

Solidarity

& Workers' Liberty



For social ownership of the banks and industry



DROP CHARGES AGAINST HONG KONG REBELS

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Drop charges against HK rebels!

“” Editorial

On 16 February, the trial started of seven democracy leaders in Hong Kong. Two others pleaded guilty. They are accused of organising an unauthorised assembly on 18 August 2019, when the Civil Front called a rally of 1.7 million people.

Among the accused are Hong Kong trade union leader Lee Cheuk Yan, General Secretary of the HKCTU (Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions); other left wing activists such as Leung Kwok Hung (“Long Hair”); and “pan-democratic” veterans such as the 82 year old Martin Lee.

The charges, unconnected with the new National Security Law (NSL) and relying instead on old British colonial law, carry possible sentences of five years.

The charging of Lee Cheuk Yan, an internationally respected trade unionist for over 30 years, has triggered protests from the trade union and labour movement. The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) [called for](#) protests on 14 and 15 February. Labour MPs John McDonnell, Nadia Whittome and Clive Lewis have written a letter of protest, which was backed within a few days by 36 other MPs, including Jeremy Corbyn. Labour Movement Solidarity with Hong Kong ([LMSWHK](#)) has worked with the MPs to get trade union leaders and activists to sign up. When the trial started, the accused held a solidarity briefing outside the court. Lee denounced the repression and the defendants and their supporters concluded by chanting in solidarity with Myanmar workers.

The trial is expected to be over by Tuesday 2 March, but it may be a month before verdict and sentence. The judge, Amanda Woodcock, is authorised to deal with NSL cases by Carrie Lam: in other words, she is trusted by Beijing, so a “not guilty” verdict is unlikely in the District Court. Defence expert witnesses have been refused the right to give evidence and many of the defence barristers’ arguments have been ruled “out of order”. The case will go to appeal at the High Court where defence arguments about the police breaching the constitution have to be heard.

A whole wave of other trials are taking place or about to start. On 22 February, [12 students](#) arrested at the time of the police siege of the Chinese University of Hong Kong were rearrested and charged with rioting (again, under British colonial law).

When, how, and if these trials will trigger renewed protests in Hong Kong, it is difficult to say. There is widespread fear of the implications of the NSL (and of Covid: case rates have been rising, or level, since late November).

But unions are still defiant. Winnie Yu, the chair of the health workers’ union HAEA was arrested and is being threatened with the NSL. Yet her union has challenged the government over the privacy of its [Covid tracing app](#).



For now, China’s police-state union, the All China Federation of Trade Unions, is welcomed at some international union gatherings. In the *Morning Star*, HK protests for democracy have been denounced as riots, and evidence of forced labour of Uyghurs denied.

Yanis Varoufakis’s [Progressive International](#) and Jeremy Corbyn’s [Peace and Justice Project](#) are silent on China.

Yet, as John McDonnell said at the LSWHK rally on 30 January, the Chinese government is still sensitive to “reputational damage”, and the labour movement has the power to cause that damage.

Workers and socialists need to support the real independent workers’ and democracy movement developing in Hong Kong, China and throughout South East Asia.

And it is down to us to do that. The Tories talk about supporting democratic rights in HK, but on Sunday 21 February, the *Guardian* [reported](#) a roundtable on 12 February at Downing Street. In that meeting Johnson referred to himself as a “Sinophile” and said he wants to reactivate the “Economic and Financial Dialogue” and “China-UK Joint Trade and Economic Commission”, both suspended for now in response to China’s repression in the former UK colony of Hong Kong.

“Some of the businesses most active in China” were represented there, such as the Swire company, which runs many businesses in Hong Kong such as the airline Cathay Pacific. Swire was founded by the great-great-great-grandfather of Hugo Swire, a Tory minister until 2019. The current chair of the company, Barnaby Swire, is a long standing donor to the Party.

Like HSBC, Standard Chartered, and Jardine Matheson, Swire have supported the repression in Hong Kong. They have sacked trade unionists who had supported the democracy protests and publicly declared their support for the National Security Law (NSL).

Tenacity International was also there. They have just received [planning permission](#) to build another 30-floor office tower in London.

We have had months of rhetoric from the government about opposing the wave of mass arrests in Hong Kong, and the National Security Law (NSL) imposed on Hong Kong by the Beijing government in July 2020. Backtracking by Johnson, in deference to UK-HK big business, will create difficulties for the Tories, especially if the labour movement speaks out. □

Myanmar: general strike against the coup!

By Sacha Ismail

At least two people were killed by Myanmar's military on 22 February, as it was confronted by fresh mass protests to overturn the coup it launched on 1 February. There is now a steady flow of confirmed killings, as well as unconfirmed reports of significantly larger numbers of deaths.

The army's claims that it is only using rubber bullets have been categorically disproved.

The two latest dead are a young man and a teenage boy. Half of Myanmar's population are under 25 (three quarters under 40) and the protests seem dominated by young people. The regime's attitude is surely summed up by its public statement on the renewed, vast wave of demonstrations on 22 February:

"It is found that the protesters have raised their incitement towards riot and anarchy mob on the day of 22 February. Protesters are now inciting the people, especially emotional teenagers and youths, to a confrontation path where they will suffer the loss of life."

The UN's "special rapporteur" in Myanmar says that the 33rd Light Infantry Division was involved in the latest killings. It should be noted that this unit was central to the mass killings, rape and arson that drove the best part of a million Rohingya people out of Myanmar in 2017.

Activists are talking about 22.2.2021, referring to the 8 August 1988 (8.8.88) uprising against the military, and about a "five twos revolution".

Groups of police have now joined the protests and publicly demonstrated against the regime.

The two protesters murdered were shot at a striking shipyard workers' demonstration in the country's second city, Mandalay. The role of workers – particularly young workers – and specifically working-class forms of action, including large-scale strikes in a very wide range of industries, is extremely prominent in this struggle.

Talk about a general strike looks increasingly plausible.

Garment workers, whose industry accounts for 30% of Myanmar's exports and who have fought sustained struggles over conditions and the right to organise over the last decade, pioneered workers' mobilisation against the coup. Their unions are calling for brands with suppliers in Burma to oppose the coup by publicly denouncing it; ensuring no workers are disciplined for participation in the "Civil Disobedience Movement"; immediately breaking links with military-owned businesses; and declaring that investment is jeopardised under the military regime.

- See here for a list of brands being targeted, many of them based or widespread in the UK: bit.ly/myanmar-brands. We need to think about how we can exert pressure on them under the lockdown.

- One of Myanmar's union federations, the All Burma Federation of Trade Unions, has launched an appeal for funds to support the strike movement: gofundme.com/f/abftu

- The British labour movement has not been particularly vocal about events in Myanmar. We should try to pull it into action, with more solidarity messages, photos, videos, etc, as well support the Burmese trade unions' appeals.

We hope to carry interviews with labour movement activists in Myanmar soon. Meanwhile, we would re-emphasise two further important points.

As in many worker-led democracy struggles, there is a wide gap between workers' organisation and militancy and the political forces likely to benefit if the movement is victorious. The leadership of the National League for Democracy is wretched, characterised in government since 2015 by neo-liberal economics, subservience to the military, and indifference towards the suppression of ethnic minorities. It worked to cover up and downplay the military's genocidal drive against the Rohingya.

Myanmar's workers' movement needs its own political voice.

More immediately, a fundamental political test for the democracy movement is its attitude to the country's minority peoples and in particular the Rohingya. There are hopeful signs that the struggle against the coup is generating changes (see this article and the ones linked at the end bit.ly/cdmrohingya), but there is a catastrophic reality and legacy to overcome.

Solidarity with Myanmar's workers, democracy activists and oppressed minorities! □



Upcoming meetings

Workers' Liberty meetings are open to all, held online over zoom.

Thursday 25 February, 6-8pm: Momentum Internationalists – Labour, Hong Kong and the Uyghurs

Sunday 28 February 7.30-9pm: Sex wars and (trans) gender panics

Tuesday 2 March 6.30-8pm: Free Our Unions public meeting – Confronting anti-union laws

Tuesday 2 March 7.30-9pm: AWL Students – Battles in Higher Education

Monday 1 March 7.30-9pm: Why is there no labour party in the USA?

Sunday 14 March, 6.30-8pm: Vive la Commune – the 150th anniversary of the Paris Commune

Sunday 28 March, 6.30-8pm: Shapurji Sakatvala – a socialist rebel in Parliament

Plus

Wednesdays 3, 17 March, 7-8.30pm: *The Retreat from Class* by Ellen Wood, study group

Thursdays, 8-9pm: Marx's "Grundrisse", study group
Calendars with updated details, zoom links, more meetings and resources, visit workersliberty.org/events □

Skwawkbox returns a favour



Antidoto

By Jim Denham

Skwawkbox is one of several “alt left” websites to have emerged over the past decade. During Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership of the Labour Party, their declared aim was to defend him against the relentless attacks of the “MSM” (mainstream media).

Skwawkbox distinguished itself by apparently having insider access to both Corbyn’s office and to the leadership of Unite. Or, to put it another way, it appeared to be the chosen mouthpiece of the pro-Brexit “Four M’s” faction (Karie Murphy, Seumas Milne, Andrew Murray and Len McCluskey) in Corbyn’s inner sanctum.

The source of many of Skwawkbox’s “exclusives” is widely believed to have been Karie Murphy, Executive Director of the Leader’s Office under Corbyn and someone who also has close links with the Unite leadership.

In November 2019, the (then) Labour MP Anna Turley sued Unite and Steve Walker, editor and owner of Skwawkbox, for libel following a story published on the site in 2017. The story came from a Unite press statement suggesting that Turley had been dishonest in her application to join the union’s Community section.

Following a six-day trial in December 2019 the court awarded Turley £75,000 in damages, and it emerged that the legal costs payable by Unite amounted to more than £1.5 million. Unite sought leave to appeal, but was refused.

In the course of the trial Walker, who had previously claimed that Skwawkbox takes “no funding from any organisation, so our independence can’t be compromised”, told the judge that Unite was funding his legal bills. It also emerged that Unite had rejected an offer from Turley to settle. If it had accepted, the case would have been resolved out of court and the costs minimised. As it was,

Unite members in effect paid an enormous and unnecessary legal bill.

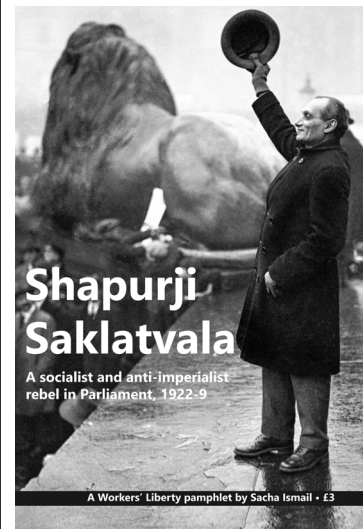
Overseeing this fiasco (alongside Len McCluskey) was Unite’s head of Legal Affairs, Howard Beckett.

