

3 Lockdowns... 20+ U-turns...

WE CAN'T TRUST THE TORIES

BUT WORKERS' ACTION CAN WIN ON HEALTH, SAFETY, JOBS AND PAY!

We can't believe a word this Tory government says. We can't trust a thing it does. Going into lockdown 3, working-class people can only rely on our own strength and organisation. This is the lesson we can draw from the education workers' fight for school safety (see pages 2-3).

One day Johnson says that schools are completely safe, the next he says they must close! Education workers had been saying for weeks that schools were Covid superspreaders. But he ignored them and the scientific evidence backing them up.

With millions going to work as normal, often on overcrowded public transport, it was

obvious that any coronavirus strain, let alone a 70% more virulent variant, would spread like wildfire. But he did nothing.

Why? Because having workers in the workplaces to make profits for the Tories' big-business friends comes before the lives and livelihoods of working-class people.

We couldn't trust the Tories to test-and-trace, handing contracts to their cronies in the private sector so they could make a quick buck. And we can't leave the vaccination programme in their hands either.

Health service workers themselves should be involved in deciding how and where the vaccines are administered. The production and supply should be taken out of private hands and democratically planned to ensure that everyone who needs a vaccination gets one, as speedily and safely as possible.

In the first Covid wave, hundreds of health workers, bus drivers and others died unnecessarily because of inadequate PPE and safety measures. On the buses in London, in Royal Mail, and other workplaces, workers organised and took action themselves to ensure that

health and safety measures were introduced. Before the latest mega U-turn, education workers were taking direct action to ensure that nobody was at risk from unsafe schools.

Following their lead, workers elsewhere need to get organised, fight for workplace safety, jobs and conditions, and put pressure on their trade union leaders to act: not put their members' interests on hold as they did in the first lockdown in the name of a fictional 'national unity' with the bosses.

Ten months of Covid crisis and it's pretty clear that we're not all in this together. The foodbank queues are getting longer, working-class people are struggling to pay their bills and face losing their jobs and homes while the super-rich get richer (see pages 6-7). This new lockdown could push millions over the edge.

But a coordinated campaign by the trade unions nationally could force this government - 20 U-turns and counting - to cough up the money needed to make sure that workers are guaranteed full pay and decent benefits, and don't suffer economically during this lockdown.

But it's not just the Tories that we can't trust to defend our interests. Labour leader Keir Starmer was also calling for schools to stay open when it was obvious that for safety reasons they needed to close. We need to fight for a political voice for workers - a new mass party that puts our interests first not those of big business and the rich.

We say:

- **100% pay for all workers furloughed, isolating, working from home or having to stay at home because of workplace or school closures**
- **Trade union and workers' control of workplace safety and what constitutes essential working**
- **Step up the vaccine programme under the democratic control of health service workers and professionals**
- **No trust in capitalist politicians. Join the fight to build a new mass party of workers and young people.**
- **Socialist planning not capitalist chaos**

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

WORKERS' ACTION WINS TORY U-TURN ON SCHOOL SAFETY

JANE NELLIST
COVENTRY NEU MEMBER

The last few days have seen a monumental battle between hundreds of thousands of teachers and support staff - members of the biggest education union, the National Education Union (NEU) - and the Tory government. Boris Johnson has yet again been forced into a massive U-turn, announcing on Monday 4 January at 8pm that a new lockdown would be put in place with school closures in England.

Only 24 hours earlier, he was claiming schools were safe. Now he is forced to admit that schools were "vectors of transmission" of the virus - something that we all knew months ago.

There was a palpable explosion of relief and celebration from education staff that this decision was made. WhatsApp groups of education workers shared the growing expectations of the announcement.

But there was also great anger and sadness. There are growing reports of more deaths of teachers and support staff as well as staff that have been left seriously ill and unable to work because of Covid.

The true scale of this is unknown because the government has refused to make public the actual statistics, even if it has them! The loss of family members is also more widely shared on social media groups.

Strike ballot

For months, Socialist Party members in the NEU were campaigning to prepare the membership for a national strike ballot to force increased safety in schools in order to protect communities.

Keeping schools fully open has nothing to do with keeping children safe. Instead, it has put more lives in danger, more pressure on an overwhelmed NHS, more chaotic disruption in schools.

With Covid cases rising rapidly during the autumn term in the north of England and the Midlands, the national union leadership prevaricated at every turn. Despite growing evidence that school-aged children have high levels of infection, and that poorly ventilated, closely packed schools have been an important factor in the spread of Covid-19.

The more recent rapid rise in outbreaks in London and the south east, spreading quickly to other areas, and the identification of a new more transmissible variant of the virus, has scared education staff.

Even the government's own scientific advisers warned ministers that "accumulating evidence is consistent with increased transmission occurring amongst school children when schools are open." Yet the Department for Education still insisted on bullying councils like Greenwich into keeping their schools open.



400,000

joined the NEU members' online meeting - what has to be one of the biggest trade union meetings in history

Now these bullies are being held to account.

Insisting workers enter an unsafe workplace, and without risk assessments in place that address the new dangers from the new variant, is a breach of health and safety. That's why the NEU executive met in emergency session on Saturday 2 January.

The NEU agreed to call on all members in primary, nursery and special schools to exercise their rights under Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act 1996 to refuse to work in unsafe workplaces. The union would support them in doing so, including through balloting for industrial action if necessary. The full opening of secondary schools had already been delayed by a week.

This action was unprecedented. Staff were relieved that at last they were starting to fight back against a government that refused to acknowledge the seriousness of the situation.

400,000 joined the online mass members' meeting later that day - what has to be one of the biggest trade union meetings in history.

In Coventry, we had two further members' meetings - over 300 at each. This has been replicated across the country.

Union membership has increased, and more school reps have stepped forward to support their members. Members are more combative.

This is hugely positive. The union

must make sure that it harnesses that willingness to fight.

By Sunday 3 January, staff had sent in their Section 44 letters to headteachers, and many primary schools started to report they were closed. Some councils expressed support for the action against the government which, in turn, gave a boost to more staff to submit their letters.

It was frantic. WhatsApp groups were busy answering questions and building confidence for members.

Throughout Monday 4 January, pressure increased on the government. Even former Tory health secretary Jeremy Hunt called for a lockdown including school closures.

Education staff felt the endgame was in sight. By 8pm, Boris Johnson confirmed the inevitable.

Labour's dithering

The dithering of the Labour leadership has seriously damaged their credibility in the eyes of education staff. Keir Starmer called for a lockdown, but to keep schools open.

While the use of Section 44 was, and is, a vital step, we must step up the fight for more secure protection for education staff via an industrial action ballot. The quicker this can be started, the quicker it can be in place.

There are still huge issues that must be won, especially on workload and pay. Now the hard work starts on ensuring that we set the terms for

this lockdown with secure Covid-free workplaces for staff and pupils.

At the time of writing, the government guidance is far from clear. There are reports of headteachers demanding all staff attend school to deliver remote learning, and high numbers of pupils in school, as well as issues regarding special schools and early years.

Members will be advised to insist on a new risk assessment and to make clear that, as long as conditions are safe, they are available to work in school to teach the children of key workers and vulnerable children only (unless at high risk themselves), or otherwise work from home to support remote learning.

By failing to act earlier in this decisive manner, the NEU has left itself with a very short timescale to get its message across to its members and to give them confidence to act. Nevertheless, it is a stand that had to be taken given the serious dangers facing all of us.

There is more potential for many members to grow in confidence and have the determination to win.

All education unions must join together with parent groups and the wider trade union movement to ensure that our communities are safe, and that families have the resources to access online learning.

It shows how quickly events can change, and the potential power of workers when they move into action.



School workers respond

As the rapid retreat over the exams fiasco in the summer showed, this has long been a government that could be forced to U-turn once pressure was applied. It just goes to show what can be achieved when trade unions give a lead.

