

Solidarity

& Workers' Liberty



For social ownership of the banks and industry



Pic edited from: World Economic Forum

TO BEAT THE TORIES:

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Beating the Tories after 6 May



The Tories' narrative about where they are taking UK politics and society is dishonest and incoherent. But it is a narrative, one strongly honed and consistently argued for. In contrast the leadership of Keir Starmer's Labour Party seems to have pretty much nothing to say about the kind of society or even the policies it wants. That is an important part of why Labour suffered serious defeats on 6 May.

Attempts to claim the problem was the party not being right-wing enough are absurd. Already the Starmer leadership had reduced Labour's criticism of the Tories to little more than one of "competence".

Former Hartlepool MP and millionaire peer Peter Mandelson, writing in the *Financial Times*, has called for the Labour leadership to use the crisis following the 6 May losses to "wipe clean" left-wing policies, purge the left, further gut party democracy and break or downgrade Labour's trade union link.

Some Corbyn supporters, emphasising Labour's vote surge in 2017, effectively airbrush out its decline in 2019. Mandelson airbrushes out the 2017 surge and also airbrushes out the great decline of European social-democratic parties following the Blair-Mandelson model (France, the Netherlands, Germany...)

Corbynism was inadequate. But not because continued Blairism would have done better! Rather, because it didn't sufficiently undo Blairism, which both expressed and reinforced a decline of the labour movement organisations and cultures that underpinned Labour's rise and successes in the past.

Guardian columnist [Aditya Chakraborty](#) has summed up the Tory agenda, particularly in the areas of country where it has shoved Labour aside: it "is based around buildings and burning red tape, state-led investment and deregulation. It is about public investment rather than public services,

Keynesianism without the welfare state. Call it capitalism with Brexit characteristics."

In reality this agenda is about more active use of the power and resources of the state to benefit employers and the rich, and help them through the Covid turmoil. We'll see how very little "trickle down" there is to working-class communities after furlough and other emergency measures are ended.

The Tories may generate increased economic activity in areas targeted for extra funding, but on the basis of low-paid, precarious work and decimated public services. It would be very premature to assume that the Tories have closely bonded millions of new people to themselves for years to come. At the moment, with the "vaccine bounce" and lockdown-easing, the Tories' appeal is working: but only last November-December, and even with Starmer's weakness, Labour was ahead of the Tories in several polls.

Lack of policies and vision

Under Starmer what Labour has been counterposing to the Tories' vision is little more than a promise to wave the Union Jack more "competently". The Labour right's cringe-inducing accolades to Starmer ignore the reality that he seems to be increasingly regarded by the voters as insubstantial and untrustworthy. The problem is both specific policies and the wider "vision thing".

We criticised Corbyn's Labour leadership for announcing a string of (good) left-wing policies shortly before the 2019 general election without even serious previous discussion of them in the party, let alone longer-term campaigning to explain, popularise or organise around them, and to develop a cohesive wider narrative. The two years since the boost from the 2017 election had been largely wasted, with such minimal anti-cuts agitation as there was swamped by floundering over Brexit and antisemitism.

Starmer's Labour is much worse. In the local elections of 6 May the party said nothing about the virtual destruction of local government which the Tories are still pushing forward.

After the Covid disasters of the last year, there was nothing in the campaign about sick pay or about social care. A lame attempt to make the election about NHS pay was abandoned when it became clear that people wanted to know what Labour was actually advocating – and it certainly wasn't healthworkers' demand of 15%. Nothing about the NHS in general – after the last year!

Polling commissioned by the Communication Workers' Union found that Labour's 2019 general election

policies were popular in Hartlepool. It does not follow that dropping those policies on the electorate at the last minute would have brought victory. But instead we had a failure to advocate any clear pro-working class policies at all, relying instead on embarrassing attempts to jump on the bandwagon of nationalism.

A record of failure

The background since Starmer became leader has been a consistent refusal to challenge the Tories over their response to the pandemic. The attempt to rely on Starmer's supposed "competence" collapsed when the Tories managed to pull off, or at least take credit for, an impressive vaccine program (achieved through extensive public funding for development and effective use of the UK's socialised healthcare system for delivery).

The Tories' good luck with the timing of the vaccination successes – somewhat reminiscent of electoral success following victory in a war, despite everyone knowing about horrors and blunders during it – is one thing. The frittering away of Labour's support and activist base through pandering to the Tories, the abandonment of any left-wing policies or message, the attacks on party democracy and all the rest are another.

Turnout in Hartlepool was very low. There is a lot of frustration and apathy around, but much is being channelled in a right-wing direction. Starmer's weakness reinforces this channelling.

Labour did better on 6 May in some parts of the country, for example, Wales, many cities and towns in the North West, the Bristol area and (though more weakly than expected) London. In none of these areas is the party's record particularly left-wing; but at least the leading local figures appear as distinctly anti-Tory.

In Bristol Labour's losses were not to the Tories but to the Green Party. In many parts of the country there was a significant increase in support for the Greens. We advocated and campaigned for a Labour vote and will continue to. But it is not hard to understand why many leftist voters who swung from the Greens to Labour under Corbyn might swing back again.

Maybe Covid-19 in the UK will continue under control, in which case the Tories' drive for cuts, currently masked by huge pandemic spending, is likely to emerge into clearer view: an NHS in crisis, schools cut, Universal Credit cut, councils decimated... Or maybe further Tory negligence will allow a big third wave, so more emergency spending, but with the Tories likely discredited for further floundering. Either way, there will be need and potential for new bat-

tlés against the Tories.

Labour will not win, and still less will working-class politics revive, through a demoralising focus on (unsuccessfully) coaxing older voters who have been won over a long period to the nationalist right – and alienating the young, the socially progressive and the internationalist, including in the working class, in the process.

The younger generation of the working class – in big cities and small towns, in all parts of the UK, from all backgrounds and communities – is where the left must focus its energies, and where we can develop the activist force capable of winning older voters, too.

The deeper and harder task is to organise the widespread but diffuse and atomised left-wing sentiment that exists in society into a strengthened and renewed labour movement, to create new networks of working-class institutions and a working-class political culture that can sustain a genuine revival of left-wing and socialist politics.

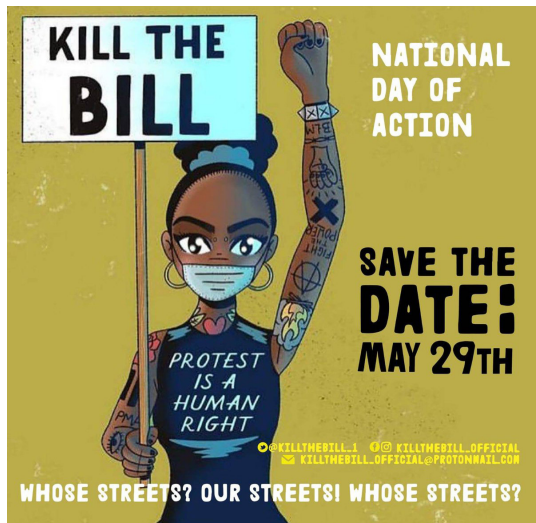
Not only but particularly in the areas of the country where Labour has retreated, the younger generation has little contact with a much weakened labour movement and little impact in politics. Those are the basic things that need changing.

Too much left-wing energy has been expended on passively sniping at or mocking Starmer, and too little on building struggles, educating for class politics – and fighting for clear left-wing, pro-working class policies which can begin to rally the labour movement. □

• More: bit.ly/6may21

"Policy review"? Only by Labour conference!

The Labour leadership talks of a "policy review". On the Labour right many are suggesting left-wing policies should be eliminated. In practice they already have been. We need to revive left policies, weld them into a coherent whole, and get the party and movement campaigning for them. The 2019 manifesto contained many good ideas. So does the "Alternative Queen's Speech" put together by John McDonnell and other left-wing MPs: bit.ly/mcd-qs The left's fundamental approach must be to insist that policy is "reviewed", and decided, by Labour Party conference (which takes place in four months, at the end of September). For left-wing motions being circulated for the conference, see page three.



Labour conference deadlines on 11 June

By Michael Elms

Peter Mandelson has effectively called on Keir Starmer ([Financial Times, 8 May](#)) to overrule or neutralise Labour Party conference, and to break or neutralise the union say in the Labour Party.

After conference 2020 was replaced by a no-debate online event on grounds of the pandemic, Labour Party conference 2021 (25 to 29 September in Brighton) is an important point for the left of the labour movement to regroup and halt the retreat.

Socialists are putting themselves forward to be conference delegates (the deadline for constituency delegates to be chosen is 11 June). The Momentum Internationalists website carries suggestions for motions to put to CLPs for conference. The deadline for those isn't until 13 September, but some CLPs may decide motions in May-June.

Also due by 11 June are constituency nominations for National Constitutional Council and the Conference Arrangements Committee: there is apparently conflict in the backrooms over "official left" nominees, but Momentum Internationalists recommend backing what-

ever "left" candidates emerge.

The [letter](#) signed by Mick Whelan as chair of TULO (umbrella body of Labour's affiliated unions) demanding Starmer repudiate Mandelson's demands shows that there is still scope for pushing back the right.

The politics of the internationalist left need to be re-asserted, against any and all accommodation to Johnson's Brexit nationalism and anti-migrant demagoguery; and for a vision of working-class, socialist internationalism, rather than the Blairite internationalism of NATO and global capitalist institutions.

Momentum Internationalists will be seeking to organise support for the politics of socialist internationalism at this conference. It is backing the following motions:

- 1) Build Back Fairer – a motion setting out demands on how society should be rebuilt in and after the pandemic
- 2) China, Hong Kong, and the Uyghurs – a motion expressing solidarity with the Hong Kong democracy movement and the struggle of the Uyghur people against repression and genocide; and taking a position against Cold-War rhetoric from western powers
- 3) Global climate justice – a motion



Labour's 2016 Conference

setting out what the labour movement should be demanding in terms of a serious and socially-just response to climate change

4) Migrants welcome: end deportations and the racist Hostile Environment – a motion from the Labour Campaign for Free Movement

5) A motion from the Free Our Unions campaign entitled "Unshackling workers from draconian anti-trade union

laws"

6) A motion on racism and policing, setting out demands around addressing the unaccountable and racist nature of policing in the UK and putting forward a programme for cutting the social roots of racism and discrimination. □

• Momentum Internationalists
momentuminternationalists.org

Myanmar week of action from 17 May

By Michael Elms

In the week beginning 17 May Momentum Internationalists and others will be organising street stalls and small demonstrations outside premises featuring big brands connected to the regime, including the energy giant Chevron and the high street clothing brands whose products are made in factories in cities like Yangon. Currently, actions are planned in London, Sheffield, Durham and Newcastle.

Trade unionists in Myanmar in organisations like the All-Burma Federation of Trade Unions (ABFTU) have put out a call for supporters worldwide to put pressure on brands which are doing business with the "Tatmadaw" military junta.

