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STRIKING TOGETHER WE CAN WIN

ORGANISE FOR A 24-HOUR GENERAL STRIKE



PHOTOS: PAUL MATSSON

A BATTLE FOR THE FUTURE OF ROYAL MAIL >>> p5

RMT: THE FIGHT GOES ON >>> p4

NHS STRIKES >>> p3

Mass coordinated action can win Prepare for a 24-hour general strike



‘T’imetable of trouble: the wave of strikes set to hit the Tories this winter. Could Britain be facing a general strike this winter?

Just two of the headlines in the Guardian last week that give a sense of the rising tide of anger and action by workers across the UK.

It seems not a day goes by without a new group of workers joining the list of strikes or ballots for strike action on pay.

And it isn't just public sector workers like nurses, ambulance drivers, highway workers and university lecturers and staff who have announced planned strikes; or those who have already joined rail, Royal Mail and BT national strikes. Across the country, groups of workers, like those from the Amazon warehouse in Coventry and drivers at Best Food Logistics, are either balloting, preparing to strike or already striking!

Inflation-busting pay rise victories for bin workers, HGV and tanker drivers, and food workers in the last year and, most recently, Birmingham Metro workers, have demonstrated again and again that strikes win.



The Tories can be brought down by this growing wave of strikes and there is a crucial need to prepare the foundations for a political expression of these strikes

Tory chairman Nadhim Zahawi's pathetic remark that "NHS strikes help Putin" not only stinks of desperation; it has done nothing but increase support for striking health workers from all workers, including previous Tory voters.

Of course, Zahawi seems to have forgotten the millions of pounds of Russian oligarchs' money that has gone into Tory party coffers in recent years!

The Tories are running scared. But reports of Sunak's new 'winter of discontent' unit, dedicated to coordinating the government's response to the growing, fighting strike wave, should further strengthen the call for mass coordinated action and preparations for a 24-hour general strike.

Mobilisation and action of that character would play a huge role in raising workers' sights and confidence, and inspire those desperate for a pay rise to join in the fight.

But at the same time, unions shouldn't wait to link up with others. The rolling and coordinated action by the RMT and CWU has given a glimpse of the potential power of the working class in bringing society to a standstill. Rolling strikes by different unions, sectors and industries are crucial, and will be so in the build-up and in the follow up of an initial 24-hour general strike.

But workers also need a political programme and, ultimately, a political vehicle through which to fight for their interests.

Starmer's Labour plays no such role, because he defends the interests of the capitalist elite rather than the working class. Asked recently in an interview in the Financial Times whether a Labour government would succumb to union pressure to give public sector workers inflation-matching pay rises of 10%, Labour's deputy leader Angela Rayner didn't hide her thoughts: "Brutally, no", was her response.

Starmer's Labour's continuous refusal to support striking workers is no surprise. As the City of London's tabloid mouthpiece, 'City AM', put it: "Starmer and Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves have also been on a so-called 'salmon and scrambled eggs offensive' in the City to sell their vision of the economy."

The Tories can be brought down by this growing wave of strikes. But it's clear that any victories and pay increases under a future Starmer-led Labour government will only come with a determined fight by workers.

Over in the US in the last week, Joe Biden - who when first inaugurated, boasted of being a 'pro-labour' president - has pushed legislation through the US Congress to force a new contract deal on US railway workers. This is an attempt to prevent a national rail strike, as growing numbers of rail workers rejected the proposed deal from the employers.

Such steps by Biden and the US capitalist class are a glimpse of the lengths the ruling class will go in order to prevent workers from striking. The TUC should meet any moves to further restrict the right to strike in Britain with a rapid call for a 24-hour general strike.

There is a crucial need to prepare the foundations for a political expression of the current strike wave at the next general election. As part of the

Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, we are fighting for 100 workers' candidates to stand. This has the potential to gain support from individuals, groups of workers, and official trade union branches, whether affiliated to Labour or not, as the vital need for this momentous strike wave to also make use of the ballot box becomes clear to growing numbers of workers.

The 2022 'Winter of Discontent' - who's striking?

