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the Socialist

Issue 1116

14-20 January 2021

formerly **Militant**

OUR HEALTH AND LIVELIHOODS

BEFORE

THEIR PROFITS

STEVE SCORE
LEICESTER SOCIALIST PARTY

The health crisis is now worse than at any time since the start of the pandemic. More people are in hospital and more are dying daily.

At the start of the crisis many gave some leeway to the government to tackle it. But now the vast majority of people know the Tories have badly mishandled things from the start. No longer is there any feeling of “we are all in it together”. Polls show more people want Boris Johnson to resign than don’t.

How can we all be in it together when, by the end of the third working day of the year, the average top company boss earned as much as the average worker earns in a whole year? Ocado boss Tim Steiner did it in a day: he was paid £58.7 million last year! (See also p6.)

100% PAY NOW!

Inequality has risen during the pandemic. Even last October, the Financial Conduct Authority said 12 million adults were “struggling to pay their bills”. A third of households had their income cut, by an average of a quarter. It is worse now.

The delays in taking action, the long-term underfunding of the NHS, the U-turns and incompetence have increased the number of deaths and economic misery for millions.

But behind it all has been the Tories’ motive of keeping people working to make the bosses’ profit.

Many workers feel they can’t afford to be off work even when they



are sick or when they are meant to self-isolate. It’s a potential choice between destitution or death! The poorer you are the sharper the choice. There needs to be proper financial support for those self-isolating and there needs to be adequate sick pay.

Statutory sick pay is currently a measly £95.85 a week, 25% of average pay. In the OECD top economies, it averages 70%. Yet two million people who earn less than £120 a week, and the self-employed, are not even entitled to it!

No one should be forced into unsafe conditions. Workers on

furlough, as well as isolating or at home because of caring responsibilities, should be given their full pay.

A huge diversionary campaign has been waged to blame individuals, like those travelling to walk in the countryside, for the rise in the virus. Yet it’s predominantly been spread indoors in workplaces and schools where millions of people have been crammed together for hours on end, often in unsafe conditions.

Far more children are in school now than during the first lockdown, despite the government’s U-turn on schools forced by union action. The government has extended the definition of ‘critical workers’ and allowed many companies to tell their workers they have to be in because they are in that category.

It’s profit-based capitalism that has led to the mishandling of the pandemic and is devastating the living standards of millions. That’s why the fight for our health, safety and livelihoods must be linked to the fight for a socialist alternative to the rotten capitalist system.

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DO YOU HAVE NEWS FOR US?

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

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

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

Dispatches from the front

Cases are rising and we are struggling to cope

➔ CONTINUED FROM BACK PAGE

The hospital that I work in has been in a constant state of change as we manage the increase in Covid cases. We have had outbreaks in successive departments, and our hospital management is choosing to move patients to other wards rather than redeploying staff within the hospital. This is to ensure that staff can work more effectively, knowing where to access equipment and working in a familiar environment.

Sat here today on my day off I have had three emails asking for shifts to be changed and asking for people to volunteer for night shifts to cover for staff who have tested positive.

Unlike at the start of the pandemic, there is now regular testing available for staff and for patients, including testing onsite. With increasing numbers of staff having already had the virus it is not clear whether it is possible to be infected for a second time and what effects this could have. I have colleagues who, months after having had the virus, have got antibodies, and colleagues who have no antibodies weeks after having recovered.

The vaccine is slowly being rolled out; not as was promised, but it is getting there. By and large the most vulnerable staff are receiving the vaccine first. Staff are identified to receive the vaccine using their NHS staff number. We have been reassured that agency staff working for companies like Serco and Mitie as security and cleaners won't be overlooked. We need to fight to make sure that all of those workers on the front line get the vaccine.



Fighting the virus and the Tories - for a 15% NHS pay rise

ADRIAN O'MALLEY
UNISON UNION MID-YORKSHIRE HEALTH BRANCH
(PERSONAL CAPACITY)

It feels like the calm before the storm, especially for those working in intensive care. Cases have not risen as much in the North compared to those in the South East, but we are waiting and expecting the new variant to come like a big wave.

The staff who have already been through it in April and November are tired. It's like a war, having gone through a big battle, getting a short rest, only to be faced with "here we go again".

Being at this level of pressure has an effect on staff sickness levels - at one stage we had 10% of staff off with Covid. When the number of cases

risers, so do numbers of staff sickness. With a shortage of staff, the whole process with Nightingales in Yorkshire was just a big waste of money.

People are cynical about the whole thing. Clapping for the NHS, squandering billions on the private sector, and not giving health workers a pay rise. Our local Tory MP has replied to a nurse who contacted them saying "you're paid enough already".

As a union rep, I watched what the National Education Union (NEU) did over the issue of school safety, in organising meetings of members online at short notice. This is what the Unison union must be doing in health.

We should be having mass meetings online of NHS workers demanding a decent pay rise and threatening

strike action in spring if we don't get one. I think we should be raising that now, and I know for a fact stewards in my branch would all be behind that.

The leadership of the NHS unions, Unison in particular, has been far too quiet. We need to be raising this issue of pay while in lockdown, while our members are on the front line fighting the virus. Socialist Party members are raising this on the Unison service group executive and putting on the pressure.

If we can organise members on the scale that the NEU did, and get 400,000 health workers at a meeting online demanding a pay rise, that will send a big message to the government: that we are fighting the virus now, but come April if we don't get a pay rise then we will be fighting you!

New variant "taking its toll in a way the first and second waves did not"

NHS WORKER

The new Covid variant is ravaging London and the South East. Its presence is now well-known far further afield and it's beginning to taking its toll on staff in a way the first and second waves did not. Firstly it's far more infectious, resulting in higher levels of staff sickness. In addition to those required to shield again, we're now losing substantially more colleagues to illness with Covid.

Secondly, these higher rates of absence are challenging the limited staff resources in complex ways,

agitating the fragile mental health of staff caused by nearly a year of fighting Covid. Thirdly, the vaccination programme is far too slow. News of the Oxford vaccine approval had raised hopes, but colleagues continue asking where it is, and why it's taking so long?

All of these challenges are set against the background of the campaign for NHS pay. News that the clapping ritual was to resume was predictably greeted with derision and even hostility. Colleagues are restless and talk of industrial action is gaining traction in some quarters,

including among those lowest paid who are asked to sacrifice more and more as their colleagues fall prey to Covid.

The union leadership in my trust is still largely absent. I would like to believe that that's because of distancing measures, but in reality this has always been the case. Unfortunately, this means that union leaders can be viewed as out of touch, detached and remote. Lay members are now more poised to ask challenging questions and are increasingly extolling the virtues of a fighting campaign to deliver 15%.

London suffers and Khan piles on pressure

NANCY TAAFFE
WALTHAM FOREST SOCIALIST PARTY

One in 30 of us in London now have the virus, and in some of London's poorer boroughs, like Barking and Dagenham, it's one in 15. All of us know people that are infected, and many of us now know people who have died.

London mayor Sadiq Khan declared London is facing a major incident due to rising rates. But workers' experience of him though the pandemic is one of failing to protect their health against the Tory government or the bosses.

He failed transport staff in the first wave, which saw over 30 bus drivers lose their lives. In total 57 Transport for London (TfL) workers have died. Then Khan agreed to more austerity for Londoners in the summer in a botched TfL funding deal.

Now he expects working-class Londoners to pay the price, announcing council tax increases. He has failed to protect working-class lives and livelihoods at every stage.

London faces nearly £500 million worth of cuts. This is after ten years of austerity, which has impacted on the current Covid crisis. Many Londoners live in overcrowded conditions, with little access to testing or space to isolate.

The London Fire Brigade has



SHAYAN BARJESTEH VAN WAAL/WILK VAN DOORN/CC

already been cut by £100 million and police by £850 million. Emergency services complain they cannot meet demand. As the NHS has declared its inability to cope, these already-cut services are now being dragooned in to plug the gaps.

London Underground has 900 less staff than 2016, and has 139 fewer cleaners. You'd think Khan would have learnt that the consequence of cutting services leaves the city ill-prepared for future emergencies.

London has a tradition of fighting Tory cuts. Throughout the 1980s the working class was mobilised again and again to stand up to the Tories and fight Thatcher. Unfortunately, Khan isn't such an opposition.

Now we face a worse assault on our

health and living conditions. The cuts being proposed will push many over the edge.

They have to be resisted. We need an industrial and public sector fightback, and we need an electoral challenge in the Greater London Authority elections in May, or whenever they are.

The Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) has called an online meeting in London on 20 January, to bring together all those in London who want to resist all cuts. Wherever you are, whatever union you represent or community group or renters' campaign, we can't just accept more cuts and more misery.

● *London TUSC meeting: preparing for the May 2021. Find the details at eventbrite.co.uk*

NHS pandemic warnings ignored - renationalise our NHS

STEVE HARBORD
HILLINGDON SOCIALIST PARTY

I have heard it said in defence of the government response to Covid-19 that "nobody could have seen this coming." But they were warned, and chose to ignore it.

"The UK's preparedness and response in terms of plans, policy's and capabilities, is currently not sufficient to cope with the extreme demands of a severe pandemic that will have a nationwide impact across all sectors" was the conclusion of the government's own 'Exercise Cygnus' study reporting in 2016.

The study, bringing together over 950 representatives from 12 government departments, was commissioned to look into how the health and social care sector could deal with a flu pandemic. The publication

of the report was delayed and its recommendations ignored.

It has been the policy of successive governments over the last 40 plus years to cut the cost of the NHS as the needs of the free market have taken preference over the broader needs of society. This pandemic has shown that this is a false economy as the economy has plunged into a recession amid the health crisis.

I worked in the London Ambulance service for 30 years and watched as Thatcher, and then Blair's New Labour took the axe to health services. Their 'value for money' mantra resulted in wholesale privatisation across the NHS and social care sectors, with attacks on workers' terms and conditions, hospital closures, a reduction of hospital beds, closures of A&E departments, and reductions in ICU beds. This has resulted in a health and social care service that is

fractured, disjointed, and wholly unprepared for such a pandemic. Unbelievably, the Cygnus report was unable to fully analyse the provision of the privatised social care sector. They were unable to get access to information about who was providing the care and where! The private sector is allowed to do its own thing - detached and unaccountable.

What this crisis has proved is that the market should have no place in the provision of health and social care. Not only is it disjointed and inefficient, but under this Tory government it has been turned into a gravy train of nepotism, cronyism and downright corruption, as contracts worth hundreds of millions of pounds have been handed out to Tory politicians' friends and family.

