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the Socialist

Formerly **Militant**

One rule for Cummings, another for us

More Tory lies over PPE and testing

Dangerous return to school and work strategy

**RECKLESS
LYING
CHEATS**

When even the Daily Mail turns on a Tory prime minister, you know the government is in trouble.

Under the headline 'What planet are they on', the Mail called for the PM's chief adviser Dominic Cummings to resign or be sacked for flagrantly flouting lockdown rules.

Scientists, bishops, ex-police chiefs and Tory MPs lined up to criticise Johnson's defence of Cummings, and to call for Cummings to go. Ordinary people who have stuck to the guidelines for weeks, often at great personal hardship, are outraged at the Tories' hypocrisy.

Week after week we have watched Tory ministers step onto the rostrum, flanked by scientific and medical advisers, and tell lies about PPE, testing and care home deaths. Now they are trying to send workers back to unsafe workplaces, and open schools more widely, even though the virus is not under control, and no mass testing and tracing system is in place.

Johnson's car-crash announcement on phase two of the lockdown inflicted a huge dent in the credibility of the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic. Exactly two weeks later he dug a bigger hole for himself declaring that in driving 260 miles to Durham with a wife who had coronavirus, Cummings had "acted responsibly, legally and with integrity".

Cummings' subsequent press conference, his long-winded and incredible justification of his behaviour, will have done nothing to dispel the idea that there is one law for those in powerful positions and another for the rest of us.

Professor Stephen Reicher, a member of Sage, the scientific body that advises the government, tweeted that in a few short minutes their advice had been trashed: "Be open and honest, we said. Trashed. Respect the public we said. Trashed. Ensure equity, so everyone is treated the same, we said. Trashed. Be consistent we said. Trashed. Make clear 'we are all in this together.' Trashed."

> Continued on p2

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The Socialist Party says

No return to school and work unless safety guaranteed

Workers' and trade union control of workplace safety

PPE and testing for all

Socialist planning to save and create jobs

For a new mass workers' party to provide a political alternative

Care home workers suffer PPE shortage and job loss fears

A Unison member, Leicester

My neighbour contacted me the other night. She is a care worker at a home for the elderly. She has seen the Socialist Party posters on my fence.

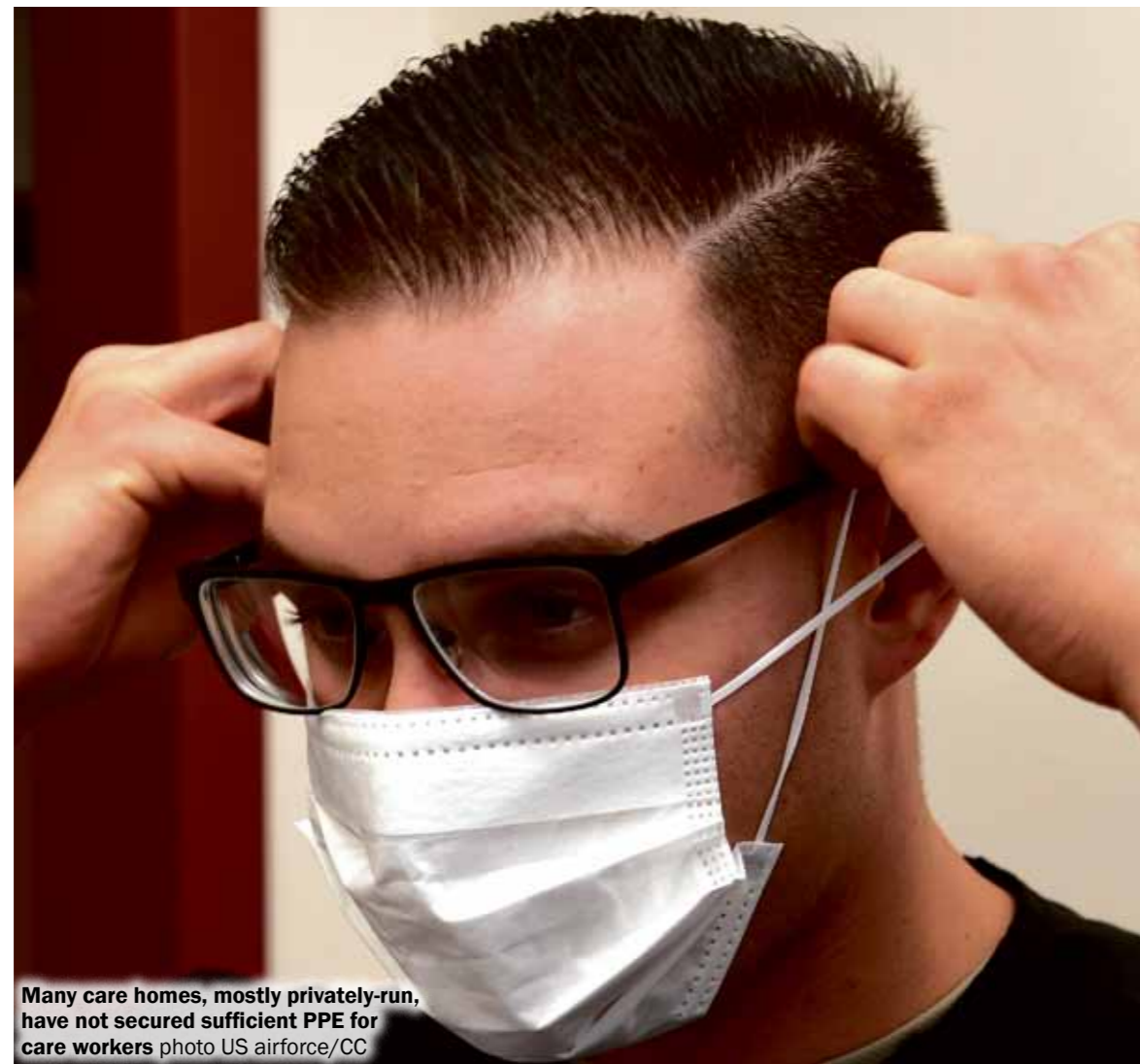
She showed me a communication that had been sent to all staff from her boss. It talks about the difficulty in obtaining PPE, hand sanitisers, and so on.

Currently, the home has had no glove supplies for three weeks. The message to staff asks that all staff "bear this in mind and use PPE appropriately and try to be cautious when using any sundries or PPE. Where appropriate, you should always use what is required, but please avoid any inappropriate use or wastage."

My neighbour asks: "What am I supposed to do, use my gloves on more than one person?" The employer's message is both insulting and worrying for staff. The home has already had several deaths from suspected Covid-19. Two residents tested positive and then no further tests were done.

My neighbour is in a union but she is the only one. Most of the other workers are from south east Asia and have accommodation at the home.

I have advised her of her rights under section 44 of the Employment



Many care homes, mostly privately-run, have not secured sufficient PPE for care workers photo US airforce/CC

Rights Act 1996, which gives workers a legal entitlement to leave their workplace if they feel that it is unsafe. She is worried she will lose her job.

What is happening at this home illustrates government ineptitude, and the inability of capitalism to protect lives. Indeed, both have caused thousands of unnecessary and untimely deaths. The government failed to plan for and obtain sufficient PPE for a pandemic, and was too slow to act at the beginning.