In addition to strikes and victories around the country on the docks, oil refineries, buses, bins, in factories, and more, the national strike wave is stepping up:

- Last week saw the biggest university strikes ever by the University and College Union and, in many universities, Unison.
- The National Education Union (NEU) struck in 6th forms and there was a massive school shutdown by EIS union in Scotland.
- Royal Mail workers in CWU are stepping up their national strike action with more strikes on 9, 11, 14, 15, 23, 24 December, with a major national demo on 9 December. Post Office staff will strike on 12 and 13 December.
- RMT national rail members are escalating their fight with strikes on 13, 14, 16 and 17 December, with new dates announced from 6pm 24 - 7am 27 December, and more in January.
- For the first time in their history in England and Wales, RCN members are striking on 15 and 20 December - with ambulance workers striking on 21 and 28 December.
- PCS members in the civil service have voted to strike, NEU members in schools are balloting, firefighters in the FBU are balloting, and the BMA national strike ballot of junior doctors will start on 9 January.

The trade union movement can defeat the bosses and bring down the Tories!



PHOTO: PAUL MATTSOON

Following decades of underfunding and sabotage: Ambulance workers gear up to strike

GARETH BROMHALL
AMBULANCE SERVICE WORKER, SWANSEA

Over 10,000 ambulance service workers across England and Wales have voted to strike and are gearing up to join nurses, posties, rail workers and others on picket lines this winter.

From paramedics and emergency technicians, to call-handlers and control staff, they are at the sharp end of the crisis in the NHS.

They are facing a pay award well below inflation, which is, in effect, another pay cut, after a decade or more of freezes and restraint. It's clear that staff who provide essential

urgent and emergency care and transport realise that they need to use their collective strength, now more than ever.

This is more than just a fight on pay, although that is vital. It's also a fight for the future of our NHS.

Workers know the reality of ambulances queuing outside emergency departments, and of wards critically understaffed as tens of thousands of posts go unfilled. They see their friends and co-workers burn out and move on, further driving the lack of staff, and of the experience that comes with long-term service.

Those working on the ambulances themselves are frustrated at waiting

in hospital car parks, while response times continue to soar. Call-handlers report the stress that their services are under, due to cutbacks in social care, delayed discharge, and overload in GP surgeries - all the fault of decades of underfunding and ideological sabotage by Tory and New Labour governments.

It is vital that the upcoming strikes in the ambulance services are coordinated with those of the other NHS workers where possible, as well as with the ongoing strikes in both the public and private sector. That will give us the most impact, and the best chance of winning, if we strike together.



PHOTO: NUMBER10/CC

Building the success of the NHS strikes

AN RCN NURSE

On strike days, as well as picket lines, we should have nationwide protests, to draw maximum awareness and engagement from workers and the general public. It would also link us with other striking workers, such as

rail and postal workers, to increase confidence and solidarity.

Health unions should be coordinating their action. It has been made clear that members of unions that didn't meet the legal threshold to strike can refuse to cross RCN picket lines without being disciplined;

this should be communicated to all members.

The Trades Union Congress (TUC) should coordinate all groups of striking workers and prepare for a 24-hour general strike.

• See also back page

Health strike in Northern Ireland

A joint statement has been made by the Northern Ireland public service union NIPSA and Unison to announce action short of a strike from 5 December, and health service-wide strike action on Monday 12 December. This is the first strike in the health service since 2019.

The unions say:

"A return to strike action is a reflection of the depth of the crisis in the

health service. Health workers in Northern Ireland, who have made enormous sacrifices during the Covid pandemic, have not even received a 2022-23 pay offer from their employers. An effective and efficient health service cannot be based on driving down the living standards of staff, some of whom now rely on food banks. A decent pay rise is essential to maintain the stability of the workforce and retain staff."

Health workers are angry Bold leadership is needed to build the fightback

SOCIALIST PARTY MEMBERS ON UNISON'S HEALTH SERVICE GROUP EXECUTIVE

New waves of health workers are set to join the RCN nurses on strike, with ambulance workers in both Unison and the GMB having hit the Tory anti-democratic ballot threshold, and they are to be joined by Unison members in three NHS trusts.

Plans are now being drawn up to coordinate the action to maximise its impact, raising the pressure on the Tory government to pay up.

Unfortunately, many Unison health workers who voted to strike will not be allowed to at this stage, as the union in their trust did not meet the 50% turnout threshold. Many are now discussing ways in which they can join and support the action. Unison has agreed to reballoon those

health branches which came close to the threshold.

It is clear that the anti-union laws have had an impact. While it's apparently OK for a Tory prime minister to be elected by an e-ballot of party members, unions are forced into postal ballots. There are no turnout thresholds to elect councillors or MPs.

Unison reps and members, like in other unions, put a lot of effort into trying to secure the mandate. However, it is clear that inadequate database systems and phone-banking organised centrally are no substitute for reps on the ground, able to meet, discuss and organise workers.

