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the Socialist

Issue 1133

13-19 May 2021

formerly **Militant**



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- **Unions must fight to build a new mass workers' party**
- **Join the fight for socialism**

6 MAY ELECTIONS -
RESULTS AND ANALYSIS ►►► p2-7

STOP ISRAELI STATE BRUTALITY
►►► 13

IS BIDEN OFFERING A NEW 'NEW DEAL'?
►►► p8-9

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

ELECTIONS SUM UP LABOUR CRISIS

New workers' party urgently needed

HANNAH SELL
SOCIALIST PARTY GENERAL SECRETARY

The postponement of the 2020 elections meant that 6 May 2021 was a bumper election day, including more than 4,000 council seats, thirteen directly-elected mayors, the London Assembly, plus the Scottish parliament and Welsh Senedd.

Boris Johnson's Tories are claiming the elections as a victory. There are different factors behind the increased Tory vote in some areas. The Tories handling of the pandemic has been atrocious. In 2020 we suffered the deepest economic contraction in three centuries, and one of the highest Covid death rates in the world. Millions of people hate the Tories as a result.

However, the relatively successful roll-out of the vaccine, in large part because of the existence of the NHS, appears to have created a limited and temporary lift in support for the 'incumbents' - whether the Tories in England, the SNP in Scotland, or Labour in Wales.

The most important factor in the Tories ephemeral electoral gains, however, has been the collapse of Labour's vote in many areas, resulting in Tory victories on low turnouts. Starting with the Hartlepool by-election, the announcement of the results began three days of disaster for Keir Starmer and the Labour leadership.

TUSC restart
These elections completely confirm the decision taken last summer by the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC), at the suggestion of the Socialist Party, to restart electoral activity and offer a voice for workers at the ballot box on 6 May, given "the new conditions of a Starmer leadership and the continued implementation of austerity cuts by many Labour-led authorities".

In the event, TUSC managed to put up more than 300 candidates - including trade unionists, frontline workers and Black Lives Matter activists. TUSC's results in the mayoral elections contested were 3,194 for Tom Baldwin for Bristol mayor and 2,192 for Roger Bannister for Liverpool mayor.

For the London Assembly, the results were 3,236 for Nancy Taaffe in North East, 2,919 for April Ashley in Lambeth and Southwark, and 1,856 for Andy Walker in Havering and Redbridge (see tusc.org.uk for other results).

This was a modest but important step in the urgent task now facing the working class: creating a mass party that stands in its interests.

The Labour right are desperately trying to blame their party's disastrous performance on their favourite

hate figure, Jeremy Corbyn. Ludicrously, they are trying to argue the road to electoral success is to further "incinerate the policies of the far left".

The shadow home secretary, Nick Thomas-Symonds, has announced a policy review with the clear intention of formalising the junking of Corbyn-era policies that has taken place since Starmer was elected. Angela Rayner, who had quickly abandoned any past associations with Corbyn to implement the anti-left witch-hunt on Starmer's behalf, has nonetheless been made a scapegoat for the election disaster.

Hartlepool
Reality is the polar opposite of their assertions. Look at the history of elections in Hartlepool. Only once has Labour in Hartlepool received more than 20,000 votes since the 2001 general election - and that was in 2017 when, under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, there was a 16.9% increase in its vote.

After two years of the Corbyn leadership making concessions to the Starmerite Labour right, including moving towards a remain position on Brexit, Labour lost most of those gains in 2019, but still held the seat.

Crushing defeat came only on Starmer's watch. It was not caused by a significant surge to the Tories but a collapse of the Labour vote. With a turnout of only 42%, the majority of workers in Hartlepool couldn't bring themselves to vote for any candidate.

The Tories are trumpeting their victory, yet under their own anti-democratic trade union legislation, a strike ballot with a turnout of 42% is deemed invalid! Compared to 2017, the Tories only increased their vote by 1,210 in Hartlepool, but Labour lost 13,000 voters.

Nationally the 3.5 million jump in Labour's vote in 2017, the largest increase in a single election for any party since 1945, was an indication of the popularity of Corbyn's anti-austerity manifesto. Around a million people who had previously voted UKIP switched to Labour because they wanted to see mass council house building, renationalising the NHS and the railways, repeal of the anti-trade union laws, free education, and the other pro-working class, progressive policies in Corbyn's manifesto.

Contrary to the mythology, even in 2019 Corbyn got over 10 million votes, something that was not achieved by Blair after the 2001 election, or ever by Brown or Miliband.

In contrast, what incentive was there to go out and vote for Starmer's Labour? Wrapping himself in the union jack, his overwhelming drive has been to demonstrate to the capitalist class that he has made Labour, once



again, a reliable representative of their interests.

He has had considerable success at that. It is unimaginable that, the week before an election, the capitalist media would have been plastered with wall-to-wall attacks on Johnson's corrupt sleazy behaviour if the alternative had been a Corbyn-led Labour Party. Then the press attention would all have been on slandering Corbyn. However, given - from the point of view of the capitalist elite - Starmer's status as a safe pair of hands and populist Johnson's unreliability, there was a clear attempt to push more votes Starmer's way. It failed because being a reliable representative of the 0.1% is not electorally popular!

Since the election, Howard Beckett, Unite assistant general secretary, has revealed that Starmer wasn't even prepared to sign up to Unite's letter demanding an end to the brutal bosses' policy of fire and rehire. Unite's organising department, initiated by Sharon Graham, has had to organise protests against Labour mayors for allowing 'fire and rehire' to be used on their watch. Labour frontbench spokespeople have also repeatedly declined to support healthworkers campaign for a 15% pay rise, say only that they deserve 'at least 2%'. It is no surprise workers choose not to vote for such a party.

The hollowing out of Labour's base has taken place over decades as, at local and national level, Labour governments have acted in the interests of the capitalist class, presiding over the privatising and cutting of public services. The increase in support under Corbyn has now been reversed, and the previous trend is continuing.

The 6 May elections were a further step in that direction. Electoral annihilations as a result of continuing to implement pro-capitalist policies - as happened in France, Greece and many other social democratic parties - is a real prospect for Labour in England and Wales, and is already deeply set in Scotland.

Other results
However, the slide in Labour's electoral prospects is not uniform. But, while the Labour vote can increase in some instances - as it did this time in Wales benefiting from the vaccine-incumbency bounce - the deep-rooted loyalty to Labour as 'their party' which existed in the past among big sections of the working class has been virtually destroyed.

As a result, even more than in the past, elections today represent a 'moment in time' where voters find what inadequate means they can to express their anger, including by staying at home, rather than having a deep-rooted loyalty to any party.

At this stage, generally speaking, there is still a bigger consistent Labour vote in major cities, partly reflecting the distrust of many black and ethnic minority workers of the racist record of the Tories. However, that base is also being undermined, as shown by the race in London going to a second round on a lower (42%) turnout.

Sadiq Khan, who famously welcomed the fact that there are more than 140 billionaires living in London, has presided over a continuation of the impoverishment of London's working class, amid the growing astronomical wealth of a few.

“““

Imagine how popular a Labour council would be if it did what Liverpool City Council did in the 1980s. Liverpool took on and defeated the Thatcher Tory government, winning an extra £60 million for the people of Liverpool

A dramatic increase in the vote for the Green candidate for Bristol mayor, and to a lesser extent in London (and also the doubling of Green councillors around the country) is mainly a reflection of a layer who want to vote left and/or simply against the three main parties, and see the Greens as a viable means to do so.

In contrast to Khan, the Labour mayor of Manchester, Andy Burnham, has increased his vote by over 100,000. There is no question that this reflects Burnham's stance in 2020, when he initially refused to accept the Tory government's attempts to put Manchester into severe Covid restrictions without providing sufficient assistance to replace workers' lost incomes.

When push came to shove Burnham retreated, but even the short-lived appearance of being willing to fight for the working class of Manchester has paid him an electoral dividend.

Imagine how popular a Labour council would be today if it was prepared to do what Liverpool City Council did in the 1980s, with Militant (now the Socialist Party) playing a leading role. Liverpool took on and defeated the Thatcher Tory government, winning an extra £60 million for the people of Liverpool, which was transformed into 5,000 council houses, plus new schools, leisure centres, nurseries, jobs and more.

However, in the absence of socialist politicians determined to fight for the working class, it is no surprise that, as in the 2019 general election, a minority of workers expressed their anger and frustration by voting for the Tories.

Bosses' party
Of course, Johnson's Tories are a bosses' party to the core, with a programme of post-Covid austerity for the working class. Johnson, however, is a 'Poundland Trump', falsely posing as a populist outsider who stands up for the 'little people'.

In addition, the Tories promise to 'level up' will have led to some workers desperately hoping against hope that after decades of job losses and cuts to local services - presided over by both Tory and Labour governments and councils - finally something is going to be done to improve the situation for millions of workers, particularly those in smaller towns in the Midlands and North.

Across the West Midlands, for example, there were 20,000 local authority jobs cut between 2010 and 2018, mainly by Labour councils.

However, any hopes - however faint - in Johnson will be smashed, at a certain stage, bursting like someone sticking a pin in the giant inflatable effigy of him that was on display outside the Hartlepool court.

As the Tory commentator Matthew Parris put it, there is a "lie at the heart of the new, populist Tory appeal" because British capitalism is utterly incapable of qualitatively improving the lives of working-class people.

As he wrote, nothing will change "without the sort of massive Marshall Plan the Americans could afford after the Second World War". Therefore, "this (or, I believe, any) Conservative government is not going to 'level up' red-wall England."

▶▶ CONTINUED ON P4

Socialist Party

WHAT WE STAND FOR

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

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

PUBLIC SERVICES

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

WORK AND INCOME

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

- Scrap Universal Credit. For the right to decent benefits, education, training, or a job, without compulsion.
- 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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ELAINE BRUNSKILL

►► CONTINUED FROM P3

Parris predicts that the Tory Party, already deeply divided, will tear itself apart as “disillusion in red-wall Britain grows” and the Tories return “towards the class interest with which the party has been historically associated... back towards business”.

Faced with the growing crisis in Northern Ireland, a strengthened campaign for an independence referendum in Scotland, and widespread working-class revolt at post-Covid austerity, the splits in the Tory Party could start to widen very quickly. A united movement - bringing together all the disparate forces of the working class and young people who are opposing the Tories’ plans for post-pandemic pay restraint and benefit cuts - could shatter the illusion of Tory strength and force the government out of office.

The trade unions, with more than six million members, are the biggest democratic working-class organisations in Britain, and have the potential power to coordinate a united struggle against the government and bosses’ attacks.

In the first phase of the pandemic, the majority of trade union leaders fell into the trap of ‘national unity’, accepting the false idea that the Tories and the trade union movement held common interests. Today, a crisis remains at the top of the trade union movement.