Private companies that supply the NHS and the care sector have profited from bidding wars as countries and organisations compete with each other for apparently scarce supplies. The smaller organisations will lose out to governments and larger companies. A socialist government would nationalise the supply industry and democratically plan the distribution of PPE and other supplies.

Care of the elderly should not be left to private companies to profit from their needs in later life. All care homes should be brought into public ownership and democratically run.

All workers in the care sector should receive an immediate pay rise of 10% and be offered permanent contracts. Migrant workers, and all workers, should be able to join a trade union without fear or prejudice.

We urgently need an alternative, political voice for workers. Our lives depend on it.

How can school workers and parents prevent reckless reopening?

> Continued from back

I've been having reps' meetings. I've been meeting endless union groups in the schools - groups that have never had reps now have four or five.

One trust of privately run 'academy' schools published a letter saying they wouldn't open till 8 June after meeting the union group. That shows they can be pressured, but it's still too early. We have to keep going.

As I say to my members, the reason we have trade unions is in part because of appalling working conditions in Victorian times, when people died in cotton mill machines and so on. Because of the trade unions, we now have at least some health and safety laws.

Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act 1996 protects our members from the unsafe conditions

they would face if they went back. That law allows workers to judge that premises are unsafe, and to refuse to go in.

And we will use that law. We will make sure our members are clear on what it says, and as a union we will support our members to take that step.

The government is also ignoring the strength of feeling among parents, the families who bring the kids to the gate. I've been invited to attend parents' meetings on this crisis. At the first meeting there were 100 on the Zoom call and another 170 in the 'waiting room'.

Hundreds are now contacting the parents' group. Parents are eager to show their unhappiness and concern about the call to return.



Louise Cuffaro photo James Ivens

One said we should put posters up on school gates and fences, so parents know others feel the same and feel confident in holding their kids back. There is also going to be discussion on what safe protest actions parents can carry out to publicly demonstrate their concerns.

In Newham, trade unionists and socialists have carried out several safe, socially distanced car cavalcades and standing protests against the deaths and the cuts, for example. Standing two metres apart outside is safer than it would be in any of those classrooms!

We understand the headteachers are having to draw up risk assessments for reopening. Those risk assessments may be very useful in the future, when it is safe. But at this time, none of those risk assessments can be acceptable, because the government hasn't met the

NEU's five tests.

They said they were going to test for the virus right from the beginning. That's still not up! No teacher or school worker in Newham can just go somewhere to be tested on a weekly basis.

There must also be an agreement that no vulnerable person, or anyone living with a vulnerable person, can come back into the workplace. The government has blurred the higher and lesser categories for vulnerable people.

One of my primary schools passed a motion calling on Newham's Labour mayor, Rokhsana Fiaz, to say the schools won't reopen, like over a dozen other councils have. She has so far refused to do that. She wants the unions to sign a joint statement with her - I'm not doing it unless she says schools will stay shut.

More blunders and profiteering in Tory track-and-trace scheme



An NHS contact tracer

The government disastrously abandoned contact tracing on 12 March and delayed the lockdown while Covid-19 spread unchecked. Now the Tories are trying to make up lost ground - too late for many. These decisions have cost tens of thousands of lives.

It's essential the tracing scheme is trusted so people willingly give their contacts' names. And it's essential everyone asked to self-isolate gets full pay and support, so they aren't forced to choose between helping the community stay well and putting food on the table.

To suppress the spread of infection, people are asked to put solidarity with others first - unlike Dominic Cummings' arrogant, selfish behaviour.

However, the Tories' 'track and trace' scheme fails on all counts. Local public services should be adapted to respond to the new situation, but have been cut to the bone by years of austerity. Instead of paying public services the

money needed, the government is giving huge contracts to profit-making companies.

Sercio is managing the centralised scheme due to be up and running by 1 June. Recently, it mistakenly released nearly 300 new contact tracers' email addresses. Another 48 were sent out a few days later by a recruitment agency.

The mistakes were probably made by overworked and overtired staff members. But couldn't these companies set their emails to 'blind carbon copy' as default?

Privatisation was supposed to bring 'free-market efficiencies' to shake up 'old-fashioned' public services. Instead, it brought cost-cutting and profiteering.

Amazingly, Sercio said it wouldn't report itself for a breach of data protection. The tracers' own training programme makes clear that it should!

Trust that personal information given to the scheme will stay confidential is vital. Without that, some with positive tests will worry their contacts might get visits from immigration officers, tax officials,

police or violent ex-partners if they give out information.

Labour's shadow minister, Rachel Reeves, lamely said: "We need reassurances that contact tracing is in safe hands." She should have called for Sercio to be sacked! Contact tracing should be done by democratically controlled, well-funded public health services.

Tax dodger

Amazon WorkSpaces has to be downloaded to run software and call centre programmes from home. Is Amazon being paid? Out of public funds? To which it contributes almost nothing in taxes from its vast profits?

Amazon has also shown complete disregard for its workers' safety from Covid-19, resulting in walkouts at some of its US depots.

Workers in insecure, low-paid work will hesitate before giving the scheme the names of fellow workers, if they fear this could lead to them trying to survive on £95.85 a week statutory sick pay and possibly losing their jobs.

Chairing the scheme is Tory

baroness Dido Harding, formerly chief executive of TalkTalk - where she was paid £2.8 million in 2016. She has previously said private healthcare "should not be demonised."

When four million TalkTalk customers had their details hacked, she professed ignorance as to whether their accounts were encrypted. As chair of the tracing scheme, this hardly inspires confidence.

Many new tracers want to show solidarity, helping frontline workers who are risking their health. Health Secretary Matt Hancock said they have "stepped forward to help their country."

But the gulf between two countries - the rich and the rest of us - gets wider by the day. Most of the 25,000 new tracers earn under £10 an hour - often less than jobs they have recently lost.

A successful contact tracing scheme is vital, but needs full public ownership and adequate funding. Sack Sercio and all big business profiteers! Full pay for anyone asked to self-isolate!

Dispatches from the front:

Eerily quiet before second wave - don't reopen schools!

An NHS health professional

"Don't use the Q-word" has been said more than once this week. But it does feel eerily quiet.

We have now reorganised yet again as most of our patients are classified as 'cold', and intensive care is only half full. All the extra capacity created early on is now empty, but no one is suggesting we dismantle any of it, as we fully expect it to be needed when we are hit by the second wave. And we do still have an entire floor of Covid-positive wards.

We are working with the local private health sector to restart ur-

gent work, particularly orthopaedics. But they call the shots, and we have to step in when they don't have the right staff or equipment - it's chaotic, and their priorities don't put patients first.

There are lots of work issues arising from the crisis. Staff who are self-isolating being forced to take annual leave is just one of them.

Schools fear

But the issue staff are most concerned about is reopening schools. Some of our kids have been attending school throughout, but others are home with partners juggling between shifts. We know the care we take using PPE for every pa-

tient, regardless of symptoms.

So how the hell will teachers manage without apron, gloves, mask and visor? It's madness, and many just won't send their kids.