The right-wing Unison leadership in health, which over many years has been turning the union into a service union rather than a fighting body, has seen many branches fall

into disrepair. It is not simple to turn them back on overnight.

The union needs to have a serious look at its lay organisation, which will be built if combined with a bold fighting lead. The anger of members is clear from the fact that, despite all the obstacles, a 34% turnout is the best Unison in health has ever seen.

Right now that means maximising the forces to coordinate action, and urgently reballoon others. As a step in this work, there should be solidarity lunchtime rallies outside hospitals on the strike days, which can help give confidence to all health workers.

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WHAT THE SOCIALIST PARTY STANDS FOR

This Socialist Party manifesto sums up our main demands on the different issues that face the working class. It outlines what is necessary to begin the process of achieving a socialist society in Britain and internationally, able to meet the needs humanity and to protect the planet.

Available from Left Books: www.leftbooks.co.uk or scan above

INTRODUCTION TO MARXISM

The basic concepts

Marxist ideas can help gain clarity on events and processes, and use lessons of past struggles to build independent workers' organisations that are capable of leading the working class to power.

SOCIALISM TODAY

Monthly magazine of the Socialist Party

December-January issue includes...

- Enough is enough. But what do we do at the ballot box?
- The party's over? The long demise of the Tory party
- Scotland's fight. The social and the national struggle are one
- COP27 calamity

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Rail bosses conspire to crush RMT The fight goes on

SOCIALIST PARTY MEMBERS IN RMT

On Sunday 4 December, rail union RMT was presented with a set of proposals from the Rail Delivery Group of employers, supposedly to enable progress towards a settlement of our long-running dispute over jobs, pay and conditions.

The proposals were quite simply outrageous. To accept the document in any form would equate to complete surrender. Correctly, the union's national executive committee rejected it.

The bosses have not stepped back an inch from their original position of shutting down ticket offices, throwing guards off trains, and destroying our precious terms and conditions, which trace their origins as far back as the 1919 railway strike.

The offer to Network Rail members was inadequate, but noticeably included fewer attacks than on

our train operating company (TOC) members. However, it still falls below our demands for a significant pay rise. Socialists are clear that the pay rise must match RPI inflation.

At this stage, it appears that the strategy is to split off Network Rail from the TOC members.

Referendum on the offer

The offers have been put out to a referendum of members and, rightly, the union has kept the action on while this takes place, and added extra dates around Christmas.

We need a massive vote to reject this offer, to send a signal to rail bosses and the Tory government that the fight will go on until an acceptable deal is on the table, and the offensive against rail workers is defeated.

While the Department for Transport and rail bosses claim that they need to increase efficiency and get rid of 'outdated working practices',



SALISBURY SP

it's another rule for their friends in charge of the West Coast Mainline franchise.

Nationalise

Avanti has succeeded in taking a highly profitable company and running it into the ground, by extracting huge profits but failing to invest in staff recruitment and training. It

has resulted in mass cancellations and misery for passengers.

Instead of being immediately stripped of the franchise for their greed and incompetence, Avanti has been rewarded with a £1.3 million bonus payment, and a six-month contract extension. Yet another example of why the railways must be democratically nationalised.

The Tory government and the employers are united in their plans to smash trade union organisation on the railways. Our strike action in December and January is absolutely essential in our campaign to defend jobs, pay and conditions.

The outcome of our dispute will shape the railway jobs of the future. We must fight on!

Sixth-form strike: Not lazy or greedy – but fighting back!

National Education Union (NEU) members in sixth forms took strike action on 30 November, coordinating with education workers in the universities. Amanda, a striking teacher in the West Midlands, spoke at the Birmingham UCU strike rally.

"As an NEU rep, it is a pleasure to stand in solidarity with the UCU in their fight for better pay, job security and decent pensions. As a teacher of ESOL qualifications, I work in a sector that has been cut to the bone since the Con-Dem government of 2010, despite the ever-urgent need for migrants to be able to access English classes.

"These cuts cannot be viewed in isolation – they are part of a decade or more of austerity measures, which have deprived vulnerable people of vital services. This means that we are more than just teachers – we are administrators, social workers and a signposting service.

"We will be labelled as lazy or greedy by the right-wing press for taking strike action, yet by definition, we are neither.

"It is the norm for school teachers to work 70-hour weeks. It was reported that support staff, among the lowest-paid workers in education, and teachers have bought essentials for students who cannot afford stationery or school uniform, out of their own pay packets.

