “too weak”.

• This article is an abridgment from a much longer one discussing Sam Farber’s book Before Stalinism: bit.ly/b-cw-s
By Les Lhearn

“Marxism does not provide a ready-made key for making judgements about scientific ideas. It cannot substitute for a detailed knowledge of the appropriate scientific material.” — Peter Mason, Marxism and the Big Bang

Marx and Engels saw themselves applying a scientific method to economics and the dynamics of class societies.

Their philosophical approach was derived from that of Hegel who used dialectics, a discussion between opposing points of view, to arrive at truths. Marx and Engels applied Hegel’s methods to the real world, in particular showing that the capitalist mode of production gave rise to a class war. It was in this arena that they distinguished between materialist and non-materialist disciplines. It was materialist, in that all phenomena arose from the physical world, and not from the human mind.

Seeing their work as part of science in general, both were deeply interested in the natural sciences of their time. Indeed, Marx wrote of Darwin’s On the Origin of Species that it “contains the basis in natural history for our view.”

Eleanor Marx’s partner, Edward Aveling, was a populariser of Darwin’s theory. Simon Ings, in his recent Stalin and the Scientists, sees Marx as believing in scientific government, where science would be extended into politics until there was “no distinction between knowledge and policy.” Sadly, evidence-based government policies are just as elusive now as then.

Engels was particularly interested in modern science: he saw his philosophy of “new materialism” (i.e. DM) potentially uniting all disciplines. It was materialist, in that all phenomena arose from the physical world, and dialectical, in that all knowledge was obtained through reasoned argument and inquiry.

As a philosophical method, DM was therefore a study of how all things change, whether these be species, chemical substances, or societies. Perhaps the most successful of Engels’ attempts to use DM in considering a scientific problem is contained in his unfinished 1876 essay The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man.

MATERIALIST NATURAL SCIENCE

Modern natural science has no choice but to be materialist and both Engels and Lenin sought to connect science to DM, seeing scientists as unconscious dialectical materialists.

Lysenko measures the growth of wheat in a field. Lysenko rejected Mendelian genetics in favour of “soft inheritance.”

Engels was particularly impressed with Mendeleev’s prediction of “eka-aluminium” from an anomaly in his Periodic Table of the Elements. Mendeleev found that arranging elements into columns of those with similar properties led to some contradictions. Guessing that not all the elements had been discovered yet, Mendeleev left gaps (in order to preserve correspondences in behaviour) and predicted the properties of the “missing elements.” He then was resoundingly vindicated when eka-aluminium, since named gallium, was discovered in 1875, with the predicted properties, just as Engels would have thought.

Engels saw the periodic table and its resulting predictions as a manifestation of the dialectical law of the transformation of quantity into quality.

LENIN AGAINST MACH

Lenin’s interest in science led him to take time out in 1908 to write a weighty tome demolishing the philosophy of Ernst Mach, a respected physicist and a fairly influential philosopher.

Mach’s ideas had caught on with some Bolsheviks, such as his co-founder Bogdanov who was challenging Lenin for leadership, and Lenin thought this was a dangerous departure from materialism. Bogdanov was subsequently expelled.

Mach enumerated three principles for valid physical theories:

1. They should be based entirely on directly observable phenomena;
2. They should be based on the principle of relative motion, rather than on absolute space and time;
3. Any properties apparently based on absolute space and time should instead be seen as arising from the large-scale distribution of matter in the universe.

Principle 1 led Mach into error when he refused to accept the existence of atoms, even after Einstein had showed how to prove their existence in his 1905 paper on Brownian motion (and Jean Perrin had actually done so in 1908).

This was because no-one had directly observed them, a rather poor reason given that many small objects had been invisible to the human eye until the invention of the microscope and one might have allowed that other smaller objects might exist, particularly with the overwhelming indirect evidence for atoms. The atomic nature of matter is so fundamental that the great physicist Richard Feynman once said that the single sentence “Everything is made of atoms” encapsulated the most important scientific knowledge we possess.

Principles 2 and 3 were rather more sound and Einstein praised them as important influences in his development of the theory of relativity.

Nevertheless, Mach, with his habit of backing the wrong horse, rejected Einstein’s theories; indeed Mach’s name was included in a rather embarrassing tome entitled A hundred authors against Einstein (though he appears not to have contributed). Einstein remarked that, if he was wrong, one author would have been enough.

PURE SCIENCE?

Alekssand Bogdanov, an interesting character, is given quite a bit of attention by Ings.