Bro. Beckett is now hoping to become Unite’s next General Secretary (the election is expected to be later this year) and has the active support of Len McCluskey. He also has the active support of Skwawkbox, which has promoted his unfounded claims to have been robbed of the union’s United Left endorsement by electoral fraud.

The site is now suggesting that Beckett should be given a clear run by the other left candidates (the United-Left-backed Steve Turner and the independent leftist Sharon Graham) on the preposterous grounds that his “Facebook metrics” are “streets ahead” of the other two’s. Apparently “Facebook metrics” means the “extent to which union members and the Labour movement engage with his [Beckett’s] social media output... and the performance of each individual post”.

There is certainly is a strong case for the union’s left agreeing on just one candidate, given the threat from right winger Gerard Coyne, but Skwawkbox’s novel method of deciding that it should be Beckett, combined with its uncritical adulation of a character for whom the term “fake left” could have been designed, has produced much amusement even in the site’s below the line comments (or rather, it did until they were switched off). One comment, in particular, drew attention to why Skwawkbox and Mr Walker might be so keen on Beckett:

“Skwawkbox’s beloved, constantly promoted as a true radical, millionaire ex law firm owner, Union bureaucrat Howard Beckett, is another insider McCluskey crony, of the same empty rhetoric mould... But Skwawkbox, which Beckett was instrumental in financially supporting during that libel case, potentially a bankrupting lost case, slavishly backs Howard Beckett as a return favour – with no platform provided for the actual Left candidate – or explanation of why he is ‘unsuitable’. This is cronyism too, Skwawkbox...” □



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Court case opens space for Indian women



Women's Fightback

By Katy Dollar

A former Indian minister has lost a defamation case against a journalist, in a ruling with huge implications for the country's #MeToo movement.

Indian journalist Priya Ramani had faced up to two years in jail for criminal defamation over an article she had written accusing Mobashar Jawed Akbar of sexual assault. Akbar is a newspaper editor, government minister 2016-18, MP for the ruling BJP, and formerly an MP for the Congress party.

After Ramani named Akbar, over 20 other women came forward with allegations against Akbar, ranging from rape and assault to systematically using his senior position to harass young female journalists.

The verdict in Mobashar Jawed Akbar vs Priya Ramani is important. By ruling that women can and should speak publicly about incidents of sexual harassment, the court has sent a clear signal of support to women despite some backlash in India to #MeToo.

In noting that such public posts can legally be classified as being for the public good, the court has brought the question of sexual harassment into the public domain. It rejected the idea that social status should provide behavioural impunity.

No impunity

"A woman cannot be punished for raising (her) voice against sex-abuse on the pretext of criminal complaint of defamation as the right of reputation cannot be protected at the cost of the right of life and dignity of the woman."

The ruling juxtaposes violence against women against Indian tradition.

"It is shameful that the incidents of crime and violence against women are happening in the country where mega epics such as Mahabharata and Ramayana were written around the theme of respect for women."

In the Ramayana, Sita is held up as ideal womanhood, docile, devoted to her household work and patriarchy, and is forced to prove her sexual virtue. This situates "respect for women" as appropriate for the right kind of women and the denial or extreme policing of women's sexuality. The decision to cite Hindu epics is also a reminder Ramani's case may have been aided by the fact the elite abuser she was facing is Muslim.

But by concentrating debate on the right to call out those with social status the case breaks through the prevalent idea that the poor and migrant labourers are the sole source of violence against women. As the judgement itself shows, pre-capitalist patriarchal politics are not simply the property of the lumpenproletariat, they are woven into Indian society.

Indian capitalism promotes caste and gender oppression, including pre-capitalist forms. This judgment also shows the danger of positing protective as opposed to liberational opposition to sexual violence against adult women. Violence against women is seen as a crime against decency rather than the woman's person. But the Indian left and women's movement can use this case in naming and challenging the culture of sexual violence. □



Activist agenda

Safe and Equal is pursuing its drive for full isolation pay for all with systematic phoning-round of its hundreds of contacts, demands for information from councils and from the NHS Test and Trace operators, and an appeal to other groups for a united front on the issue. Momentum Internationalists has given support; a good informal response from [Don't Leave Organise](#), but no formal answer yet.

Free Our Unions has a Zoom meeting on anti-union laws, Tuesday 2 March, 6:30pm: bit.ly/fou-2m Speakers include Gerry Carroll MLA on the "Trade Union Freedom Bill" in the Northern Ireland Assembly, Mark Porter, Unite convenor at Rolls Royce Barnoldswick, and Michelle Rodgers, National President of the RMT union.

Orpington and Norwich are among the Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) to have passed motions affiliating to Neurodivergent Labour and supporting its manifesto for radical action to reduce discrimination. Model motion at bit.ly/ndl-m

The Uyghur Solidarity Campaign and the HK campaign LMSHKUK have published their joint model motion bit.ly/u-hk-m for Labour's September conference which it will submit into the Momentum "policy primary" and also advocate in CLPs.

The next "Poplar 100" dates are [25 February](#) and [26 March](#). □

• All links and info, and suggested words for labour-movement motions, at workersliberty.org/agenda

Aviation workers and “just transition”



Environment

By Blake Tan

In its recent Budget, the Singapore government announced plans to give \$870 million to the aviation industry in an attempt to rescue it. Yet, in the third quarter of last year alone, Singapore Airlines – the national carrier – reported a net loss of \$142 million. So, a whopping \$870 million is not likely to go very far, especially if travel takes time to pick up after the pandemic.

Singapore Airlines laid off 4,300 workers last year while its CEO continued to draw an annual salary of around \$5 million, causing outrage on social media. At the beginning of the pandemic, flight attendants had initially been deployed to public hospitals to assist nursing staff with increased patient load. Healthcare workers and junior doctors I spoke to thought that these workers were a god-send to the manpower-starved wards.

“It was like having first-class in-flight service on the wards. I would be tending to a patient after a long shift, and one of these flight attendants would swoop in with their perfect hair and make-up (looking much more put-together than I), they would prop the patient’s head up with a pillow so I could examine them better, and then offer to make me a cup of tea.” Another doctor spoke of flight attendants’ skill in feeding stroke patients, and in taking vitals.

Hospitals decided to get Singapore Airlines to conduct customer service training for healthcare workers, so that doctors, nurses and ultrasound technicians could learn to emulate the posh Singapore Airlines service. But Singapore Airlines branding was the only thing that hospital administrators took from the experience. They did not learn anything about increasing manpower on the wards, or the fact that giving healthcare workers better working conditions will almost always translate to better patient care.

If healthcare workers had had democratic control of the industry, they would’ve drawn the right conclusions from the experience and applied them. Short of that, if healthcare workers and flight attendants in Singapore had at least been organised, they could have banded together in solidarity to demand that the Singapore Airlines workers be allowed to keep their jobs in the hospitals instead of being forced to go back to the aviation industry where they would later be retrenched. It was not to be. The initiative was shortlived. The healthcare workers I spoke to



were sad to see the flight attendants go after less than a year.

Redeploying cabin crew to public hospitals was a wonderful example of how a just transition away from fossil fuels is perfectly achievable. It was strong evidence of how some of the skills gained from working in pollutive sectors like aviation can easily be transferred to more sustainable sectors like public healthcare. No doubt ground staff at airports can also apply their skills to public transport. Public transport is not only more sustainable but it is also used more often by working-class people than planes (often only affordable to the rich.)

The initiative was also a good example of why climate activists don’t have to abandon workers in such industries in order to pursue environmentalist demands. It is within the bounds of reality to campaign for both workers’ rights and solutions to the climate crisis. In fact, the solution to the climate crisis can only be found in workers’ struggle, particularly in the pollutive industries.

This new Budget goes to show that the government learnt very little from what was actually a very good initiative of theirs. Instead of pumping \$870 million into the aviation industry, the government should fund the redeployment of these now-unemployed aviation workers – who already have the skills – to more sustainable industries like public healthcare and public transport. Instead, they have put a heavy tax on petrol, which will not only fail to solve the climate crisis, but will also penalise food couriers and cab drivers. This is what they call “a green plan.” It spits in the face of aviation workers as well as the youth-led climate movement.

Workers and activists in Singapore must campaign for a just transition in regards to Singapore Airlines. During the pandemic, Singapore Airlines announced plans to do “flights to nowhere”, which was meaningless and pollutive.

Thanks to a mass campaign by SG Climate Rally, which sought out the voices of airline workers, Singapore Airlines made a sharp U-turn on a plan they had already announced, deciding instead to launch a new catering service and to convert their A380 planes into restaurants. It was a victory for the climate justice movement in Singapore. They pulled it off once. They can pull it off again. □

What Russia's socialists say

Loretta Marie Perera reports from Moscow

The first two months of 2021 in Russia have been outlined by protest, police brutality, arrests, a fight for justice, and more.

Centred around the return, arrest, and imprisonment of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, massive country-wide protests transformed the streets of Russia, both in central Moscow and far beyond. On 23 and 31 Jan, and following Navalny's sentencing on 2 Feb protestors took to the streets by the thousands. As the protests grew, so did police presence, and along with it violence on the streets that was both live-streamed and heavily documented on social media as videos of riot squads exerting their force, photos of mass arrests being made, and stories of the treatment of detainees made their way around the internet, and the world.

Internationally, world and European leaders have called for the release of Navalny, announced sanctions, and sent a top diplomat to confront Moscow – the first move of its kind since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.

But as Russia's left finds itself in a changing political landscape of new activists and mass movement, one thing is clear: the time to organise is now.

A changing narrative

"[In Russia now], the situation has changed somewhat," says Denis Razumovskiy of Социалистическая Альтернатива (Socialist Alternative). "At first, [the government] tried to ignore the investigation into Putin's palace and completely ignored the protests," he said, referring to an investigation by Navalny's team that has been viewed more than 113 million times, with themes and catchphrases that featured heavily in the protests.

"After 11,000 arrests, Navalny's headquarters, which took the lead in the movement, changed tactics and abandoned street protests."

Due to the massive violence, detainments, and arrests that occurred during this time, Navalny's team has called for two things: attention to be focused on Russia's parliamentary elections in September 2021, and for citizens to gather in more localised forms of protest, including recent "Любовь сильнее страха" or "Love is stronger than fear" light-themed protests all were encouraged to organise in their own neighbourhood courtyards on 14 Feb.

This current tactic, Denis said, is a step in the right direction, and can lead to greater unification of efforts. "We believe that in the current conditions, it is not a bad decision if people use courtyard gatherings to make acquaintances, organise grassroots struggle committees and then mobilise for protests and strikes," he said.

This sentiment is shared by Anya, a member and activist from SocFemAlt (СоцФем Альтернатива) – or the Socialist-Feminist Alternative. "On the 23rd and 31st, approximately the same number of people came out in Moscow, but the brightest moment of the beginning of the protests was the huge support of the regions," said Anya, pointing to an important fact about these protests



Alexander (in the blue hood) at a protest in Moscow

– unlike former public action, these were not limited to Russia's largest cities.