This call has been taken up by international networks like the Clean Clothes Campaign, which has specifically placed a focus on Aldi North, Lindex, and Marks and Spencer, noting their silence in the face of the coup. Other brands like H&M,



Next, C&A, Primark and Benetton have suspended placing orders in Myanmar, but not made serious steps to document the factories they use and guarantee the livelihoods and safety of their workers.

Motions for branch donations are currently being put to branches of the RMT rail union and local government branches of the Unison union in London. The Congress of the University and College Union (UCU) will shortly debate a motion of solidarity with the Myanmar workers' movement, after which branches will be asked to make donations to the solidarity fund. UCU activists are pushing the higher education pension scheme USS

to divest from companies supporting the Tatmadaw regime.

In Myanmar, the workers' movement is still battling against the "Tatmadaw" military government, which was installed in a coup in February 2021. Workers' organisations, in particular transport and factory workers, form the core of a working-class movement of civil disobedience and strikes, which is leading a nationwide pro-democracy coalition. The labour movement is pushing for the restoration of elected government and democratic freedoms, while the military is using British-drafted colonial-era legislation.

Currently, a shadow "National Unity Government", which was set up by a group of deposed elected lawmakers, is in session somewhere in territory controlled by ethnic minority armed groups, out of reach of the Tatmadaw. But the Myanmar labour movement is the force that can not only beat the junta, but also guarantee

true democracy and justice in its wake, rather than a return to "business as usual", or the status quo from January 2021.

The American trade union federation AFL-CIO is running

a fundraising campaign for Myanmar trade unions: bit.ly/myanmarfunds. Momentum Internationalists is backing a solidarity statement: bit.ly/myanmarsolidarity □

Upcoming meetings

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

Sunday 16 May, 12-1:30pm: Socialist Feminist reading group – Rape, gendered violence: various readings

Sunday 16 May, 6.30-8.30pm: Socialists on the Israel Palestine conflict – Workers' Liberty debates Red Flag

Tuesday 18th May, 6.30-8.30pm: Free Our Unions – Unions, Rights and disabled workers

Wednesday 19th May, 6-8pm: Workers' Liberty health workers – organising to strike on NHS pay

Wednesday 19th May, 7-8.45pm: Shapurji Saklatvala and John Archer – pioneering working class & black representation

Monday 24 May, 6-7pm: Workers' Liberty students – Solidarity with Deliveroo and other platform workers

Plus

Weekend of 10-11 July: Ideas for Freedom 2021 festival of socialist ideas. Online or in person – buy tickets now!

Thursdays 8-9.30pm: Lenin's *What is to be done?* reading group

Mondays, 6-7pm: AWL Students' discussions

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

Scotland: a weak Labour campaign

By Dale Street

Sections of the media and the right wing of Scottish Labour have hailed Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar for having run “a good campaign” in the 6 May Scottish election. But Scottish Labour lost seats in the election, and ended up with a (slightly) lower share of constituency and regional list votes. Its overall score of 20% was only slightly higher than its poll ratings before Sarwar became leader.

Sarwar did not make any election gaffes and was articulate in the televised party leader debates. But the lack of improvement is the surprising thing, given that between 2017 (when Richard Leonard was elected leader) and early 2021 (when Leonard was ousted) Sarwar spent his time undercutting Labour by briefing the media against the party leader.

Even allowing for the restrictions on campaigning resulting from Covid-19, Labour’s campaign on the ground was particularly lacklustre. Reports from across the country indicate that few party members came out to leaflet and doorknock.

Back to the bad old days

The big turnouts by campaigners in the 2017 and 2019 general elections were replaced by the traditional ritual of small-scale leafleting and knocking a few doors of already-identified Labour promises.

Younger voters, Labour-turned-SNP (Scottish National Party) voters, soft SNP voters and first-time voters were largely ignored. Instead, as if nothing had been learnt from the disastrous “Better Together” campaign of 2014, there was a dog-whistle appeal to soft Tory voters.

The much-vaunted 8% increase in the Labour vote in Glasgow Southside (candidate: Anas Sarwar) and the 6% increase in the Labour vote in Dumbar-ton (candidate: the equally right-wing deputy party leader Jackie Baillie) corresponded almost exactly to the decline in the Tory vote in the two constituencies.

It would not be unfair to describe Scottish Labour’s election “strategy” as an Anas Sarwar ego trip.

Although earlier suggestions that Labour list candidates might stand as “Anas Sarwar – National Recovery Plan” candidates were dropped, Scottish Labour leaflets appealed to voters to “use your second vote (i.e. list vote) for Anas Sarwar’s National Recovery Plan”. And they were dominated by the pictures and thoughts of Anas Sarwar.

Many e-mails to members were requests for money. Given the low level of on-the-streets campaigning, what the money was to be spent on was something of a mystery. Until billboard



advertising featuring Anas Sarwar appeared shortly before election day.

Predictably, Sarwar’s election team consisted largely of right-wing sycophants and hangers-on. Their e-mail output was even worse than Sarwar’s.

“It would not be unfair to describe Scottish Labour’s election ‘strategy’ as an Anas Sarwar ego trip...”

As a post on the Campaign for Socialism/Scottish Momentum Facebook page summed up one of them:

“Priceless. That’s the only way to describe that e-mail we’ve all just received from British Army 77th Brigade Specialist Reserve Officer Kate Watson, who now doubles up as Anas Sarwar’s National Election Campaign Coordinator. ‘If it wasn’t for members like you, there would be no Scottish Labour,’ she writes. But it’s because of members like former Better Together Director of Operations Kate Watson that there nearly isn’t a Scottish Labour... The e-mail... informs me that I am ‘a member of a select family: members of the Scottish Labour Party.’ I can remember when I

was a member of a mass labour movement. But now, thanks to the politics and actions of people like Kate Watson, I’m reduced to being a member of a dysfunctional nuclear family?”

Self-centred charlatan

It was the e-mail which Sarwar sent out on the Friday morning after election day which best sums up his self-centred charlatanism. Before a vote had been declared, Sarwar proclaimed success:

“We have run a massively positive and uplifting campaign, which has focused relentlessly on the priorities of the people of Scotland. And I couldn’t be prouder of what we have achieved. Before a single vote is counted I can tell you one thing – we’re back.”

This hardly tallies with the actual election campaign and subsequent results. Nor has there been any accounting by “Anas and his team” for the gap between reality and earlier campaign e-mails: “Experts say there’s just 0.5% between us and the Tories.”

Scottish Labour did badly – again – on 6 May 2021. And anyone not prepared to look that reality squarely in the face has nothing to contribute to any potential strategy for Scottish Labour’s democratic and socialist recovery.

The SNP won 64 of the 129 seats in the Scottish Parliament, in an electoral system designed to prevent any one party (specifically: the SNP) securing, or coming close to securing, an absolute majority.

The Tories won 31 seats (same number as in 2016), Labour won 22 (down two), the Scottish Greens won eight (up two) and the Scottish Lib Dems won four (down one). Alex Salmond’s Alba Party and George Galloway’s All for Unity won no seats, and hardly any votes.

Turnout

At 63% the turnout in the election was over 7% higher than in 2016. In fact it was the highest turnout in any Holyrood election since the Scottish Parliament’s creation in 1999.

The SNP’s share of the vote increased slightly in constituencies (48%, its best score ever) but declined slightly in regional lists (40%). The Tories’ share of votes was virtually unchanged (30% and 23%), while Labour’s vote went down by 1% in constituencies (22%) and in regional lists (18%).

Even on the eve of election day a high proportion of voters self-identified as undecided. And for a layer of non-SNP-voters the key question was how to vote tactically against the SNP.

Also noticeable was the vehemence with which many voters expressed their hostility to the SNP. It was reminiscent of Scottish politics in the period 2014-16, though the venom then was mainly from SNP voters against Scottish Labour.

To maintain and build support from voters indifferent or hostile to independence, the SNP claimed that they were a safe pair of hands who had steered the country through the Covid-19 pandemic; to keep the faithful on board, they committed to a second independence referendum.

The Tories ran on opposition to a second referendum. Labour focused on a post-Covid “National Recovery Plan” and dismissed all talk of another referendum as a bit of an irrelevance.

By any normal standards, the SNP/Green victory is a mandate for a second referendum.

At the same time, the election result underlines how divided the Scottish electorate is over independence. Anti-independence parties won 50.4% of the constituency vote, while pro-independence parties won 50.1% of the list vote.

The SNP will not be pushing for a referendum in the very short term, having promised to prioritise recovery from the pandemic. But that will only delay an inevitable clash with Tory-controlled Westminster. □

• Abridged. More: bit.ly/scot-6m

Tories go for voter suppression

By Mohan Sen

Emboldened by their success on 6 May, the Tories are proposing new measures to (further) restrict election democracy in the UK.

One – a proposal to change executive mayoral elections from a “supplementary vote” system to “first past the post” – is designed to make it harder for opposition parties to win mayoral elections, at a time when the left-and-centre vote is more split than a right-wing vote consolidated around the Tories.

Already this time around, the change would have prevented Labour from winning the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough mayor, handing the position to the Tories on the basis of 40% of the vote.

The left should oppose the existence of executive mayors, and advocate wider democratic bodies which elect collective leaderships (including committee-based, not cabinet, systems in



A US protest against voter ID laws which disenfranchise working-class BAME people

local authorities). We should also support proportional representation. This is a move in the wrong direction.

More serious is the proposal to make voter ID compulsory to vote in future general elections. Supposedly intended to address election fraud, this

is a move straight out of the Trump-Republican playbook (bit.ly/300laws).

The change will not tackle major electoral fraud, since such a problem does not exist. The Electoral Commission says the UK “has low levels of proven electoral fraud”. In 2019 there was just

one conviction and one caution for impersonating another voter. In the 2018 local elections there were only eight such allegations, with no action taken over seven of them.

What the voter ID requirement will do is lower the number of people voting. In 2019, trials of such a system in a few areas led to over 700 people being turned away and not returning. The introduction of a requirement for ID in Northern Ireland for the 2005 election saw turnout fall 6.5%, against a 2% increase UK-wide.

There is substantial evidence that the change will most hit younger, poorer and ethnic minority voters, who already generally vote in lower numbers.

This follows changes to electoral registration over the last decade which have seen many hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, disappear from voter rolls, in a sequel to the first big disappearance from rolls in the days of the Tories’ poll tax. □

Spy stories from the fall of Stalinism



Film review

By Bruce Robinson

Deutschland '89 (currently available on All Four) is the last series in a trilogy following Martin Rauch through the 1980s. He is an East German border guard who has been coerced into becoming a spy for the HVA, the external wing of the Stasi.

Each of the three series is concerned with a major crisis of the East German state: 1983 with NATO’s stationing of nuclear missiles in West Germany; 1986 with the desperate need for foreign currency that leads the GDR into supplying arms to the South African apartheid government and pimping its citizens as guinea pigs for West German Pharma companies to test their drugs

on (both historically true); and 1989 with the opening of the Berlin Wall and moves towards German reunification.

