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the Socialist

Formerly **Militant**

PPE TESTS FULL PAY FOR ALL NOW

Prince and PM get tests while workers risk lives

Socialist planning is the alternative to capitalist corona chaos

The number of coronavirus deaths in the UK is now well over 2,000. At least one person is dying every three minutes.

The situation will “get worse before it gets better,” says Boris Johnson. Thousands more people will die as the pandemic reaches its peak.

But let’s be clear - the enormity of the death toll will not be the fault of the individual actions of ordinary working people. Many of these deaths could have been prevented if the government had acted earlier; and if we hadn’t had to endure ten years of brutal austerity in the NHS, social care and other vital services.

Four years ago, a three-day exercise carried out by epidemiologists from Imperial College London - Exercise Cygnus - warned that the NHS would be overwhelmed by a future major flu pandemic; staff would be short of personal protective equipment (PPE), there wouldn’t be enough ventilators, and bodies would be overflowing in mortuaries. A nightmare scenario that is now being played out because the government refused to act. The report was never published.

The same Tory government also rejected expert medical advice to expand eye protection for health professionals to cope with a pandemic because it would “substantially increase” the costs of stockpiling (see also p4).

This and previous Tory governments have always put wealth before health. Hypocritical government ministers join in applauding the very NHS workers who have been denied adequate PPE because of their profit before safety policies.

A survey of medics by the Society of Acute Medicine found only 42% had the right, or enough, PPE. Desperate staff have been forced to buy their own equipment on eBay! Now frontline staff have already started to die from Covid-19. Others are terrified that lack of preparation means that they could be next.

To reduce the spread of coronavirus, isolation and social distancing measures must go alongside mass testing and contact tracing - and this still isn’t happening. Care homes are being asked to take in elderly people sent home from hospital to free up beds in the NHS. But these patients haven’t been tested for coronavirus, putting the lives of other residents at risk, and the

safety of staff who don’t have adequate PPE.

Two weeks after the government promised to “ramp up” testing to 10,000 a day, only half that figure was being reached. Germany is testing 500,000 a week. Health officials say it could be weeks before antibody testing is available for NHS staff so that they can know whether it is safe for them to go to work. 25% of doctors are already self-isolating but most have no idea if they have Covid-19 or not.

The priority is clearly health and social care staff, but everyone needs to have access to testing. How can it be possible to have an accurate picture of the spread of infection and know whether lockdown is working if testing is not taking place on a mass scale?

There are 44 labs in the UK which could have been taken over for diagnosing tests but that hasn’t happened. The government should have acted much sooner in buying test kits, expanding staff and lab capacity and requisitioning private health facilities. All of that now needs to be massively stepped up, and testing must be free for everyone.

Johnson has issued a “call to action” to manufacturing industry to design and build ventilators for the NHS. But that could take months and even years. A company in Cheshire claims its offer to secure 25,000 ventilators was completely ignored.

In this, and in other areas such as food distribution (see p8-9), the coronavirus crisis is exposing the anarchy of the capitalist market economy and the need for it to be replaced by public ownership and democratic working-class control and planning.

The rapid creation of a potential 4,000 bed hospital in London, and the invention of breathing apparatus which could limit the number of patients needing ventilators, give just a small glimpse of what could happen on a mass scale if the resources of society were not in the hands of a rich minority and could be rationally planned in a democratic way to meet need not profit...

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The Socialist is written, read, sold and bought by ordinary workers, trade unionists, young people and Socialist Party supporters. We want you to write for the Socialist.

Send us reports of your workplace and community campaigns, short letters on working-class issues, or ideas for other articles.

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"The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."
Karl Marx

Special coronavirus crisis financial appeal

HELP US CONTINUE TO FIGHT FOR WORKERS AND SOCIALISM



RMT transport union pickets reading the Socialist reports on their driver-only operation dispute with the private rail operators photo Elaine Brunskill

Hannah Sell

Socialist Party general secretary

The coronavirus crisis has led to the upheaval of every aspect of society. After it, nothing will remain the same.

It has laid bare the class character of society in numerous ways. It is has made clear to many that it is the working class - including NHS, transport, retail, and refuse workers - who are essential to keeping society running, not the CEOs of major corporations.

The results of austerity have been graphically demonstrated as public services strain to try and cope with the crisis. The number of hospital beds, for example, has more than halved over recent decades.

And as the economy plunges downwards, by a predicted unprecedented 15% in one quarter, it is primarily the working class that is paying the price, with almost half a million being forced to claim Universal Credit in one week alone.

Desperate to prevent a mass revolt against the developing economic catastrophe the Tory government, along with capitalist governments worldwide, has been forced to intervene into the economy on a huge scale. It has ripped up its 'austerity is necessary' mantra, carrying out policies that just weeks ago were denounced as socialist.

The Tories, of course, do not carry out such policies in the interests of the working-class majority, but in order to prop up capitalism - a system driven by making profits for a few, not meeting the needs of all.

Without doubt, in the aftermath of

the corona crisis, the Tories and the capitalist class will try to make the working class pay for it, setting out to claw back what has been given.

After a decade of being made to pay for capitalism's last crisis, and in the midst of an ongoing economic crisis that looks set to be worse than the one before, the working class will ferociously resist such an assault.

The ideas of socialism began to be repopularised over the last decade. In the period after corona there will be opportunities to win mass support for a fundamental socialist transformation of society.

Socialist programme

The Socialist has consistently put forward the need for such a transformation: arguing for the nationalisation of the commanding heights of the economy under democratic workers' control and management in order to begin to develop a rational socialist plan of production - as the only means to harness all the science and technique created by capitalism to meet the needs of all and protect the planet.

Throughout our history, first as the Militant newspaper and since as the Socialist, our paper - and our party, the Socialist Party - has linked the struggle for socialism to the day to day battles of the working class to defend and improve its living conditions.

We have played an important role in countless struggles, including leading the mighty 18 million-strong movement against the poll tax thirty years ago which successfully defeated the tax and forced the 'Iron Lady' Maggie Thatcher out of office. The class battles on the agenda in

the coming years, however, are set to dwarf all that we've experienced before, and will provide greater opportunities to put the case for socialism.

We therefore urgently appeal to all of our readers to donate to our special coronavirus appeal in order to make sure we come out of the lockdown ready for the stormy events ahead. Inevitably, the lockdown is preventing many of our normal means of selling the Socialist and raising funds.

Please give all you can to help compensate for those difficulties and to enable us to continue producing the Socialist throughout the lockdown.

This is vital not only for what is going to come after the lockdown, but also for the battles taking place during it. Tory ministers may be breaking the habits of a lifetime and praising workers, but - despite their claims to the contrary - they are not acting in the 'national' interest. There is not one single national interest but different class interests. Ultimately the Tories are acting for the capitalist class.

It is vital that the working class has an independent voice to defend its own class interests, just as much in times of crisis as at other times. Unfortunately, the majority of the leaders of the trade union and labour movement have made concessions to the pressure of the capitalist class to unite behind the government.

In contrast, on the ground a number of unions have reported increased membership, as workers look for a means to defend themselves during the crisis. They can find that in the Socialist by reading our 'fighting coronavirus workers' charter', which sums up a programme to effectively combat the virus and protect workers' living conditions.

A workers' paper

You can also read countless reports of trade unionists - Socialist Party members and others - that are in the frontline in their workplace, leading fights to prevent layoffs, to increase pay or staffing levels, or for better health and safety measures. And, of course, you can read about the battles within the trade union movement to demand that the union leaders nationally take the same fighting approach.

The corona crisis is not only a health crisis; it has triggered a profound crisis of the capitalist system. It has also demonstrated the central role of the working class in running society.

Armed with a socialist programme they are also the force capable of ending this sick capitalist system and building a new democratic socialist society that puts the health and needs of humanity before the profits of a few.

The Socialist has a vital role to play - please donate to help us do so.

Coronavirus crisis - Socialist Party special appeal **DONATE TODAY!**

Visit socialistparty.org.uk/donate or call **020 8988 8777**
or make cheques payable to Socialist Party,
Please indicate the donation is for this special finance appeal.
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NHS workers speak out: the propaganda isn't true, austerity has left us unprepared



We've known for weeks and still there's not enough kit

We have had many weeks to get ready to deal with coronavirus. It's a shame that only in the last couple of weeks things are actually happening.

I work in an East Midlands NHS hospital. From porter right up to consultant, we are concerned. There were a few days when almost all admitted patients were tested for Covid-19. Now there is just the odd couple that gets checked.

So we get people who are coughing all over everything and everyone in a four-bed bay. Some go home; suddenly, a few days on, some other patients from that bay are poorly with symptoms and get moved to side rooms.

I dread to think how many patients have been infected on the ward, and how many we have sent to their homes to infect other residents, family, their community and the people who look after them. We only get a flimsy mask and apron to look after 'awaiting results' patients.

Seems like not testing saves kit and just may get rid of the old and the weak. Staff may still be held accountable for spreading the virus! When concerns are raised, we usually hear: "We will look into it." Good luck everyone.

Lucy, NHS worker

Austerity ambulance service filling gaps with non-clinical staff

We must remember, at the end of all this, that they implemented so many cuts that we arrived at this point.

Retired paramedics are being called back in. Final-year paramedic students are being encouraged to finish their course early. They are supposed to have finished their placements first, but the universities don't really care about that - they just are saying 'go, go, go!'

At the ambulance trust I am doing my placement with, we have 3,500 workers, including people on the phones - but currently 1,000 of us are having to self-isolate. We are at the highest pressure point on the pressure scale, to the point that they are putting non-clinical people alongside clinical staff just to get more hands out there.

They say they can't afford to give personal protective equipment (PPE) to students who are going to work. And now staff are not being allowed to wear PPE. They can only wear them for cardiac arrests, nothing else. And nothing is being said by the leadership of our union, Unison.

A paramedic student

Pandemic response is causing hidden damage

Over years of budget cuts in the NHS we have learnt to be hugely adaptable as we struggle to maintain services to our patients. From a hospital providing every specialism, we are now a Covid-19 treatment centre.

Other patients have been shipped out, and areas have gone from 'dirty' to 'clean' and back again at a moment's notice. The hospital itself is on lockdown - no one gets in without their badge.

Unlike many other hospitals who are struggling for PPE, we have demanded and got masks for all patient-facing areas - although it's been left to clinical staff to make sure maintenance and cleaners get theirs.

Of course, we are hugely worried about ventilators and intensive care provision. But what about other services, like cancer care? Breast screening is being shut down in many areas.

Much of our trauma services are being picked up by the private sector. This provision should be taken over and controlled by the National Health Service to prevent the usual profit-driven chaos we already get from Care UK and the like.

The damage this will do is entirely hidden. And we will have a hell of a fight to restore these services when this is all over!