"In general, a large number of people want to continue the struggle, but due to the lack of a strong coordinator from above, they have stopped," said Anya.

Rather than defeat, it is this that allows for progress and coordination, said Anya, who is also a member of Socialist Alternative and Queer Resistance. "It is necessary to promote the idea of grassroots coordination and the creation of committees of struggle to the masses, to explain to people that there is no need to have a leader from above," she said. "There are other, more effective ways to fight the regime."

Alexander Siriskin, who was arrested during protests in Moscow, said that the increasing danger of protesting is precisely why collective action is necessary. "There is no point in being a hero alone," said Alexander, who frequents protests but was on 31 Jan arrested for the first time. Recalling sitting in a prison cell with a dedicated libertarian (Alexander himself identifies as a progressive socialist), political differences became less relevant. "Against the background of police brutality," he said, "we developed a strong friendship."

What happens next?

While the street protests have subsided for now, the issues that led to them have not gone away quite as quickly. "The economic crisis has not gone anywhere, the epidemic too, and unemployment and poverty are only growing," said Denis. "The capitalist system is simply not able to cope with these problems and people will look for a way out." →

→ Because of this general unrest, he predicts, it won't take much to provoke a new wave of protests.

With this in mind, Denis said, it is essential for socialists to keep their finger on the pulse, participate in the struggle, help people organise themselves, and offer their own program and revolutionary perspective. Next month, for example, a strike against the regime, oppression, and poverty is being co-organised by Soc Fem and Socialist Alternative.

For Alexander, the main goal now is to continue to take action while fighting for democracy in Russia. "There is more and more interest in social policy in society," he said. "Navalny began to use more and more leftist rhetoric – I don't know whether it's speculative or not – but it doesn't matter now. All these ideological differences will [only] matter when basic democratic principles emerge in the country."

Coordination and collective action is key during what Anya describes as a wave of mass politicisation. "Considering that the overwhelming majority of the protesters are not tied to Navalny, but participated for their own rights, we consider it necessary to be present at all these actions in order to communicate with people and invite them to join us."

"Of those polled, 42% in Moscow came out to protest for the first time after Navalny's arrest," she said. "The presence of the left is the only force inviting people to put forward their own demands, and achieve them with the help of grassroots coordination."

Words for the world

As Russia's socialists continue to organise and activate, there are some important takeaways they believe is essential for the international socialist movement to understand the movement in a Russian context.

To SocFem, it is important to stand by their position of cooperation with various other groups. "A large number of leftists, both in Russia and abroad, do not approve of our participation in actions organised by the liberal opposition, motivating their words by the fact that we need to go out only to left-wing protests," said Anya. Due to the fact that most leftists are keen to distance themselves from Navalny's politics, the question has risen for many: to stand with or against? For the socialist-feminist organisation, the answer is clear.

"Our position on this issue remains unchanged: we will continue to go out to all civil protests promoting demands similar to ours, such as 'freedom for political prisoners'."

To better understand this movement, it is important to understand the shifting demographic of Russia's protest movement, Socialist Alternative said. Because Putin's politics no longer suit the needs of an increasing number of people across different classes and strata of society,



Denis said, the movement while still unorganised, young, and working class at heart, has itself become inter-class in nature.

And while this temporary opportunity for organisation is good, it isn't enough for addressing key issues.

"Politicians like Navalny want to change the faces at the top without changing anything in essence," Denis said. "Let's say he comes to power, will he go against these billionaires? No, he will negotiate with them, their parties will be in parliament."

It is then socialist solutions and true democracy that need to step in.

"Real democracy can be built today only on the basis of a democratic planned economy," said Denis. "it is necessary to deprive the oligarchs and billionaires of their economic and political weapons, and to socialise all large enterprises, banks, use their resources to increase living standards, finance high-quality free medicine and education, and to multiply salaries."

Rather than aligning only with your leftist comrades or fellow progressive socialists, Alexander believes, it is simply human qualities such as honesty, courage, and sticking to your principles that is most important now.

"Consolidation is needed," said Alexander. "This is the only way to create a really strong opposition. Otherwise, we will not win." □

Karen Lewis obituary

Karen Lewis, leader of the 2012 Chicago teachers' strike, died of cancer on 7 February 2021. An obituary in *Labor Notes* bit.ly/kl-ob describes her role in building a rank-and-file caucus in the Chicago Teachers' Union and then leading the CTU. □

Anti-racist resources

We have compiled various anti-racist resources to learn about anti-racist movements, and arm yourself with ideas to beat back racism: readings and pamphlets, video and audio.

See workersliberty.org/anti-racist-resources □

India: building new solidarities

By Mohan Sen

Despite aggressive propaganda against them, harsh repression and an uphill struggle, India's farmers' protests are not fading away. They are gaining momentum and taking on characteristics of a deep-going challenge to the Modi regime.

In September the Hindu-nationalist-dominated Indian Parliament passed three laws deregulating the prices, sale and storage of agricultural produce. These laws push towards eliminating the system of minimum prices for farmers and of state-regulated marketplaces (mandis), further empowering corporations and placing the already highly precarious livelihoods of millions of farmers and rural workers at risk.

The protests have been concentrated in the northern states of Punjab and Haryana, where the system of state protection and regulation has survived to the greatest degree, but they are spreading. On 6 February farmers and their supporters blocked highways across India. The leaders of the largest farmers' unions have announced agitational tours to take the protests to new areas of the country.

The movement gained renewed strength in December when it linked up with a tens-of-millions-strong general strike against Modi's anti-worker and privatising "reforms". Possibly the largest and most sustained popular mobilisations in post-independence India, they have, in the words of academic and author Ravinder Kaur, built "new solidarities across caste, class, religion and region. One probable reason for the continued popular support is widespread disillusionment with the free-market formula; instead of spreading prosperity, liberalising reforms have produced high unemployment and increased income inequality. Equally alarming for many is the majoritarian impulse of Hindu nationalism and the aggressive marginalisation of minority groups.

"Thus, it is hardly a surprise that the language of love and solidarity has been key to the vocabulary of the protesters, the very opposite of the hyper-nationalist rhetoric that thrives on social division and exclusion. Everyday life in the tent cities at Delhi's periphery offers a vision of a shared community built on voluntary labour that strives to be inclusive. These protest cities did not emerge from a pre-existing solidarity but have, through the protest itself, created the opportunity to forge new solidarities."

Meanwhile, the authorities are continuing their attempts to deny bail to Nodeep Kaur and Shiv Kumar, young trade union activists who have been mobilising workers alongside the farmers. Their family and comrades say they have been beaten in jail, and that Kaur has been sexually assaulted. The High Court had to order a medical examination and family visits for him, after he was denied these.

There will be a new bail hearing for Kaur on 24 February, by which time she will have been held for almost two months. In a different part of India and of Indian society, climate activist Disha Ravi has also been denied bail following her arrest for links to Greta Thunberg, who has

vocally supported the Indian farmers.

Kaur was sacked from her job in a Haryana factory for supporting the farmers' protests. She faces eleven charges in connection with leading precarious workers to demand unpaid wages, as part of the Mazdoor Adhikar Sangathan (Association for the Empowerment of Labourers) which Kumar helped found.

Kaur and Kumar's cases bear multiple hallmarks of a frame up. Both are from Dalit ("lowest" most oppressed caste) backgrounds, which combined with their militant records makes them particularly vulnerable to police mistreatment.

Haryana is both a centre of the farmers' movement and at the sharp end of the BJP's assault on workers' rights. Last year the state suspended to the pandemic by suspending virtually all labour laws for two months, setting the stage for an epidemic of super-exploitation by employers, including widespread non-payment of wages.

MAS activists say that workers' struggles in the area have gained new confidence and momentum from the farmers' movement, and in turn many workers have turned out to support the farmers. □

- Solidarity statement from Momentum Internationalists bit.ly/no-k

- More on Nodeep Kaur, Shiv Kumar and their movement: bit.ly/kaurkumar



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- An introduction to Marx's Capital, in 19 parts, with Martin Thomas
- Tubeworker/Off The Rails, videos by the producers of the bulletins □

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Break this new “tradition” now!

By Martin Thomas

A new “tradition” is being developed in the Labour Party, of activists being suspended and fobbed off without due process, presumably in the hope that we will give up. An [analysis](#) by John Stewart in early February counted 56 CLP (Constituency Labour Party) officers suspended. 91 CLPs had passed motions which might have flouted the bans issued by General Secretary David Evans against discussion of Jeremy Corbyn’s and other suspensions, and 29 had had officers suspended.

That may not be all, and probably hundreds of members were suspended earlier in 2020. We are told that the National Constitutional Committee is now processing cases faster, but there is no word of any recent suspension getting an NCC date.

On 4 February the Skwawkbox blog [reported](#) that 50 of those suspended have been reinstated (though with a warning, or “reminder of conduct”, finding them guilty of “not following the guidance of the General Secretary”). We know for sure of only two reinstatements, though.

On 11 February, eleven members of Labour’s National Executive (NEC) [wrote](#) to Evans reinforcing the [message](#) sent in December by 284 CLP officers from 194 CLPs, complaining about the suspensions. The five left CLP reps on the NEC were joined by four union reps and the Youth and Disabled Members’ reps, but by no-one from the “centre” of the NEC.

On 15 February, the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy (CLPD) [called](#) on Labour members to email Keir Starmer and NEC members about the withdrawal of the whip from Jeremy Corbyn, another issue apparently put into indefinite storage.

The news that the Forde Inquiry report into the 860-page Labour Party internal report on misdeeds in Labour HQ has been indefinitely [delayed](#) (on grounds of the Information Commissioner’s Office doing an inquiry into the *leaking*, not the substance, of the report) is strictly speaking entirely separate, but adds to the “tradition”.

We have heard of no new suspensions recently. No action was taken against the 284 CLP officers. Time for more protests! □

Jumping the vaccination queue?



Letters

I thought the call for school workers to be bumped up the vaccination queue had faded, because it was originally advocated as vaccination in half-term (mostly week 15-19 Feb).

Not so. My local Labour Party passed a motion on 17 Feb for bumping up the queue. It was motivated by sympathy and appreciation for school workers, but as a teacher myself I argued against it.

We’re for requisitioning Big Pharma to speed vaccine supplies. Even then vaccination will take time. Not everyone can be first.

The vaccines drastically reduce death and severe illness from Covid. The risk of death and severe illness is [hugely greater](#) for the old and vulnerable.

So the decision by the scientists ([JCVI](#)) to prioritise by age and vulnerability makes sense.

There are about a million school workers *full-time equivalent* in state schools in *England*. So “vaccinate school workers first” would mean bumping well over a million people up the queue.