An essential task for socialists is to campaign for the election of fighting left trade union leaders, alongside striving for the trade unions to fight in defence of their own members and

for coordinated action against Covid austerity. The increase from one to four Socialist Party members elected to the executive of the education union, the NEU (see page 11), is an important step forward in that struggle.

However, allied to the building of militant, fighting trade unions, there is also an urgent need to create a political voice for the working class. In the wake of Starmer’s election disaster, a few Corbyn-supporting Labour MPs have raised the need for Labour to move left. Leaders of Labour-affiliated unions, Dave Ward (CWU) and Len McCluskey (Unite), have made similar points.

Labour left

So far, however, the focus has been - as Len McCluskey put it - on urging “Keir to reach out” and to “embrace the left”. This when Jeremy Corbyn is still not allowed to sit as a Labour MP! It could not be clearer that no amount of pleading will convince Starmer to change course.

There are rumours that the Labour left is considering launching a leadership challenge. While this would clearly be an improvement on pleading, the pro-capitalist make-up of the Parliamentary Labour Party means that it is difficult to imagine a left candidate getting the 20% of MPs necessary to trigger a contest, never mind winning it.

Instead, it is necessary for left trade union leaders to launch an initiative to fight for political representation for the workers’ movement. If they were to call an emergency conference to discuss the situation, with the support of even a handful

of MPs and councillors, it would have the potential to transform the situation. The right’s determination to obliterate the Labour left is clear. If the time is not now for the left to show similar determination to fight for a socialist voice for the working class, when is?

The Socialist Party believes that what is needed is a new mass workers’ party, and appeals to all those who agree to join us in that struggle. As a beginning, the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC), involving the RMT transport workers’ union, the Socialist Party, ex-Labour MP Chris Williamson, and others, has made an important stand in this May’s elections, offering an alternative, wherever we could, to the misery on offer from every brand of capitalist politician.

At root, the rotten character of mainstream politics in Britain reflects the crisis of British capitalism. All parties - including the Tories and Starmer’s ‘New Labour’ - that defend the capitalist system end up implementing policies that further undermine the living standards of the working-class majority.

That’s why increasing numbers of people are looking for an alternative to capitalism, and why the Socialist Party will fight for a new mass workers’ party to adopt a socialist programme, breaking with profit-driven, ailing capitalism and taking the major corporations and banks which dominate the economy into democratic public ownership. This would allow the development of a democratic, socialist planned economy in Britain and internationally.

Welsh Labour holds on to government but new crises loom

DAVE REID AND ALEC THRIVES
SOCIALIST PARTY NATIONAL COMMITTEE

Welsh Labour has won the Welsh parliament election with increased votes and seats. Mark Drakeford’s government benefited from the ‘incumbency factor’ and actually increased the party’s seats in the Senedd to 30, half of the 60 seats. This was despite polls at the beginning of the Covid crisis indicating that it would lose a quarter of its seats.

Undoubtedly the Welsh government has benefited from appearing relatively competent in the Covid crisis compared to Boris Johnson’s UK government. But Drakeford also shared with Johnson and Sturgeon in Scotland a feel-good mood as the nations emerge from lockdown and many workers are still temporarily protected from unemployment by furlough, and tenants protected from evictions by an eviction ban.

Both schemes are due to end soon and unemployment is likely to skyrocket dispelling any feel-good mood.

In reality, the Drakeford government was only marginally less incompetent in the Covid crisis than the Johnson government. It had imposed even more austerity cuts on the Welsh NHS than the UK as a

whole and was ill-prepared for the pandemic with shortages in staff, intensive care beds, PPE and other vital resources.

Despite the lack of change in the Senedd, the election result does not reflect widespread satisfaction with the status quo. Less than 50% voted in the election. On many housing estates there were absolutely no placards supporting any parties in the election, which in the past would have been a sea of Labour red and yellow.

As the effects of the end of furlough and other support become apparent, the pent-up frustration of a decade of austerity and declining wages will come to the fore and undermine any support for the Drakeford government.

Plaid Cymru’s vote share did not rise, and the party lost seats despite the rise in support for independence to over 20%. Some polls have shown that 40% of Labour voters support independence. However, Plaid has not gained from this renewed support because for now other issues are seen as more important.

Significantly, despite Abolish the Assembly getting broadcasting coverage way above its support, including a place in the main leaders’



Swansea

debate, its share of the vote did not rise from 2016.

The intensity of support for independence could change as working people look for a way out of the crises that will develop in British society. And as events in Scotland develop towards a showdown over an independence referendum the dissatisfaction with the status quo might look for a way to break free from the UK straight-jacket.

TUSC

The Socialist Party participated in the election as part of the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition standing as the lead candidates in four out of the five party regional lists.

The election campaign began under lockdown in conditions which made it very difficult for emerging electoral forces like TUSC to gain any visibility in the election. The broadcasters imposed a news boycott on TUSC refusing to even mention that TUSC was standing in the election, let alone covering events like the launch of the campaign or the manifesto, despite TUSC standing in all five regions.

Nevertheless, Socialist Party members and other TUSC activists delivered over 30,000 leaflets plus thousands more in the Castle ward by-election in Swansea. TUSC was also prominent in workers’ actions like the sparks protests and BT strikes and mass movements like the Black Lives Matter protests in Cardiff.

TUSC Wales’s campaign has created a solid base to campaign in the 2022 council elections against Labour and Plaid councils that are carrying out cuts to public services. TUSC activity took place in entirely new areas all across Wales and had a presence in every region. It will be well placed to develop as an electoral force in the new battles ahead.

● For full report see
socialistpartywales.org.uk



Scotland

Scotland: Pro-independence majority in highly polarised election

PHILIP STOTT
SOCIALIST PARTY SCOTLAND GENERAL SECRETARY

Following a highly polarised Scottish election, the Scottish National Party (SNP) will form the new government at Holyrood. By winning 64 MSPs it will once again be a minority administration. However, pro-independence supporting parties - the SNP and Scottish Greens - will make up a majority with 72 of the 129-seat parliament.

The outcome sets the Scottish parliament - and more importantly a majority of the Scottish working class - on a collision course with a Boris Johnson-led Tory government that has ruled out granting the powers for a second independence referendum (indyref2), no matter the outcome of the election.

Despite the victory of the SNP in the election, it has no strategy for taking on and defeating the Tories and capitalism’s opposition to indyref2. In particular, Nicola Sturgeon is mortally opposed to mobilising mass working-class struggle to win democratic rights.

The SNP won 62 of the 73 constituencies, with a record 1.3 million votes. The largest vote for a party in the 22-year history of the parliament. It also won two seats on the regional lists.

The Tories, yet again, came second with 31 MSPs. Labour underwent no significant recovery under their new Blairite leader Anas Sarwar. Indeed, they ended up with two fewer seats than 2016 with 22 MSPs. It was Labour’s worst ever performance in a Scottish parliament election.

The Scottish Greens increased their representation to nine from their previous six, all of them elected on the regional lists. Alba, the new party formed by former SNP leader Alex Salmond, failed to win any MSPs.

The turnout was a record for a Holyrood poll at 63%. Overall, roughly 50% of those voting backed pro-independence parties and 50% voting for pro-union parties.

While Nicola Sturgeon’s handling of the pandemic boosted the SNP, it was independence that dominated the election. Pro-independence working-class voters overwhelmingly backed the SNP.

Labour and Tories

Tactical voting in seats where there was a close contest between the SNP and a pro-union party was clearly evident. For example, in Dumbarton, a Labour-SNP marginal, there was a sizeable swing from the Tories to Labour to hold off the SNP. In Eastwood, Labour voters in large numbers backed the Tory candidate to prevent the SNP from winning. This pattern was repeated in seats across Scotland.

Scottish Labour was again decimated in its former working-class heartlands, winning only a single constituency seat in the Glasgow-West Scotland-Central Scotland region and two constituency seats overall.

Socialist Party Scotland advocated consistently the need to stand working-class, socialist candidates to make the case that no other party would make: for a socialist recovery for the working class after the

pandemic; for pay rises, jobs and homes and for the building of a mass movement for indyref2.

We were the only socialist organisation in Scotland prepared to put up candidates. Most of the socialist left groups that had stood in the past - SSP, Rise, SWP etc - retreated, bowed by the pandemic and the temporary moods to back the SNP or the Greens as the best available option.

Socialist Party Scotland was a key driving force in supporting the Scottish Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) campaign which stood in three regions and three constituencies.

With the election being so polarised and taking place against the backdrop of focus on the pandemic, the space for a socialist alternative was more limited. More than 98% of the votes on the constituencies went to the pro/anti-indy blocs.

SNP and Greens

It’s also clear that the priority for many working-class people was to vote for the party on the regional list most likely to add to a pro-independence majority - in this case the SNP or, for some young people especially, the Scottish Greens.

Still, we won over 700 votes in Dundee and 230 votes in Aberdeen Donside. In Glasgow region the Scottish TUSC vote was 645. In West Scotland it was 469 and Highlands and Islands 280 votes.

These modest votes for Socialist TUSC are far from the whole picture. There was a large amount of support and sympathy for our ideas from a much wider section of the working class and young people.

Some examples from young people on Twitter who we did not know previously: “Go out and vote today guys! I’m voting @ScottishTUSC as they’re the only Scottish party that seem to care about helping the working class”. “Vote @ScottishTUSC to actually make a difference and stray away from anti-working class parties.” “I voted for TUSC on the regional ballot and I’m proud of it.”

A leading trade unionist in Glasgow messaged to say: “I really think the profile of socialism on the political spectrum has been raised. Thanks to all TUSC candidates in this election.”

Another said: “I think TUSC ran a great campaign. Many, many were impressed and ready to hear socialist ideas. Well done on a brilliant campaign.”

We were pleased to have the support of leading NHS pay campaigners, 2018 Glasgow equal pay strikers and RMT activists among many others.

Overall, the Scottish TUSC campaign was simply necessary. With an array of pro-capitalist options on the ballot, the need for a fighting socialist alternative was essential.

Now, the attention of workers and young people will turn to the struggles that impend. On the fight for the right to decide and an indyref 2. On pay rises, jobs, affordable homes and a future free from a system that benefits only the rich and the billionaire class. On the fight for an independent socialist Scotland and for socialist world.

● Next week’s issue of the Socialist will include an article looking at the question of Scottish independence

London-wide socialist challenge to Khan's cuts

HELEN PATTISON

LONDON SOCIALIST PARTY

Across London workers are facing a housing crisis, low pay and growing unemployment. The transport funding system is broken and in crisis. The Labour mayor Sadiq Khan is planning to increase taxes and cut bus services across the city too.