An NHS health professional

Applause is touching - but bosses only call us heroes when it suits

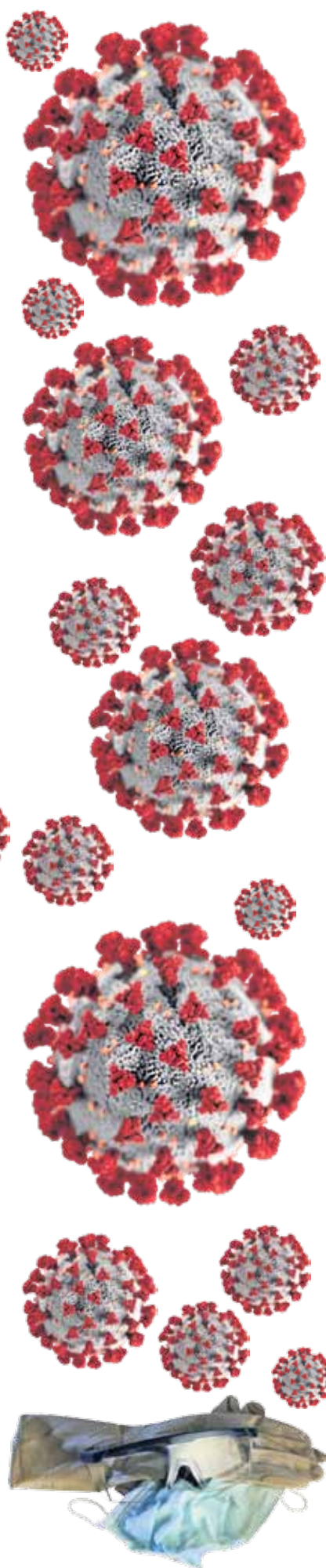
As much as seeing the support for the NHS, and by extension myself and my colleagues, is quite touching and overwhelming - we're not heroes, we're ordinary workers. We're no different to the builders, the engineers, the retail workers.

We're being called heroes in the media now. Yet we weren't heroes when the junior doctors were forced into strike action in 2016, or when management threatens to close emergency departments or whole hospitals, or when low pay forces nurses to foodbanks in order to feed their families.

We're heroes when it suits the bosses and their media. But will we be heroes in two years when we're asking for a wage rise? Or heroes when we ask for safe staffing levels?

We're not heroes - we want simple things. A wage we can afford to live on, enough staff to deliver safe care, and an NHS we can be proud of. After this crisis, remember that, and fight for the NHS.

Matt Whale, NHS nurse



WHAT WE STAND FOR

The Socialist Party fights for socialism - a democratic society run for the needs of all and not the profits of a few. We also oppose every cut, fighting in our day-to-day campaigning for every possible improvement for working-class people. The organised working class has the potential power to stop the cuts and transform society.

As capitalism dominates the globe, the struggle for genuine socialism must be international. The Socialist Party is part of the Committee for a Workers' International (CWI) which organises across the world.

Our demands include...

PUBLIC SERVICES

- No to ALL cuts in jobs, public services and benefits. Defend our pensions.
- No to privatisation and the Private Finance Initiative (PFI). Renationalise all privatised utilities and services, with compensation paid only on the basis of proven need.
- Fully fund all services and run them under accountable, democratic committees that include representatives of service workers and users.
- Free, publicly run, good quality education, available to all at any age. Abolish university tuition fees now and introduce a living grant. No to academies and 'free schools'!
- A socialist NHS to provide for everyone's health needs - free at the point of use and under democratic control. Kick out private contractors!
- Keep council housing publicly owned. For a massive building programme of publicly owned housing, on an environmentally sustainable basis, to provide good quality homes with low rents.

WORK AND INCOME

- Trade union struggle for an immediate increase in the minimum wage to £12 an hour without exemptions as a step towards a real living wage of at least £15. For an annual increase in the minimum wage linked to average earnings. Scrap zero-hour contracts.
- All workers, including part-timers, temps, casual and migrant workers to have trade union rates of pay, employment protection, and sickness and holiday rights from day one of employment.
- An immediate 50% increase in the state retirement pension, as a step towards a living pension.
- Scrap Universal Credit. For the right to decent benefits, education, training, or a job, without compulsion.

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- Scrap the anti-trade union laws! For fighting trade unions, democratically controlled by their members. Full-time union officials to be regularly elected and receive no more than a worker's wage. Support the National Shop Stewards Network.
- A 35-hour week with no loss of pay.

ENVIRONMENT

- Major research and investment into replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy and into ending the problems of early obsolescence and un-recycled waste.
- Public ownership of the energy generating industries. No to nuclear power. No to Trident.
- A democratically planned, low-fare, publicly owned transport system, as part of an overall plan against environmental pollution.

RIGHTS

- Oppose discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, disability, sexuality, age, and all other forms of prejudice.
- Repeal all laws that trample over civil liberties. For the right to protest! End police harassment.
- Defend abortion rights. For a woman's right to choose when and whether to have children.
- For the right to asylum. No to racist immigration laws.
- For the right to vote at 16.

MASS WORKERS' PARTY

- For a mass workers' party drawing together workers, young people and activists from workplace, community, environmental and anti-racist and anti-cuts campaigns, to provide a fighting, political alternative to the pro-big business parties.
- Fight for Labour to be transformed into such a party: deselect the Blairites.

SOCIALISM AND INTERNATIONALISM

- No to imperialist wars and occupations.
- Tax the super-rich! For a socialist government to take into public ownership the top 150 companies and the banking system that dominate the British economy, and run them under democratic working class control and management. Compensation to be paid only on the basis of proven need.
- A democratic socialist plan of production based on the interests of the overwhelming majority of people, and in a way that safeguards the environment.
- No to the bosses' neoliberal European Union and single market. For a socialist Europe and a socialist world!

Do you agree? Join the fightback!

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to find out more today!



Workers must not pay the price

> Continued from front page
We are constantly told that we are all in this together; that the virus doesn't discriminate - even princes and prime ministers can get it. But while those with a 'serious underlying wealth condition' have no problem getting tested, the rest of us have no idea whether we have the virus or not. While Prince Charles can self-isolate in luxury at Balmoral millions of people are stuck in overcrowded small flats, with no garden and, in many cases, without sufficient food (see p10).
And millions more are still being forced to go to work in unsafe workplaces, either because of unscrupulous and penny-pinching bosses, or because they still can't afford not to work. 80% of wages (if you can get it) is a 20% wage cut - a disaster for the low-paid already struggling to get to the end of the month. And, scandalously, the self-employed are being told they will have to wait until June to get their money.

Workers must not pay the price for the coronavirus crisis. All workers forced to self-isolate or not in work should immediately receive 100% of their normal income, and nobody should lose their job. Those already sacked should be reinstated.

No bailouts

There must be no public bailout of the Richard Bransons of this world. If big business say they can't pay up, open the books to the trade unions and workers - let's see where the profits have been going. Nationalise those big corporations which threaten job losses and closures, under democratic workers' control and management.

Up and down the country workers are taking action in the workplaces to defend their health, safety and income, often with little lead from the tops of the trade unions (see p6-7). With union membership on the rise, as workers see the need for defence organisations during this crisis, they should be going on to the offensive. And unions that give a fighting lead now will be laying the basis for the future battles that will be necessary.

Workers must not pay for the coronavirus crisis now. But neither must the bosses and pro-capitalist politicians present us with the bill when it's over - through austerity mark 2 and attacks on jobs, wages and conditions.

This is not just a coronavirus crisis - it is a crisis of the capitalist profit system, which is incapable of protecting the health, living standards and lives of working-class people. Socialism as an alternative way of organising society - eliminating the profit motive and democratically planning to meet the needs of all - has never been more necessary. Join the Socialist Party to fight for a socialist future.

Do you agree?
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Schools: union oversight needed to end chaos in provision under coronavirus

A school teacher
North London Socialist Party

Like many other teachers up and down the country, I have been trying to set lessons online for students to continue their education at home. I have also been in school, having volunteered to help with vulnerable students and the children of key workers.

Like the vast majority of teachers I'm happy to do this, on a non-compulsory basis in a safe environment, just so long as my own health and the health of my family permits. However, not all teachers are in this position.

The long-term running down of local authority management of schools, and the government's abdication of responsibility for making key decisions, has thrown responsibility back on individual schools and created a charter for bullying school management.

As a result, there are reports of teachers being ordered to come in, and if they are working from home, subjected to ridiculous accountability measures to demonstrate they have been working the same hours they would have in school.

Mixed signals

Contrary to instructions from exam boards, and all common sense, some teachers have even been instructed to continue delivering the curriculum and marking coursework assessments as if nothing had happened!

Even responsible school managements were unclear as to how to implement the long-delayed decision for a shutdown, and whether



teachers should be coming in on an opt-in or opt-out basis. It has therefore taken the intervention of teaching unions at local level to ensure that going into the workplace has happened only on a strictly opt-in basis.

Non-teaching staff in schools have not always benefited from this protection. Generations of outsourcing has meant that many site and admin staff now have contracts that will not protect their earnings while the schools are shut.

Similarly, the drive by successive governments towards privately run 'academy' schools means there are no structures to coordinate planning of local resources. Consequently, we are now seeing the farce of large secondary school sites opening each day for only a dozen students, with all the staff and resources needed to ensure their safety, and with no mechanism for pooling facilities more effectively.

Teachers and other education

staff are committed to the continuing education, wellbeing and safety of their students in this time of crisis.

The Department for Education, local school managements and local councils should now be coordinating their response, subject to democratic trade union oversight. The education unions should establish all-union committees in every workplace and area to guarantee safe working practices and efficient use of resources.

Councils must use resources now for emergency response to Covid-19

The following is an edited letter sent by **Southampton Socialist Party to the Labour leader of Southampton City Council**. We have had a reply to say he is in the process of discussing our proposal with the council officers.

Our experience tells us that senior council officers are likely to enforce the rules in favour of the Tories and the bosses. But this crisis has shown that these so-called rules are not worth the paper they are written on.

We will keep up the pressure. Labour councils need to use all of the resources at their disposal now to save workers, not the capitalist system.

The devastating impact of coronavirus is exposing the impact that

austerity has had on all of our public services, and particularly the NHS. It also reveals that the number-one concern for Boris Johnson and the Tory government is looking after the bosses' profits as they face an economic crisis bigger even than that of 2007-08.

We need to fight for policies that put the health and livelihood of workers first. Our local councils could have a role to play in using all of the resources at their disposal to organise the response locally.

In Southampton, the Labour-run council has huge spending power, and the capacity to borrow much more. It currently plans to borrow £200 million to develop a private property portfolio and build offices.

A council-led campaign, with the support of the trade unions, must be launched for the government to back up council funding. If Southampton leads the way, this could be taken up in other areas around the country.