The Socialist Party calls for a publicly owned NHS and social care sector under democratic worker's control. We call for nationalisation of the major pharmaceutical companies, bringing them and the social care sector under the NHS umbrella, to be organised on a not-for-profit basis, and with compensation only paid on the basis of proven need.

Only these actions can ensure a health system that is free and fit for purpose. We need to end the chaos of the free market system in health and broader society, and replace it with a democratic, socialist planned economy.



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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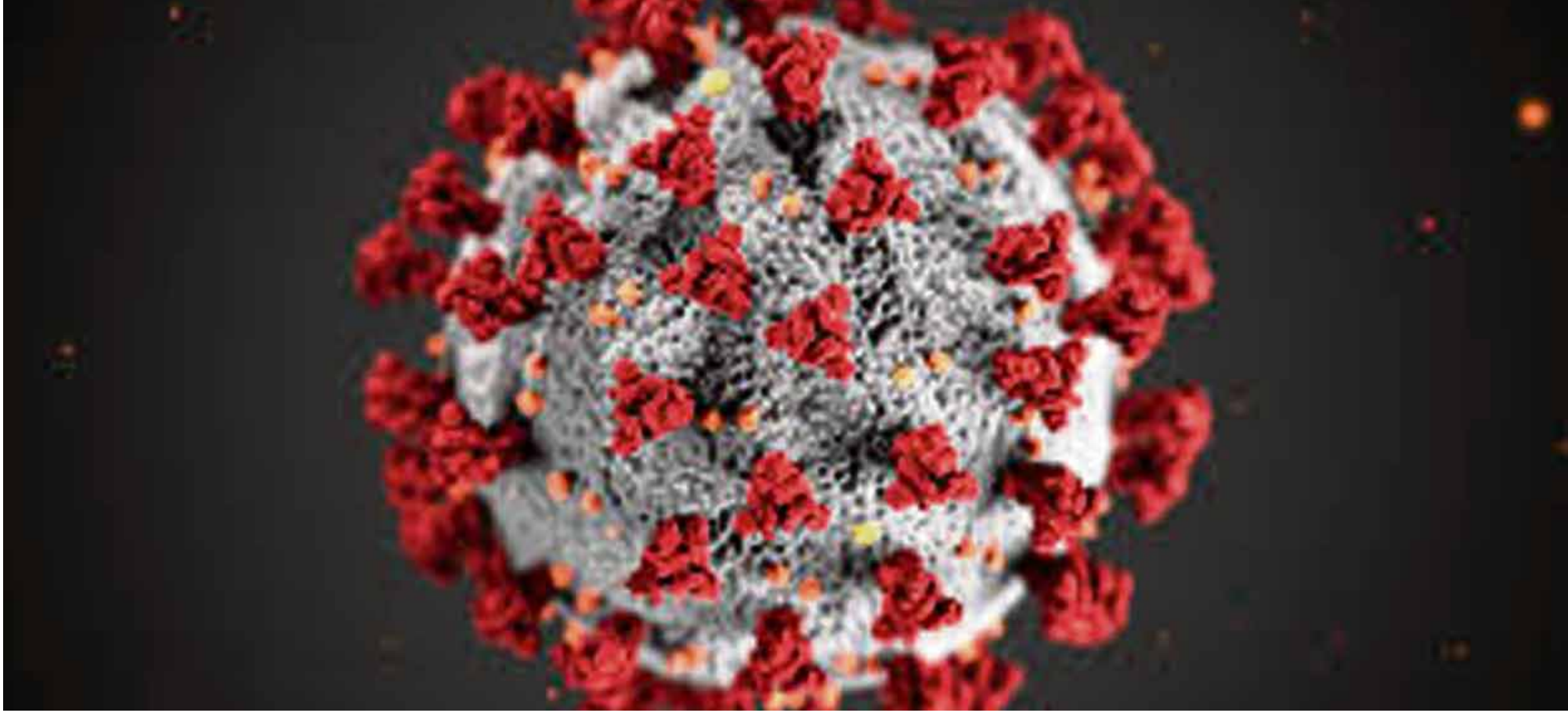
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SCHOOLS: ACT TOGETHER TO OPPOSE UNSAFE NUMBERS AND RISING WORKLOAD



MARTIN POWELL-DAVIES

NEU DEPUTY GENERAL SECRETARY ELECTION CANDIDATE

School staff should take confidence. Our mass refusal to accept unsafe working conditions forced the government to U-turn after only one day of the new school term.

Only 24 hours earlier, Boris Johnson was claiming schools were safe. He then had to admit that schools act as “vectors for transmission” of the virus after all - something that we all knew months ago. The cancellation of Sats, GCSEs and A-levels soon followed too.

We should learn important lessons. We were able to succeed by acting together, asserting our legal rights to a safe workplace through ‘Section 44’ of the Employment Rights Act 1996. We achieved more in a few days than petitions and letter writing to ministers had achieved in months.

Far from over

The education unions’ work is far from over. Any celebrations over the U-turn have sadly only been short-lived. It soon became clear that schools aren’t really ‘closed’ at all.

Everyone is working under highly stressful conditions. Workload is rising. And the threat of Ofsted monitoring is being raised again.

Too many schools are making unreasonable demands, particularly over online learning. Some have told staff they have to attend work every day, even though the lockdown regulations say: “Everybody should work from home where possible”.

Support staff have been under

particular pressure. They should be included on rotas to support learning from home too.

Above all, too many classrooms remain dangerously full. The definition of ‘critical workers’ has been applied far too widely.

Nursery classes have been told they must remain fully open. Special schools have also been under pressure to accept every pupil.

It is putting more lives in danger and more pressure on an overwhelmed NHS. We have to insist that numbers in classrooms are cut back.

100% pay

We recognise the pressure on our school communities. Children need more resources at home and parents/carers should be eligible for full pay when they have to stay at home to provide childcare.

We can’t let government failures be used to browbeat us into accepting unsafe working conditions. Look at the data. The UK situation is stark.

Unless we remain firm, infections and deaths will continue to rise. That is of no help to anyone.

The National Education Union (NEU) and other unions urgently need to agree a set of minimum conditions for school safety and take the action necessary to make sure that they are met.

● **Check out spined.co.uk for more from Socialist Party members in education**

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

What we need to do now

1. Don't compromise on school safety - we have to stop the spread of Covid

The points agreed by an emergency meeting of the NEU’s national health and safety CV-19 group on 6 January are a good starting point. They include:

- Minimum two-metre social distancing in classrooms to sufficiently reduce pupil numbers
- Specific maximum numbers will depend on the size and type of rooms and workplaces. However, during the spring 2020 lockdown, a maximum 10% of normal pupils/staff capacity was recommended. The new variant is significantly more transmissible
- Where lateral flow testing centres are set up, negative results should not change any existing isolation measures since they may be false negatives
- Clinically extremely vulnerable and clinically vulnerable members and pregnant staff should work from home as well as those living with clinically extremely vulnerable family members
- Rooms must be well ventilated

with extra heaters provided if necessary

- Every staff member should be allowed to deliver remote learning from home, and numbers in school should be kept to absolute minimum
- All staff work should be workload-impact risk-assessed, and staff workload overall managed appropriately

2. Get ‘ballot-ready’ for action to defend health, safety, welfare and workload

- NEU branch officers have been advised that, if workplaces are unsafe, then Section 44 still applies
- If your workplace is unsafe, urgently seek advice on the wording of a letter to submit to assert your rights to a safe workplace
- Union groups should also request urgent school or employer-wide ballots for strike and non-strike action over safety and workload. Union branch officers have been assured that these will be organised on as rapid a timescale as possible, although government

laws mean that the ballot process will still take over a month

- Urgently request membership lists and check members’ home addresses to be as ‘ballot-ready’ as possible. This is vital to maximise turnout
- Cover to meet emergency needs during strike action should be agreed in each case

3. Declare a national dispute with the government - and build a national ballot

The new year U-turn was won because we acted together across the NEU as a whole. The problems we still face remain ones that, above all, the government needs to resolve. That’s why we think the union should:

- Demand the government negotiates a national ‘Covid conditions agreement’ that protects safety and workload for all staff
- If the government refuses to negotiate an acceptable agreement, unions should declare a national dispute and build an urgent national ballot for action



LARS PLOUGMANN/CC

Oaks Park School, north east London NEU - 1 Bullying management - 0

National Education Union (NEU) members at Oaks Park School in north east London have secured a victory over health and safety.

With the backing of Labour-controlled Redbridge Council, the school wanted to force workers to travel and go into school with hundreds of others, simply to deliver online lessons from an empty classroom. This unnecessarily risked the chances of those workers catching Covid-19.

The school said it would discipline any staff who refused, including pregnant workers and those with a disability.

The anger was such that the union decided to consult members for a borough-wide strike, which would have halted all education across the borough.

Glenn Kelly, regional officer for the NEU, said: “Given that we have one in 30 Londoners infected with the virus, given that the NHS is over-run, why would Oaks Park School

and Redbridge Council be willing to gamble with the lives of these workers and their families?”

“Our members across the borough are teaching key-worker and vulnerable children in person. They are delivering online teaching to thousands of children.

“Why was this school making staff take a risk just to deliver an online lesson, when most teachers across the county are being allowed to do this from the safety of their homes? This is nothing other than bullying, and it is a scandal that a Labour council is backing such measures.

“I am pleased to say that the school and the council have now backed down due to the brave stance of the NEU members standing firm, and the backing the rest of the union branch gave. There can be no excuse to force workers to risk their lives, just to sit in an empty classroom to deliver online lessons.

“NEU 1, Bullying management 0.”

Keeping nurseries open spreads virus and has disrupted our lives

RETIRED HEAD OF A CHILDREN'S CENTRE

This may seem comparatively minor issue. Insignificant when compared to the shocking number of deaths, poverty and homelessness arising from the appalling mishandling of this pandemic by a callous, shambolic, government, but significant when multiplied by the millions of families being affected in these small ways without a collective voice.

Childcare

My son’s girlfriend is a local nursery teacher, and I have been looking after my two-year-old grandson since last June, when she had to return to work. We knew that we were taking a big health risk when we started caring for him full-time, but it was important for him to have continuity.

With the new variant now rampant, we have become more and more concerned. The action by the National Education Union (NEU),

using Section 44, gave us some hope that we could finally all be safe.