So TUSC took our fight London-wide to offer working-class people the chance to vote for a real alternative. TUSC stood on the Greater London Assembly top-up list, which elects eleven people to the London Assembly, as well as in three constituencies and 13 council by-elections. In doing so TUSC got more than 18,000 votes in London.

We described our list as "of the working class and for the working class". It reflected the many battles working-class people are facing in

the city. Our candidates were teachers and teaching assistants, including those organising action on safety; NHS staff and campaigners who have been on the frontline of the pandemic; retired transport workers; Black Lives Matter campaigners; housing activists; young workers; students; and a McStriker.

Our leaflets were headed "Don't trust Khan or the Tories"; huge numbers of people feel completely let down by Labour's Khan as mayor. A son of a bus driver, he failed to keep bus drivers safe during the height of the pandemic, and has failed to stand up to bus companies against 'fire and rehire'. This was reflected in a huge dent in his electoral majority over the Tories.

In our campaigning we also explained that the Tories offered no alternative on issues such as air pollution, housing or knife crime.

Instead, we stood firm on a programme of fighting the Tories for the funding that London needs, to bring back the libraries, nurseries and social care services that have been lost. We called for council house building, instead of Khan's 'London Plan' which has seen huge numbers of expensive, shoe box-sized flats built on public land, compounding the housing crisis.

Our campaign was focused on making noise on high streets and outside transport hubs across London, to let people know they could vote for a bold alternative in these elections, and that they don't have to put up with austerity and cuts from either Labour or the Tories.

Now we are looking ahead to next year when every council ward has an election, and a challenge will need to be built against local government cuts and closures.



Campaigning in South London LONDON SOCIALIST PARTY

● Standing for my socialist principles

I stood for TUSC in the Devon County Council elections on Thursday 6 May. In 2019 I stood for the Labour Party in the same area and was elected to Newton Abbot Town Council, where I now sit as an independent socialist. I have enjoyed standing as a TUSC candidate, spreading the message of socialism and an end to cuts to the residents of the town.

Many voters who had voted for me in 2019 when I was a Labour member were pleased I was continuing to stand for the principles of socialism, which the Labour Party no longer represents. The message of rejecting council tax rises and services charges went down well with voters; people are sick of the usual establishment parties who are not willing to stand up for them. Although the TUSC vote was modest in Devon, we will continue to build and fight for socialism.

RYAN HALL, INDEPENDENT SOCIALIST COUNCILLOR, NEWTON ABBOT TOWN COUNCIL

● Bakers' union activist to keep building socialist ideas

Large numbers of new people came out to help campaign for bakers' union activist Kumaran Bose, the TUSC candidate in North Evington, Leicester. The whole ward of 7,000 properties was leafleted over just one weekend. During the campaign we delivered two separate leaflets to almost every house, but we also had campaign stalls and went door knocking.

Kumaran came fifth in the crowded council by-election field of nine candidates, receiving 117 votes. But more important were the points of support we won in the area. As an activist who was sacked by food manufacturer Samworth brothers after trying to establish the union, Kumaran was known by former co-workers we met. And now we need to get Kumaran's supporters involved in continuing activity against austerity and building socialist ideas.

Labour won the seat, but lost over

1,600 votes to the Tories in an area that in the past it had completely dominated. This does not reflect support for the Tories' ideas, but anger at the role of Labour Leicester City Council and city mayor, and the failure of Labour to act as a party of the united working class.

STEVE SCORE, LEICESTER SOCIALIST PARTY

● Labour in North East meltdown, TUSC still fights austerity

Across Tyneside, TUSC activists have had solid election campaigns. In Newcastle, we've participated in 'Kill the Bill' protests, taking our message to a young layer of people, including by speaking from the platform at the protests, putting forward the case for TUSC.

Over in North Tyneside, campaigners held successful park meetings, where local residents turned out to hear TUSC's anti-austerity message.

Our stalls in Gateshead particularly attracted young people who are at the sharp end of Covid job losses.

Our votes have been modest. However, despite the total lack of publicity, TUSC outpolled the Green Party and UKIP in Chirton, North Tyneside; and in High Fell, Gateshead, we gained more votes than either the Lib Dems or the Greens.

In stark contrast to our optimism, the mindset of Labour Party activists at the count in Gateshead was rock-bottom. Every Labour member we spoke to understood the Labour vote in Hartlepool was in meltdown.

Although on the night Labour didn't lose any seats in Gateshead, their councillors spoke to us of their votes haemorrhaging. They also conceded this was as a result of years of Labour not putting up a fight against Tory cuts.

Throughout the campaign we've been inundated with messages of support. This included someone who unfortunately lived just outside one of the wards we were standing in. He sent us a photo of his ballot paper, to which he had added our candidate Ros Cooper and TUSC with a cross next to it. Maybe next year he will be standing as a TUSC candidate in that ward!

ELAINE BRUNSKILL, SOUTH TYNE AND WEAR SOCIALIST PARTY

● Ferocious TUSC campaign in Warsop

Ferocious Dog's lead singer Ken Bonsall stood as a TUSC candidate for the Nottinghamshire County Council elections in the Mansfield district. The Warsop born-and-bred socialist was approached to stand by local activist and Socialist Party member Denise Tooley-Okonkwo.

Ken was a miner for 30 years and a retained firefighter for 16 years. Ferocious Dog had played at a Corbyn rally and was introduced by the man himself. Ken was a big supporter of the Labour Party's manifesto under Corbyn, but like many of us no longer felt represented by Sir Keir Starmer and Co.

The Warsop TUSC candidate stood on a platform 'against cuts', fed up with decades of austerity and cuts which had decimated local services and facilities. The campaign was well-received, and we ran several campaign stalls in the village, winning 343 votes at the count, 12.4%.

PHOEBE COX, MANSFIELD SOCIALIST PARTY

● TUSC 'othered' by media

TUSC stood eight candidates in the Nottinghamshire County Council elections and got 738 votes altogether. In Warsop we received 12.4%!

But on the results page of the county

council website TUSC candidates are listed as 'other'. Yet Reform UK, a newly registered party in 2018, that only stood seven candidates and got a similar number of votes, gets listed.

It seems that the words Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition cannot be published in case people are attracted to them! It is a testament to our ideas and programme that the Socialist Party and TUSC are 'othered' in this fashion.

We cannot expect council websites or the mainstream media to tell people about us and our ideas. This is why we talk to people at work, on the streets and in our communities. That is why we sell the Socialist!

CLARE WILKINS, NOTTINGHAM SOCIALIST PARTY

Building the Socialist Party in south west Wales during the elections

LINDA THRAVES

SWANSEA AND WEST WALES SOCIALIST PARTY

Swansea and West Wales Socialist Party branch achieved a tremendous result in the Senedd and Castle ward by-election, not unfortunately in the number of votes cast for our TUSC candidates, but by raising the profile of our socialist programme. We recruited new members to the Socialist Party, met dozens of young workers and students looking to get more involved in our campaigns, and highlighted to thousands of electors the desperate need for the trade unions to launch a genuine mass workers' party with the resources, strength and profile that would make it impossible for the media to ignore.

Our TUSC candidates – working-class fighters, trade unionists, youth and community leaders were all socialist stalwarts prepared to raise the red flag of socialism as an alternative to Labour 'cuts councillors', reactionary racists, and political opportunists.

Our small vote, not unexpected after the relaunch of TUSC following a four-year gap when we stood aside for



Campaigning in Swansea SWANSEA AND WEST WALES SOCIALIST PARTY

Corbyn's Labour, definitely wasn't a reflection of the enthusiastic response we had on our street campaigning stalls when we could actually engage in person with ordinary people.

Over a short, sharp, three-week campaign, 29 Socialist Party members delivered almost 15,000 leaflets across seven constituencies, participated on 21 public stalls, sold 172 papers, raised £150 fighting fund and, most importantly, got two new members signed up to the Socialist

Party, 29 others want to find out more with a number of these wanting to discuss joining!

These new potential recruits to our socialist ranks recognised that Socialist Party members were to the forefront of the TUSC challenge – a stepping stone to a much bigger and powerful mass workers' party that will in the future not only challenge, but replace Starmer's politically bankrupt Labour Party.



Campaigning in Waltham Forest, East London MARY FINCH

TUSC IS BACK

The Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) stood over 300 candidates in the 'Super-Thursday' elections on 6 May, the biggest number of TUSC candidates since the elections in 2016.

TUSC contested three regional lists and three constituencies in the Scottish parliament elections; all five regional lists for the Welsh Senedd contest; the all-London list for the Greater London Authority (GLA) assembly and three GLA constituencies; the city mayoral contests in Bristol and Liverpool; and 272 council seats (in 268 wards or divisions) in 89 local authorities. This was the first TUSC election campaign since 2018.

Overall TUSC candidates won a total of 46,622 votes, the largest number won in a single year's elections since the 2015 elections - in the era before Corbyn.

Among the highlights was the TUSC candidate for the mayor of Bristol, Tom Baldwin, polling 3,194 votes, more than double the score achieved when TUSC first contested this post in 2012. In one-tenth of the wards or county council divisions contested the TUSC candidate polled 5% or more.

The TUSC results, of course, are still modest - the only victory achieved was a candidate elected unopposed to a local town council! But to launch a campaign on this scale, in just over seven months from when the decision was made back in September to stand candidates again, is an achievement nonetheless. TUSC is definitely back.

Fight goes on to resist austerity in Liverpool

LIVERPOOL SOCIALIST PARTY

The Liverpool mayoral election took place against the background of a meltdown in the local Labour Party, and the arrest of City Mayor Joe Anderson on charges of corruption and witness intimidation. TUSC put forward Socialist Party member Roger Bannister as the mayoral candidate, and to contest the Kirkdale Ward where he lives. TUSC also stood candidates in four other Liverpool city wards, as well as two in neighbouring Knowsley, and one in St Helens.

Local business interests, and the wealthy middle class, were aware of the possibility of disillusioned

Labour voters moving to the left and supported a local 'charity boss' Stephen Yip as an independent candidate in order to prevent this. Yip benefited from a well-funded campaign and lots of publicity from the right-wing Liverpool Echo. Joanne Anderson (no relation), the Labour candidate, was the party's fifth choice! The Green Party, Liberal Democrats and Liberal Party also stood candidates.

At organised hustings, and on the BBC North West Politics programme, it was clear that Roger was the only anti-cuts candidate with a programme to use council reserves to set a balanced budget whilst building

a campaign among trade unionists and working-class communities to fight for adequate funding from the Tory government. Roger was also the only candidate to call for the removal of Tory government-appointed commissioners to take over important council functions.