A million young and healthy school workers bumped up the queue to get in before 12-week second jabs for those vaccinated in January means a million ageing and vulnerable people bumped down. Plus maybe another million with vaccinations delayed by time lost while changing from a simple schedule to a much more complex one.

The JCVI is open to occupational prioritisation after jabs are done for the elderly and vulnerable. Even then, I don’t

think we school workers should jostle to be *first*.

What about the elderly and vulnerable in poor countries? Teachers have a Covid death rate [similar to](#) the general working-age population. What about groups which have [markedly higher](#) Covid death rates? Bus workers, supermarket workers, security guards?

Chris Reynolds, London

A 0.32% swing



Letters

It’s been said that “Biden won easily” in the 2020 US presidential election. In fact, tilt the results by a uniform 0.32% swing from Biden to Trump, and Trump would have won.

That 0.32% swing would have tipped Georgia (which Biden won by 0.24%), Arizona (0.3%), and Wisconsin (0.63%) to Trump, and produced an Electoral College tie. Biden would still have had a big majority in the popular vote, but with an Electoral College tie the presidency is decided by the House of Reps with each state, small or large, having one vote. Trump would have won.

A uniform 0.59% swing from Biden to Trump would have tipped Pennsylvania (1.17%) to Trump, and Trump would have won the Electoral College.

Colin Foster, London

To attack inequality, fight “business”, don’t partner with it

By Sacha Ismail

Perhaps stung by criticisms about his lack of fight – and alarmed by stagnant poll ratings – Keir Starmer seems to be trying to indicate a change of tack, promising “a moral crusade now... to address the inequalities and injustices that this crisis has so brutally exposed”.

“The Tories... want to build back”, Starmer said in his 18 February [speech](#). “I don’t want to go back... certainly not to an economy rooted in insecurity and inequality.”

“They’ve been slow at every stage. They’ve ignored advice. They haven’t learnt from their mistakes... Yet a government out of its depth is not even half the story... The terrible damage caused by the virus to health and prosperity has been made all the worse because the foundations of our society have been weakened over a decade.”

Starmer nodded to the important Marmot reports on inequality and public health.

This is, obviously, better than what Labour has said recently. However, among the many problems with Starmer’s speech, two are glaring and indicative of something fundamental.

Starmer said: “if we’re honest, for too long Labour has failed to realise that the only way to deliver social justice and equality is through a strong partnership with business”, then waxed lyrical about the wonder of “business”, i.e. capitalists.

Every Labour leader for ages, including Jeremy Corbyn, has – unfortunately – advocated the labour movement cooperates and Labour governments cooperate with capital. But Starmer is pulling hard in that direction. He appears to have no conception of the reality that “business” is deeply implicated in the disaster of the last decades – as if capital and the Tory party are two completely unconnected things – and that addressing the problems he indicates will require at the very least some serious campaigning to pressure it.

In a surreal departure from reality, Starmer stated that “the vast majority of businesses... know the days of ignoring their social and climate responsibilities are long gone” and “are waiting for politicians to catch up”.

Employers and the rich, having increased their wealth at the majority’s expense for many years, have increased it again during the pandemic. If we are going to even seriously mitigate poverty and inequality we will need to take at least a significant chunk of that wealth. Obviously “business” will not want that. We will have to fight them.

Instead Starmer tries to evade the issue of wealth inequality and tackling the wealth and power of the rich by advocating “people” invest in “British Recovery Bonds”.

And while he praises capital, there is very little in Starmer’s speech about the labour movement.

It is good that he has supported the British Gas workers’ struggle against “fire and rehire”. We should demand that Labour routinely supports strikes, and that it commits to



implementing its conference policy of repealing all anti-trade union laws. Which, again, “business” will not want!

Secondly: Starmer advocates very little in the way of concrete policies to constitute the shift he says he wants.

The immediate difference between us and Starmer is not just or mainly that we are socialists and he is a social democrat. It is that, even far short of overthrowing capitalism, we advocate radical demands for changing society, while he advocates very little.

The Marmot and other recent reports highlight the deep and deepening inequalities in British society (read a summary and some analysis [here](#)). The policies Marmot advocated to address them were inadequate, but went far further than what Starmer is hinting at.

On support in the pandemic, on wages and workers’ rights, housing, rebuilding public services, public ownership, climate and much more, radical policies are needed if we going to meaningfully “build back fairer”. For some ideas, see the motion Southampton Momentum has submitted to Momentum to promote in CLPs for Labour Party conference.

We must insist that Labour Party policies should be decided by conference, not by Leader’s Officer or the PLP. Where did the “Recovery Bond” idea come from? Meanwhile reams of actually left-wing conference policies are ignored, including [here](#).

To take two important example from the speech, it is noteworthy that Starmer talked in woolly terms about “affordable homes”, but ignored Labour policy on building council housing; and about “ensur[ing] care homes are places of dignity”, while ignoring policy for public ownership and provision of social care.

The left and labour movement should take the opportunity to challenge Starmer on what his supposedly new approach means in practice, and advocate policies and ideas which, unlike his, at least begin to measure up to the depth of the crises society faces. □

More online

More debate on vaccines: bit.ly/vac-deb

The great Post Off

By Dave Chapple

Dave Chapple is not a member of Workers' Liberty, but the article is published in full [on our website, bit.ly/p-1971](https://www.workersliberty.org.uk/p-1971) and abridged here with his permission, and with thanks. The Union of Post Office Workers, UPW, was the predecessor of today's Communication Workers Union (CWU).

In January-February 1971, 200,000 Post Office workers struck for 44 days. Telegraphists, telephonists, Post Office counter clerks, cleaners, postmen (170,000 of them!), and Postmen Higher Grade (PHGs), members of the Union of Post Office Workers (UPW), struck for their claim of 15%, or £3 a week for lower-paid grades such as cleaners.

Inflation was rampant (6.1% 1970, 9.5% 1971), but the UPW claim for 15% would mean, at least, a real rather than an apparent pay rise. The Post Office offered 7%, then raised it to 8%. The UPW Executive Council, under UPW Rules, without a ballot, called an all-out national strike from Wednesday 20 January.

On Sunday 24 January, 20,000 UPW members took their first strike march and rallied in Hyde Park. Rallies were held every Thursday thereafter. For most of the six weeks, these were loud, confident, working-class celebrations of struggle. Other strike rallies took place in all of the UK's cities, with some, as in Bristol, led by militant young telephonists.

Post Office boss William Ryland upped the pay offer to 9%, but only if the UPW agreed to a massive increase in part-time labour into the postman grade, which was a "closed shop", i.e., 100% trade union, and nearly 100% male. The UPW refused, and the strike carried on, a war of attrition that affected every city, town, and village in the country.

The strike had some weaknesses. Some Post Office Crown Offices [as distinct from the smaller "sub-offices"] were open, and, at the start, staffed by UPW striking volunteers on the days when people then collected their pension and social security money, until strikers refused to work alongside scabs.

Telephonists were the weak link: only a minority of night full-time male telephonists were in any union, and many were in the non-TUC National Guild of Telephonists; many female day telephonists were UPW, but others were non-union.

The angry mass picketing was mainly outside the main city telephone exchanges. Police were often called out, as scabs alleged harassment, and pickets complained of liquids being poured on them from the exchange's upper floors. Many telephonists came away in tears from claiming their last pre-strike wage, £8, paid in arrears, when managers withheld a five-pound note and told them: "You will get this only if you stay in work now!"

The telephonist grade apart, the strike was solid from

beginning to end: there was no drift back to work at all. In Ilfracombe, North Devon, Mike Creek, for decades now the Ilfracombe TUC Secretary, recalls that only one PHG UPW member scabbed, out of a branch of 53. Mike says that PHG was given a hard time for years afterwards.

In Bridgwater, Somerset, postman Eric Payne remembers shouting out "The wages of sin are death!" to a solitary scab who gave a religious excuse for crossing the picket line. The only scab in the Bridgwater Crown Post Office Counter was a Tory Borough Councillor, Trevor Donaldson.

The UPW only had £330,000 in its strike fund on 16 January, which did not go far, with 200,000 strikers! Public support was impressive: one survey claimed 47% sympathy, which was unprecedented for a trade union dispute in those days. A postman's wife in Totton, Southampton, had her strike collection of £15 confiscated by the police!

Then, after six weeks, UPW general secretary Tom Jackson and the union Executive Council suddenly called off the strike, with nothing but a state-sponsored Inquiry to compensate for the abandonment of its 15% claim.

The "official" UPW reason given was a simple one: the union had run out of money and was close to bankruptcy.

The UPW could have asked the other Post Office unions to show real solidarity and strike with them till they won. The UPW could even have called out its own "Ship to Shore" radio operators, such as its members at Portishead Radio Station in Somerset: only a few hundred UPW members nationally, yet crucial to the whole operation of the UK merchant fleet.

Appealed

The UPW could also have appealed to members of the Association of Scientific, Technical, and Managerial Staffs (ASTMS, the union of "left-winger" Clive Jenkins, now merged into Unite), who staffed the Telex Service, to strike in sympathy.

The Post Office Management Staff Association (POMSA) had many members who wanted to walk out with their UPW colleagues, but they were never asked. George Massey, the Communist POMSA Secretary for Bristol, remembered secretly collecting money for the UPW strike fund from about 20% of his supervisor members at the Small Street Head Post Office.

The UPW should have appealed to the powerful skilled Post Office Engineering Union (POEU), whose telephone engineers could have put major pressure on industry and commerce.

There was a one-day POEU strike in solidarity with the UPW towards the end of February, but too little and far too late. Their General Secretary, a member of the House of Lords, might have been less than keen. But what about the POEU branches and members?

Second, the TUC, and especially the key TUC unions,

Post Office strike of 1971

including those “left-wing”-led such as ASTMS, the AEU, and the TGWU (all now merged into Unite), need not have failed the UPW. When they failed the UPW, with supportive strikes or even just substantial hardship donations, they should have been challenged and publicly shamed.

The National Union of Railwaymen (NUR), 600,000 strong, had a pay claim lodged at the same time as the UPW. Yet right-wing NUR General Secretary Sidney Greene was incapable, or unwilling, to see this opportunity to strike alongside the UPW, probably defeat the Tory Government, and advance his own members’ standard of living.

The Tory Industrial Relations Bill, sponsored by Home Office Minister Robert Carr, was being opposed by the TUC. One TUC-sponsored London rally during the UPW strike, on 23 February, had called over 100,000 trades unionists out. At that Hyde Park Rally, UPW general secretary Tom Jackson was the most popular speaker, while the forked tongue of TUC General Secretary Vic Feather “gave his full support.” When Feather failed to deliver on this TUC promise, and others, Tom Jackson kept silent, and when the strike collapsed, allowed his members’ anger to be concentrated upon himself.

