In the space of one week, the trade union movement is marking two of its most important annual days - International Workers’ Memorial Day on 28 April, and May Day on 1 May. Coming as they do during the coronavirus pandemic, they are particularly poignant and relevant.

Tragically, too many workers have died already. Over 120 workers in the NHS and the social care sector have died: killed in many cases by a scandalous lack of PPE, the result of years of austerity and privatisation carried out by successive Tory and New Labour governments.

All frontline and essential workers must have the PPE they need to do their work as safely as possible. They should not be left to individually decide whether or not it is safe to work, but have the collective support of their union behind them.

And now this government, and their friends in big business, are trying to build momentum to push other ‘non-essential’ workers back to work.

But we have no confidence that the bosses and their political representatives can be trusted with our safety. Profit is their number one priority - in normal times and during emergencies such as this.

Look at the construction companies forcing workers back to the sites. Building luxury apartments isn’t ‘essential work’!

We have to decide when it’s safe to return to work. We need workers’ and trade union control over workplace safety. If a workplace isn’t safe, it must be closed, and workers sent home on full pay until it is.

If management tell workers that they want us to come back to work, we must only return when we and our unions are convinced it is safe to do so.

A union and workers’ risk assessment must be carried out. There must be adequate PPE available; sufficient hand sanitisers and washroom facilities; thorough workplace cleaning carried out on a regular basis; a workplace layout and staff capacity that allows for safe social distancing; regular testing; and any other measures considered necessary to guarantee workers’ safety.

If management doesn’t accept these demands, workers must discuss what to do next, including deciding collectively to refuse to work in an unsafe workplace. Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act 1996 provides for the protection of workers if they decide not to work in an unsafe environment.

But we also know that Tory anti-union laws can be used against us. So the best protection, as always, is for workers and their unions to act together. This is what postal workers, firefighters and now Jobcentre staff have done to defend their safety.

Workers have won historic victories on the back of collective struggle. Our pay, pensions and conditions, and the very right to be organised in a trade union, were secured as a result of our struggles and those of workers who came before us.

May Day this year must be a platform to send out a clear message: collective workers’ and trade union action is our life-saver.
Private firm causes weeks of distress to free school meal vouchers: bring it back in-house!

Dear Minister Morgan,

I rely on free school meal vouchers to get by, and daily lack of the 30 April 2020 and didn’t arrive in my post until 8 May. I am writing to ask you to bring it back in house.

The Department for Education has contracted a private UK company, Edenred, which is a global private company Edenred, which is a global private company, to provide a service of school meal vouchers to low-income children. According to a recent report by the Child Poverty Action Group, 1.1 million children are entitled to free school meals but are not receiving them.

Instead, some families are having to wait weeks before they get a code emailed to them. Then they have to wait another 10 days or more before they can redeem the code on the Edenred website. Only then will they receive their voucher. This is causing great distress to many families.

We were advised by our child’s school that their school wouldn’t even do this, and it was an issue with Edenred. Some teachers were not able to access the Edenred website after signing up for the code in one in the morning where the code had been sent.

As many as 600,000 people are having to make waiting for their school meals. The child poverty action group found that as few as 10% of children are receiving their free school meals, and that recent surveys show that many children have not eaten for a week or more.

They were advised by their child’s school that there wasn’t any more they could do, and it was an issue with Edenred. Some teachers were not able to access the Edenred website after signing up for the code in one morning where the code had been sent.

As many as 600,000 people are having to make waiting for their school meals. The child poverty action group found that as few as 10% of children are receiving their free school meals, and that recent surveys show that many children have not eaten for a week or more.

They were advised by their child’s school that there wasn’t any more they could do, and it was an issue with Edenred. Some teachers were not able to access the Edenred website after signing up for the code in one morning where the code had been sent.

As many as 600,000 people are having to make waiting for their school meals. The child poverty action group found that as few as 10% of children are receiving their free school meals, and that recent surveys show that many children have not eaten for a week or more.

They were advised by their child’s school that there wasn’t any more they could do, and it was an issue with Edenred. Some teachers were not able to access the Edenred website after signing up for the code in one morning where the code had been sent.

As many as 600,000 people are having to make waiting for their school meals. The child poverty action group found that as few as 10% of children are receiving their free school meals, and that recent surveys show that many children have not eaten for a week or more.

They were advised by their child’s school that there wasn’t any more they could do, and it was an issue with Edenred. Some teachers were not able to access the Edenred website after signing up for the code in one morning where the code had been sent.

As many as 600,000 people are having to make waiting for their school meals. The child poverty action group found that as few as 10% of children are receiving their free school meals, and that recent surveys show that many children have not eaten for a week or more.

They were advised by their child’s school that there wasn’t any more they could do, and it was an issue with Edenred. Some teachers were not able to access the Edenred website after signing up for the code in one morning where the code had been sent.

As many as 600,000 people are having to make waiting for their school meals. The child poverty action group found that as few as 10% of children are receiving their free school meals, and that recent surveys show that many children have not eaten for a week or more.

They were advised by their child’s school that there wasn’t any more they could do, and it was an issue with Edenred. Some teachers were not able to access the Edenred website after signing up for the code in one morning where the code had been sent.