Each time we see Martin unwillingly put to work by the HVA to deal with the threat to the regime’s continued existence. He becomes Kolibri, an accomplished spy, who becomes sought-after by other secret services who also force him to work for them. Around him there are a number of other central characters: his aunt Lenora, a hardened ideologically committed Stalinist; Walter Schweppenstette, an ambitious but more ambivalent high-ranking HVA operative who also turns out to be Martin’s father; and Markus Fuchs, the head of the HVA, who is loosely based on his real counterpart, Markus Wolf. Also in 1989, there is Nicole, the teacher of Martin’s son Max, who falls for Martin and gets drawn into his espionage

activities almost by accident. As an innocent East German exploring the post-wall world, she questions whether his enforced role has cost him his humanity.

More than a thriller

What makes the *Deutschland* trilogy more than a spy thriller with several subplots and a somewhat unsatisfactory ending that leaves open questions (will there be a *Deutschland '92*?) is its firm roots in historical events and the picture it paints of the decline and collapse of the East German Stalinist state.

Deutschland '89 shows how, the HVA having failed to prevent the fall of the wall, the characters make their way in the new world. Lenora becomes a terrorist, who, hoping to jolt the people out of their growing infatuation with the West, joins forces with the remnants of the Red Army Faction who have been given sanctuary in the GDR and who successfully assassinate the head of the Deutsche Bank. (Both of which happened.)

Markus Fuchs absconds with his PA and much of the country’s gold and foreign currency to live in luxury in Italy, while still plotting how to keep the

State Bank out of the hands of the Deutsche Bank. He sends Walter on a joke mission to Frankfurt to try and ensure the HVA has someone placed high up in the Deutsche Bank.

Other characters try to bury their past and remake themselves. Some are unmasked as Stasi agents. One HVA agent, who at the start of 1989 kills a socialist dissident, uses his training to seize control of the firm where Martin was working and to brutally transform himself into a capitalist computer entrepreneur. Other socialist dissidents plan a radical takeover and transformation of the economy that is never more

than a vague hope on paper.

Alongside characters and realistic presentation of the atmosphere of the time, the trilogy also takes care with detailed depiction of everything from wallpaper and furniture of the GDR to scenes filmed in the actual Stasi headquarters. It is spot on about the corruption and cynicism of a desperately decaying regime which must know the end is near.

If you are having post *Line of Duty* withdrawal symptoms or if you’re interested in a fictionalised but convincing account of world historic events, binge watching of the *Deutschland* trilogy is recommended. □



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The underside of plutocrat philanthropy

By Zack Muddle

Tin-hat conspiracy theory claims that vaccinations are a ploy by Bill Gates to implant tracking microchips in our arms communicate at least two lies. There's the obvious lie, that vaccines contain microchips. Then there's the subtle, implicit lie: that Bill Gates is helping net global vaccination efforts.

Way back in April 2020, Oxford University [pledged](#) that they would make any technologies that they develop against the Covid-19 pandemic available under "non-exclusive, royalty-free licences to support" free or cost-price supply. They only pledged to do this for the duration of the pandemic, but it would have applied to – at the very least – what was to become the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine.

A few weeks later, Oxford [backtracked](#), and signed an exclusive deal with AstraZeneca, given the pharmaceutical corporation full and exclusive rights, with no guarantee of low-pricing. Why?

Oxford had been persuaded to change course by the "Gates Foundation", and by Bill Gates himself.

Throughout the pandemic, and for long before it, Bill Gates has been using the power that his billions afford him to fight tooth-and-nail for so-called "free trade" backed up by a tightly policed set of "intellectual property" restrictions.

Intellectual property, politics and profit

The threat to the sanctity of intellectual property rights, and to the belief that their rigid policing is good, has seldom been sharper and more public than in the fight over global Covid-19 vaccination.

Gates is often lauded for giving significant funding to COVAX, Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access, as well as *all three* of COVAX's directing organisations: "Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance"; CEPI (the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations), and the WHO (World Health Organization). Gates and foundation contribute to many other causes too. But these are not neutral "gifts".

Gates has a political and ideological agenda, and whether there is explicit intervention or not, receipt of or reliance upon Gates foundation funding shapes the direction of the organisations that receive it, the organisations that try to, and the prominence of those that don't.

COVAX only *aims* to provide low income countries with a *maximum* of enough [supplies](#) to vaccinate 20% of their population. Their supply so far is insufficient and too slow. And it aims to facilitate a continuation of the status quo whereby billions in public finances are funnelled into pharmaceutical cor-



porations, but [without](#) requiring them to hand over or relinquish their "intellectual property" (IP) in return.

Global ramifications

There is a global shortage of vaccinations. The world's richest states purchase more than they can use, while many of the world's poorest states have received zero vaccines. But even if they were more equitably distributed, production and distribution would be painfully slow.

Intellectual property hoarding and protections prevent factories being constructed around the world to produce cost-price vaccines using existing recipes, instead forcing states in the global south to purchase them from the global north, often at higher prices than states in the global north pay.

A year ago, the WHO's "COVID-19 Technology Access Pool" (C-TAP) looked like a promising step towards sharing of IP and other knowledge. Yet it has been [outstripped](#) by the WHO's Gates-sponsored and promoted "Access to Covid-19 Tools Accelerator" (ACT-A).

Once again, IP, profit, and control remain privatised and increasingly centralised, even as funding for research, development risks, and the product itself are increasingly socialised; and an ideological commitment to IP and the free market [defended](#).

The Gates Foundation also funds, and thereby indirectly influences, many [news organisations](#). This provides yet another arm in its ideological battle.

The same IP regime, that is, which facilitates the growth of lucrative monopolistic corporations – such as [Microsoft](#), from which Bill Gates spent around two decades being the richest person in the world.

The harmful impacts of this so-called "philanthropist" from his philanthropy-cum-lobbying are far from unique. As with the corruption and sleaze at the heart of this Tory government, it is [en-](#)

[demic](#) to capitalism, and particularly to the million- and billionaire sections of the ruling class. Gates – and the focus on vaccines, eliding his anti-union and environmentally harmful "philanthropic" activities – merely provided an illustrative example.

“It is no more “moral” or “philanthropic” than someone who mugs you, stealing all your possessions, but then throwing some coppers in a charity pot to ease their conscience...”

Such individuals have built their wealth by exploiting hundreds of thousands, millions of workers. Their wealth is built through our labour – which they control – merely giving us back in wages enough to survive. If they donate a section of their wealth to "charity" it still leave them with almost [unfathomably](#) large [fortunes](#). It is no more "moral" or "philanthropic" than someone who mugs you, stealing all your possessions, but then throwing some coppers in a charity pot to ease their conscience

– before doing it all over again.

In fact, Bill Gates – like other billionaire philanthropists – continues to get richer. Meanwhile, the Gates foundation is tax-exempt, lobbies for his ideology and interests, and has long-standing investments in pharmaceutical corporations such as Pfizer and Johnson & Johnson.

His intentions in doing so are irrelevant. Socialists can have no truck with conspiratorial world-views which identify capitalism's evils in the malicious intentions of a small number of cartoonishly ruthless supervillains. The problem is systemic.

Gates likely genuinely believes that his foundation is improving the world. But his ideology and priorities are shaped by his interests and experiences – as a successful member of the capitalist ruling class. They are the undemocratic decisions of an unaccountable individual, powered by wealth stolen from our class.

Not that Gates, or his class, is entirely immune to pressure. Biden's administration recently, under pressure, has signalled support for a temporary suspension to intellectual property protections for Covid-19 vaccines. This was against Gates' [lobbying](#).

The administration committed to a narrow scope of this waiver than proposed elsewhere, the commitment has not yet borne fruit, and it has been accompanied with statements that "The Administration believes strongly in intellectual property protections". Yet it shows that pressure is mounting.

Days after, Gates' foundation followed suit, conceding to support of "a narrow waiver during the pandemic". This came after they received heightened criticism, and as they presumably recognise which way the wind is blowing.

The working class must force much greater concessions from the ruling class than liberal "philanthropist" billionaires will readily hand us. We must fight to reclaim power over the wealth we create, to be used democratically in the interests of all. □

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Why we should support Sharon Graham for Unite general secretary



By Matt Dunn

The election for the General Secretary of Unite presents an opportunity to elect a candidate with a genuinely radical vision of change – with shop stewards at the centre of it – and a track record of successfully confronting employers with bold tactics and detailed strategy. It is also an opportunity to elect a woman as leader of Unite for the first time. These are powerful reasons to back Sharon Graham.

Shop stewards and the workplace

Central to Graham's pitch is the criticism that Unite has drifted too far from its core purpose as a trade union – leading and supporting its reps to mobilise members in defense of their own workplace interests – and has become more concerned with Westminster chatter, and dominated by the interests of its own officers and political allies. Her slogan is, "let's get back to the workplace". She pledges to work to rebuild a shop stewards' movement, to coordinate bargaining across sectors and internationally.

Her manifesto states, "I will immediately ramp up the resource required to defend jobs, fight cuts and protect pay... Now it is time to fight for jobs. Unite and the other trade unions have to deliver a serious, joined-up and strategic campaign in defence of working people."

Sector-wide bargaining

Unite is constrained by its regional structure. Bloated regional bureaucracies compete with each other and duplicate effort. Reps meet and, as far as it goes, organise region-by-region. Capital organises internationally – or at least nationally. How do you take on a large transnational corporation region-by-region, with incoherent and competing strategies? How do reps coordinate their bargaining in a structure like this?

Sharon Graham has led efforts to gather Unite's industrial data – pay deals and anniversary dates – and put it in the hands of reps; to build industrial combines as part of sector organising campaigns and to develop sector plans to organise the dominant ("top 10") companies in each sector to take on shared concerns – be they automation, working hours, casualisation... These issues cannot be tackled shop-by-shop or region-by-region. Bringing reps together and sector-wide coordination



are essential first steps to rebuilding sector bargaining.

Taking on bosses

"We cannot be a union if we can't effectively defend our reps" is a favourite quote of Sharon Graham. And it is not just a catch phrase. She developed Unite's brand of "leverage" to hit back against bad bosses (usually when the rest of the union has failed). Talk to reps like the blacklisted Frank Morris, who won his job back at Crossrail after a leverage campaign, about how effective this has been and Sharon's fighting qualities.

The record of Sharon Graham and the organising department in supporting action by workers – against very real resistance from many officials, including the "left" officials and regional secretaries, is a good one.

Winning

A hard-working ethic and a serious approach to strategy are qualities Graham brings that are largely absent elsewhere in Unite's leadership. Her record of winning – against the high street supermarkets on the meat organising campaign, against construction giants in the BESNA and Crossrail campaigns, against Honda when they sacked our senior steward and derecognised Unite... stands in sharp contrast to the record of others.

Democracy and accountability

This is a theme Graham has talked about and sought input from reps on. Ideas like making contracts and salaries available online for members to scrutinise have been raised by reps. Building strong combines of shop stewards that can drive the industrial agenda is certainly central to her pitch. She is consulting on a detailed manifesto – a plan for change – to which she promises to be accountable.

Meetings are taking place on the key

areas of Graham's manifesto as part of consultation process. Reps are invited to email contributions into the consultation and Graham promises that the process will go on after the election and the manifesto is important for holding her to account.

