

Solidarity

& Workers' Liberty



For social ownership of the banks and industry

**No rushed
lockdown
easing!**

» **Isolation
pay for all**

» **Requisition
industry for
PPE and tests**

» **Union
control over
workplace
assessments**

WORKERS' CONTROL



Poster workshop 1968-71,
London, UK (adapted)

Exit strategy? we're not there yet

Still a way off the needed
reduction in cases and
assurance of PPE supply.

Page 2

Care blighted by profit

Poor workers' rights and
the drive for profit in care
homes have increased
deaths.

Page 10

Universities and the pandemic

Fight starts against big
job cuts threatened for
the coming months

Page 5

Apps aren't a cure-all

Adequate take-up won't
be got without answering
real civil-liberties
questions.

Page 13

“Exit strategy”? Not yet

By Martin Thomas

On the evidence, Britain is not yet ready for experiments in easing the lockdown.

As of 1 May, the seven-day moving average of daily deaths from the virus is only 20-odd per cent down from its peak around 13 April. By contrast, Spain, Germany, Denmark, and Austria are all about 50% down from peaks in early April, Italy is 60% down from a peak in late March, and France is over 50% down from a peak in mid-April.

Basing calculations on case numbers is tricky because they reflect the extent of testing as much as the extent of cases. But in Britain the number of daily new cases is declining only slowly and the number of “active cases” is still rising, while in those other countries it is falling.

Scientists talk about easing lockdown and switching to a “tracking and tracing” emphasis. Britain at present has 15-20 times the number of confirmed “active cases” in proportion to population that South Korea had at its peak. It is hard to see how a “tracking and tracing” emphasis could work without the number of “active cases” being brought down to a much lower figure.

It is possible that some elements of the lockdown have marginal effect on the pandemic and could be eased while increasing risk only marginally. Lockdowns have varied a lot in detail from country to country, and some items of the British lockdown have been absent from lockdowns in more “successful” countries such as Germany and Australia. Stopping the deaths in care homes depends on quite other issues than lockdown.

The lockdown-easings so far in a range of countries have all “worked”, pretty much. The lockdown-easing in the Czech Republic has “worked”, and indeed has been speeded up in the light of experience. The only cases where lockdowns have been reimposed after easing have been in Hokkaido (Japan) and Singapore, and there the broad trend of decline of infection has continued.

The lockdown has severe social and medical costs of its own. It would be wrong to construct our policy just by saying no where the mostly-right-wing lockdown-easing enthusiasts say yes, yes where they say no.

Even more wrong to trust the Tories to calibrate the easing. “This or that easing? Maybe. Show us the plans, and give the labour movement resources and time to do detailed risk assessments before each move is made”.

What we demand in the crisis

1. Requisitioning (emergency public ownership) of key sectors
 2. Workers’ control
 3. Make the labour movement an essential service, to exert workers’ control
 4. Defend workers’ rights. Work or full pay! Cancel rent, mortgage, and utility payments.
 5. Take care of the worst-off
 6. Defend civil liberties
 7. International solidarity
- bit.ly/what-d □

All lockdown-easings are likely to be limited for a long time. At present re-licensing “mass gatherings” is at the very end of the governments’ lockdown-easing schedules almost everywhere. With festivals, concerts, spectator-sports, big religious events, etc., there may be a case.

But protests and picket lines can be - in fact, some *have been* - organised with social distancing at least as good as most workplaces which have continued in the lockdown. We should demand the lifting of the ban on demonstrations and picket lines early in the easing.

Our demands for requisitioning, workers’ control, isolation and fallback pay, rent and utility bill cancellations, PPE, and integration of social care into the public sector on public-sector conditions, will not fade. They will become more vital with easing.

The accumulation of debt during the lockdown creates a real risk of a snowballing slump and job cuts developing not just from the lockdown as such, but also, and maybe even more so, from the easing of the lockdown, as creditors start coming after debtors. We demand public ownership and democratic control of high finance. □

Momentum Internationalists

Momentum Internationalists (MI) is a platform launched by supporters of Labour for a Socialist Europe to promote left-wing, class-struggle, pro-democracy and internationalist ideas in the big Labour left grouping Momentum as part of the debates around the coming elections for Momentum’s National Coordinating Group (NCG: nominations 28 May to 11 June, voting 16 to 30 June).

MI’s first action after launch was to initiate an open letter to Keir Starmer protesting against his pro-Modi u-turn on Kashmir, demanding that Labour uphold conference policy to “stand with the Kashmiri people fighting against occupation”.

MI will stand and support candidates in all regions of the UK and hopes for productive collaboration with other like-minded candidates, including those supported by the “Forward Momentum” faction, founded by some staff from Momentum’s “World Transformed” events bureau.

FM’s platform calls for a healthier culture in the party, but otherwise is very light on any policy other than democratic reforms. But even on democracy, the platform is lacking: it doesn’t even propose that Momentum have a sovereign annual conference – i.e., be at least as democratic as every other labour movement organisation.

Likewise, FM’s decision to hold their own “open” primary selection process using a first-past-the-post voting method shows – at best – that the comrades’ thinking on best practice when it comes to democracy is muddled. Hopefully, the debates surrounding this NCG election can lead to some clarification of ideas in the Labour left. □

- Momentum Internationalists platform: bit.ly/momi-p
- MI’s open letter to Starmer on Kashmir: bit.ly/kashmirpetitionmi

Workers' control over "easing"

“” Editorial

Workers, and our unions, need to get out in front of any discussion or planning by the bosses to begin to reopen workplaces and bring workers back to work.

We need to put in place clear assessments and our own criteria, overseen by union reps with the maximum degree of control for workers, for when it's safe for work to resume or for workers to return to the workplace.

If those criteria aren't met, and bosses insist on resuming work anyway, we need to organise to obstruct that, and refuse to work if necessary.

Specific demands will vary from workplace to workplace, but there will be some common themes:

Distancing measures in place to reorganise workspaces to ensure workers can maintain 2m distance from each other while working. If this is physically or structurally impossible with a full complement of workers, rotating work patterns, agreed and decided amongst workers themselves, should be implemented to ensure the number of workers in work does not exceed the maximum level at which it's possible to distance safely.

Cleaning regimes should be stepped up, with cleaners guaranteed full PPE to protect their safety. This should include regular cleaning, with antiviral solutions, of all workspaces and shared equipment. Any shared equipment not absolutely essential for the functioning of the workplace should be mothballed.

Distancing

Employers should provide hand-sanitisers and gloves to all workers. For work tasks where maintaining distancing is impossible (e.g., emergency maintenance or engineering work that requires working in pairs or teams, in closer proximity), face masks and shields should also be provided. Handwashing stations should be set up, readily accessible to all workers, additional to whatever existing toilet facilities are present in the workplace.

Workers in higher risk categories, due to age or underlying health conditions, should be shielded as much as possible while public health guidance is that social distancing measures remain in place. Any worker in a vulnerable category should be given special paid leave to remain at home.

More challenges are presented by industries that involve customer service, such as transport and retail. On London Underground, bosses are attempting to impose emergency timetables that would increase the train service beyond the minimum levels to which it has been reduced. This would require a contingent increase in shifts for station staff, service controllers, and others, which have been significantly reduced to eliminate non-essential work.