The TUC General Council promised workplace collections that came to nothing. Some unions gave substantial donations, others made double-edged loans to the UPW: the NUR loaned £100,000; the TGWU, the AEU, and the Furniture Trade Union £50,000 each. It was just these loans, or the UPW’s inability to repay them, which, after four or five weeks, caused the UPW’s bankers to threaten the confiscation of the union’s Clapham HQ.

Trains and lorries carried vast numbers of parcels throughout the strike, and, despite donations to the UPW, the NUR and TGWU did little or nothing to prevent that. Local Government and Civil Service union members were allowed by their leaders to deliver mail between their departments.

The strategic thinking of the UPW leadership was non-existent, and its tactics were both timid and over-confident. But the TUC and the trade union movement that deserves most of the blame. They clearly deserted the UPW in 1971, its unique time of great need.

So the UPW Executive decided by 27 votes to 4 to call for immediate branch votes for a return to work.

The branch meetings were held within five days, amid some accusations of undue haste. For example, meetings at the huge Mount Pleasant office in London were always held on Sundays, yet many members awoke on that Sunday to find their branch meeting had already been called on the Saturday!

The Sir Henry Hardman Inquiry was the fig-leaf that ended the strike, covering up the surrender. It ordered a binding settlement of 9%, the acceleration of mechanisation into Post Offices, productivity schemes to pay for the

extra 1%, and the new idea of extra money for postmen in areas where recruitment had been difficult.

The UPW as a whole, and the postmen/PHG Grades in particular, which had been 98% solid, were bitter and resentful for the next decade and a half.

Bitter

Many strike veterans were especially bitter at any newcomers who showed signs of militancy. When I, a young militant socialist, joined the Post Office in Clevedon in 1978, I was told time and time again by the 1971 veterans: “Don’t even mention a strike, David: we went through 1971, so never again!” Doug Pond, a Bridgwater postman, kept a 1971 social security receipt for 6d in his wallet until he retired after 49 years’ service!

Yet the basic union organisation, especially in the sorting and delivery offices, remained solid. With mail volumes showing a massive increase in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the stage was set for a remarkable trade union renaissance: the massive and prolonged militancy of Royal Mail workers, who, for the last 30 years, has been, without doubt, the best organised section of the British working class.

As a UCW/CWU Bridgwater Delivery Office Rep, and Bristol Branch Officer, I am proud to have played my own small part in this: at Bridgwater Delivery Office between 1993 and December 2016, when I retired, we held 20-odd strike ballots, walked out unofficially ten times, held eight official strikes, all without a single significant defeat.

That total would be significantly increased if, during those years, you took the Bristol Branch Royal Mail offices as a whole. Even during Covid, Bridgwater Delivery Office Royal Mail CWU members have held three successful wildcat strikes! □

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US working-class p



Debate

By Daniel Randall, Ben Tausz, Paul Hampton, and Stephen Wood

Donald Trump was the most right-wing, authoritarian, nationalist, president in recent US history, as well as a racist, sexist, transphobic narcissist. For workers of the world, and in particular for black, brown, and immigrant working-class people in the US, it is a relief that he is no longer president.

Trump's politics championed the interests of US big business. His domestic and foreign policies were designed to lever advantages for US capitalists above other bourgeois factions and to use the state to tip the balance of forces in favour of capital and against labour.

His anti-working-class politics were illustrated by his hostility toward migrant workers and his attacks on the Black Lives Matter movement. His contempt for working-class communities was clear from his gross mishandling of the Covid-19 pandemic in the US.

His lies, the repetition of blatant falsehoods, conspiracy theories, fake news and his denial of science, reason, and genuine debate, have poisoned US and world politics.

His contempt for the norms of bourgeois democracy, even the limited democratic system of the US, poses a genuine threat. His attempt to deny the results of the presidential election, to subvert his defeat through lawsuits and ultimately, via the march on the Capitol on 6 January, show that he is a mortal enemy of democracy and of the working class.

Fascism

Trump encouraged and amplified the US far right, including explicitly fascist elements and armed right-wing militias. The US working class will have to face down the growth of such elements in the years ahead.

However, Trump is not a fascist in the sense Marxists have historically understood the term. Fascism originated in the 1920s as a reaction to growing, militant, labour movements led by Communists in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. Fascism organised disaffected soldiers, ruined petty bourgeois, and even workers into a plebeian force to physically confront and beat down the labour movement. Fascism garnered support from big business when it feared these labour movements.

Fascism in power has always developed towards totalitarianism, and has been distinguished by its violent suppression of workers' parties, trade unions, minorities, and political freedom, even in instances where certain democratic freedoms and mechanisms of opposition were not snuffed out immediately. Fascism has taken many forms,



some close to Bonapartist, military, or other anti-democratic forms of bourgeois rule.

Socialists oppose almost everything Trump did in power. But in the 2016 election and in power, he was an authoritarian right-wing leader of the Republican party, one of the main bourgeois parties in the US. To characterise Trump and his movement as straightforwardly "fascist" is to misdiagnose the threats our class face and misdirect the working-class politics needed to oppose him and the growth of the far right.

Even if Trump could be described as fascistic or proto-fascist, this would not indicate an orientation to the Democrats as the appropriate response. US workers and oppressed minorities cannot rely on the Democrats or the Biden administration to curb the far right.

Working-class anti-fascist politics emphasises:

- Working-class political independence
 - No reliance on bourgeois parties and bourgeois states
 - Working-class self-defence
 - Support for black and other forms of self-organisation and self-defence
 - Working-class political answers to social despair and alienation that opens some workers to fascist movements
- These remain the best guiding principles for working-class anti-fascism.

The US labour movement and left also needs to take up the struggle for democracy in a serious and consistent way, around demands including:

- Demilitarisation and curbing of the police
- Abolition of the Senate
- Proportional representation for the House of Representatives
- Fixed terms for Supreme Court judges
- Abolition of the Electoral College
- Removal of the many obstructions to especially black Americans registering and voting
- Suffrage for prisoners, felons, and all residents regardless of nationality

Politics and Trump

- Thresholds for election nominations reduced at least to UK-comparable levels, and no exemptions for incumbents

- An end to over-representation of small rural states; statehood for DC, self-determination for Puerto Rico

The vote in the presidential election

In the November 2020 election, the pressing matter was supporting a mobilisation to defend democracy from the election loser's power-grab. The AWL was right not to advocate a Biden vote. Biden is a wretched representative of a mainstream bourgeois party, the Democrats, which has traditionally been a net that has enmeshed US radicalism. Biden will almost certainly introduce anti-working class and anti-migrant legislation. Biden may well pave the way for a new Trump, or someone worse than Trump. Chiming in with the "Vote Biden" clamour would have made it less likely, overall, that our key message about the need for independent working-class politics was heard. On balance it was right to favour a vote for the Green candidate, the socialist and trade unionist, Howie Hawkins.

Our attitude to the Democrats

We oppose US socialists having a thoroughgoing activist orientation, of the type Workers' Liberty currently has to the Labour Party, to the Democrats. The Democratic party is not "reformable" via an intervention from US labour or the socialist left. It is a bourgeois party of big business, primarily an electoral machine for those interests. There are no direct mechanisms to hold elected Democrats accountable, and no structures via which unions, which give substantial funding to Democratic candidates, can assert direct democratic control, or push for particular policies – except by threatening to withdraw funding and support.

The Sanders movement, and the success of figures like Ocasio-Cortez, show that Democratic electoral structures can be used to win a hearing for socialist, or social-democratic, ideas. The unusual nature of the USA's major parties – lacking coherent programmes and with relatively open primary structures – combined with severe barriers to third-party ballot access, makes intervening in Democratic primaries a possible tactic for socialists despite our hostility to the party itself. But the likes of Sanders and AOC also express the limitations of an orientation to the Democrats: they are individual figureheads, unaccountable to any permanently organised socialist movement, whose principal strategy for political advancement is to get more people like themselves elected to public office.

Whilst socialist challenges in Democratic primaries have a place as one of several socialist approaches to official politics in the US, the ultimate aim should be for an independent working-class party that breaks up the "Democratic coalition". We agree with those US socialists who oppose a thoroughgoing orientation to the Democrats that aims to take over or "reform" the Democratic

party as such.

The greatly expanded Democratic Socialists of America has immense potential to renew and develop socialist politics in the USA. For that potential to be realised, class-struggle socialists within it need to organise to promote and win:

- A consistent and systematic turn to activity in workplaces and rank-and-file organisation in unions
- Working-class anti-fascist and anti-racist organising
- Working-class independence in politics
- A "third camp", pro-working-class-independence stance on international issues
- The strengthening of the DSA's multi-tendency democracy, combined with central democratic coordination to carry through majority decisions

Lesser evilism

In bourgeois elections our general policy is to support working-class candidates. This means supporting candidates who argue for socialism; or for social democratic reforms that can mobilise the working-class to fight for its own interests; or candidates standing for parties based on or structurally linked to the labour movement, who are thus directly subject to organised working-class pressure. The key criteria is developing a working-class voice in politics, as part of the drive for working class self-emancipation. We judge working-class candidates on their politics, and endorsement of particular candidates does not exclude sharp criticism as necessary.

The tradition of AWL politics in recent decades across the globe, including South Africa, Brazil, Mexico, Venezuela, Pakistan, Indonesia, as well as in US and European elections, has been to support even small independent working-class candidates, where this contributed to developing independent working-class politics and organisation.

We have no ironclad principle of never voting for "bourgeois" candidates. Socialists may advocate a vote for non-working-class, and even "bourgeois", candidates in certain circumstances, for example where such candidates are tied to the aims of a democratic national liberation movement (e.g., the pro-Kurdish HDP in Turkey), or, sometimes, in run-offs where working-class candidates we supported have been knocked out.

But potential exceptions are not the basis for a general approach, which is to oppose "lesser evilist" votes, however critical, for bourgeois parties. In a context in which electoral conflicts between various forms of bourgeois liberalism on the one hand, and various forms of right-wing, populist nationalism on the other, are likely to be a common feature, it is especially important to continually assert the need for the working class to speak and act in its own interests, including electorally. □

- Abridged: more at bit.ly/0221trump

“Silvertown Tunnel will be a disaster”



Environment

By Victoria Rance

Victoria Rance, a spokesperson for the Stop the Silvertown Tunnel campaign, spoke to Sacha Ismail from Solidarity.

If it goes ahead the Silvertown Tunnel [a road tunnel under the Thames between Silvertown and the Greenwich Peninsula, [supported](#) by London’s Labour mayor Sadiq Khan] will be a disaster for people in East London and for the fight against climate change.

It’s being justified as a way of easing congestion. The Blackwall Tunnel always has jams, and there’s not many river crossings in the East of London. But what they’re doing is making a crossing right next to the Blackwall Tunnel – it’s the same approach roads. There’s no new road infrastructure. The congestion will be truly awful.

Newham, where the northern end of the tunnel will be, is already the most polluted borough in the UK, despite having a very low level of car ownership, as well as the most BAME and the second poorest borough in London. It has very high rates of asthma and other health problems related to pollution. Now it will be made worse.