At the beginning of this pandemic, we felt we were lambs to the slaughter, as most health workers experienced the acute lack of resources. But now it's like we have all the protection, and the workers outside are being forced back to work without any of the PPE we've fought for.

We say to the rest of our community: if it's not safe, don't return to work or school - stay safe, join the union, and get organised to fight back.



Under the microscope

Coronavirus pandemic news in brief

Tories consider nationalising

Chancellor Rishi Sunak is launching a bailout scheme called 'Project Birch' to prevent the collapse of key big businesses. Essential sectors like airlines, steel and manufacturing could receive public loans "on a 'last resort' basis," says the Treasury.

However, the governor of the Bank of England has told MPs that many firms are already drowning in debt. They may prefer to sell shares in their companies rather than take on more loans.

And bankers' association TheCityUK is pressuring Sunak to consider part-nationalisation. Financiers are concerned that private business will not be able to pay back all that debt. They estimate that government-backed loans alone could exceed £100 billion, having hit £40 billion within two months.

The government might guarantee banks' repayments by changing its loans into shares. "You convert into preferred equity on the assumption that some of these companies have a good future, then flog them - à la Margaret Thatcher - over time," says the chief economist at investment bank Goldman Sachs.

But denationalisation "à la Margaret Thatcher" is part of what got us into this mess in the first place! We say: forget bailouts for bosses and banks - nationalise finance and big business with no compensation to the fat cats. Then run them under the democratic control of workers and service users, not the profit parasites and their lackeys!

Migrant surcharge lifted

Public anger at mistreatment of health staff has forced the Tories to stop the £400 NHS surcharge on visas for overseas NHS workers. The fee remains for other workers from outside the UK, and rises to £624 in October.

We say: scrap all healthcare charges for all users - prescription payments, dental and opticians' fees, visa surcharges and the rest. Make the privateers and billionaires pay!

Top 1% take 17% of wealth

The richest 1% in Britain were taking 16.8% of national income up until the Covid crash, reports the Resolution Foundation. The figure was previously calculated as 13.8%, which didn't include taxable 'capital gains' like land, shares and fine art.

While the top 1% took almost 17 times over the odds, the top 0.1% took over 80 times over the odds. They received 8.1% of national income - previously calculated to be 5.6%.

Tory panic laws

The government is exploiting pandemic disruption to rush through anti-worker legislation. The new immigration bill passed its first stage on 18 May, and a new counter-terrorism bill has just materialised.

The immigration bill would introduce a 'points-based' system which punishes 'low-skilled' workers like those risking their lives in the NHS, care homes and supermarkets. The counter-terrorism bill would make even more extensive snooping on unconvicted people lawful - trade unions, beware.

No return to unsafe construction sites



Andy Bentley
Unite construction sector

The last five years has seen an average 36 construction worker deaths each year. According to the Office for National Statistics, in just four months of Covid-19 there have been 199 deaths!

Despite this, the government has told construction workers it's now safe to return to work and ignore the minimum two-metre distancing rule, as long as it's limited to 15 minutes. Anyone who has set foot on a building site for five minutes would know that this would not be possible.

The Unite union has said this is unacceptable, and advised members to contact them immediately if they are asked to work in a way that would threaten their health and safety - which the '15-minute rule' itself does.

But Unite should also demand each site is investigated by workers and union reps to check its safety before any return to work. This way workers are more likely to stay safe, and will be acting collectively, thereby raising their confidence.

Unite also says the employer is responsible for the health and safety of workers as soon as they leave their homes to go to work. But building workers often travel together in one car to reduce petrol costs and its more eco-friendly to their place of work which could be 30-50 miles away!

Based on the new 'laws' they would need one driver, one in the boot and another strapped to the roof, or they could stop every 14

minutes to get out of the car and stand two metres apart - for how long no one knows! Others are picked up in company vans with up to 16 workers inside!

Another serious issue is the engineered divisions in the industry between workers officially employed and those who work as 'subbies' - sub-contract labour. Those who work officially are more likely to be in a trade union than those who work sub-contract.

In the 1970s, construction company bosses went into overdrive to push workers into sub-contract labour as a method of splitting their union Ucatt (now part of Unite) after its first ever national strike had won a significant pay increase.

The Unite leadership should, along with making sure their members have full control over health and safety on all known sites, be carrying out a recruitment drive to gain new members, whether they are officially employed or sub-contractors.

The Covid-19 crisis has demonstrated in action the effect that workers not working can have on this so-called strong government. In reality, workers have experienced elements of what a general strike would look like, and in particular have been given at least a glimpse of the potential power that we have.

We need to put maximum pressure on all trade union leaders, including the Trade Union Congress, to mobilise from our 6.4 million members to fight with strike action when necessary against the inevitable attempts by this government to make workers pay for their Covid-19 shambles.

Energy firm plans to make 2,600 redundant - union must not accept attacks

Carl Harper
Socialist Party Cambridgeshire

OVO Energy has announced plans to make 2,600 workers redundant, including workers in Cambridgeshire. Some workers found out through the TV or radio that they were at risk of losing their job.

The statement from the GMB union informed workers that the GMB had unsuccessfully worked "behind the scenes" and had reached "the end of the road on attempts at a rescue package". The union said it would "seek workers' views" on the announcement!

One worker, who worked as an SSE employee before it was taken over by OVO, told us: "They (the union) have given up fighting. It sounds like the company wants all customer services gone and automated. But I doubt they have informed customers of this. It seems they want us working as self-employed because then they will give us no benefits. And when work dries up, or we're not needed as much, they can tell you you're not needed". And despite SSE workers being

told during the OVO takeover that jobs were safe, the worker said that "they're doing something like this every couple of months, I'm sick of it".

This is clear opportunism by OVO, blaming the Covid-19 pandemic to cut jobs and workers terms and conditions. Throughout the crisis customers will still be paying energy bills, and it is unlikely that any reduction in services, such as customer services, will be reflected in a reduction of those bills.

It is disappointing that the union has chosen to 'work behind the scenes' and allowed threats to workers' livelihoods to be 'leaked' to the media without workers' knowledge, rather than tap into the anger clearly felt by workers, organising action in defence of jobs. Workers need to put pressure on the union to fight.

We need to bring the energy industry into public ownership, run under democratic workers' control and management. This would bring security to the workers currently exposed to the chaos and cruelty of 'the market'. A socialist plan of production would also enable workers, trade unions and service users

to decide how best to run the company in a way that battles the environmental and climate crisis, and end the 'fuel poverty' experienced by the poorest in society.

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Hull Trades Council debates workers' political representation

Paul Spooner
Hull Socialist Party

Tackling the coronavirus threat is the most pressing problem facing working people. Unfortunately, with a few honourable exceptions, we have to take up that fight without the benefit of a combative national leadership in either the trade unions or the Labour Party.

Hull Trades Council, the body representing local union branches in the city, held a very successful public meeting on working-class political representation on 14 May.

There were many new faces, as well as Labour Party activists.

Steve Hedley, senior assistant general secretary of transport union RMT, was scathing in his criticism of both the Tory party and Keir Starmer's Labour. He emphasised the vital role of the trade unions, and how unions must try to recruit among low-paid and zero-hour workers.