Bogdanov, a medical doctor, was very interested in science, seeing capitalism as fragmenting scientific progress into separate non-communicating, disciplines. The “pursuit of science for its own sake” was a tragic error. In a socialist society, “practice and theory would once again be fused, and science could at last be put to the service of society.” In other words, “there is no such thing as pure science.”

This is a profoundly misleading approach as there is no way of knowing what there is to discover and you can’t just say “Let’s find the cure for cancer” (though of course you can try to find it). Unfortunately, this is close to the attitude of Stalin to science. As Lenin recognised, Bogdanov, a follower of Mach, had departed somewhat from Marxism some 10 years before the revolution.

Bogdanov did not rejoin the Bolsheviks but did set up Proletkult, a “proletarian” art movement whose rather ultra-left aim was to completely replace the old bourgeois culture. He later became interested in the idea of rejuvenation through blood transfusions but seems not to have been aware of the painstaking work that had revealed the existence of blood groups and their role in death following blood transfusions...in 1901!

He died in 1928 after receiving blood from a student with malaria, tuberculosis, and an incompatible blood group: the student recovered.

Lenin seems to have been widely read on nature and ecology and would go for long hikes in the wilderness and mountains while in exile in Switzerland. While desperate to find ways of increasing agricultural productivity and aware of the latest science on soil fertility, such as the discovery of nitrogen-fixing bacteria in leguminous plants in 1888, he understood that people could not simply ignore the forces of nature.

It was essentially to understand nature and work with it: “To replace the forces of nature with human labor...would be just as impossible as replacing the arbour with the pod...man may merely avail himself of the actions of nature’s forces, if he knew these actions, enlistng machines and tools to make this process easier.”

TROTSKY AND SCIENCE

The other great leader of the October revolution and leader of the triumphant Red Army, Trotsky, who is not really discussed by Ings, had an important though short-lived role in Soviet science.

After being forced to resign as People’s Commissar of the Army in 1924, he was given two scientific posts in 1925, head of the Electro-Technical Board and chair of the Scientific-Technical Board of Industry, nominally in charge of science in the USSR. He clearly rejected the idea that politics could interfere with science, as he stated in a speech at the 1925 Mendeleev Congress (on the centenary of Mendeleev’s birth).

“A single individual scientist may not at all be concerned with the practical application of his research. The wider his scope, the bolder his flight, the greater his freedom from practical daily necessity in his mental operations, all the better.”

Clearly, Trotsky understood that science cannot simply be ordered to come up with the answers. Soon he was to resign as Stalinist political interference in science policy.

The history of science in the USSR from the revolution through Stalin’s counter-revolution to its collapse (and even to the present day) confirms Paul Mattick’s conclusion that Marxism has nothing to say about the physical sciences, beyond taking their results into consideration when considering the development of the class struggle and setting physical limits to what may achieved by a workers’ government.

Suffice to say that the reverence for facts that characterised the early scientific policies of the Bolshevik government gave way to the idea of science as a tool to implement the plan. If scientific theory indicated the impossibility of the plan, so much the worse for scientific theory – and for the scientists who tried to explain this.

All too frequently, the messenger was shot!

• Version with full references at bit.ly/1vms

Clover harbours nitrogen-fixing bacteria

- Workers’ Liberty
Delivero: next strikes 14 February?

By Zack, a Bristol Courier and treasurer of Bristol Couriers Network

Strike action by Delivero couriers spread across the country, with simultaneous strikes having been held in various locations on 1 February. These strikes were inspired by an energetic and visible strike that took place in Bristol on the 18 January and precipitated by steadily decreasing pay.

Bristol, Cheltenham, Horsham, London, Nottingham and Woking all saw strikes by couriers, mostly starting 6pm. Birmingham struck earlier that week.

Couriers in those six places are all it seems, discussing or planning further strike action and protests. Couriers in Bournemouth, Cardiff, Leeds, Manchester, and at least one other place, are also planning future strikes, and probably many more away from the 12 places I know of at the time of writing.

Many places have been discussing strikes on Valentine’s day, 14 February. This is a busy day for Delivero, and riders can communicate “no love for Delivero”. Other places have been discussing alternative dates.

On 1 February, in Bristol, we built upon the previous protest, with around 250 or more riders striking, the bulk of the active workforce. This led to three quarters of Delivero’s normal operation shutting down — 120 of 160 restaurants stopped delivering — and very long waiting times, and cancelled or refunded orders.