Southampton Council should:

- Establish an emergency fund, potentially worth hundreds of millions of pounds, using borrowing powers and existing reserves. This should be spent with the oversight of workers and their trade unions
- Demand that all employers in the city pay workers full wages when sick or self-isolating

- Launch a campaign for recruitment to the trade unions for workers to hold their employers to account, for full pay, full protective equipment, and healthy practices at work

- Demand that the city's landlords give 'rent holidays', writing off rent payments, to tenants who need it; stop collecting council rents where necessary; and ensure no evictions in the city

- Stop collecting council tax from those unable to pay due to coronavirus

- Requisition empty homes to house the homeless and those escaping domestic abuse

- Take control of private health and social care facilities in the city for the planned use of anyone who needs it

- Give financial backing to schools providing vital care for children, as well as delivering free school meals for children and others in the community that are in need

- Stop all council budget cuts, and demand full funding from the government

NHS Supply Chain worker: privatisation has cut equipment quantity and quality

Terrified staff across the NHS are risking their health and lives treating coronavirus patients without adequate personal protective equipment (PPE). **Barry Boden**, an NHS Supply Chain worker, spoke to the Socialist about how privatisation and the pursuit of profit have impacted the shortage of quality PPE.

NHS Supply Chain provides daily medical and non-medical items to hospitals in England and Wales. We were privatised in 2006 and handed over to the multinational courier firm DHL, whose main aim was to make 'savings'.

Then, in 2018, DHL failed to win the new contract for warehousing and distribution, resulting in a fragmentation into 13 different contracts for procurement, warehouse and distribution, marketing, etc. The biggest was won by Unipart, better known for supplying components to the motor industry.

There's a managing company, Supply Chain Coordination Ltd, which sets our contracts on behalf of the Department of Health and Social Care. But the divisions, and poor planning, have exacerbated the current problems.

Caught out

Preparing for Brexit, our stocks were built up, and new warehouses were opened. Then, in January, management started to reduce our stock levels - right at the time that the Covid-19 outbreak was happening in China! Now we have been completely caught out.

For the last 30 years we've been told to use the 'just-in-time' principle



for supplying NHS trusts and maintaining stock levels in the network. So when there's a major outbreak, such as now, the system is already at full capacity, and therefore struggles to meet the extra demand.

Austerity has affected our operations, just as it has across the NHS. Cost-cutting has meant less experienced staff and managers, an over-reliance on agency personnel, reduced warehouse maintenance, and an underfunded internal transport system, causing logistic delays in moving stock around the network.

When I started working for NHS

Supply Chain, I recall sitting down with a range of medical goods, such as wound dressings, with experienced nurses in front of us giving their clinical opinions, saying 'that's good, that's not good.'

Now the decisions are profit-driven, with much less medical input in the procurement and tendering process. This is part of why the quality of the PPE getting through to frontline staff has been so poor.

Our members have been working longer shifts for the last three months, with some already clocking up 60 extra hours plus in March, to try to provide hospitals with their PPE and

normal daily medical requirements.

The PPE for NHS frontline staff has now moved to a third party, under the control of the NHS with the support of the army. But fragmentation, privatisation and a profit-led management have helped to create the current crisis in PPE.

Clinical oversight of equipment procurement must be reinstated. Massive funding for purchasing and manufacturing PPE must be made available now. Privatisation must be scrapped, and NHS Supply Chain brought back in-house, under a fully funded and democratically planned NHS.

Scandalous conditions in food distribution centre: hygiene now!

A distribution centre worker

"Too little, too late" is ringing in many workers' ears. In my workplace, a food distribution centre, it definitely echoes. A worker on the morning shift, who had been with the company decades, was recently confirmed to have the virus.

It took until last week for management to make some minimal, last-minute provisions. Hand gel stations were put in just days ago. Not all equipment is sterilised. Smoking areas are cramped, and bike sheds are not allowed to be used for smoking.

The company has liquidated certain product chains to focus on

high-demand goods. Bosses are dragging their heels with health and safety - but sprinting towards recruitment drives.

We have an intake of hundreds of new starters over the next few weeks. Agency workers are to be trained in clusters of ten. Social distancing is not enforced during training.

All this is weeks after the World Health Organisation and later the government named the virus a threat, and days after the national lockdown. A collective worry is that coronavirus carriers could already have infected co-workers, or even people receiving the food.

Messages are regularly sent to staff via Tannoy and wrist trackers



Hand gel stations were put in just days ago... not all equipment is sterilised

to thank us for our hard work during the crisis. But like the recent hand-clap for NHS staff, it raises the question of how workers in essential sectors are really treated at this time. Although performance measurement has been quietly suspended for directly employed workers, the agency workers are not told this. And once 'normal' is restored, will it be the 'normal' we had before, the normal that laid the foundations of this crisis?
The bosses have offered us a 10%

Lockdown cladding 'time bomb'

New tests have found that 'high-pressure laminate' (HPL) cladding is almost as deadly as Grenfell's 'aluminium composite material' (ACM) cladding in a fire. In 2017, 72 people were killed when profit-motivated cladding on Grenfell Tower acted like a wick spreading an inferno up the building.

As of September 2019, over two years later, government figures still recorded up to 24,800 homes in 324 buildings covered in Grenfell-style ACM cladding. Industry data suggests at least a further 340 tall buildings have dangerous non-ACM cladding, including combustible HPL, says Inside Housing.

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) says that buildings "could and should have been made safer with a comprehensive testing regime immediately after Grenfell, but the government failed to act." FBU general secretary Matt Wrack points out that "with people spending far more time at home under the lockdown, this is a ticking time bomb."

It's another failure of the big business politicians and the capitalist system, which put profit above preparation. Cladding off now! No safety - no rent!

Homeless housed in days

On 27 March the government instructed local councils to house all the homeless by the end of the week. Great - but if that was always possible, why are councils only doing it now?

Why the hell were they waiting for a pandemic and an order from the Tories to give them an excuse to end homelessness? The Local Government Association has said councils will need more funding to cover this - why didn't they demand it before?

Meanwhile, in Las Vegas, rough sleepers are allotted parking spaces to sleep on to maintain social distance! Rough sleepers in various European countries are turfed out of shelters to prevent contagion, fined for being in public, or herded into packed gyms!

We say councils in Britain must reverse all funding cuts and demand the money local areas so urgently need. Seize empty homes now, and start a mass council house building programme as soon as Covid-19 passes!

Depression looms for capitalism

Economic output in the UK could plummet an unprecedented 15% in the second quarter of 2020, reckons the Centre for Economics and Business Research. Japanese bank Nomura is more optimistic - a mere 13.5% nosedive in 'gross domestic product' (GDP).

To put this in perspective, during the worst year for the Great Depression, 1932, GDP in the United States fell 12.9%. Of course, that was for a full year, not just three months, and British capitalism may recover a little by 2021.

But that's cold comfort to the millions of workers already losing pay and jobs. Returning to the US, an astounding 3.28 million workers filed unemployment claims in just one week. The third week of March 2020 shattered the previous record - 695,000 in the last week of September 1982 - by a factor of five.

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Bosses concede to walkouts in Northern Ireland

CWI member, Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland virtually every manufacturer continued to operate as normal following the coronavirus lockdown, which led to rising confusion and then mounting anger.

Employers in aerospace manufacture - those producing doors, windows, electronics, concrete pipes, wooden fence poles and luxury carpets - all made the case that they were essential. The entire construction sector claimed its sites were 'essential' as well.

While workers could be stopped and fined for coming within two metres of someone on the street, they were expected to work shoulder to shoulder with colleagues on the factory floor. While people were being told to avoid hand-shaking, to wash their hands, or use hand sanitiser to protect themselves, when it came to ensuring profits continued to roll in for the boss, workers were expected to freely handle the same equipment as hundreds of workplace colleagues.

At some workplaces, workers started to develop symptoms and were forced to self-isolate.

The revulsion of workers at the disparity of the words telling them of the importance of infection control precautions and the reality in

the factory grew, as did a clear understanding of its root in the employers' drive for profits. After a day of mounting anger, the largest and most effectively unionised workplace in the private sector, Bombardier, was largely forced into a temporary shutdown, with furloughed workers receiving 80% of their pay.

Employees in unionised meat-packing companies organised walkouts - at first, 80 workers at ABP Meats in Lurgan, and then several hundred at Moy Park in Portadown.

The issue of infection control, and the denial of social distancing and PPE, dominated the media as workers across the entire manufacturing sector started to expose what they were experiencing.

In general, the demand in non-food manufacturing was for a temporary or partial shutdown, with workers furloughed on full or 80% pay. In essential workplaces like retail, the demand was for rigorous social distancing and PPE. The wave of walkouts continued with about 60 workers at Linden Foods in Dungannon refusing to enter for several hours. Like the other walkouts, this one resulted in a commitment to improvements from bosses.

Growing numbers of non-essential businesses are being forced to shut down by workers 'voting with their feet'.

It became a place for workers in different stores to come together.

The bosses have flagrant disregard for our safety. Some angry workers began sharing links to trade union websites.

We would have remained open unless we were specifically told to close. Despite the government finally announcing on Monday 23 March that all non-essential shops were to close, we received emails the next morning from upper management stating that we were expected to work until at least Friday.

Staff safety was put a firm second

Whether or not the government goes ahead with the planned increase, it is clear that workers' anger is growing. They are fed up with being told they are not important enough to have decent wages even though they can see the vital role they are playing in society - especially now.

increase to the national minimum wage due in April should be postponed. It has even raised that the minimum wage should be cut to save jobs!

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On the other hand, they are being made to live off poverty wages. How undervalued and underappreciated these workers are is clearer now than ever before.

Yet, the Institute for Fiscal Studies is now suggesting that the planned

keeping it running, and protecting the most vulnerable.



photo Kenneth Allen

Hull construction workers force bosses to shut down site over health and safety fears

Keith Gibson
Senior GMB union steward
(personal capacity)

The government says "stay at home" yet leaves the bosses to decide whether their profits are more essential! At the Tricoya site in Hull, steel construction workers employed by Engie Fabricom, are building a wood chip acetylation plant.

We have always worked in pairs for safety reasons. We share cabins that hold around 16 workers. The cabins are 5x2 metres and are airtight tested to protect against any chemical release incident. The government guideline on Covid-19 of a two-metre distance rule is therefore impossible to implement while working on site, and even during break times.

On 23 March the 100-strong workforce decided to withdraw its labour

until it received reassurances from the company that our idea to split the tea breaks, and work start and finishing times, would be implemented. This would halve both cabin and changing room occupancy. This was agreed, and the workforce went back on site.

That night Boris Johnson announced the need for everyone to stay at home. 'Necessary and unnecessary' work entered the fray. The next morning the workforce again refused to start work, demanding a lay-off on the agreed 38-hour week national trade union agreed pay rate.

Although the provision for lay off has temporarily been replaced by the furlough, an actual 20% cut in pay, workers are proud to have collectively united to protect the health and safety of the workforce, their families, and the wider local community, which in turn gives support to NHS workers on the front line.

Believing our work unnecessary, another refusal to risk worker health and safety saw a unanimous agreement not to return to work. I put forward that workers should only return to the site to put all the equipment back in the stores, to store tools away, and then return to the cabin area to await a response from management.

We put together a written collective grievance which included putting the company on notice that it had a duty of care to the workforce. After explaining the content of the grievance to a manager, he informed us that the head of HR was coming down to the site to address the workforce. He told the workforce that as of 25 March we would be sent home, and would be paid 80% of our wages through the furlough scheme until further notice.

All the workforce agreed to this proposal, and were relieved to be going home to their families.