The campaign was an enthusiastic one, with a mass canvass involving supporters from the West Midlands and London, commuters were leafleted, and campaign stalls held in the city centre. TUSC supporters also helped leaflet in the Tuebrook and Stoneycroft Ward, and mass leafletting took place in support of the TUSC candidate in Norris Green.

On the eve of poll, three candidates - Stephen Yip, Stephen Radford (Liberal) and Tom Crone (Green Party) - jointly issued a surprise statement, condemning single-party rule in the city and calling for parties to work together. However, this move was seen by many as an attempt by Radford and Crone to secure cabinet positions in a Yip administration!

The count had to go to second preferences as no candidate had an outright majority. A run-off between Anderson and Yip resulted in an Anderson win for Labour with 46,493 votes compared to Yip's 32,079. Roger Bannister received 2,912 votes.



LIVERPOOL SOCIALIST PARTY

English council wards 'league table'

Below is a league table of the top 20 results by percentage achieved by TUSC candidates in the English local council elections on 6 May. For full results and analysis of TUSC votes visit tusc.org.uk

Lydney Town Council	Lydney West	98	19.4%
Knowsley	Northwood	238	14.5%
Redbridge	Seven Kings	551	14.0%
Teignmouth Town Council	Teignmouth West	154	12.8%
Nottinghamshire County Council	Warsop	343	12.4%
North Tyneside	Chriton	275	12.0%
Newton Abbot Town Council	Bradley	205	11.7%
Liverpool	Kirkdale	324	11.3%
Barking and Dagenham	Thames	345	9.5%
Coventry	St Michaels	274	9.0%
Lydney Town Council	Lydney East	91	9.0%
Knowsley	Shevington	141	8.8%
South Hams	Ivybridge West	149	8.0%
Doncaster	Conisbrough and Denaby	251	7.7%
Doncaster	Bentley	210	7.3%
West Northamptonshire	Castle	211	7.2%
Oxford	Blackbird Leys	44	6.3%
Chorley	South East and Heath Charnock	152	6.0%
West Northamptonshire	Abington and Phippsville	191	5.9%
Gateshead	High Fell	102	5.9%



TUSC candidate for Bristol mayor - Tom Baldwin (front) BRISTOL SOCIALIST PARTY

Labour loses ground to Greens in Bristol

the culmination of years of neglect and taking working-class voters for granted

ROGER THOMAS

BRISTOL NORTH SOCIALIST PARTY

The weekend started fairly well for Labour in Bristol by winning the West of England mayor, and re-election of Marvin Rees as the Bristol city mayor, albeit with Greens getting a big increase in their vote. But the elections for city council were a bloodbath for Labour, on a turnout of 41% - seats and heads started to roll. The Greens took 12 seats off Labour in the elections, becoming the joint biggest party. Of the 70 seats contested, the Greens now hold 24, level with Labour.

In Lockleaze, Labour lost a former stronghold to the Greens. This was clearly the result of the impact of the machinations of Labour regional officials, who deselected the candidates selected by the local ward and imposed new candidates weeks before the elections.

Labour in power has failed to solve the chronic housing crisis in the city. Failure to

meet its own targets on affordable housing, and a lack of any meaningful numbers of council homes built, has placed this at the centre of the city's problems. Indeed, it is the cost of housing which is changing the complexion of many of the city's working-class areas, as house prices and private rents have risen to eye-watering levels.

TUSC fought a strong campaign and this was reflected in 3,194 votes (2.3%) for Tom Baldwin. In council seats TUSC obtained good results of 3% in Ashley, 3.1% in Lockleaze and 4.5% in Filwood.

The Greens will now come under the microscope as they have raised their profile without clearly indicating what policies they intend to pursue. The TUSC demand of building council homes, with secure tenancies, and truly affordable rents found a ready reception, as did our demand for a mass campaign to fight for the resources the city needs from central government.



IS BIDEN OFFERING A NEW ‘NEW DEAL’?



In the first in our series looking at the policies of US Democratic President Joe Biden, **Robin Clapp** analyses the various economic and social stimulus packages Biden has announced since he was first elected.

Joe Biden's victory over Donald Trump in last November's bitterly fought US Presidential election has been followed by a whirlwind of policy announcements. These are increasingly being compared to the state expansionist 'New Deal' initiatives unveiled by the Franklin D Roosevelt administration between 1933 and 1939 to counteract the devastating impact of the Great Depression.

Biden came to power promising that his administration would not only combat the Covid-19 pandemic, which has now claimed more than 500,000 lives in the US and triggered unemployment levels not seen since the 1930s, but also deal decisively with the deeply entrenched wealth disparities it has graphically exposed. In the words of the Washington Post: "While Trump claimed he wanted to 'Make America Great Again', Biden is attempting to actually do it."

Upon Biden assuming office, an American Rescue Plan was signed into law, containing a \$1.9 trillion coronavirus stimulus boost. This included cheques being directly dispatched to most Americans in another attempt to ameliorate the economic effects of the pandemic.

Poverty

Grandiose boasts have been made for the success of the Rescue Plan which Biden says will lift more than five million children out of poverty this year and cut child poverty by more than 50%.

Mainstream and left-of-centre Democrats are as incredulous as they are joyful. Bernie Sanders, congratulating Biden, declared that the American Rescue Plan "...is the most significant legislation for working people that has been passed in decades".

Now the White House has brought forward two more massive packages - the American Jobs Plan and the American Families Plan, which together add up to the most ambitious expansion of the US welfare state in many years.

In a speech delivered in Virginia on 7 May, Biden proclaimed that the richest Americans and corporations must pay their "fair share" of taxes, adding that while he is not anti-corporate, it is now "time we started giving tax benefits to working-class families and middle-class families".

In total, the reform packages amount to approximately \$6 trillion and have understandably been viewed enthusiastically by many Americans. Spread over an eight-year period, however, there remain many

pitfalls in realising these reforms: in the first instance, inevitable opposition from Congress Republicans in both the House and Senate where Biden's majority rests solely upon the casting vote of Vice-President Kamala Harris.

Nevertheless, the commitment to a vast increase in public expenditure promised by the new administration in this honeymoon period constitutes a sharp break with the neoliberal policies that have long been the dominant strategy of US and world imperialism. Characterised dismissively as 'Sleepy Joe' by Trump, and regarded as a longstanding conservative fixer within the Democratic Party machine, Biden backed Bill Clinton's 'Third Way' in the 1990s, which sought to marry the irreconcilable interests of capital and labour. He was also a cheerleader for fiscal responsibility (budget cuts) under Obama, when the stock of federal debt was only 67% of what it is today.

Historical necessity has now cast Biden in the unfamiliar role of the man who, in order to deal with the multiple and unique geopolitical, economic, health and social crises affecting US imperialism, is forced to conclude that Reagan-era unbridled market capitalism cannot alone rebuild America after the pandemic. He has therefore been compelled to resurrect policies that until recently were regarded as the discredited remnants of state interventionist Keynesianism discarded over forty years ago.

Rich

The Trump years saw a huge further widening of inequality between the classes and the slashing of taxes for the super-rich. During the pandemic the multi-billionaires, especially in the tech and banking sectors, have seen their profits further skyrocket, leading even some capitalist commentators to concede that the 'Roaring 20s' described by Scott Fitzgerald in his novel, 'The Great Gatsby', seems by comparison to have been a time of comparative penury for the rich.

For workers the situation has worsened even more in the last year, with the economy still 10 million jobs short of its pre-pandemic peak. There is a brewing crisis in home ownership with half of US households earning less than \$35,000 per annum falling behind with their housing payments.

The open sore of racial inequality and racist policing practices that continue to trigger the Black Lives Matter movement are intertwined with staggering poverty levels. One in three young black males is expected to go to jail or prison during his lifetime, and black men, while making up just 6.5% of the population, comprise 40.2% of the total prison population.

The US faces unprecedented geopolitical challenges too in the form of Chinese capitalism which now produces 18% of global output and, through its aggressive Belt and Road

infrastructural investment policies, seeks to expand economic and political influence across every continent, including Latin America,



long regarded as Washington's own 'backyard'.

Thus Biden is compelled, both through economic expediency and for reasons of prestige linked to trying to decisively turn the page on Trump's extreme isolationist stance, to change course and announce that 'America is back', signified by its rejoining the Paris Climate Agreement.

Yet the almost simultaneous decision to withdraw all combat troops from Afghanistan by 11 September has been attacked by Hillary Clinton, former Secretary of State in Obama's administration, who has warned that the pull-out will only lead to a

resurgence of the Taliban and a possible civil war.

US imperialism no longer functions as an unchallenged superpower. In an increasingly volatile inter-imperialist era foreign policy uncertainties abound as China, but also Russia to a lesser extent, comes into conflict with and challenges US hegemony.

Cornerstone

The cornerstone of Biden's grand reform announcement presented to Congress is encapsulated in the American Families Plan. This sets out to provide free pre-school for US children aged three to four, paid family

leave and free places at community colleges, including for 'Dreamers' (young immigrants residing in the US without legal status).

The administration claims that five million children will directly benefit from this reform, saving the average family \$13,000 when fully implemented. All employees in these state government-funded programmes will, according to Biden, earn at least \$15 an hour.

The child tax credit that was expanded during the pandemic will be extended until 2025, offering monthly payments to lower-income parents of around \$300 per child.



The American Jobs Plan certainly echoes Roosevelt's New Deal in its bombastic claims, with Biden declaring it to be "a transformational effort that could create the most resilient, innovative economy in the world,"

and "a blue-collar blueprint to build America". But while the original New Deal represented around 40% of total US GDP (total economic output) at the time, Biden's three plans combined, if implemented, would constitute around 25% of current GDP.

Billed as an infrastructure package, the American Jobs Plan seeks to invest in public transit, rail, airports, roads and bridges, veterans'

hospitals and childcare centres, while spending money on combating racial disparities.

Injection

There would be a massive injection of dollars into rebuilding 20,000 miles of roads, while \$80 billion would be earmarked for Amtrak and freight rail infrastructural improvements. The ten most economically important bridges in the country would be repaired and 10,000 smaller ones modernised to current safety standards.

\$42 billion would be spent on ports and airports, \$100 billion to extend high-speed broadband and \$111

billion for water infrastructure, with the aim of eliminating lead pipes from the nation's water supplies.

20% of the nation's fleet of yellow school buses would be converted into electric vehicles, while \$300 billion would be allotted to promote advanced manufacturing, including a four-year plan to restock the country's national stockpile of pharmaceuticals, including vaccines, in preparation for future pandemics.

In total, many of the items in the plan are equivalent or greater than the price tags that would have filled entire, ambitious bills in past administrations.