Mick Whale, chair of the trades council and Socialist Party member, agreed with Steve - but argued that alongside the unions, we need a political party that can represent workers. That party is not now the Labour Party. We need to work towards a

new party that will be democratic and accountable, campaign against cuts and privatisation, and fight for socialist policies.

Joe Solo, a singer and entertainer, got a fantastic response when he spoke from the heart. "Workers have not deserted the Labour Party, the Labour Party has lost contact with them."

It was clear that many Labour members are very critical of the direction the party is taking after the election defeat, and are weighing up where their political future might be. We agreed that the trades council would act as a forum for debate on this issue in the period ahead.

The officers of the trades council also agreed to coordinate a car cavalcade protest with the RMT against the announcement of mass redundancies at P&O ferries. (See opposite page)

Strong union response needed against job cuts at Rolls Royce

Ian Hunter
Derby Socialist Party

The announcement on 20 May by Rolls Royce to cut 9,000 jobs worldwide will have a severe impact on the company's UK civil aerospace division. Although Rolls Royce has not yet stated the specific redundancy numbers for the UK operations, the factories in Derby which employ 9,000 workers, mainly in civil aerospace, are likely to bear the brunt.

The company cites the Covid-19 pandemic crisis and its hugely devastating effects on the aviation industry. Plane manufacturers such as Boeing and Airbus, Rolls Royce's main customers, expect the recession in aviation to continue for years to come.

For Derby, the effects on the workers, their families, and the local economy will be shattering. In a statement the Unite union describes Rolls Royce's actions as "shameful opportunism". Steve Turner, Unite assistant general secretary for manufacturing, said: "Britain's taxpayers deserve a more responsible

approach to a national emergency", and he criticised the company for "running away from their responsibilities to workers". Steve Turner went on to say: "We will leave no stone unturned in our fight to protect skilled jobs".

Unite intends to meet with the company "to convince them to take a different approach", and to ask the government for assistance. The Unite statement calls on the government to "establish a national council for recovery and work with us".

However, Rolls Royce is typically putting profit first, looking to save £1.3 billion, with proposed redundancies set to meet half the savings target. Warren East, CEO of Rolls Royce, said that the aim is to make "more than half" of the job cuts this year, as expected airplane production is likely to be a third less than last year.

A large portion of Rolls Royce's profits come from regular engine-servicing fees, which will be severely hit by grounded air fleets. East remarked that while many governments are assisting aviation businesses in the short term, Rolls Royce "must respond to market condi-

tions for the medium term", because "governments cannot replace sustainable customer demand that is simply not there".

For Derby the current redundancies add to the 3,000 jobs cut from 2018, and there is every possibility the company will come back again for more in the near future. It is essential there is a strong union response, backed by a mobilised Derby community to fight these job cuts.

The union must seize the initiative and demand there are no job cuts, and nationalisation as a real, necessary and viable option. A serious fighting campaign, that could start with a socially distanced protest, preparing the ground for an occupation if necessary, could have a huge impact and raise the sights of workers.

Nearly 50 years ago, the Tory government of Ted Heath was forced to nationalise Rolls Royce. Socialist public ownership would allow the development of an alternative plan, under democratic workers' control, of the production of socially-useful products and services, to shift the emphasis from making for profit to making for need (see page 14).



photo Matti Blume/CC

Fight P&O's billionaire bosses' jobs cut plan - nationalisation not bailouts!



photo Charles01/CC

Eric Segal
Kent Socialist Party

P&O Ferries has announced plans to cut 734 jobs in Dover and 122 jobs in Hull after it reported a severe downturn in demand.

The cuts, affecting more than a quarter of the group's workforce, come after the firm's owner, the Dubai-based DP World, had been seeking about £150 million in UK government aid. It is also only two months since DP World said it would be paying its investors about £270 million in dividends.

DP World owns shipping company P&O, the ports of Southampton and London Gateway, plus dozens more around the world. 80% of DP World is owned by the United Arab Emirates, and the rest by international investors. Last year the company made profits of more than £1 billion on revenues of more than £6 billion.

P&O operates passenger ferries between Dover and Calais, as well as Hull to Rotterdam and Zeebrugge, plus services across the Irish Sea. This is in addition to transporting 15% of all goods in and out

of the UK.

The government has already dished out over £10 million in wage payments for 1,400 furloughed P&O staff since the start of the pandemic.

The RMT transport and maritime union has written to shipping minister, Kelly Tolhurst, demanding actions from the government to support the union's fight to save jobs. The letter includes a call for the government to "pursue public ownership and control of P&O Ferries' operations as a priority". Contracts should be brought back in-house, jobs and pensions guaranteed, with no bailout for bosses!

However, we cannot have any confidence in this Tory government to defend jobs. Plus experience has shown that any nationalisation must be on the basis of democratic workers' control and management.

P&O workers need to draw on the valuable lessons of the bitter year-long strike in 1989 which linked seafarers internationally against the attacks on job losses, and recall the words of Bob Crow, the late general secretary of the RMT, "If you don't fight you will lose but if you fight you may win".

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BLACK AND ASIAN COVID-19 DEATHS: AN INDICTMENT OF CAPITALIST INEQUALITY

Jim Hensman
Socialist Party BAME group

The figures for Covid-19 deaths broken down by ethnicity caused widespread shock and anger when they were released on 7 May by the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

After adjusting for age, black men were 4.2 times more likely to die than white men. The equivalent figure for Bangladeshi and Pakistani men was 3.6, and for Indian men 2.4, with similar proportions for women. Figures for other black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups paralleled this to different extents.

The first ten doctors to die from the coronavirus were all BAME. The government was forced to promise that Public Health England would provide a report by the end of May. There has been pressure for an independent inquiry, and the Labour Party has also launched its own investigation.

We may find out more through these investigations. But it is vital for socialists to understand what key factors lie underneath the grim statistics now, to determine how to fight back and rectify them.

The government's general approach is to divert attention from its failures by peddling the line that it has done the best that was possible - in the circumstances. The Tories attempt to shift any remaining blame and responsibility onto the individual.

With regard to disproportionate BAME death rates, the government points to supposed genetic factors particularly. This idea was taken up by a University College London epidemiologist, Professor Nishi Chaturvedi.

"There's no evidence that genes explain the excess risk of Covid susceptibility. It's important to put a nail in that one because it feels as if we can abdicate any responsibility for sorting this out, and this really isn't the case."

In the US, attempts to put responsibility on the individual have reached farcical proportions. Jerome Adams, the (black) surgeon general appointed by Donald Trump, stated that to avoid the virus, "African Americans and Latinos should avoid alcohol, drugs and tobacco!"

Inequalities key

But as the pandemic has developed, the key factors that have emerged as responsible for inequalities in death rates are inequalities in society as a whole.

Consider poverty. The government uses a measure called the Index of Multiple Deprivation to help allocate local spending. ONS figures showed that in England and Wales, the most-deprived areas on this index had twice the coronavirus death rate of the least deprived.

Deaths, in general, are not recorded by ethnicity. But the connection can be inferred. Government figures from 2019 found black people were over half again as likely as the national average to be in the 'persistent low



There's no evidence that genes explain the excess risk of Covid susceptibility. It's important to put a nail in that one because it feels as if we can abdicate any responsibility for sorting this out, and this really isn't the case

- Prof Nishi Chaturvedi, epidemiologist

income' category. Asian people were twice as likely.