Unions have so far resisted this imposition, arguing

Tories keep UK's prisons full, despite Covid-19

The Prison and Probation Service and Public Health England say that at least 15,000 prisoners must be released to keep prisoners and prison staff safe in the pandemic. The Tories announced the release of 4,000 – and have released only 33. Matt Ford explains and calls for urgent action: bit.ly/toriesprisons □

there is no operational need to increase the service while lockdown continues, and that any ramping back up the service must be planned and agreed with unions in advance, rather than simply imposed. If LU presses ahead with imposition, unions are reminding members of their legal rights to refuse unsafe work.

Meanwhile, union safety reps are formulating demands to place on the company as part of workers' own assessment criteria for any increase in the service and staffing levels. Many supermarkets have implemented distanced queuing systems, which could be explored for train and Tube stations. Other demands might include the installation of handwashing stations outside all stations, with passengers required to wash their hands before entering.

Clearly, this relies on consent and common sense from the passengers to work and wouldn't necessarily be entirely enforceable. Within stations, unions should demand that staff work from behind physical barriers – whether from the station control room, former ticket offices, or "Gate Line Assistant Points" – wherever possible, to minimise contact with passengers.

The key principle in all situations should be workers' control. Unions must fight for the maximum degree of workplace-level control over any back-to-work plans or plans for service increases.

Only when workers are satisfied that everything possible has been done to maximise safety and minimise risk should we agree to return to work. □

July deadline

Dave Prentis, general secretary of the public services union Unison, joined a May Day virtual rally called on 1 May by Tower Hamlets Unison, over "Tower Rewards". That is a plan to reduce workers' conditions to minimum "green book" standards, by way of sacking them all and re-employing them on new contracts. The unions got big ballot majorities for strikes, but suspended them for the pandemic. The (Labour) council said it would still impose the change on 13 April, then at the last minute said it would postpone it to July. □

• facebook.com/TowerHamletsUnison

Lockdown-easing in Germany

By a reader in Germany

Germany's federal states have been gradually easing their pandemic "lockdowns" since some schools were partially reopened in the second half of April.

So far as can be seen, daily confirmed cases, outstanding active case numbers, and daily deaths are still falling gradually.

The "lockdown" was always more liberal than in Britain. One-third of workplaces went onto "Kurzarbeit" (a scheme where the government pays wages for temporarily laid-off workers), but travel to work went down by 43% in Germany compared to around 65% in Italy, Spain, France, and the UK. German manufacturing has been running at 71% of capacity, as against 58% in the UK.

Now almost all shops are open in most of the country, though people have to wear masks. The U-Bahn in Berlin has been crowded in rush hour throughout the period. Churches have been re-opened, though with a ban on singing. Small political demonstrations are allowed.

Many restrictions remain. Visiting friends at home is still banned in most of the country. Wider reopening of schools has been postponed. But there is more traffic on the streets in the daytime.

The CDU (Germany's conservative ruling party) is in the middle of a (postponed) leadership contest, so its candidates are using the virus for electioneering – who can be toughest, or who can be most "liberal". Leaders of the CDU's sister party in Bavaria, the CSU, made it the first state to lock down, from 20 March. Now the CDU leader of North Rhine-Westphalia (Cologne, Düsseldorf, Dortmund, Essen), Armin Laschet is pressing for quicker easing.

Pressure for easing

Pressure for easing comes most vocally from the German Football League, and also from business organisations and churches. There have been small street demonstrations against the lockdown, by "anti-vaxxers", conspiracy-theorists, and the type of people who took part in nationalistic and anti-refugee "Pegida" marches. Some are led by one-time far-leftists who – often via support for Putin, Assad, or the Iranian regime – have since become convinced mouthpieces and publicists of the far-right.

Some unions have called for pay rises for essential workers, but said nothing distinctive about slower or faster easing of the lockdown. They do not see this as their role. Their focus is on improving the amount of pay furloughed workers get, either by law or by union agreement, along with some criticism of the loosening of health, safety and working time rules.

Surveys show only 3% for immediate reopening of football, but 43% now for all shops re-opening immediately. Most people say they support the lockdown in broad terms, but the percentage saying that they would quarantine on their own if required has gone down within the past week from 59% to 22%.

My impression is that richer people, visible by their

"designer" fashion-item masks, a lot of younger people (teenagers, early-20s), and the better-off elderly, are ignoring social-distancing rules, especially since the wearing of masks has become mandatory. Masks seem to give people a sense of security (I assume false), and I suspect they have been introduced to enable the authorities to relax the restrictions.

There is a lot of argument about contact-tracing apps. There are plans for an EU-wide app, with the individual movements of all citizens stored on central servers. After first being against, and then being for, the German government currently says it won't be part of that, and wants to go for an app which stores and transmits data only on and between individual phones.

For obvious historical reasons data protection and the lack of data collection in the first place is a big part of the national discourse, not only as a result of the coronavirus.

But it's not at all clear that any app, whether centralised or one that only stores data on individual devices, can work adequately, or on enough phones to be effective.

There are significant shortages of PPE in Germany, too, but because there is no national health service in the British sense, only social insurance, those are seen as issues of individual hospitals or organisations within the health system and not as the fault of the governments, at national or state level.

It remains true that Germany has a much lower Covid-19 death rate (81 per million) than neighbouring countries such as Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and Switzerland (670, 379, 291, 204 respectively).

It is still unclear why. It may be the case that more frail elderly people in Germany are cared for in their own homes rather than in institutions, and that may contribute, but we don't know. There are few reliable national statistics in the health sector in Germany. □

Closing borders

As part of its lockdown, Australia has banned entry to everyone other than citizens, and compelled returning citizens to quarantine for 14 days in a hotel before going home.

Now Kristina Kenneally, immigration spokesperson of the opposition Labor Party, has picked up on that to call for the conservative government to put tighter permanent curbs on immigration. "Do we want migrants to return to Australia in the same numbers and in the same composition as before the crisis? Our answer should be no".

Some Labor MPs have complained that Kenneally was freelancing, or finessed the question by talking of a cut in temporary work visas and an increase in permanent migration.

As we must be on guard against lockdown rules becoming permanent curbs on civil liberties, so also against them becoming permanent higher barriers to migration. □

University jobs at risk

By a UCU member

The pandemic, and the fall-off in international student fees which will come as a consequence, has tipped an already unsustainable model of university expansion into crisis.

It will speed up marketisation, and bring on cuts harder and faster than they would have come before.

The government has brought forward some payments due to universities to avoid a cash-flow crisis, but as yet has refused to provide extra funding to fill what could be a £1.7bn gap.

It is unlikely to want to see universities closed outright, especially in marginal constituencies. But some of the more vulnerable institutions might be forced into mergers with those in stronger financial positions, with the risk of campus closures a few years down the line. The Tories will want to see the market “working”, and won’t care too much about students who need local universities, or universities more oriented to people without a traditional academic background.

Many universities are already freezing recruitment and refusing to renew fixed-term contracts. In practice that will mean increased workload for permanent staff. In some universities, like Warwick, where over a third of teaching staff are on fixed-term contracts, the effect could be drastic. On top of that, if (as seems likely) social-distancing rules are still operating in September and October, universities will not be able to reopen in the usual way. Usually there’s a two-year run-in time for developing an online programme, so moving even some teaching online will bring a huge extra workload.

Universities are also losing out on income from summer conferences, accommodation and catering. The longer this continues, the more likely it is that catering and security staff will face redundancies.

Some universities are more dependent on international student fees, and have built up higher levels of debt, than others. The Russell Group (the more “prestigious” of the older universities) will be more immediately affected by a drop in international student numbers. The risk is that they will seek to compensate by recruiting more UK students. They have agreed with the government to limit this to a 5% rise each. But multiplied through several institutions this could devastate the last in the chain.