As many as 600,000 people are having to make waiting for their school meals. The child poverty action group found that as few as 10% of children are receiving their free school meals, and that recent surveys show that many children have not eaten for a week or more.

They were advised by their child’s school that there wasn’t any more they could do, and it was an issue with Edenred. Some teachers were not able to access the Edenred website after signing up for the code in one morning where the code had been sent.

As many as 600,000 people are having to make waiting for their school meals. The child poverty action group found that as few as 10% of children are receiving their free school meals, and that recent surveys show that many children have not eaten for a week or more.

They were advised by their child’s school that there wasn’t any more they could do, and it was an issue with Edenred. Some teachers were not able to access the Edenred website after signing up for the code in one morning where the code had been sent.

As many as 600,000 people are having to make waiting for their school meals. The child poverty action group found that as few as 10% of children are receiving their free school meals, and that recent surveys show that many children have not eaten for a week or more.

They were advised by their child’s school that there wasn’t any more they could do, and it was an issue with Edenred. Some teachers were not able to access the Edenred website after signing up for the code in one morning where the code had been sent.

As many as 600,000 people are having to make waiting for their school meals. The child poverty action group found that as few as 10% of children are receiving their free school meals, and that recent surveys show that many children have not eaten for a week or more.

They were advised by their child’s school that there wasn’t any more they could do, and it was an issue with Edenred. Some teachers were not able to access the Edenred website after signing up for the code in one morning where the code had been sent.

As many as 600,000 people are having to make waiting for their school meals. The child poverty action group found that as few as 10% of children are receiving their free school meals, and that recent surveys show that many children have not eaten for a week or more.

They were advised by their child’s school that there wasn’t any more they could do, and it was an issue with Edenred. Some teachers were not able to access the Edenred website after signing up for the code in one morning where the code had been sent.

As many as 600,000 people are having to make waiting for their school meals. The child poverty action group found that as few as 10% of children are receiving their free school meals, and that recent surveys show that many children have not eaten for a week or more.

They were advised by their child’s school that there wasn’t any more they could do, and it was an issue with Edenred. Some teachers were not able to access the Edenred website after signing up for the code in one morning where the code had been sent.

As many as 600,000 people are having to make waiting for their school meals. The child poverty action group found that as few as 10% of children are receiving their free school meals, and that recent surveys show that many children have not eaten for a week or more.

They were advised by their child’s school that there wasn’t any more they could do, and it was an issue with Edenred. Some teachers were not able to access the Edenred website after signing up for the code in one morning where the code had been sent.

As many as 600,000 people are having to make waiting for their school meals. The child poverty action group found that as few as 10% of children are receiving their free school meals, and that recent surveys show that many children have not eaten for a week or more.

They were advised by their child’s school that there wasn’t any more they could do, and it was an issue with Edenred. Some teachers were not able to access the Edenred website after signing up for the code in one morning where the code had been sent.

As many as 600,000 people are having to make waiting for their school meals. The child poverty action group found that as few as 10% of children are receiving their free school meals, and that recent surveys show that many children have not eaten for a week or more.

They were advised by their child’s school that there wasn’t any more they could do, and it was an issue with Edenred. Some teachers were not able to access the Edenred website after signing up for the code in one morning where the code had been sent.

As many as 600,000 people are having to make waiting for their school meals. The child poverty action group found that as few as 10% of children are receiving their free school meals, and that recent surveys show that many children have not eaten for a week or more.

They were advised by their child’s school that there wasn’t any more they could do, and it was an issue with Edenred. Some teachers were not able to access the Edenred website after signing up for the code in one morning where the code had been sent.

As many as 600,000 people are having to make waiting for their school meals. The child poverty action group found that as few as 10% of children are receiving their free school meals, and that recent surveys show that many children have not eaten for a week or more.

They were advised by their child’s school that there wasn’t any more they could do, and it was an issue with Edenred. Some teachers were not able to access the Edenred website after signing up for the code in one morning where the code had been sent.

As many as 600,000 people are having to make waiting for their school meals. The child poverty action group found that as few as 10% of children are receiving their free school meals, and that recent surveys show that many children have not eaten for a week or more.

They were advised by their child’s school that there wasn’t any more they could do, and it was an issue with Edenred. Some teachers were not able to access the Edenred website after signing up for the code in one morning where the code had been sent.

As many as 600,000 people are having to make waiting for their school meals. The child poverty action group found that as few as 10% of children are receiving their free school meals, and that recent surveys show that many children have not eaten for a week or more.

They were advised by their child’s school that there wasn’t any more they could do, and it was an issue with Edenred. Some teachers were not able to access the Edenred website after signing up for the code in one morning where the code had been sent.

As many as 600,000 people are having to make waiting for their school meals. The child poverty action group found that as few as 10% of children are receiving their free school meals, and that recent surveys show that many children have not eaten for a week or more.

They were advised by their child’s school that there wasn’t any more they could do, and it was an issue with Edenred. Some teachers were not able to access the Edenred website after signing up for the code in one morning where the code had been sent.
Workers fighting to defend safety and livelihoods

In the main, there is support among civil servants at the respective lockdowns in these countries to hold protests to defend their livelihoods.