"We come into the profession wanting to make a positive difference to people's lives, but we are up against a very different political agenda, which has led to cuts,



At Hull Wilberforce College, pickets asked, "Why aren't we all out together?!" HULL SP

privatisation and casualisation in education and elsewhere.

"As a rep, it has been inspiring to see my trade union lead the campaign for a pay rise in line with inflation and better funding for colleges. This, combined with the momentum that has been built up among members, brought us the amazing result of an 88.5% vote for strike action, on a 63% turnout.

"This has to be taken in the context of the growing movement for change, resulting in transport workers, nurses, postal workers and many others saying 'enough is enough'. Over one and a half million workers are currently engaging in strike action.

"But why are workers taking action now? Is it because they realise that in the sixth richest country in the world, there is no need for cuts to vital public services?

"According to the 'Rich List' in May, the wealth of UK billionaires increased from £490.7 billion to £597.2 billion. That extra £106.5

billion could pay for a fully funded education system, NHS and social care.

"Are workers taking action because the strikes taking place across different sectors have given them the confidence to stand up against attacks to their own pay and conditions?

"Coordinated strike action between transport workers, teachers, postal workers, nurses and everyone else long overdue a pay rise could show who really keeps the country running.

"Sadly, Keir Starmer has not given any indication that he will fight on the side of the working class. Not only has he reprimanded Labour frontbenchers for appearing on RMT picket lines, but he was also in Birmingham last week trying to blame migrant workers for low pay, rather than stingy bosses.

"This is why there is a need to channel the energy from the strike wave into a political alternative to the Tories and Labour."

A battle for the future of Royal Mail

POSTAL WORKER

After eleven days of strike action, the turnout and resolve of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) pickets is as strong as ever.

It is increasingly looking like the strike will have to be a prolonged one. Hopes of it all being settled in the run-up to Christmas, with the action on Black Friday/Cyber Monday and the pre-Christmas period, seem to be waning by the day.

'Simple Simon', as CEO Thompson is known on the CWU Facebook group, and his board look set on ruining Christmas for everyone but themselves.

He has been claiming that strike breakers have increased by 84% in some areas, which is an absolute joke. Maybe four people have worked instead of three out of hundreds.

Although the exact numbers are not fully known by the union at this point, it is clear to us that the vast majority, if not all, of the work going out on strike days is done by managers and agency or temporary workers.

Nationalise

Keir Starmer's Labour Party finally came out this week and called for a full audit of the accounts and the reason for the losses Royal Mail have made in the last year.

But Starmer should come off the fence – if he promised to enact the policy agreed at Labour Party conference to renationalise Royal Mail, that would put huge pressure on the Royal Mail bosses and their political backers, the Tory government.

A lot of the losses are due to the tapering-off of the pandemic: the loss of Covid test-kit revenue, and a decrease in online ordering, caused by both real-life shopping and a crisis in spending power of ordinary people.

However, the £560 million awarded to shareholders, and the millions wasted on agency workers, are clearly the biggest factors in the alleged £1 million a day losses. There has also been considerable investment in new parcel-sorting hubs that has come out of the profits.

All of this clearly calls for an opening of the books, in order to halt the finger being pointed at the strike days.

Victimisation

Meanwhile, to add fuel to the fire, management in most areas have been trying to provoke unofficial action by attacking the most militant and visible reps, with what appear to be trumped-up charges.

In east London, our two most vocal reps have been indefinitely suspended in a bid to provoke us into walking out unofficially (something we have a strong tradition of) which, of course, would be used to stop our official action.

We're already taking official action, which is being escalated and will likely need to be further stepped up. Defending our reps against victimisation must be added to the demands of the dispute.

Thankfully, we have not taken the bait and are all being extra-careful to not do anything that can be used



SOUTH WEST LONDON SP

against picket lines. This is the safest tactic we can follow due to the extreme nature of management's vicious measures.

Posties were outraged when they saw a joint statement by senior Royal Mail management and the managers' union CMA, which is part of Unite. It appeared to show that managers would receive bonuses for implementing the attacks on CWU members.

Postal workers welcomed the statement by Unite general secretary Sharon Graham and national chair Tony Woodhouse repudiating this. The CWU tweeted their thanks to the Unite leadership.

Many of us believe that Unite should now join with the CWU in a united fight to save Royal Mail from the wrecking agenda of Thompson and Co. The jobs of all Royal Mail staff are on the line.