Occupation statistics are another indicator. A higher proportion of BAME workers are in 'low-skilled' jobs than the average. ONS figures showed men in 'low-skilled' jobs were four times more likely to die from the coronavirus than men in professional jobs.

Similarly, they found that women working in 'low-skilled' care jobs were twice as likely to die from the coronavirus as those in professional and technical jobs. In London, 67% of the adult social care workforce is BAME.

Overcrowded housing is yet another key risk factor. According to a 2018 government survey, 2% of White British households experienced overcrowding according to their definition. This compared to 15% of black African, 16% of Pakistani, and 30% of Bangladeshi households.

General health is an important consideration too. Existing health problems are significant contributors towards coronavirus fatalities. But the capitalist establishment states this as if it is a given, caused either by bad luck or an individual's bad 'lifestyle choices' - frequently brought up in relation to ethnic minorities.

However, general health too is linked to the inequality of class-based society. In February 2020, a team led by the distinguished academic Michael Marmot published its latest Health Equity in England report.

Using life expectancy as a general index of health, Marmot found there had been no improvement in the last decade - something unprecedented in over a hundred years. The report highlighted the role of austerity in this. Among women in the most-deprived areas, life expectancy had actually fallen!

The time people spent suffering poor health had increased since 2010 - directly increasing vulnerability to the coronavirus. How this particularly affected BAME individuals was highlighted in a report from the British Heart Foundation.

"Before the outbreak of Covid-19, BAME populations were already more likely to suffer ill health, including heart and circulatory diseases and

their risk factors such as high blood pressure and diabetes, and from a younger age. Much of this is linked to social and economic inequalities rather than genetics."

Inequality alone?

But do social inequalities explain all the discrepancy in BAME death rates?

The ONS carried out an analysis which tried to measure how social conditions impacted on BAME deaths - so it could adjust the figures to take this into account. It is worth looking at this in detail.

ONS statisticians constructed a model for predicting coronavirus deaths in general. It used factors like location and the deprivation index associated with it, housing and other information, and indications of individual health and disabilities.

What they were effectively asking was: if you were white, but lived in the same area, had the same type of housing, and so on - would you still have died?

They found this reduced the discrepancy in the numbers. For black men and women it was now 1.9 times the white figure, and for Bangladeshi and Pakistani men 1.8 times - so the figure had roughly halved.

This is a direct indication that class inequality drives up coronavirus deaths.

But what about the remaining half of the discrepancy that was still unexplained? To get an idea of what might account for this, we need to examine what the statisticians were doing a little more closely.

The government often tries to hide behind the claim that it is "driven by the science". This is untrue; it is driven by the defence of the profit system, and its own political survival. But even if it was true, science always has to be seen in its context, so in a case like this it is important to dig deeper.

Let's start with a simple example. Overcrowding is one of the factors the ONS tried to take into account. At any time, this can clearly have a detrimental effect on health. However, with the coronavirus, it takes on another dimension.

Everyone would have been deeply touched by the tragic stories of families in accommodation who share toilet and bathroom facilities with other families. This makes it almost impossible to self-isolate, despite desperate attempts to do so, often with the result that the infection spreads between families.

This situation will particularly be experienced by the poor. So it will be reflected to a higher extent in BAME people, including groups such as asylum seekers and refugees living in hostels and similar accommodation.

The problem is that general indications of overcrowding, which the ONS and others have to rely on, would not reflect the more specific situations that may affect ethnic minorities in cases like these.

Overcrowding can negatively impact on other factors known to influence coronavirus mortality. This includes intergenerational family groups



BAME people, including health workers, are dying of Covid-19 at two to four times the rate of white people in the UK
photo CDC Global/CC

living together - a situation with a higher prevalence among certain ethnic minorities.

And the ONS itself released numbers on 14 May showing that black people in England were nearly four times as likely as white people to have no outdoor space at home. Especially when the weather is warm and sunny, as it has been, people will need to make more use of outdoor spaces.

The ONS actually produced statistics showing average distances people would have to go to do this. But crowded parks can become hotspots for coronavirus transmission. Councils around the country have even closed parks, sometimes counterproductively.

Information like this about the different factors that can individually affect health, but also interact with each other, is clearly relevant. But it is not necessarily measured, and in some cases can be more difficult to quantify or record. Therefore, it may not be taken into account.

There is a technical point relating to this which illustrates how science is not a single objective representation of reality, but rather is influenced by many considerations. The methodology used by the ONS in this study on BAME deaths is called 'logistic regression'. This method is not intrinsically suited to representing interactions between causative factors in general - which, as we have seen, could be relevant.

Health workers

Deaths among health workers have rightly received a lot of publicity. They can perhaps provide us with the best indication of what is going on, because of the greater detail available.

The figures for BAME deaths are stark. Taking the NHS as a whole, about 21% of staff are BAME. But figures released at the end of April showed that, up to then, they had accounted for 64% of NHS staff deaths from the coronavirus. So the huge discrepancy in society generally is also reflected here.

But how could this be? These were people working for the NHS, not a cross-section of all society. Doctors, for example, could hardly be said to sit at the bottom of the socioeconomic tree.

In mid-May, ITV News released a survey of more than 2,000 NHS staff, and broadcast interviews with a number of them. A key thing this showed was that there were many more BAME staff in frontline roles - with higher exposure to the virus. The reasons appear to be a combination of two factors.

The first factor is that, within each given health role such as doctor or nurse, all staff at lower grades have higher death rates. This is one expression, on a smaller scale, of some of the economic inequalities in class society generally. And within each given role, BAME staff are more likely to be in the lower levels.

According to one health charity, The King's Fund: "On average, black doctors in the NHS earn £10,000 less and black nurses earn £2,700 less annually

than white colleagues. Minority ethnic-group staff are systematically over-represented at lower levels of the NHS grade hierarchy, and under-represented in senior pay bands."

This helps explain the situation in what would seem to be a relatively privileged group, the doctors. One BAME consultant cardiologist explained it like this in the ITV survey: "Many of the white doctors are in management positions, leaving more BAME at the coalface."

This differentiation occurs at every level. NHS information shows it is mirrored with junior and senior doctors, and junior and senior manager grades.

The second factor is clearly direct racism and discrimination. Half of the respondents in the ITV survey felt that this played a part in the high death rate, and 20% said they had experienced it personally.

One BAME doctor reported that "suggestions from the BAME group are not taken by hospital management. The concerns or comments are ignored. Not a single BAME member was included in the Covid response team."

A number of workers, including a Filipino nurse who appeared on the programme, stated they were scared to speak out about concerns like the shortage of PPE, because they feared losing their jobs. In some cases, visa regulations and other measures made staff even more vulnerable to this.

Both socioeconomic factors and racism are thus responsible for the higher number of BAME deaths. But these causes are not independent. They interact with each other: discrimination is obviously the key factor in BAME workers tending to be among the staff in harder-hit lower grades.

Class and race

What can we conclude overall about BAME death rates? It is possible that much more of the discrepancy between white and BAME deaths is based on class inequalities than officially estimated. But racism is nevertheless also a very important factor.