Confusion still reigns on the details, why early years settings have been told they should remain fully open and why Btec vocational exams are still going ahead in the coming week.

As things stand, not just me but, more importantly, my learners have been left without any clarity. This lot can't even handle their U-turns competently!

The battle in schools is still far from over. We have to make sure that schools operate safely for the priority learners they will be teaching face-to-face; that staff are able to resist unacceptable workload demands around online learning; that learners at home get the laptops and other help they need; and that parents and carers are paid when they need to be at home for childcare reasons.

But, overall, we can be proud that we have helped to push the government back and made sure our communities are a little safer at least.

MARTIN POWELL-DAVIES
LANCASHIRE NEU MEMBER

This is just the beginning of the next stage of the mess in education caused by the Tories. Many headteachers have not caught on or deliberately ignore the changed circumstances of the new variant and crisis in transmission; calling members into schools for inset or to work online from school, even though it is not necessary; and not updating

risk assessments before setting up rotas for vulnerable and keyworker children!

Section 44 has to be stuck to in the face of unreasonable requests by headteachers. We need the threat of action to sustain it and win new risk assessments, training and agreements on safe and reasonable online learning, including laptops and wifi for all pupils.

But, most importantly, the union guidance and government diktat is leaving nurseries and special schools believing they have to be fully open, despite the particular vulnerability of nursery and special needs staff, with pupils who need intimate care and cannot socially distance.

Education workers are not even on the list for urgent vaccination. The union leadership finally raised its little finger and the members responded and massively increased in numbers.

But the job of the union is only just beginning. It has to ballot to give the message we are not cannon fodder, and pupils need a socialist education system now.

LOUISE CUFFARO
NEWHAM NEU BRANCH SECRETARY (PERSONAL CAPACITY)

I'm a secondary school rep and had a lot of staff ready and willing to send in Section 44 letters. The past week has transformed union consciousness - we must build on that and keep this momentum.

The rapid switch to online learning will be a huge challenge for teachers and school leaders. We need to balance providing the best education possible to the students with ensuring that teachers' workload is

manageable, and safeguarding is protected.

Schools have been given little to no support or resources from the government to help them make this switch. Even worse is the outrageously short notice this government gives for these decisions. It shows the Tories have no respect for the teaching profession and clearly do not care about students getting a good quality education.

BRADFORD SECONDARY NEU REP

I have very much mixed feelings. There is an inescapable sense of triumph in seeing the government doing such a U-turn.

They so categorically contradicted the very things they had said only 24 hours previously, that I can't help but think of Stalinist Russia. And make no mistake they weren't led by the science, they were pushed by the collective pressure of thousands of trade union members.

Without teachers' and support staffs' refusal to go into unsafe schools I do not think we would have a national lockdown. Never forget that in the last week before Christmas this inept and uncaring government was actually threatening legal action against local authorities and headteachers who felt their schools were unsafe and should be shut.

But on the other hand, as a teacher, I was feeling overwhelmed by trying to deliver a day of online lessons, and even more so by messages from young people, whose fragile mental health has already taken such a battering, and who are now full of fears and anxieties for the future.

CHRIS HOLMES
NORTH LONDON TEACHER



WHAT WE STAND FOR

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

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

Our demands include...

PUBLIC SERVICES

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

- Scrap Universal Credit. For the right to decent benefits, education, training, or a job, without compulsion.
- Scrap the anti-trade union laws! For fighting trade unions, democratically controlled by their members. Full-time union officials to be regularly elected and receive no more than a worker's wage. Support the National Shop Stewards Network.
- A 35-hour week with no loss of pay.

ENVIRONMENT

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

RIGHTS

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

MASS WORKERS' PARTY

- For a mass workers' party drawing together workers, young people and activists from workplace, community, environmental, anti-racist and anti-cuts campaigns, to provide a fighting, political alternative to the pro-big business parties.

SOCIALISM AND INTERNATIONALISM

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

Do you agree? Join the fightback!

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● Vaccine roll-out delay

Why is the Covid vaccine roll out so slow? Government bureaucracy delaying the recruitment of vaccinators, and foul-ups in the private manufacturing and supply are to blame.

According to Martin Marshall, head of the Royal College of General Practitioners “there is not a big enough workforce in primary care or mass vaccination centres come three weeks’ time, when we start seeing the AstraZeneca vaccine coming through at volume.”

And John Bell, professor of medicine at Oxford University and member of SAGE, has stated that a lack of investment in the capacity to make vaccines left the UK unprepared. Instead, the drug companies have outsourced vaccine production offshore.

Incredibly, one reason for delays in rolling out the AstraZeneca vaccine is the lack of glass vials and specialised bungs. Yet a probable shortage of glass vials for Covid vaccines was identified back in May of last year!

Perhaps the ‘bung’ shortage is down to the Tories handing out billions of pounds worth of medical supplies contracts to their chums to profit from!

● Massive job cuts

A staggering 176,718 retail jobs were axed last year in the UK, according to the Centre for Retail Research. This is despite the upturn in sales at supermarkets.

The above figure includes the 13,000 job cuts from the closure of tax dodging Philip Green’s Arcadia, technically owned by his partner who resides in Monaco.



● Minimum wage scandal

Meanwhile, it’s been revealed that another multi-billionaire ‘non-dom’ tax dodger, and also a resident of Monaco, Ineos’s CEO James Ratcliffe, was found guilty of paying staff employed at his Home Grown Hotels venture below the minimum wage.

Ratcliffe joined a list of another 138 ‘rogue employers’, including Tesco and Pizza Hut, owing £6.7 million to more than 95,000 workers for paying less than the legal requirement.

The Tory government, bowing to pressure from UK bosses will only increase the current insufficient minimum wage of £8.72 an hour for over 23s, by a paltry 19p from next April.

● Reverse charges

On the eve of crucial run-off elections for two Senate seats in Georgia, the Washington Post has reported transcripts of a telephone recording of president Donald Trump haranguing Georgia’s Republican secretary of state Brad Raffensberger to reverse the state’s presidential election vote, which narrowly gave victory to Democrat Joe Biden.

Trump regurgitates his usual accusations that the election was ‘stolen’ from him. In one laughable exchange he claims 5,000 dead people cast their votes. Raffensberger dryly replies: “The actual number was two”!

Having failed to pressurise Raffensberger with threats of legal action Trump then pleads: “I only need 11,000 votes. Fellas, I need 11,000 votes. Give me a break.”

Most senior Republicans have distanced themselves from Trump, but some, such as vice-president Mike Pence, have remained loyal. This is because Pence, et al, are setting their sights on running for the White House in 2024 and want to secure Trump’s electoral base.



● Assange extradition rejected

The refusal by a judge at the Old Bailey to extradite WikiLeaks co-founder Julian Assange to the USA and face a show trial, has undoubtedly angered the White House.

However, the judge’s ruling was not a rejection of the US administration’s witch-hunting vendetta against WikiLeaks - who released secret documents and emails showing the US government and its allies carried out war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan - but because Assange’s delicate mental health could result in his suicide if incarcerated in the US.

The ruling leaves the door wide open for future investigative journalism into the US, and other governments’ misdeeds to still be criminalised and suppressed.

● *For background reading on the Assange trial see: ‘Assange arrest: US and allied governments seeking revenge for exposing dirty wars’ on socialistparty.org.uk*

Protect lives and livelihoods, fight to defend the NHS

MICK GRIFFITHS
WAKEFIELD AND PONTEFRAC SOCIALIST PARTY

A recent report ‘Exposed, Silenced, Attacked’, commissioned by Amnesty International, highlights the global failure of governments and employers to protect health and essential workers during the Covid pandemic. Using the limited available information, the report raises very important concerns for the trade union and workers movement.

Examples are given of systematic and systemic abuses of workers’ rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The rights of workers to fight for just, favourable, and safe working conditions are under attack. Scandalously, the UK is reported as having the second highest number of known health care workers’ deaths.