For example, along the M4 corridor, expansion at Bristol will hit numbers at Cardiff, which will look instead to recruit students who would have gone to Swansea, which in turn will target applicants to Cardiff Met or UWTSD, putting programmes at those institutions at risk.

Sunderland University was already planning to cut its humanities courses in favour of an “employment-focused” curriculum before the pandemic began. In Australia, where universities have been even more dependent on international student fees, the University of Tasmania plans to cut three-quarters of its courses.

It’s said that if you added up all the expansion plans of all vice-chancellors in the last decade or so, they would need one million more students than were actually available to finance them. And there have been some particularly notorious cases of universities getting it wrong.

At Swansea University, the vice-chancellor and dean of the management school were sacked for gross misconduct and allegations of bribery referred to the Serious Fraud Office following an internal investigation into the tendering process for a £200 million “Wellness Village” project. The University of Chester has been told by planning inspectors to close down new teaching facilities at the Thornton Science Park after failing to secure the correct permission for the expansion. The site is considered inappropriate for students because of its proximity to an oil refinery.

There are, however, efforts to stop the cuts. The [Corona Contract initiative](#), started by postgraduates and casual teaching employees at Birkbeck University, is campaigning for a two-year extension on all fixed-term contracts.

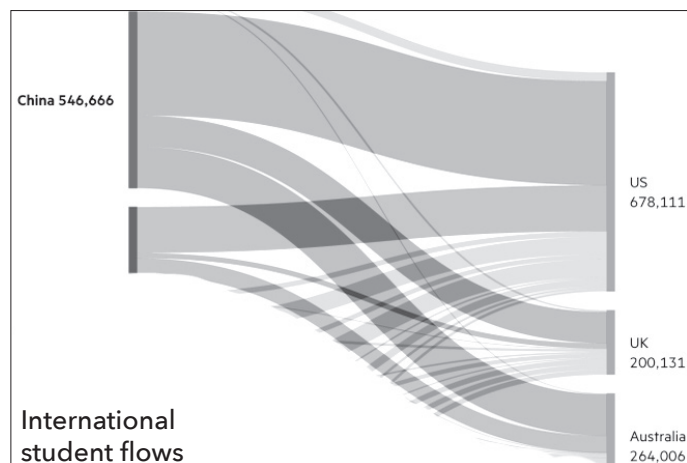
[Crisis Justice at Sussex](#) (a joint campaign by campus unions) is also calling for contract extensions, and for a maximum 6:1 pay ratio on campus.

Branches of the UCU [the academic-staff union] are beginning to meet online, as are the national committees. The pandemic hit just as many universities were coming to the end of strike action over the USS pension scheme and the “Four Fights” (over pay, casualisation, equalities and workload). Those ballot mandates have now expired and it isn’t clear that UCU will be able to organise any official industrial action while extensive working-from-home continues, given that most UCU members are registered with the union at their work, not home, addresses.

But the demands should be clear: government support for universities to save jobs, and no course closures.

Leverage to win them exists. In the medium term, there are still going to be students. In recessions, generally, more people seek university education.

Already a union campaign has pushed Durham University to drop plans to cut the number of modules on offer next year by 25%. □



Block the Tories' Brexit rush

By Josh Lovell, Stevenage CLP and Hertfordshire councillor

The statement calling for Labour and the unions to fight to delay Brexit, promoted by Labour for a Socialist Europe, has now been signed by over 350 party and union activists: bit.ly/labourexend

Probably for a mix of reasons, this is not (yet) an issue figuring prominently in most left-wingers' consciousness. Nonetheless, it is incredibly important. Allowing the Tories to push through a hard Brexit in the midst of the economic and social fall out from Covid-19 will be disastrous for workers, and facilitate the hard right pursuing their nationalist, anti-migrant, disaster-capitalist agenda at our expense. And we do not have long to drag the government out of its seemingly entrenched position.

I've made a push to promote the statement among other activists in Stevenage. About a dozen have signed so far including our CLP (Constituency Labour Party)

Chair, Secretary and Campaign Co-ordinator, and our parliamentary candidate in last year's general election. I've also got a range of activists in the Labour Campaign for Free Movement to sign the statement.

It's very good that prominent comrades like former MEP Julie Ward and Richard Corbett, the last leader of the European PLP, are promoting this. In general, though, grassroots activists need to build the campaign and drag "big names" into taking a stand.

Comrades should make an effort to promote this important initiative and help get it off the ground. □

Wake Up Labour!

A call for the Labour Party to restart decision-making meetings, to function as a campaigning force in the pandemic, and to get accountability for councillors and the parliamentary leadership. Sign at: bit.ly/w-u-l □

Private-health lobbyist in key Labour job

Seamus Milne – Stalinist, Brexit-supporter, and anti-democratic political manipulator – has departed as Labour's director of communications. His replacement in the £100,000 a year job is very different, but not an improvement.

Keir Starmer's new appointment Ben Nunn is a conservative "political professional" with an extensive history of organising full-time on the right-wing of the Labour Party. His career outside politics has been as a lobbyist for the private health industry.

Nunn, who voted for Liz Kendall for leader in 2015, was deputy director of communications for Owen Smith's Labour 2016 leadership campaign. Before that he worked for right-wing Labour MP Heidi Alexander – the first shadow cabinet member to resign in the "chicken coup" and a central person in Smith's campaign.

Until she resigned to overthrow Corbyn, Alexander was Shadow Health Secretary. Before he worked for her,

Nunn's job was with private healthcare lobbying firm Incisive Health. Incisive's founders included a former special adviser to Tory health secretary Andrew Lansley. It was founded with an explicit mission of promoting marketisation and privatisation in the health service.

After Smith's defeat Nunn returned to the company as associate director.

Starmer has also appointed noted right-wingers to investigate the leaked report into how full-time party staff dealt with antisemitism and undermined the party's campaigning and election work.

Alongside barrister Martin Forde are three Labour members of the House of Lords.

Former Newport council leader Debbie Wilcox has publicly and recently attacked the Corbyn leadership from the right, including by retweeting anti-Corbyn comments by Iain McNicol – one of the obvious targets of any meaningful investigation.

Larry Whitty was general secretary of the party 1985-94, oversaw the expulsion of Militant and Socialist Organisation members, and helped Neil Kinnock carry out his attacks on party democracy and rightward shifts in policy.

Ruth Lister, an academic and anti-poverty campaigner, is a more middle-of-the-road figure. She is chair of the (extremely) soft left group Compass.

Things do not bode well for serious action to deal with the problems the report exposed. □

The left in disarray

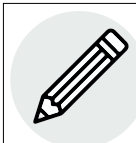
Sean Matgamna



Featured book

Politically, the left is still very weak and disoriented. It needs to emerge from defining itself primarily in a negative and reactive way, and rediscover what, positively, the real left must be for. By Sean Matgamna; a companion volume to *Can Socialism Make Sense?* 408 pages, £12.

workersliberty.org/books



Correction

Austria (from 14 April) wasn't the first European government to start easing lockdown. It was the Czech Republic, from 7 April. □

Taking awareness forward

Ben Selby, East Midlands rep on the Fire Brigades Union's national executive council, talked with Sacha Ismail from Solidarity.

The crisis has highlighted across public services what Grenfell demonstrated to so many about the fire service and fire safety. All governments in my lifetime, including Labour governments, have promoted the market, not public provision, workers' rights and keeping people safe.

Now there's a feeling that things can't just be run on the basis of the market – but where are we going to take that awareness?