There are big pledges in relation to climate change too, but Columbia University's Adam Tooze has punctured those by pointing out that the President's climate spending amounts to just 0.5% of US GDP, an amount ten times smaller than that required to decarbonise the economy.

The White House says both plans, if passed by Congress, would be "fully paid for" by tax hikes on the richest Americans and corporations. The capital gains tax rate on incomes above \$1 million would be doubled to 39.6% and the top income tax bracket would likewise be increased to the same level for households earning more than \$400,000.

The corporate tax (taxes on businesses) rate moreover would be raised from 21% to 28%, partially though incompletely reversing Trump's hand-out to the big corporations (his 2017 tax bill slashed the corporate rate to 21% from 35%). But this projected increase doesn't begin to come near the 50% rate of corporation tax that prevailed in the 1950s.

After years of neoliberalism, the US raises less corporate tax revenue as a share of economic output than almost all other advanced economies, according to the OECD.

Congress

Unlike the American Rescue Plan, which was able to be carried out by Presidential Executive Order, the new proposals have to wend their tortuous ways through Congress, with hostile Republicans already preparing for a legislative fight at every stage and prepared to use the filibuster - a stalling tactic that holds up legislation unless 60 senators agree to pledge support.

Republicans and business groups have not surprisingly attacked the tax proposals, calling them immovable obstacles to meaningful bipartisan negotiations. Republican leader in the Senate Mitch McConnell declared: "President Biden ran as a moderate, but I'm hard pressed to think of anything at all that he's done so far that would indicate some degree of moderation."

Biden has said that, if approved by Congress, these measures would end decades of stagnation in federal investment in research and infrastructure, returning investment in those areas, as a share of the economy, to their highest since the 1960s. He has particularly sought to win over Republicans by emphasising the importance of standing up to Chinese competition stressing that it is vital for the US "to win the 21st century"

and stop the "undermining of American values by the world's autocratic nations."

A recent study found that the top 1% failed to report 20% of their income and avoided paying over \$175 billion in owed taxes. Biden is seeking to end that by making sure the wealthiest citizens play by the same set of rules as all other Americans.

It is clear, however, that such Presidential ambition will never be able to close the many loopholes that US firms and individuals use to escape

taxation. In total, over \$1 trillion in unpaid taxes stays in the pockets of the super-rich every year, and the Internal Revenue Service is equipped to do little about it, having had its enforcement budget cut by 25% since 2011.

Biden intends that his proposed doubling of the tax rate on Global Intangible Low Taxed Income earned by foreign subsidiaries of US firms from 10.5% to 21% will raise \$1 trillion over 15 years, while a new 10% surtax on corporations that "offshore manufacturing and service jobs to foreign nations in order to sell goods or provide services back to the American market" would be imposed.

In order to encourage US businesses to invest at home, an advanceable 10% 'Made in America' tax credit for activities that restore production, revitalise existing closed or closing facilities, retool facilities to advance manufacturing employment, or expand manufacturing payroll would be offered as an incentive.

In unveiling these tax plans, that have caused uproar from Wall Street to Silicon Valley, Biden has floated the idea that other countries should raise their corporate tax rates too. But an enforceable global minimum tax rate is utopian between competing capitalist nation states, while raising domestic corporate tax rate unilaterally will only make American businesses less competitive, and determined to seek out additional loopholes and more lucrative areas for global investment.

Unstable and weak

Despite massive stimulus policies being enacted to deal with the pandemic, capitalism in the US and internationally has not stabilised its system. In every sphere the Trump years further weakened America.

Biden's plan harks back to the New Deal, but his programme will prove to be wholly inadequate to restore US capitalism to its former pre-eminence. Social and class polarisation are growing. As the reforms get bogged down in Congress, while life for workers and the middle class becomes ever less secure, notwithstanding the current and temporary upturn in economic growth, demoralisation with the Democratic presidency will sink in, enabling Trump and his supporters to capitalise on the dashed hopes of millions.

But despite its many limitations, which will be exposed by the hammer blow of events, Biden's partial rejection of the economic orthodoxy that has prevailed for four decades opens up a new phase of struggle in US society and will cause workers to draw fresh conclusions about the system they toil under.

The key tasks for socialists in the US are to step up the struggle to create fighting trade unions, reach out to the more than 50% of young people who now view the idea of socialism favourably and construct a new workers' party in which Marxists will play a decisive ideological and organisational role in clearing the path to the socialist revolution.

Ealing parking wardens strike against Serco over absence policy

HELEN PATTISON
WEST LONDON SOCIALIST PARTY

Once again, Ealing parking attendants are out on strike. This time for six days over two weeks. They are fighting outsourcing private company Serco, which has been targeting the union's activists, and is refusing, even during the pandemic, to negotiate a decent absence management policy.

Socialist Party members have been down to support the strikers who

were angry with Serco, but also the Labour-run council which has refused to come out in support of the workers.

There were three council by-elections taking place on one of the strike days, with Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition candidates standing in each election, supporting the strike.

We need a council that will stand in solidarity with their workers against bullying companies such as Serco, and bring staff back in-house.



HELEN PATTISON

Norwich City Council workers vote for strike action over broken promises on pay and conditions

Workers who carry out vital services for Norwich City Council have overwhelmingly voted for industrial action.

In the Union ballot, 83% of the workers backed industrial action on a 90% turnout, and Unison members voted 81% in favour of strike action on a turnout of 84%.

Unite and Unison will now begin preparations to announce strike dates at the council's new arm's-length company called Norwich City Services Ltd (NCSL) in a dispute over pay and conditions.

The unions have been in discussions since 2018 with Norwich City Council (NCC) regarding the formation of NCSL. The company has been set up to bring services, including ground maintenance and street

cleaning which had been outsourced to Norse, back in-house.

But management is not delivering on commitments the council made to union members to harmonise their pay, terms and conditions with their council colleagues. The workers transferring in have some of the lowest pay rates and terms of employment; much worse than any council worker.

The company's offer on pay, sickness and holidays falls well short of what is required to make progress on equality, plus new managers are being recruited on superior terms and conditions compared to existing staff.

The workers carry out services including street cleaning and the maintenance of the parks and gardens.

Socialist Party member Martin Powell-Davies on the ballot paper National Education Union needs a socialist, fighting deputy general secretary

My campaign to be the first elected deputy general secretary of the National Education Union (NEU) has met an important first target by achieving the minimum number of district nominations required to be on the ballot paper.

Although districts have been meeting to make their choice since January, nominations didn't officially open until the start of May. However, already over 15 have let me know they have voted to nominate me - exceeding the threshold set down in NEU rules. That number can now be added to by further district meetings this term, providing a firm base from which to mount a successful challenge in October's postal ballot of the whole membership.

I believe that my growing support is because NEU members are looking

for clear and bold leadership to help defend both educators and education against a government that will be seeking to make us pay for the cost of their failures. That will mean yet more staff driven out by job cuts and further intolerable workload under the 'exam factory' conditions imposed by Ofsted, performance pay and league tables - unless we organise our national union strength to prevent those attacks.

After a stressful year dominated by the Covid-19 pandemic, the pressures certainly haven't eased now that staff and students are all back in school. For example, many secondary staff are rightly complaining of the excessive hours demanded of them to provide teacher assessed grades for this summer's exam classes. More schools are announcing

further job losses as cuts continue to bite, with support staff posts being particularly vulnerable.

Too often without adequate facility time and support, union caseworkers are struggling to keep up with the constant stream of members asking for union support. There is also a growing list of victimised school reps, targeted by bullying management seeking to push back against successes made by the union.

The successes of the school safety action in January showed what can be achieved when we combine a firm national lead with determined local organisation. Now we must fight even harder against the attacks on jobs, pay and working conditions. I am standing in this election to help make sure that we do.

MARTIN POWELL-DAVIES



Martin Powell-Davies



GLENN KELLY

Beal school strikers suspend action after possible victory

Beal High School workers, who have taken two rounds of strike action against a punitive, two-tier sick pay policy, are voting to suspend their current action after progress in negotiations.

Staff at Beal - England's largest secondary with over 2,600 students - have been demanding: don't punish the sick!

Kevin Courtney, the joint general secretary of the National Education Union says: "We had been demanding that ill-health should be separated from the disciplinary process and the ending of a two-tier ill health policy. Looks like we have won on both demands."

• See next week's issue for more.



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RMT general secretary election Militant industrial and political strategy must be fought for



PAUL MATTSSON

SOCIALIST PARTY MEMBERS IN RMT

The election of Mick Lynch as general secretary of the RMT transport union comes at a crucial time for our union.

The government is now set on a course of emerging from social distancing and lockdown, and with that demand will return for transport services. But it is far from clear how fast demand will return and to what level. Fare revenue is unlikely to return to pre-pandemic levels for some time, creating financial pressure on the rail and transport industries.

This would be bad enough if we were just facing the financial costs of Covid, but the national rail industry, bus industry and regional authorities responsible for transport, such as London Underground, were already confronting government demands for massive cuts before Covid hit.

These problems also face the maritime members of RMT, who entered the Covid pandemic already engaged in a struggle against casualisation and an international race to the bottom on pay and conditions.

Recognising this, RMT adopted a policy of resisting all redundancies and job cuts during the pandemic. More recently, RMT has also stated its opposition to the government public sector pay freeze, which is being imposed, at the insistence of the Department for Transport, by

both Network Rail and the privately owned train operating companies and contractors.

The Socialist campaigned for Steve Hedley in the general secretary election because he put forward the case for a militant industrial and political strategy to meet the coming showdown. But Socialist Party members in RMT welcome the comments of Mick Lynch in the press after his election committing RMT to a determined defence of jobs and pay. His success as general secretary will be measured by how effectively this can be put into action.

Socialist Party members in the union will support and seek to build a national campaign to defend jobs and pay. This will require a mobilisation of officers, reps and members to build rallies, both online and physical, the production of regular propaganda and a constant media presence.

There is evidence that RMT members are now responding to the slow emergence out of lockdown with a renewed determination that transport workers will not pay for the pandemic with jobs and inferior terms of employment. Several important ballots for strike action have been won in recent weeks.

RMT has been seen as playing a leading role in industrial militancy and the defence of jobs and conditions in Britain. But the union has

grade to attack electricians' wages by employing unskilled labour.

As the protesting workers left the building, they warned that the campaign against ESO will be stepped up, just days after sparks walked off site in Whitby in North Yorkshire and blockaded a job in Cardiff. This will include protests at retail parks, where NG Bailey has jobs or maintenance contracts.

Sparks fight continues

London sparks continued the fight against deskilling by again targeting offices of landlords Landsec, Land Securities Group, because NG Bailey has its maintenance contract.