2020 has left health workers feeling shell-shocked. Lives and livelihoods are still very much at stake. The National Health Service is facing its greatest ever threat.

Under the cover of the Covid chaos, the government is proposing legal changes to enable the establishment of so-called ‘integrated care systems’ to replace the current system of district-based clinical commissioning groups (CCGs). These remote bodies could privatise entire health services with little or no accountability and transparency.

This reform could start the process of tearing up the founding principles of the NHS. The government aims to implement it by April 2022!

Wakefield CCG has carried out an ‘engagement with interested parties’ process over these proposals which is due to end on 8 January. It has welcomed the proposals, and so far no “interested parties” have raised any concerns.

As health service trade union leaders continue to hibernate themselves against the reality faced by members,



the establishment is relishing the prospect of making workers pay for the crisis. Under Corbyn’s leadership, Labour’s policy was to reverse all NHS privatisation. Under Starmer it is likely that this will no longer be the case.

International cooperation for the benefit of the peoples’ interests is not possible under the existing capitalist system. All the mainstream parties prop up the system at our expense.

The Tories were never in favour of the creation of the NHS, and they seek to further privatise it. The health service was not gifted to us by a

benevolent state. It had to be fought for and won through mass struggle.

Our lives and livelihoods can only be defended by building trade unions with leaderships committed to fighting programs for real change. A mass struggle is once more required to save our NHS.

As part of this, the trade unions also need to campaign for the creation of a new mass workers’ party, to give a political voice to the working class, and take action to defend its interests. A socialist alternative is necessary to combat the market madness of profiting from ill health.

UNICEF feeds children in the UK for the first time



ARCHIE
WALTHAM FOREST SOCIALIST PARTY

“It is a real scandal that UNICEF should be playing politics this way” was the response of millionaire and Leader of the House of Commons Jacob Rees-Mogg to the announcement that UNICEF will be responsible for feeding children in the UK for the first time in its history.

This perfectly sums up the callous attitude the ruling classes have for working-class children. While Jacob Rees-Mogg can lavish his children with all the privileges that money and prestige can buy, 30% of children living in the UK are deemed to be living in poverty. Their health and living conditions are rapidly deteriorating following ten years of Tory austerity, and now exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is no surprise that Rees-Mogg spouts such bile. He and his Tory peers have always openly proclaimed their disdain for working-class children. Speaking in the Houses of Parliament earlier this year, in the debate over giving children free school meals throughout half term, Tory MP Ben Bradley claimed that this would result in the “nationalisation of children”. This was before tweeting that free school meals vouchers would be directed to “crack dens and brothels” if issued.

The real scandal is that huge layers of the population have to rely on charity simply to survive. Charity can only offer small relief from the relentless drive for profit. Only a democratic socialist planned economy using the vast resources that exist in society can end poverty and provide everyone with a decent standard of living.

Universities: refund the rent, cancel the fees, for fully funded, publicly owned education

THEO SHARIEFF
SOCIALIST STUDENTS NATIONAL ORGANISER

The government’s announcement of a new national lockdown in England has left a huge question mark over what university students can expect for the rest of the academic year. At the time of writing, it is totally unclear to millions of students, many of whom have already paid their rent for the term, whether or not they will be allowed to return to campus.

This episode has yet again underscored not only the complete incompetence of the Tory government, which has sought at every stage of this pandemic to put the profits of big business ahead of our health and education, but also the broken funding model on which universities are run.

With the new lockdown, students across the country face the possibility of being made to pay both full rent and tuition fees for stay-at-home, online-only university courses.

Rent Refund

In particular, the prospect of paying thousands of pounds of rent for rooms which they won’t even be able to live in will be outrageous to thousands of students. Students who for any reason are unable to move into their halls of residence and have already paid this term’s rent should be given 100% rent refunds by their universities, and any lost university revenue made up by the government.

Students who are yet to pay their rent, or no longer require the use of accommodation, should be released immediately from their contracts should they wish, including those living in either third-party

accommodation or in the private rented sector, with landlords given compensation only on the basis of proven need.

Universities were already in the midst of a huge funding crisis prior to the arrival of Covid. Students last term were lied to by university management so that universities could get access to rent payments and tuition fees.

That’s why Socialist Students and the Socialist Party is fighting not only for rent refunds for the year, but for free education. This means tuition fee refunds through a cancellation of all student debt and the scrapping of tuition fees, and replacing the broken market model with a fully funded and publicly owned education system.

Part of fighting for free education is fighting to kick profit out of higher education. This would involve placing all halls of residence currently owned by private companies under the ownership and control of the universities themselves. This would lay the basis for democratically set rents in student halls, decided on by democratically elected committees with the involvement of students themselves.

To win all of this will take the building a mass student movement, uniting rent strikers, students struggling for free education, and university staff opposing cuts, to fight the Tories for the funding and resources our universities need. Come to Socialist Students online national conference on Sunday 28 February to discuss how we can build such a movement.

Join the student fightback
JOIN socialist students
socialiststudents.org.uk/join



University teaching moves online in England Workers to fight redundancies and pay freeze

BEA GARDNER
SOUTHAMPTON UCU

Like in the rest of education, university staff and students are left in disarray by this consistently inconsistent and incompetent Tory government.

Under mounting pressure even before the lockdown announcement, the universities minister, Michelle Donelan, sent a last-minute letter to universities on 30 December (one working day before students were due back) to announce a staggered return from 25 January for students. Then, just days later, unmentioned in Boris Johnson’s speech, the government gave instructions to keep learning online. Meanwhile, as it stands, the Welsh government is set to continue with a staggered return.

In England, where the announced lockdown does mitigate some of the worst of workers’ immediate safety fears, it still poses challenges. Those now attempting to manage home working with home schooling need appropriate flexible working arrangements, including paid time off if needed.

Workers asked to attend the workplace still need safety provision and new risk assessments which take into account the higher infectivity rates of the new Covid strain. Postgraduate students continue to resist government’s decision that they should “adapt” their projects without funding extensions. And of course, we still face the onslaught of cuts and voluntary and compulsory redundancies, alongside the announced pay freeze for this year.

But branches of the University and Colleges Union (UCU) are fighting back. Members at Brighton, East London and Goldsmiths universities have successfully won ballots for industrial action against redundancies. They could soon be joined by many other UCU branches including Solent, Manchester Met, Roehampton and Birmingham, all having delivered impressive consultative ballot results in the autumn term.

The National Education Union has showed that unions have power (see pages 2-3) - collective organising can win massive concessions for workers. Such action is a start towards building a movement capable of winning more than concessions, but transforming our workplaces in our interests.

Hospital security staff on strike for £12 an hour

Security staff at the Royal Berkshire Hospital in Reading are continuing strike action, the next action taking place over 20 days throughout January and February.

The Unite members are striking to demand a rate of £12 an hour, more than affordable for the employer Kingdom Services Group, which

has a turnover of more than £100 million.

Disgracefully, the bosses are employing agency staff to attempt to undermine the strike. Socialist Party members attended the picket line on the first day of this new round of action on Monday 4 January and will continue to support the strike.

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● British Gas workers on strike against fire and re-hire pay cut

British Gas workers begin five days of strike action on Thursday 7 January, with potentially more to follow. It comes as bosses pursue a ‘fire and re-hire’ policy and issued an ultimatum for workers to agree cuts to pay, terms and conditions on pain of dismissal.

The strike ballot of GMB members returned an overwhelming 89% vote in favour of industrial action. Alongside the 4,500 service and repair gas engineers being called out on to strike will be 600 central heating installers, 540 electrical engineers, 170 specialist business gas engineers, and 1,700 smart metering engineers.

2020 - A YEAR WHICH DROVE HOME THE CATASTROPHIC FAILURES OF CAPITALISM

Join the fight for a socialist world!