Politics

Graham has been accused of being a syndicalist. It is not true, but it is true to say that her focus is very much on the workplace and building an effective, fighting union – as opposed to seeing the union as a prism through which to view the Labour Party and Westminster. This is a good thing. Workers will have a powerful voice in politics first and foremost if we are powerful industrially.

She was quick to back Corbyn and has been sometimes in, sometimes out of the Labour Party. She doesn't go to Cuba or go along with the stalinoid nonsense that dominates in Unite.

Support

Sharon has the support of an impressive number of the more credit-worthy members of the Unite Executive – chair Tony Woodhouse, Dave Williams, Jane Stewart, Frank Morris, Steve Hibbert, Therese Maloney, and others who have been involved in recent struggles or represent well-organised workplaces..

The other candidates

Others have already pointed out why we cannot support Beckett or Coyne. This leaves Steve Turner. Turner's credentials seem to mainly come down to "it's his turn" or "he's the left candidate". The first point is obvious nonsense, so is he the left candidate?

He is the candidate of the United Left. The United Left routinely excludes genuine left activists; offers no vision of a fighting, winning, democratic union; is largely concerned about who gets what jobs; and is subservient to the leadership. Its selection process was

clearly designed to favour its preferred candidate. Prominent bureaucrats, with no previous association with the "left" were welcomed in just in time to vote for their favoured candidate.

A large swathe of the rank and file leadership of the "United Left", like Unite Chair Tony Woodhouse, National Executive local authorities rep Kathy Smith, and Ellesmere Port Convenor John Cooper, have been expelled for supporting Graham. The United Left is certainly not united and it has little credible case for calling itself left.

The UL is dominated by an awful Stalinoid politics which Turner is no opponent of.

He was slow to support the union backing Corbyn as he didn't think Corbyn could win the leadership election and he would not win a general election – better to support Burnham.

Turner has promised more power to these regional secretaries and an easier time for officials. He is the bureaucracy's man. His campaign launch Zoom was dominated by officials and staff.

Talk to reps who have close experience of working with him and they will attest to his lack of work ethic or basic competence. An ex-convenor from an airline told me recently that he will be backing Sharon, "you have to remember, Steve was my national officer". When he took over the aviation contractors' combine, following an organising campaign that had won dozens of new recognition agreements and brought thousands into Unite organisation, he chaired one meeting, having not bothered to check progress thus far, got a hard time off reps who told him they had "gone through all this months ago, why haven't you done your homework?" And he never convened the combine again.

Absence of a rank-and-file candidate

This has been raised as a problem in this election, and of course it is. It comes from the lack of militant activity in the union, activity that is not encouraged by a lazy, timid bureaucracy. However, we did not back Ian Allinson or Jerry Hicks. Many of their supporters have already announced their support for Graham.

For sure Graham is not a Trotskyist. Her leadership style is highly "command". Simply electing her will not transform the union. That requires collective workers' struggle and rank and file organisation. But there are many positive reasons, some outlined here, why socialists should positively support her candidacy. □

Thoughts towards s

By Traven Leyshon

The US labour movement has an unfortunate practice of failing to publicly draw lessons from our setbacks. Yet it's important that labour and the left learn from the Bessemer Amazon experience. After all, we've seen a series of defeats in the South from Volkswagen to Nissan and now Amazon. [On 29 March a government-mandated ballot on union recognition at the Amazon Bessemer distribution centre returned a clear anti-recognition majority].

In this article we want to focus a bit on problems with the strategies and tactics used in the campaign by the organisers; and especially what we need to do differently to win.

One of the factors making organising at Amazon so difficult is the estimated 100% turnover. Injuries in Amazon warehouses are more than double the industry average, and the company has a poor record of workplace derived Covid infections. Workplace surveillance has reached oppressive levels. Many Amazon workers have to rely on food stamps to make ends meet.

With conditions so bad, what explains the defeat in Bessemer?

We need to draw out not only why Amazon won this round, but to especially consider what it would take to win at Amazon, as well as Google, Walmart and other anti-union behemoths. Amazon's sophisticated union busting operation, some of it illegal, most of it fully legal – including harassing and intimidating workers, and telling bold lies – is well documented and discussed elsewhere. Amazon apparently spent around \$25 million to defeat this union drive.

One factor which I think is underestimated by most commentators is the economic desperation and low expectations of many workers. In areas like the South with historically low levels of unionisation, especially in the private sector, with few experiences of effective collective fight back, many workers have a low level of confidence that a union would be able to make things much better.

While Amazon pays below the median wage in warehousing and transportation jobs, and Amazon's pay at its distribution centres starts at just above \$15 an hour for regular employees, its pay and benefits are better than those found in the industries where Amazon recruits its workers, such as fast food, hospitality, and nursing homes. Many people do flock to Amazon for those wages and benefits.



Amazon's aggressive campaign has once again shown the need for labour law reform. The predominant conclusion that top labour officials, and much of the left, has drawn from the Amazon vote is to lobby congress to pass the Protecting the Right to Organise Act (PRO Act). Labour leaders emphasize passing the PRO Act as a panacea. Thus AFL-CIO President Trumka's view: "Amazon's outrageous behaviour is only the latest reminder that our rights have been steadily eroded by a handful of powerful elites. We can't allow this societal failure to deprive one more worker of the freedom to organise. This is the fight of our time, and it starts with passing the PRO Act."

PRO Act

The PRO Act is an ambitious attempt at labour law reform which would make union organising easier. The PRO Act would among other things ban captive audience meetings and increase fines on employers who break the law.

However, given the history of four decades of failed attempts at progressive labour law change, including under Democratic administrations, passage of the PRO Act is a long shot. The bill will not pass without a mass mobilisation of unions and allies which would have to include protests, rallies, and workplace actions. Yet this brings us back to the reality that most unions have failed to build strong member driven unions.

And there is nothing that has prevented organising Amazon workers more than the passivity of most unions. Currently, the PRO Act only has the support of 48 out of 50 Democrats in the 50-50 divided Senate. The challenge of passing the legislation also highlights the power of Amazon, which has grown in recent years to become

not only the second largest employer, but also the second largest spender on lobbying in the US

Daunting challenges

Despite the bravery of pro-union workers and hard working organisers, it appears that there were significant problems with RWDSU's [the union's] campaign.

Were there clear demands developed by the workers put forward? Apparently not. Just dignity, etc. They might have said that with our union we would fight for \$20 or so per hour, union safety and health committees, frequent breaks, longer lunch periods, less surveillance, etc.

Organisers chose not to do house calls because of the pandemic. Yet this is an essential part of a successful organising drive. Instead, most of the brief contacts with workers were happening on the road to the plant. RWDSU was also relying on "digital strategies" and phoning Bessemer Amazon workers. These are not substitute for house-calling, identifying leaders, tasking and assessing workers.

The lead organiser explained that, "the access to worker information [the list of eligible voters] doesn't come until late January, so it didn't leave us with a lot of time... the biggest thing that went wrong, ultimately, is that there wasn't enough time to have committee people prepare the masses for the union-busting campaign." To build a strong campaign with 5,800 workers, four to five months was not enough time. In a massive workplace, the process of building a strong in-plant organising committee, and building worker confidence through escalating actions against the boss takes time. In a strong campaign, the organisers would

have assessed virtually every worker in one-on-one conversations and actions several times. Time, or strength, or willingness was lacking to run the kind of structure tests (collective worker actions by a majority that create confidence, demonstrate and test power) to prepare workers to overcome fear and boss intimidation.

By the eve of an election, a lead organiser should have a reasonably accurate, informed projection of how the vote will break down. That the union did not make the painful decision with its key inside supporters to postpone the election seems to have been a blunder.

As happens all too often, Amazon was able to "third party" the union. And the organisers appear to have contributed to the problem. In videos organisers regularly talk about "the union," as if a union is something other than the workers who are trying to form one. Their slogan "The union is on your side" didn't help. In a refreshingly self-critical interview with *Labor Notes*, the lead organiser acknowledged, "I heard us being third-partied by our own folks a few times and I cringed a little bit, but it's not always going to be perfect."

A majority of workers need to be convinced that there is a credible plan to win real gains before they would be prepared to stand up to the threats and harassment of Amazon's intense union busting campaign. Yet, given the redundancy the company has built into its logistics system, wresting meaningful concessions from Amazon would likely require significant pressure at more than one facility.

In the event that the workers won union certification at the ballot box, Amazon would have stonewalled at

Strategic organising

the bargaining table. Winning a first contract is a major challenge, and almost half of new unions fail to gain a first agreement. Large companies like Amazon can probably only be effectively forced to bargain over wages, benefits, and safety conditions as well, when the whole company is organised into a union. And large bargaining units are harder for unions to organise than smaller ones.

Amazon has built into its supply chain redundancies so that it could plausibly threaten to shut down the Bessemer centre to foil the organising attempt. Yet US labour law typically forces workers to win elections at individual work sites of a company like Amazon, which would require hundreds of separate campaigns.

Organising Amazon's drivers is also made more difficult due to Amazon's practice of hiring its drivers through sub-contractors, fragmenting workers in local companies, rather than employing them directly, so Amazon is not the direct employer. When Michigan Amazon drivers voted in 2017 to join the Teamsters, the contractor that hired them shut down. The complaint lodged with the National Labour Relations Board alleging unlawful retaliation was lost.

To win real gains, organisers will need to build majorities for strikes within warehouses and coordinate with logistics workers in other warehouses and trucks as well as Amazon tech workers. Fortunately, Amazon workers in Chicago, New York, Baltimore, New Orleans, Portland, Denver, Southern California, and other places are already organising their own campaigns.

Union decline

In analysing union decline and the failure to organise the key logistics industry and elsewhere, it certainly is correct to point to the human rights violations embodied in US labour law, vicious union-busters, globalisation, the anti-union corporate media, politicians in service to the corporations, etc., but as Kim Moody writes, this "lets the top leadership, the union hierarchy, off the hook for its own role in the crisis of organised labour... The problem lies in the whole practice of bureaucratic business unionism".

In other countries workers have been able to organise Amazon. This March, across Italy, in the first nationwide strike in the company's history, Amazon workers held a twenty-four-hour strike. Italy isn't the only country where Amazon workers have been on strike. Germany was first in 2013, followed by France in

2014, Italy in 2017, and Spain in 2018.

Successfully organising at Amazon will require massive resources, far more than one union. The RWDSU, even with backing from its parent, the UFCW, is not going to organise this behemoth (with 819 facilities, up from 359 two years ago, with an additional 286 facilities planned for the future) by itself, even with a better NLRB [National Labor Relations Board] and in the unlikely event that Congress passes the PRO Act to make it easier. Unions will have to learn to work together to target multiple Amazon facilities across the country at the same time.

As far as I know, there are only two or three official union organising drives at Amazon's hundreds of facilities: in Alabama and two Teamster campaigns. Help elsewhere has come from the small, resource-strapped UE union, allied with DSA [Democratic Socialists of America] members through the Emergency Workplace Organising Committee, or from Amazon workers themselves.