NG Bailey is still looking to use the electrical service operator (ESO)

also led on political issues. RMT was thrown out of the Labour Party for supporting Scottish Socialist Party candidates in 2004, and in 2018 a special general meeting voted against reaffiliating to the Labour Party.

The reality is that renationalisation and an end to government demands for cuts to transport budgets is the only sure guarantee of RMT members pay and conditions.

Labour under Keir Starmer is firmly set on a course of continuing Labour's local authority cuts. In London, Sadiq Khan has been re-elected as Labour mayor and has published plans to impose jobs cuts and pension cuts on Transport for London workers, as well as seeking road pricing, additional council tax charges and even an additional rate of VAT in London to make London's working class replace government support for public transport in the capital.

As well as keeping RMT's militant industrial traditions, it is crucial that RMT not only maintains but redoubles efforts to take the debate about how to build a new party of the working class throughout our union.

That means continuing to participate in the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, not as a finished alternative but as a first step to pushing the wider trade union movement towards building a bona fide workers' party that will not implement austerity.

Thurrock refuse workers strike escalates

DAVE MURRAY
ESSEX SOCIALIST PARTY

From 6am on Monday 10 May, Unite members working for the refuse service in the Borough of Thurrock escalated their strike, moving from a position where they withdrew their labour at 9am, to full-time strike action for the next three weeks. The employer has had to inform residents that there will be no refuse collections for the duration of the strike.

The council has rewarded these workers' loyalty and dedication to the community during the pandemic with a proposed pay cut - moving to abolish anti-social hours payments, potentially leaving workers thousands of pounds out of pocket annually. These proposals are also being applied to street cleansing, social services and care workers in the borough, with similar disastrous results if they are allowed to stick.

Morale on the picket line is extremely high. Strikers realise that they are holding the line for refuse workers around the country, and also for workers in care and other services in their own authority.

Tory gains in the recent local elections mean that it's a straight fight between a well-organised workforce and a hostile but not particularly

astute right-wing council. During recent talks, the Tories had the bright idea of antagonising the refuse workers further by announcing new attacks on overtime and vehicle maintenance agreements that were made when the council took the refuse service back in-house.

By introducing new issues they hope to make it difficult to extend the action without a new ballot. Speaking to workers on the picket line, it seems to me that this is a miscalculation as the feeling is strong for striking as long as it takes. A new ballot would return a big majority for further action.

After only two days, mountains of rubbish are piling up at the drop-off points the council has arranged in place of the house-to-house collections. Unite's compliance team has been leafleting around the estates and is getting widespread support from the public.

A hardship fund has been set up for workers whose normal pay is not fully covered by strike pay rules. Already sizeable donations from trade union and labour movement bodies are coming in.

• Hardship fund donations to: Unite 1/1152 Sort code 60-83-01 Account 20216557



Letter: Agency workers and unions - organising the unorganised

The letter by the Tyne and Wear Socialist Party members in issue 1132 (see 'I'm in a non-union workplace' at socialistparty.org.uk) raises some important points.

While it is obviously more difficult to recruit agency workers into unions, it is neither impossible, nor illegal. Agency workers have the same legal rights as any other worker to join a union, and be represented by it in disciplinary proceedings.

My union, Communication Workers Union (CWU), has been very successful in recruiting agency workers at its large call centres over a number of years.

While unions should invest much more money and resources into

organising agency workers, there are things that workers can do now. Facebook and WhatsApp make it possible to bring groups of workers together in social media to discuss problems in closed groups free from management spying.

When a decent level of agreement and confidence has been reached, collective grievances could be brought to the company. Workers should have a supply of union application forms at hand or a website address to join online.

Another tactic the CWU has used to some effect is to organise offsite meetings, so workers can discuss grievances and agree demands. Organising the unorganised isn't something that can wait.

CLIVE WALDER
BIRMINGHAM

WHAT'S YOUR VIEW?
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Right-wing Partido Popular wins Madrid elections - a warning to the working class

TONY SAUNOIS

COMMITTEE FOR A WORKERS' INTERNATIONAL (CWI)
SECRETARY

Following a highly polarised and bitter election campaign, the right-wing Partido Popular (PP - 'People's Party') has emerged victorious in elections to the 'autonomous community' of Madrid (one of 17 autonomous administrative areas).

Led by Isabel Díaz Ayuso, the far-right President of the Community of Madrid, PP emerged as the winner, taking seats and votes from the right-wing populist Ciudadanos ('Citizens'). The PP increased its number of seats to 35, and increased its vote by 864,000.

The fascistic party, VOX, increased its vote by 35,000 and its seats in the parliament from one to 13. This is clearly a setback and blow for the working class in the Spanish state and for the left.

This was despite the strong criticism of Ayuso over her handling of the Covid-19 pandemic and the high death rate in Madrid. Residents in care homes, which she had privatised, were simply left to die. However, she was able to appeal on a populist basis to café and bar owners and small businesses, demanding they remain open because of the devastation they faced.

The biggest loser was the social-democratic party, PSOE, which scored its worst-ever election result in Madrid. In 2019, PSOE received the highest number of votes and seats in Madrid. This time, it fell to third place and its seats fall from 37 to 24.

UP - the left electoral alliance which includes Podemos - slightly increased its number of seats from seven to ten. A right-wing split-off from Podemos, Más Madrid, took many PSOE votes, to become the second-largest party.

This result is a clear warning for the working class, in the Spanish state and throughout Europe, of the threat of the far-right. The failure of PSOE in the government of the Spanish state, in coalition with UP, to transform society, and instead to operate within the boundaries of capitalism, has created a political vacuum that the right and far-right can step into on a populist basis.

By going into government with PSOE, Podemos became imprisoned,

failing to offer a radical socialist alternative, and isolating itself from the social struggles being conducted by workers and youth.

This has crucial lessons for the left throughout Europe - especially the so-called 'new left' forces like Podemos, which arose out of the '15-M' anti-austerity movement ten years ago.

A failure to advocate a combative socialist alternative, both in programme and strategy, for the struggles of the working class and youth gives the opportunity for the right to step in.

Seeking a compromise with the so-called moderate left leads to the 'left' being weakened and/or defeated. The failure of the Corbynistas in Britain to confront the right wing in the Labour Party led to the counter-revolution being carried through by Keir Starmer, which they have failed to effectively fight against.

The depth of the crisis of capitalism and its social consequences has exposed the political weakness of the 'new left' to an even greater extent. The polarised situation which exists in many countries has found them wanting and floundering, not offering an independent class alternative.

Podemos's mistakes

It was a big mistake for Podemos to enter the government with PSOE. This has important lessons for the socialist left in Spain and internationally.

It should have voted in parliament to allow PSOE to form a government but remain outside, voting on each piece of legislation on a case-by-case basis, in the interests of the working class. This would have allowed it to maintain its independence and a socialist programme. It is now paying the price for this mistaken position.

The right conducted a highly polarised campaign. Madrid PP leader Ayuso tweeted the election was about "communism or freedom".

The polarised nature of the campaign was illustrated by the death threats against Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias, who stood down as deputy prime minister to contest the Madrid election. Bullets were sent through the post to him, and his family was threatened. Podemos' offices were attacked.

These threats probably were undertaken by fascistic forces around VOX. Ayuso has not excluded

governing jointly with VOX, such is the right-wing character of the PP.

Iglesias, tainted by being in the



Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias has now resigned all his positions and withdrawn from politics PHOTO: PODEMOS/CC

government rather than leading a mass campaign with radical socialist demands, at the beginning of the campaign initially proposed a joint platform with Más Madrid, which it refused.

Stunned by the election victory of the right wing, in which Podemos finished in fifth place, Iglesias, rather than draw the lessons of this defeat, announced that he was resigning all his political positions and withdrawing from politics.

The need for a mass party of the working class with a bold revolutionary socialist programme is an urgent necessity to offer an alternative to and combat the populist right and the threat that it poses.

The elections are a warning. Youth unemployment officially stands at 40%. The economic and social crisis will trigger

new struggles of the working class and youth in the Spanish state in the coming months.

To take these forward, the building of a new mass party of the working class with a revolutionary socialist programme is an urgent necessity.



Obituary - Jon Elvin

It is with sadness that I have to inform you of the death of our dear friend and comrade Jon Elvin.

Jon died on 4 May at Michael Sobell hospice at Mount Vernon Hospital where he was being treated for cancer. He was 65. We send our condolences and solidarity to his wife Maggie and sister Heather.

Jon was pivotal to the relaunch of Hillingdon Trades Union Council

(TUC) in north west London, to which he gave his time and energy. He was a union rep for Unite local government (he worked as a grounds keeper on Hillingdon Borough golf courses) and latterly for Unite community, and was a steadfast supporter of the campaigns that Hillingdon TUC were involved with.

Jon was also a recognisable figure

on many national demos with his homemade t-shirts printed with his own sometimes cutting slogans. These were often the subject of interest for national media.

If there was a campaign to support, Jon would be there to support it. A slight figure due to fighting bouts of cancer throughout his life, he would often turn up astride a monster Kawasaki motor bike,

which was another passion of his.

Jon was a true socialist, and had no time for those who he viewed as careerists within the movement. For Jon, action spoke louder than words and he led by example, and it is an example we will strive to follow. We will miss you - RIP comrade.

STEVE HARBORD

SOCIALIST PARTY AND HILLINGDON TUC

TEXT FROM SOCIALIST PARTY NATIONAL LEAFLET

Weeks of repressive, brutal Israeli policing of Palestinian gatherings and protests in East Jerusalem have resulted in a new round of escalated conflict.

In April, Israeli security forces erected barriers to prevent Palestinians from congregating next to the Damascus gate into the old city - gatherings that are usual during Ramadan. This led to an outbreak of Palestinian protest, which was met with heavy repression. The protesters were able to celebrate a victory when the barriers were subsequently removed.

At the same time, there have been protests against threatened 'ethnic cleansing' home evictions of Palestinian families in nearby Sheikh Jarrah. The Israeli police and security also used appalling brutality there - including stun grenades - against protests of unarmed, young Palestinians.

Then, on 10 May, amid right-wing Israeli nationalist provocations - including attempts to hold 'Jerusalem Day' events that annually 'celebrate' the 1967 seizing of East Jerusalem - police fired rubber bullets, stun grenades and tear gas into hundreds of Palestinians in the al-Aqsa mosque compound, causing serious injuries.

This outrageous escalation - at the third holiest site in Islam and in the last week of Ramadan - inflamed anger even further across East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza and beyond.

In response, right-wing Hamas forces and other Palestinian militias fired a new round of rockets and incendiary balloons into Israel. It was the 'excuse' Benjamin Netanyahu's caretaker Israeli government jumped on, to launch high-tech missile strikes on Gaza, which slaughtered over 20 people, including children.