She wouldn’t have to take the dangerous bus journey to work, where she cannot avoid being close to three and four-year-olds who are, understandably, not very good at hand washing or social distancing.

Unfortunately, we can’t stay at home and protect the NHS as requested! Nursery teachers and early years workers are still expected to work. In fact, many teachers are still at work, providing a service for key workers’ children and children in need.

Nursery teachers are in a difficult position because they are often the only teacher in their setting. There is no one to discuss with or to be supported by to take the Section 44 action. Individuals find it difficult to stand up to managers, even on serious breaches of health and safety.

By invoking Section 44, encouraging teachers to take individual

action, but en masse, the NEU had out-manoeuvred the government, shut schools and provided immediate protection for most teachers, with full pay.

Strike ballot

In my son’s girlfriend’s case case, balloted strike action would be better. It would enable her to withdraw her labour immediately.

The union could negotiate a fair system for covering essential services that didn’t place vulnerable workers or their families at risk - which they should be doing anyway.

Very reluctantly we are having to withdraw from caring for our grandson, because of our age vulnerability. It is heartbreaking for us, and tragic for our grandson who won’t understand what’s happened.

But how ironic, a key worker, his mother, is forced to care for other key workers’ children, while her child’s care has been completely disrupted.

Home schooling is hard, it’s a Tory failure

LINDSEY MORGAN

PARENT AND LEICESTER SOCIALIST PARTY MEMBER

The U-turn over schools by the Tories was forced by the graft of National Educational Union (NEU) members. It is a victory for all of us.

But there is no getting away from just how difficult this latest lockdown is for parents now having to home-school children. Years of austerity, poverty, and cuts to services have left many parents exhausted.

Some school classrooms are over 50% full still, due to the government massively widening the category of ‘key workers’. But many working-class parents still have to try and balance working from home and home-schooling.

Teachers have worked incredibly hard to improve the quality of home learning, including live lessons and timetables which help those children

that need the structure of a school day. But it’s about time the government did much more to support us in terms of resources.

Some students are going into school because they don’t have access to IT at home. This could be pretty easily solved - provide students with the devices they need and free broadband.

Parents have been given awful food packages, which private companies charge schools £30 to make up, but which include less than a tenner’s worth of ingredients. This is shameful.

We need money for the extra electric, gas, and supplies. It costs having students at home.

We need real social distancing in classrooms when students do return, and a rota system so that we don’t have the infuriating hassle of never knowing from one week to the next

if your child will be in school the next day because the schools are so unsafe.

If the government had listened to the workers themselves regarding the health and safety of their workplaces, and the leadership of the NEU had stuck to its original demands on school safety, we could be in a completely different situation with the virus.

Instead, parents who want their children and the rest of the family to be safe face further exhaustion and economic hardship because of Tory callous incompetence. As with everything, this government won’t simply give us the resources that we need.

We need to unite and fight to make sure that there is no full return to school until it is safe, and that all home-schooling is properly resourced.

Support staff: fear ignited into anger

VICKY PERRIN

CALDERDALE UNIONIS LEAD SCHOOL STEWARD (PERSONAL CAPACITY)

We take no lectures from the Tories about vulnerable children missing more school. They have slashed special educational needs and disability and pastoral budgets.

With infection rates rising, we as education workers knew there was no choice. It wasn’t safe to reopen schools fully.

At the National Education Union (NEU) historic Zoom meeting,

400,000 education workers got the shot in the arm needed to say ‘no’. It gave school support staff massive confidence to be acting alongside teacher colleagues, with the National Association of Head Teachers clearly supporting the stand we were taking also.

Stewards’ group chats went into overdrive over the weekend of 2-3 January. The Section 44 letter was circulated and discussed, and we used employment law with our unions’ backing to refuse to work in unsafe schools.

Fear soon ignited into anger when, having allowed children to return to school for a day and mix with their friends and staff post-Christmas, we forced the government to say they should be shut.

Our battle with this government for safe schools is far from over. Pupil numbers in schools are currently climbing far beyond those of last spring’s lockdown - pushed by the Tories compromising safety.

The fight continues and we know what winning feels like.

Refund student rent and fees - fight for free education and make the 1% pay

The first weeks of 2021 have seen an explosion of student anger. Students are paying extortionate rent and tuition fees for education by Zoom and unused accommodation. The number of student groups organising rent strikes is growing, and increasingly individual universities are offering concessions. Socialist Party and Socialist Students members are participating - making the case for rent and fee refunds and for free education, paid for by the 1%.

Join Socialist Students' national meeting 'Refund the rent, cancel the fees and fight for free education' Wednesday 20 January at 6pm - visit Socialist Students on Facebook for Zoom details.

Below we print a statement from the Swansea University rent strike that Socialist Students initiated.



Since moving to university in September, students at Swansea University have been treated as a reliable source of income by the university, rather than as students. We were moved to Swansea during a pandemic, when the university was fully aware that we would either rarely access campus, or not access it at all.

Most students at the university could've undertaken the first term from their laptop at home, and the upcoming term will be no different. We have seen students' extortionate rents being syphoned out of our already criminally low maintenance loans, for a service we don't require. As we head into a new lockdown, it is clear that on-campus learning will be minimal.

Conflicting advice from the UK government and devolved governments has caused great confusion among students, and the university has remained shockingly silent. Amid all this, a student mental health crisis is raging. For years, mental health support nationally has been cut to the bone, and the pandemic has revealed the effects of this.

Forced away from home unnecessarily, many students have struggled with the isolation of the pandemic and lack of social interaction outside of their accommodation bubble. All this to line the pockets of the university. At the same time, students have been set difficult January deadlines, with no access to on-campus support for assignments and no help over Christmas.

This comes at a time when the university plans on making huge redundancies across departments. This means that while students cough up £9,000 a year in fees and thousands more in rent, the university is actively cutting staff numbers and lowering the quality of our courses. We support our staff and the University and Colleges Union (UCU) in its fight against these redundancies.

The government and university vice-chancellors have taken students for granted throughout this crisis. We will not pay. We are calling for students to withhold rent from the university. We will be working with university rent strike groups around the country, of which there are now over 45. In numbers, we will win!

We demand:

- A mass rent refund for students
- Complete cancellation of rent for this term for students unable to move into halls and government funding to plug any funding gap
- For the right of students in private housing to cancel their contracts. Compensation to the landlords only on the basis of proven need
- For the election of a university pandemic advisory group made up of students and workers
- A fair evaluation of the situation next term regarding accommodation and lockdown
- Funding support for mental health services
- Clear guidance to students

regarding the new lockdown, direct from the university

- Democratically set rents, decided on by elected committees including students!
- Democratic control and oversight of health and safety, for elected committees made up of campus unions, workers and students
- Build a national student movement to fight for the funding our universities need! Scrap the market model and fight for free, high-quality education for all

Come to Socialist Students online conference

Sunday 28 February

Exams scrapped again - young people need a future with jobs and free education

TOM GRAY
DEVON SOCIALIST PARTY

In another Tory U-turn, Education Secretary Gavin Williamson has told the second class of Covid that A-level and GCSE exams will not be taking place at the end of the 2020-21 academic year. Rather, their results will depend on teacher moderation. A welcome change from the anti-working class algorithm that under-graded countless working-class students last year.

The exam season produces a lot of anxiety in students; understandably so. They are told their careers, which in a capitalist society translates to their lives, depend on the results. Most students have the same desire - to one day be able to qualify for a well-paid job that does not entail the worst aspects of exploitation that large sections of the working class have to go through.

However, entering the second major capitalist crisis in just twelve years, students are now realising the chances of their desires being realised are ever-slimmer. This makes the pressure of exams even more difficult and youth anxiety levels have been rapidly rising.

The pressures of exams, as well as the changes as a result of the pandemic, have led some to the conclusion that exams should be completely replaced by teacher assessments on a permanent basis.

Exams should be scrapped. But just like anyone else, teachers can hold views that reflect the prejudices that exist in wider society. These attitudes, often unconscious, can lead to working-class students, and others who are discriminated against, being treated unfairly.

Working-class students often witness their parents suffer from brutal capitalist exploitation and the side-effects of that each day, which in turn makes school life much harder.

The lack of prospects for working-class students also mean they are less likely to buy the myth "if you work

hard, you will succeed". Whatever the reason, the results are the same, teachers are less likely to see their potential, and therefore more likely to downgrade them.

Neither exams nor teacher assessment can provide students with the fair evaluation they deserve in a capitalist society. The issues with both methods stem from the inequality, poverty and prejudice that capitalist society creates.

It is only when young people have a future of full employment and decent pay that we will see students faced with less pressure on a few weeks when they are just 16.

It is only when education is free and accessible to all that people will be able to fulfil their potential and fully explore their interests. This will only be possible on the basis of a socialist society.

Bosses earn workers' annual wage in three days

FERDY LYONS
EAST LONDON SOCIALIST PARTY

Within the first three days of 2021, the already super-rich bosses of the 'FTSE 100' companies earned more than an average worker's annual salary.

For many working-class people, the annual average of £31,461 is still a long way away. For someone on the minimum wage of £8.72, that would mean working 75 hours every week!

While the working class is dealing with insecure work, low wages, irregular shifts and soaring living costs, which have only worsened during this pandemic, the rich are just getting richer. I've experienced all this myself.

I work for one of the biggest pub companies in the UK and get told over and over it can't afford to pay me more than my £8.82-an-hour wage; my irregular and insecure hours are there to benefit me; and topping up my 80% furlough pay is also unaffordable.

To make things worse, the company is actually registered in the Cayman Islands and paid no UK corporation tax last year. Its parent company is in the process of taking

over one of the largest supermarket chains in the UK.

This year, my colleagues and I have effectively taken a 20% pay cut, while my bosses have only reaped the benefits with bailouts from tax they've avoided paying.

Capitalism will always work in the interest of the bosses. The Socialist Party makes real demands that will truly benefit the working class.

We need an immediate £12-an-hour minimum wage as a step towards £15, an end to zero-hour contracts, truly affordable controlled rents, subsidised transport and free childcare. All of these things would help lift the working class out of the poverty.

We can't just tax this wealth and think all will be solved. Look at my bosses, they'll just put their money somewhere else.

We need to nationalise this wealth. Bring it into workers' democratic control, so we can implement our demands unimpeded.