Civil servants in Paisley protest over Covid outbreak

Clair McKeena
Correspondent to a Workers’ International Alert

Workers first downed tools in March 2021 to protest against the cuts.

In France, Italy and Spain, thousands have been held for holding the respective lockdowns in these countries.

In France, Italy and Spain, thousands have been held for holding the respective lockdowns in these countries.

The lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was consistently raised in the meeting. Over 1,000 workers had been told they would have to clean their own premises but were given no PPE.

Workers won motions to seal off the front doors and retain the risk of infection to bus drivers. As a result, routes on London buses have been largely busy.

Many reported that workers were organizing working unions using section 41 of the Employment Rights Act 1996. Stick footage, slowdown and the engineering efficiency, and usual running for the Unite execs committees, said: “We are under threat of redundancy”.

<Insert photo of Newham waste services obtaining 100% furlough agreement.>

ISS workers’ pay victory

Clearing the closing funds Williams and Merrett, both trade unionists, also explained why “this time to fight is now”.

Unite union has negotiated with Tesco for a 100% furlough agreement. If members currently work for the Westway煤气公司, they have maintained a drastically reduced working schedule.

Union members have organized the Tesco workers to protest for their jobs.

The fight demanding in Dublin is a working as a normal to the labour movement, back in Ireland and internationally.

In the main, there is support among civil servants at the respective lockdowns in these countries to hold protests to defend their livelihoods.

In France, Italy and Spain, thousands have been held for holding the respective lockdowns in these countries.

The lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was consistently raised in the meeting. Over 1,000 workers had been told they would have to clean their own premises but were given no PPE.

Workers won motions to seal off the front doors and retain the risk of infection to bus drivers. As a result, routes on London buses have been largely busy.

Many reported that workers were organizing working unions using section 41 of the Employment Rights Act 1996. Stick footage, slowdown and the engineering efficiency, and usual running for the Unite execs committees, said: “We are under threat of redundancy”.

<Insert photo of Newham waste services obtaining 100% furlough agreement.>

ISS workers’ pay victory

Clearing the closing funds Williams and Merrett, both trade unionists, also explained why “this time to fight is now”.

Unite union has negotiated with Tesco for a 100% furlough agreement. If members currently work for the Westway煤气公司, they have maintained a drastically reduced working schedule.

Union members have organized the Tesco workers to protest for their jobs.

The fight demanding in Dublin is a working as a normal to the labour movement, back in Ireland and internationally.
**SHOULD THE SOCIALIST STILL BE PRODUCED DURING THE CORONA CRISIS?**

Debate with Mark Serwotka, general secretary of the PCS civil servants’ union

**On 7 April Mark Serwotka wrote to Hannah Sell, general secretary of the Socialist Party, asking for an assurance that the Socialist would not be sold outside PCS-organised workplaces during the coronavirus emergency. Hannah Sell replied, explaining how seriously the Socialist Party takes compliance with social-distancing measures. She also raised points about the importance of the role of the Socialist in the crisis and the need for the workers’ movement to continue to organise independently in defence of workers’ interests.**

We are publishing the correspondence, as it raises important issues for the whole workers’ movement.

**As has been reported in the Socialist, more than five million workers are still at work, many in dangerous conditions, even after the government’s social distancing guidelines. Workers in PCS-organised workplaces are now experiencing increased risks of infection, and restricting activity outside the home to essential matters in order to follow the government’s guidelines must be followed as the least that can be done in the interests of the working class, most of whom are having to continue working, often from home, amid the coronavirus pandemic. The Trades Union Congress has also called for workers’ rights to be protected.**

**Workers have had to get organised to fight for proper PPE and social-distancing measures especially in public health workplaces, where they are often facing dangerous working conditions, and restricting activity outside the home to essential matters in order to follow the government’s social distancing guidelines. The Socialist, along with many other socialist newspapers, has continued to publish to inform and organise.**

**This behaviour will not be repeated.**

7 April 2020

Dear Mark Serwotka

I am writing in response to your letter of 7 April 2020 with complaints about a Socialist Party newspaper being distributed to staff and the potential danger of this activity. While you are correct that the Socialist was placed on a table next to hygienic products, this was the Socialist newspaper and distributed independently. The Socialist newspaper is independent of any organisation or party. The Socialist is produced by the Socialist Party, a revolutionary socialist political organisation.

The Socialist was placed on a table next to hygienic products, this was the Socialist newspaper and distributed independently. The Socialist newspaper is independent of any organisation or party. The Socialist is produced by the Socialist Party, a revolutionary socialist political organisation.

I wish to emphasise that this behaviour will not be repeated.

Yours sincerely,

Hannah Sell

21 April 2020

Dear Ms Sell,

I have been contacted by PCS reps in Jubilee House in Stratford, London, a DWP and HMRC workplace, which took place on Monday 30 March, 2020. The Socialist newspaper stall that you refer to, strictly complied with them. We also stated that if, however, the Socialist newspaper was not to be placed on a table next to hygiene products, we would not be able to continue to publish the Socialist.