While the government gives reassurances to the public that 'we are all in this together' and they will do 'whatever it takes', bosses are doing whatever it takes to protect their profits.

Go Ahead South Coast bus company run a network of National Express coaches. Workers were met by managers as they turned up for work on Thursday 19 March.

The drivers were told they were being laid off without pay from the following Tuesday. Drivers were in tears in the mess room, shocked and worried about how they were going to manage. They were expected to run coach services immediately after these meetings.

An all-day battle broke out between members of the RMT union and managers, resulting in a tea-time retreat. The company director said there had been 'a misunderstanding'.

But by Monday the company resorted to taking drivers out on re-tests, failing them on spurious grounds as a new way to get rid of them.

The company has acted appallingly, making agreements with the union, and within hours renegeing on them. The company has sent communications out of line with government advice, and communications claiming they had been agreed by the union, when they hadn't.

The company announced that as routes are cut, drivers would be put on their contractual hours. For

many who do regular overtime, this is a 20% wage cut.

But the union has overturned the company. It now accepts government advice - pay should be calculated on average hours actually worked.

Some drivers have been pushed to sign a company furlough agreement. They want to only pay us 80% of our wages.

It is the view of drivers in the union - and the Socialist Party - that no one should lose a penny for the impact of coronavirus. The fight for 100% of pay continues.

Key workers should make bold demands

The coronavirus epidemic has highlighted how important health and social care staff are in caring for some of the most vulnerable, and keeping society running. Through our work we help people to live safely, and with dignity, and reduce the strain on hospitals and A&Es. In a sector characterised by low pay and poor conditions, it is important that trade unionists and activists now make bold demands.

I am the union convenor in my workplace, a homeless charity in London. Although we have shut our day centre due to the pandemic, we are now being asked to return to staff the homeless hotels housing rough sleepers.

We have won a number of important concessions, including: full pay for all those self-isolating or off sick;

full pay for any locums who have had shifts cancelled or had to self-isolate; return to face-to-face work on a voluntary basis only; pause in all disciplinary hearings and restructure procedures until we return to the work place; weekly Joint Negotiating Committees to deal with workplace issues; for all employees to have the option of travelling to work via taxi, paid for by the employer, to reduce risk of contagion, and for all clients to be given mobiles to reduce face-to-face contact where necessary.

In an environment where even a journey to work can be a potential risk, it is important for us to demand every action is taken to ensure safety where possible, and that workers are treated with the respect they deserve.

Jack Jeffery
North London Socialist Party



photo JHUAPL/CiOw/NASA/CC

Bus drivers halt sackings - now restore our pay

A South Coast bus driver

While the government gives reassurances to the public that 'we are all in this together' and they will do 'whatever it takes', bosses are doing whatever it takes to protect their profits.

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Postal workers walk out over health, safety and junk mail

Gary Clark
CWU Scotland No.2 branch secretary

Postal workers give the public a great service. But in this is a time of national emergency - we should be doing this in as safe environment as possible.

We should only safely deliver essential items, with proper PPE and observe the two-metre safe distance. But from reports from all over the country, this is not happening.

Communication Workers Union (CWU) reps are going out and sourcing hand sanitiser etc for their members. It is shocking Royal Mail hasn't provided them.

The government says only essential work. What is essential about postal workers delivering advertising leaflets? This time could be used

to deliver medical supplies and other items to people in self-isolation, particularly those at-risk or being shielded.

We are reaching breaking point. But now we have to deliver a letter from the prime minister to every address in the country when thousands of postal workers are either off sick or in self-isolation.

Localised actions are already starting to take place. At the Alloa sorting office in Clackmannanshire in Scotland, workers have walked out over health and safety, and junk mail deliveries.



Working from home during the pandemic

A worker in the heritage sector

People's experience of the transition to working fulltime from home varies.

Many financial sector employers were more prepared. This was partly because their profits are better protected by a healthy workforce.

This is in stark contrast to 'non-essential' public services, such as the heritage sector. National heritage institutions only started to close their doors to the public one or two days after Boris Johnson's 16 March announcement that people should stay at home.

Nothing for staff

The heritage sector adheres to international standards to ensure there are comprehensive disaster plans for their collection items. However, this crisis has proven that many don't have any comprehensive plan for staff when their health and safety is at risk.

We were told simply to just wash our hands, and had very little access to preventative tools to stop the spread of the virus. It was obvious management were floundering.

Our employers have reiterated that they understand that people can't be as productive as they usually are in the office. However, they haven't spent out what this means.

Many homes are not equipped to be full-time workplaces. Many people have children and other caring

responsibilities to deal with on top of their work duties.

Many are working from their kitchen table, flatpack desks bought online or even the sofa. Sometimes more than one person is working from home.

Although some employers have circulated Health and Safety Executive guidelines, what happens if our homes fail these assessments?

What about your health?

Working for long periods of time without ergonomic chairs, height-adjustable desks or other equipment needed to create a comfortable working environment could aggravate current health issues or cause future ones.

Many people want to continue working, so it is important to ensure that you are a member of a trade union. Although unions can't meet in person, many union branches are busy working together to secure more favourable pay and working-from-home conditions. (See 'Organising in the workplace in the time of coronavirus' at socialistparty.org.uk).

The trade union movement must be campaigning for full pay for all staff. But also that we should be working a lot fewer hours.

This would offset the additional costs incurred at home - energy and other utility bills. However, most importantly, this would help offset the health and safety risk of working from home.

Adam Viteos
A Shop Worker

I work for one of the retail chains in Mike Ashley's empire. As more shops were closing, pressure began mounting for our chain to close too. But we were expected to lone work, rather than simply closing the shop down.

Lines of communication were set up between stores so lone workers could check in regularly - as if this would somehow guarantee their safety.

This move completely backfired.

Essential workers deserve more

Workers are receiving some very contradictory messages about their wage levels and the importance of their jobs. On the one hand, warehouse and food distribution workers, staff in supermarkets, cleaners, those providing care, and others are being told they are key workers - they are keeping society fed,

increase to the national minimum wage due in April should be postponed. It has even raised that the minimum wage should be cut to save jobs!

Whether or not the government goes ahead with the planned increase, it is clear that workers' anger is growing. They are fed up with being told they are not important enough to have decent wages even though they can see the vital role they are playing in society - especially now.

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In some places this new found confidence is breaking though. We've heard of staff starting petitions for higher wages in unorganised workplaces and taking the first steps to improve their pay and working conditions.

The minimum wage increase should go ahead. But low-paid workers need, and deserve, much more than £8.72 an hour. The trade unions should be demanding an immediate rise to at least £12 (£15

in London) as a step toward a real living wage of £15 an hour. The age exceptions to the national living wage should also be scrapped - you don't get a discount on your shopping and bills for being under 25, so why should you be paid less?

Angry and fed up key workers will increasingly be forced to take action and fight for the pay rises they need and deserve.

Helen Pattison
London Socialist Party

Thank you!

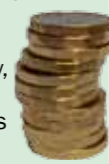
Unite Lancashire Community NW/11500 branch has donated £100. Branch secretary and treasurer Jim Leigh said: "We hope this will go a little way in helping the Socialist newspaper navigate through this crisis." Turn to page 2 to read our special coronavirus crisis financial appeal - 'help us continue to fight for workers and socialism.'



Coronavirus crisis special appeal

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The global coronavirus pandemic has exposed the fragility of capitalist food supply systems - whose rationale is based on maximising profits rather than meeting human needs. Everything - from the shortage of labour to pick fruit and vegetables, to the airfreighting of foods sometimes over thousands of miles, food insecurity, and price hiking - is currently under the spotlight. Today's health crisis means we cannot return to a system which means empty shelves while supermarket profits rocket skyward. In the following articles, Socialist Party members argue the case for a food system based on socialism - a model of production and distribution that is efficient and can meet of the population.

Supermarket supply chains Delivering short-term profits but not the goods we need

Socialist Party members in Usdaw shop and distribution workers' union

Many supermarket shelves have been left bare in recent weeks, as if locusts have accompanied the coronavirus. The government and their mouthpieces in the media have fuelled anger across the population by blaming the empty shelves on ordinary people panic buying and stockpiling essential items.

While some individuals may have bought too much, and there has been some stockpiling, this doesn't tell the whole story.

Between 1 and 21 March, supermarkets saw a 10% increase in sales. This is to be expected, as people who have been told to self-isolate for weeks, not eat out, and prepare for a lockdown, will obviously buy more to ensure they have enough for themselves and their families, and to minimise shopping trips.

The increase in purchasing is therefore modest, explicable, even justified. But what about the empty shelves which understandably left many - including key workers and the elderly - not able to purchase necessities?

Supermarkets operate using 'fast-moving consumer goods just-in-time' supply chains. This means most stores, especially smaller stores in cities which have been some of the hardest hit, do not carry excess stock. They base their deliveries on sales from the same period in previous years, 'like-for-like' sales in retail speak, and on their own marketing and sales plans.

It only takes a small disruption to the norm for these supply chains to fail and leave empty shelves. The disruption of the coronavirus crisis has been increased sales, especially on certain goods, and the just-in-time supply model has been exposed as being woefully short term and inflexible. It is only fit to make profit, not to meet need.

The inflexibility and short-termism is the fault of the supermarket bosses and companies. Firstly, they failed to anticipate increased sales, despite the examples of other countries. Secondly, they failed to react quickly enough

to the crisis, taking weeks to enact modest rationing and special shopping hours. And thirdly, in most cases they still have not altered business and marketing plans.

For example, delivery lorries are still arriving at stores carrying huge amounts of Easter eggs, taking up space which could be filled with essential goods. Instead, stock is left in warehouses, and only delivered in small batches, as if it is business as usual. Easter eggs may be a pleasant distraction from the stress of this crisis. However, most people would argue Easter eggs are low priority at the moment!

The spectre of a no-deal Brexit was also used to issue warnings about the inability of just-in-time supply chains to cope with even slight shifts in the chain, and the possibility of massive chaos and shortages.

Compounding these problems is the competition and duplication that exists in the supermarket industry. Competition laws restrict companies from sharing their separate warehouses, distribution centres and delivery lorries but these laws have been relaxed to cope with the crisis.

As the coronavirus crisis deepens, these problems could get even worse as delivery drivers and warehouse workers fall sick, and both UK and European supply chains buckle under the pressure.

This crisis and the consequences on food supply show the vital need for coordination and socialist planning of our food supply chain, rather than the chaos that the capitalist 'free market' has created.

The only way to ensure that companies, supermarkets and supply chains are run on the basis of long-term social need, rather than short-term private profit, is by bringing them into public ownership under democratic workers' control and management.

Retail and distribution workers have an important, central role in securing the safety and sustenance of the population. Retail unions should be demanding more control for workers in stores and warehouses to ensure this, and ultimately nationalisation of the major retailers to guarantee food supply.



photo Daniel Case/CC

Profits soar in supermarket sector

Iain Dalton
Usdaw union Broad Left chair

While the rest of the economy is reeling, the big supermarket chains are enjoying a profit bonanza. Photos have abounded on social media of supermarket shelves stripped bare. Confusion about what measures the government was planning to take, and talk of a total shutdown of the country, has fuelled increased purchases.