A large proportion were striking by simply logging out and choosing to stay at home, rather than joining the protest, because of the snow and the cold weather. They struck despite Delivero yet again offering “boosts” — additional pay — in order to persuade them to undermine it.

Around 40 of us — couriers and supporters — were on the protest, which was energetic and loud. We protested outside and leafted within four restaurants. We know that Delivero was scared of this too, as they had it seem they had hired bouncers to be outside some of the restaurants, and at least one of them followed us from restaurant to restaurant. In Nottingham, too, Delivero reportedly supplied bouncers to restaurants too.

In Cheltenham, around 30 people struck, a significant proportion of a much smaller fleet. 22 people joined in a protest, chanting and talking to customers in the busiest restaurants. Delivero attempted to bring in riders from other zones. There was nonetheless a significant backlog of orders with long waits, and restaurant managers reported furious riders.

Horsham saw 11 people striking in a smaller workforce still, with a few of them talking to couriers who hadn’t heard about it before. Most of the riders had been brought in from other zones, although some were from Horsham but felt unable to strike because of loss of pay. Some restaurants turned off their Delivero service, and others saw over two hours delivery times as they struggled with a backlog.

Worthing, perhaps the smallest workforce for Delivero, reportedly saw slightly fewer people striking. The majority of restaurants turned off their Delivero service, and the others had a backlog. Delivero called some riders about their strike action, confused about what was occurring.

Couriers in London went on strike for longer, starting earlier in the day, with perhaps 50 present at the protest and reports of some reports — and others passively striking. There is a much larger total number of couriers in London, across many zones, and Delivero reportedly placed a £2 boost on all orders to try to bring in strike breakers.

Couriers picketted a restaurant and a set of Delivero’s “dark kitchens” in Islington. Dark kitchens are prefabricated shipping containers with industrial cooking equipment which Delivero rents to restaurants wanting to expand their delivery service.

Nottingham saw a large number of riders striking, causing severe delays and cancelled orders. Birmingham, earlier in the week, had seen a strike by 50 couriers, who protested outside Delivero’s offices.

We know that the strike caused Delivero to directly lose tens of thousands of pounds across the country, perhaps significantly more, in lost or refunded orders. We know that they were scared enough to email restaurants across the country warning them about it, and to hire bouncers in many places. In many places they raised pay significantly to attempt to break the strikes — but they should raise that pay not just for a day, or weekend, but in the longer term!

DEMANDS

Most places had fairly similar demands, as we encouraged them to model theirs on ours (bit.ly/demandsBC). The core of these demands is higher pay a hiring freeze which would allow us to work more orders and raise our weekly pay.

We also have demands around due process for termination — i.e. job security — and transparency. Most places have one or two demands about particular aspects of their local working conditions.

To escalate this strike, activists in all of these areas need to build robust local organisation, and reach out to more and more couriers. This means organising local meetings of couriers, to plan democratically and to organise how to reach out effectively to yet more riders.

Bristol Couriers’ Network (BCN) have regular and well publicised general meetings for all couriers, and we make sure that we always have one shortly after a strike that we publicise at the strike. BCN also elected a committee that does more detailed organising between these meetings. For every strike and meeting we make bilingual leaflets.

At every restaurant where we see other riders, we discuss the struggle, try to persuade them if they are unsure, give them leaflets, and take their phone numbers. We keep in contact through texts and WhatsApp. Press releases, getting support from local union branches and left-wing groups, and social media, have been very useful too.

This local organising is the backbone of how we can build a successful strike movement to force Delivero to pay us better. BCN has affiliated to the IWGB union, and lots of us have joined. Cheltenham Couriers’ United likewise have a growing number of members, and activists in various other places are members too, and hopefully more will join up and more places will affiliate. IWGB’s Couriers and Logistics Branch (CLB) has been very supportive and has a wealth of experience of fighting and winning in the courier industry in London.

Couriers nationally should try to co-ordinate and come together in a more organised way nationally, which will help us to support each other better. The similarity of demands in most places across the country is a good step in the right direction.

A demand that hasn’t yet been raised in these strikes is for us to be categorised as workers rather than “independent contractors”, a demand that would automatically win us many workers’ rights. Delivero has promoted a lot of misinformation about the supposed but non-existent advantages of the way they (mis)categorise us.

Many riders have accepted or repeated this misinformation. Locally, and nationally we need to have this discussion, and I think most couriers will be won round when they know the facts.

Finally, the spreading of these strikes increases the urgency and importance of building a strike fund. In Bristol we have almost £1,600 altogether, but with hundreds of riders altogether we realise that it wasn’t enough to make available for the last strike.