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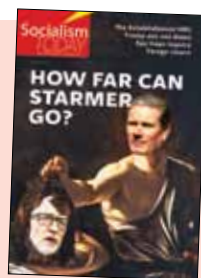
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- Police spies - inquiry or cover-up?
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Unison general secretary election shows left can win national executive council



SOCIALIST PARTY MEMBERS IN UNISON

The result of the Unison general secretary election shows the mood for change in the biggest public sector union. While Christina McAnea, the candidate supported by outgoing general secretary Dave Prentis, has won, the potential has been shown for the union's right wing to be defeated. This must be the message ahead of the national executive council elections, which are due to begin at the start of February.

The election has lifted the lid on the anger and frustration that many members feel at years of retreats by the union leadership against the cuts of successive Tory, Con-Dem and New Labour governments.

The catastrophic effects of this offensive of austerity and privatisation have been revealed during the Covid pandemic, which has seen the NHS pushed to, and even beyond, its limits.

Last summer, we also saw health workers demonstrating with their masks and PPE for a 15% pay rise to make up for a decade of pay cuts and freezes. But Unison's presence on these protests was through ordinary reps and members because of the total absence of the union officially.

McAnea was the national health officer at the time of the massive 2011 public sector pensions strike. Infamously, after the Prentis leadership, along with the Trades Union Congress, broke the strike unity by accepting Tory terms, McAnea justified the retreat: "...we always knew this would be a damage-limitation exercise."

However, the combined vote of the three other candidates, who stood against McAnea from the left, could have beaten her. Standing for the first time, Socialist Party member and Unison national executive council member for the male black members' seat, Hugo Pierre, won a very good vote of over 10,000.

This shows that there was an audience for his fighting, left, industrial and political programme, including demanding that Labour councils refuse to pass on Tory cuts.

Hugo was the only candidate to question the union handing over millions of pounds to Starmer's Labour Party. Given Starmer's refusal to back last week's call of education unions, including Unison, to close schools, and what his Labour leadership has done to Jeremy Corbyn, many Unison members will increasingly see this as the correct position and will see the need for a real political alternative that fights for workers.

Hugo was the only left candidate to actively propose reaching agreement for a single candidate to oppose the Prentis bloc. Both the others, Roger McKenzie and Paul Holmes - supported by Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell respectively - refused to even engage with the discussion that was clearly necessary.

But the lessons must be learned for the forthcoming national executive council election, which affords members the opportunity to confront McAnea's leadership with a fighting, national, lay leadership, armed with the militant programme that is particularly necessary now, including leading the fight against the Tory public sector pay freeze.

It is therefore very concerning that there are reports that Holmes' supporters are considering standing against existing Socialist Party national executive council members, risking a split in the left vote and thereby strengthening the hand of the right. The Socialist Party calls on the wider left to immediately discuss how a left slate can be put together on the fighting policies that are needed.

Result in full:

- Christina McAnea 63,900 (47.7%)
- Paul Holmes 45,220 (33.76%)
- Roger McKenzie 14,450 (10.79%)
- Hugo Pierre 10,382 (7.75%)

Fully resource the vaccination programme now

The Covid death toll is over 80,000 and rapidly rising. A successful vaccination programme couldn't be more urgent. Over two million people, in four priority categories, have received a first dose of one of the two vaccines currently in use in the UK.

Few people would disagree with them going to the most vulnerable first, but the lengthy timetable for offering them to everyone they're authorised as safe for - "by the autumn" - shows that the resources are not matching the urgency.

This comes after the slowness and failings of the test-and-trace system, the shortages of PPE, and the too-late lockdowns. Like all the government's measures during the pandemic, it again shows the dire overall lack of preparedness for the coronavirus outbreak.

Where was the advance planning for the mass vaccination centres that have belatedly been opened? And where are the many more needed? Will hospital sites, GP-led centres

and pharmacies be given the full resources they need to contribute to the vaccination programme on top of their normal workload?

There is also uncertainty over the vaccine supply, with the present stocks enough only for another month, and not yet all safety-checked and packaged.

The issue of staffing is especially critical. Rife with low pay and overwork, the NHS had a shortage of staff in normal times, without the huge extra burden of treating Covid patients, and now a vast vaccination programme. Tory ministers are resorting to involving volunteers from the St John's Ambulance charity, many with no medical background, and given only short, rudimentary training.

Despite the government's catalogue of failures, once again blame is being twisted onto ordinary people: 'too many aren't turning up for the vaccinations', is a new refrain in the big business-supporting media.

What about the travel difficulties, in winter weather, for the over-80s and "extremely clinically vulnerable", not to mention for the incredibly busy and over-tired frontline health and care workers?

The minority who don't want to be vaccinated are attacked, regardless of the varied standpoints within that layer, and many simply have questions with no one to direct them to - 'don't contact the NHS' is the instruction. The government added to potential concerns by lengthening the gap between the first and second doses, and by allowing the two doses to be different vaccines in some circumstances.

So, while everyone would be glad to see Matt Hancock's prediction of a "great summer" come to fruition (though surely not great for those who have lost family and friends to Covid), few will trust that Boris Johnson's short-sighted, incompetent Tory government can deliver that.



Covid vaccine nationalism threatens pandemic response

DAVE CARR

EAST LONDON SOCIALIST PARTY

Without a global vaccination programme, the Covid-19 virus will continue to circulate among the world's poorest countries, and possibly mutate into a new strain requiring a new vaccine. Yet the Covax fund, designed to make Covid vaccines widely available beyond the advanced capitalist countries, is chronically underfunded.

The Covax initiative, set up by the World Health Organisation, European Commission and France, is an alliance of 190 countries aiming to provide two billion doses of Covid vaccines to low and middle-income countries by the end of 2021 - enough to inoculate health workers and 20% of the most vulnerable people.

The fund is hundreds of millions of dollars short and, according to Unicef, faces a "high risk" of failure, leaving billions of people with no access to vaccines until as late as 2024.

So far, the US and China have made no contributions to the world vaccine programme, while the World Bank has merely offered repayable loans to poor countries to purchase the vaccines.

Moreover, at the end of 2020 the rich countries (with only 13% of the world's population) had pre-ordered 50% of vaccine production. This is yet another example of a 'Covid nationalist', short-sighted approach of the major capitalist countries - especially with the pandemic costing the world economy \$375 billion each month.

Covax cannot utilise the Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna vaccines because of the high costs per dose. Pfizer's vaccines costs about \$18.40-\$19.50 per dose and Moderna's \$25-\$37 - the company's share price has shot up by nearly 400% since the start of 2020, making its boss a billionaire in the process - whereas Covax's cost assumption is based on \$5.20 per dose.

Therefore it means waiting for

other vaccines, such as AstraZeneca's, Novavax and Sanofi to gain approval. So the roll out may not start until the second half of 2021, especially as the Modi regime in India - where 60% of the world's vaccines are manufactured - has banned for three months the export of the licenced AstraZeneca vaccine, in order to inoculate its most vulnerable population groups and key workers first.

India's government has also approved for emergency use the Covaxin vaccine developed by Bharat Biotech, even though it is still undergoing clinical trials to determine its efficacy and safety.

Like the issues of combating damaging climate change, or addressing humanitarian catastrophes, only a global strategy can tackle the Covid pandemic. But because capitalism is rooted in the existence of nation-states, it stymies worldwide cooperation. Yet another example of why democratic, socialist planning is a burning necessity for humanity.



Only socialism offers a way out of the spiralling crises created by the profit system PHOTO MARY FINCH

ROBIN CLAPP

SOCIALIST PARTY NATIONAL COMMITTEE

For over a year the Covid-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc across the globe, causing over two million deaths and unleashing enormous economic and social crises. 2021 has ushered in new lockdowns in the UK, Germany and many other countries, while from California to Tokyo the as-yet-unconquered and mutating virus continues to surge.

The World Bank predicts global GDP (total output) will have shrunk by 5.2% during 2020, twice as deep a decline as in the 2007-09 'Great Recession'. This marks the biggest global economic contraction since 1945.

Developing countries face a debt tsunami as the World Bank estimates that African government revenues have collapsed between 12% and 16% since March. Zambia has become the first of several countries in that continent likely to default on its debt.

Last May, Unicef warned that if global income per head fell by 20%, which appears probable, the number of extremely poor people in developing countries could increase by 420 million, wiping out a decade of gains in the fight against poverty.

While the Covid-19 crash is on-track to rank as the fourth-worst global recession out of 14 in the past 150 years, it has nevertheless only been the catalyst for exposing deep latent structural imbalances within capitalism.

A new synchronised economic slowdown was already highly probable last year, little more than a decade after the soothsayers of capitalism sought to assure us that the 2007 financial crash and the recession that followed were 'once-in-a-generation' events.

In this era, capitalism is not able to play even a relatively progressive role in advancing the needs of humankind and indeed the planet itself. Increasingly sclerotic, it can neither take full advantage of the marvels of artificial intelligence, nor implement

multilateral action programmes that can effectively begin counteracting climate change.

Where new technologies are taken up, they lead inexorably not to new job creation, but unemployment, chronic under-employment or zero-hour jobs that pay minimum wages or less.

The US under Biden will re-enter the Paris Climate Change Accords, but little beyond hot air will result. The last two years have shown the dangers of ignoring the steady rise in extreme weather events. Yet competing capitalist nation-states will continue to evade responsibility for dealing with this crisis.



The urgent historical task for the working class now is to step up the building of new mass parties and revolutionary parties of workers and youth

Heavily dependent upon speculative 'fictitious capital', most of it debt-fuelled, the centre of gravity of western economies, especially the US and the UK, has shifted from real production towards what often resemble gigantic financial Ponzi schemes (fraudulent investment scams).

The last year has once again highlighted that capitalism is a barrier to human progress. Privatisation of health provision and the greed of the market have combined to undermine effective medical responses to the pandemic.

The urgent historical task for the working class now is to step up the building of new mass parties and revolutionary parties of workers and youth equipped with socialist programmes, and to transform the trade

unions into combative fighting organisations. Only socialism offers a way out of the spiralling crises created by the profit system.

Some of the serious strategists of capitalism had an inkling of the underlying precariousness of their system. A system resting increasingly upon debt and propped up since 2008 by more than a decade of ultra-low interest rates and trillions of dollars from government quantitative easing programmes.

Inequality

Kristalina Georgieva, head of the International Monetary Fund, warned in January 2020 that unprecedented levels of wage and social inequality and financial sector instability were eating away at the vitals of the system.