The organising model proposed by experienced organisers like Jane McAlevey is necessary but insufficient to produce the kind of democratic, unions promoting worker self-activity to successfully challenge corporations' massive powers of resistance. As Moody writes, this "cannot be done with current bureaucratic organising techniques no matter how refined. There are not enough staff organisers in all the unions together to take on even Amazon alone... it will take much more of the sort of worker self-activity and initiative we saw among industrial workers in the 1930s, or among public employees in the 1960s and 1970s, and that we have seen recently in the 2018-19 strikes of education workers, as well as the first signs of action by workers at Amazon."

It is promising that growing networks of organisers are taking on Amazon, like the grassroots group Amazonians United which describes itself as: "A movement of workers fighting to end management's domination in our workplaces. We organise with our coworkers to fight together for the dignified lives we all deserve."

Amazonians United has been forming locals across the country, making contacts around the world, and building on small actions, including wildcats.

It's also important that unions with significant resources like the Teamsters are planning for the long haul. The Teamsters union is particularly focusing on delivery drivers, many of whom



work for subcontractors rather than for Amazon itself. They're taking the time to learn how the company operates, where it's vulnerable, and to explore ways to organise that don't involve immediately moving to an NLRB election.

Socialist tasks

The Teamsters may be looking to union recognition strikes rather than NLRB elections. The Teamsters National Director for Amazon, Randy Korgan, says, "There are many platforms to seek recognition, there are many platforms for workers to do concerted activities... Truth be told, that [NLRB] process is where corporate America wants organising to be, and that's how they want it to be defined. Because they clearly have more of an advantage there than they do in other spaces..."

Community support too is essential to create a supportive context for workers to take on Amazon. The Bessemer workers received strong support from worker and community coalitions like the Southern Workers Assembly, DSA, and the political support of electeds like Senator Bernie Sanders. However, the experience shows that without deep internal organising, no amount of external support can overcome the power of a corporation like Amazon.

Socialist groups like DSA should be training and supporting members who take jobs at Amazon to help organise from within, either through efforts like Amazonians United or salting for a union. Socialists should take rank and file jobs in companies like Amazon, and industries that are of strategic importance, and work to build up a militant

minority of workplace leaders.

DSA member Hannah Ehrlinspiel explains the case for socialists to take on internal rank-and-file organising: "The capitalists know that logistics is far too important a battlefield to give up in the class war – do we?" The logistics industry is central, not just to retail (as with Amazon and Walmart), but also to global just-in-time manufacturing. So, it is a key arena where organised workers could potentially exercise a great deal of structural power. □

• Traven Leyshon is a retired Teamster, member of the Advisory Committee of Vermont AFL-CIO, and a member of the Democratic Socialists of America and Solidarity

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An incoherent, unprincipled electoral stunt



Antidoto

By Jim Denham

Having supported Labour in all elections while Jeremy Corbyn was leader, the Communist Party of Britain (CPB) has started standing candidates again.

The *Morning Star*, which poses as a broad labour movement publication but is in reality a mouthpiece for the CPB, quoted the party's general secretary Robert Griffiths in its May Day edition: "That we are fielding numbers of candidates unprecedented in recent decades is no accident... The latest edition of our programme – *Britain's Road to Socialism* (BRS) – has struck a chord with many militant working class voters, especially the young..."

There is, of course, one obvious problem, as the *Morning Star* had to acknowledge in an editorial on 13 April: "Much of the labour movement remains sceptical of voting left of Labour. Despite the party's lurch right under Keir Starmer, there is a widespread belief that a non-Labour vote only helps the Tories in England and Wales, and the SNP in Scotland."

How did the editorial answer that? It didn't, except by stating "the left within Labour will be strengthened by the promotion of socialist solutions to the crisis and by leftward pressure on Labour candidates across Britain." The

CPB's "socialist solutions" amount to a set of left-reformist demands like public ownership, control of the export of capital, and the development of green energy sources, all laudable aims, of course, but scarcely socialism.

And one question naturally arose: how should socialists vote where there is no CPB candidate? That's most places: the CPB [reported](#) nine candidates in the London Assembly elections, and seven in the rest of England, for example. (In the London Assembly list poll, the CPB [got 0.3%](#), as did the Socialist Party's Trade Union and Socialist Coalition, TUSC).

You might assume the answer would be "Labour" but it seems not; a Young Communist League statement on the elections reads:

"In areas of the country without a Communist candidate, we call on members to consult primarily with the structures of the Communist Party for guidance on electoral strategy. Sometimes this will mean voting for a good Labour candidate, in other circumstances it might mean supporting a left-wing alternative. Please consider the options, and come to a collective decision."

In an editorial (4 May) on the Welsh Senedd election, the *Morning Star* called for "a Labour vote in the constituencies and a Communist vote in the regional list."

If the CPB was serious (and honest) about wanting Labour to retain control of the Welsh Senedd, then that simply



made no sense. Labour had 29 of the 60 seats. If the CPB had got more than their 0.2% of the list vote, that could have blocked a Labour majority.

The editorial states "the destructive anti-socialism of leading English and Scottish Labour figures is not a major characteristic of the Welsh party. Anger at Labour's Westminster leadership is not a good reason to deny Welsh Labour a vote" (so it is a "good reason" in England and Scotland?)

Alongside that editorial, the paper ran an uncritical interview with Labour's Welsh First Minister Mark Drakeford.

Politically, this simply doesn't make sense, unless you believe that Welsh Labour is qualitatively to the left of English and Scottish Labour – and there is simply no evidence for that (although

Drakeford is a more empathetic character than the robotic Starmer, and on the day scored Labour's best ever result in Wales).

So what were these Stalinists playing at, calling for a Labour vote in Wales, but nowhere else? And how on earth can they explain the *Morning Star's* preposterous claim that "A strong Communist vote will benefit the whole of the Welsh Left and does not contradict the need to re-elect Welsh Labour"?

In the Communist Manifesto, Marx wrote that "the Communists... have no special interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole". It would seem that the CPB's "special interests" on 6 May amounted to an incoherent, unprincipled, sectarian stunt. □

More doubts on Malm's water power



Letter

I would like to add some rough and ready comments to the letter from Paul Vernadsky ([Solidarity 591](#)). The idea that coal-fired steam power (as opposed to water power) was somehow adopted in order to control wage labour seems to me to be questionable. Certainly water power at one point in industrial development was very important, and not just in textile manufacture.

I remember as a child growing up in Stockbridge, about ten miles west of Sheffield. There was a place called Tin Mill Wood where there was a small lake (now owned by an angling club) and piles of large stones lying around.

I found out much later in life it was the site of a water-powered strip mill where sheets of metal, usually steel, were cut into strips. The river Don ran nearby, and further upstream was the Wortley Forge which can be visited today.

The forge has a history going back centuries. Not much is known about the strip mill. The point is that this is not exceptional. All around Sheffield there were dozens of mills, forges and furnaces, powered by the rivers and streams flowing down from the Pennines. In the late 18th and early 19th century the Sheffield region had more watermills than anywhere else in Europe. Some of these mills were still working into the 1950s.

Yet: 1. Water power alone



Equipment at Wortley Forge

could not provide the huge amounts of energy required to fire such furnaces as the Bessemer Converter, the Siemens Open Hearth and the Blast Furnace, all central to iron and steel making and processing.

2. Coal could be moved around the country – and abroad – relatively easily, water can't. There is mention of aqueducts but, surely the sheer quantity of water nec-

essary would make this impossible. Also, supplies of coal are not affected by drought.

3. The exploitation of the world's coal reserves hardly made for a docile working class – coal miners were in the forefront of many struggles over the years. It should also be noted that in the Sheffield region workers in the water-driven forges were also not noted for

their timidity, in one famous dispute they dynamited the factory owners' mansions. Militancy and the willingness to resist the vagaries of capitalist development depends on a shifting, complex social and economic reality and surely can't be reduced to a simple question of what fuel is used in a particular industry.

For these reasons I would suggest that Malm's "insight" is open to some doubt. □

John Cunningham,
Lancashire

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Eating meat to prove masculinity?



**Women's
Fightback**

By Katy Dollar

Fragile masculinity is back in the news with a new poll, which showed almost three quarters of men would choose to die a decade earlier over giving up meat.

The Australian survey was commissioned by No Meat May, a group that encourages people to give up meat for a month to combat climate change, global food scarcity, health problems, and animal cruelty.

The poll, which included 1,000 respondents, found that almost half (47 per cent) of all participants thought of meat as a "masculine undertaking", and almost three quarters (73 per cent) of

men surveyed said they would rather die ten years early than give up eating steaks and burgers.

Although a vast majority of respondents (81 per cent) said they cared about the climate crisis, 79 per cent said they were not willing to give up meat to combat it. One 2018 study found that "men routinely incorporate red meat to pre-empt the negative emotional states caused by threats to masculinity".

It gets weirder. This is not the only environmental choice men think of as "feminine" and therefore lesser. In 2019, researchers found that straight men perceive using a reusable shopping bag as a "feminine" act, and would avoid recycling for fear of "looking gay".

Further research published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* in 2016 also showed that men will reject choices perceived as environmentally friendly if their masculinity is "threatened". When

researchers showed men a "pink gift card with a floral design" and asked them to buy a lamp, backpack, and batteries, they chose products that were far worse for the environment than those presented with a plain gift card. Researchers said: "Men may shun eco-friendly behaviour because of what it conveys about their masculinity."

"It's not that men don't care about the environment. But they also tend to want to feel macho, and they worry that eco-friendly behaviours might brand them as feminine."

Vegan brands and campaigns are fighting back trying to claim the manly mantle. There has been a rush of viral marketing and media pushing the message that, far from being soy boys, meatless men are butcher.

The Vegan Bros run a blog, sell an online fitness course and, at the end of last year, signed a publishing deal with

Penguin Random House. They are the self-proclaimed leaders of an "army of fit, sexy, vegan soldiers". The former mixed-martial-arts fighter James Wilks has claimed that veganism improved the quality of his erections. Arnold Schwarzenegger and boxer David Haye are poster boys for the new muscular veganism.

It's perfectly reasonable to want to show that it is possible to be physically strong and vegan, given popular concerns about whether plant-based diets can provide enough protein, but the choice of musclemen and fighters as spokespeople for veganism is about more than athleticism or health.

The macho culture around meat is destructive and pathetic, but the answer is not an equally macho veganism. We should fight gender stereotypes that confine and limit us. □

No to Netanyahu, no to Hamas!

By Martin Thomas

Hamas, the political-Islamist group ruling the Gaza Strip, and allies, fired some 480 rockets at civilian targets in Israel on 9-11 May. The Israeli government responded by bombing hundreds of targets in Gaza. Escalation looks likely to continue.

Solidarity argues for "two nations, two states". Israel should withdraw from the West Bank, end its blockade of Gaza, and concede the right of the Palestinians to an independent state of their own alongside Israel.

The surrounding states

should recognise the right of Israel to exist, i.e. the right of the Israeli-Jewish nation to self-determination. The large Palestinian minority in Israel should have full equal rights there.