HANNAH SELL

SOCIALIST PARTY GENERAL SECRETARY

The world was united in misery in 2020. Too many deaths from the pandemic, job losses, pay cuts and poverty were the experience in virtually every country on the planet. Britain, as the year ends, is leading the world in a new surge in the virus; with the highest ever level of recorded infections.

The misery, of course, is not universal. Sections of the capitalists are doing very nicely indeed. Ten of the richest people in the world have increased their wealth by more than £300 billion since the pandemic began. Across Britain's 100 biggest stock market-listed companies, CEOs collect an obscene 73 times the average wage of their workers.

But while the fortunes of the bosses of logistics, PPE, pharmaceutical and some other companies soared, capitalism as a whole entered a devastating crisis, the price for which is being paid for by the working class and poor.

Chancellor Sunak's autumn statement confirmed that Britain's economy is expected to have contracted by over 11% in 2020, the worst situation in three centuries. Sunak's family will not be facing impoverishment as a result; he is married to one of the richest women in Britain.

Collapsing living standards

It is a different story for the majority however. By the middle of the year 5.6 million people were claiming Universal Credit, with more than 60% of them having little or insufficient work. That is an increase of three million from October 2019.

It is estimated that the pandemic has left two million families destitute - struggling to feed, house or clothe themselves. Meanwhile, there are still more than two million people furloughed, often having to live on 80% of their normal wage, and fearing they will have no job to return to.

The latest surge in the virus and Johnson's belated and botched new lockdown measures have only worsened an already dire situation, forcing Sunak to extend the furlough until the end of April 2021. This will mean that the government will have paid 80% of millions of workers' wages for a year.

The Tories, like all governments with the resources to do so, have spent unprecedented sums in an attempt to limit the damage to capitalism done by the pandemic.

UK government debt is now at its highest ever level outside of wartime. In the short term, this has lessened

the effect of the crisis, although it is still devastating.

It is already clear, however, that longer term the capitalist class intends to use the scale of the state debt to justify new attacks on the working class and some sections of the middle class. Sunak's announcement of a new public sector pay freeze - when public sector workers' wages have been squeezed for a decade (a civil servant's wage has shrunk by 19% in real terms in that time, for example) - is a down payment on their future intentions.

What type of recovery?

The year 2020 marks a turning point in history and the start of a new era of intensified capitalist crisis. That does not mean there will be no economic recovery from the current devastation. In the short term, the rapid spread of the new strain of the virus is leading to a new severe contraction in the economy. However, if the vaccines that are starting to be rolled out prove effective, the lessening of the pandemic's grip will be in sight as 2021 dawns.

That will also create a certain economic rebound. In addition, the fear of a 'no deal' Brexit having been lifted, despite the very limited character of the deal, will have some effect in lightening the deep black cloud of pessimism that currently dominates the mood of the majority of Britain's capitalist class.

It is ruled out, however, that any recovery will wipe out all of the devastating plummeting of the economy in 2020, either in Britain or internationally.

The events of the last year, and those still to come, are having a profound impact on the outlook of the working class. Johnson's general election victory a year ago, and the mood of 'national unity' that existed at the start of the pandemic, now seem to have happened in a different lifetime. No capitalist government has dealt well with the pandemic, but Johnson's crew are at the bottom of the pile, at least of the economically developed countries.

Those measures that have been taken have been done incompetently, often by companies whose only qualification was connections to Tory politicians.

Cronyism is rife. One survey found that half of all the money handed out by the government for Covid-related measures went to companies which had links to Tory politicians and/or no previous experience in the field!

Extreme short-termism has dominated decision making from the

initial attempt to do nothing and rely on herd immunity onwards. It has resulted in countless edicts that have worsened the pandemic, followed by endless U-turns. From 'eat out to help out' in the summer, to insisting that schools remain open - even using Covid emergency powers to threaten Greenwich Labour council for planning to end term a few days early because of surging virus rates.

Less than 24 hours later the government was forced to recognise schools' part in spreading the virus, not least the new strain. It hastily announced a non-existent plan to test pupils, adding to the already astronomical pressure on teachers. It was then forced to U-turn again, delaying the start of the new term for many school students. Laughably, Johnson has still claimed that schools that remain open are safe.

Trade unions representing teachers and other school staff have correctly raised that they should not have to work if it isn't safe to do so (see pages 2-3). At the time of writing, thousands of schools are not open as a result. The whole trade union movement needs to stand in solidarity with this important struggle to protect workers' and school students' health.

The schools fiasco and the last minute curtailment of Christmas are only the latest of countless blows to the population that Johnson has presided over in his year in office.

Unsurprisingly, the Tory government's opinion poll ratings have been on the slide for months, and the dominant moods in society are of deep-seated fury, frustration and fear.

Pent-up anger

That mood has not yet, in the main, been expressed through action. Shock and the struggle to deal with immediate personal health and economic stresses have been dominant. It could not be otherwise given the almost complete absence of a lead from the top of the workers' movement in a struggle to defend the health, jobs and conditions of the working class.

When predominantly young people took to the streets for the Black Lives Matter protests during the summer, many trade unionists took part, as did the Socialist Party, but the majority of the leadership of the organised trade union movement was woefully absent.

Meanwhile, Starmer's New Labour leadership has acted at every stage to defend the interests of the capitalist class. Even this week, when calling for a new national lockdown, he still declined to support school unions' call for school closures!

Nonetheless, despite the blockage at the top, it is inevitable that 2021 will see new mass expressions of class anger, possibly dwarfing anything seen in recent years. Movements on the scale of those that have shaken Chile, Lebanon, Nigeria and other countries can also come to Britain.

There are countless issues around which struggles could develop, including the continued battle for health and safety in the workplace, the fight to save jobs and against mass unemployment, to stop evictions and homelessness, among students who are paying £9,000 fees for very little education, public sector workers opposing the pay freeze, and many more. An important aspect of all such struggles will be attempts to transform the trade unions into fighting, democratic bodies capable of effectively defending the interests of their members and the wider working class in a coordinated war against Covid austerity.

While it is not possible to predict the exact timing of such developments, the factors creating them are clear and deep-rooted. The nightmare of 2020 came, not against the background of a healthy capitalist system that was taking society forward, but rather an ailing, weak and increasingly crisis-ridden one, which was already heading into a new slow down prior to the pandemic.

Back in 2019 the IMF pointed out that so great was the level of UK corporate debt, almost 40% of it would become impossible to service in the event of a recession just half as deep as 2007-08. In this far greater economic contraction, only huge state intervention has prevented a much bigger swathe of bankruptcies than those that have so far taken place.

Johnson's incompetence and the divisions in his party are not the only reasons that Britain has done so badly in the pandemic. An even greater factor is the huge cuts that have taken place in the public sector, including to local authority public health budgets.



At the start of the crisis Britain had just over 4,000 intensive care beds, one of the lowest numbers in Europe. Italy, for example, had 8,000 and Germany 28,000. As demonstrated by the largely empty and unused Nightingale hospitals - created at huge expense by the private sector - an even bigger problem was Britain's very low number of nurses and other health workers. In a World Health Organisation comparison of ten developed economies, Britain languished in ninth place for the numbers of practising nurses and physicians.

The death rate from the virus is also higher because of the levels of poverty and overcrowding. Deaths from respiratory diseases are three times higher in Britain than the European average, with death rates highest in regions with high levels of poverty - South Wales, Glasgow and Liverpool top the table.

The experience of the last decade of capitalist crisis and austerity, coming on top of 40 years of relentless anti-working class neoliberal policies, has eaten away the foundations of social support for all the institutions of capitalism.

For many commentators it

seems that British capitalism has been buffeted by a series of unrelated and inexplicable tragedies - ranging from the Brexit vote, to the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader, to the rise of support for independence in Scotland, to having an unreliable populist as Tory prime minister. In reality, all these varied phenomena have something in common: the anger of millions of working-class people at their falling living standards and the search for a means to protest against it.