Labour's response has been weak and apologetic. The party has not set out clear demands to protect workers, it's allowed the government free rein and it's lost sight of its basic role as an opposition. All its criticisms feel like a matter of detail. Labour could have made a difference by pushing for a lot more, and that is still necessary.

We need to go forwards, in a more radical direction, not backwards. If you take absolutely key issues like trade union rights and climate change, under Corbyn Labour moved to a much stronger position that genuinely did serve workers' interests. However, there were limits. If you take the work we've done in Free Our Unions, yes, there were good policies but still great reticence about the right to strike and scrapping all the anti-union laws. Of course, that is more relevant than ever in this crisis.

It shouldn't be up to a new leader to change policy. That should be decided by Labour Party conference. We need to insist that the positions conference has passed are carried out and hold the leadership to account. In fact we need to take conference more seriously.

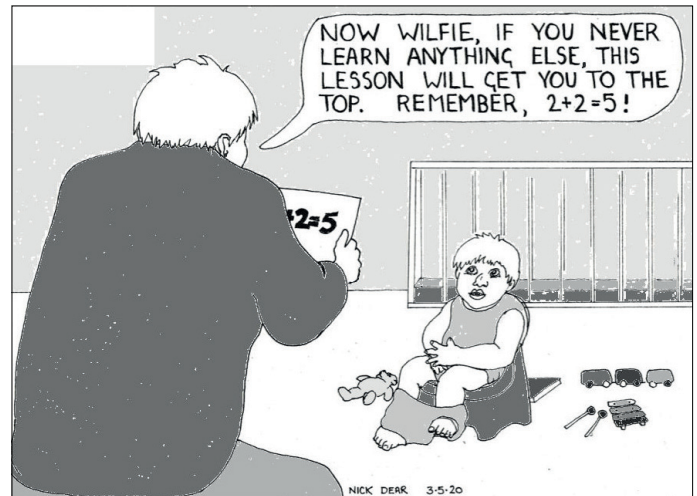
At TUC Congress last year you moved the FBU amendment for public ownership of the banks and finance. Why did the FBU propose that?

How do we avoid workers being made to pay for this crisis and future ones? The question of the banks and who owns and controls them is key. We need democratic control over this key section of the economy and therefore public ownership.

That will give us the resources and control to really improve people's rights and conditions, really strengthen our public services, elevate the workers who have been on the frontline in this crisis, and get out of it in workers' interests.

The other aspect is about climate change. Our response to the climate crisis would be much stronger if we had the power to make decisions about investing in the right things, in renewable energy and green jobs and infrastructure rather than fossil fuels and extreme energy.

Now when we're taking stock is exactly the time raise this demand and win support for it. We need to make labour movement support for it real and campaign in the Labour Party for it too.



You're on the steering group of Forward Momentum?

As a Momentum member I've become more and more uncomfortable with the lack of democracy and accountability in the organisation. I've also been critical that Momentum has lost its focus as a campaigning force which brings people together on issues, and has been focused more on being a glorified election agent for various people.

What kind of democratic structures do you want to see in Momentum?

Well, it might involve an annual conference to bring people together and take decisions.

Isn't that pretty essential?

I agree, and that is what I favour. A conference is by far the most democratic option, in that you can put motions forward, disagree properly and have real debate and deliberation, which is much harder in other formats. That's certainly how we do it in the FBU.

• Full interview, in which Ben talks about the fire and rescue service, extending the Brexit transition and how he sees the role of Forward Momentum, on *The Clarion* at bit.ly/bensinterview □

Forced labour

A giant Chinese company, BYD, known for employing Uyghur forced labour has converted one of its factories into the world's biggest respirator-mask factory, and has won big contracts in California. The BYD subsidiary which runs that factory is registered in the British Virgin Islands tax-haven. We want industry requisitioned to produce PPE – with union labour on union conditions! □

• bit.ly/ppe-uy

The right to strike

By Riccardo la Torre and Sacha Ismail

Since the Covid-19 crisis hit, many workers, including those working in hospitals, libraries, construction and in the postal service, have taken unofficial industrial action to stand up for themselves and for safety.

In the face of a government disastrously dragging its feet and putting profits above lives, these actions highlight the central role of workers' struggles in defending rights, winning new ones and changing society.

During this crisis, employers have not suspended their organisation or paused their struggle against workers. The workers' movement should not suspend its fight either, but instead do our best to maintain and step it up.

In the midst of the pandemic and lockdown, there is debate about whether the restrictive system that oversees the authorisation of industrial action – endured since Thatcher – is still functioning.

In this crisis, some of the organisations which run legal industrial action ballots on behalf of unions have said that they no longer feel confidently able to perform this function whilst guaranteeing their workers' safety.

This is not the fault of these organisations or their workers – who deserve the same right to safe working as anyone – but of the anti-trade-union laws. There may be immediate ways to resolve this problem, which unions should of course explore; but the issue highlights the absurdity of the law which requires a postal ballot for industrial action to be legal.

Unions and the Labour Party should loudly demand the urgent introduction of alternative balloting methods – including but not limited to online ballots – so that the “normal” right to strike is clearly restored and strengthened.

However, even with online balloting, the bureaucratic hoops workers have to jump through to strike make quick and decisive action impossible: notify an employer of a ballot (seven days), conduct the ballot (usually two weeks or more), and notify the employer of action (two weeks).

When workers are being put in danger through unsafe working practices, such as a lack of PPE, they need to be able to act straight away, not wait weeks and months. This is no better demonstrated than by the Royal Mail workers who recently felt forced to walk out over unsafe working practices, later organising safe and effective socially distanced picket lines.

Firefighters, who regularly put themselves at risk to help others and are highly attuned to issues of health and

“The truth is that bosses and governments feel brave enough to put their workers in danger because they face too few consequences. And despite the praise heaped on nurses and other key workers, our collective workplace rights have been under their own permanent lockdown, with decades of laws shackling unions...”

“For the good of workers everywhere, we need to free trade unions from the undemocratic and draconian anti-union laws. If the clapping every Thursday night is anywhere near serious it should mean respecting workers for the long term and restoring their collective rights” □

– Fire Brigades Union general secretary Matt Wrack
(from an article for May Day – see bit.ly/wrackmayday)

safety, are also keenly aware of this need to act quickly to address unsafe working practices.

All of this emphasises why workers taking unofficial action deserve support. And why unions using health and safety law to legally organise a refusal to work, without ballots, is a tactic that should be supported, too.

More broadly, on a political level, the issues surrounding the right to strike illustrate why we must fight to radically change the law, so that all workers can decide for themselves when, how and for what demands they take action. First of all, the proposal for new restrictions on transport workers – essential workers heroically providing an essential service in this crisis, but whom the Tories cannot wait to get back to attacking as soon as possible – must be dropped.

Beyond that all anti-union laws must go – not just the 2016 Trade Union Act, which added another layer to the anti-worker structure, but all of them. A position supported unanimously by FBU conference.

Repealing all anti-union laws is a position clearly supported by Labour Party members: recent polling shows they back it 5-1. It is the policy adopted by the party's democratic structures: since 2015, Labour conference has voted four times to commit to this. It is also the position of the trade union movement, adopted unanimously at TUC Congress 2019 – thanks to the FBU.

In the campaign to be leader, Keir Starmer emphasised his championing of human rights and his support for workers' struggles in the past. Angela Rayner was an active trade unionist and not long ago explained clearly and eloquently why all the anti-union laws must go.