She compared the current economy to the 'roaring 1920s' that culminated in the great stock market crash of 1929, adding that fresh issues, such as climate change and increased trade tensions, meant the next ten years were likely to be characterised by social unrest and financial market volatility. She concluded: "If I had to identify a theme at the outset of the new decade, it would be increasing uncertainty."

Challenges abound for capitalism in this era. Geopolitical and economic rivalries with China mean that the US is no longer able to assume the role of a unipolar superpower.

Biden's victory in the US Presidential election and any subsequent stimulus programmes that the administration unveils will not become locomotives for world recovery, as was the case after 1945.

This reflects the US's relatively weakened position in a world where China's emergence as a competing economic and political superpower has begun to decisively change the balance of international relations. At the same time, the US is compelled to pursue its 'America First' approach in order to try and reverse the dangerous economic and social malaise into which it has sunk.

Biden has scotched the idea of a



Speculation has seen stockmarkets surge in contradiction to the recessionary trends in the real economies PHOTO ZUMA PRESS/COM/CC

comprehensive return to untrammelled tariff-free trade. While his remarks are aimed at his domestic electorate, they contained barely disguised warnings to China's regime too.

China outgrows USA

All sections of the US capitalist class are obsessed by the threat China poses to its economic, strategic and geopolitical interests. By 2022, according to forecasts by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the US's economy will be the same size as in 2019, but China's will be 10% larger.

This has placed great strain on the unfettered globalisation model beloved of right-wing neoliberal governments, which since 2009 has

begun to stutter and even partially reverse.

The pandemic will mark a turning point in politics and geopolitics as well as economics. The world will emerge from 2020 into an era of even more intense great-power competition.

A survey conducted by the McKinsey Institute think tank in May last year found that 93% of firms were looking to make supply chains more resilient. These companies are worried not just about trade wars and other shocks, but about their environmental footprint and labour standards. These are easier to monitor closer to home.

The emergence of unstable right-wing populist governments in India, Turkey, Brazil and elsewhere are all expressions of the new volatile

GLOBAL CAPITALISM AT MOST DANGEROUS CONJUNCTURE SINCE THE 1930S



Massive quantitative easing by capitalist governments during the pandemic will give way to renewed austerity PHOTO PAUL MATTSSON

is politically necessary now to steady the ship, but tomorrow the capitalists will look to claw back these dizzying expenditures through a sharp turn to austerity.

While the lockdown has been disastrous for some sectors, notably hospitality and airlines, people stuck at home have been spending more time online, shopping, watching, and working.

Hi-tech stocks

This has been good news for the big Silicon Valley tech giants such as Apple, Amazon, Facebook, Google, and Netflix, who have made huge profits in the past few months as the world has accelerated its shift online. Amazon chief Jeff Bezos has had an excellent pandemic, becoming the first person in history to be worth \$200 billion.

At the other end of the scale, data from Harvard University reveals that in August there were 2% fewer jobs in the US paying more than \$60,000 a year than in January. But jobs paying under \$27,000 were 16% scarcer.

The Federal Reserve expects unemployment will not return to its pre-pandemic rate of 4% until 2023. Analysts at Goldman Sachs think it will do so only in 2025, while remaining naively optimistic that the roll-out of the vaccination programme will go smoothly with 40% of Americans receiving their jab by March.

The US economy collapsed by a revised annual rate of 31.4% between April and June, its sharpest contraction since 1945. Despite a 7.4% recovery from the spring lockdown, official GDP figures for the third quarter showed the size of the economy was still almost 4% below its previous peak.

The US's economic bounce-back in the summer quarter was wholly because of the eye-watering scale of the stimulus packages agreed by Congress in the spring, worth 14% of GDP.

Biden now intends to implement an 'Emergency Action Plan' to save the economy. Using wartime legislation known as the Defence Production Act, he will compel US businesses to

make personal protective equipment, medical supplies, ventilators and whatever else the US needs to tackle the pandemic.

While the UK is likely to enter a double-dip recession, stock markets across the developed world appear to be surging in an opposite direction. Between the start of April and the end of August, global stockmarkets rose by 37%, fuelled by rising technology shares.

The chief investment officer at UBS Global says the rally on Wall Street and the fall in the US dollar are "being driven primarily by central bank policies of adding unprecedented liquidity to markets through renewed quantitative easing and ultra-low rates."



The pandemic will mark a turning point in politics and geopolitics as well as economics... an era of even more intense great-power competition

The reason for this apparent gravity-defying bounce is simple - stock markets are largely detached from the real economy, particularly in the UK, and no longer principally provide capital for productive investment.

Interest rates for savers are barely above zero, and in some countries the interest rates (yields) on government bonds have turned negative, which means investors have to pay the state for the privilege of putting their money in a safe asset.

For investors who believe shares are overvalued, there is gold, or bitcoin - which has soared to over £25,000 per unit in the last period as speculators seek paper profits, albeit at very high risk.

After the 1929 Wall Street crash there was no major speculative bubble for 50 years, but since 1990 there has been one on average every six years. The global economy resembles a giant tinderbox, susceptible to any passing spark.

Veteran financier Jeremy Grantham, who foresaw the crash in 2007, warns: "The long, long bull market since 2009 has finally matured into a fully fledged epic bubble. Featuring extreme overvaluation, explosive price increases, frenzied issuance and hysterically speculative investor behaviour, I believe this event will be recorded as one of the great bubbles of financial history, right along with the [1720] South Sea Bubble, 1929, and 2000."

Individually, any one of these issues - a global economy that is struggling with historically low productivity rates, financial markets divorced from reality, geopolitical tensions, a retreat from multilateralism, irresolvable debt crises, widening inequality levels, an over-heating planet - would be a challenge. Together they represent the most dangerous conjuncture since the 1930s.

Analysing the causes of the Great Depression, Trotsky wrote in 1932 that: "The present economic crisis is an indubitable expression of the fact that world capitalism has outlived itself as a system... even though the automatic working of the laws of the market may lead to a softening of the crisis after a year or two, it will return again in a comparatively short time with redoubled force... the ruling classes will cure the crisis with a further economic decimation of Europe and a strengthening of protectionism and militarism."

This analysis applies today with equal force. Capitalism offers only more poverty, wars, disease and racism, all of which are its natural excrescences.

Only the working class possesses the ability to rid the planet of these threats. To do that, we have to build mighty socialist forces to transform and create a 21st century worthy of the name.

GARY CLARK
CWU SCOTLAND NO.2 BRANCH SECRETARY
(PERSONAL CAPACITY)

The Communication Workers Union (CWU) postal executive has unanimously agreed to propose to the membership a national agreement that, if agreed, would end the two-year dispute between the CWU and Royal Mail. The agreement has been supported by every divisional officer across the country, and in a national online meeting not one branch spoke against the deal. It looks, therefore, as if all branches will be recommending the deal to the membership.

As socialists we must look at the whole dispute to have a complete understanding of where we are and whether the deal represents a step forward.

Royal Mail was privatised in 2014, which was totally opposed by socialists in CWU. We warned, correctly, that management would see this as a platform to launch attacks on the terms and conditions that the CWU had secured through the combativity of its members. These are vastly superior to those of any company in the sector. So CEO after CEO has looked to dismantle the influence of the union.

In 2018, the ‘Four Pillars’ agreement secured gains for the membership. This included a legal agreement on issues such as outsourcing, and a flightpath to a shorter working week for postal workers - down to 35 hours by 2022.

Rico Back

The infamous Rico Back replaced Moya Greene as CEO in May 2018. We knew that with his background he would be intent on taking on and smashing the CWU. He made this, and his desire for a Royal Mail structure like that of parcel company GLS, very clear straight away. At that point, the battle lines were drawn. It was evident that he wanted to break up the company and renege on the national Four Pillars agreement, including the shorter working week.

Over the last three years, the CWU has had three massive ‘yes’ votes for industrial action, the first of which led to the Four Pillars agreement. Then we had two ballots when Rico Back was CEO. The first of these was just prior to the general election, but Royal Mail took the CWU to the capitalist courts to declare the ballot illegal. At that point, it looked as if we were heading towards a long period of industrial action. A reballot produced another massive ‘yes’ vote for industrial action.

Members within Parcelforce World-Wide had been given ‘TUPE’ letters - relating to workers’ terms and conditions when changing employer. This was an obvious breach of the Four Pillars agreement, and preparation for breaking up the company. It was also clear that management was planning to renege on the shorter working week and had no intention of awarding members a pay rise.

In March last year, at the time of the first Covid lockdown, it looked as if the union was about to announce industrial action. But, bowing down to the ‘national unity’ mood, the union’s national leadership decided not to call strike action. At the time, socialists in the CWU said that the union should have called strike action to defend our terms and conditions, support Parcelforce members, and

CWU to ballot on national agreement

ROYAL MAIL
MANAGEMENT FORCED
TO MAKE CONCESSIONS



PAUL MATTSSON

defend previous agreements around the shorter working week.

This non-action, on the back of the union leadership not acting on the first strike ballot which had been undemocratically dismissed by the courts, gave confidence to the Royal Mail leadership to go on the offensive. They tried to undermine the Universal Service Obligation (USO) - the delivery and collection of letters from Monday to Friday - for a short period, but we believed this would become permanent.

No negotiations had taken place with the CWU, showing management’s contempt for the union. This was a crucial part of the dispute. Correctly, the CWU leadership responded, and it looked very likely unofficial action would spread across the country. This forced Royal Mail to sack Rico Back and reach an agreement with the CWU to suspend USO for only a temporary, defined period. It has now been restored.

Even though we got rid of Rico Back, this was not yet a victory. We still had the same management leadership team with the same outlook as Back regarding breaking up the company and smashing the

union. But the balance of forces has definitely changed in favour of the CWU and postal workers, forcing management to propose the latest agreement, which makes significant concessions.

There have been changes at senior management level. And the pandemic itself, with the explosion in online shopping, has massively increased postal workers’ workload. Postal workers have delivered around a billion parcels/packets since the first lockdown was imposed. This clearly strengthened the CWU’s position in the negotiations.

The agreement includes a two-year pay deal. A rise of 2.7% in the first year, backdated to April 2020 and flowing through to all allowances, and another 1% rise in April 2021. This will be widely welcomed by the majority of the membership as, with the current Retail Price Index (RPI) rate at 0.9%, the rise over two years will be significantly above inflation. However, we believe that the second year should have been inflation-proofed, in case the RPI rate rises.