Although it's not ruled out that other factors may play some subsidiary role, class inequality and racism are undoubtedly the main problems.

The key question is: how can they be addressed?

The struggle against racism and institutionalised racism must be a priority. BAME workers will need to play



It is possible that much more of the discrepancy between white and BAME deaths is based on class inequalities than officially estimated. Racism is also a very important factor

a central part in this. But racism cannot be separated from issues of class inequality.

The struggles against each must be combined. Inadequate PPE, for example, may impact on BAME workers to a higher extent - but it still affects all frontline workers, and must be fought against as part of a general struggle by all workers.

There are many ways to fight, but crucial will be trade union and political action. If existing workers' institutions in these fields do not prove adequate for the task, they must be transformed or replaced.

The workers' movement must also be careful not to be diverted into playing off one section against another. BAME workers are particularly affected in many areas, but not alone, and not necessarily in all areas.

For instance, 95% of care home residents are white. But obviously, a campaign against the care home deaths scandal is not just a 'white issue'. The traditional motto of the workers' movement - an injury to one is an injury to all - must be central to all struggles.

There are lessons from a previous disaster. On 14 June 2017, a fire broke out in Grenfell Tower in west London. Over 75% of those who died had a BAME background. This was definitely a BAME issue.

So how could the campaign make sure this atrocity is not repeated? Undoubtedly, BAME workers are disproportionately residents of similar, unsafe working-class accommodation. But the only guarantee would be eliminating unsafe housing in the population as a whole.

In one sense, we can consider the Covid-19 death toll, at its peak in Britain, equivalent to 15 Grenfell Towers a day. There are more lessons from Grenfell.

One is on public inquiries. These can be used by campaigns to apply pressure and get information, so they shouldn't be disregarded. But the abject failure of the Grenfell inquiry, nearly three years after the fire, is a warning not to place too much reliance on anything similar with regard to coronavirus deaths.

Neither, if something is a BAME issue, can we rely on BAME politicians for support simply by dint of their being BAME. We only need to consider Priti Patel and Rishi Sunak.

The failure of a strategy which looks to individual racial representation rather than class politics is underlined by the tragic situation in the US today. Many of the worst-affected cities with large black populations have had black mayors - as well, of course, as the country having had a black president.

The excessive rate of coronavirus BAME deaths is important and highlights several aspects of what is wrong with society under capitalism. What is required is taking up the fight against this scandal as part of the wider class struggle, and linking it to the fight for a socialist society that will eliminate the inequalities and irrationalities of the current economic and social system.

Obituary - Mick Cotter

21 September 1957 to 20 May 2020

Tony Saunois,
Committee for a Workers'
International secretary

It is with great sadness and regret that the Socialist Party has lost a dedicated comrade and friend of many members, Mick Cotter.

Until the recent party congress Mick had been a member of the National Committee of the party for many years. Although in declining health for a long period, he was struck down by Covid-19.

Mick has a long history of struggle from the mid-1970s when he joined the Militant in his beloved Birmingham. He was one of the best representatives of his class. His uncle Howard was a leading figure in the Fire Brigades Union (FBU).

The bitter strike by the firefighters in 1977 drew Mick into activity when he initially joined the Labour Party Young Socialists (LPYS) and then rapidly became a Militant supporter.

I first met Mick when he was on a visit to London a couple of years later. He was in London to help out at the Militant offices. I had moved down from Leicester beforehand. We then became life long friends after he joined the full time staff of Militant, tirelessly working in the printshop.

Prior to this he had worked in the engineering industry. He remained steadfastly at his post in the printshop for over 40 years.

He, with other comrades, undertook the galley labour necessary to produce thousands of papers, journals, leaflets, posters and other political weapons needed to build a party like the Socialist Party. They are the unsung heroes of the revolutionary movement.

He would work with others battling to keep the web offset press running as it frequently broke down. With little formal education, he mastered printing, and the unassuming Mick eventually became the printshop manager - which had become a sizeable operation.

He played a central role in planning and executing the move of factory and offices to Hackney Wick - especially the back-breaking job of moving the printshop and reassembling it. A task he repeated when the printshop, relocated to Clapton and then to Leyton. Like other comrades who perform this work in the printshop, he did not expect praise and was embarrassed by it when his work was recognised by other comrades.

This work also brought him into contact with comrades in the trade unions, as he oversaw production of leaflets and posters for them.

In Hackney, which became his home for the rest of his life, he was fully active in the LPYS and its strug-

gles. The mass campaigns conducted at that time against racism and the fascists, and youth unemployment, and the industrial struggles of the following decades, saw Mick fully participating in them. On numerous occasions he was found in the security teams formed by LPYS members on anti-fascist/racist activity.

Like other comrades, he took his turn on the night guard at Militant's offices in this period.

From a solidly working-class background, like most of the LPYS at the time, he had a great ability to engage with workers and trade unionists. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Sunday lunchtimes would usually find Mick, myself and other comrades from Hackney in the local pub with a group of activists from the trade unions - shop stewards from the docks, Trumans brewery and the print industry - all gathered for drinks, discussing events and selling the Militant.

A major struggle against cuts in Hackney in the 1990s took place, directed against the council managing director who was implementing them, called Max Caller. "Mad Max" was on the posters and leaflets at the time. Together with other comrades Mick played an important role in cementing links with workers and shop stewards in the council workforce. Later he stood as a Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) candidate in Stoke Newington ward in the council elections in 2014 and 2018.

He also undertook consistent, solid trade union work. Maintaining his links with the FBU, he attended its annual conference for many years, and was well known to the left leaders of the union at the time, like Ken Cameron. He became personal friends with many of the firefighters and FBU activists at his local fire station in Stoke Newington.

He was active in the metal mechanics' union, TASS, which then became part of the MSF, in which he was on the NEC of the craft section of the union.