Consequently, we believe it would be useful for the movement for us to discuss these issues further. In the meantime, we assure you that the Socialist will continue to be produced. If you agree, please contribute to our special corona virus appeal (see p2).

Yours sincerely,

Mark Serwotka

**Should the Socialist still be produced during the corona crisis?**

Debate with Mark Serwotka, general secretary of the PCS civil servants’ union
Adding demands to the weekly claps

Gateshead: Chanting
Another excellent response on our street.

Lots out clapping, taxis tooting their horns, bagpipes playing and a bit of chanting - “PPE for all frontline workers”, “mass testing for all” and “save our NHS”.

Elaine Brunskill

London: Protest
We had a car cavalcade from to Whips Cross hospital to support the workers, clapping and sounding sirens. At Newham hospital we also responded to the call for protest.

Going viral

Socialist comments and letters on the corona 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 (we reserve the right to shorten letters), to editors@socialistparty.org.uk.

Tory propaganda has consequences
This morning (27 April) there’s much more traffic than there has been during the lockdown.

The media has been full of stories about how we are getting on top of the virus. I think they want workers to individually decide to go back to work. Not having any money, they are desperate to earn again. It gets the government off the hook.

The National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) had many great examples at its meeting of how workers have fought for better conditions (see page 5).

Heather Rawling

Leicester

I don’t believe the lies
I’m fed up with the slick speeches on TV every night from callous government members and their toady advisors. On Newsnight, carers visiting elderly people said disposable masks are used for two weeks. Two weeks!

Tory MP Tobias Ellwood arrogantly says he would continue to work under these circumstances - I don’t believe him.

And I don’t believe any of this rotten Tory government. If capitalism cannot provide a safe environment for carers and other frontline workers, then we can’t afford capitalism.

Elaine Brunskill

Newcastle

Price hikes
The Times reports prices at online supermarket Ocado have jumped 16% during the lockdown. Although Ocado may be the worst offender, it is not the only one.

For providing universal healthcare and the dedication of its staff, the NHS generates huge amounts of goodwill among the working class. But we can’t rely on goodwill and charity to keep our hospitals running.

Nick Hart

Black Country

Charities and NHS
Charities affiliated to hospitals and other NHS bodies have renewed appeals for donations during the corona crisis. Efforts made by ordinary workers, such as World War Two veteran Tom Moore, to raise sponsorship should be applauded.

Extra money to fund healthcare is welcome. Even before the epidemic, many hospitals were already running at or close to capacity.

However, why, when most of us pay tax and national insurance, is it necessary for workers to dip into their pockets further to give the NHS a fighting chance of coping with the virus? The 1% are hoarding obscene wealth.

It’s estimated that big business and wealthy individuals in the UK dodge £112 billion in tax annually - just £3 billion less than the budget for NHS services in England last year.

A good number of these “tax shirkers” are the same companies and shareholders charging the NHS through the nose. The interest payments on debts owed by NHS trusts from the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) totalled £2.2 billion in the last financial year - nearly five times the amount raised by NHS charities in the same period.

For providing universal healthcare and the dedication of its staff, the NHS generates huge amounts of goodwill among the working class. But we can’t rely on goodwill and charity to keep our hospitals running.

Nick Hart

Black Country

Price hikes
The Times reports prices at online supermarket Ocado have jumped 16% during the lockdown. Although Ocado may be the worst offender, it is not the only one.

The Times revealed Sainsbury’s and Asda are 3% dearer. Millions of workers and others have suffered a fall in wages or no income.

Profiteering is nothing more than helping the customers according to Ocado: “Like all supermarkets, we removed a number of promotions [price discounts] to encourage customers to shop in a responsible way.”

The Times concludes that the Competition and Markets Authority has “received 21,000 complaints about unfair price rises”, but only “written to 187 supermarkets after their prices.”

John Merrell

Leicester

Richard Branson’s advice
“Loss-making and inefficient airlines should go to the wall... the government should not intervene to stop companies going bust”. Richard Branson on Morrisons flotation and the future of the airline industry.

Leicester

Kier Starmer
Sir Kier doing a great job on his socialist distancing.

Harry Smith
Liverpool

Get some fire in your belly. Thousands have died and thousands more will perish due to Tory covid policies. Evoking the ‘national effort’ and lightly rapping the government over the knuckles for being “too slow” isn’t opposition.

Niall Mulholland
Newham, London

Let them drink bleach
Marie Antoinette is supposed to have told workers on the eve of the French Revolution to “let them eat cake”. 200 years later, Trump is telling workers to drink bleach!

Dave Bartlett
Cardiff

Tories attack trans rights
Equalities Minister Liz Truss has hinted that some rights could be stripped from trans people, especially youth. The Socialist Party submitted a response to the online consultation on reforming the Gender Recognition Act - calling for the right to gender self-identity and an end to austerity, so the needs of all can be met.

Since the consultation, the Tories have been silent on the issue while continuing to starve the NHS of vital resources. To deliver healthcare for trans people alongside everyone else.

Now Truss has stated her three priorities: protecting single-sex spaces, making sure trans adults can live their lives ‘whilst maintaining the proper checks and balances’, and protecting under-18s from ‘irreversible’ decisions.