As well as pay, the deal covers a number of other major issues. The pathway to a shorter working week,

which management reneged on, is now back on the table. One hour is due to come off the working week as each unit does a revision. This will take postal workers to a 37-hour week. Royal Mail has agreed to enter talks about how to get to a 35-hour week with fully paid meal reliefs.

Royal Mail workers generally accept that the job has been affected by the change in people’s shopping habits during the pandemic, and it’s unlikely that these will go back to what they were pre-Covid-19. The agreement aims to look at that, including Sunday working in packet delivery companies, which will at first be on a voluntary basis.

On job security, Royal Mail has agreed to keep the ‘Managing the Surplus Framework’ agreement till May 2023, when it will be jointly reviewed. This means there will be no compulsory redundancies at a time of a major economic crisis due to the pandemic. This will be welcomed by the membership.

Along with a review of workload across the company, this should be an opportunity to convert fixed-term contracts into permanent contracts, give part-time members a chance to progress to full-time, and convert agency workers into direct employees.

It’s clear that the CWU has made significant gains through these talks, which have been helped by a complete change in the type of work postal workers preform due to the pandemic. This could be a chance to improve the terms and conditions of our membership.

But we should not think that Royal Mail will just hand over better terms and conditions; there are still a number of issues that need to be resolved. For example, Royal Mail wants to look again at the attendance agreement. So we must not take our foot off the gas. There are still managers who we dealt with before, and the whole culture within the company needs to be addressed. It should be made clear that if these managers don’t change they will be sacked. We are not prepared to take the constant bullying culture within Royal Mail.

Lessons

We in the union need to learn the lessons of this dispute. We should not bow to the idea of national unity and call off industrial action, allowing Royal Mail to go on the offensive. There should not be negotiations behind closed doors which lead to frustration among the members. And when we ballot we should make sure we are ready to take action, no matter what the bosses do. If these steps had been taken, we believe more could have been won.

However, on balance, we welcome this agreement and call for a ‘yes’ vote. Instead of job reductions and a race to the bottom, the union can now fight to improve the work/life balance of the membership and go into the other companies to organise workers there.

There are two main lessons from the last two years. Firstly, management cannot be trusted and agreements are only as good as the strength of the union and the willingness of members to fight. Secondly, privatisation has been a disaster and is a continuing threat to the jobs and contracts of Royal Mail workers. The union must continue to emblazon on its banner the demand that Royal Mail group be brought back into public ownership.

Lockdown 3.0 - fight to make our shops safe!

IAIN DALTON
USDAW BROAD LEFT CHAIR (PERSONAL CAPACITY)

Over the last few months, retail has been vying with schools for the top spot for Covid-19 outbreaks. Now schools are rightly shut to many students, to try to stop the spread of the virus. This shines a spotlight on the retailers that remain open where conditions are far more lax than was the case during the first lockdown.

Already this year, there have been a number of high-profile outbreaks of Covid in Tesco stores. Tragically, two workers in a store in Greenock, Scotland died as a result of an outbreak there. A store in Bridgend, south Wales has had 40 confirmed cases since Christmas, with 140 workers isolating at one point. There have also been outbreaks at a Cardiff Tesco Extra store and the distribution centre at Magor, south Wales. There are numerous other reports in local newspapers of other outbreaks.

Retail and distribution workers will be asking what their unions are doing to protect them. In a recent Usdaw retail union press release, a series of measures are put forward, which we would support. These include observance of two-metre social distancing; one-way systems; retail workers being among those with priority for receiving the vaccine; doorstep-only deliveries of shopping; trained security staff overseeing entry and exit

from stores; and compliance with mask wearing.

We would argue that given the increased transmission of the new variant these measures should go further. Restocking of shelves, for example, should be done when aisles or stores are closed in order to protect staff. Also, current capacity limits, which seem to be based on one-metre-plus distancing in stores without any shelves, should be vastly reduced.

Measures

Ushaw general secretary Paddy Lillis has pointed out many of these safety measures were agreed with the retail bosses during the first lockdown. But a key sentence follows this in the press release, which points to the problem of why they are not being implemented. He says: “Where safety measures are agreed, retailers need to make sure that they are being followed consistently, in every store.”

While measures may be agreed at the level of the bosses’ organisations like the British Retail Consortium, or individual companies, it is far from automatic they will filter down to store level, given the pressures on store managers to maintain sales volumes in order to reap company profits.

The only guarantee of safety measures being implemented is confident union membership, and reps within stores.

Yet a number of Usdaw reps have reported that when they have

become aware of these issues cropping up in multiple stores, they have still been forced to attempt to deal with them at store level, instead of the union taking them up collectively with management.

Retail workers must take a leaf out of the tremendous action by education workers. The National Education Union (NEU) and then Unison union members, invoked their rights under Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act 1996, in a collective fashion. Section 44 gives workers the individual right to withdraw from a workplace where they believe they face “serious or imminent danger”.

We urgently need the Usdaw leadership to bring members together, using technology such as Zoom, like the NEU successfully did, to hammer out a strategy of how the union’s rank-and-file membership can be mobilised to force the retail bosses to take our safety seriously.

As well as discussing how Section 44 could be used in the retail context, other options could be explored, such as indicative ballots of members over the possibility of taking strike action.

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NICKOLAY ROMENSKIY/CC

Ryan Aldred: Why I’m standing for the Usdaw union executive council



Ryan Aldred (left) with Usdaw members protesting outside Debenhams PLYMOUTH SOCIALIST PARTY

With Covid decimating the retail sector, it is vital that Usdaw takes a lead in organising retail and distribution workers in supermarkets, high street chains and smaller, independent businesses.

Workers shouldn’t pay for this crisis, every job must be defended.

We need an end to zero and low-hours contracts, except where members specifically opt in.

Supermarket and distribution staff have worked through three lockdowns to ensure that everyone in Britain has access to food. Retail and distribution workers should be rewarded with wages that reflect their status as key workers.

This is why we need £12 an hour as a minimum wage with hazard pay for workers putting themselves at risk to continue to deliver what has been recognised as a vital service.

We shouldn’t shy away from taking industrial action up to and including strike action if supermarket bosses refuse to give up their bumper profits.

We need to challenge companies

like Sainsbury’s which can afford to pay out massive dividends to shareholders while simultaneously putting thousands of jobs at risk.

With each subsequent lockdown we have seen many names disappearing from the high street for good. We need a leadership prepared to roll out a retail industrial strategy calling for public ownership to save the hundreds of thousands of jobs currently at risk, whether it be Debenhams, the Arcadia Group or any of those on the growing list of retailers who have fallen into administration.

If elected, I would take such a strategy to the Usdaw executive council to ensure that key supermarket workers and non-essential retail and distribution workers alike are protected. A vote for me is a vote for a fighting, democratic leadership.

● Socialist Party member Ryan is standing in the South Wales and Western Division, with ballot papers out on 18 January. See ‘Ryan Aldred for Usdaw EC’ on Facebook and usdawactivist.wordpress.com for more

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Book Review: Humankind

Dispelling the myth that humans are too selfish for socialism

DAVE CARR

EAST LONDON SOCIALIST PARTY

Historian Rutger Bregman's book 'Humankind' tackles a subject matter that socialists know about only too well - 'human nature'. Indeed, how many times have passers-by told party members on public activities that "socialism goes against human nature"?

This Hobbesian view of humanity (Thomas Hobbes was a 17th century 'Enlightenment' philosopher) argues that, stripped of its thin veneer of 'civilisation', life is "nasty, brutish and short". Moreover, humans are 'naturally selfish'.

The bestselling novel 'Lord of the Flies', by Nobel prize-winning author William Golding, graphically imagines what will happen to schoolboys stranded on a deserted island. 'The law of the jungle' and its murderous brutality are quickly asserted.

Bregman puts this pessimistic worldview to the test. He examines a real-life Lord of the Flies event in 1966 when a group of adventurous schoolboys from Tonga sailed off in a stolen fishing boat. Disaster struck and they were shipwrecked on the deserted, small volcanic island of 'Ata in the South Pacific.

Yet these 13 to 16-year-olds, marooned on the island for more than a year, didn't resort to savagery and cannibalism, despite the huge privations they endured. Instead, they rallied around to provide water, food and shelter for all.

Even when one of the group broke his leg they didn't abandon him, but nursed him back to health. And when arguments did break out, they implemented a simple socially distanced 'time-out' rule to cool tempers.

Human solidarity

Moreover, Bregman gives other examples showing that, contrary to Hobbes' pessimism, humans faced with adversity and disasters tend to look after each other rather than become hideously selfish. The current Covid pandemic illustrates this well. Hundreds of thousands volunteered to nurse and to provide social care to the vulnerable.

Bregman gives the example of New Orleans when it was devastated by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. In the immediate aftermath, the establishment media manufactured hoary tales of rape, murder, etc. The only murders occurred when the National Guard eventually appeared and shot innocent survivors! Looting took place, some of it on an organised basis, by people who were desperate for food and medicines for survivors and had been abandoned by the local and federal authorities.

But, you might ask, what about all those social-psychological experiments that pitch students into jailers and prisoners, which show that those in authority rapidly become sadistic brutes? In short, it's not true! Left to their own devices, student jailers and inmates chilled out



LORD OF THE FLIES, 1990, COLUMBIA PICTURES

together and drew up their own set of rules.

Of course, this 'failed' experiment wasn't publicised. Instead, in the more familiar one, researchers imposed draconian rules from the outset, intervened to prevent fraternisation, and encouraged jailers to punish prisoners. Hardly objective research. Likewise, the infamous electric-shock punishment experiment was equally designed and manipulated to produce the results the researchers wanted.

To his credit, Bregman presents a slew of thorough scientific studies which demolish the capitalist establishment view, continuously propagated by the bosses' media, that lurking just below the surface of civilised society is the savage primate and that, therefore, we need today's rulers to save us from ourselves.

In passing, Bregman also punctures the misanthropic view of humanity put forward by some in the environmental movement. In particular, he dispatches the false 'Malthusian' idea that it was a crisis of overpopulation which crashed the Easter Island civilisation.

Primitive communism

Wars, violent crime, and human atrocities aren't an inherent consequence of human nature. Early human communities weren't preoccupied in clobbering their next-door neighbours. Hunter-gathering societies were largely cooperative and equal. And this 'primitive communist' existence has pervaded most of human history.

Bregman, coincidentally overlapping with a Marxist view of history,



Humans faced with adversity and disasters tend to look after each other

points out that this tranquil phase in our past only changed with the emergence of settled agricultural communities and the production of surplus produce. Then, gradually, society divides into separate classes of producers and those that own and control the surplus. In other words, the development of class society, or 'civilisation' as Bregmann calls it.