This was the root cause of the size of the working-class vote for Brexit. However, in the absence of a mass left force putting the case for socialist opposition to the neoliberal dictates of the EU, room was left for right-wing populist forces to dominate.

Corbyn and Brexit

There was nothing automatic about this. Had Jeremy Corbyn - then newly elected as Labour leader - defied the Labour right and, as we argued, called for a vote for Brexit on the basis of opposing the pro-big business rules of the EU bosses' club, it would have created an entirely different situation.

Such a stance, both at the time of the referendum and afterwards, would have been an important factor in Corbyn winning a general election. Now, with a thin Tory Brexit deal which will further exacerbate

British capitalism's crisis, it is difficult to imagine how different the situation could have been. A left government taking socialist measures and making an appeal to workers across the EU to support its opposition to the anti-working class, pro-privatisation rules of the EU would have been in an infinitely more powerful negotiating position than this weak, divided Tory government.

Of course, all Tory governments, regardless of whether they are pro or anti-EU membership, act in complete opposition to the interests of the working class. Johnson has been negotiating from what he perceives to be the interests of British capitalism. He is claiming to have negotiated a tremendous victory that allows more 'freedom' for big business.

Only a tiny minority of the British capitalist class will be pleased with the deal, however, although most will be relieved that it wasn't a worse 'no deal' Brexit.

It is true that the deal allows the continuation of tariff-free goods trading between Britain and the EU, while at the same time allowing Britain's government to divert from the EU's level playing field, including on state aid. However, this only pushes arguments further down the road, as the EU will have the right to take measures against British imports, including

introducing tariffs if at any point it considers Britain has gone too far.

Even now, the increased regulatory checks required at borders will be a significant headache for exporters. At the same time, no deal has yet been negotiated for finance and services, which make up 80% of Britain's economy. On fishing, only very limited concessions have been won.

National question

Meanwhile, Northern Ireland will still be expected to obey the EU customs union rules in order to prevent a hard border with the Republic of Ireland. The result - for all Johnson's denial that this would be the case - will effectively be a border in the Irish Sea. The Democratic Unionist Party has therefore pledged to vote against the deal.

It was always ruled out that the capitalist politicians of Ireland, Britain and the EU27 would reach an agreement that satisfied the national, religious and cultural differences - and the economic needs of the working class - across Ireland. Only a programme for a socialist Ireland and a genuinely equal, voluntary, socialist federation of Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England could do that. Johnson is going to preside over a significant increase in sectarian tensions in Northern

➡➡➡ CONTINUED ON P8



The Tories, like all governments with the resources to do so, have spent unprecedented sums in an attempt to limit the damage to capitalism done by the pandemic



The events of the last year, and those still to come, are having a profound impact on the outlook of the working class



The last decade of capitalist crisis and austerity... has eaten away the foundations of social support for all the institutions of capitalism

►► CONTINUED FROM P7

Ireland and a growing movement for independence in Scotland.

For what? Johnson's wing of the Tories were reliant on their right-wing populist campaign to 'get Brexit done' to win the general election. Beyond that, despite their denials, they aspire to turn Britain into 'Singapore on Thames'. Doing so would be likely to lead to EU tariffs and, even if achieved, would be a million miles from their propaganda promising the restoration of Britain to an imperialist power of the first rank.

Rather, it means Britain going further down the road of being a low-corporation tax, low-regulation economy, reliant for example on 'free ports' - aka super-exploiting tax free zones, and becoming a flag of convenience for international shipping.

Johnson hopes this could be combined with state aid for high-tech industries. It is only necessary to look at the government's record over the last year to see that any such attempts would largely end up as bungs to their mates for no-hope projects. The prospect of them leading to Britain competing with the major blocs of the US, China, Japan and the EU is ruled out, with the possible exception of a few small industrial sectors.

Nonetheless, the Brexit deal was agreed by parliament, reflecting the desperation of the majority of the capitalist class to prevent a disorderly no-deal crash out.

Despite mutterings, the big majority of the Tory right voted for the deal, plus Starmer whipped Labour MPs to vote for it. This is yet another example of his determination to show British capitalism that he can be relied on to act in its interests.

Thirty-six Labour MPs rebelled. These were a combination of some lefts, plus right-wing pro-EU MPs who do not oppose the deal as the bosses' charter for super-exploitation that it is, but rather because they would prefer a bosses' deal that more closely aligns Britain with the EU.

Tories' narrow social base

The passage of the Brexit deal through parliament, however, will not bring peace to the parliamentary Tory party. The undermining of the social basis of the party is ultimately a reflection of the decline of British capitalism. In the 1950s the Tories' membership peaked at over two million, even in 1990 it had 400,000 members, now it is barely a quarter of that, and does not represent the views of the majority of the ruling class.

Resting on a very narrow social base, only able to win a general election by promoting a 'Trump-lite' right-wing populism, the Tory party is a very weak and unreliable tool for British capitalism.

The more than 20 U-turns made in 2020 show how easily the Tories can be forced to change course under mass pressure. With numerous aspects of Britain's relations with the EU still to be negotiated, a dire economic crisis, and a continuing pandemic, new schisms will develop in the Tory party in the coming months. Faced with a mass united movement of the working class, it could quickly be forced from office.

The one advantage that the capitalist class has chalked up in 2020 is the election of Starmer as leader of the Labour Party. He is a reliable representative of capitalist interests, waiting in the wings should the Johnson



Left-led unions should seize the moment and launch a conference for political representation for the workers' movement, and thereby transform the situation PHOTO TU SENAN

government collapse. He has burnished these credentials repeatedly with his parliamentary voting record and failure to oppose Johnson, and even more with his willingness to wage a ruthless 'scorched earth' war against Corbynism.

Not only has Corbyn been forced to sit as an independent MP, but swathes of Labour Party members and local Labour party organisations have been suspended for supporting him. Under Tony Blair a handful of left Labour MPs remained as prisoners of the pro-capitalist right, able to occasionally smuggle out a note through the bars. Under Starmer's version of New Labourism, not even that is allowed.

The question of a political voice for the working class is therefore extremely urgent in 2021, when the working class is facing an economic and social catastrophe, and urgently needs effective tools to defend itself. Labour councils are not prepared to fight cuts.

Without such a party, struggle will still take place. Occupations of workplaces threatened with closure could, for example, take place on a much bigger scale than in recent decades.

However, such struggles would be given enormous confidence by the existence of a powerful mass party that, in order to save jobs and incomes, fights for the nationalisation - under democratic workers' control and management - of companies facing bankruptcy, as a part of a socialist programme.

Similarly, the battle against the public sector pay freeze would be given confidence by a mass voice arguing for a huge expansion of the public sector in order to provide much needed jobs and services.

Having failed to transform Labour into a workers' party when Corbyn was leader, hoping against hope that this might happen under Starmer is not a viable strategy. It is urgent that serious action is taken.

Jeremy Corbyn has announced a new 'Project for Peace and Justice', to be launched in January. Unfortunately, this shows no signs of being a significant step towards building a new workers' party.

Its limited written material so far focuses overwhelmingly on international issues and, as the online left

newspaper the Canary put it, proposes to "work beyond political party lines and to foster cooperation and change outside of established democratic processes."

The Canary admits that "there may be some disappointment that Corbyn hasn't launched a new political party in the face of the continuing demise of the Labour Party."

If the project develops on these lines it will indeed be disappointing for working-class people facing the choice in the May 2021 elections between voting for different shades of pro-austerity politicians. If this project limits itself to "change outside of established democratic processes", it will rightly be judged to be avoiding the issue.

If, instead, Corbyn was to take up the suggestion of the London regional council of the transport union RMT to back an anti-cuts candidate for London mayor, and to launch his own candidature, backed by a list of trade unionists, socialists, and community campaigners on an anti-cuts platform, it could have a dramatic effect in combating Starmer, inspiring and rallying all those previously enthused by Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party.