IWGB’s CLB is also reviving its slightly bigger strike fund, to be further supported by a proportion of membership dues, and to be available to members.

• gophundme.com/bristol-couriers03-strike-fund
• fb.me/bristolcouriersnetwork
• twitter.com/couriersnetwork

Ideas for Freedom 20-23 June

The 2019 Ideas for Freedom — Workers’ Liberty summer school — has been announced for 20-23 June in London.

As well as main sessions on the weekend 22-23 June, there will be a walking tour on the evening of Thursday 20 June, and a debate on the evening of Friday 21 June.

We’re only just beginning to organise the agenda, but it will include presentations and debates on issues such as racism, anti-Semitism, climate change, 1919, and 1989, and more.

Super Early Bird tickets are now on sale, and until 24 February at half the price “£25 waged, £12 low waged, £5 unwaged”.

After 24 February, ticket prices will go up in instalments. Book early, for the date in your diary, and be ready to book your transport to London at cheap rates when they become available (probably late March). www.workersliberty.org/ideas
Lambeth children’s centres

By Kelly Rogers

Local parents, residents and trade unionists in Lambeth are campaigning against the latest round of cuts to children’s centres.

Lambeth Council’s proposals would close five of 23 children’s centres in the borough, and cut in half the provision at another seven centres.

Children’s centres are places for children to play, and, for parents, a point of access to a range of services from ESOL classes, through breastfeeding sessions, to LGBT parenting support groups.

The right-led Labour Council have been running a public consultation since mid-December, which has been met with a huge backlash from children’s centre users and other local residents.

The Green opposition in the council has submitted an amendment, to be decided on later in February, which asks the Council to reduce the amount by which it plans to increase its reserves. The Council could then continue funding children’s centres for the next four years, by which point there might be a new government.

Lambeth UNISON and community-campaigning group Lambeth Save Our Services have distributed thousands of leaflets held meetings with parents and workers, organised a well-attended demonstration in Brixton on 26 January and occupied Lambeth’s newly refurbished Town Hall with toddlers in tow.

PCS left focus on living wage

By Mike Chester

The civil service union PCS has just completed a membership consultation on the 2019 civil service pay claim and campaign plan.

A February meeting of the union’s National Executive (NEC) will “press the button” for a new civil service pay ballot.

At a December NEC, general secretary Mark Serwotka and the leadership proposed a pay claim of 8-10%. Phil Dickens, a member of the PCS Independent Left, the organisation where Workers’ Liberty activists organise in within the union, proposed the following alternative claim:

• A living wage of £10/hour (Grenfell Threshold) for the lowest grades
• Pay at all other grades to be uplifted in proportion
• Contractual pay progression where there aren’t spot rates
• Outsourced pay to be minimally brought in line with civil service pay

Previously PCS has had a perennial “5%” rise formula, and IL has argued that goes nowhere near addressing the pay injustice PCS members have suffered.

The Living Wage and common pay rates across the civil service both appear in the official pay claim. There has been almost no emphasis on them, so the likelihood of them being addressed looks minimal.

IL’s alternative claim makes common rates and a living wage the central points on which the claim hinges.

The claim eradicates the worst injustices of the current pay system – that there are workers who don’t make enough money to live, and that those of the same grade can make wildly different rates of pay.

If such things remain apart from the claim, the government could arguably agree to the percentage PCS asked for without giving a living wage to all or equal pay for equal work.

Further failures to meet the 50% turnout threshold and allows the funnelling of resources into any group [sector of the civil service] which fails to reach the threshold.

There is a serious strategic and organisational deficit in the leadership’s reliance on the biggest section of the union to drag the rest over the line for the ballot.

As we saw with the MoJ pay offer that followed the ballot, an aggregated ballot doesn’t hide organisational weakness from the employer, though even from such a weak position, the reps in that group pulled off a heroic effort to see off the attack.

In a disaggregated ballot, any group which didn’t make it past the line could similarly regroup, but instead of having to do so alone they would have the cover of an ongoing campaign by those groups that passed the threshold.

We will know the results of the membership consultation in the week starting 4 February. We expect the leadership’s proposal to win through as it was presented as a fait accompli at the consultation meetings, often poorly attended.

IL will continue fighting for our claim and our strategy and encourage members to support and vote for our candidates, including John Moloney for Assistant General Secretary.

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Further failures to meet the 50% turnout threshold and allows the funnelling of resources into any group [sector of the civil service] which fails to reach the threshold.