These ‘priorities’ are utterly hypocritical. Women’s refuges need protection from the Tories, rather than trans people in need of services. Refugees have lost a quarter of their funding since 2010, forcing an estimated 44% of domestic violence victims to sofa-surf.

Many trans adults are on waiting lists for several years for just their first appointment at underfunded gender identity clinics. Trans people face discrimination and abuse, with severe effects on mental health.

The Tories have an appalling record on LGBT rights - or at least the rights that cost the Treasury anything. These ‘priorities’ confirm they will do nothing serious to support trans people.

Three priorities that trans people need are self-identity, an end to austerity, and high quality healthcare under workers’ control.

Adam Harmsworth
Coventry
### Schools: No return without a national union agreement that guarantees safety!

National Education Union (NEU) members have put forward the following model motion at meetings on opposing the reopening of schools unless safe.

1) Welcomes the huge support for the NEU petition opposing any reopening of schools until it is safe to do so.
2) Recognises the pressures on school communities that both school closures and the more general lockdown are causing, especially for the most disadvantaged and the families of keyworkers. However, we also recognise that schools are places where there is a significant risk of transmission of Covid-19. In needing a safe return for staff, we are therefore also ensuring that we are prioritising the health of our school communities too.
3) Opposes leaving the responsibility for decisions about a safe return solely down to union negotiations with individual schools or employers. While the detailed application would need to also be worked out at these levels, the NEU should make clear that no NEU member should return to work until and unless there is a clear national union agreement that guarantees a safe return for all our members, in all schools and settings.
4) Believes that a national agreement must:
   a) Ensure World Health Organization recommendations are being followed before any return begins. These require infection to be first brought down to a level where transmission is under control and that sufficient capacity for testing and contact tracing is in place.
   b) Ensure that there is guaranteed provision for regular repeat testing of school staff and for prompt tracing and isolation of contacts, including immediate re-closure of schools, on full pay, if required to ensure isolation occurs.
   c) Reduces risks by ensuring that student numbers attending on any day will remain substantially reduced until it is certain that Covid-19 transmission has remained under control.
   d) Also include requirements on open agreement for: prior training for staff; PPE provision for staff in high-risk categories; the provision of regular sufficient cleaning; safety on transport; counselling; specific risk assessments in each workplace; funding to recruit additional staff required as well as correcting any unequal treatment suffered by supply staff.
   e) Make clear that there will be no requirement on staff to work during the summer holidays, instead, additional funding should be provided for fully funded free summer play schemes provision.
   f) Calls on the union to put any draft agreement out to consultation to districts and then agreement by a full online meeting of the NEU national executive.
   g) Further calls on the unions to make clear that, should any attempt be made to open schools without such an agreement, the union will support members in not returning to work in line with relevant employment law and health and safety legislation.

### From the frontline: B&M Bargains management puts profit before safety

A B&M Bargains worker

The attitude of B&M Bargains management has been ‘business as usual’. Some staff are furloughed, often in stores in shopping centres which have closed anyway, and some admin staff. But most are still working, with the company’s attitude being that we can pick up sales from competitors while they are closed.

B&M management is using the argument that we are key workers because we sell food, but it’s a minority of what we usually sell, and in my store we’re selling even less than usual at the moment. Instead, most of the people coming in are in the garden, DIY and paint aisles.

In the rush to sell as much as possible, health and safety is going out the window. We’ve had cages blocking fire exits so people can restock quicker. The cleaner in store had to self-isolate, yet for days no-one replaced her. Our till screens are next to useless. They are free standing but they keep falling and hitting the cashiers on the head. It’s been reported to management but nothing is being done.

Easter weekend was the worst period. We had a policy of only allowing 20 people in the store at a time, then it went up to 30, 35, 40 and then 120 at a time! Management told us they were letting in "only how many we feel safe" - I think they really wanted to make as much money as possible. To cap it all, we had a regional manager in on Good Friday. Was he concerned about our safety? No, he was more bothered about stock on the paint aisle!

It’s only through the union, Usdaw and get organised.

### Waltham Forest trade unions discuss the fight for PPE and workplace safety

Nancy Taaffe
Waltham Forest Socialist Party

In organising a meeting on PPE and workplace safety, Waltham Forest Trade Union Council showed the role of these bodies in drawing together workers in struggle, strengthening solidarity, and helping clarify the tasks for the labour movement through discussion.

Hundreds of small - and not so small - victories are being won in workplaces through workplace organisation and collective action all over the country.

Our trade union council meeting was organised so we could hear about some of these victories and to look at how the whole trade union movement can benefit from discussing them and perhaps emulating them.

There were seven panel speakers at the Zoom webinar discussion.

Unions must organise throughout crisis

The coronavirus pandemic throws up its own unique problems and challenges which cannot be unti after the lockdown has ended. Workers are being subjected to unfair and unsafe conditions now, and it is simply unacceptable for union leaders to put things off.

Plymouth and district general Usdaw branch has made use of Zoom and met on 22 April to ensure that members can still come together. It is clear the union is needed to defend against the lack of PPE as well as the disregard of social-distancing guidelines by management in many stores.

There is no reason why union members can’t make by meeting use of apps like Zoom.