The bombing of Gaza by Benjamin Netanyahu's government is a characteristically disproportionate and brutal use of overwhelming military superiority (it is reported to have killed ten children so far). Israel has a right to defend itself, to deter attacks on its civilian population like the rockets of Hamas,



but that general right does not justify the escalation.

Nor do the real Palestinian grievances justify the Hamas rockets. Hamas's aim is not liberation, but conquest of Israel and imposition of an Islamic state in the area (even if its forces are far too weak to

achieve that).

The pretext for the rockets was heavy-handed Israeli police action round the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem during Ramadan and threats to evict 13 Palestinian families from homes in a district of East Jerusalem which Jewish chauvinists have been targeting for decades on the grounds that the buildings were Jewish-owned before 1948.

That doesn't justify the rockets, though. In fact, *before* the rockets, big protests inside Israel had pushed the Israeli au-

thorities to postpone a court hearing on the evictions and re-route then block a provocative planned Jewish-chauvinist march in Jerusalem.

Netanyahu has a political interest in keeping military conflict "hot", within limits, so as to derail moves to form an anti-Netanyahu coalition to replace him after the recent Israeli elections. Hamas has chosen for its own reasons to play its part in that game.

Neither Hamas nor the Israeli chauvinists! Two nations, two states! □

Thrown out by events



Letter

I agree with Mohan Sen (*Solidarity* 591) that "Labour's campaigns have been weak", as the Labour Party under Starmer hasn't really challenged the government on the NHS and impending cuts. Also, I don't believe the left should be gleeful at Labour setbacks.

But I disagree that a good result for the Tories, which is now apparent, will push us way back. I'm of the belief that further Tory cuts, and their lack of care for housing, especially in regards

to safety in their failure in removing dangerous cladding (just look at what happened in Canary Wharf on 7 May [a fire at the New Providence Wharf block]), will further anger people.

With other causes such as Kill The Bill, BLM, the working class movement can strengthen. But with this the labour movement has to organise and unite instead of squabbling and failing to stop further inequality.

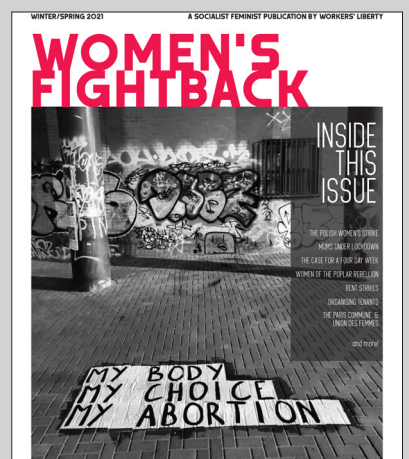
These two quotes of Trotsky come to mind when thinking of the current situation within the Labour Party.

"The politicians of reformism, these dextrous wirepullers, artful intriguers and careerists, expert parliamentary

and ministerial manoeuvrists, are no sooner thrown out of their habitual sphere by the course of events, no sooner placed face to face with momentous contingencies, than they reveal themselves to be – there is no milder expression for it – utter and complete fools".

"The party that leans upon the workers but serves the bourgeoisie, in the period of the greatest sharpening of the class struggle, cannot but sense the smells wafted from the waiting grave" (*What Next?*, 1932) □

Mo Starke Hannon,
London



Women's Fightback is a socialist feminist publication by Workers' Liberty. Order issue 25, Spring 2021, for £1 – or cheaper in bulk! □

workersliberty.org/publications

More in-person action on campuses

By Abel Harvie-Clark

One hundred students protested at SOAS University in London on 10 May, rejecting an investigation into racism in the institution as insufficient and demanding the removal of director Adam Habib.

Petitions, online actions, and motions in the student union and Unison union branch have been organised since back in March the director delivered a racial slur in response to being challenged about cuts to the African Studies department and the failure to address direct racial discrimination on campus, back in March.

Students have been challenging Habib's position as director since his interview with the Board of Trustees, on grounds of his role in instigating violence against the Fees Must Fall student protests that took place at Wits University, where he was vice chancellor.

Protests have escalated since the investigation commissioned by the uni-



versity's Board of Trustees promised "restorative justice" through vague and non-committal actions, which have been rejected by students as normalising anti-Black racism in the university. The investigation was set up by the same Board who hired Habib in the first place, and it employed "experts" from the police and prisons apparatus to carry it out.

Students are calling for a "People's Tribunal" to address Habib's position and racism in the university. The ongoing fees strike is also demanding #FireHabib. There is an understand-

ing in the university that justice will not be handed down from management boards, but won through collective power built from the bottom up.

The Office for Students is proposing a 50% cut to creative arts subjects across UK higher education institutions. Pause or Pay UK, a student-led campaign, have engaged in the government's consultation on the proposal, rejecting competition between disciplines for funding and highlighting the value of creative arts study.

In fact these consultations and investigations by university bosses and

their allies in government are only providing cover for a further drive for profit criteria in higher education, at the expense of students and university workers. A serious government bail-out of higher education remains an important demand, alongside militant campus campaigns against callous university managements.

The University of Sheffield rent strikers have been forced to leave their occupation after the University won a court Interim Possession Order which threatens a six month custodial sentence for any occupations on the campus in the next year. Comments by the outgoing president of the student union betraying the occupation did not help, and they should be held accountable by the student body.

The Sheffield Hallam and Manchester rent strike occupations are continuing, despite security harassment. A coalition of campaigns held a protest outside the occupation in Manchester on Monday 10 May. □



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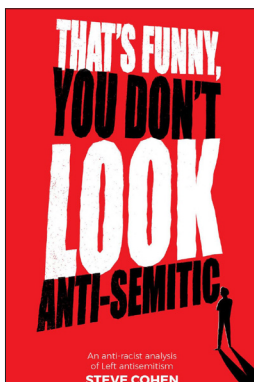
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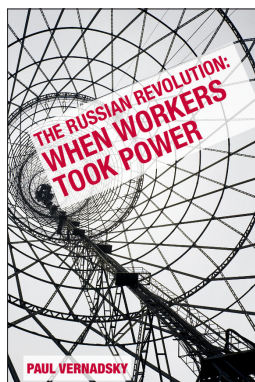
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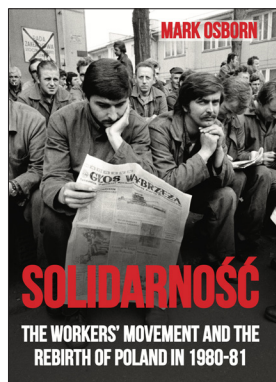
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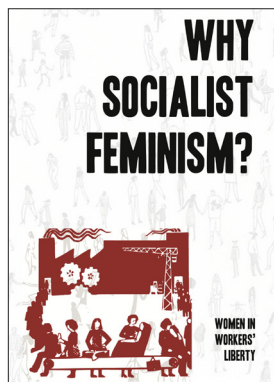
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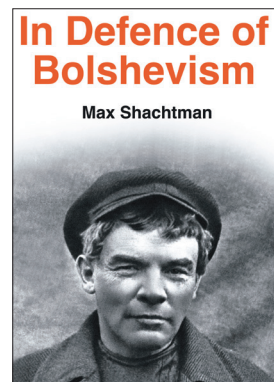
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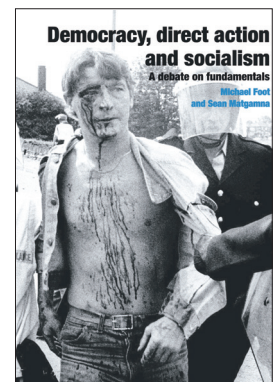
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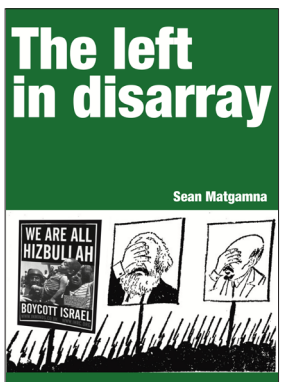
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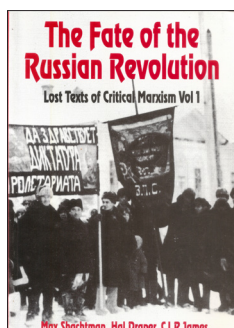
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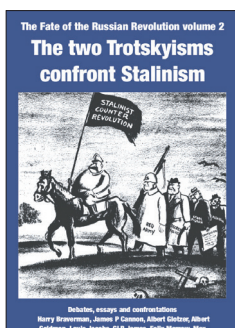
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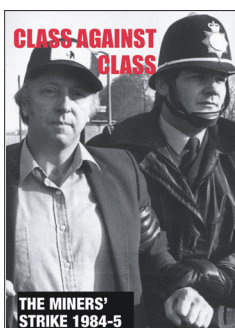
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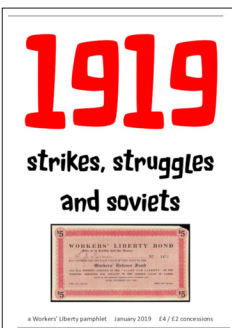
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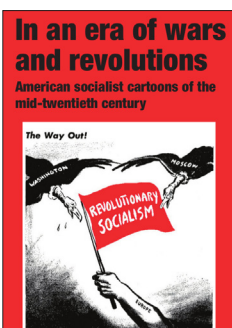
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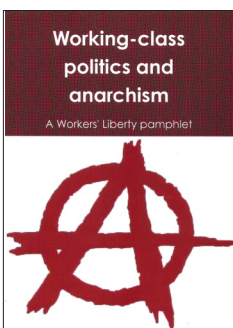
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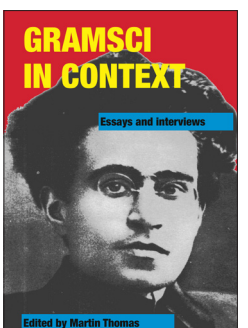
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Rail union: after the general secretary election

From Off The Rails

Mick Lynch has been elected general secretary of the RMT rail union. Lynch won 7,605 votes in an election that saw 19.4% of RMT's members vote. The three other candidates – Steve Hedley, John Leach, and Gordon Martin – won 4,352; 2,944; and 1,628 votes respectively.

The outcome (on 4 May) was expected: as the favoured successor of the retiring former general secretary, Mick Cash, and as the candidate backed by both a majority of nominating branches and most of the union's bureaucracy and officialdom, Lynch was always the favourite. While there is widespread desire for change in the union, the union's left has not organised this or focused it on specific proposals for change, so defeating the continuity candidate was always a tall order.

Off the Rails supported John Leach, the Regional Organiser for the union's London Transport region, in the elec-

tion. His vote was respectable, significantly increasing his total from the 2014 general secretary election, in which he also stood. Leach stood on a platform of rank-and-file democracy and effective militancy, differentiating himself from both Lynch's continuity campaign and the conception of militancy offered by Lynch's main rival Steve Hedley, which conflates it with machismo.

Leach also stressed the need to empower marginalised and under-represented groups in the union. Gordon Martin, the Regional Organiser for Scotland, raised similar themes in his campaign, along with the legitimate argument that the union's national leadership is too dominated by officers from London. With the opposition to the union's current leadership somewhat directionless and divided, we will work to ensure that discussions begun in Leach's and Martin's campaigns about an alternative vision for the union, and how to realise it, can continue.