The Israeli authorities blamed some of those deaths on an alleged misfire of a Hamas rocket. While that can't be discounted, few will believe it given the massive disparity between Israel's military firepower and the relatively low-tech rockets of Hamas, and also when recalling the terrible death toll of Palestinians in previous wars on Gaza.

Netanyahu

A significant background to these events is the inability of Netanyahu to form a new coalition government after failing to achieve a majority in each of four successive Israeli general elections. His Likud party and allied parties on the right and far right don't stop short of destabilising national relations to suit their agenda of posing as the strongest defenders of 'law and order'.

For instance, on 10 May, the head of the religious Zionist party, Bezalel Smotrich, provocatively visited Sheikh Jarrah and called for even tougher measures there against the Palestinian protesters. He pointedly said: "We must form a stable government that will clarify who's in charge of the state of Israel."

Whether or not this round of conflict subsides for a while or increases further, anger among the Palestinian youth will remain high and more explosions are inevitable.

As well as the brutal military occupation, they suffer high levels of unemployment, poverty and lack of services. None of the pro-capitalist

STOP ISRAELI STATE BRUTALITY

Israeli government and right-wing provocations escalate conflict



PAUL MATTHESSON

Palestinian-based parties can improve their lives in any of these respects, never mind end them. And the so-called 'international community' of capitalist powers have also shown their bankruptcy regarding a way forward.

Socialism

Rockets and individual 'terror' attacks show the desperation but are not the answer. They only bring down greater repression and alienate the Israeli Jewish working class, who need to be won to a socialist solution of national rights and decent living standards for both sides of the divide.

Security for the Jewish population won't be achieved by military means, nor will it be achieved by looking to any of the many brands of Israeli pro-capitalist politicians for another solution. Israeli Jewish workers - together with the Palestinians they live and work amongst - will need to build their own party, completely independent of capitalist interests.

For the Palestinians in the occupied territories, an urgent task is the development of democratically run local committees to organise actions and defence. They cannot look to Fatah or Hamas, neither of whom have answers. Such committees could build further on the recent successes achieved by mass protests - the latest two being postponement of a court hearing that was pursuing the home evictions and cancellation of the Jerusalem Day march which intended to go through the old city.

Democratic committees, linking up with each other, would be important preliminary steps towards building a mass, independent,

working-class led party in the Palestinian areas.

With workers' parties, Palestinian and Israeli, adopting a programme for a socialist Palestine alongside a socialist Israel - as part of a socialist confederation of the Middle East - the capitalist nightmare of cycles of death and destruction could be brought to an end.

- Stop the Israeli military's missile strikes on Gaza!
- No more brutal force against Palestinians defending their homes and religious sites!
- Stop the home evictions of Palestinian families
- For democratically organised action and defence committees in Palestinian communities
- For the immediate withdrawal of the Israeli army from the occupied territories
- For a mass struggle of the Palestinians, under their own democratic control, to fight for genuine national liberation
- For independent workers' organisations in Palestine and Israel
- For an independent, democratic socialist Palestinian state, alongside a democratic socialist Israel, with two capitals in Jerusalem and guaranteed democratic rights for all minorities, as part of the struggle for a socialist Middle East

North London Socialist Party meeting

- 'Israel-Palestine flare-up - how can the conflict be ended?'
- All welcome
- Wednesday 19 May - 7.30pm
- Zoom meeting ID: 562 668 7946



● Social care: Another broken Tory promise

KATIE SIMPSON

CARE HOME WORKER AND UNISON MEMBER IN NORTHAMPTON

Since 2010, spending on social care has decreased despite demand increasing. Boris Johnson pledged in 2019 that he would finally come up with a solution to the social care crisis, and ensure that people do not have to sell their homes to pay for their care. This has proved to be another broken promise, with no concrete plans for social care in the Queen's Speech.

An estimated 1.5 million people across the UK are not getting the care they need. Councils are tightening their belts and failing to accurately predict the costs of social care.

Part of the reason for the 'unexpected' increase in social care needs is the fact that many services which helped maintain independence for vulnerable adults have been taken away or privatised - libraries, mental health services, rehabilitation services, housing, jobs and training.

With a surplus of need, private care companies are demanding higher payouts for care packages to take on new clients. At the same time, many care providers are understaffed and offering little to attract new staff.

Privatisation and cuts have ultimately cost us not just monetarily, but in the wellbeing of some of our most vulnerable citizens. Bringing services back in-house and funding them sufficiently is the only real solution to this growing crisis in care. Labour leader Keir Starmer is unlikely to take up this call as his policies move closer to the Tories.

● Another fire rips through 'Grenfell-style' tower block

FERDY LYONS

EAST LONDON SOCIALIST PARTY

A fire ripped through a 19-storey tower block with 'Grenfell-style' cladding in Canary Wharf on 7 May. Parts of the eighth, ninth and tenth floors of a building in New Providence Wharf were ablaze in the early morning, with the smoke travelling much higher. Many residents at the Ballymore development have claimed that no fire alarms went off, and they were only alerted by screams and shouts in the corridors and knocks on their doors.

Four years after the Grenfell fire

tragedy, many high-rise blocks still do not have adequate fire safety measures. If this fire had spread through the cladding, it could have been much worse, and it's only a matter of time before we see another Grenfell.

We need:

- All cladding off now and proper fire safety, with the government and the big developers and landlords footing the bill
- Immediate rehousing for affected residents
- The release and redoing of fire safety assessments, with democratic residents' control over safety
- Quality homes for all through a mass programme of council house building
- No safety - no rent, no service charges!

● Tories and Labour won't deliver £100 billion NHS needs

TOM HUNT

NHS NURSE AND UNISON NOTTS HEALTHCARE CHAIR (PERSONAL CAPACITY)

As a nurse with over 40 years' experience, I have witnessed the devastating effects of cuts. Pre-pandemic, the NHS was brought to its knees with cuts and financial ruin, in part due to the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) brought in under New Labour and carried on by the Tories.

It is reported that the NHS is

underfunded to the tune of £100 billion! It is of little wonder that services become inefficient to the detriment of patients and staff. This is cynically used by the government to argue that services would be much better in private hands.

Locally, I know of one NHS service that pulled out of the tendering process because it was told it would have its budget cut by a third. Surprise, surprise, a private contractor stepped in and won the tender.

How can they run the service with much less money? By supplying a watered-down service and attacking staff terms and conditions. Unions need to step up and organise to demand a fully publicly funded NHS, democratically run by the workers.

Non-fiction: Bobby Sands - Nothing but an Unfinished Song

Forty years ago in May, Bobby Sands, provisional IRA prisoner and an MP, died on hunger strike in the Maze Prison in Northern Ireland. Sands was the first of ten young republican prisoners who died in the next few months in their campaign to get the Thatcher government to concede political status and jail reforms. In the following article, reprinted from the Socialist in 2006, **Niall Mulholland** reviews ‘Bobby Sands Nothing but an Unfinished Song’ by Denis O’Hearn (Pluto Books).

The 1981 hunger strikes provoked enormous sympathy from Catholics towards the prisoners and huge anger towards the vindictive, intransigent Thatcher government. Deep alienation among Catholics prepared the way for the rise of Sinn Féin, which today is the largest nationalist party in the North. For my generation of Catholic youth, 1981 was an intense, radicalising year. Today, the hunger strikes are still a highly-charged subject and Bobby Sands is an iconic symbol of ultimate resistance to extreme prison repression.

This book is a well-paced, often harrowing read that captures the horrors of prison life and the charismatic Bobby Sands - who, by the time of his death, at 27, was a talented writer, propagandist, poet and songwriter.

Troubles

Sands was brought up in a mixed Catholic and Protestant council estate near Belfast and played football with Protestant friends. However, the start of the Troubles led to increased sectarian tensions, and the Sands family were forced to flee their home, moving to West Belfast.

As the Troubles worsened, Sands

joined the local Provisional IRA, to hit back against state repression. Like many working-class youth, Sands was let down by the leaders of the labour and trade union movement, who failed to take a lead in the civil rights struggle, allowing right-wing nationalists and unionists to dominate ‘politics’. O’Hearn says Sands was “enthusiastic but militaristic”. After a few minor local IRA actions, Sands was arrested, convicted, in 1972, and sent to Long Kesh prison camp, on the outskirts of Belfast.

Political transformation

Jail transformed Sands into a “radical student”. While the Provos’ “conservative leaders” of Cage 18 held “burnings of Marxist books and pornographic magazines”, Sands and other young prisoners “...were reading and talking about the Communist Manifesto, Trotsky, Animal Farm, Frantz Fanon... everything.” Sands studied struggles of the oppressed worldwide. His heroes were Che Guevara and Liam Mellows, the 1920s left-wing IRA leader.

Sands also learnt to speak and write fluently in the Irish language, which he then taught to other prisoners (partly so they could communicate without the prison warders understanding).

Sands argued that armed struggle was not enough and called for “grass-roots” politics in local communities. On his release, in April 1976, he tried to put this into practice. According to a fellow republican, “Bobby’s attitude was different from other IRA men. He believed strongly in socialist revolution and political mobilisation”.

But whatever Sands’ intentions, democratic self-organisation and resistance by a united working class, in a modern, urban society, was incompatible with the IRA’s secretive organisation and individual terror methods.

The campaign of bombs and bullets could never defeat the might of the British state - in fact, it provided excuses for the state to increase repressive powers - and only deepened sectarian divisions amongst workers.

It was also counterproductive to developing mass, class struggles. This was brought home by a terrible incident, when an IRA volunteer friend of Sands was shot dead by the army while driving a car in West Belfast. The car went out of control, killing three children. This sparked the ‘Peace People’ mass movement, which temporarily put the republican movement on the back foot.

Crackdown

After a failed IRA robbery, Sands was once again imprisoned. Under a Labour government, the state cracked down on jails, to try to break the morale of prisoners. The right to wear their own clothes, and other concessions, were withdrawn from those convicted of offences arising out of the Troubles committed after 1 March 1976.

Republican prisoners responded by refusing to wear prison uniforms and were left naked in their cells with only a blanket. The protest escalated under a brutal prison regime. In March 1978, the ‘no-wash’ protest began. Prisoners lived in intolerable cell conditions - the walls smeared with their own excreta - and were subject to constant humiliating body searches, beatings and torture.

Despite the inhumane prison conditions, Sands developed as a writer and organiser. His optimism and determination spread infectiously to other prisoners.

Although there was considerable sympathy among Catholics for the prisoners’ plight, the IRA’s campaign stunted an effective support



Sands became an iconic figure of Irish republicanism PHOTO OLF BAUMANN/CC

campaign. The Militant tendency (the forerunner of the Socialist Party) took up the issue of the H-Blocks within the labour movement and the working class, in Ireland and Britain.