With two days of action in the pipeline every week till Christmas, many of our members are feeling the pinch. That's why the union needs to really step up a mass appeal for strike funds.

We don't want posties to feel they have no choice but to think about looking for alternative employment or consider the meagre £6,000 and nine-month redundancy payoff.

Some of the talk is that even if there are any jobs left after the onslaught, they may not be jobs worth

going back to. What an indictment of the behaviour of a board, in charge of what is seen as a public service, towards posties considered key workers during the pandemic.

Destruction of Royal Mail

Thompson claimed this week that we are not a letters but a parcel company now, and so we have to compete with the likes of Evri and Amazon. The proposed introduction of owner-drivers in Royal Mail would mean the beginning of the end of the six-day letters service and a decent job for hundreds of thousands.

It could double the number of redundancies, from the currently suggested 10,000.

If they pay 50p per parcel we will have to race around to deliver 20 an hour, at the very least, and letters, along with non-driving staff, will be pushed to the side. What then of the NHS letters, Christmas cards and bank cards people are waiting for?

We are fighting for the future of this service now, despite our top management being intent on asset-stripping. So we stay strong and continue into the new year.

On 9 December, posties from across the country are coming to central London for a demonstration that should be a "sea of red uniforms", as CWU leader Dave Ward put it. Transport will be organised from most areas and we expect bumper crowds.

CWU pickets said:

About the backlog at Mansfield: "Inside it's up to the rafters. A couple of agency staff are going in, they won't even scratch the surface".

PAUL TOOLEY-OKONKO
MANSFIELD SOCIALIST PARTY

Pickets at Northfield delivery office in Birmingham also reported a huge backlog of mail. "One casual left the depot with 80 parcels and came back with 56!" We were told another put a Bradford postcode into his satnav instead of a Birmingham one, and ran out of petrol on the M1 on route to Bradford!

CLIVE WALDER
BIRMINGHAM SOUTH WEST SOCIALIST PARTY

Bishop Auckland posties said: "They want to get rid of us. Managers are only bothered about the tracked parcels because they get a bonus for them, they don't care about letters or other post."

CATHERINE GATHERCOLE
TEESIDE SOCIALIST PARTY

At the Windsor picket line, pickets all read the Socialist Party strike bulletin and agreed that we need coordinated action. One worker told me that even some who previously hadn't come out, had since joined with the strikes.

NEIL ADAMS
READING SOCIALIST PARTY

University workers on the march

Thousands of University and College Union members rallied and marched in central London on 30 November, as part of the union's biggest ever university strikes.

They were joined by Unison members also striking in several universities, and by rail and postal workers and union leaders in solidarity.

In addition, rallies and marches took place in towns and cities around the country.

Socialist Party and Socialist Students members participated and spoke at rallies including in Swansea, Cardiff, Sheffield, Leeds, Bristol, Birmingham, Leicester and many more.

National rally PAUL MATTSSON



Fire fighters lobbied parliament in big numbers on 6 December, as part of the campaign for their strike ballot

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

Capitalist rivalries put Newport workers' jobs at risk



Newport Wafer Fab
PHOTO: JAGGERV/CC BY-SA 2.0

DAVE REID
SOCIALIST PARTY WALES

600 jobs at a semiconductor plant in Newport have been thrown into doubt as the plant is caught between farcical mismanagement by the Tory UK government and geopolitical rivalry between imperialist powers. Business secretary Grant Shapps has blocked the sale of microchip firm Newport Wafer Fab to Nexperia, a Chinese-owned company, on national security grounds. He has ordered the company to sell its stake in the firm, which will jeopardise the future of the plant. Unless hundreds of millions of pounds of support is provided by the government for selling the plant and finding new customers, 600 well-paid jobs will go.

The plant is one of the UK's largest and most efficient manufacturers of semiconductor components, and has been making silicon wafers used in the production of microchips since the 1980s when it was privatised by the Tories. It is a key part of a South Wales semiconductor cluster of four plants, which could be all affected by its closure. But after its £63 million purchase by Nexperia, a company said to be linked to the Chinese state, the UK government called in the purchase, alleging national security concerns.

The British government has followed the dictat of the US intelligence agencies by banning Huawei and in blocking the takeover of Newport Wafer Fab.

But it's the 600 families of the workers whose Christmas will be ruined worrying whether they will be

working there next year. The plant does not contribute to high-end superconductors - mainly wafers for switches for phone chargers and lightbulbs, and Shapps has refused to reveal what the alleged security concerns are. The government alleges that there could be "potential reintroduction of compound semiconductor activities" at the plant.