Of course, the author acknowledges the enormous technological and societal progress made in the last 10,000 or so years. But again, mirroring Marxism, he wants to eliminate the inequalities, division and conflict in today's 'civilisation'. Logically, this means the abolition of capitalist class society and its replacement with a sophisticated socialist society.

Here Bregman's arguments fall flat. Intellectually he considers communism better than capitalism, but then he trots out the all-too-familiar crass narrative that 'revolutions always end in tears', and that 'Lenin and Stalin were two dictatorial peas in a pod'.

In fact the Russian Revolution degenerated, not because of some inherent flaw in revolutions, but due to real causal events, namely: the attempted military overthrow of the

Bolshevik government by invading western armies and their proxies, and the resulting debilitating effects and privations on the relatively small working-class population. Above all, it was the failure of revolutions in the advanced capitalist countries that condemned Soviet Russia to isolation. It meant that under such siege conditions of terrible and widespread poverty, a privileged state and party bureaucracy emerged, headed by Stalin.

Lenin recognised this cancerous growth and formed a political pact with Trotsky to resist this process and remove Stalin from leadership, but unfortunately died prematurely in 1924.

Utopian or scientific

Bregman's solution is an imaginary egalitarian capitalism. Maybe he should read Engels' 'Socialism: Utopian and Scientific'. He would see himself parroting 19th century utopian socialists like Robert Owen! (See 'Clear explanation of what socialism is and why it's necessary' at socialistparty.org.uk). Indeed, he warms to the 'be nice to your workers' philosophy of a handful of enlightened CEOs in companies such as Buurtzorg and FAVI.

What Bregman fails to address is that these islands of 'goodness' are still subject to the same laws of capitalist boom and bust as other companies. And, in periods of economic crisis like today, they will be compelled to attack workers.

In 1990, car parts manufacturer FAVI was indeed facing a crisis after orders plummeted. Workers only

kept their jobs by agreeing to cut their hours, and hence wages, by 25%. Likewise, in 2010, healthcare company Buurtzorg faced a cash crunch. Its CEO Jos de Blok told the workforce they could either temporarily halt recruitment or increase productivity. The workers 'chose' to work harder.

This 'choice' is redolent of the plebiscites in which councils faced with squeezed budgets often ask residents - where would you make cuts? As if there was no alternative.

In the case of a teetering company, trade unions worth their salt should not volunteer concessions to the employer, but demand an inspection of the accounts to see where the money is or where it's gone. Further demands, including public ownership, flow from this starting point.

Bregman concludes with 'ten rules to live by', which are frankly very hippyish. However, Rule VIII - 'Don't punch Nazis' - ie don't mobilise against the far-right, is downright dangerous, as the events in Washington show.

Nonetheless, Humankind, with its useful arguments against capitalism, is worth a read. But if you really want to find the tools to change society, you should (re)read the Communist Manifesto.

● **'Humankind - A Hopeful History' by Rutger Bregman, Bloomsbury Publishing, £20 Hardback**

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British Gas workers strike against 'fire and rehire' plans



British Gas engineers in the GMB union held a picket line on Aylestone Road, Leicester on 11 January and received tremendous support from passers-by, both on foot, and in cars hooting their horns.

They have been out on strike for five days so far against massive attacks on their pay and terms and conditions. These include an increase in working hours for no extra pay. This is in addition to driving time to customers' homes at the start of the day, and back at the end, being excluded from working hours, plus attacks on holidays and rota systems, and more.

Leicester Socialist Party members have been on the picket line on Aylestone Road showing solidarity.

Paul Carvell, the local shop steward and a regional GMB rep, who is

a technical engineer and has worked for the company for 38 years, spoke to the Socialist:

"We are out on strike because our terms and conditions are under threat.

"To force this through they've used the tactic of fire and rehire. The union has successfully negotiated with the management for years, but, now a new CEO (Chris O'Shea) has decided the only way forward is to use bully-boy tactics. These terms, and conditions will make a massive difference to my work-life balance.

"Over 95% of the engineers are on strike, we are a heavily unionised industry. We don't want to take this action; this is the time of year when our customers need us most to keep them warm. But this is the last chance to stop these disgusting attacks.

"The next step is five more days of, strike spread across three weeks.

"We want a settlement, but fire and rehire is an absolute disgrace and should be illegal."

The holding company for British Gas, Centrica, made £901 million in profits last year. The Socialist Party campaigns for renationalisation of the industry, with democratic workers' control, so that this kind of profiteering management can be removed.

GMB regional organiser based in Leicester, Colin Wyatt, said "this action is a result of bullying tactics. We've said 'No way O'Shea' and enough is enough!"

• GMB have announced five new dates, for 24 hours each day, on 20, 22, 25, 29 January and 1 February

PCS Broad Left Network conference

Get stuck in to build a fighting, democratic PCS union

The PCS Broad Left Network (BLN) conference takes place on Saturday 16 January.

The BLN is a rank-and-file socialist group. It was set up two years ago by PCS members looking to build the fighting, democratic union leadership no longer provided by Left Unity.

The bankruptcy of the current Left Unity leadership of the PCS has been ruthlessly exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic:

• At the outset of the pandemic it issued so-called guidance to members which concluded: "We are not advising you to do, or refrain from doing, anything."

• Not until October did it acknowledge that collective action could and should be the appropriate response to workplace safety concerns. This was after months of vilifying BLN supporters for calling for collective action.

• The 2020 pay campaign began with a whimper and ended with a petition. In between, the leadership put in a 10% claim, which it then withdrew as a national unity gesture, and asked instead for an inflation-linked increase. The employer thanked it for its "constructive approach" and contemptuously rejected even the watered-down claim. The union leadership then reinstated the original claim but with no strategy for advancing it.

• Workers turned to their unions during the pandemic, and many unions gained substantial numbers of new members. The National Education Union recruited 50,000 new members through its campaign

for safe schools, and responded to the mass pressure to take decisive action about schools reopening in January. Not PCS though. In a blind panic, the union leadership launched a 'future of the union' exercise, with merger and/or major cutbacks as their twin solutions. BLN supporters, meanwhile, called for an in-depth analysis of the failure to recruit new members before jumping to conclusions about what needs to be done.

• The union's 2020 elections and conference were cancelled. BLN supporters opposed these decisions. Elections and a Zoom-based conference are scheduled for 2021. But in a move of breathtaking arrogance, the leadership is attempting to dictate to branches what can be discussed, and place limits on the number of motions they can submit. This unconstitutional attack on our democracy was, and is, opposed by BLN members.

The challenge for 2021 is to develop the BLN fighting, democratic programme and elect a PCS leadership that will actually give a determined lead to defeat the attacks our members face. Whether it has been on safety, jobs, conditions or pay, BLN supporters have been to the fore in putting forward demands on how our union can mobilise our members to stop these attacks.

If you want to get stuck in to actively build the fightback - come along to our conference on Saturday 16 January and get involved in the Broad Left Network.

• Join BLN and register for the conference at pcsbln.wordpress.com

Help us fund the fight for Socialism

The Socialist Party stands for the rights of workers. We fight for an alternative to capitalism, to the misery faced by workers, students and young people. Every quarter, we set a fighting fund target to help fund the vital work of our party. In normal circumstances we would be raising money on our campaigning stalls, paper sales, at car boot sales and through various other methods.

During the Covid pandemic and lockdowns, we have had fewer opportunities to receive donations on the streets. But, through virtual initiatives, and the marvellous Socialism 2020 financial appeal, we ended the last quarter of 2020 on 228% of our target! This shows the confidence in our socialist ideas and the strength and unity of our organisation.

But we understand that the current period is going to be difficult for the working class and our members who are facing the biggest health and economic crisis in living memory. There are many uncertainties, including the threat of job losses and loss of income.

The Socialist Party has a fighting fund target of £25,000 for the current

quarter that ends in March. This is to enable us to fund the vital campaigning work that our members and the wider working class are involved in.

Read this week's edition of the Socialist. If you agree with our demands, programme, and the need for a political voice for the working class - then support us. Help us to reach our target.

If you are already a member of the Socialist Party, then help to develop a plan in your branch for how to reach your fighting fund target.

Fund the fightback

DONATE TODAY

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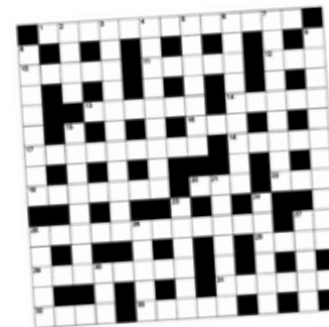
SOCIALIST PARTY FIGHTING FUND

AREA	£ RECEIVED	£ TARGET	Q1: JANUARY-MARCH 2021	DEADLINE: 31 MARCH 2021
Southern & SE	1,008	2,350	43%	
North West	360	1,150	31%	
Northern	218	750	29%	
Wales	382	2,300	17%	
London	538	4,600	12%	
Yorkshire	112	2,550	4%	
East Midlands	32	1,850	2%	
West Midlands	2	2,600	0%	
South West	0	1,800	0%	
Eastern	0	1,200	0%	
Other	5,035	3,850	131%	
TOTAL	7,686	22,000	35%	

TUSC to hold local elections conference in February

Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition

- The Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) national steering committee has agreed the agenda and timetable for a local elections conference to be held on Zoom on Sunday 7 February.
- The conference has been convened under the heading 'Fighting back against Starmer's new New Labour - including at the ballot box!', starting at 11am to conclude by 1.30pm.
- Platform speakers from the constituent components of the TUSC steering committee, the RMT transport workers' union, the Socialist Party, the Resistance Movement and the individual members' representatives, will introduce the single plenary session.
- There is no pre-registration for this conference. The Zoom details will be published on the events page at tusc.org.uk nearer the time.



Crossword Competition

The winners of the Socialist's Christmas Crossword Competition in issue 1114 will be announced next week, in issue 1117 of the Socialist.

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HOW SHOULD SOCIALISTS RESPOND TO THE 6 JANUARY ATTACKS ON CAPITOL HILL?

On Wednesday 6 January, the world witnessed unprecedented scenes of frenzied Trump supporters, some armed, breaking through a thin line of police and occupying the Capitol building in Washington - the seat of the US government.