The RMT's current leading faction consists of an alliance between an "Old Labour" right-wing element, which both Cash and Lynch broadly represent, and a Stalinist element, involving members and supporters of the Communist Party of Britain (*Morning Star*). They present themselves as serious, competent trade unionists, loyal to the structures of the union. In practice this has meant industrial conservatism and a consolidation of control by officers.

Cash's retirement and the recent election were preceded by a crisis at the top of the union, in which both Cash and Lynch, then an assistant general secretary, essentially accused the union's rank-and-file executive – which, in constitutional terms, is the day-to-day leadership of the union – of preventing them, senior national officers, from running the union, which they saw as their role. Lynch's victory means that their conception of what the union is – i.e., that it is its officers and staff, whose job

is to run the union and provide services and representation on behalf of members – will be consolidated, against a rank-and-fileist conception which contends that the union should be democratically controlled from as close to the workplace as possible, and function primarily as an instrument for struggle.

With significant industrial battles on the horizon – including against a pay freeze in mainline train companies, potential job cuts in Network Rail, and attacks on pensions in Transport for London – different perspectives and strategies will soon be tested in struggle. Across the political spectrum, everyone in RMT says that they want the union to be "democratic", "fighting" and "member-led" – or that they think it already is.

However, those rank-and-file activists who recognise that the union has some way to go to attain this ideal will only make genuine progress towards it if we organise. □

NEU votes: a setback and advances

By a Lewisham teacher

The National Education Union (NEU) Executive elections closed on 29 April. Disappointingly, Workers' Liberty supporter and victimised rep Tracy McGuire lost the national support staff seat, after a vicious campaign by the misnamed "NEU Left", who have been as determined to remove her from her Executive role as her employer was to sack her.

This deprives the executive of a tenacious fighter for support staff. Tracy has fought to ensure the union fully represents support staff and develops into an industrial union. That is why the "NEU Left" fought so hard to remove her. However disgusting her defeat, it is only a temporary setback for the fight for an industrial union.

Tracy stood as part of the Education Solidarity Network (ESN), the rank-and-file opposition in the union. In the district elections the ESN will



have at least eight supporters on the new Executive (four re-elected, four new). Workers' Liberty supporter Patrick Murphy topped the poll in West and South Yorkshire and his transfers helped ensure the election of another victimised rep, Louise Lewis.

There are four more ESN candidates standing in elections to be re-run due to a foul up on the ballot papers, with a real possibility of further gains. Workers' Liberty supporter Pat Markey is amongst those in the re-runs.

The districts result is a signifi-

cant strengthening of the ESN's presence on the Executive. It is clearly the main opposition to the current leadership. This is also shown in the coming election for Deputy General Secretary (DGS), where Martin Powell-Davies has already secured sufficient nominations to contest the election against Gawain Little of the "NEU Left". A "moderate" candidate, Niamh Sweeney, has, as yet, to secure sufficient nominations.

Tracy's defeat, set against the gains elsewhere for the ESN, suggests that whilst the ESN is strong in many geographical areas, we have yet to develop it across the country, and we are yet able to match the electoral machine of the "NEU Left". We must continue to build in our districts and develop grassroots militancy. We can use elections such as the upcoming DGS vote to spread our message wider and sow the seeds for future success. □

BT ballot: still waiting

By Darren Bedford

On 30 September 2020, the Communication Workers Union (CWU) announced that its "Count Me In" campaign against planned job cuts and other attacks to terms and conditions by BT was "stepping into full gear."

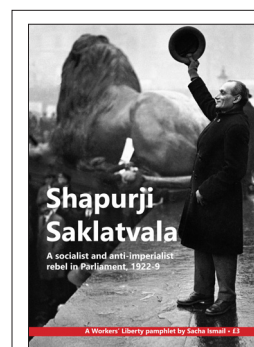
More than seven months since that announcement, and nearly six since CWU members voted for industrial action by a 97.9% majority in a consultative ballot, the union has still not launched a formal ballot. More announcements about "intensification" and a "significant ramping up" of the campaign have followed, but no ballot.

A large national ballot requires preparation. The CWU is right to want to put itself in the best possible position to beat the thresholds of the Tory anti-union laws. The campaign has been impressive on its own terms, keeping up regular communication with members and organising large online meetings.

But beyond a certain point, repeated announcements that a campaign is kicking into "full gear" start to have a counterproductive effect. In reality, the campaign has been stuck at the preparatory phase for month. Surely "full gear" would involve moving to the formal ballot workers voted for by such an overwhelming majority in December?

An interview with a local rep published on the CWU's website on 7 May said that the rep and their members were ready to ballot "once the headquarters push the button." Good: but there's a danger. If decision-making is happens only at "headquarters", with the rank-and-file membership just waiting, then the democratic self-organisation needed to sustain and win any serious dispute is much harder to build.

And if the message from headquarters is that the button is continually about to be pressed, then the rank and file may start doubting their officers' seriousness. □



A socialist and anti-imperialist

Shapurji Saklatvala was Labour's first SBAME MP, and a revolutionary socialist and anti-imperialist. Learn about his life and struggles in this pamphlet, replete with lessons for today. £3. □

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Bus workers to strike 25-26 May

The Unite union has announced new strikes by bus drivers on the Metrolink services in London in an ongoing dispute about the bosses' plan to introduce "remote sign-on". Drivers will be out on 25-26 May, and 7-8-9 June. □

669 What we stand for

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Independent working-class representation in politics
- A workers' government, based on and accountable to the labour movement
- A workers' charter of trade union rights – to organise, strike, picket effectively, and take solidarity action
- Taxing the rich to fund good public services, homes, education and jobs for all
- Workers' control of major industries and finance for a rapid transition to a green society
- A workers' movement that fights all forms of oppression
- Full equality for women, and social provision to free women from domestic labour. Reproductive freedoms and free abortion on demand.
- Full equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people
- Black and white workers' unity against racism
- Open borders
- Global solidarity against global capital – workers everywhere have more in common with each other than with their capitalist or Stalinist rulers
- Democracy at every level of society, from the smallest workplace or community to global social organisation
- Equal rights for all nations, against imperialists and predators big and small
- Maximum left unity in action, and full openness in debate

If you agree with us, take copies of *Solidarity* to sell – and join us! □

• workersliberty.org/join-awl

"We don't get sick leave, just statutory"



Diary of an engineer

By Emma Rickman

The night shift operators seem to have smashed the crane and grab into a wall. No one will admit fault, but it's a mess. The grabs are connected to the crane with heavy shackles and thick steel cables. When we first inspect the ropes one of the guides has splayed open, which must have taken incredible force. The crane engineer replaces it immediately.

I assist the hydraulics contractors on the grab while the electricians work on the crane controls. The contractors – A and S – gather spanners, rags, paper overalls and work permit, then head into the pit where the grab is parked on a concrete platform.

While A and I put together the lifting equipment that will lift out the damaged hydraulic cylinder, S has disappeared.

A: "He's trying to book a doctor's ap-

pointment – tonsillitis."

Me: "He's sick? Can't he just go home?"

A: "We don't get sick leave, just statutory. He's ok."

Me: "Well that's shit. He's only going into a waste pit full of biological hazards."

A: "Tonsillitis isn't contagious, is it?"

Me: "Don't think so."

S joins us once the cylinder is on the floor, and immediately starts prepping the replacement. He doesn't stagger and works quickly, but he looks miserable and his voice is hoarse.

A: "Did you get an appointment?"

S: "No. No chance, not at a time I can do."

A: "Want to go home?"

S: "Nah I'm ok. Let's just finish this."

Once we have the grab back together, the crane maintenance engineer comes down to negotiate.

"You can't test it yet sorry – we're still working on stuff up there. In a bit I'll open and close it if you need."

A and S go for a break while the electricians take parts from the crane back to the workshop. P explains to me how

encoders work, and L solders a new plug onto the encoder signal cable. The encoder is a device that tells the crane where the grab is by counting rotations, and the team think that the crash damaged the connection between the encoder and the main controller. L complains: "It doesn't help that this soldering iron is piss-poor and cold."

Me and the apprentices separate off to fix some lighting, and when we come back L is swapping the crane's main controller for a new one.

P: "Do you need a hand, L?"

L: "Nah I'm all right. I've just got to fix this and then tell the crane where it is – and then we're done."

J: "Radio if you need anything."

L: "Can you pass that first aid kit?"

L plasters a small cut on his hand and refuses antiseptic cream.

L: "It's already in there, whatever bacteria are in the pit's now in my hand."

P: "You're an idiot." □

• Emma Rickman is an apprentice engineer in a Combined Heat and Power plant.

GMB votes to reject 4% in NHS

By Alice Hazel

Scottish NHS workers in the GMB union have rejected the 4% Scottish government pay offer. The RCN, who also recommended rejection, are expected to announce their result as *Solidarity* goes to press on 11 May. Unison recommended acceptance of the offer, and Unite did not make a recom-

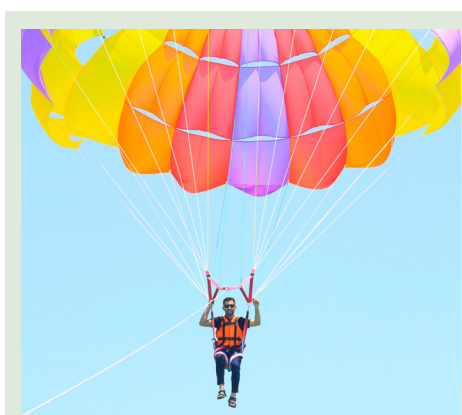
mendation, so it seems likely their members will vote to accept. The issue in Scotland will now be whether GMB and possibly the RCN will ballot for action, or simply use the recommendation to reject as a crude recruitment ploy, as happened in the last pay round.

Members should push for a ballot for strike action, particularly if RCN members

also reject. A campaign involving these unions could be effective and allow members of other unions to organise alongside them. An ongoing industrial action campaign in Scotland over 4% will have obvious knock on effect in England and Wales, where the offer, expected in June, is likely to be significantly lower. Across the unions its clear that

cross-union rank-and-file organisations are key to building democratic campaigns to push union leaderships to deliver and to build for action in workplaces.