Trade union leaders

Even more important than Corbyn's actions as an individual, however, is the responsibility that lies with left trade union leaders inside and outside the Labour Party. Those affiliated to Labour have correctly protested against Corbyn's suspension and other undemocratic measures taken by Starmer. It is necessary, however, to go further.

If the left-led unions were to seize the moment, with the support of even a handful of MPs and councillors, and to launch a conference to fight for political representation for the workers' movement, it could transform the situation. If a conference agreed even on limited steps, such as freeing trade union branches to stand or back anti-cuts candidates in May's elections, and setting up a trade union group in parliament - perhaps proposing Corbyn as its chair - it would do more to fight back against Starmerism than any amount of pleading behind closed doors.

The right's determination to

obliterate the Labour left is clear. If the time is not now for the left to show similar determination to fight for a socialist voice for the working class, when is?

The Socialist Party believes that what is needed is a new mass workers' party, and appeals to all those who agree to join us in that struggle. A failure to take steps in this direction will also leave more space for Farage and his ilk to step into the vacuum.

As a starting point, the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC), involving the RMT, the Socialist Party, ex-Labour MP Chris Williamson, and others, is back in action and preparing to stand as widely as possible in the elections next May against pro-capitalist, pro-cuts Labour candidates.

Last year drove home the catastrophic failures of capitalism. Growing inequality, dire impoverishment, and a complete inability to effectively combat a virus have all been writ large.

Enormous state intervention, previously considered unthinkable by capitalist politicians, has proved necessary to try to prop up their system. Meanwhile, millions of workers have felt the importance of their low-paid and undervalued jobs in keeping society functioning.

The search for an alternative to capitalism is on the rise. Only by taking decisive socialist measures will it be possible to harness the enormous wealth, science and technique that capitalism has created, through the labour of the working class, to start to meet people's needs, and to safeguard the environment.

That would require breaking with profit-driven, ailing capitalism and taking the major corporations and banks which dominate the economy into democratic public ownership, allowing the development of a democratic, socialist planned economy in Britain and internationally.

The priorities of a socialist economy would be decided democratically. Instead of filling the coffers of corporate chief executives, priorities would include providing a real, living income for all, mass building of high-quality and carbon-neutral housing, and creating and expanding decent public services, health care and education. **Join the Socialist Party in the fight for a socialist world.**



In the absence of a mass left force putting the case for socialist opposition to the neoliberal diktats of the EU, room was left for right-wing populist forces to dominate



The search for an alternative to capitalism is on the rise. Only by taking decisive socialist measures will it be possible to... start to meet people's needs...

Nottingham City Council: Major battles against cuts ahead

NOTTINGHAM SOCIALIST PARTY MEMBERS

Nottingham's Labour Council faces a decisive choice: whether it defends services, jobs and terms and conditions, or implements major cuts.

The council is in deep financial difficulty due to longstanding government underfunding, exacerbated by around £38.5 million of unfunded additional costs from Covid-19. It has also suffered the collapse of its energy company, Robin Hood Energy, and failed commercialisation policies, which attempted to increase income to cover for insufficient government funds.

The collapse of Robin Hood Energy, costing the council around £38 million, led to the government commissioning a public interest report on the council's governance of the company. The report was damning, and the government then commissioned a rapid non-statutory review into wider financial and governance issues at the council, seen as a possible precursor to a process for sending in commissioners.

It also appears that the council might have already been at risk of a Section 114 notice being issued by the senior financial officer. This would mean that no new expenditure would be permitted, with the exception of funding statutory services.

Tory cuts and privatisation

The agenda of any Tory-commissioned review will never be in the interest of those who work for the council or depend on its services. This review's stated aim was to make the council a "best value authority... having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness" - to Tories this means cuts and privatisation.

The report published last month criticises the council for outsourcing to wholly owned subsidiaries rather than to wider private contracts, arguing that "in outsourcing to wholly



Local authority workers protesting against austerity in 2016 PAUL MATTSSON

owned subsidiaries, Nottingham City Council have not realised the scale of savings that other bodies have enjoyed", pointing out that savings can be made by "modernising the terms and conditions of employees".

Yet for council services and staff there have already been massive attacks. There has been around £299 million worth of announced savings since 2010, with service reductions, closures, around 250 job losses in

the last year alone, and around 1,200 jobs (possibly more) lost since 2010. There has been a pay increment freeze, 'dismissal and re-engagement' of staff who did not sign new contracts, and further attacks on terms and conditions.

If the figures in the report are correct, on 31 March 2020 the council had the highest debt to net budget of all the core cities (only Birmingham and Leeds have higher total levels of debt).

In September, the council's executive board updated its projections in the light of Covid-19 and emerging issues. This is now showing budget gaps in the range of £39-54 million for 2021/22, rising to £53-64 million in 2023/24. The council officers were set the task of identifying cuts of £50 million; as yet they have not fully done so. We argue that all cuts must be vigorously opposed.

The report calls for further cuts and

reorganisation, with a three-year recovery plan. It proposes that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, in partnership with the council, should establish an 'improvement board'. Set up to include only one elected city councillor (the council leader), it would be a huge dilution of democracy.

Consistent with their failure to fight, the council leadership has accepted the findings of the report. It appears that the review team decided not to move towards sending in commissioners because they have been "impressed with their determination to fix the issue". In other words, carry out more attacks on workers and services.

Alternative budget needed

This report, and the council leadership's response to it, throws down the gauntlet to those councillors who regard themselves as anti-austerity - at least ten of the 50 Labour councillors in Nottingham.

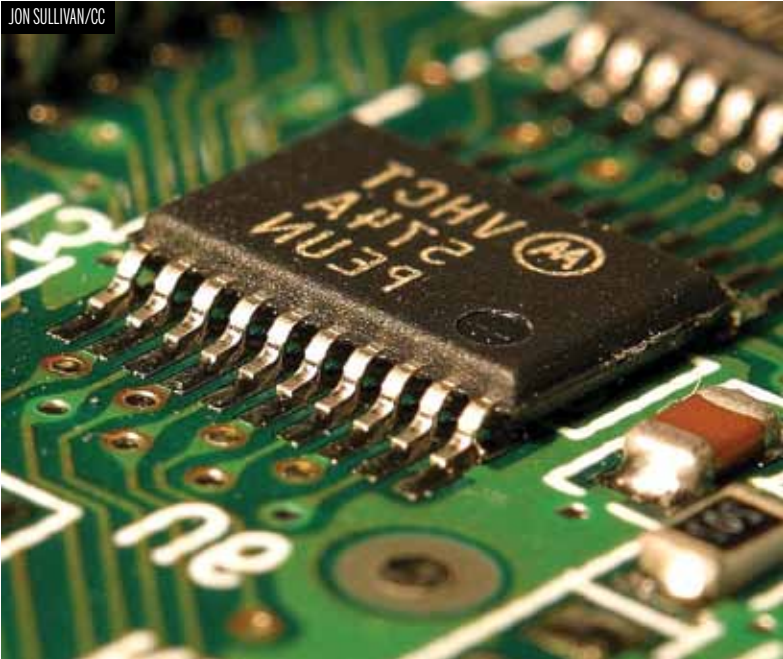
So far, these councillors have mainly been publicly silent. Between now and the setting of what is likely to be a huge cuts budget in March 2021, they need to go public in actively opposing further cuts. It is crucial that they work with the council trade unions and wider trade union movement to organise in local communities to defend services and jobs.

These councillors should build support for an alternative budget, one which demands proper government funding to meet the needs of the people of Nottingham. This campaign should link up with communities and trade unions in other areas around the country, many of which face the same prospect of cuts and job losses.