If key workers are expected to work as normal, why can’t we also organise in a trade union as normal? Where this isn’t already taking place, workers should demand that branches find ways to overcome lockdown so that union branches aren’t effectively suspended at a time when they are vitally important to struggle.

It needs to be made clear to bosses that workers will not abide profits being put before worker health and safety; dangerous conditions should be met with walkouts. Likewise, it needs to be made abundantly clear to union leaders that this will not be tolerated. This is especially so with thousands of new members looking to the unions to step up and fight for their rights, and indeed advancing workers’ rights and conditions.

Ryan Aldred, Usdaw Plymouth and district general branch secretary (personal capacity)
Overworked, underpaid, struggling to afford the basics - this is true of the situation facing many ‘key workers’ that the Covid-19 lockdown has so clearly demonstrated society is dependent on. This was also the situation facing many workers 130 years ago, when the first May Day marches took place to celebrate International Workers’ Day.

At that time, trade unions were mostly based among skilled ‘craft’ workers. These ‘aristocrats of labour’ found political expression by riding on the coat-tails of the capitalist Liberal Party. As industrialisation developed, however, unskilled sections of workers arose in industry. But the attitude of most craft trade union leaders was that such workers simply couldn’t be organised, and would be a drain on their strike funds.

It was in this period that International Workers’ Day originated. It started in the US, where strikes took place in May 1886 for the eight-hour day, with strikers often facing repression from the police. In 1889, the newly founded Socialist International called for protests and strikes demanding the eight-hour day to take place on or near 1 May 1890.

In Britain, socialists like Eleanor Marx, along with socialists like the Leeds-based Tom Maguire, as well as workers like Tom Mann, Ben Tillett and Will Thorne, who had passed through the newly founded socialist organisations, also helped to organise mass strikes, and build the ‘new unions’ organising unskilled workers, who were suffering tremendous working conditions.

Despite attempts by the craft unions to split the 1890 London May Day demonstration, around 100,000 turned out. 90% of those attending crowded the platforms organised by Eleanor Marx and the new unions.

‘New unions’

Eleanor Marx, along with socialists like the Leeds-based Tom Maguire, as well as workers like Tom Mann, Ben Tillett and Will Thorne, who had passed through the newly founded socialist organisations, also helped to organise mass strikes, and build the ‘new unions’ organising unskilled workers, who were suffering tremendous working conditions.

Despite attempts by the craft unions to split the 1890 London May Day demonstration, around 100,000 turned out. 90% of those attending crowded the platforms organised by Eleanor Marx and the new unions.

Join the fightback

Join the Socialists

Visit socialistparty.org.uk/join

or call 020 8988 8777

or text your name and postcode to 07761 818206 to find out more about joining us today

The resolution, passed from both of the platforms set up at the rally stated: “This meeting rejoices in the universal action taken by the workers of the civilised world with respect to the necessity of an eight hours working day, and regards it hopefully as the first step towards the abolition of national and industrial war, the overthrow of race hatreds between the working classes, and the final emancipation of labour.”

But as well as the immediate industrial issue of the eight-hour day, political issues were raised too. In her speech at the London demonstration, Eleanor Marx said: “We must kick these Liberal and Radical members out if they refuse to support our programme. I am speaking this afternoon not only as a trade unionist, but as a socialist.

“Socialists believe that the eight hours’ day is the first and most immediate step to be taken, and we aim at a struggle when there will no longer be one class supporting two others, but the unemployed both at the top and at the bottom of society will be got rid of.”

This was to be the music of the future. Just one month later, during the gas strike, Liberal councillors used the town hall to shelter and entertain strike breakers. The following year, during the Manningham Mills dispute, the Liberal-controlled watch committee allowed the police to be used to break up their demonstrations, and the poor law guardians refused strikers relief.

Those strikes were the impetus for the formation of the Independent Labour Party in Bradford in 1893. Further battles, including the 1897–8 engineers’ lockout, began to push the Trades Union Congress to support the formation of the Labour Representation Committee, precursor of the Labour Party.

Struggles today

130 years on, these struggles continue. During the Covid-19 crisis, Keir Starmer, newly-elected leader of the Labour Party, seems to be even keener than some government ministers to represent the desire of big business to defend their profits and force workers back into potentially unsafe workplaces. The question of independent working-class political representation is back on the agenda.

Workers have won concessions to improve their conditions over the years. But experience has shown that, in a capitalist system, these concessions can be taken back in the drive for profit. In the current wave of capitalist Unidos de las Karlsruher in New York by London bus workers and postal workers, for example, shows what can be done (see page 4).

To ensure adequate safety protection, workers need to organise and take control in their own workplaces. The steps in this direction, through action by London bus workers and postal workers, for example, shows what can be done (see page 4).

But to permanently achieve the aims of the pioneers of May Day - not just an eight-hour day and decent conditions but a society that meets all the needs of ordinary people - we need to go further and fight to bring the major companies and financial institutions under public ownership under democratic workers’ control and management.
Lessons from history

NO RETURN TO THE 1930s: WORLD WAR TWO AND ‘A LAND FIT FOR HEROES’

In the fourth article in our series ‘war, global crises and working-class struggle’, Socialist Party national committee member Tom Baldwin shows how working-class expectations were transformed by World War Two and the impact this had on the initial post-war period.