During a daily UK government briefing on 21 March, the environment secretary suggested that an extra £1 billion worth of food had been bought in the previous weeks. Supermarkets have reported 500% and even 700% increases on annual like-for-like sales in recent weeks.

With restaurants, cafes and schools closed, there are expectations that this alone could see an extra £15 billion in food sales through supermarkets. But with their already bigger store footprint, it's entirely possible

the big retail chains could make up some of the market share they had lost to the discounters over the last few years.

This is particularly the case with online food deliveries, where companies have been expanding their capacity. Many of the estimated 40,000 temporary workers hired are in this sector.

Belated efforts

But apart from these sales increases, the supermarkets will benefit from some of the government's emergency measures. The 100% rates holiday for retail means massive savings. Last year Tesco paid £750 million in business rates, while Sainsbury's paid £567 million and Morrisons £308 million. After this, shares in Sainsbury's went up 11.7%, Ocado 11.2% and Morrisons 10.8%.

But what about their hardworking staff making all this possible, working in one of the few workplaces remaining still open and, in the case of stores, coming into daily contact with cus-

tomers who may have coronavirus? Belatedly, supermarkets have taken some measures to implement social distancing measures and bring in PPE. They have made several rounds of improvements on sick pay in relation to coronavirus, with some companies announcing a 10% bonus to wages for the next couple of months.

But this is a pittance compared to their soaring profits. In some companies workers don't even reach £10 an hour, the demand that retail and distribution union Usdaw adopted back in 2016. The Institute for Fiscal Studies is lobbying for tiny minimum wage uplift scheduled for April to not go ahead (see p6).

Socialist Party members in Usdaw are demanding that retail workers' squeezed wages are commensurate with the key role they are currently playing ensuring the food supply. We are campaigning for a minimum wage of £15 an hour, a restoration of premium payments, and paid breaks that companies have stolen over the past decades.

Simon Carter

As global 'just-in-time' food supply chains break under the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, the idea of bringing more UK land into agricultural use is gaining traction.

At present, coronavirus travel restrictions, combined with the government's post-Brexit limits on using overseas seasonal labour, means that crops could be left rotting in fields (the recent floods have also impacted on production).

Farmers have said that all this could result in a shortage of 80,000 agricultural workers and have called for a 'land army' to be recruited - with the public purse meeting the bill!

Currently, the UK is 'food inse-

curer' and imports over 40% of food consumed. To avoid possible food shortages, a big increase in agricultural land and agricultural workers is required. Moreover, roughly twice as much land is used for grazing than crop production, but only produces less than 2% of the protein we eat.

Who owns the land?

So who owns the land? Last year the Guardian reported that more than half of all UK land is owned by less than 1% of the population - mainly aristocrats, corporations, city bankers and oligarchs. What's more, the EU and the UK government's farm subsidies mean some landowners receive £1 million or more a year - no benefits cap here!

Government ministers routinely say the country is at war with coronavirus. In World War Two the British government, faced with acute food shortages, requisitioned land and mobilised a land army of mainly women workers.

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Capitalism means empty shelves, food insecurity, and soaring profits - the case for a socialist alternative

Food poverty - what councils should be doing

Eating well will be a key means of staying fit and resisting the virus. For Boris and the royals, recovery won't be the struggle that it is for millions hit by the economic tsunami of coronavirus, on top of a decade of Tory austerity.

For all the warm words of comfort from the government of wealthy Etonians, the cold reality is over 1.5 million adults say they don't have enough food, and over half of all NHS workers are worried about getting food, according to food charity the Food Foundation.

Of the 1.5 million considered most at risk from C-19 and told to stay at home, over 800,000 were considered to be in food poverty before the crisis. Government promises for the army to supply food parcels to 400,000 vulnerable people will once again be too little, too late.

Even this cruel Tory government can't hide from the statistics that the poorest are most vulnerable in this coronavirus crisis.

With 500,000 claiming Universal Credit in recent days, most without savings and no prospect of money for weeks, many will be borrowing to stay afloat. Many unable to borrow will be forced to go hungry or steal.

It is estimated over six million, low-paid and insecure workers are still going to work, forced to for fear of being out of pocket to buy food.

Schools that have remained open are continuing to feed children on free school meals. As the days have gone by, the number of families not coping is rising dramatically, and greater numbers are turning up for emergency food parcels. The promises of "prepared meals, food parcels (for collection or delivery) or supermarket vouchers from schools", for the eligible 8.3 million children have not materialised for many.

There is a ticking time bomb waiting to explode if money and food aren't provided quickly. Food riots and stealing from supermarkets, which are already starting to happen in Italy, have forced the government there to act by distributing €400 million of food stamps.

For the most vulnerable, the elderly and isolated in working-class communities stripped of their welfare services by austerity, a letter from Boris at a cost of £5.8 million won't be any comfort.

As the government, the army and its team of charities fumble, what can be done to urgently address this crisis and to ensure food reaches those most vulnerable, those hit by the

mass lay-offs and at home without money to pay for the essentials? It is local Labour councils who are in the best position to act and put pressure on the Tories to step up, with an estimated £7 billion collectively held in reserves.

Labour councils should immediately set up emergency funds, using their reserves and borrowing powers, to ensure no one is left behind by the failures of Tory measures to respond, and get emergency payments to help workers abandoned by their bosses. Collectively, Labour council leaders can then send the bill to Boris and demand that central government funds all emergency spending and borrowing made by local councils.

With the full support of the Trade Union Congress and its six million members, the pressure on Johnson to act would be overwhelming.

Councils are in a powerful position to bring together their resources and direct food distributors to make sure there is a regulated supply of food and essentials that reaches everyone.

Where the elderly are isolated and without help, council rapid response teams could ensure food and care gets to everyone who needs it, resourced by the reemployment of the many council workers sacked in the last decade, on full-time contracts.

While this is an enormous and urgent task, it could be accomplished effectively and efficiently if council workers, their trade unions and the wider trade union movement, alongside democratically elected local community action committees, were mobilised to organise in their local communities.

The democratic oversight of the organised working class is essential to ensure that everyone's needs are met, that food and essential goods are distributed to all.

Huge pressure will grow in the coming days on the government to act. Equally, the silent hand of big business will be felt on Tory ministers to remind them of their need to be 'fiscally responsible' and not 'overspend'. They will only concede in the interests of workers and our communities what they are forced to by the pressure applied by the labour movement.

It is vital that trade unions and local trade union councils step up the pressure on their local Labour councils to do whatever it takes to end the food crisis engulfing working-class homes right now.

Nick Chaffey
Socialist Party national committee

Self-isolation class divide: decent homes for all!

Holly Eaton
West London Socialist Party

The nation has been told to stay home. But that doesn't mean the same thing for everyone.

The BBC's coverage of how people are rising to the challenges of self-isolation has included affluent professionals ensconcing themselves in their spare rooms or hotels, and allocating different bathrooms to infected and non-infected family members.

What about those of us who don't have enough rooms, let alone spare rooms, extra bathrooms or spacious lounges? The advice to stay at home, work from home, home-tutor children, self-isolate and shield the vulnerable is a considerably different challenge for those living within the confines of small, already heavily used spaces.

Successive neoliberal governments have created huge overcrowding for hundreds of thousands of households - 600,000 in England alone, says the National Housing Federation.

Over the past 20 years, overcrowding has spiked, with all of the increase in the rented sector.

Homeowners have around 60% more space than those who rent, and over half have two or more spare rooms.

According to the English Housing Survey, around 14% of renters are overcrowded, compared to 1% of homeowners. Overcrowding is at the highest rate ever among council and housing association tenants.

Now, with coronavirus spreading, having a spare room in which to self-isolate could mean the difference between life and death. Yet it is low-income social renters who are singled out for the bedroom tax, imposed on spare rooms by the Tory-Lib Dem coalition government in 2013.

Overcrowded households immediately need free, self-contained accommodation made available so people can self-isolate if necessary - and the bedroom tax must be scrapped straight away. But beyond that we also need an entirely different approach to housing.

A company called Under the



Overcrowding is at its highest rate ever among council and housing association tenants

Doormat is temporarily offering over 300 empty luxury homes in London for free to NHS staff who need to stay near work. They can't rent them out at a profit because of the pandemic.

These are just a fraction of the homes that are sitting empty. Just think what we could do if the all the resources were under democratic workers' control!

Homes, and the space within

them to live and flourish, should not just be a privilege of the wealthy. A socialist system would prioritise building housing for all - for its value as a home, not as a commodity to make profit for the wealthy.

Leicester: Nylacast worker exposes truth

Workers risk health, bosses protect wealth

Tessa Warrington
Leicester Socialist Party

Key workers continue to put themselves at risk. The absolute least we should expect is the same level of sacrifice from the bosses.

The Socialist has previously reported the lack of health and safety at Nylacast Engineering Plastic Solutions in Leicester. (See 'Worker's death could happen again at Leicester plastic factory' at socialistparty.org.uk).

In 2018, a worker, Tarsem Singh, died from an industrial accident. The judge in the court case described it as "an accident waiting to happen".

Despite being hit with a £300,000 fine, the firm has learnt nothing. A Nylacast worker contacted the Socialist to report further negligence

from the company in response to Covid-19.

Workers who 'choose' to stay home, will only receive statutory sick pay. To receive only 80% of their wage, workers must be given permission to self-isolate by the company.

The company brags that it has seen "no changes to our business and services" and "zero impact to our production and delivery". It claims 'key workplace' status in Leicester, despite having to close its facility in Pennsylvania, USA.

Nylacast claims "zero cases of colleagues affected by coronavirus". How can it tell?

Not because staff are being tested. No, because they're using the incontrovertible medical practice of checking workers' temperatures with thermal cameras!

The Socialist's whistleblower at

Nylacast says workers are still coming in with colds and coughs, and have little choice but to work in close quarters with each other.

Nylacast made £4.7 million profit in 2018, almost £9,000 from each employee. It spent an undisclosed amount acquiring another company, Viva Nylons, mid-lockdown.

The company has reportedly trumpeted its record: 'only' one workplace death.

The Socialist Party says one death is too many. Should health and safety concerns continue to play second fiddle to profit, then this number could easily rise.

Nylacast workers should unite together, collectively discuss their concerns and democratically decide on action to fight to protect their income, their health and their families.

Fully fund hospices to care for vulnerable children

I am a parent of a child with a terminal diagnosis. My daughter was diagnosed nearly six years ago, and since this time we have been using Shooting Star Chase Hospice in Guildford, Surrey. Over recent years, austerity measures have caused the hospice to cut vital services to many vulnerable children and their families.

The Covid-19 virus pandemic has caused further funding issues for the hospice, now under threat of closure.

When my daughter became acutely unwell in December last year, the Symptom Management Team was on call day and night to provide us with support when we needed it. If it wasn't for them, the task of caring for my daughter would have been unmanageable for us as parents.