There are no Nottingham City Council elections until 2023. But it is clear that fighting, anti-cuts councillors are needed. We will be prepared to stand as part of the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition against councillors unwilling to fight the government to stop austerity.

Technology and AI response: Capitalists only invest for profit

JON SULLIVAN/CC



CLIVE WALDER

BIRMINGHAM SOUTH WEST SOCIALIST PARTY

Mark Best's article 'Can green technology and AI save capitalism?' (see socialistparty.org.uk) was excellent, and many readers could use personal experiences to develop the points he made.

Mark is quite right when he points out that capitalists will only invest where they can be confident of a profit being made rather than for the good of society. Many of us take broadband for granted. What is less well known is that the technology has been around since the 1970s.

The Post Office Engineering Union (a constituent part of what is now the Communication Workers Union) passed a motion supporting a nationwide broadband rollout in 1981! They could see even then how this could benefit society - with possibilities such as remote medical

diagnosis or the remote learning that is so necessary today.

That conference motion lay gathering dust and was ignored by successive governments because there was no profitable commercial application for it. This only changed when computers became a mass consumer product and could be produced sufficiently cheaply to make a profit, a fact well hidden by the capitalists.

Self-driving cars would be useful for people like me who have an eyesight condition, which means that I would never pass a driving test.

The job app that Mark referred to could enable workers to not just advertise their skills, but also to advise

potential employers what hours they would be available, whether they have caring responsibilities, and where would be the most convenient location to work. It could also be used to procure work to be done from home if necessary.

Capitalism has developed the applications it finds profitable and useful. It will no doubt develop applications such as automatic reminders to buy groceries because the capitalists can use that information to increase sales.

But the unprofitable, socially useful stuff like the early broadband requires a socialist economy without the profit motive.

WHAT'S YOUR VIEW?

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or, if you're not online, write to the Socialist Inbox, PO Box 1398, Enfield EN1 9GT



ENGELS ON THE ORIGINS OF WOMEN’S OPPRESSION

And its relevance to today’s struggles

In the final article in our series to commemorate 200 years since the birth of Friedrich Engels, Christine Thomas looks at the relevance of his important work ‘The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State’ for the struggle today to end women’s inequality and oppression.

The Covid pandemic has exposed all of the existing inequalities in society, and then magnified them. This includes the gender inequality that women face. Women are one-and-a-half times more likely than men to have lost their jobs, been furloughed or sacked, and are 50% more likely to have had their hours cut.

Covid has also shone a light on another pandemic - the scourge of domestic violence and abuse. At the beginning of the first lockdown, the number of women killed by violent partners or ex-partners increased from an average of two a week, to five. Calls to helplines and searches on websites which offer help for women experiencing domestic violence have skyrocketed.

This has all been exacerbated by the desperate shortage of beds in refuges caused by years of austerity. And now, with women losing their jobs in ever greater numbers, escaping the violence is becoming more and more difficult, putting lives at risk.

Disadvantage

Basically, women, and working-class women in particular, went into this pandemic socially and economically disadvantaged, and are likely to come out of it even more so. Engels’ ideas help to explain why that is and, most importantly, what we can do about it.

The ‘Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State’, published in 1884, was Engels’ main contribution to this issue. It showed that women’s second-class status in society, the inequality, discrimination and oppression we face, hasn’t always existed.

In the late 19th century this was explosive stuff. At the time, women’s inferior status was considered ‘natural’, explained by their biology or ‘God’s will’, and absolutely necessary for maintaining social stability. At the same time, the patriarchal family, with a male breadwinner and an economically dependent wife in the domestic sphere giving birth to and raising children, was a central, core institution of capitalism, and to challenge its universality was to challenge the entire fabric of society.

Of course, Engels’ book should be



During lockdown women were responsible for **70%** of homeschooling and were **50%** more likely to lose their jobs, be furloughed or sacked, or have their hours cut

viewed in the context of the time in which it was written, and in conjunction with more up-to-date material. But the general ideas he outlined regarding women’s oppression are still relevant today, and still just as explosive.

He explained that gender inequality, discrimination and oppression are rooted in class society - in the emergence of societies where a small minority, an exploiting class, owns the means of producing wealth in society and exploits the class that actually produces the wealth.

Before that, in pre-class societies, people lived in communal, cooperative, egalitarian societies in which the main social unit wasn’t the nuclear family as we know it today, but a kinship group - that Engels called the ‘gens’ - which today are usually referred to as hunter-gatherer societies, based on how they made a living.

In these societies, in which humans lived for 99% of the time that we been on the planet, there was no private ownership of the means of producing wealth, no classes and

exploitation, no state apparatus and no systematic oppression of women.

Although Engels got some of the detail wrong, because of the scant anthropological and scientific evidence available at the time (see Engels and women’s liberation at socialismtoday.com for more on this), the evidence that has come to light since backs up the general thrust of his ideas.

Pre-class societies

There was a gender division of labour in pre-class societies, although it was not necessarily a rigid one. In general, men were usually responsible for hunting and fishing, and women for gathering wild foodstuffs and looking after children. But this did not result in any economic or social disadvantage. The economic contribution of women and men were both vital for the maintenance of the group. Childcare was a public responsibility carried out on behalf of the group as a whole.

This was very different from the situation today. One of the main reasons why women are suffering

so much more during the pandemic in terms of job losses, and pay and hours being cut, is because they are concentrated in the low-paid, part-time, often precarious jobs in retail and hospitality that have been the hardest hit by lockdowns and the economic consequences of Covid. And the principal reason why they are concentrated in those kind of jobs is that they are usually the main carers for children in the family.

During the first lockdown, women were responsible for 70% of homeschooling. In one-third of the cases where women have lost their jobs or had their hours cut, it has been because they have been unable to access the childcare they need. Covid has turned an existing shortage of affordable childcare into a disaster for working-class women especially, which can only be solved by bringing childcare provision into the public sector, democratically run by service providers and users.

Engels wrote that the situation for women drastically changed following an economic revolution in which some hunter-gatherer



societies discovered how to domesticate animals and cultivate crops. This unleashed economic and social processes which, in some societies, over thousands of years, led to the development of an economically exploiting class extracting surplus production from the labour of others, and expropriating it for themselves. A special state apparatus was also created to ensure that the exploited class continued to produce, and was kept under control.

As an intrinsic part of these processes, the individual household, or family, replaced the communal kinship group as the main economic unit in society. At the same time, women of the ruling class literally became the private property of men within the family.

Wealth and property

In order to ensure that their property and accumulated wealth could be passed on to legitimate heirs, the sexuality and reproduction of women of the ruling class came under the authority and control of husbands and fathers, including through the use of violence and physical chastisement. And, as the state apparatus developed, the legal system, religion, education, and ideology generally served to legitimise and reinforce women’s inferior, second-class status, and deny them basic rights.

This is the historic basis for all of the inequality, discrimination and oppression that women still face today. It is at the root of domestic violence and abuse, rape, sexual harassment, the double standards and stereotyping of male and female roles and behaviour, and sexism in general.

Many feminists believe that the main cause of women’s oppression is the patriarchy, but Engels showed that there isn’t a structure of patriarchy separate from class society. Women’s oppression and class society emerged together as part of the same process - they were inextricably linked together then, and still are under capitalism today.

Therefore, gender oppression, Engels explained, can only be eliminated by ending class society - a fundamental transformation in the way that society is structured, organised and run. Today, this would mean moving away from an economy based on the private ownership of the means of producing wealth by a small group of super-rich capitalists interested only in making a profit, to one where the principal industries are publicly owned, and democratically run and planned by working-class people.

It would then be possible to immediately release the resources for changing the economic and material situation for women. Everyone would be guaranteed a job on a decent wage, which would mean that women would have real economic independence.

It would be possible to do what Engels put forward in the ‘Origin of the Family’ - to socialise the unpaid labour of women in the family by the state providing flexible, quality childcare, social care, affordable community restaurants, affordable housing - things that would totally transform the lives of women, and working-class women in particular.