Trade unionists and Labour activists should push the party leadership to prove themselves once more by respecting the decisions of Labour Party conference and TUC Congress, and to pledge to lead the movement in the fight against these oppressive laws. □

• Abridged from an article on the FBU website:
bit.ly/coronarighttostrike

“What we stand for

The Alliance for Workers' Liberty fights for socialist revolution, for the labour movement to militantly assert working-class interests.

See workersliberty.org/about – if you agree, join us! □



Covid-19 crisis: online resources & meetings

workersliberty.org/c19-online brings together articles, online meetings and resources to help us through the crisis. All articles on Covid-19: workersliberty.org/covid-19.

Online meetings

All meetings are open access and use Zoom videocalls.

Monday 4 May, 7.30pm: first of fortnightly series on [The state, crime, prisons, and the police](#).

Wednesdays 6 and 13 May 7-8.30pm: ABCs of Marxism – **6 May:** [politics of identity](#). **13 May:** [The state](#)

Thursday 16 April, 6pm: [What can we learn from the "lock-down easings"](#). A weekly informal discussion on different topics about the politics of the crisis.

Sunday 10, 17 May, 6.30-8pm: Sunday "political hangout" – **10 May:** [Marxists on the US civil war and the fight against slavery](#). **17 May:** [Who was James Connolly?](#)

Saturday 16 May, 2-4pm: [For one school workers union! Learning from industrial unionism](#).

Sunday 24 May, 7:30-9pm: [Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution](#): forum with Brendan McGeever

Sunday 31 May, 7:30-9pm: [After Sanders, where now](#)

[for the US left?](#) A Workers' Liberty forum with Lois Weiner (New Politics)

Zoom videocall study courses

Wednesdays 4-5pm, until 24 June: [Online study course on Marx's Capital](#), volume 1.

Thursdays 8pm: [Trotsky's History of the Russian Revolution](#) A 13-week online study course.

Sundays until 10 May: [Marxism and trade unions](#). Registration closed.

Resources and campaigns

- **Tuesday 5 May, 2pm:** [virtual protest, jamming Gap's comms](#) against their ties with forced Uyghur labour

- [Safe and Equal](#). Campaign for full pay for self-isolation for all, regardless of contract or status: with sub-campaigns for NHS workers and care workers.

- [Pause Brexit](#). Campaigning for the Brexit transition period to be extended beyond 31 December.

- [Take action to win safe workplaces](#). A briefing for workers and union branches.

- [Disabled Workers and the Covid-19 Crisis](#). Briefing.

- [London Renters Union campaign](#) for rent holidays.

- [Online Workers' Liberty – facebook page](#)

- Local mutual aid [group listings](#)



Audio recordings of publications and meetings

We have been recording an audio version of our paper, *Solidarity*, for some time. We have recordings from various other publications and meetings!

Links to the audio version are at workersliberty.org/audio, and can be found through many podcast providers: search "Workers' Liberty" or "Solidarity & More". More information on subscribing and using podcasts at [the URL above](#).

E-reader version

Email awl@workersliberty.org for e-reader version of *Solidarity*.

Study guides

Many educational resources, lots of them tried, tested, and revised over years or decades, can be found at workersliberty.org/study. Includes:

- [Marx's Capital](#). A study guide; link to Capital in audio format; 19 short videos; extensive background notes.

- 13-session ["Introduction to Workers' Liberty"](#)

- [Russian revolution](#): 13-session study guide to Trotsky's History of the Russian Revolution; The Fate of the Russian Revolution vol. 1; vol. 2; more...

- [The revolutionary party and the working class](#): Pierre Broué's The German Revolution 1917-1923; Lenin's What Is To Be Done?; Gramsci's Prison Notebooks; more...

- And much, much more...

For studying in reading groups, in pairs, or alone. If you'd like to work through one, but might like to discuss it with someone [contact us](#) and we may be able to buddy you up! □

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Workers' Liberty videos

Explore Workers' Liberty's videos and playlists, subscribe to youtube channel: bit.ly/wlvideos

New this week:

- [A socialist feminist look at 50 years of women's liberation](#) – by Jill Mountford

- **From Tuesday 9am:** [Fifty years of women's liberation](#) – opening speech by Kelly Rogers

Featuring:

- Several videos giving [socialist commentary on the Covid-19 crisis](#) – a playlist

- [Ed's Corona Diaries](#) – a playlist

- [In Defence of Bolshevism](#): series by Martin Thomas accompanying the book, its namesake

- [A debate on Marxist perspectives on Irish history](#): Rayner Lysaght and Sean Matgamna

- [Two nations, Two states 101](#) – Camila Bassi explains our perspectives on Israel/Palestine

Plus many more debates, introductions, comment pieces, and coverage. □

Buy our pamphlets from workersliberty.org/pamphlets — The German Revolution; For workers' climate action; Two nations, two states; more!



workersliberty.org/audio



Online meetings & resources: workersliberty.org/c19-online

Care blighted by profit

A palliative care nurse who works in both hospitals and care homes responds to our briefing on social care in Solidarity 544: bit.ly/socialcarearticle.

What's happening at the moment in care homes has thrown a spotlight on how they operate. A lot of the problems now running wild were already problems, but with the pandemic everything is obviously more acute.

Staff must have been working very hard to keep people in care homes rather than sending them off to hospital. I think it's generally the right thing, because most people living in care homes will not benefit from hospital treatment.

For some vulnerable older people who contract the virus, particularly those already near the end of their lives, there may not be a lot you can do. You don't want to take them from what is effectively their home into the chaos of a hospital, to have distressing medical interventions, when those interventions are not going to work. The only case is if you think something specific can be done. But these decisions should all be made on a case by case basis and not decided en masse.

Reducing the infection rate is, or would have been, crucial. People need to be able to work safely, or not work if necessary.

You need to get your head round what it means that care homes are independent private businesses. They can pretty much do what they want. Even if homes advertise themselves as open to all and receive public funding, the companies that run them can pick and choose who they admit, and they will often choose not to admit people they think will pose a particular challenge. There is no right to care. I've had a patient who was turned down by twelve different nursing homes.

Care homes are also landlords and residents can be evicted, even if that basically means slashing their life expectancy. There are retaliatory evictions sometimes if someone complains. And of course many people in homes don't have family to back them up, even before the difficulties caused by the pandemic.

Residential care homes have no qualified nurse on site; nursing homes have. But nurses in nursing homes usually don't get proper training or support. It depends on what the company has put in place. They are cut off from the district nursing and other frameworks, from proper training, from being part of a collective team and getting peer support. At least with residential homes a district nurse who is properly trained and part of that wider framework will visit.

Care home staff of various kinds are held responsible but they get very little support, not just in terms of their terms and conditions but also in terms of doing their job.

Managers are accountable to the corporate body they work for, no one else really. Unless it's something extreme safeguarding or failing an inspection badly, they're generally left untouched. Recently I came across a case of workers making a complaint to the Care Quality Com-

mission. The CQC said you need to have PPE, the manager said yes, and that was it. And then the workers were targeted and treated even worse for having complained.

Without a union and collective organisation you can't make an impact – that is what's needed. You get exposés on Panorama and so on, but without staff being organised and having the support of the labour movement it is hard.

However the barriers to unionising are quite strong. The fragmentation of the system is the obvious one. Strong union organisation could overcome that but it's chicken and egg... The same for the precarious terms and conditions workers are on and their vulnerability to management.

I think if there was a wider, high-profile campaign to change social care it would lift workers' spirit and maybe make them more confident to organise.