I have no words to describe how

upset we are that we may lose this invaluable service, and I am sure many families would be feeling the same, especially when our children are so vulnerable to this new virus. To put it frankly, if my daughter was to contract this virus we would not have the option of a service like Shooting Star Chase to help us through the end of my daughter's life.

We need the government to urgently review the funding needed to keep this and all children's hospices open. They must be fully funded now and beyond. The austerity measures that have crippled children's hospices must stop with immediate effect. We need their support as a family through what has been an incredibly difficult journey.

James Lewis
Staines Socialist Party

Socialist Party Fighting Fund

	£ received	£ target	January to March 2020	Deadline: 2 April 2020
East Midlands	4,453	1,850		241%
South West	3,275	1,800		182%
Southern & SE	3,737	2,350		159%
London	6,495	4,600		141%
North West	1,608	1,150		140%
Northern	1,042	750		139%
Wales	2,953	2,300		128%
Eastern	1,469	1,200		122%
Yorkshire	2,602	2,550		102%
West Midlands	2,582	2,600		99%
Other	5,779	3,850		150%
TOTAL	35,995	25,000		144%

Support the working-class press in 2020

MAY DAY GREETINGS IN THE SOCIALIST

- Calling all trade union branches and committees, community campaigns and student groups!
- Show solidarity and fund the socialist press with a 2020 greeting
- Prices start at £30 for a small box - minimum price negotiable
- £55 for our most popular size, 1/16 of a page
- £90 for 1/8 and £170 for 1/4
- £300 for 1/2, £500 for a page
- socialistparty.org.uk/mayday

STOP PRESS

Refuse collection workers strike

Bin workers in Medway, Kent, walked out on 30 March over management's failure to follow social distancing directives, to provide adequate PPE and the closure of public toilets. The workers issued Section 44 notices (of the Employment Rights Act 1996) and stopped work. Talks are underway with the employer Medway Norse to resolve the situation.

Labour must resist 'Covid coalition'

Workers need their own voice and party



In the early stages of a war or national emergency, there is often a mood to pull together in the 'national' interest, and the idea that 'party politics' should be put to one side. An Opinium poll in the Observer showed trust in Boris Johnson has gone up. This is echoed in increased support for previously unpopular leaders elsewhere, such as Macron in France.

Leading Labour figures like John McDonnell have said this is not the time for "political point-scoring", and the leaders of the TUC have pledged to work with the government "in the national interest" (see 'Union independence must be maintained at socialistparty.org.uk').

Now senior Tories are floating the idea of a "Covid coalition" - some form of a national unity government.

However, despite this mood, there is no single national interest, but different class interests, which this coronavirus crisis is laying bare.

The instinct to stand in solidarity together is a strong one - not a 'British' value but a class one (see also p15). The millions who clapped for the NHS are an illustration of that, along with the more than 700,000 people who came forward



as volunteers.

Class solidarity is illustrated in the countless battles taking place in workplaces to try to win protective equipment, to fight against pay cuts and job losses, to close unnecessarily open workplaces. That stands in stark contrast to the instinct of the rich tax-avoiding bosses, demanding bailouts and refusing to pay wages.

The virus itself is not a respecter of class, but the experience of living through the crisis, and the chance of getting the necessary care, very

much displays the class divide - 'staying at home' in a tiny overcrowded flat; struggling on 20% less pay or inadequate benefits (see page 5). One week into the lockdown and already 1.5 million adults say they cannot get enough food. We have heard the lie "we are all in this together" before, and this crisis is exposing the inability of rotten capitalism to protect lives.

The greatest fear of the capitalists is how they get out the other side of this crisis. The economy is in an unprecedented nose-dive - described

by economic commentator Nuriel Roubini as "the fastest, deepest economic shock in history". Class polarisation will only deepen.

The challenge for the representatives of the capitalist class, is how do they roll back the state interventions and make the working class pay.

A form of national unity government, as far as the Tories and big business are concerned, would be a shield, to share the blame for the punishment they aim to mete out on the working class.

They would hope bringing Labour

leaders into the tent would provide a cover that would make anti-working class policies more palatable.

It is an illustration of how the boss class views Keir Starmer as a safe pair of hands for capitalist interests, that the Tory MP raising this idea, George Freeman, said: "When Labour have a sensible new leader, Keir Starmer [if elected] should be invited to a Covid cabinet, Cobra and joint No 10 briefings."

The sigh of relief that the unreliable Corbyn has gone is almost audible. In fact, none of the candidates for Labour leader opposed the idea of a unity government.

The current dominant mood of standing together can mean that, temporarily, class collaboration in some form of national government could be accepted.

But ten years of austerity and the reality exposed by this crisis will make it much harder to get away with forcing the working class to pay.

The tolerance for a Labour Party that has not stood up and expressed workers' anger, and that is prepared to work hand in hand with the Tories to defend the interests of the capitalists, could be short-lived.

A national unity government runs a great risk for the ruling class: that workers' anger wouldn't be contained by the Labour Party under its new leader, but could find expression in struggle and in efforts to forge a new working-class party, with a socialist programme. It is that risk that could stay their hand.

Emergency legislation

Trade unions must be on guard against attacks on workers' interests

Within just a few days, Tory ministers managed to drive their 329-page emergency coronavirus bill through both houses of parliament.

The new Act gives the government unprecedented and widespread powers. Along with some 'secondary legislation' measures enacted just before, it gives powers to a range of state officials and the police to close premises, stop events, restrict or close transport networks, enforce 'social distancing', order isolation, detain people, and much else.

It also provides power to close the UK borders.

Many of the temporary measures to protect the health of workers and their families, and save lives, will be widely supported, despite the limits on freedoms and rights. The Act also includes measures such as allowing recently retired NHS staff to return

to work without any loss of pension rights.

But there are powers in the Act which could potentially impact badly on the health of sections of the population. For instance, it gives councils the power to downgrade care for the disabled and the elderly.

In addition, there are measures which could be misused. For example, it will be more straightforward for doctors to be able to certify a death without actually seeing the deceased person; and the signature of only one doctor rather than two will be necessary to section someone on mental health grounds.

It was for reasons like these that even some Tory MPs expressed disquiet. A Kent Tory MP, Tom Tugendhat, argued that some of the powers could be used in a "malicious fashion". The criticisms led the government to promise a six-monthly 'review' of the measures - which have been legislated to re-

main in force for two years!

Why two years, when the top health representatives are saying that special measures will be necessary for six months? The trade union movement needs to be on guard for the many possible ways the Act could be used against workers' interests.

The foremost aim of capitalist governments is not protecting people's lives and health but defending the interests of big business and the super-rich. With the economy plummeting, sharp and major battles lie ahead over who will pay the price of the crisis - battles in which the government will seek to use laws and the justice system against workers' struggles.

The new legislation could also be used against other democratic rights, such as the regular holding of elections in which political representatives can be removed.

The Tory government can't be



trusted to make decisions on these issues in the interests of working-class people.

The trade unions and working people need to fight for the right to be able to check and veto all emer-

gency measures - and assess and control the way they are used. This is the only way to ensure they are used solely to safeguard the health and other interests of the overwhelming majority in society.



photo Paul Mattsson

More than ever, we need accountable union leaders

Dave Semple, PCS National Executive Committee (personal capacity)

On 26 March, the leadership of the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union, which represents civil servants and private sector workers on government contracts, voted to suspend the union's national elections. With the union's National Executive Committee (NEC) and departmental executives elected annually, there is concern that this would in effect be a cancellation.

This decision comes at a crucial time. The PCS leadership is in daily discussions with the Cabinet Office, while the union's groups are dealing with departments, as well as contractors like Interserve, as public services have been thrown into chaos by the Covid-19 crisis. With such complex negotiations going on, it is more important than ever that they are accountable to members through elections.

Immediately prior to the NEC debate on the elections, members of the PCS Broad Left Network (BLN), in which the Socialist Party participates, raised concerns that the senior officers of the NEC were far too weak in the negotiations with the Cabinet Office.

Demands

Some of the demands posed by negotiators included a "moratorium" on office closures, an "above inflation pay rise" rather than the 10% demand agreed by PCS annual delegate conference, a delay to changes to civil service redundancy rights for a year, and a 2% reduction in pension contributions. Members would welcome all of these as a step towards more in the future, but BLN supporters queried why our negotiators should reduce the union's own demands before the scheduled negotiations had even taken place.

On the contrary, workers are suddenly looking to the trade union movement for leadership in a way that hasn't happened since the mass strikes of 2011. If anything, we should be demanding deep and long-lasting change, including the kind of substantial investment in IT and protective equipment that would allow tens of thousands more members to work from home, and

the others to work safely in their offices, where they are needed to support vulnerable people, or to maintain the infrastructure that delivers benefits and other services.

After the NEC meeting the union's senior officers, including president Fran Heathcote and general secretary Mark Serwotka, published correspondence with the employers that had been sent before the NEC even met, which increases our concerns.

In a letter to Mervyn Thomas, an executive director in the civil service and key representative of the bosses, the PCS representatives utterly failed to take up the question of the additional staffing that will be required by the civil service during the crisis. The very most it raises on this is that no fixed-term member of staff be let go, and that "in areas where there is a requirement for additional resources to cope with the coronavirus crisis" fixed-term staff should be made permanent.

Permanent jobs

In fact, all fixed-term staff should be made permanent and thousands of extra permanent jobs are urgently needed. In a civil service which has lost more than a hundred thousand staff over the last ten years the scale of the crisis is clear. Yet the union's leadership is failing, to seriously raise the democratically agreed demands of the union with the employer.

The suspension of elections needs to be put into this context. Mark Serwotka repeatedly told the NEC that a legal ballot was deliverable, but that he did not want it to go ahead. Socialist Party members put forward extremely measured alternatives, and agreed that any deterioration in the situation could well result in a need to suspend elections, but that with Serwotka's repeated assurance that a legal ballot was deliverable, this should proceed, with additional time and support to drive up turnout from the usual meagre 10%. But these proposals were denounced in thunderous terms by Serwotka and his supporters in 'Left Unity'.

Socialist Party members in PCS met online on 28 March to discuss the situation, more convinced that the current leadership of the union must be replaced in order to put the union on the war footing it needs.

By a Jobcentre worker

More than half a million claims to working-age benefits such as Jobseekers' Allowance and Universal Credit have been made in the last two weeks. And that number seems to be accelerating as the coronavirus develops into a crisis of capitalism.

In one day last week, 105,000 claims were made in a single day. This is happening at a time when 43% of staff at the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) are self-isolating because they are vulnerable, are looking after children, or have symptoms of the virus.

With hundreds of thousands of telephone calls to the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) going unanswered from those being sent home on unpaid leave by billionaire bosses, it is clear that coronavirus might be the most immediate cause of the chaos. But Tory austerity has a huge amount to answer for. With more than 30,000 jobs lost since 2010, DWP is a shadow of its former size. Many of the staff lost were among the most experienced too.