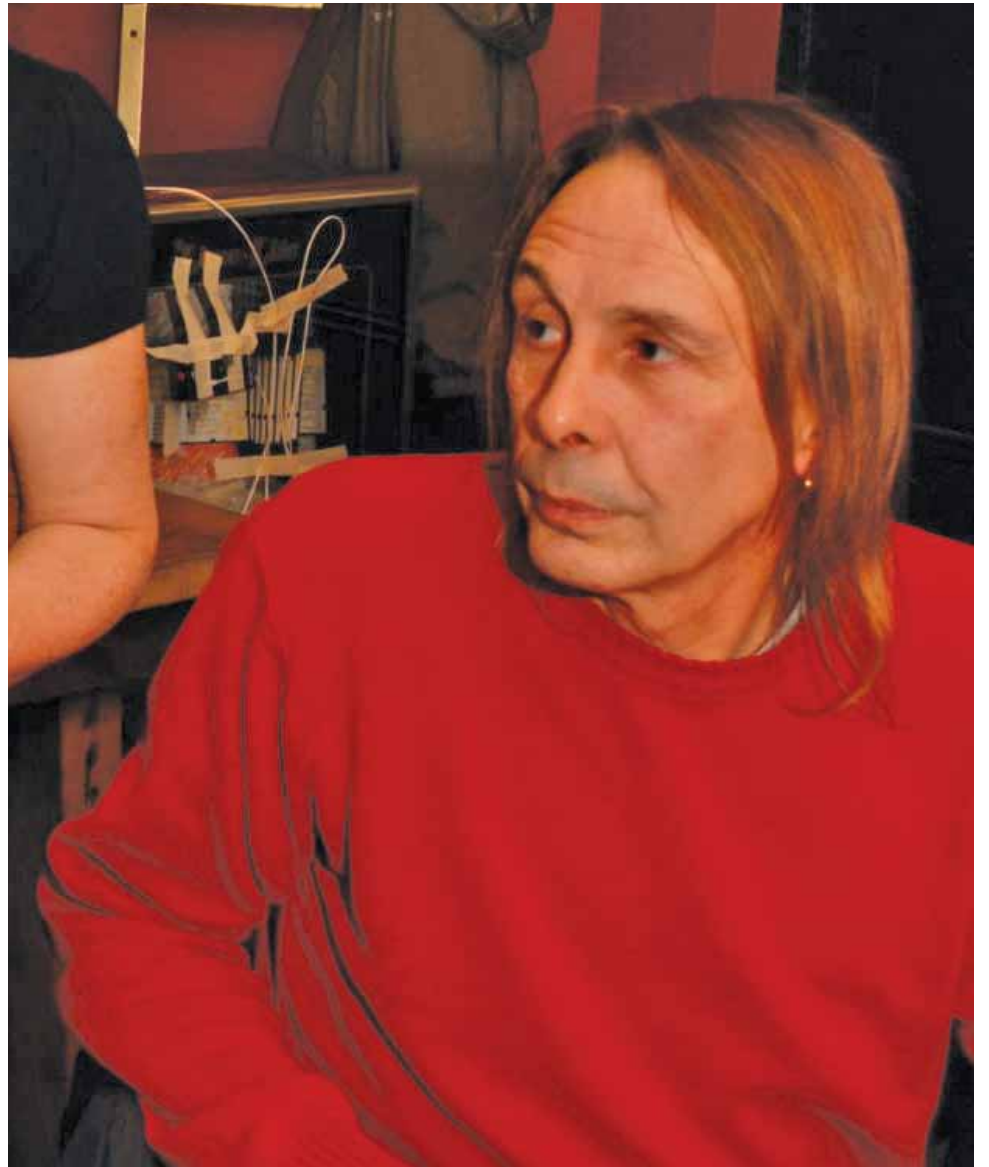
Then he became active in Unite where he was elected Chair of the London print branch, a post he held until his untimely death. He was well respected by the activists in that branch. Before becoming more seriously ill, he attended the 2018 Unite national conference, speaking from the podium.

Never afraid of being on the front-line he was one of the first over the gate to join the factory occupation of the Visteon car plant at Enfield in 2009.

Although not a great reader, he got his education from the party, which aided his sharp basic class instinct and sense of empathy for the



The Socialist Party has lost a determined fighter for the working class, and for many of us a strong friend



oppressed. This allowed Mick to instinctively smell what was right and wrong politically, and rapidly grasp the relevant political point.

In all of the debates in the Committee for a Workers' International (CWI - which the Socialist Party in England and Wales is part of), his instincts led him to adopt the right position. He had an ingrained mistrust of the petty bourgeois left, no matter in what guise they present themselves.

Often appearing shy, or maybe somewhat reserved, he never sought to dominate a conversation, but had opinions on all issues when asked. His qualities of honesty and loyalty shone through in his approach towards Militant and the Socialist Party, and also in his close friendships. This loyalty was not always uncritical but it was always honest.

Leisure interests

Away from the struggle he continued to support his beloved Birmingham City football team. He and other comrades played in the team we formed in the 1970s-80s at the national headquarters of Militant. One of his favourite past times was winding up Villa fans.

Later he took up running, inspired by the involvement in that sport of his beloved partner Alex. She also encouraged him in trips to the theatre, which he increasingly enjoyed.

He became a keen cyclist, which he sadly had to give up as his health rapidly declined. The sad look in his eyes when he told me he was going to sell his bike spoke volumes about

what he was feeling.

His renowned fondness for real ale would enable us to frequently meet and chat about politics and the ups and downs of everyday life. In both he was able to just take it all in his stride and accept almost anything, providing it did not threaten the interests of the party or the working class. He even dealt with the crippling illness which hit him in the same unflappable Mick style.

This allowed him to become a very strong friend, confidant and comrade. More recently, before his illness prevented him venturing out, a lot of our conversations in our local pub bemoaned the gentrification of Hackney which was taking place around us. He joked on one occasion that we sounded like the two old men in the Muppet show sitting on the balcony complaining about everything!

As his health declined he never lost interest in what the CWI and the Socialist Party were doing. During visits to him he wanted to know of the work of the CWI sections, even when in hospital during the coronavirus crisis.

Until his final week, he attended local Socialist Party branch meetings on Zoom from his hospital bed.

Always he would ask about Chile, to which he felt a particular bond because of the political situation there, and having met comrades from Chile when they visited London in the 1980s. He spoke no Spanish, and they no English, but they established a mutual international understanding as workers from the same class. As I travelled back and

forth from Chile under the Pinochet regime, Mick would always be at the airport to greet me - expecting a bottle of Pisco in return.

The Socialist Party has lost a determined fighter for the working class, and for many of us a strong friend. He will be sorely missed but not forgotten. We continue the struggle for socialism which he fought for all his life, as the best testimony to his memory.

CWI members in Chile display flags in memory of Mick



ECONOMIC COLLAPSE LEADS TO RENEWED PROTESTS ACROSS LEBANON

Iain Dalton
Socialist Party national committee

After a pause for a little over a month with the Covid-19 lockdown, new protests have erupted as the situation for ordinary workers in Lebanon has become desperate.

Unemployment has reached 30%, while hyperinflation seems to be developing, with 70% increases in the price of sugar, and a doubling of the price of vegetables. The Lebanese Lira's official exchange rate to the dollar is 1:1,500, but that is now a complete fiction. In January, black market rates were 1:2,500, and are now reportedly over 1:4,000!

New protest wave

Lebanon, so far, has had few officially recorded deaths (26) from Covid-19, and just over 1,000 cases officially confirmed. But a recent increase in cases has provided the grounds for a new intensification of the lockdown measures.

Lockdown measures require social support and workers having the material means to abide by them. The situation had become so desperate that, from the end of April, sections of the population began to take to the streets.

Some of the most oppressed workers have taken strike action, including mostly Bangladeshi and Indian migrant workers at private waste-management company RAMCO. Al Jazeera reported that the company - with arrears of \$8.7 million from the government - cut workers' pay from \$300 to \$100. A strike started on 3 April, escalating with a blockade of the company's main facility on the outskirts of Beirut on 12 May - with at least 250 out of the 400-strong workforce remaining out on strike.

Banks have been the focus of protests, with a number destroyed, as well as roads blockaded and car convoy protests. In the words of the Financial Times: "The Lebanese army said it had responded to threats to private property in the city after a number of bank branches were set on fire."

In Tripoli, in the north of Lebanon, one protester, Fawaz Al-Hamman, was shot dead by the armed forces, dubbed by the thousands of mourners who turned up for his funeral as the "Martyr of the Hunger Revolution."