The profit motive operates quite directly. You get homes shut down or expanded on the basis of what will make a profit. There was a spate of homes shut down a few years ago, and it seems staff are being laid off in this crisis – this is because care homes get paid per bed, so if lots of people die there will be empty beds, and less money coming in.

The health service is fragmented now but in terms of governance and people being held to account it's on a different level. You have proper local structures, even though they're not what we would want. The regulation you get in the care homes from the CQC is far more arms-length and last-resort. People's families making a fuss is often the main mechanism for getting things changed.

There has to be a reorganisation to end the situation of totally fragmented units. Public ownership would be the best way to do that. □

• "A public care sector must focus on independent living".
Jamie Hale responds to our social care briefing:
bit.ly/jamiehcare

Cancel rents!

The New Economics Foundation has published a report (bit.ly/rent-nef) supporting the London Renters' Union for a cancellation of rent and mortgage payments (the NEF says for three months). The NEF finds that as early as 9 April residential tenants were paying less than half their rent bills. "Low income tenants who lose their job and have to rely on universal credit will in many cases see their incomes fall by around 50%". Without rent cancellations, the easing of the lockdown will bring a flood of evictions. Commercial tenants, including big ones like Burger King and Superdrug, are also not paying rent. Many of them have called for a nine-month rent holiday. □

The cabal system



Women's Fightback

By Katy Dollar

On Tuesday 28 April, Tim Roache, general secretary of the big GMB union, which organises in many different sectors, stepped down, just months after his re-election.

He cited ill-health. On Wednesday, following the circulation of an anonymous letter to press outlets, GMB issued a statement: "GMB received an anonymous letter, last Wednesday, in which a number of allegations have been made about Tim's conduct whilst he held the office of general secretary."

The news of the allegations against Roach has reignited discussion of conduct in the labour movement, echoing previous incidents including the SWP "Comrade Delta" scandal, Steve Hedley of RMT being accused of domestic violence, and various high-profile sexual harassment claims in the Labour Party.

These very public debates are joined by many more less well known instances of gendered violence across the labour movement. We need to be prepared to tackle sexism and gendered violence within our movement, including on the left. Though instances are experienced incredibly personally by victims, they often reflect broader cultural and structural problems.

The immediate task for the GMB is a full and fair investigation. Barbara Plant, president of the GMB union, has said the safety of "our people, particularly women" is paramount, and called for a "fully independent investigation".

Plant is right. For the investigation to have credibility with the wider labour movement and GMB members, it cannot be a GMB subcommittee or officer that investigates. A panel could be brought together from other parts of the labour movement, including appropriate experts in the field.

It would be naïve to think that in a society where sexism and sexual and gendered violence are so prevalent we can create a left or labour movement where they never occur. But we certainly can build a political and organisational culture which reduces violence and makes people more confident to stand up to unacceptable behaviour.

Unions should be organisations for collective action, uniting workers and knitting together struggles against exploitation and oppression. They should be democratic, political and rooted in their membership.

Currently, after a period of defeats, they're bureaucratic and sluggish. Individuals and cliques act as gatekeepers for jobs, positions and power.

This cabal system creates conditions for abuse and incentivises cover-ups and looking away when it occurs.

We need clear processes through which women, and others, can raise issues, with training and support to help members and reps build the skills to use them. We need those in positions of power to be elected and accountable. We need a movement where sexism (or any other kind of discrimination), violence, intimidation and bullying are not accepted. We need education and discussion so we understand how and why abuse happens and how to fight it.

A labour movement which began a serious discussion could begin to sort out its problems and make itself fit to challenge exploitation and oppression in society. □

Return to school?

By a teacher and NEU activist in south London

The National Education Union has produced five tests for the reopening of schools.

They are: much lower numbers of cases; a national plan for social distancing; comprehensive access to regular testing for staff and pupils; a commitment to testing a whole school when a case occurs; and the option for vulnerable staff, or those who live with vulnerable people, to continue working from home. These are fine as far as they go.

A more general slogan being used by teacher and school worker trade unionists about the reopening of schools is "not until it's safe." This really has to be understood as "not until it's safe enough", because realistically we might not be back to pre-pandemic levels of risk for years.

There are steps that can be taken in the workplace to try to improve distancing, but it's very hard to get primary-age children to understand that they need to stay two metres away from anyone else at all times. Some school workers are pursuing the demand for PPE, mainly masks.

The issue for us is that there are two aspects to the question of reopening schools – a "trade union" aspect, about workplace safety, and a wider social aspect about the implications of continuing a shutdown of schools for an extended period. There are children, particularly vulnerable children, for whom not being in school is also a threat to their safety. On the other hand, where I work, many children are cared for by their grandparents, and have underlying health conditions linked to poverty, and bringing them back to school could expose them and their families to infection.

The issues are not straightforward. □

Testing: learn from Korea and Taiwan

By Martin Thomas

Some trade-unionists have suggested swab-testing of all workers in each workplace before a return to work.

The Tory government's focus on the crude total of test numbers as the big thing has boosted this idea.

Full isolation pay for those with symptoms, or identified as contacts of virus-sufferers, and social distancing plus PPE where necessary in the workplace, will help much more. So will regular (instant-result) temperature checks, widely used and effective (so far as we can tell) in South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

More testing is surely needed for a "tracking and tracing" policy. When scientists such as Devi Sridhar talk of "mass testing", what they mean is large test numbers, but *targeted on such a policy*.

"Mass testing" in the sense of testing the whole population weekly, or whatever, would mean a scale a *hundred* times bigger than the highest-testing countries such as Israel (or 400 times bigger than S Korea, 1600 times bigger than Taiwan), and would probably not be do-able even with a workers' government.

One-off pre-return-to-work testing? Employers might be happy to go for it if the government would organise it. But for workers it would be much more a token than a protection.

The tests are much less than 100% reliable. 90% reliability, say, looks good, and *is* good for some purposes,

but has unexpected effects when you're testing for a small minority trait.

Even if the numbers of those who *have been* infected at some time between January and May are at the highest end of estimates, most workforces of, say, 100, will have no, or at most one or two, infections at any one point of time.

With those small percentages of "true positives", "false negatives" and "false positives" become a sizeable problem. The "true positives" testing positive will be swamped by "false positives", and "true positives" may well test negative.

In Australia, for example, generally reported as having "done well" in the pandemic, if you get a virus test and test *negative*, you're regularly instructed to quarantine for 14 days anyway, on the grounds of whatever symptoms motivated you to take the test.

And a *one-off* test, even if 100% reliable, tells us only who has the infection at the time of the test. Or rather, who had the infection three to five days before that time: the tests detect the virus only from about three to five days into the infection. According to the WHO, the time from infection to symptoms is typically five days. Sometimes as long as 14, but typically five.

Testing all the workers in a workplace and then restarting work a few days later, when the results come back, would pick up very few who wouldn't have symptoms by the restart. □

More forced onto the streets

Tom Zagoria, Labour Homelessness Campaign activist, told Solidarity:

"Virtually every local authority is reporting that for every rough sleeper they house, more new rough sleepers come onto the streets after losing their income, or being unable to stay in overcrowded accommodation during the pandemic.

"Massive holes in the government's Covid response are leading to these desperately sad stories of working-class people being left to fend for themselves on the streets during the pandemic.

"We need to demand the cancelling of rent and a total ban on evictions during the crisis, including for people who are lodgers. We also need a surge in homelessness spending and an end to all restrictions on support, so that when any rough sleeper is referred for support they get accommodation the first night.