World War Two saw both civilians and soldiers exposed to the horrors of total war. When it was over there was a determination not to return to the horrors of poverty that had characterised the 1930s. Pay had been low and incomes often insecure. Dockers could be hired for just half a day at a time. Working-class people in cities had to contend with slum housing conditions and rapacious landlords. Wartime rationing had actually improved the diet of a lot of workers who couldn’t afford nutritious food. These conditions, combined with the cost of private healthcare, meant that ill health was rife.

After the sacrifices of the previous six years, however, things would not be allowed to go back to the way they were before. Having won the war, workers would now win the peace. Returning soldiers echoed the demand that followed the First World War - a land fit for heroes. The elements of planning and state direction of production that had been used to support the war effort had given a glimpse of what was possible if the economy was planned for the benefit of ordinary people.

The 1945 general election saw a landslide victory for Labour, sweeping to power on a programme of radical reforms. The wartime coalition government was dissolved and the election took place just two months after victory over the Nazis was declared, while the war with Japan was still continuing.

Myths have subsequently been built up about Churchill being ‘the Greatest Briton’, yet his Conservative Party were unceremoniously dumped at the first possible opportunity. His strong public support during the crisis of war didn’t translate into peacetime. Labour’s manifesto was influenced by the 1942 Beveridge report, which had identified five giant evils: Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness. The proposed solution was the building of the welfare state, providing social security from cradle to grave.

NHS founded

Its centrepiece was the NHS, established under the Labour left-winger Nye Bevan. This ensured, for the first time, that everyone had access to public health care, free at the point of use. Publicly owned council housing was built. Key sections of the economy were also nationalised. These included coal and other energy production, railways, the Bank of England, and the iron and steel industries. Around a fifth of the economy was taken into public hands.

Labour’s manifesto declared it to be a ‘socialist party, and proud of it.’ Upon the opening of the new parliament, Labour MPs sang the socialist anthem The Red Flag, much to the dismay of their Tory counterparts. Yet for the more right-wing Labour Party leaders, these reforms were not to be a stepping stone towards socialism. On the contrary, they were necessary measures to protect the capitalist system.

State investment was needed to help rebuild from the devastation of war. The industries that were taken into public ownership had mainly been failing. Nationalisation was used to shore up these vital props of the capitalist economy. Just as had been the case with the war economy, even capitalist politicians were forced to recognise that their preferred system of the unplanned, private ‘free market’ was not the best way of delivering what was needed.

Moreover, the government was pushed into action by pressure from below. During the war, workers had acted collectively to protect one another. This including breaking into tube stations to force their opening as air raid shelters, an action led by Trotskyists.

These lessons were not forgotten with the end of the Blitz. Workers’ struggles placed demands upon the new government. For example, homeless families occupied former army bases and empty hotels, compelling mass house building.

Labour’s leadership was driven to act by events, carrying out left-wing policies that many of them disagreed with.

Just a year before the election, right-winger Herbert Morrison had shown his disdain for expanding public ownership. He took aside the mover of the successful resolution for nationalisations at Labour’s conference, saying: “That was a good speech you made, but you realise, don’t you, that you’ve lost us the general election?”

The Labour right may have been slow to grasp the public desire for change, but that desire actually went even further than the reforms carried out by the 1945 government.

Despite the huge swing to Labour, the Communist Party still won a seat from them in East London.

The shift in workers’ outlook was by no means limited to Britain. A revolutionary mood swept Europe.

Having driven out the Nazis, resistance movements began demanding socialist change. There were waves of strikes, and the control of some factories was taken by workers’ committees, even in the formerly fascist countries.

Limitations of Labour

Labour’s leadership conceded far-reaching reforms in order to prevent revolution. They ensured the reforms remained within certain limits. Nationalised industries were not controlled by workers but by the former heads of private firms. The 20% of the economy that was in public ownership was dictated to by the 80% that wasn’t.

Because they remained within a capitalist framework, the reforms have been chopped away and reversed over the succeeding years.

This began as early as 1951 with the introduction of charges for dentists and opticians. Nye Bevan walked out of the cabinet in protest, spurring the beginning of the end of the post-war Labour government.

The NHS is now an underfunded and fragmented patchwork of public and for-profit providers, leaving it in a weakened state to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic.

While the current crisis is of a very different nature, there are some parallels with the World War Two situation. Boris Johnson clearly thinks he’s Churchill, appealing to a ‘Blitz spirit.’ This is largely mythical, rich and poor weren’t ‘all in it together’ during the war and aren’t today.

Johnson may find himself facing the same fate as his hero. Unfortunately, Labour, shifting to the right under Keir Starmer, is not putting forward any kind of alternative.

Nevertheless, coronavirus is laying bare the weaknesses and inequities of capitalism. Beveridge’s five evils resurfaced in the period of austerity capitalism. Working class people today have no desire to go back to the way things were either.

We demand a world fit for heroes. Today’s heroes aren’t returning from war, they’re saving lives in our hospitals, they’re transporting food, collecting bins and staffing supermarket checkpoints.