London traffic has doubled over the last ten years and in Greenwich, where the southern end of the tunnel will be and where I live, the number of miles driven on our roads has increased by 130m between 2014 and 2019.

That’s before you get to the wider issue of carbon emissions and why on earth money is being spent on this rather than on public transport and facilitating other forms of travel. We advocate a cycling and pedestrian crossing by the Thames Barrier, which could be done at a fraction of the cost. The Silvertown Tunnel will have no provision for cyclists to use it.

The tunnel is being funded through one of the last PFI schemes that was allowed. The corporate conglomerate building it, [Riverlinx](#), will make its money back through the money from tolls on both the Silvertown and Blackwall tunnels. In other words they’ll be allowed to take money out of some of London’s poorest communities to make a profit. The amount they’ll be taking keeps growing; it was originally flagged as £600m, but it now seems it will be more like £2bn.

Transport for London could put a smaller toll on the Blackwall Tunnel now and use the money for clean, environmentally friendly and sustainable infrastructure.

There’s been campaigning on this since 2013, when the plans were first announced. In the early stages it was essentially a local community campaign; when the Development Consent Order went through in 2018, many of those campaigners felt exhausted. In 2019 we started a broader campaign. It was just when Extinction Rebellion was starting up, which really helped, and we also got support from Labour members, Green Party members (I’m one), some Lib Dems and a campaigning group called Speak Out



Photo credit:
Ben Darlington

Woolwich.

We’ve been extremely active. We went to City Hall with a letter signed together by 1,500 local residents, which we got together in about a week – it showed the strength of feeling. That included support from fifteen head teachers. We went again with a group of school student climate strikers. We organised lots of demonstrations and some direct action. We’ve spoken at a range of organisations, at XR demonstrations and now at Labour Parties and union branches too.

It’s a cross-party, grassroots campaign. In terms of politicians, Sian Berry, the Green mayoral candidate, has supported us, and now Luisa Porritt, the Lib Dem candidate, has expressed support too.

There is now something of a grassroots movement in the Labour Party. Our friends in South East London Labour for a Green New Deal have been coordinating motions for people to use, and they’ve been passed in quite a number of wards and CLPs. All three Greenwich CLPs have called for pause and review, and now Eltham has called for cancellation. Peninsula Branch Labour Party, in the ward where the tunnel is going to be built, has also called for cancellation.

[On 17 Feb] Islington South CLP passed a motion, with overwhelming support, which was particularly significant as Heidi Alexander, the deputy mayor of London, intervened to try to stop it. She’s been sending out letters and “fact sheets” full of things that simply aren’t true.

There’s a problem of Labour politicians, councillors and GLA members, privately express supporting but apparently feeling unable to say or do anything publicly. Despite some private rumblings, Greenwich’s Labour council has not said anything publicly, and we’ve heard the council leader Danny Thorpe has been obstructive in wider South London Labour coordination on this.

The key thing is winning more grassroots support in the Labour Party, and trade union support is important too. We’ve recently made links with Newham trades council.

□

- Campaign: [@silvertowntn](https://bit.ly/s-tun)
- SE London Labour for a Green New Deal [@lgndselondon](#)

From scoffing to persuading

By Jay Dawkey

The conspiracies and misinformation associated with Covid-19 have shifted within my workplace on the Tube as the pandemic and the measures to combat it have changed. I hear less about 5G and the disease being fake or the same as flu, and more about fear of the vaccine and myths surrounding the “Great Reset”, the World Economic Forum’s plan for economic revival after the pandemic. Misinformation around the vaccine is what dominates now.

There is really only a handful of people who are passionately convinced by the anti-vaccine theories. They have gone out of their way to read up and listen to the propaganda. But the small number of evangelists have weight on what everyone else thinks.

For them, there is nothing that happens in the world that doesn’t smell fishy. An ulterior and more sinister motive is the cause of everything.

With people who will listen to the out-and-out anti-vaxxers and to me on a more equal footing, I have been trying to gradually shift people’s thinking. The pandemic is real. Actions need to be taken to control it. Vaccinating as many people as possible is a major way out.

My first instincts when hearing something ridiculous is to scoff. I have learnt it does not work. You have to find out how willing people are to talk, and how. Some people welcome discussion in front of others, with multiple views. Others prefer conversation one on one.

The dialogue has to be largely positive. Tackling the weakest or most outlandish proposition put forward won’t cut it. The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci wrote that too many leftist polemics would just ridicule some stupid or crass expression of our opponents. He instead proposed that: “It is necessary to engage battle with the most eminent of one’s adversaries if the end proposed is one of raising the tone and intellectual level of one’s followers and not just... of creating a desert around oneself by all means possible”.

To deal with claims that the vaccine is unsafe and has been developed too quickly without adequate testing is far stronger than ridiculing claims that it is a way for Bill Gates to implant a microchip into everyone.

If you engage in this discussion honestly you will get a more fruitful result. Building on ideas like nationalisation of the railways, nationalising big pharma to help tackle future pandemics and other diseases can be a relatively easy argument to make. Or you can get agreement that it would be beneficial to the whole of humanity if wider scientific research had the level of cooperation, funding, and support that has enabled the Covid vaccines to be developed at considerable speed.

A constructive discussion that persuades someone feels less like knocking someone down and more like a dialogue where people are genuinely convinced rather than humiliated. But just a big list of facts won’t cut it, either.

For every source you cite, an alternative will be put



forward, and in the moment you cannot prove that your source is better than theirs. For vaccine scepticism, for example, a doctor or an alternative scientist can always be pulled from somewhere to argue that what you, a lay person, have said is false.

The recent Panorama on anti-vaxxers could highlight that most of the people who feature in the anti-vaxx videos that circulate on social media are under investigation, or not real medical doctors, or have been reprimanded for using untested treatments for other diseases, but on the spot you probably won’t be able to do that without hours of previous research.

Most of the time it is not the facts that hold people to conspiracy theories, but some feeling they have. Those feelings can make them see the person they are arguing with as a part of the conspiracy. The endorsement of medical science can make you a “shill of big pharma”, and the fact that you yourself cannot be seen to derive a personal benefit from your supposed work as a “shill” doesn’t do away with the suspicion that someone, somewhere, is benefiting.

Relating to why someone may have potentially hard-to-define feelings that put them off vaccines is also important.

We need to understand that people are interested less in expert opinion and more in the opinion of their peers and others they trust. An argument around scientific consensus is important here, as it is with climate change, but, for quite understandable reasons as well as negative ones, trust in experts whom people do not know is limited.

You will not achieve a knock-out blow from one conversation. Just as with the patient persuading we do when discussing why be a socialist, changing someone’s mind-set away from conspiracies is a process. Ideas we have heard repeated have more grip than new information. It takes time for the arguments to filter through.

As I discussed in my [previous article](#), where we can do them, intellectual “inoculation” and “pre-bunking” are better than debunking. Prevention is better than cure. □

• Useful links: bit.ly/tips-c • bit.ly/h-book • bit.ly/c-hbk

Three books by Eric Vuillard



Book review

By John Cunningham

A review of: *The Order of the Day* (2019, Picador); *Sorrow of the Earth* (2019, Pushkin Press); *The War of the Poor* (2021, Picador)

I had never heard of Éric Vuillard before, although he has a reputation both as a writer and documentary filmmaker in his native France. So far, these are the only books of his translated into English.

All three are fascinating, beautifully written and deeply moving. *The Order of the Day* revolves around the meetings that took place between the European powers in the months preceding the outbreak of World War Two; *Sorrow of the Earth* considers the exploitation of Native Americans by the showman William Cody (aka "Buffalo Bill"); and *The War of the Poor* is the story of Thomas Müntzer, the leader and inspirer of the Peasants' Revolt in Central Europe in the sixteenth century.

What links them is their concern for the oppressed, the dispossessed and the marginalised. Even when Vuillard is writing about the meetings between an increasingly deranged and belligerent Hitler and the cringing, spineless Austrian Chancellor, Kurt von Schuschnigg, he constantly brings this Punch and Judy show down to earth with his descriptions of the desperate plight of Jews in Vienna on whom von Schuschnigg has turned his back. Relentlessly persecuted, they begin to flee the city that has been home for generations. In fact, so many leave in such a hurry, that they fail to pay off their household bills and the Viennese gas company, in a macabre and unknowingly dark, ironic act, writes to all remaining Jews informing them that their gas supplies have been cut off. After the war, von Schuschnigg enjoyed a long career as a lecturer in politics at the University of St, Louis in the USA.

In *The Sorrow of the Earth*, Cody, having already played his part in slaughtering the Bisons on which the Native Americans depend, turns showman and hires Sitting Bull, the famous Sioux chief who becomes the highlight of Buffalo Bill's famous Wild West Show and the main reason why spectators turn up in their thousands. Yet Native Americans are loathed and the crowds boo, jeer and spit at him.



Thomas Müntzer

After only four months Sitting Bull returns to the Dakota reservation, where those of his tribe who have survived the white man's genocide are holed up in miserable conditions. Shortly thereafter he is killed in a confused brawl. Cody travels to Dakota and hires a group of the remaining Sioux to provide the highlight of his future Wild West Shows – a re-enactment of the "Battle" of Wounded Knee which, as everyone now knows, was a massacre of a people already half-starved and freezing to death. It was never a battle.

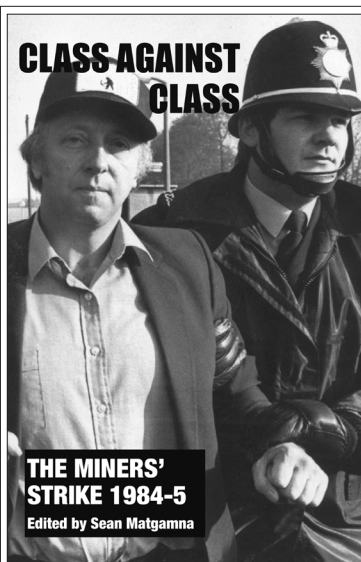
The Shows were a grotesque parody of what happened in the so-called Wild West, a "Circus of lies" as a critic in *The Independent* so aptly described it. The Wild West label was probably invented by Cody, as was Sitting Bull (whose real name was Tatanka Iyotake). Everything was fake.

At the show's end: "The spectacle is over; people wander round the Indian craft stall and the hot dog stands. They'd love to have a tomahawk or even a feather head-dress. This is what we now call merchandising. The Indians are selling products that derive from their genocide. They haggle with the gawpers, and then stash the modest sums in their leather purses".

At times, the degradations heaped on the Native Americans leave you struggling for words. One of the few survivors of Wounded Knee, Zintkala Nuni, was sold as a baby by a business acquaintance of Cody's. Re-named Marguerite, she appeared briefly in a few Hollywood films depicting a culture and a people about which she knew almost nothing. She was hired for Cody's Wild West Show and dressed in fake tassels with a feather boa.