Meanwhile, Tory determination to push ahead with the supposedly "digital first" Universal Credit has been shown for the sham it is. Claimants in their hundreds began to show up at Jobcentres because they were not getting answers to questions asked via their online journals, or when they made phone calls. Initially, DWP tried to keep Jobcentres open, but this was quickly abandoned in the face of fury from staff, and rapidly accelerating restrictions from the government. Jobcentres have now been closed to all but the vulnerable.

Common interest

Claimants and staff have a common interest: for an effective social safety net to be provided to all those affected by the crisis, and to protect all those - both staff and claimants - for whom face-to-face is the only way of getting help. To deliver services properly, DWP needs tens of thousands of permanent staff immediately, not merely the 1,500 it has begun to recruit. On 27 March, DWP announced an internal move of around 3,000 staff from "non-essential" duties to primary benefits such as Jobseeker's Allowance. Even this will not be enough to cope with the colossal demand.

Recruitment, if not accompanied by the reversing of the office closures programme that has decimated DWP offices over the last five years, will produce problems when it comes to social distancing. DWP must be pushed to open temporary Jobcentres in towns around the UK. But they must also acquire sufficient buildings to house thousands of additional staff whose job will be to work with claimants to get enough evidence so their claims can be put into payment as soon as possible.

Staff need sufficient protective equipment, and a stringent cleaning regime for offices. This is far beyond what privatised cleaning services can provide, unless DWP offers to throw more money at a contract -



photo State Farm/CC

padding the profits of companies like Interserve at a time of national crisis.

These services must be taken back in-house straightaway, with the purpose of immediately recruiting more cleaners and offering pay rises for these poorly paid staff.

Where effective cleaning, protective equipment and supplies such as hand sanitiser are not forthcoming, the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union, which represents staff in DWP, should be prepared to

organise walkouts. Walkouts over safety have happened, or come close to happening, at a number of offices such as Dalston in London and Springburn in Glasgow.

A trade union-led campaign on the basis of 'safety, staffing and services' would get a huge echo from staff, who are under enormous pressure, and could be targeted at supporting the huge numbers of new claimants.

These claimant numbers are not going to simply disappear once the

initial crisis, of self-isolation and social distancing, abates. The depth of the economic crisis facing the global capitalist order is reflected in the \$2 trillion stimulus package being mustered by the US Congress; this is roughly half the total cost of World War II to American capitalism, adjusted for inflation.

The priority of DWP must be getting benefit claims into payment, and ensuring that people have enough to look after themselves and their families. A trade union-

led campaign on safety, staffing and jobs could link up with unemployed workers, including those organised by Disabled People Against Cuts, to demand significant changes.

Increased benefits

The Tories have increased the value of Universal Credit by £20 per week, in response to the crisis. For a single claimant over 25, the value of a UC claim will rise from £317.82 to £409.89 per month. But this does not even return benefits to the level

they would have been at, had they kept pace with inflation instead of either being completely frozen or rising by 1%, since the last crisis.

Other aspects of the benefit system have been improved in response to the crisis, such as increases in the value of housing benefit for those renting from private landlords, and easing of the rules which discouraged many self-employed workers from claiming UC. Yet, this is not close to providing the universal safety net de-

manded by socialists. More can be done. Emergency payments for all unemployed workers, equivalent to a living wage, should be a central demand of the labour movement, to ensure all workers weather the storm of this crisis.

Additionally, as an immediate measure, all sanctions must be scrapped. DWP has issued guidance to workers that indicates that where workers have been put on unpaid leave, or are likely to return to work, their "claimant commitment" (the

document they are obliged to sign which lays out what they have to do to look for further work, in order to get benefits) does not have to include work search requirements. But this is initially for a month, with nothing clearly stated about what will happen after that period.

DWP, in order to reduce workloads, has introduced a strategy it calls "trust and protect"; this is a temporary relaxation of the evidence requirements on claimants to get claims into payment as fast as possible. It is a complex task, trying to get DWP the evidence it requires when it comes to children, childcare, private rental agreements, self-employment, habitual residence, educational status or how much capital you possess.

The strategy announced by DWP will take claimants at their word, with claims being "repaired" later, after the crisis. Given how complex providing this information can be, it would be absolutely unacceptable for claimants to be subjected to fines or repayments just because DWP doesn't have sufficient staff to cope with the pressure on the benefit system. Yet nothing has been said about what will happen after the crisis.

Requirements dropped

For those people claiming "new style" Employment and Support Allowance, which is for those who are unable to work due to their health, the requirement to be assessed has been temporarily suspended. Claimants will be awarded three months "limited capability for work", with no evidence requirements, if they are suffering from coronavirus; work search requirements will be dropped, and "work prep" - steps that claimants can take that are about getting ready for work without actually looking for a job - can also be reduced or removed. Yet this guidance is not as prominent as it could be; local PCS reps have been taking the lead in publicising it to members.

To cope with the volumes, many of the most experienced decision makers dealing with disability benefits like PIP are being moved to other benefits, such as Jobseekers Allowance. The impact on PIP claimants, who are in the process of disputing a disallowance, will be a very long wait. The process can already take more than a year in some cases. If no action is taken, these claims will simply close, until such time as the dispute is finally heard, having gone through a much depleted DWP and HM Courts and Tribunals Service. DWP does not seem to have even considered this. Again, the task seems to fall to grassroots union reps.

Socialist Party members in PCS, working on the shop floor of DWP offices, will continue to fight for unity between the workers who deliver social security and those workers who rely upon it. This unity is a class unity: to defend our safety, to deliver a crucial public service and to secure the sufficient staffing to do so, while also fighting for the best possible social security network for the unemployed, those too ill to work, the disabled and those who are retired.

Going viral



Socialist letters and comments on the coronavirus crisis

The Covid-19 pandemic is a world social crisis which touches every aspect of life. The iniquities and failings of the capitalist system are being exposed, and workers and communities are organising in response. Send us your comments, reports, anecdotes and thoughts, in not more than 200 words, to editors@socialistparty.org.uk

Chronic cuts and coronavirus - an overwhelmed NHS leaves patients in pain and anxiety

A few weeks ago, I was referred by my GP for an ultrasound scan which found a large cyst on my left ovary, probably caused by endometriosis. I was told by a consultant that it's so large that it absolutely has to be removed by surgery, and possibly my left ovary too. Under what were then relatively normal conditions, it was a minimum two-month wait for a simple, short operation which might not even need an overnight stay. Even at that point, they said it could be up to six months' wait depending on how Covid-19 develops. I got a letter from the hospital on 25 March which told me that my pre-op appointment with the surgeon has been rescheduled to January 2021! I called the next day and the hospital confirmed it currently looks like my operation will take place next year. That's 12 months for the cyst on my left ovary to keep growing, making it more likely the ovary will need to be

removed. They weren't even sure if the ultrasound scans I was due to have - to keep an eye on any growth - would be going ahead! As if that wasn't bad enough, I have a smaller cyst on my right ovary too. I have no idea how long it will take for that one to grow so large that it overwhelms the other ovary. Six months? 12 months? If my operation is delayed until next year, will I have either ovary left? This is the reality of NHS cuts and privatisation over past decades, both from the Tory and New Labour governments. On 26 March Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak applauded NHS workers. But they have created a nightmare situation for them, and still refuse to provide them with adequate PPE and tests. Cancer patients are having chemotherapy stopped so hospitals can free

up capacity to fight Covid-19. I'm 25 and I'm really scared I could be left infertile. Unless my hospital changes the plan - and I have every intention of harassing them till they do! Covid-19 is an enormous crisis, and obviously many 'non-urgent' procedures would have been delayed even with a fully funded and operational NHS. But the situation facing me and many others - important but often quick, simple procedures being put off endlessly - is purely down to brutal austerity which has gutted public services. I can't fault the care I was given by my GP and the hospital - but they have been put in an impossible situation, and this is what it comes down to. The Tories and the Blairites have to face a reckoning for what they've done. **Mary Finch**
East London Socialist Party

Burying bad news

Enfield council held a planning committee meeting on 24 March, two days after the government's belated lockdown of the country.

The justification for the council meeting was that only essential business was going to be discussed. However, this was not the case, as the non-essential but controversial Meridian Water housing development was also on the agenda.

The public was not allowed to attend because of health and safety. It begs the question, why was it safe for the councillors to attend? The whole thing suggests that the council deliberately chose to proceed in order to vote through controversial decisions while avoiding public scrutiny.

As expected, a green light was given to the council's plans for the second phase, which will see 2,300 homes built. Only 40% of them will be 'affordable', and none at social rent levels - which makes them all unaffordable for local residents in need of housing.

One councillor, a Tory, voted against the plans, stating (in the local press) his opposition to the lack of affordable homes. His stance is no doubt opportunistic, but the fact that a Tory is able to criticise a Labour council for not even adhering to its own policy (which is for 50% 'affordable' homes) is in itself shameful.

The Meridian for Council Homes grassroots campaign - for 100% council homes at the lowest social rent - also

slammed the council for cynically using the lockdown to forward its pro-developers agenda. **North London Socialist Party member**

Cuts comparison

Interviewed on German TV news channel ARD, a medical expert confirmed that in Germany they are planning to have 100,000 coronavirus tests a day in the next few weeks.

Their health system has been supplied with an additional 10,000 ventilators since the start of the year, suggesting that a decision was made to increase capacity as soon as the outbreak in Wuhan became known.

Despite the fact that the German health system has, like our NHS, also been subject to cuts and privatisation, it proves that when you have more staff, equipment and overall capacity, you can deal with such a crisis much better and save lives.

Here, the Tories can't be allowed to gloss over the fact that they have starved our NHS of resources and have left it considerably weakened to cope.

Domenico Hill
Bristol

Lack of care

My friend works as a carer in the community, and like many others gives much but gets very little from their

WHAT'S YOUR VIEW?
editors@socialistparty.org.uk

Building the Socialist Party

Finding new ways to meet, sell the Socialist and distribute our campaign leaflets



Socialist Party members have maintained regular branch meetings and recruitment discussions by utilising online technologies photo Kris O'Sullivan

London

All our online branch meetings have been brilliant. Lots of people are attending - members new and old, people at their first meetings, and those taking part to find out more about the Socialist Party.

Our Socialist Party day schools, aimed at newer members, are happening fortnightly. Three times a week we Lunctime Link-up so our members stuck at home can still meet, discuss and plan.

Many of our members are on the frontline and fighting alongside their fellow workers for PPE, pay and against job losses. Already the new public Facebook group for the National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN), to share examples of battling the bosses, is proving vital.

The Socialist Party joined #ClapforourCarers, adding the essential demands for PPE, full pay and funding.

Where possible our members are giving out and sticking up our Workers' Charter (see back page), selling the Socialist and collecting donations. And, of course, our members are warriors of the working class and for socialism on social media.

It's a tough and unprecedented time for workers and young people, but the ideas and work of the Socialist Party is more vital than ever.

Paula Mitchell

Leeds

I dropped off the Socialist for someone who normally buys it regularly at meetings. She said: 'Wait, I will get the money'. I was handed coins still a bit damp from the sanitiser, very safe.

Kevin Pattison

Stratford, east London

We sold the Socialist and distributed our Workers' Charter (see back page) where hundreds of members of civil service union PCS are still working. We wore protective gloves.