These and other key workers are keeping society running through the crisis. They’re doing so without sufficient protective equipment and often for poverty wages.

Billionaire bosses are not on the list of key workers, they play no useful role in society. It is workers that make and deliver everything of value, even in ordinary times. The capitalists are no more than parasites, profiting from the labour of others.

The Socialist Party fights for every possible improvement for the working class, but we don’t just want a society where we’re taken better care of. We want a socialist world where our class gets the full fruits of its labour. Workers make society run - we must run society.
Income, jobs and workplace safety

- Full pay for all workers. Workers, especially those on low pay, can’t afford to lose 20% of their income.
- Any worker who has to self-isolate 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 asked to work from home must be supplied with adequate equipment, and performance monitoring should be scrapped.
- Workers who follow health advice to be absent from work to avoid potential spread should be excluded from any attendance-management procedures.
- Trade unions to establish an all-union health and safety committee in every workplace to agree joint actions required to guarantee safety.
- No return to work unless adequate safety measures are agreed with trade unions and the workforce.
- 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.

NHS and social care

- Emergency increase in funding for the NHS and for social care.
- Adequate personal protection for all frontline workers.
- NHS to take over all private healthcare facilities and staff.
- PPE for all NHS and frontline staff.
- Tests and full pay for all.
- Take over private health and other necessary facilities and industries. 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.

Government should take over other industries and convert production where necessary, under the democratic control of workers in those industries and in the wider workforce, to guarantee the supply of PPE, medical equipment and testing. Not a penny to the profiteers.
- Emergency training of NHS staff to deal with the coronavirus crisis.
- Immediate 10% wage rise for all NHS staff and social care workers.
- Resources to be mobilised from government and big-business sources so that free, accessible testing with rapid results is available for all frontline staff, workers interacting with the public, patients transferred into social care and anyone with flu or cold-like symptoms. Requisition all private testing and analysis facilities. Massively increase the number of contact tracers.
- Reverse privatisation in the NHS, remove the privateers and cancel all the billions of pounds in annual PFI payments. End profit in social care and bring it into the public sector under democratic working-class oversight.
- 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.

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 local distribution of food, medicines and other supplies to the needy and vulnerable with the democratic oversight of trade union and community organisations. Scrap existing cuts budgets. Demand that the government nationally finance all additional spending necessary to deal with the coronavirus crisis, as well as releasing the resources to reverse a decade of austerity.
- 24-hour, adequately staffed, local authority helplines for landlords in genuine need.
- Councils to use their powers to take over empty homes to house the homeless, those in inadequate housing and those fleeing domestic violence. Hotels to be used to provide emergency accommodation.
- Funding for 24 hour helplines and increased spending on refuges and safe 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

- 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.
- No profiteering. Prices to be controlled by democratically elected committees of workers and consumers.
- No action to be taken for non-payment of utilities. Free broadband for all.
- For international socialist cooperation.

Workers asked to work from home must be supplied with adequate equipment, and performance monitoring should be scrapped.
- Workers who follow health advice to be absent from work to avoid potential spread should be excluded from any attendance-management procedures.
- Trade unions to establish an all-union health and safety committee in every workplace to agree joint actions required to guarantee safety.
- No return to work unless adequate safety measures are agreed with trade unions and the workforce.
- 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.

NHS and social care

- Emergency increase in funding for the NHS and for social care.
- Adequate personal protection for all frontline workers.
- NHS to take over all private healthcare facilities and staff.
- PPE for all NHS and frontline staff.
- Tests and full pay for all.
- Take over private health and other necessary facilities and industries. 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.

Government should take over other industries and convert production where necessary, under the democratic control of workers in those industries and in the wider workforce, to guarantee the supply of PPE, medical equipment and testing. Not a penny to the profiteers.
- Emergency training of NHS staff to deal with the coronavirus crisis.
- Immediate 10% wage rise for all NHS staff and social care workers.
- Resources to be mobilised from government and big-business sources so that free, accessible testing with rapid results is available for all frontline staff, workers interacting with the public, patients transferred into social care and anyone with flu or cold-like symptoms. Requisition all private testing and analysis facilities. Massively increase the number of contact tracers.
- Reverse privatisation in the NHS, remove the privateers and cancel all the billions of pounds in annual PFI payments. End profit in social care and bring it into the public sector under democratic working-class oversight.
- 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.

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 local distribution of food, medicines and other supplies to the needy and vulnerable with the democratic oversight of trade union and community organisations. Scrap existing cuts budgets. Demand that the government nationally finance all additional spending necessary to deal with the coronavirus crisis, as well as releasing the resources to reverse a decade of austerity.
- 24-hour, adequately staffed, local authority helplines for landlords in genuine need.
- Councils to use their powers to take over empty homes to house the homeless, those in inadequate housing and those fleeing domestic violence. Hotels to be used to provide emergency accommodation.
- Funding for 24 hour helplines and increased spending on refuges and safe 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

- 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.
- No profiteering. Prices to be controlled by democratically elected committees of workers and consumers.
- No action to be taken for non-payment of utilities. Free broadband for all.
- For international socialist cooperation.