Nexperia even promised to cut all links with the cluster, never to transfer intellectual property out of the Newport plant, not to take on military contracts or pursue compound semiconductor manufacturing, and to have a government monitor on the company board.

The suspicion of Newport workers is that the decision is more about trying to stymie Chinese commercial expansion as part of the developing trade war between China and the US. Nexperia had discussed expanding at Newport, building two more 'fabs' that would have created 1,000 jobs.

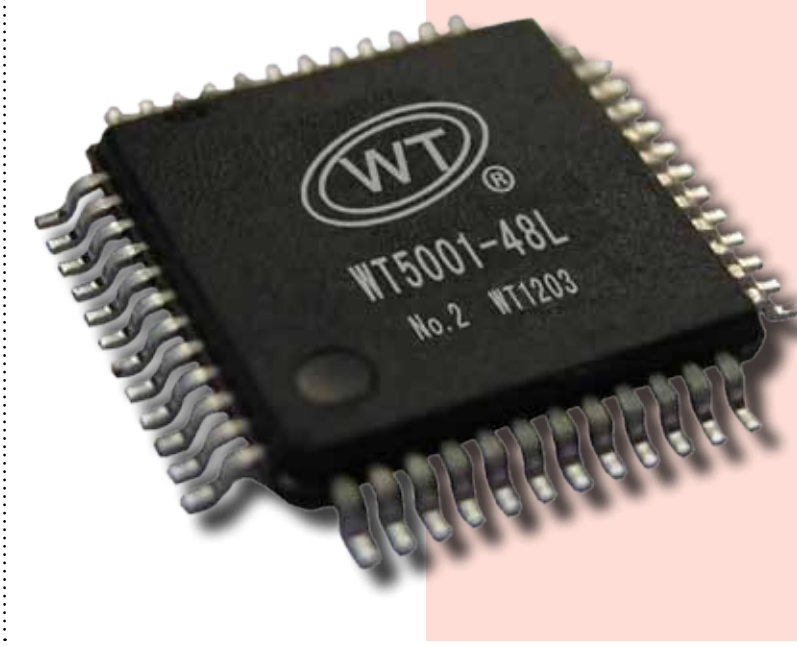
The whole affair highlights the attitude of the Tories and British capitalism - they intervene in industry to accommodate US demands but refuse to intervene to save the plant, together with its jobs and specialist skills which have been built up over decades and are vital to the local economy, and potentially for the UK economy.

We say:

- Save jobs and skills at the plant
- Nationalise Newport Wafer Fab under workers' control and management
- Nationalise and integrate the UK semiconductor industry



Nationalise Newport Wafer Fab under workers' control and management



The global semi-conductor industry has become one of the linchpins of the world capitalist economy. Semiconductors are used in virtually every modern electronic good. A global shortage of semiconductors that arose during the Covid crisis has led to huge slowdowns in the global production of electronics, telecommunications, and especially cars.

Globalisation encouraged an international division of labour with components gathered from around the world to be assembled to produce finished products. The suppliers of most components can be changed if they fail to deliver, but the semiconductor industry is concentrated around just a few producers.

One company, Taiwanese Semiconductor Manufacturing Company, produces 90% of the world's most sophisticated chips that are needed for high-end electronics, telecommunications and automotive industries.

Realising the vital strategic importance of the semiconductor industry, the two big global rivals, China and the US, are racing to try and develop their own capacity to mass produce the most sophisticated semiconductors to provide a reliable supply to their domestic industries, which would give them a vital edge in industrial production.

The US government is ploughing \$52 billion and the EU €43 billion to develop semiconductor production capacity. This chip race has become increasingly competitive, with the Biden government banning the sale of equipment that would allow the development of advanced semiconductor production in China.

The semiconductor industry is also strategically important because its products can be secretly manipulated for security purposes by companies linked to the Chinese or American state. The blocking of Huawei 5G technology and mobile phones by the US government, which has also been imposed on its allies, including Britain, was in part to ensure that the Chinese state could not use its semiconductors to spy or sabotage infrastructure.

Students squeezed and forced into debt - fight for living maintenance grants



Socialist Students fighting back on campus
PHOTO: SOUTHAMPTON SOCIALIST STUDENTS

ISLA DEFTY
LEEDS SOCIALIST STUDENTS

91% of students are either worried or very worried about the rising cost of living, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS). This worry is reflected in the measures students have been forced to take simply to survive. This year, a survey by the National Union of Students found that 11% of all students have resorted to using food banks.