Hours earlier, the defeated President Donald Trump, who continues to falsely claim he won November's election, told his assembled motley supporters to march on the Capitol, where Congress was voting to certify Democrat Joe Biden's presidency. "You'll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength," he barked.

After the chaos, a reassembled Congress confirmed Biden as president, but over 100 Republican lawmakers voted against.

Democrat House representatives are moving to impeach Trump for a second time although it's very unlikely this will pass in the Senate. It's also clear that Trump, or at least 'Trumpism', ie right-wing populism, won't go away, and the Republican Party could easily fracture in the coming months.

However, the idea that establishment politician Joe Biden, pursuing policies acceptable to the ruling class, can overcome a highly polarised US society, the Covid pandemic, narrow the ever-widening health and wealth gap, end systemic racism, and provide secure jobs and improved living standards for the majority, is utopian.

Future working-class struggle against the iniquities of capitalism is inevitable. Building an independent mass working-class party armed with a socialist programme is therefore a vital task. **The Independent Socialist Group** (CWI co-thinkers in USA) explains how this is possible.

The 'March to Save America' began on 6 January in Freedom Plaza, Washington DC. Trump promised that "millions of Americans" would attend. In actuality, the number of attendees numbered in the few thousands.

By then Trump probably had given up thoughts of being able to carry out some 'constitutional coup' and now did not expect to block Biden becoming president. But Trump wanted to give the impression he was going down fighting, saying to his supporters they had been 'robbed' and laying the basis for future campaigning.

Trump lacks the support necessary to pull off a seizure of power - neither the military, the majority of the capitalist class, nor sections of his own party are behind him in his election claims.

Biden's endorsement by numerous current and retired military commanders, as well as his considerable lead over Trump with a number of wealthy donors, clearly signals that



most of the ruling class is done with Donald Trump.

However, the unprecedented open letter of ten former defence secretaries, initiated by George W Bush's vice-president Dick Cheney, warning against "efforts to involve the US armed forces in resolving election disputes", showed extreme worry and mistrust from sections of the ruling class over Trump's attempts to stay in power.

The majority of the capitalist class is relying on Biden to provide US capitalism and the government with a 'clean slate' in the eyes of voters and end the personal rule of Trump and his family, without the intent of undoing many of the attacks on workers' rights and living standards carried out under Trump's administration.

Trump also lacks the organised base which could otherwise counterbalance his lack of state support. Though he does have loyal supporters, many of whom are well-armed and have ties to various white nationalist and militia organisations, these core supporters are neither numerous nor organised enough to carry out a coup.

As seen on 6 January, there did not appear to be an overarching plan for protesters to somehow seize power for Donald Trump. Instead, it appears that protesters felt emboldened

enough to spontaneously enter the Capitol building, facing little opposition from the police.

Right populism

However, just because this isn't a coup does not mean that it should be ignored. 'Right populism' has the economic conditions to grow, especially given the lack of alternatives to capitalist crises, like the Covid crisis, housing crisis, and economic crisis.

The Democratic Party does not offer any way forward and could not appeal to those seduced by Trump's false promises and attacks on the Washington elite. The right could be temporarily set back by reaction to and division over what happened on the 6th.

It's up to working people and youth to fight the right. When the far right tried to hold a 'free speech rally' in Boston in 2017, the weekend after the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, the 100 or so attendees were completely outnumbered and overpowered by the 40,000 counter-protestors who showed up to oppose their bigotry and semi-fascist politics.

When capitalism enters a crisis, people, including the most downtrodden, begin to look for answers and alternatives. The capitalist system has been in near-constant crises since the Great Recession in 2007-09.



Joe Biden will pursue policies acceptable to the ruling class, and will not overcome polarised US society, the Covid pandemic, narrow the health and wealth gap, end racism, or provide jobs and improved living standards for the majority

On 6 January, a counter-protest, a tactic that has been overwhelmingly effective in the past, wasn't organised. Before the pro-Trump protest, the Democratic mayor of DC told people to stay home.

The lack of a left counter-protest was the result of large sections of progressives and the left capitulating to the Democratic Party and 'lesser-evilism' in the recent elections. Even the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement was redirected by many of its leaders into supporting the Democratic Party in the recent elections.

Workers' party

The lack of an independent left outside of the Democratic Party serves to strengthen not only the interests of the capitalist class, but the interests of the far right as well. Working people want solutions, and if there is no significant left workers' party to help organise against capitalism, then those on the far right will be able to use populist rhetoric, alongside racism, sexism, antisemitism, and other oppressive ideas, to attract and recruit those who otherwise might have been won over to socialist ideas and actions.

Capitalism presents no way out. Polarisation will continue and some people will be drawn to right-wing populist ideas - but many people will also be pushed by conditions



to consider left ideas, including socialism.

Unless an independent left workers' party forms, offering a socialist programme, and organising the working class in all its diversity against the capitalist elite, then the far right could continue to gain in numbers and influence, until a right-wing coup in the United States would become a real possibility.

Black Lives Matter

We cannot depend on a government controlled by capitalist political parties to defend us or our limited rights under capitalism. The Democratic Party and the Republican Party at federal, state, and city level mobilised Homeland Security, the National Guard, and local militarised police teams against predominantly peaceful anti-racist protesters just a few months ago during the height of the renewed BLM movement.

It's obvious that the differences in policing between the pro-Trump protest and riot, vis-à-vis the militarised police attacks against the BLM movement, are because of racist police policies.

Police in DC showed some sympathy to the pro-Trump protesters and refused to seriously restrain the partially armed crowd that entered the Capitol.

BLM protests are often violently suppressed and attacked by police,

Instead of defending the current system, we should be calling for independent counter-protests against Trump, the right, and the far right; not in support of the Democrats, Joe Biden, or some myth of 'democracy' under capitalism, but to defend and extend real democratic rights.

Intimidation

The huge propaganda campaign denouncing the 6 January 'insurrection' is partly aimed at intimidating movements like BLM and working-class struggle, while new legal measures against protests may be tried out against the 6 January rioters.

In towns and cities, campaigning organisations, people on the left, socialist groups, rank-and-file trade unionists, anti-racist protesters, and so forth, need to organise working people and youth in mass demonstrations against the right - including in response to the pro-Trump protest.

Such joint actions should be linked to fighting for access to free healthcare, enhanced unemployment pay and no evictions, as steps to immediately defend lives and living standards during the pandemic.

These steps could begin to bring together working people and youth to build a movement - locally, statewide and nationally - to fight for their needs and lay a basis for building a political force - a party of the working class and oppressed.

Trumpism and the Republicans offer no way out of the problems rooted in the capitalist system. The Democratic Party also has no way forward or any solutions to offer working class people, as we witnessed under the Clinton and Obama presidencies, while itself being a fundamentally undemocratic organisation.

The terrible pandemic has once again illustrated the horrors of a profit-run healthcare system, but Biden has made clear he is against any fundamental change.

Desperately needed social benefits - like free national healthcare, cancelling student debt, banning evictions and more - can be fought for now and need not wait for the Democrats to act. Real democratic rights can only be won through struggles for the immediate gains working people need, including stopping and pushing back the far right, and organising mass movements against racism, police brutality, evictions, and profit-making off the pandemic.

Socialists argue that such actions need to be part of a struggle to build a force that will break the grip of corporate control and enable working people to democratically run the economy so it meets the needs of society as a whole - and not the richest 1% who own 30% of the nation's wealth.

Working-class opposition to the right must be different from the calls of the corporate media and Democratic Party politicians for increasing police repression, for more corporate censorship of social media, and for using hatred of Trump and Trumpism to cover up real economic and political problems in government and US society.

Independent action is necessary, and history has shown that the only force capable of beating back the far-right and winning progress is the organised working class.

● Also read 'US in crisis - need for a mass workers' party and socialist programme' at socialistworld.net

Hong Kong state repression

Also on Wednesday, 6 January, more than a thousand state forces carried out pre-dawn raids on 73 premises in Hong Kong. They arrested 53 activists and politicians

for 'subversion' under the National Security Law imposed by Beijing in June of last year.

● For a full report see socialistworld.net.

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the Socialist

Issue 1116

14-20 January 2021

formerly **Militant**

NHS EMERGENCY FIGHT FOR A FULLY FUNDED, PUBLICLY OWNED, SOCIALIST NHS

The NHS is under more pressure than ever. Ambulances are queueing outside A&E and hospital resources running low. Millions of people are living in mortal fear of falling ill.

Everything has been made worse by successive governments, Tories and Labour, underfunding and selling-off our NHS.

The endless squeezing of NHS staff pay and conditions has led to enormous staff shortages and now, as the pandemic reaches new heights, 46,000 hospital staff are off sick with Covid-19.

The criminal underresourcing of the health service is leading to reduction in the quality of care. With a critical lack of oxygen supply at Southend Hospital, the target blood oxygen level for patients has been reduced from 92% to as low as 88%.

At least two London hospitals have cancelled urgent operations, including cancer surgery. Meanwhile, private hospitals have

continued to carry out non-urgent operations for those able to pay.

The NHS bosses are reportedly attempting to 'negotiate' with the private hospitals for use of their facilities.

The Socialist Party demands that all private health and social care facilities, including hospitals, care homes and the pharmaceutical industry, be requisitioned to respond to the pandemic.

This would lay the basis for a publicly owned NHS, care sector and big pharma under democratic workers' control and management.

For those working in the NHS we demand a 15% pay rise and a scrapping of training fees for health workers, including a wiping of existing tuition fee debts. To harness the knowledge and experience of health workers we demand workers' and trade union oversight of the pandemic response. We fight for a fully funded, publicly owned, socialist NHS.



Dispatches from the front
Cases are rising and we are struggling to cope

A TRAUMA RADIOGRAPHER

Working in A&E a few days ago, every patient I X-rayed had Covid, and we are working on the basis that every patient has the virus. We had 219 Covid inpatients last night, and expect to reach 400 by the end of the week.

We are working on the assumption that cases will continue to rise to a peak at the end of January, but with the figures reported every day steadily increasing, there is the constant worry that the crisis will continue for longer.

It does feel a little bit like a war-zone. Everybody I work with is struggling to cope with the crisis and it is having an effect on their mental health. Everyone is brittle. People regularly break into tears and need to take time out.

▶▶▶ **CONTINUED ON P2-3**

A SOCIALIST RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC CRISIS
▶▶▶ socialistparty.org.uk/coronavirus

WHAT WE STAND FOR: THE SOCIALIST PARTY'S MAIN DEMANDS
▶▶▶ see column on p3