"These demands are winnable, and very urgent – because we're worried that what's happening now is only a taste of the crisis to come. The day the lockdown ends millions of precarious people will be out of income, facing higher rents, and at significant risk of homelessness." □

- More: "We need a different and bigger public sector" – bit.ly/labourhomelessnessmigrants
- And: www.labourhomelessness.org.uk

Safe and Equal rally with McDonnell on 12 May

The Safe and Equal campaign continues to grow. Through using stickers with QR codes outside nursing homes, social media, and phone-banking our new online sign-ups, every week we are making contact with more workers who want to support our political campaign and organise a fight at work.

A letter to MPs raising our demands for full self-isolation pay and equality for all is in the works, and John McDonnell MP has agreed to address a Safe and Equal rally at 7pm on 12 May, which will be held via Zoom.

Meanwhile every week provides more confirmation that exploitative bosses are COVID-19's best friends. Most recently, the GMB union has reported that security guards employed by G4S at Croydon University Hospital are complaining that they are unable to self-isolate as they cannot survive on £94 a week statutory sick pay.

The GMB has issued a press release calling on the hospital to take these workers back in-house. But these conditions are not new, and a much more vigorous response from the unions nationally is needed. Safe and Equal is campaigning to spur on the kind of vigorous action that's required. □

- safeandequal.org

Tracing app is no cure-all

By Ben Tausz

As governments and tech companies tout digital contact tracing as a way out of coronavirus lockdown, many experts and privacy campaigners are expressing scepticism. They worry these systems may do little to help contain outbreaks but could usher in unprecedented mass surveillance.

Manual contact tracing is an age-old public health measure. A patient newly diagnosed with an infectious disease sits down with an expert interviewer, who helps them retrace their steps for the time they may have been infectious and identify encounters in which other people may have been infected. Health workers then contact those people and isolate them to prevent further spreading.

But that has limits.

Enter digital contact tracing. The forms proposed in most European countries are based around building smartphone apps that use Bluetooth and anonymous IDs to ping other nearby smartphones carrying the same app, to build a log of close encounters. When a user reports they're infected, the log shows recent encounters that could have posed an infection risk. Anyone who might have been infected can be alerted via their app, and given advice ("self-isolate", "order a test", "contact your doctor" etc.) before they unwittingly spread it further.

The technology is new, and it is difficult to separately assess the effectiveness of individual components of a public health response – meaning that there is little evidence about how much good it does on top of existing methods.

Minimum necessary uptake

To be effective, a large percentage – perhaps a majority – of the population needs to take up the app. In Singapore only 20% have.

According to Ofcom 22% of UK adults don't have a smartphone, so couldn't participate. That's even higher for poorer people and older people (groups who are already more vulnerable if infected) and younger children.

So not only are large numbers of people left out, they aren't spread evenly through the population but are clustered, more vulnerable, and more likely to interact with each other – compounding the problem.

Non-coercive, non-exploitative strategies to encourage as much uptake as possible, as evenly as possible, are therefore needed. And these strategies must consider how to protect people from being scammed into downloading any malicious software that falsely claims to be the official app.

With the government's planned testing levels, the app would largely rely on individuals self-assessing their symptoms to report infection. So, contact tracing's effectiveness might depend on NHS testing capacity.

Especially given the rise of hard-right authoritarianism, we can't trust the state to regulate its own use of intrusive technology. And anything stored or processed centrally is vulnerable to hacking, especially if development is rushed.

So, privacy must be built into the system's bones. As little data as possible must pass through the hands of the authorities or businesses.

First, that means only collecting necessary data: the "encounters" each device has had, their duration and proximity. No personal or location data.

Second, as little as possible should be stored centrally. Campaigners, backed by even Apple and Google, favour a decentralised system. The log of encounters stays on the user's device unless the user tells the app they are infected. Then it uploads its log to a central list.

Each other user's device regularly checks that list to see if one of its (anonymised and constantly rotating) IDs appears. The app on the device estimates the risk that its owner has been infected – based on number, proximity, and duration of encounters with other infected users – and alerts its owner if they need to act.

But some governments, including the UK, want a centralised system. All our encounters would be on a central database. They talk about anonymised IDs, but with that much information it wouldn't be hard for the state – or a hacker! – to identify individuals.

Third, the system must constantly delete its records. It should keep only recent encounters and reports, within the virus incubation period.

Fourth, the system must be separate from any lockdown or quarantine enforcement. Users could be given the option of sharing information with the NHS or their GP when they get an alert, but this should require additional consent.

We must guard against anything like China's system, where an app's opaque risk-scoring of its user acts as a passport to certain rights, and the state might easily manipulate scores to lock down dissidents and persecuted minorities.

If people feel the app is too intrusive, they won't install it or obey its guidance, rendering it useless.

People with more reason to fear surveillance, or with experience of ill-treatment by the state, might be less likely to use an intrusive app. For example, migrants with uncertain or changing status, or ethnic minorities who already experience more state harassment and violence. Precisely the people on the sharp end of inequalities that already make them more vulnerable if infected.

As trust in health authorities fell and suspicion grew, a knock-on effect might even reduce compliance with other public health measures – letting the virus surge back.

Close scrutiny is necessary. Any proposed contact tracing system must complement and not replace other measures; must have decent answers to these difficulties; and must protect privacy. □

Falling on deaf ears



Diary of an engineer

By Emma Rickman

This week access to the control room and the manager's offices is more restricted. Lack of contact with Ops and the assistants means no information about bin wagon drivers is coming through to us, although the email from the union suggests drivers are almost at breaking point:

"We have requested an additional payment (Covid Clear up) for the increased weights that are coming through and also the risk of infection. This fell on deaf ears locally so the union will be raising it nationally this week.

"We cannot hold a mass meeting at the site due to social distancing but it is important that we use all forms of social media to communicate with each other...

"Let the reps and convenor know what the problem is and they will deal with it. Any industrial action that takes place on-site will be illegal and individuals may be held responsible. Tempers are running high at the moment but it is important that you keep your cool when speaking with supervisors and management."

I'm working closely with the electrician P, who has overcome his terror of the coronavirus by doing a short course in microbiology. As a result we can share a workshop and work together – we get on well.

His opinion is that the city manager is a sociopath looking to cash in on Covid-19 by getting as much waste through the ERF [Energy Recovery Facility] weighbridge as possible. The city manager and our head of operations have had stand-offs, turning bulker lorries of waste away at the gates, only to receive three the following morning.

Rumours are that waste incinerators in the south don't have enough waste to keep running, but the power stations in Yorkshire are overwhelmed. This is clearly a distribution problem.

Within the maintenance team social distancing has gone out the window. We've found it impossible to stay two metres from each other while working in the same

electrical cabinet, changing light fittings or in the narrow switch room corridors.

Most of our work has been routine inspections, but we've had a lot of trouble with the cranes. Their constant operation is fundamental to the plant, and mid-week Crane 1 developed an electrical fault which kept us busy for two days, and which I still only half understand.

As we move around the plant replacing control units in different crane panels, stopping and starting the programmable logic controller (the computer that tells the crane what to do), it accumulates faults.

Eventually we discover that the data must be "compiled" before upload, and the fault disappears. We hope it will not recur. □

• Emma Rickman is an engineering apprentice at a Sheffield Combined Heat and Power plant.