Students have been virtually abandoned by the government and university bosses, and left to deal with a crushing cost-of-living crisis by ourselves. Provisions such as the £400 energy bill payment will not affect those in student accommodation and, since full-time students are unable to claim income-related benefits, we are blocked from receiving the low-income cost-of-living payment. Personally, my bill payment is done through a service called UniHomes. We pay a set amount per person per week. That amount is rising from £16 a week to £24 a week next year if we want to live in the same house. There is no way to negotiate this payment, we simply have to accept that we will be paying a third more on bills with no extra financial help.

'Cost-of living packages' provided by many universities fall disappointingly short. In an email sent to students, the University of Leeds stated it has increased its Financial Assistance Fund by £1.5 million to £1.9 million. But with over 36,000 students, all paying at least £9,250 a year in tuition fees, if the 91% of students who are struggling all claimed this hardship fund, they would receive just under £60 each.

The major issue is the fact that the student loans system is fundamentally broken. The amount given as a student maintenance loan is based on several factors, including how much your parents earn, where you're going to university, and whether or not you live with your parents.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies states that "the real value of maintenance entitlements has fallen



Students have been virtually abandoned by the government and uni bosses

substantially and is now at the lowest level it has been in seven years... students from the poorest families have lost more than £1,000 in maintenance loan entitlement."

Parents, themselves hit by rising costs, are typically expected to pick up the slack for inadequate maintenance loans. Instead of providing real help, university bosses suggest students pick up part-time jobs on top of full-time studies. One in four students have taken on new debt in response to the rising cost of living, according to the ONS.

Things need to fundamentally change. Socialist Students fights for living maintenance grants which rise with the cost of living, and for the abolition of tuition fees. Universities must open the books so we know exactly where our £9,250 per year is going. Universities must agree to pay staff a decent living wage, as well as stopping and reversing pensions attacks.

These are not unreasonable or unattainable demands. Students in Scotland don't pay tuition fees, and neither did students in England until 1998. Why is the government insisting that young people suffer for our education? Because they would rather plunge us into a lifetime of debt than take money from their super-rich mates to fund free high-quality and accessible education for all.

AN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPLAINS WHAT THE COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS MEANS FOR THEM:

"Our tuition fees don't have a price cap, so universities feel free to charge us any ridiculous amounts they want. We are not eligible for any welfare schemes because we are not citizens. We are not eligible for Disabled Students Allowance or hardship funds. Most of us are self-funded. We work exploitative zero-hour contracts and we don't get any maintenance loans. We can only work 20 hours a week. At my current wage this barely meets my rent. We are stuck in this bubble of financial insecurity knowing we are on our own with no state support, relying on family and friends for help."

Rent controls now to end 'rent gouging'

OSCAR PARRY
SOUTH WEST LONDON SOCIALIST PARTY

Over the past few months average rents have exploded in price. Combined with skyrocketing energy bills and food prices, many tenants are struggling to make ends meet. Prices in 48 council areas are now classed by the Office for National Statistics as unaffordable when compared with average wages.

Asking rents on new listings are up by almost a third since 2019, and some people are facing increases of up to 60%. The London Renters Union said its members had reported average rent increases of almost £3,400 a year (21%), which it described as "rent gouging".

My own experience of trying to find a flat in London was constant calls with estate agents, checking sites like Zoopla and Rightmove daily, and attending viewings every week. Each viewing had 20 or more people trying

to rent the same flat, forcing tenants into competition with each other.

Faced with a chronic housing shortage, profit-driven estate agents are now organising a bidding system, where prospective tenants are forced to try and outdo each other's offers to secure accommodation. This means that prices are inflated way over the original asking price, forcing working people out of certain areas and into mouldy and damp properties.

'No-fault' evictions

There are growing calls to finally ban 'no-fault' evictions, used by landlords seeking to raise rents, which the government has been pledging to do so since April 2019.

The Scottish government announced a temporary, limited rent freeze in September, describing the pressure on household budgets as a "humanitarian emergency". Tenants in London and Manchester, many of them organised in renters' unions,

protested this weekend to demand that the government freezes rents as an emergency measure.

However, this is only a partial solution. Freezing rents at unaffordable prices will leave many workers high and dry. We need a permanent reduction in rents to a level democratically determined by elected representatives from working-class communities and trade unions.