Everyone going in took a leaflet. We gave people the option of taking a leaflet from our campaign table, so as not to get near us.

Hannah Sell

Coronavirus, capitalism and worldwide socialism Committee for a Workers' International reports

The Committee for a Workers' International (CWI - the socialist international organisation to which the Socialist Party is affiliated) is posting regular features from CWI sections around the world, including **South Africa, the USA, France, Japan, Nigeria**, and more.

These articles analyse the failings of capitalism, exposed by the coronavirus pandemic; report on working-class struggles to secure safe working conditions and health coverage and food security; and how CWI sections are advancing socialist programmes to deal with this immediate crisis and a post-coronavirus world. See socialistworld.net



ALL IN THIS TOGETHER?

The 'Blitz spirit' myth

In the first of a series of articles on 'war, global crises and working-class struggle', **Chris Holmes** exposes the myth of class unity during the second world war.

The 'spirit of the Blitz' has often been evoked during the current Covid-19 crisis. It presents a reassuring image of a British national characteristic - a plucky nation united in the face of adversity, keeping calm and carrying on because we are all in it together.

However, this is a myth that does not reflect the true experiences of working-class people during WW2. Moreover, those experiences reflect the inequalities we face in the present coronavirus crisis.

Even before the war had started, military strategists had developed theories of bombing cities to break civilian morale and the will to fight, thereby avoiding the horrors of the war of attrition seen in the trenches of World War One. At the same time, governments in the late 1930s started to develop civil-defence systems.

However, these 'air raid precautions' were far from being the same for everyone. In the West End of London, hotels and private member clubs installed deep bomb-proof shelters.

Following the Munich crisis in 1938, the Conservative-led government developed Anderson shelters that provided some protection if installed in a suburban garden. However, provisions for those Londoners living in overcrowded tenement buildings in the East End were virtually non-existent.

Working-class action

When the regular nightly bombing of London began in the autumn of 1940 - known as the Blitz - working-class Eastenders took matters into their own hands.

Most memorably, in a campaign led by the Communist Party, a group of Eastenders occupied the Savoy Hotel one evening, along with its deep shelter, to highlight the inequalities of 'civil defence'.

Trotskyists of the Workers' International League (forerunners of the Militant Tendency and today's Socialist Party) initiated a campaign to open up the deep tube lines for air raid shelters. They encouraged the public to break open the chained tube station gates (which were locked at 11pm) and occupy the stations. This proved to be popular.

And the government was forced

to turn many of the stations over to use as shelters for the rest of the war.

Nonetheless, 43,000 civilians were killed in the Blitz, most of them in the crowded working-class districts. Resentment at the inequality of protection was such that when King George VI and Queen Elizabeth visited the bomb-damaged East End they were actually booed.

Prime Minister Churchill had also been booed when visiting the area. Perhaps that's why when 173 people were killed in an air raid when sheltering in Bethnal Green Tube station he hushed up the tragedy.

Propaganda

Much propaganda was made of the fact that the royal family had chosen to stay in London rather than seek the safety of Canada, as was suggested at one point. However, in truth, they may have been in Buckingham Palace by day, but they spent each night in Windsor Castle away from the main bombing targets.

Queen Elizabeth famously claimed after Buckingham Palace had been bombed that "now she could look the East End in the face". But, in reality, only some outhouses in the palace were damaged, and the royal family were far away!

Inequality extended to the routines of daily life. While ordinary families struggled to feed themselves with the food available under rationing, for the rich, life often continued as normal. Foreign visitors to London were amazed at the quality of food still available in West End hotels, and a new popular term 'Ritz-krieg' was coined.

Similarly, campaigns to grow vegetables in gardens and to keep chickens helped supplement the diet of the suburban middle classes, but provided little help in the overcrowded East End.

In such circumstances, it is not surprising that many took matters into their own hands. The black market thrived, and between 1940 and 1942 there was a crime wave as full advantage was taken of the blackout and abandoned bombed-out houses.

Despite this, there were remarkable acts of altruism and heroism as communities pulled together. Childcare was shared, and bombed out families were taken in by their neighbours. Tens of thousand vol-



Children in London's East End made homeless after an air raid

unteered for organisations such as the Auxiliary Fire Service, Red Cross, Air Raid Precautions (ARP) and Civil Defence rescue.

Despite the horrors of nightly bombing, and later in the war the V2 rocket attacks, a significant defeatist attitude never developed among the communities which were suffering most from these attacks.

In fact, the only incidence of defeatism, ironically, came from the aristocratic circle around Tory politician Lord Halifax. After the fall of France in 1940, he argued for a negotiated peace with Nazi Germany on the basis that the British Empire was left alone.

Solidarity

The solidarity and determination that working-class communities displayed during the blitz did not come largely from abstract ideas of patriotism. Instead, just as is happening at the moment with the Covid crisis, communities pulled together in instinctive acts of class solidarity.

This was not a uniquely British phenomenon arising from the supposedly national characteristic of 'bulldog stoicism'. To the surprise of British strate-

gists, who believed that a campaign of bombing German cities would break enemy morale, in Hamburg, Dresden and Berlin the same 'spirit of the Blitz' was displayed by German working-class communities. These suffered approximately ten times the level of civilian casualties suffered by the bombing of British cities.

The 'spirit of the Blitz' was a contrived piece of wartime government propaganda. Even the iconic photograph that summed this up - showing 'business as usual' - was notoriously staged; the 'milkman' was actually the photographer's own assistant who had borrowed a uniform.

The propaganda campaign had a two-fold purpose. Firstly, to maintain civilian support for the war effort - although this was largely unnecessary. The nowadays much quoted 'Keep Calm and Carry On' campaign was, in fact, never used in wartime. Market research showed that people found it patronising and offensive, and so it was never actually implemented.

Secondly, the 'spirit of the Blitz' was evoked as means of securing support for the USA's entry into the war.



The 'spirit of the Blitz' was a contrived piece of wartime government propaganda

The classic propaganda film 'London can take it' presented a narrative of an undaunted Britain willing to fight on alone. It was produced for an American audience by the Ministry of Information in 1940, at the time of Britain's lowest point in the war, and played a significant part in swaying public opinion before the attack on Pearl Harbour.

Then, as now, working people did not need patronising lectures about their communal spirit. Altruism and solidarity were instinctive reactions in the context of common struggle. What they needed was practical support and a genuinely equal experience of the crisis - which of course the government was unable to provide.

CORONAVIRUS

A WORKERS' CHARTER



National Health Service

- Emergency increase in funding for the NHS and for social care
- Adequate protection for all front-line workers
- NHS to take over private healthcare facilities and staff, and any other private facilities necessary for care, quarantine, and supplies. No compensation to the private fat cats
- Emergency training of NHS staff to deal with the coronavirus crisis
- Resources to be mobilised from government and big-business sources so that anyone with flu or cold-like symptoms has the right to a free coronavirus test with results available within hours, as has been the case in S.Korea and some other countries. Requisition private testing and analysis facilities
- Increase production to meet the urgent need of more protective and medical equipment, including ventilators and virus testing. Convert production where necessary, under the democratic control of workers in those industries and in the wider workforce.
- Reverse privatisation in the NHS, remove the privateers and cancel all the estimated £50 billion annual PFI payments
- Nationalise the big pharmaceutical companies to guarantee research, production and supply of medicines, vaccines and treatments
- Suspend fees for overseas NHS patients - treat all patients for free without the need to register to control the spread. Scrap prescription charges

Pay and benefits

- Work or full pay. Workers, especially those on low pay, can't afford to lose 20% of their income. Any worker who has to self-isolate

- Tests and full pay for all
- Take over private health and other necessary facilities. Not a penny to the profiteers
- Socialist planning not capitalist chaos

This charter is for discussion and debate in workplaces and communities so that we can organise to defend our health, safety and rights during the crisis. Get in touch if you would like to join a Socialist Party online meeting.

or cannot go to work should receive full pay from day one and not be forced to take annual leave. Pay should be paid directly to the worker not via the employer

- Increase benefits to the level of the national minimum wage. No delay in the payment of benefits
- Increase the minimum wage immediately to at least £12 an hour, £15 in London
- Workers who follow health advice to be absent from work to avoid potential spread should be excluded from any attendance-management procedures
- Open the books of any company threatening redundancies or closure to the inspection by the workforce and trade unions
- To defend workers' jobs and incomes, industries should be nationalised under democratic workers' control and management with compensation only on the basis of proven need.

Public services and housing

- Emergency funding to take on more workers in essential services. Resources to protect workers, patients, and service users
- Councils to coordinate a local

response. Scrap existing cuts budgets. Councils to use reserves and borrowing powers to fund necessary jobs and services

- 24 hour, adequately staffed, local authority helpline for vulnerable and elderly people forced to self-isolate.
- Community and trade union control over local distribution of food, medicines and other supplies
- Workload demands must be reduced and time made available to prioritise protecting the health, safety and welfare of staff and service users. Workers asked to work from home must be supplied with adequate equipment, and performance monitoring should be scrapped
- Quality childcare for vulnerable families and children of essential workers must be organised under the democratic control of education and care workers, with adequate protection for all. Emergency local authority provision of meals to children normally in receipt of free school meals under community and trade union control
- Nobody should lose their home because of coronavirus. Mortgage and rent payments should be

suspended. Government funds for democratically controlled local authority hardship funds for landlords in genuine need

- Councils to take over empty homes to house the homeless and those in inadequate housing. Hotels to be used to provide emergency accommodation
- Funding for 24 hour helplines and emergency accommodation for victims of domestic violence
- No action to be taken for non-payment of utilities. Free broadband for all

Trade union and workers' action

- Trade unions to establish an all-union health and safety committee in every workplace to agree joint actions required to guarantee safety
- For the Trade Union Congress and the unions, the biggest voluntary national organisation with over six million members across the country, to prepare to lead national coordinated strike action to protect people should necessary health and safety measures not be taken
- Democratic trade union oversight over any government or private

sector emergency measures taken to contain the virus, such as restrictions on public assemblies or strikes and supermarket supply rationing

- No profiteering. Prices to be controlled by democratically elected committees of workers and consumers.
- No erosion of workers' right to organise, including the democratic functioning of trade unions and parties
- No trust in the Tories and other pro-capitalist politicians who are responsible for the crisis in the NHS and other public services to deal with the coronavirus crisis. For a mass workers' party, drawing together workers, young people, socialists and activists from workplaces and community, environmental, anti-racist and anti-cuts campaigns, to provide a fighting political alternative to the pro-big business parties
- The resources are there to deal with the crisis. Introduce an immediate 50% levy on the hoarded £750 billion lying idle in the bank accounts of big business.
- The capitalist market system that prioritises profit and is based on competition cannot keep society safe. We need a democratic socialist plan of production and distribution to meet the needs of the majority in society. Take into public ownership the banks, financial institutions and the top 150 companies that dominate the British economy and run them under the democratic control and management of working-class people so that we can make the decisions about what is needed. Compensation to be paid only on the basis of proven need.
- For international socialist cooperation