More online

Women's Place UK response to Natalia Cassidy article

Reply to our article about responses to Liz Truss's recent statements

bit.ly/wp-uk

Hollow declarations: a reply to WPUK's letter

Reply to the reply, from Natalia Cassidy and Zack Mudde

bit.ly/r-wp-uk

"An ethos of equality is our only firewall"

Hannah Pollin-Galay on the Israeli left and the new coalition government

bit.ly/h-p-g

A zero-hours worker in the pandemic

How to get unpaid wages? How to seek new jobs?

bit.ly/z-h-w

Organising in the care sector

A big area neglected by the union movement

bit.ly/org-care

Learning lessons in dark times

Luke Hardy on responses to the rise of the nationalist right

bit.ly/dark-t

The birth of the Labour Party and the right to strike

The battle which won the 1906 Trades Disputes Act was central to the Labour Party becoming a real force

bit.ly/1906labstrike

Karl Marx and Uyghur solidarity

If Marx were around today, he'd back Uyghur rights

bit.ly/km-uy □

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To subscribe with a standing order: £5 a month, or pay us more to support our work. Forms online, as above. □

Getting safe workplaces



John Moloney

Our union (PCS) National Executive Committee will meet this week to discuss a formal position on criteria for any possible return to work. The majority of civil servants can work from home, so there's no reason why any return to the workplace shouldn't be voluntary.

Other ideas being discussed include a demand that distancing measures be maintained in the workplace, facilitated by mechanisms such as staggered start times, to regulate the amount of people who are in the workplace at any given time. We also want a clear agreement around a protocol for what will happen when there's a confirmed case of the virus in the workplace, which would include all other workers being sent home and the workspace isolated.

We're planning joint campaigning with the United Voices of the World union (UVW) targeting the cleaning contractor OCS. Two UVW members working for OCS at the Ministry of Justice died from the virus, which prompted a walkout by other cleaners. Those cleaners were told by OCS they would only receive Statutory Sick Pay if they went off sick, so kept working despite being ill.

We had an agreement in place with the civil service that outsourced workers who needed to self isolate would be paid in full; we have to increase the pressure to ensure that agreement is enforced right across the sector.

We'll be working with UVW to ensure the maximum pressure is put on the Ministry of Justice. □

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

Contact us

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 solidarity@workersliberty.org

The industrial estate in which our office is located closed for the duration of the pandemic, so please contact us by email or phone.

Solidarity production team: Cathy Nugent, Martin Thomas (editor), Misha Zubrowski, Sacha Ismail, and Simon Nelson.

 workersliberty.org/audio

 Online meetings & resources: workersliberty.org/c19-online

Post walkouts win

By a postal worker in London

At work, postal workers continue to make demands around the provision of PPE, and the implementation of adequate distancing measures at work.

The walkouts that have taken place nationally have built up pressure around these demands, and they have largely been achieved in the offices where I work, with PPE being provided and staggered shift times in place to ensure numbers in the workplace don't exceed levels at which it's possible to distance safely. We also want to stop delivering junk mail, and prioritise essential personal mail.

There was a short walkout at one of the offices I work at recently, in protest at an imposed change to our shift patterns, which would have forced people to move their days off. Management eventually backed off. It shows the power that action can have.

The union has done well in terms of maintaining communication with members, with daily WhatsApp message, live streams on Facebook, and Zoom calls with officials. That's all good, and it ensures members feel informed, but it's all one way. There's not much opportunity there for members to discuss, have our say, and take ownership over the direction of the union.

Royal Mail has made a unilateral announcement that it was revising the "Universal Service Obligation" (USO), which commits the company to providing a postal service to all parts of the country, six days a week, down to five days, by eliminating Saturday deliveries.

They came to this decision without any sort of prior consultation with the union. While they claimed they had consulted with Ofcom, the government body which regulates the postal service, this doesn't actually appear to have been the case.

The company presented this as a measure that would benefit postal workers by reducing our workload, but many of my workmates saw this as a precursor and a pretext for what they plan to do next. If mail is delivered on fewer days, the company will say they need fewer workers.

Rico Back, the Royal Mail CEO, has written to the CWU giving various guarantees, including that the revision of the USO will only be for six weeks, and that no jobs will be lost. The CWU leadership has hailed that as a "breakthrough agreement", but we should absolutely not trust the company on this. We need to be prepared to fight to hold them to those commitments. □

Fallback pay for all!

30 million workers in the USA have applied for unemployment benefit since March. 35 million workers are on government-funded furlough schemes in Europe (10 million in Germany, 11.3 million in France). 1.8 million have applied for Universal Credit in Britain, and 700,000 have got advance payments. Signals are also increasing of a new wave of job cuts as the lockdowns ease and creditors start chasing debts. □

Solidarity



For a workers' government

BEHIND THE TALK OF “HEROES”

By Luke Hardy

The “heroes” narrative about NHS and other essential workers is dangerous. As a nurse on the Panorama programme on PPE said, it has an implication that unnecessary deaths are workers willingly sacrificing themselves. It absolves the government of responsibility.

It also carries an implication that those workers rebelling against these conditions lack the courage of their colleagues who accept risks due to lack of PPE.

We have been here before with the government seizing on a semi-spontaneous “heroes” narrative to deflect and silence criticism. It’s what happened in the Iraq war.

All polls suggest the majority of people opposed that war. But at the same time a lot of people wanted to “support the troops”.

That in itself was obviously a nationalistic stance. The government seized on this to push the “heroes” discourse as much as possible. The Royal Family were drafted in to shape the official “heroes” narrative. The government’s responsibility to treat and financially support seriously wounded soldiers was seen to be a matter of charity. What else is “Help For Heroes”?

The *Mail*, *Sun*, *Star* and other media pushed that narrative, and they spent much of their time denouncing opponents of the war who failed to confirm to this “support our heroes” discourse. Under that pressure the Labour soft left and Lib Dems who had opposed the war before it started spiked or downgraded their criticism because they didn’t want to seem unsupportive of “our boys”.

Corporations got in on the act to show their patriotism by supporting Help For Heroes and poppies, and because they feared being shamed in the press.

When serving or ex-military personnel and the families of the dead were critical of the war, their voices were largely silenced in favour of the uncomplicated patriotic narrative.

There is obviously no analogue between those who join the military, and in the final analysis, with caveats

about “economic conscription”, are voluntarily signing up to be paid killers of the state, and health and care workers who sign up to save and improve life.

People’s support for NHS workers is overwhelmingly an act of solidarity, with left-wing implications, and has no equivalence with national-chauvinist “support our troops” sentiment.

However, in the government’s shaping, repackaging and promotion of a “heroes” narrative for its own ends, there is a similarity with the Iraq war period.

The Government has been slow and negligent, and so a lack of PPE and testing has helped contribute to deaths.

Yet no one could accuse the government of tardiness in seizing on the Thursday clapping. The Queen was brought in to reconfigure the support for the NHS as a patriotic effort, in the language of wartime propaganda, and to erase the aspect of working-class solidarity.

The right-wing press, after being blasé about the virus and anti-lockdown, are now pushing the “heroes” narrative in the most crude censorious and nationalistic way and demanding performative conformity.

Corporations too are publicly advertising their support for “heroes”. That can help deflect criticism of their treatment of their own workers in this crisis.

All the while the actual voices of NHS and care workers and their unions demanding PPE and better pay, terms and conditions are ignored and opposed. Anyone amplifying those voices is said to be “playing politics”, and spoiling the mood of national unity.

Some on the left are responding to this with a blanket hostility to the Thursday clapping. That hostility seems individualistic and at worse akin to “Wake Up Sheeple” type elitism.

The positive approach is to try politicise and contest those moments with slogans, posters, etc.

Health, care and other workers shouldn’t have to be “heroes”. They should just be able to do difficult, stressful work with the safety equipment and other support they need. □