A video on the Guardian website shows a rally outside Al-Hamman's mother's home with chants of revolution. Other revelations have been made of protesters being tortured under arrest by the army in Sidon, a port in the south of the country.



Non-sectarian protests against the ruling class, austerity and corruption have been erupting in Lebanon since 2019 photo RomanDeckert/CC

As one woman quoted by Al-Jazeera commented: "The army are not our brothers. They are shooting us to protect the politicians."

This new wave seems to be an even poorer and desperate layer, forced onto the streets, preferring to risk catching Covid-19 than doing nothing in the face of starvation. The government has failed to provide any of the aid it promised to workers. Indeed, videos of a protest have appeared showing protesters and police arguing about who is hungrier!

As one protester quoted in the

Washington Post said: "We stopped the revolution because of corona..." But now, he said, "bankruptcy is coming. Hunger is coming. Of course we're going to rise to change the whole of the political class."

Programme

Last year's movement was significant in a society deeply divided along sectarian lines. These were cut across in the course of the movement that was opposed to all the sectarian parties and politicians. As we have commented previously, "For 'All means all' to come to fruition, the

sectarian constitution, which is the cornerstone of this horse-trading, has to go. The movement must fight for the convocation of a genuinely representative constituent assembly, but this in itself is not sufficient. Unless a non-sectarian workers' party is built, then these same parties, representing the interests of big business, will continue to dominate." ('Lebanon - mass protests cut across sectarian division' - socialistparty.org.uk).

Indeed, unless such independent workers' organisations are built, the vacuum that currently exists



could be again filled by sectarian forces. As the Economist comments "...the country's crises are giving its factions a new lease on life, as the state struggles to provide help. Hezbollah, the Shia militia and political party, has its own fleet of ambulances and more than a dozen Covid-19 clinics. Every party is vaunting its efforts to treat patients and distribute food and cash. Some even hand out surgical masks emblazoned with their logos."



'Bankruptcy is coming. Hunger is coming. Of course we're going to rise to change the whole of the political class'

Ruling class splits and austerity

In his masterful History of the Russian Revolution, Leon Trotsky makes the point that revolutions start at the top when the ruling class cannot continue to rule in the manner it previously did.

Significant splits in Lebanon have opened up between the prime minister, Hassan Diab, and the governor of the central bank, Riad Salame. These are over who is to blame for the perilous financial position Lebanon is now in, and how to reduce the country's debt, or more precisely, how to make the Lebanese working class pay for it.

This split includes the recently announced forensic auditing of the central bank. This audit is undoubtedly designed to produce scapegoats in that institution for the financial Ponzi scheme of borrowing increasing amounts of dollars on the promise of high returns that kept the currency peg to the dollar stable.

Indeed, some banks, as the Economist reports "...are still pursuing outlandish schemes to raise capital. One recently offered to double the amount of any fresh dollar deposits (9/5/20)."

But perhaps the key disagreement is over exactly how some of the debts can be reduced, with the government's emphasis being on a 'bail-in' or haircut for investors.

The Lebanese banking association has opposed this, particularly on the grounds of "violating private property". The talk of floating the Lebanese Lira in relation to the US dollar, will wipe out the value of savings denominated in the Lira.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) aid that the government has now formally applied for has strings attached in terms of long held-back 'reforms', such as phasing out electricity subsidies and cuts to wages and state jobs.

Diab undoubtedly fears that a

plan to clear the debts solely consisting of implementing such attacks will provoke even deeper resistance, much like the announcement of the WhatsApp tax last October led to a huge protest movement that swept his predecessor away.

Nevertheless, the austerity measures included in his plans could still do that. The government's own forecasts are of a 53% jump in consumer prices this year. The IMF predicts GDP (total economic output) will drop by 12%, while the World Bank predicts the numbers of Lebanese living in poverty will reach 50%.

This devastation of the lives of working-class people in Lebanon will provoke more and bigger revolts. Consequently, in order to take the heat out of the situation, the Lebanese government has now announced subsidies on basic foods.

Such independent workers organisations need to be armed with a programme to deal with the impending catastrophe facing the masses in Lebanon. A starting point should be: repudiating the foreign debts, and nationalising the banks and the financial sector.

Capitalism has served up nothing but war and devastation to the Middle East, and the Covid-19 crisis will only deepen this, impoverishing workers and the middle classes even further. The new waves of struggle that will emerge against this backdrop need to sweep away not only the sectarian division fostered by capitalism, but the whole rotten system.

In its place must be socialist measures of a democratic plan of production to meet the needs of the masses, based on bringing the key sectors of the economy, and the wealth they produce, into public ownership under the democratic control of workers, as part of a socialist federation of the region.

SCHOOLS AREN'T SAFE



Workers, unions and parents must decide when they are

Louise Cuffaro

NEU Newham branch secretary
and Socialist Party

It's reckless. It's unsafe. It flies in the face of all advice from scientists and from teachers. The schools must not reopen on Monday 1 June.

The Tories have had to say they didn't mean the 1 June reopening date for England 'firmly', but they clearly did. It doesn't feel to me, or my members, or parents that the government has rowed back at all.

Everyone is supposed to be socially distancing outside school, but somehow when you get inside school it's not so bad? The government says you can have 15 children in nursery, in reception, in Year

One, in Year Six!

They haven't seen their friends for goodness knows how long. They're young children. They don't understand. We don't have the facilities or space to properly social distance, even if that alone was enough to make it safe.

Look carefully at what they're proposing, especially in the younger age groups. They're not going to be able to play with their toys. What if one child picks up a coloured pencil that the other child just used?

And there are no facilities to look after children and nurture them in what must be quite a traumatic time for them. Many in Newham have lost people in their families.

To return to school in these circumstances - it's reckless.

But in fact, schools never closed.

The National Education Union (NEU) is absolutely happy to carry on with a rota that cares for vulnerable and key workers' children. We want to protect the NHS and other essential services. This is still a sacrifice, and still a danger. But it is much smaller numbers.

Difficult situations

And our members not in class are still working from home. It's not a case of 'the schools are closed, so we're doing sod all'. In fact, teachers have been working even harder, and in the most difficult situations.

We're using IT in ways it's not been used before, to provide activity and teaching to our students, both primary and secondary. Sometimes very long days, long hours online, making sure we are there for our

students. And in primaries, making videos, presenting storytelling time, and so on.

Disgraceful headlines have called teachers lazy, and vilified unions who are trying to protect staff, students and their families. It's outrageous, and smacks of the gutter press at the time of the miners' strike, 1984-85.

We're not saying we're not prepared to go back. We want to go back - but only once it's safe. That means satisfying the NEU's 'five tests', including a comprehensive testing and tracing system. These are reasonable and achievable.

But this government cares more about big business than it does about the lives of school staff, students and parents. This mad rush, to get everyone in on

1 June regardless, is a result of the government's mishmash, reckless, uncaring and two-faced strategy.

Scotland and Wales aren't reopening. Why are we in England? It's childcare for big business. This is simply Johnson appeasing the bosses. Asking us to be 'heroes' - cannon fodder for their version of war.

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■ Trade union organising can stop unsafe reopening: p2

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