There is a serious strategic and organisational deficit in the leadership’s reliance on the biggest section of the union to drag the rest over the line for the ballot.

As we saw with the MoJ pay offer that followed the ballot, an aggregated ballot doesn’t hide organisational weakness from the employer, though even from such a weak position, the reps in that group pulled off a heroic effort to see off the attack.

In a disaggregated ballot, any group which didn’t make it past the line could similarly regroup, but instead of having to do so alone they would have the cover of an ongoing campaign by those groups that passed the threshold.

We will know the results of the membership consultation in the week starting 4 February. We expect the leadership’s proposal to win through as it was presented as a fait accompli at the consultation meetings, often poorly attended.

IL will continue fighting for our claim and our strategy and encourage members to support and vote for our candidates, including John Moloney for Assistant General Secretary.

NEU: call a march on school funding!

By Patrick Murphy (NEU national executive, in personal capacity)

On 28 February the Executive of the National Education Union (NEU) meets to consider the next steps in our campaign on funding and pay.

The most significant new information available to NEC members will be the results of a lengthy indicative ballot which closed in mid-January. After a number of “warm-up” questions about support for the union’s campaign, the ballot asked whether members would support industrial action to achieve its demands.

Support for industrial action from those who voted was impressive (over 80%) but the turnout across the union was 31%. The 2016 Trade Union Act requires a turnout of 50% and a yes vote from 40% of eligible members.

The Executive is unlikely to call a “official” national ballot for strike action on the basis of this result.

There must be a serious risk that industrial action will be shelved for the moment.

If action remains on the table it is likely to be in the form of some sort of selective strikes in areas or phases with the highest turnouts.

There are major problems with all options there. Members who voted yes to action in the indicative ballot did so on the understanding that they were supporting unified national strikes. They weren’t voting to take action only in their own schools or geographical area.

There is also little point in selective action unless the intention is to roll it out across the country. In the 2012 pensions dispute, London was called out for a one-day strike with the promise that other regions would follow. In fact no other region was called out. Many mem-

bers in London felt used and misled.

The demands of the proposed action have been a problem from the start. School funding is a critical and popular campaigning issue, but the main effects are yet to be felt and will be different between different schools and areas.

PAY

The pay element of the campaign was very weak.

The NEU abandoned its own pay claim (for a 5% increase for all) and replaced it with a demand for 3.5% for all. This was justified by the claim that 3.5% was the recommendation of the School Teachers’ Review Body and it would embarrass the government to have that high.

In fact the majority of teachers were already getting a 3.5% increase under the government’s pay award. The NEU was asking the majority of teachers to vote for strike action which might gain an increase in the pay of school leaders and such but would not gain most teachers a penny.

It is unlikely that a viable proposal for strike action which really builds a national dispute will emerge from the 28 February Executive meeting.

But the NEU should call a national demonstration on a Saturday to demand increased funding, decent pay, an end to the exam-factory model of education and bringing academy schools back into local authority control. We should be clear that there is a right to strike and the rest of the trade union movement to support it.

Such a demonstration would not only put education on the political agenda in a new way, and build confidence and engagement within the movement, but it would provide the industrial action that will eventually be needed.

Checks only after 82 days!

By Ollie Moore

Tube union RMT is preparing to ballot members working in fleet maintenance for industrial action to resist an attempt by London Underground to extend two-yearly pay ballots.

Currently, trains are prepared, with all basic checks being performed, every 24 hours. New pro-

cedures from the company would extend that by varying lengths on different lines, to a 96-hour sched-

ule on some lines and an 82-day one on others.

Although LU bosses are yet to announce any definite plans for job cuts, union activists say that a reduction in head count could follow, an extension of train prep schedules.

Elsewhere on London Underground, station staff on the District Centre group covering stations including South Kensington and Gloucester Road, are planning a ballot for strikes against short-staffing, after a similar ballot on the Bakerloo Line forced signif-

icant concessions from management.

Drivers at the Acton Town depot on the Piccadilly Line are also preparing to ballot, after management imposed a new roster.
Students vote “no confidence”

By Natalia Cassidy

The National Union of Student (NUS) Trans Students’ Conference, on 30-31 January in Manchester, unanimously passed the Student Left Network motion of no confidence in NUS President Shakira Martin.

Earlier in January, an NUS UK board meeting had voted to scrap the trans students’ campaign, budget, officer and committee. The motion condemned the NUS leadership’s “deeply undemocratic” handling of NUS’s financial deficit. It called for NUS to cut back on bureaucracy to make a lasting impact on the values and present in the wider movement and society as a whole. It is crucial that the left champion the right to free speech.