Militant called for an end to oppression in the prisons, for the right of all prisoners to wear their own clothes and to have a choice of work or study. Militant also called for a labour movement review of the cases of all those convicted of offences arising from the Troubles to determine who was a political prisoner.

This position found a good response among both Catholic and Protestant workers. A resolution moved on the British Labour Party NEC, by the Young Socialist representative and Militant supporter, Tony Saunois, committed Labour to this position.

But the trade union leaders in Northern Ireland did not campaign on the issue of prisons. The result was a sharp rise in sectarian polarisation. After several years, the Maze protests had not won prisoner rights. The increasingly desperate inmates organised a hunger strike.

In October 1980, seven prisoners refused food. In return for vague promises from the government, they called the hunger strike off in December. Characteristically, Margaret Thatcher refused to move and the prisoners were left angry and demoralised.

But Thatcher vastly underestimated the prisoners’ desperation and

determination. Sands, now the IRA’s OC (officer commanding) in the Maze, led another hunger strike from 1 March 1981, although the republican leadership again opposed it.

Defiance

His courageous and defiant stand inspired the Catholic community, and the H-Block protests drew mass support across the North. When the independent nationalist MP for Fermanagh/South Tyrone died suddenly, Sands was nominated to fight the seat. His victory, with over 30,000 votes, registered the deep sympathy and support among Catholics.

O’Hearn’s book covers the last weeks of Sands’ life in harrowing detail. His sense of small grew as he became feeble; prison warders taunted him with ever-larger portions of food; Sands’ body organs failed until his bowels burst, leaving him in terrible agony.

After 66 days of starvation, Sands died on 5 May. Over 100,000 attended his funeral, and Northern Ireland was convulsed by heavy rioting and brutal state repression.

His death had a big international impact: “Motions of sympathy, minutes of silence, and days of mourning were declared in national parliaments of Italy, India, Portugal, Iran and elsewhere...”

After Sands, nine other prisoners died (six IRA members and three Irish National Liberation Army):

Francis Hughes, Patsy O’Hara, Raymond McCreesh, Joe McDonnell, Martin Hurson, Kevin Lynch, Kieran Doherty, Tom McElwee and Mickey Devine.

Without a prospect of prison reforms, families of the remaining hunger strikers intervened to end the fasts in October. No concessions were given but the Thatcher government had only won a Pyrrhic victory.

The hunger strikes restored the morale of the republican movement. There was no mass influx of youth to the Provisionals but enough recruits for a long campaign. Most importantly, Thatcher’s refusal to budge deeply alienated Catholics and prepared for the political rise of Sinn Féin. Later, prison reforms were introduced quietly.

Unease

Some commentators criticised O’Hearn’s book for its perceived pro-Gerry Adams leadership position. Another author, Richard O’Rawe, the IRA public relations officer in 1981, sparked controversy among republicans with the publication of his book, Blanketmen: An Untold Story of the H-Block Hunger Strike (New Island Books, 2005).

O’Rawe said a deal was offered by the British government, in July 1981, which addressed most of the prisoners’ demands for political status. O’Rawe claims the IRA Army Council effectively prevented the prisoners



After 66 days starvation, Sands died on 5 May. Over 100,000 attended his funeral and Northern Ireland was convulsed by heavy rioting and brutal state repression

from accepting the deal to ensure republicans kept the sympathy of Catholics and won a Westminster seat.

However, Brendan “Bik” McFarlane, the IRA commander in the Maze during the hunger strikes, completely refutes O’Rawe’s claims.

Whatever the truth, this very public row [reflected in the mid 2000s] growing unease and opposition by republicans to the Adams leadership, including those opposed to the leadership’s continuing shift to the right.

For socialists, the way forward in Northern Ireland lies in developing a powerful, united working-class movement that opposes sectarianism, injustice and capitalism, and which fights for a socialist solution - the ideal which Bobby Sands and many young working-class republicans believed they fought for.

British state absolves itself from killings during ‘the Troubles’

Family of Joe McCann continues to fight for justice

Two unnamed former British paratroopers, accused of the 1972 murder of Joe McCann, an Official Irish Republican Army (IRA) leader, were formally acquitted on 4 May. The trial at Belfast Crown Court collapsed after the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) confirmed it would not appeal against a decision by Justice O’Hara to exclude statements given by the ex-soldiers at the time of the shooting of McCann.

Joe McCann, 24, was shot dead by paratroopers in the Markets area of Belfast in April 1972. Unarmed, he was shot in the back. Bullet casings found close to his body indicate McCann was shot at close range as he lay on the ground.

McCann is an iconic figure for the republican movement. He joined the IRA in his teens in the early 1960s and became Officer Commanding of the IRA in the Markets.

Judge O’Hara ruled there were deficiencies regarding the soldiers’ statements given to the Royal Military Police (made without caution, for example) in 1972.

Prosecutors had argued that the 1972 statements became admissible because they were adopted and accepted by the defendants during their interviews with the police-led Historical Enquiries Team (HET), in March 2010.

The HET concluded in 2014 that Joe McCann’s killing was ‘unlawful’ and ‘unjustified’. Yet this did not lead to an investigation by the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

McCann’s family’s campaigning eventually led to the Director of Public Prosecutions bringing charges. The family, who have fought for almost 50 years to get justice, condemned the judge using a technicality for the collapse of the trial. “This ruling does not acquit the state of murder. It does not mean that Joe McCann was not murdered by the British army. It is proof that the British army operated with impunity for their crimes”.

The family said they will apply to the Attorney General to open an inquest into Joe McCann’s killing.



Commemorative plaque for Joe McCann PHOTO WICK/CC

The British establishment has always opposed criminal charges being made against soldiers arising from the ‘Troubles’ and other conflicts around the world. The ruling class does not want to be hindered from carrying out future military actions in the interests of British capitalism and imperialism.

The Tories’ ‘Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Bill’ provides soldiers with de-facto immunity against prosecution for war crimes, including torture.

An estimated 200 former members of the ‘security forces’ could face potential prosecution arising from the conflict in the north of Ireland. On 11 May, the Belfast coroner will deliver the result of an inquest into the killing by soldiers of eleven people in Ballymurphy, west Belfast, during two days in August 1971.

Johnny Mercer, who quit his post as the UK’s ‘veterans minister’ in protest at the prosecution of former military personnel, attended the Belfast trial of the soldiers and

welcomed the result. “Government must act,” he demanded, calling for legislation to end prosecutions of former soldiers who were deployed in Northern Ireland.

The other combatants in the conflict also appear unwilling to point a spotlight on all events during that period. But families of the many victims of the conflict deserve justice, including those seeking answers about the deaths of their relatives at the hands of paramilitaries, Republican and Loyalist. But it is clear that justice will not be provided by the state.

A trade union and genuine community-led public inquiry could investigate Troubles-related deaths and the role of the state, including that of its agents in the paramilitaries.

Above all, Catholic and Protestant workers need a mass party of their own, with socialist policies, to struggle to end the bosses’ system that causes repression and injustice, exploitation, poverty, and sectarianism. **NIALL MULHOLLAND**

The split between the Official and Provisional IRA

After the failure of its military ‘border campaign’ (1956-1962) the republican movement moved to the left and became involved in the civil rights movement, and social and economic agitation.

But frustration at this ‘political’ role and the IRA’s failure to defend Catholic areas in Belfast during sectarian rioting in August 1969 led to a split, into the Provisional and Official IRA. Joe McCann went with the latter.

The Officials, influenced by left ideas and the Communist Party, favoured political action for change. The Provisionals, more traditionally

militarist, pledged to smash Stormont rule and expel British forces.

The Officials conducted a brief military campaign after the introduction of internment without trial in August 1971, which saw hundreds of innocent Catholics rounded up in British army raids.

On 9 August 1971, McCann’s unit took over the Inglis bakery in the Markets area and fought British soldiers.

McCann was photographed during the incident, holding an M1 carbine, against the background of a burning building and the Starry Plough, a

flag that had been associated with the workers’ movement in Ireland. The image appeared in newspapers and magazines around the world. McCann was now high on the state’s most wanted list.

Just weeks after McCann’s killing on 15 April 1972, the Official IRA declared a ceasefire and largely abandoned the dead end of individual terrorism.

The political wing - Official Sinn Féin - eventually morphed into the Workers’ Party, attracted a significant layer of youth for a period of time, but its reformist policies saw the party’s support decline.

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formerly **Militant**

UNITED ACTION NEEDED TO DEFEAT FIRE AND REHIRE

ROB WILLIAMS

SOCIALIST PARTY WORKPLACE ORGANISER

Seventy percent of people are opposed to 'fire and rehire' and want it made illegal. This number will only grow as this brutal weapon of the bosses, imposing worse pay and conditions on workers by sacking them and employing them on inferior contracts, is meted out to more and more workers. We've already seen blue British Gas vans piled up on car transporters after new contracts were imposed. Each van represents a sacked worker and their family.

The bosses tell us that we have to adhere to agreed pay and conditions if we find that we can't live on our wages - but they can just rip up our contracts to preserve and boost their profits!

For those union leaders who thought at the outset of the pandemic that there was a Covid national unity, fire and rehire is confirmation that workers have no common interests with the employers and their Tory government. No wonder Boris is ignoring calls to outlaw it. This bosses' united front wants to make workers pay the price for the Covid crisis. For British Gas workers, the price was up to £15,000.

Workers want a lead, but they won't get it from Starmer's Labour Party. It is reported that the Labour leader refused to sign Unite's letter opposing fire and rehire. Is this because he wants to continue to pose himself and Labour as 'business friendly'? Or is it because a Labour council in Tower Hamlets was shamefully one of the first to resort to it last summer, forcing workers to strike?

But an increasing number of workers are fighting back. British Gas workers took 43 days of strike action. Bus drivers at Go North West in Manchester have been out indefinitely for well over ten weeks, and appear on the verge of a victory. Workers at Goodlord in London are on all-out action as well. But these disputes need to be drawn together to face down this general attack.

The Manchester bus drivers, like the workers at SPS in Leicester and elsewhere, are showing that fire and rehire can be fought and defeated. Action on the widest possible scale is the way to force the bosses and Boris back. But we also need a political alternative to Starmer and the Tories, one that fights for workers and not the bosses.

● **Come to this year's annual conference of the National Shop Stewards Network, which this year will be online on Zoom. To register email:**
info@shopstewards.net



Goodlord workers strike against fire and rehire JAMES IVENS

A SOCIALIST RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC CRISIS
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WHAT WE STAND FOR: THE SOCIALIST PARTY'S MAIN DEMANDS
▶▶▶ see column on p3



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