We would add, that ending gender inequality in the family and in the workplace would also lay the basis for eliminating gender violence and the sexual and cultural oppression women face.

The values in society would change. Capitalism is a system based on unequal wealth, hierarchies of power, and competition. The capitalist class is prepared to resort to the use of force and violence to defend its interests and control where necessary - against strikers, protesters, and in wars. Those values have an impact more broadly in society and affect how we relate to each other.

A socialist system would be based on cooperation and solidarity, and those values would be reflected in personal relations and culture, just as they were in pre-class societies.

And of course, there would no

longer be a privately owned media, or beauty, fashion, and leisure industries, and all the other industries that turn women’s bodies into a commodity to make a profit, and promote stereotypical expectations and norms about how women and men should look and behave.

End oppression

If we removed all of those things, while at the same time initiating a programme of awareness raising and education, then all gender oppression could be ended over time.

Engels outlined the origins of women’s oppression and what would be necessary to end it - a socialist revolution led by a united working-class. His general ideas continue to form a vital part of the programme and strategy of the Socialist Party in our struggle to end capitalism and all forms of exploitation, inequality and oppression.

● **‘The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State’ by Engels is currently out of stock at leftbooks.co.uk but can be read online at marxists.org/archive**

● **It Doesn’t Have to be Like This: Women and the Struggle for Socialism by Christine Thomas, £7 including postage - leftbooks.co.uk**



Books that inspired me: The Grapes of Wrath

by John Steinbeck



While Steinbeck depicts smaller farmers and shopkeepers as more sympathetic, he doesn’t point in the direction of the necessity of a combined struggle of both sections of the working class, battered by the effects of the Great Depression.

The novel describes shocking and deep poverty. It is an indication of the strength of the writing, and the realism of the characters, that it never feels like an imagined world. As the reader, alongside the Joad family, faces the devastating poverty, it is impossible not to feel disgust at the capitalist system.

Steinbeck stops short of leading the reader to drawing socialist conclusions. But workers do get organised, with all of the familiar obstacles of the pressures of huge poverty and repressive blacklisting. Farming bosses are paranoid about ‘red’ agitators and the forces of the state are used to break a strike. Steinbeck addresses these issues in his preceding novel ‘In Dubious Battle’.

New Deal

For a period, the family manages to get residence at a government camp, part of the poverty relief programme carried out as part of Roosevelt’s ‘New Deal’ (see ‘Roosevelt’s New Deal programme’ at socialistparty.org.uk). In this camp, workers are shown to be able to look after their own affairs, without interference from police, and with access to sanitary facilities. The bosses see this as a threat and seek to break up the camp. They understand that nothing but the most brutal repression can keep the workers from organising. “Those folks in the camp are getting used to being treated like humans. When they go back to the squatters’ camps they’ll be hard to handle.”

Some right-wing critics have dismissed Steinbeck’s work as socialist propaganda, it is definitely not that. Indeed, he jettisoned any left-leaning views during the ‘Cold War’ period of the 1950s and 1960s. But he does transport the reader into the lives of super-exploited workers in a capitalist crisis, with the inevitable conclusion that workers need to get organised. The fact that it does this so well is what makes it so good.

The Grapes of Wrath was released in 1939, with the US still in a period of economic crisis and with huge unemployment. It was a best seller, undoubtedly because it reflects workers’ experiences and offers some explanation of capitalist crisis. Now, in the midst of another global capitalist crisis, is a good time to read this novel.

● **Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck. Penguin Modern Classics, £8.19 (Amazon)**

large industrial farms, and the mechanisation of large-scale farming machinery left hundreds of thousands homeless and without work. After receiving a leaflet advertising for fruit pickers in California, the Joads join the hordes travelling west.

The narrative chapters are interspersed by chapters explaining the landscape and social conditions. These chapters describe the absolute injustice, including the destruction of food deemed unprofitable: “The fertile earth, the straight tree rows, the sturdy trunks, and the ripe fruit. And the children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange.”

This reflects capitalism’s inherent crisis of overproduction. Despite thousands of migrant farm workers starving, food was destroyed as prices plummeted.

Like today, the 1930s was a period of mass unemployment. The experience of the Joad family demonstrates the downward pressure that this has on wages. The big farm bosses, in their greed for profits, frequently cut wages, safe in the knowledge that there are thousands of other starving workers desperate and willing to work for less.

The huge swathes of migrant workers arriving into California was great for the bosses, but the book also takes up the effects of unemployment on the existing working class in the region. The bosses cynically exploit layers of these workers to assemble vigilantes to help to oppress the migrant workers.

JOSH ASKER
NORTH LONDON SOCIALIST PARTY

Millions of workers in the US and globally find themselves out of work, unable to afford the basics, and at the mercy of capitalist crisis. Like the protagonist of the book, Tom Joad, through their experience, millions will draw the conclusion that solidarity and collective action is the only way to fight. “And the little screaming fact that sounds through all history: repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed”.

The Grapes of Wrath transports you to 1930s California, travelling with the Joad family seeking work. John Steinbeck’s writing makes it impossible for the reader not to feel indignant, together with the migrant agricultural workers, at the most brutal effects of the capitalist market.

Dust Bowl

The 1929 Wall Street crash had devastating consequences for the working class internationally. Steinbeck’s work details the effects on the lives of agricultural workers in the Dust Bowl of parts of Texas, Oklahoma, and other nearby states.

With the pressure to meet loan repayments to the banks, tenant farmers had been forced to use farming methods that left the land vulnerable to droughts and dust-storms. Recent research shows that these conditions are now twice as likely to occur in today’s climate.

Unable to make their payments, small farms became absorbed by

PROTECT THE NHS

• FUNDING • PAY • PPE • PUBLIC OWNERSHIP

The Tory government's plea to "protect the NHS" is rank hypocrisy. The blame for the depth and scale of the unfolding health crisis lies squarely with Johnson's government.

They are responsible for the queues of ambulances outside of A&E and hospital wards bursting at overcapacity and without enough staff. They are responsible for failed test-and-trace and the drive to keep people in the workplace and in schools.

The problem for the Tories is that "protecting the NHS" is at odds with protecting the profits of their big business mates.

The government handed out lucrative contracts to their friends so they could make a profit providing PPE for health workers, and now again there are reports of shortages. All health workers should have access to full PPE, not just those working on Covid wards.

Hospitals are overflowing, but the Nightingale hospitals remain closed - the NHS doesn't have enough staff to open them. There are reports of nurses that are meant to look after just one patient on a ventilator being asked to take responsibility for three. Health workers have been driven from the NHS by Tory-imposed low pay, intolerable workloads, and extortionate training fees.

To truly protect the NHS we need workers' control and public ownership. The socialist party fights for:

- An emergency increase in funding for the NHS and social care
- Full PPE for all staff, for production and distribution to be taken into public ownership under democratic workers' control
- For a 15% pay rise for NHS staff
- For the scrapping of training fees and for free emergency training for staff to respond to the pandemic
- For the NHS to take over private healthcare facilities to be run in the interests of all
- Nationalise the big pharmaceutical companies, including the testing labs and vaccine production and distribution
- For a socialist plan of production and workers' control and management of the pandemic response

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MATT
NHS NURSE

"We're running on empty. The pressure on NHS staff is becoming unbearable.

Staff are being moved wards numerous times to cover sickness. New wards are being opened last minute to cope with the pressure. Wards already running on unsafe staffing levels are being stretched to breaking point.

Lots of the media are calling this a Covid crisis. The reality is this is exposing the crisis the NHS has been hurtling towards for years.

Tory and New Labour policies of cuts, closures, and privatisation have come to bite and its frontline staff are facing the repercussions. The need for socialist plan for the NHS is clear."

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- More on the NHS and privatisation, p4