The conference also passed a motion submitted by Workers’ Liberty students resolving to campaign alongside the labour movement for better provision for trans healthcare in a fully funded, publicly and democratically owned and run NHS.

Another motion we submitted argued against the dominant view on the student left that transphobic feminists should be “no-platformed”, making the case that protest, discussion and debate are more effective than bureaucratic methods such as bans at rooting out reactionary ideas within the movement.

An amendment to the motion argued that transphobic feminists should be denied a platform because they often use “fascist tactics” such as “doxing, alienating with the religious right, and stirring up the demonisation of trans people on the street.” The amendment passed, although around forty percent of delegates abstained.

We argued that while tactics of leaking personal information about trans students should be condemned and dealt with by existing well-being policies to ensure the safety of students, this does not represent the core threat that fascism poses to the labour movement and minority groups: that is, an immediate, physical threat to their continued existence and ability to organise. Transphobic feminists are simply not building movements on the streets.

Unfortunately, transphobic attitudes are widespread, not marginal, in society. Only through democratic rather than bureaucratic techniques can we hope to make a lasting impact on the values and present in the wider movement and society as a whole. It is crucial that the left champion the right to free speech.

This, by necessity, includes fighting for free speech for those who hold ideas we do not agree with. Although we lost the vote this time, the large number of abstentions shows that opinions on the student left are starting to shift slowly in our favour on “no-platforming” as a tactic and on freedom of speech.

Workers’ Liberty held a fringe meeting entitled “Bolsonaro, trans liberation and class struggle in Brazil”. Fifteen people came (the total at the conference was 50 or 60), and interesting discussions were had.

The Student Left Network and Workers’ Liberty interventions had a positive effect on the conference as a whole: normally, all motions pass unanimously and there is little political debate or contention. Similar interventions should be organised into as many upcoming NUS Conferences as possible (Women’s, LGBT+, Disabled, Black Students, plus National Conference in April). NUS National Conference is 9-11 April in Glasgow, and the deadline for motions is 28 February. Workers’ Liberty students have already submitted motions to on solidarity with Brazil, campaigning against Brexit, for free movement and migrants’ rights, and for radical social and democratic changes in the EU, actively supporting workers’ struggles and campaigning to bring outsourced workers in-house. The Student Left Network will be submitting motions of no confidence in Shakira Martin and the NUS Trustee Board, plus others on positive demands NUS democracy and other political issues and campaigns.

Student Left Network candidates Justine Canady and Ross Taylor are running for President and Vice President Higher Education respectively, with more candidates to be announced.

- Read the Student Left Network bulletin: bit.ly/nustrans
- Register for the SLN conference: bit.ly/SLN19

In the first months after the Brexit referendum of June 2016, the Tory government revealed, triumphantly, that it had reassured the car-making multinational Nissan. Nissan, whose 7000-worker site in Sunderland is the biggest car factory in the UK, wouldn’t move production from the UK after Brexit after all.

The government refused to say what had done the trick. It insisted “there was no special deal for Nissan.”

Business minister Greg Clark said: “There’s no chequebook. I don’t have a chequebook.”

Now we know Clark offered Nissan bosses £80 million. It turns out Nissan is moving its new production lines anyway, so won’t get most of the money.

The Tories offered no similar pay-out to workers facing Brexit clouds. They were happy seeing EU-citizen workers pushed out, and knew British-born workers would have little choice but to endure whatever came.

This is a curtain lifted on a whole world of capitalist lobbying, deals behind the scenes, and pay-outs.

A book published in 2014 estimated the lobbying industry in Britain at £2 billion a year, which means an average of £3 million a year per individual MP, and a lot more for the more powerful MPs. The lobbyists expect a return for what they pay.

The other side of that coin is the lavishly-paid “adviser” and “non-executive director” given to ministers and MPs after they finish with politics. Former chancellor George Osborne now has eight jobs on top of his post as editor of the Evening Standard, including a one-day-a-week gig with Blackrock which pays £500,000 a year.

The Tories have attempted a feeble “workers” version of the same ploy by suggesting Labour MPs who vote for whatever Brexit deal the government comes up with may get central government investments in their constituencies.

The Tories have attempted to foist a feeble “workers” version of the same ploy by suggesting Labour MPs who vote for whatever Brexit deal the government comes up with may get central government investments in their constituencies.

Find an economically equal society, with open financial accounts, can bring substantive democracy.