Workers' Liberty healthworkers' fraction are holding an online public meeting at 6pm on Wednesday 19 May, "Organising to Strike for NHS Pay", on Zoom bit.ly/org-nhs □



£20,000 by 11 July

We have raised an additional £190 this week: thanks to Dave, Sarah, Pat, Amanda, Vicki, Bas, and Martin. Total so far, £6,110.24. You still have some time to donate towards Tim Cooper's sponsored parachute jump: go to bit.ly/tim-jump to help encourage Tim in his daring leap! Or send direct donations via workersliberty.org/donate2021 □

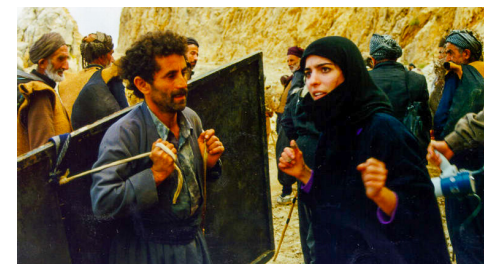
A film from Kurdistan



Kino Eye

By John Cunningham

Pete Boggs' articles on the Kurds (*Solidarity* 591 and 589) suggest it is time for a Kurdish film. Although director Samira Makhmalbaf is not Kurdish, her film *Blackboards* (Takhté siah) was shot in the Kurdish-populated mountainous border region of northern Iran and Iraq. Released in 2000, the film features a group of itinerant teachers who, carrying their cumbersome blackboards on their backs, hope to find some village children to teach. It is hard, dangerous work and many villages are deserted as the inhabitants have taken flight due to the Iran-Iraq war. One of the teachers, Said, encounters a group of old men and helps them to locate their village;



another teacher befriends a group of boys engaged in cross-border smuggling. In a hasty ceremony Said marries Halaleh, a widow with a child, the only woman with the old men. Eventually, they find a village although there is confusion about whether this is their home or just another ruinous product of the war. They cross the border and Halaleh goes with them, Said however wants to stay – "this my land", he says. A divorce is then arranged and Halaleh takes the blackboard with her. Gunfire echoes in the distance and the future for everyone looks uncertain. □



DVLA: who controls?



John Moloney

Workers at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) complex in Swansea struck again from 4-8 May. The strike was very successful, and built on the previous strike. Our picture is that more workers participated this time, so it's good to see the strike is growing. The call centre, which is a key part of the complex, had more people striking than last time.

The workers want to strike again, so the union will announce further dates soon. After that we are looking at ongoing selective action, with rolling strikes across different parts of the complex, aimed at maximising impact.

The dispute is being led by the branch. As Assistant General Secretary, I attend, in an auxiliary role, various meetings related to the dispute, but this is not a matter of senior union officials giving orders to a passive stage army of members. The branch is the key active element. This is essential to building fighting, rank-and-file trade unionism: leadership and decision-making has to be as close to the workplace as possible. This active leadership from below has allowed the union to be bold, calling two sets of four-day strikes so far, with the aim being to win, not to just protest.

Negotiations with the employer are conducted by a small team involving officials and a rank-and-file lay rep, who report back to meetings of members and the Branch Executive Committee (BEC). The members and the BEC aren't passive consumers in this dispute; they engage critically with the reports backs. Plans for the next

steps in dispute are formulated on the basis of the BEC discussions and reactions of members. No proposed settlement will be accepted without a vote of all the members affected.

Covid safety has been the trigger, but beyond the immediate dispute the key matter that will increasingly be posed are much wider questions about how the workplace is run. It sounds grandiose, but in a very real and direct sense it poses the class question, the question of political economy: is the workplace run under the total command and control of the bosses, or do workers, through elected representatives in their recognised union, have a say?

Whilst a bit player in the running of the dispute itself I'm more centrally involved in developing a parallel aspect of the campaign in DVLA, which is a legal challenge about its sickness policy, which we believe is discriminatory. On Monday 10 May I'll also lead a meeting to discuss how we can practically support another legal challenge, being pursued by the United Voices of the World union, about the potentially discriminatory impact of outsourcing in Royal Parks, where we organise the directly-employed workers.

In the Department for Work and Pensions, consultative ballots about potential action over Covid safety are ongoing. The union's National Executive Committee results are due to be announced next week; as I stood as the Assistant General Secretary candidate from the Independent Left, I'm of course hoping for good results for the candidates of the Independent Left. □

- John Moloney is assistant general secretary of the civil service workers' union PCS (personal capacity).

Train guards to strike

By an East Midlands railworker

After a 20 month delay, due to Covid and a change of franchisee, guards on East Midlands Railway will resume their fight against unfair starter contracts and rostering which busts terms and conditions with three strikes on consecutive Sundays starting on 16 May, the first day of the new timetable.

Reps have paid close attention to the strike days that members wanted, with the majority being in favour of consec-

utive Sunday strikes rather than Saturdays, weekdays, or more than single days of action per week. Planning has also been done to further pressurise management if they don't see sense.

Mindful of their role as key workers, the guards feel that with lockdown easing and with the vaccination program providing more protection against infection, it is high time for the company to materially acknowledge the important role these staff have played in keeping the trains running. □



Activist Agenda

The Uyghur Solidarity Campaign and the Hong Kong campaign LMSH-KUK will protest on 4 June from 7pm outside the Chinese Embassy in London: "Remember Tiananmen 1989 -Democracy, freedom, workers' rights for China, Hong Kong, Tibet, and Uyghurs".

The Safe and Equal campaign is putting together a model Covid safety survey. It wants health and safety reps to use this period where there is a lull in the pandemic to conduct workplace inspections and a survey of the workforce.

Health and safety reps have a legal right to paid time off for these duties. We don't know if there will be future waves coming or if the worst is behind us. But unions should use this time to find out how workers have fared during the past year and to draw the lessons.

The surveys are designed to investigate needs for in-sourcing, full sick pay, and measures (ventilation, PPE) to address risks of airborne transmission which many employers still refuse to recognise. S&E hopes the process of conducting these surveys will also

lead to better organisation across the workforce and stronger unions. Want to help? Contact the campaign.

On Friday 30 April, Neurodivergent Labour held an online event asking "what do neurodivergent people need from our local councils?" Speakers were Andrew Berry (Islington Unison) on neurodiversity in the local government workforce; Nikki Hughes (ND Labour Executive) on the need for Labour councils to engage more with the community, including with Gypsy, Roma, Traveller people; John McDonnell MP on his support for ND Labour; Gethin Jones (PCS activist and Senedd candidate) on neurodiversity in the prison service and on Welsh Labour's record; and Joan Martin, Osime Brown's mother, on how the local authority let her son down.

You can watch or listen to the event on ND Labour's YouTube channel. Campaigning initiatives and further events will follow. □

- Links and info for these and other campaigns, and suggested words for labour-movement motions on many issues, at workersliberty.org/agenda

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People queue for the Covid-19 vaccine in Nagpur, India

Covid: it's not "almost over"



Covid-19

By Martin Thomas

With further lockdown-easing announced from 17 May, many people are coming to think that the Covid pandemic is "almost over".

It's not. The battle for social measures to underpin pandemic control remains urgent.

- Requisition the assets of Big Pharma, especially the vaccine patents and the know-how to expand new vaccine-production facilities. The US administration's move to support a patent waiver is a victory for campaigning here, and Labour should demand that the UK government does similar.

- Full isolation pay for every worker self-isolating because of Covid symptoms, testing, contact, or travel quarantine. Publicly-provided quarantine accommodation for those otherwise trying to "self-isolate" in crowded housing.

- Take social care into the public sector, and give care workers NHS-level pay and conditions.

- Workers' control of workplace safety (see page 11 for the new campaign by Safe and Equal on that).

The news on vaccine efficacy is almost all good. Cases and deaths are now low in Britain. But worldwide Covid death rates have risen again since mid-March, are still only fractionally below their highest-ever, and have eased off only recently and tentatively.

Even in Britain, case and death rates are not as low as last July. Then, governments across Europe responded by accelerating from the step-by-step easing since April 2020, and rushing to reopen bars, cafés, and tourism. The result: a new

rise of Covid from August-September, which created fertile conditions for new variants and so for dramatic further rises.

Vaccines will limit the death and long-Covid toll of future spikes. But vaccination rates are still low in many countries; no vaccine is 100%; we don't know how long vaccines' protection will last; and the risk remains of new variants which evade the vaccines.

The Seychelles, an Indian-Ocean archipelago, has the highest vaccination rate in the world. But recently, and especially since reopening to tourists with few precautions from 25 March, it has had a big Covid spike. Because of the vaccinations, the death rate is lower than it would have been for a similar spike earlier, but still, since 25 March, it is the equivalent, relative to the Seychelles' small population, of 7,000 dead in Britain.

Countries like Australia and New Zealand have been able to ease most "internal" covid-distancing rules, but only by keeping their borders rigidly closed, and deploying intermittent lockdowns to contain inevitable leaks from border quarantines. The same is not possible for most countries, with more porous borders. (Britain has 10,000 truck drivers arriving each day).

How to develop, step by step, a liveable longer-term covid-distancing and selective-quarantine system, we don't yet know for sure. It looks possible with the vaccines. It will surely be difficult unless we can win the social measures like isolation pay, workers' control of safety, requisitioning of essential supplies.

The Tories, after being forced into less slapdash policies from January, are now edging towards "open up and hope for the best". *Solidarity* will support campaigns like Safe and Equal pressing for continued social-solidarity measures against Covid. □



Solidarity

For a workers' government

SOCIALISM VS CAPITALISM

By Sacha Ismail

The world's richest man, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, has increased his wealth from \$130 billion to \$186 billion during the pandemic. US billionaires in general have gained by about the same. Meanwhile poverty in the US has exploded.

Thirty years ago US billionaires owned less wealth than the poorest half of US society. Today they own four times as much.

It's the same basic picture in the UK, and worldwide. The number of billionaires in the world has increased by a third in the last year. Those 2,700-odd people now control combined wealth of almost £10 trillion, up from £6 trillion a year ago.

This rocketing wealth is the flipside of deepening poverty and insecurity, runaway climate change, and the trashing of even the limited political democracy and social rights won over decades.

Those who want an equal, sustainable and democratic society need to make the staggering facts about inequality as widely known as possible. We need to demand *emergency* changes to unwind its growth, by *taxing the rich* and taking

socially vital industries and corporations under *public ownership and democratic control*, so wealth can be used to create a better life for the majority and tackle the climate crisis.

But how did this situation come about? How is it possible? How did the billionaires get their wealth, and the astonishing power which allows them to increase it?

Jeff Bezos will have a thousand ways to increase his wealth through trickery, but it does not appear in his bank accounts by magic. He is the head of a corporation which "employs" approaching a million and half people – a number which has increased by half during the pandemic, as logistics and delivery industries have burgeoned.

During the recent attempt to establish a trade union at the giant Amazon facility in Bessemer, Alabama, which the company defeated through a campaign of intimidation, we learned about things like drivers pissing in bottles and shitting in bags because they were too scared to take toilet breaks. Such are things which have multiplied Amazon's *profits* and with them Bezos' wealth.

Amazon workers are far from

the worst off in the US, one of the world's richest societies. Spiralling wealth worldwide has come about through appalling suffering and denial of human rights for hundreds of millions, at the sharp end of suffering for billions.

Even to win alleviations, workers must organise. It's with good reason that Bezos and his ilk fear any growth and strengthening of trade unions. But in many countries, including the UK, changes won by workers' movements to make things less brutal – higher wages, better working conditions, health services and welfare – are being demolished step-by-step.

As long as the rich remain in control of the big concentrations of wealth, corporations and banks, and the human labour which creates them, they will always push for more.

The only sustainable answer is for workers to take control of the main systems for producing wealth away from the plutocrats, converting them into the common property of society and creating a new system run not for profit but human need. □

• More on Jeff Bezos and the billionaires: bit.ly/ch-jb