Finally, destitute, she turned to prostitution and died in the influenza pandemic at the end of the First World War.

Cody ended up a failure as his Wild West Show lost out to the new medium of cinema. He tried his hand at film-making. It was a disaster. The great showman wasn't →



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Facebook, Australia, and democracy

By Matt Cooper

In the week ending 20 February, users of Facebook platforms in Australia found links to many external sites no longer available.

Facebook claimed they aimed only to cut links to news outlets, but the bans were more wide-ranging including some trade-union and campaigning organisations (such as Living Income For Everyone, LIFE, where Workers' Liberty people in Australia are active), as well as state bodies.

Facebook have stated that some of the bans have been errors, but it is unclear which will be reinstated or when. It has gone for "shoot first, question later" maximum disruption.

That is its response to a law currently progressing through Australia's parliament which requires platforms such as Facebook to reach an agreement to pay for the news content that people click through to.

The disruption is not trivial. Access to web-based material is structured by social media platforms and search engines. Private corporations determine much of what people see.

Television is still the most popular source of news, but social media is catching up and is the main source for younger people. People's access to news from media organisations is often through social media platforms, either

through Facebook's feed or through user posted links.

Facebook is limiting users' access to the web to protect its profits and is willing to push governments around to do that. Success in Australia would be a base for Facebook to block similar moves in the EU (there is already a more limited version of the Australian law in France, where Facebook chose not to pick a fight).

Some corporate news organisations are dominated by right-wing propaganda (the *Mail Online* is the fourth biggest globally), but others provide [more reliable](#) news (within limits, and if we read critically). The first and second globally are the *New York Times* and *Guardian*. We have an interest in the serious bourgeois news media not becoming an eviscerated husk supplying trivial click-bait for social media platforms.

But we can't align with the Australian government, either. The state represents ruling class interests. It suits states to have a cosy relationship with their own media (often right-wing, as in Australia, where the Murdoch empire dominates). Google, which has accepted the Australian law, is soon to launch News Showcase, a curated newsfeed likely to reflect only the mainstream commercial press.

Neither Facebook nor the state will guarantee a free press. □

→ so talented after all.

In a final act of self-aggrandisement he even built a town, Cody, which still exists today in Wyoming.

The radical preacher Thomas Müntzer, the leader of a huge peasant army (which really wasn't an army) and the main figure in *The War of the Poor*, was driven by one overriding thought – why was it that God, who supposedly loved the poor, was always on the side of the rich? He answered this question by attempting to overthrow the established church and replace it with a plebeian, radical Christianity which rejected wealth and strove for the accessibility and openness of religious teaching.

At that time radical politics were usually expressed in religious language. Müntzer translated the bible into German and then Czech, and he refused to preach in Latin. He was a firebrand and a fighter. He thought Martin Luther was weak and he called for the "miserable, wretched sack of maggots", the Bishops, Dukes and Princes, to be put to death. He signed his letters "Müntzer the Sword of Gideon".

40,000 flocked to his cause and the established order, church and state, began to tremble. However, the Peasant "Army" had hardly any weapons, little military expertise, cannons or cavalry. They were butchered in their thousands at the battle of Frankenhausen, 14-15 May 1525, by the joint forces of Philip I of Hesse and Duke George of Saxony. Müntzer was captured, tortured and executed. Vuillard ends the book with these words, "Martyrdom is a trap for the oppressed. Only victory is desirable. I will tell of it". □

For the love of Irn Bru

By Sarah Morgan

Here I am in the fabled land of England knocking back Irn Bru, which has absolutely no sugar in it just girders, lots and lots of girders.

It has so many girders in it that you can build bridges with Irn Bru to get you all the way to Scotland, but at the moment no one is allowed to leave London except for essential travel.

However, it is of course essential that Irn Bru reach us, otherwise we'd be back in the dark old days when you had to smuggle it across the Scottish border in Whiskey kegs.

As everyone knows Scottish money is all in Irn Bru, it is their only export.

The English can get on just fine without the Scottish, they just really need them to export Irn Bru at the moment because none of Europe want to export any of their Beer to them because they're annoyed that they want Independence.

The English of course cannot make Beer, they're too damn stupid.

Independence is also incidentally what the Scottish want, this is because the Scottish hate the English and this has nothing to do with austerity and Conservative governments.

Only the Scottish have a national health service, the English think that such things are a waste of tax payers' money. □

Keep up pressure on British Gas!

By Ollie Moore

British Gas engineers struck again from 19-22 February, in an ongoing battle to prevent their employer from dismissing its workforce en masse and rehiring them on worse conditions. The strikes succeeded in eliciting a new offer from British Gas, which was due to be issued to workers on Wednesday 24 February, and voted on over the weekend of 26-27 February. As Solidarity went to press on 23 Feb, strikes planned for 26 Feb-1 March were still due to take place.

A previous round of strikes, due for 12-15 February, were called off, after British Gas agreed to further talks at conciliation service Acas. The GMB union says talks have "faltered", and insists British Gas must withdraw its "fire and rehire" threat if negotiations are to be meaningful. Prior to the suspension of the 12-15 February strikes, British Gas indicated it would "suspend" the threat, but without the threat being categorically withdrawn, union reps say they are negotiating "with a gun to our heads."

22 February was the 22nd strike day in the dispute. British Gas has currently set a 1 March deadline for the imposi-

sition of new contracts, which would see some engineers working up to 156 additional unpaid hours annually. The new terms represent a 15% cut in the basic rate of pay for most engineers, and also involve increased productivity monitoring via apps similar to those used by Amazon and other employers.

Prior to the 19-22 Feb strikes, a backlog of over 210,000 domestic repairs had built up, with 250,000 annual service repairs cancelled.

GMB national officer Justin Bowden said: "Talks at Acas faltered because the company refused to end the fire and rehire notice. GMB entered into these Acas-brokered talks in good faith, but a deal is only possible if the company takes the fire and rehire plan off the table."

Throughout the dispute, reps and activists have continually highlighted the damaging impact the new contracts would have on pay and work-life balance. To risk narrowing the dispute into one against the method of the new contract's imposition, rather than its content, is wrong.

Strikes must continue not only until "fire and rehire" is off the table, but until British Gas abandons its plan to force engineers onto worse contracts. □

School cleaners to strike for 40 days

By Ollie Moore

Cleaners in the United Voices of the World union at La Retraite Catholic girls' school in south west London will strike for 40 days from 16 March, in what the union describes as "the longest school cleaners' strike in history."

The cleaners, who are employed by outsourced contractor Ecocleen, have faced cuts to their hours, as well as being low-paid, and denied contractual sick pay. Several cleaners have also recently been docked wages, after they exercised their right to refuse unsafe work under Section 44 of the 1996 Employment Rights Act.

The union estimates that 25% of cleaners at the school had Covid between December 2021 and January 2021. Despite this, neither the school nor Ecocleen carried out adequate risk assessments in consultation with the workers, leading to the Section 44 action.

A UVW statement said: "Members worked two-three hours a day, on minimum wage and all the other statutory terms and conditions. Workers joined UVW in the autumn of 2020, where six weeks of pressure brought their pay up to £10 an hour. However, the school also requested a decrease in cleaning hours – from 46 weeks a year to 43

weeks. This decrease in hours means they are still £150 worse off a year.

"We are demanding full pay sick pay and the London Living Wage. As the Covid-19 pandemic has proven over and over again, essential personnel such as cleaners are vital to keeping schools like La Retraite safe for teachers and children.

"Like all of our outsourcing disputes, we are demanding parity of terms and conditions with in-house support staff workers. It is wrong that our members, who are majority BAME and migrants, provide essential services to La Retraite but are ignored, mistreated and on worse terms and conditions than all the other staff they work alongside."

• Strike fund: bit.ly/uvw-lr □

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- *101 Poems Against War*, by Matt Hollis and Paul Keegan
- *Dream Factory Communism: The Visual Culture of the Stalin Era*, by Max Hollein
- *The Environmental Revolution: A guide for the new masters of the world*, by Max Nicholson
- *School Wars*, by Melissa Benn

Stop school victimisations!

By Pat Markey

Members of Shrewsbury Colleges Group NEU members are set to strike against the victimisation of [John Boken](#), one of the union reps at the college. John is a NEU safety rep and it is clear that the disciplinary action faced by John is a result of his trade union activity before and during the pandemic.

NEU members are due to strike on Wednesday 24 February, and have just announced an escalation to nine

strike days in March: Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday for three weeks. John deserves our support, as do other NEU reps such as [Louise Lewis](#) of Kirklees NEU, [Tracy McGuire](#) of Darlington NEU, and [Kirstie Paton](#) of Greenwich NEU, who are also currently facing victimisation for supporting staff and for raising safety issues during the pandemic. The NEU nationally needs to step up and make defence of workplace reps a priority. Messages of support for John Boken to jean.evanson@neu.org.uk □

UEL strikes 22-23 February

By Cathy Nugent

University of East London UCU (University and College Union) held a 230-strong solidarity strike rally on Monday 22 February, the first day of a two day strike, with staff, students and other union activists speaking.

The strike is over four compulsory redundancies, including the UCU branch chair (a clear example of victimisation). UCU is also fighting rising workload, drastically

increased since September 2020, when 82 jobs were cut.

Speakers talked about the effects of the cuts to date, in terms of insufficient services and overwork. Many called for national action by UCU over this and a wave of redundancies at other colleges.

College management are using the pandemic to implement their business model, and, asserting “management’s right to manage”, are refusing to negotiate. □

Heathrow workers strike again

By Ollie Moore

Workers at Heathrow Airport struck again on Sunday 21 February, in their dispute against a “fire and rehire” threat by their employer, Heathrow Airport Limited (HAL).

Strikes planned on 13 and 16 February were called off, in what the workers’ union, Unite, called “an act of good faith”, as negotiations between Unite and HAL continued. A Unite statement said that HAL had provided “an initial positive response” to the union’s proposals, and they would therefore call off the strikes “to increase the prospects of securing a negotiated settlement.”

Strikes have now resumed. This follows a similar pattern to the British Gas engineers’ dispute, in which the union, GMB, called off strikes on 12-15 February, only to resume them again on 19 February.

The widespread orthodoxy in the trade union movement – that the purpose of strikes is to secure negotiations rather than concessions, and that strikes should be suspended to allow negotiations to take place – needs to be broken. Employers will be under greater pressure to concede unions’ demands if negotiations take place under the direct pressure of ongoing industrial action. □

Fee strikes and solidarity

By Abel Harvie-Clark

Talk of fee strikes is starting to spread through the UK student movement. There are fee strikes ongoing at SOAS University of London and Royal College of Art (RCA); they started in January primarily due to students feeling they have not received “value for money”.

Fee strikes are particularly feasible at those universities because of the high proportion of international and postgraduate students, who pay fees from their own accounts, and can therefore withhold them. Home undergraduates’ fees are paid directly by UK student finance, and so they cannot “fee-strike”.

The ongoing strikes remain worthwhile, and are winning demands. In the strike’s first week, SOAS students have won improved academic mitigation conditions. Wider political demands have been passed to further meetings with higher management.

The demands of the RCA fee strike exist more appealingly within the narrative of university as a consumer experience, with demands not mentioning free education as a long term goal, or solidarity with staff facing cuts. This is an attitude taken up by a number of student campaign groups.

Fee strikes with radical demands on management, in solidarity with staff, could be effective at some universities, and should be supported. They are not, however, a quick-fix answer to a national strategy. □

When does your shift end?



Diary of a paramedic

By Alice Hazel

I'm working with a newly qualified paramedic today. As we check our equipment we chat about how pissed off he is that, although he's been doing the full role and not getting any extra support during the pandemic, he's still on the probationary wage. He says his girlfriend is a student nurse covering wards on no pay at all.

Our first job is helping transfer a Covid-positive patient to hospital using specialist equipment. We're all in highest level PPE. It still feels very odd to be outside on a suburban street in that gear.

Once we're finished and tidied up, we try to clarify what cleaning processes are needed. One phone call to the hub that we ring for support and advice, gets one instruction, the second phone call the opposite. We've been issued with reams of guidance, an overwhelming amount of information which is impossible to keep up with, yet staff are still individually blamed if they don't follow it to the letter. So we sit and wait, using the time for a coffee.

A text from a work and union mate improves the day. He's been discharged from hospital after 16 days on a ventilator. He's lost four stone, is not able to walk or speak, but says he's "grateful to be here".

The risks health workers have been forced to take are

very real. When I think about the trauma faced by some of my workmates and the permanent damage the illness will do to them, I feel upset, angry, and guilty for accepting some of the daily complacency. But at that moment I'm lifted by the thought that he has started on the road of recovery.

Finally we're told our vehicle needs a deep clean, so we book off the road to swap vehicles. We get one of the old worn-out ambulances, which always happens at this time of day, because people leave them until last. That means working the rest of the shift on a cramped vehicle with old equipment. I spend the rest of the day apologising to patients for the bumpy ride.

Near the end of our shift we get a job right over the other side of town. In an effort to get the patient support at home, rather than an unnecessary hospital visit, I spend 40 minutes on the phone listening to answer machine music, before finally getting through to a nurse, who, as well as answering these calls, is running a ward.

"What time does your shift finish?" she asks me. 25 minutes ago. □

• Alice Hazel is a paramedic.

China's first gay film



Kino Eye

By John Cunningham

News of the Chinese Education Ministry's ludicrous concern over the "feminisation" of Chinese boys brings to mind China's first explicitly gay film, *East Palace, West Palace*, directed by Zhang Yuan in 1996. Homosexuality was legalised in the following year, but gays are still regularly harassed for supposed "hooliganism".

A-Lan, a gay writer, is attracted to a policeman, Xiao Shi, and intentionally gets arrested by him in a public toilet (the title refers to two toilets in Beijing where gay men meet). Xiao Shi interrogates A-Lan overnight in the police station. As he listens to the young writer's life story his own feelings, previously suppressed, are drawn out. The film was smuggled out of China. Unsurprisingly Zhang Yuan was prevented by the Chinese authorities from attending the 1997 Cannes Film Festival. □

Call for 10% rise in local government pay

By Ed Whitby

Significantly later than usual, on 16 February, Unison, GMB, and Unite, the three unions who have negotiating rights for local government workers, including non-teaching staff in schools, have submitted a pay claim for a minimum 10% increase for all grades from April 2021.

The information shared with members and branches does not explain a strategy for fighting the government's public sector pay freeze. The pay freeze isn't even mentioned.

Still, Unison activists should take up the claim and build strong local campaigns to put pressure on employers and prepare the ground towards a strike ballot. If the national unions are not coordinating with other public sector workers we should start doing that at rank and file level. □

• Abridged: more at bit.ly/lg-10pc

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We've had a slow week for direct second-hand book sales and donations, so only an additional £45.35. That brings us to £630.35. Thanks to Jon, Andrew, and Dave for their contributions. We'll pick up the pace heading into spring and towards some limited reopening. Donate at workersliberty.org/donate2021

Ballots close 5 and 11 March



John Moloney

Our industrial action ballots at DLVA Swansea, and in 12 courts across the UK, are continuing. Our members there are balloting over workplace safety concerns. Those ballots close on 11 March and 5 March respectively.

Our aim is to speak to every member who's being balloted. Where reps can safely have those conversations in person, in the workplace, they will. But we're also mounting a phone-banking operation to ensure every member is spoken to, to remind them about the ballot and the importance of voting. That effort will be run by activist volunteers, with support from union officials and with the support of union resources.

The phone-banking will continue throughout the balloting period, to confirm that members have returned their ballots. We want to be in no doubt of reaching the 50% turnout thresholds.

The union's National Executive Committee will meet on 24 February. These disputes, as well as our dispute with the outsourced contractor OCS in the Ministry of Justice, will be discussed, as will the issue of national pay.

We won't know the outcome of the referendum on the department-specific pay offer in HMRC, but I will continue to argue that, even if that deal is accepted, we should still build towards a national fight on pay and conditions that involves all members in all departments. □

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

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Make Uber pay up!

By Michael Elms

In a case brought by taxi drivers including Yaseen Aslam and James Farrar of the App Drivers and Couriers Union, the UK Supreme Court has ruled that drivers working for Uber are not independent contractors, but workers. Specifically, they are "dependent contractors" or "limb b) workers".

This judgement means that Uber owes its workers sick pay, holiday pay and the national minimum wage going back to the start of their employment with Uber. Law firm Leigh Day, which is representing thousands of couriers making a joint claim for this money, estimates that Uber may owe something like £12,000 per worker. Limb b) worker status also implies more protection against discrimination, and therefore Uber may face additional litigation over discriminatory practices in future.

The *Financial Times* summarises the court's central arguments: "Uber set maximum fares, drivers had no say in their contracts and the application imposed penalties if drivers cancelled too many requests". This level of control meant drivers could not increase their income using "professional or entrepreneurial skill", the court concluded, meaning they worked for Uber and not themselves."

Limb b) worker status also opens the door to union recognition, which the IWGB union is now pushing for.

Uber is attempting to wriggle out of the court judgement. Jamie Heywood, Uber general manager for northern and eastern Europe, issued a statement to drivers saying: "a small number of drivers from 2016 can be classified as workers, but this judgment does not apply to drivers who earn on the app today." But unless Uber has reduced its degree of control over its workers since 2016, this is bullshit.

Keeping open loopholes in employment law is a vital interest to Uber. In 2020, after a California court made a similar ruling to this 2021 UK Supreme Court decision, Uber, along with gig economy firms Lyft, DoorDash, and Postmates, spent more than US\$200 million on a referendum to pass "Proposition 22", which classified app workers as independent contractors, nullifying the court decision.

It is worth asking why Uber has only been hit with this judgement now, after many years of operations. This long failure to enforce the law on the tech giant may well have been the fruit of long-running lobbying efforts. UberEats and other app-based firms will now be scrambling to use fair means and foul to stay one step ahead of employment law and avoid racking up similar liabilities. Stuart, which performs delivery services for JustEat, lost an appeal in a similar case regarding the status of one of its couriers in 2019.

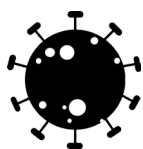
Uber's market value is US\$100 billion. The firm's vast wealth should be spent on drivers and on subsidising fares for customers. Like many app companies, Uber provides a service which is genuinely useful. It should be publicly owned and run democratically, for social need, not private profit. □

Solidarity



For a workers' government

ISOLATION PAY CAN KEEP THE CURVE GOING DOWN



Covid-19

By Martin Thomas

If we self-isolate when we have Covid symptoms, that reduces transmission by about a quarter or a third. The current contact-tracing regime brings a reduction of only 2% to 5%, an official 19 February [report](#) estimates.

Reducing social contact for us *all* – especially face-to-face indoors contact – also reduces transmission, since many transmissions happen before the transmitter gets symptoms.

But present only a minority of people with Covid symptoms – maybe [18%](#), maybe [29%](#) – self-isolate properly. Winning full isolation pay for all is central to improve self-isolation rates and help keep the curves of infections and hospitalisations falling even with step-by-step lockdown-easing.

Vaccination is important, but not enough on its own, or for a while to come. Despite the highest vaccination rate in the world, Israel's infection and death rates are still falling quite slowly.

Necessary social measures include requisitioning of private hospitals and the medical and PPE supply chain, bringing social care into the public sector, public quarantine accommodation for people otherwise trying to "self-isolate" in crowded housing, public-health test-and-trace, and extended furloughs.

School workers' and management unions have agreed that schools should be the priority for lockdown-easing, but have called for the return from 8 March to be step-by-step rather than all-at-once. The basic demand should be for workers' control, as in the agreement won by the Chicago Teachers' Union (CTU) for [safety committees](#) comprising the "school principal; the building engineer... selected by the principal; up to four CTU members, as selected by CTU; and a reasonable number of employees represented by other unions".

Lockdowns do work, under certain conditions and up to a point. [Scientific analysis](#) points to step-by-step caution in easing. But police measures are not cure-alls, even when advocated from the left, as in an article by

Susan Michie in the [Guardian](#) (22 Feb). "Australia, New Zealand, China, South Korea, Singapore, Vietnam and Finland... locked down early and hard, driving down transmission until it reached a level that could be managed by an effective system of test, trace and supported isolation".

[They didn't!](#) Finland locked down a little earlier than the UK, but always *more loosely*. It had a spike from mid-November, and has another one now. Its less bad death rate than Britain's plausibly owes much to better social conditions and social measures. Nothing to heavier police measures.

The other countries have had *no* whole-country lockdowns, or only *later* and (mostly) *looser* lockdowns. All have had spikes since their first responses.

The real common factor (Finland apart, but shared also by Taiwan, Mauritius, Madagascar, and even Japan, whose Covid death rate is less than half Finland's) is of being remote islands, or countries with borders that could be rigidly closed. Better quarantine rules for entrants to the UK are necessary, but they're never going to close borders as rigidly as New Zealand (even if we want them to, which we don't).

Winning social solidarity is the key to easing the costs of lockdown, speeding the benefits of vaccination, letting us "get our lives back", and at the same time keeping the infection curves falling. □

Spread vaccines world-wide!

First figures from Scotland and Israel show vaccination working well. It is urgent to spread it to the world's poorest countries. Africa has had only 2 vaccinations per 1000 people, and many countries have no vaccine supplies at all any time soon.

Money from the rich countries into the World Health Organisation Covax project, much less than spent on bailing out businesses, and requisitioning of Big Pharma to get maximum spread of technology and maximum production, can fix that.

Saving lives should be the driver, not just the current anxiety of France, for example, that China and Russia will get diplomatic advantage by bigger vaccine donations. □