The UK government has resisted rent control, saying last month it would lead to "disinvestment in the sector". France, with a similar population, is building twice as many homes as present as Britain. A mass council house building programme, employing thousands of workers on trade union rates of pay, would boost supply and provide good-quality affordable homes for all. Only by treating decent housing as a right available to all, and not an investment to maximise return on, can we resolve the housing crisis.



PHOTO: JAMES IVENS

IRAN 1979 A REVOLUTION THAT WAS TAKEN FROM THE WORKING CLASS

The current mass movement in Iran by women and the working class is taking place against the regime that came to power in the revolution of 1979. What lessons are there for today's revolutionaries from what happened in 1979? We reprint an article by **Chris Moore**, first published in the Socialist on the revolution's thirtieth anniversary in February 2009.

In February 1979 the hated monarchical dictatorship of Mohammed Reza Shah was finally swept away by a general strike, with oil workers in Khuzestan in south-west Iran at its heart. Millions of protesters poured onto the streets of Tehran and other Iranian cities.

This mass movement ended the so-called 'Peacock Throne' and Pahlavi dynasty. It was described by eyewitness Edward Mortimer in the Spectator as "a genuine popular revolution in the fullest sense of the word: the most genuine, probably since 1917."

But unlike the Russian Revolution in 1917, the Iranian working class lacked a Bolshevik-type party and leadership that could act independently and decisively for the working class, and a socialist programme which could show a way forward. Without such a leadership a religious movement came to the fore to direct political opposition to the Shah and take power.

Background to revolution

The history of the Iranian working class is full of heroic struggles. Under the impact of the 1917 Russian revolution the Gilan Soviet Republic was set up in northern Iran. But this was butchered by Reza Khan, the Shah's father, who came to power through a military coup in 1921. Khan was always a pawn of British imperialism, which replaced him in 1941 with his more malleable son.

The Iranian working class has suffered from tragically inadequate leadership. The main workers' party prior to the revolution, the Tudeh (Communist Party), was formed in 1941. Leading massive strikes, it built tremendous support during the Soviet Union's occupation of Azerbaijan in northern Iran, while Britain occupied the south. Khuzestan oil workers led what was called the largest industrial strike in Middle Eastern history in 1946, and the Central Council of Iranian Trade Unions became the largest union federation.

By 1951 a popular movement, led by the radical nationalist prime minister Muhammad Mossadeq and his National Front, ejected Britain from the oilfields and nationalised them. The 'mighty' Shah fled into exile in 1953. But as Iran was an oil-rich and strategically important country, US and British imperialism instigated a coup to return the Shah. The leadership of the 100,000-strong Tudeh effectively did nothing and fled to its

Stalinist masters in Moscow.

To secure his rule, the Shah began crushing all organised political opposition, and trade unions were banned. During the Cold War, the US wanted to build Iran as a capitalist fortress for the West against the Stalinist Soviet Union, massively supporting its rearmament. Backed by the CIA, the horrendous Savak secret police organisation, formed in 1956, became increasingly indiscriminate. After the Shah's fall, one grisly cell was discovered with bed frames adapted into human cookers and with a bacon slicer-type contraption for hands and arms.

Terror alone was not enough to preserve the regime. There was another rebellion in 1963. Thousands were slaughtered, and religious leader Ayatollah Khomeini was exiled, not to return until 1 February 1979 when a crowd of five million greeted him.

In 1963 the Shah launched his 'White Revolution' of massive industrialisation, including a transformation of the countryside. Using oil revenues to buy out and enrich the mainly absentee landlords, his aim was for them to invest in industry, so transforming them into a capitalist class. Imposing capitalist farming techniques, over 1.2 million peasants were driven from the land, flooding into the urban areas to live in appalling living and work conditions.

The Shah's economic policy was borrowed from the National Front and explains why their support ebbed away. The Tudeh party suffered repression, but was politically incapable of laying the basis of a workers' movement to overthrow capitalism, hankering only for a new Mossadeq.

Growing oil revenues fattened the opulent Peacock throne. During the 1973 Israel-Egypt war, imperialism's puppet cut some of its strings, becoming one of the most militant members of OPEC (Organisation of Oil Exporting Countries). Oil embargoes quadrupled the price of oil. In 1976 Iran produced 295 million tonnes of oil, 10% of world production.

Breakneck industrialisation was creating a working class that was beginning to feel its strength and demand its share of the new wealth. Anger was fermenting and a reckoning was on the horizon.

Revolutionary explosions

US imperialism appeared blind to the growing prospect of unrest. President Jimmy Carter in December 1977 toasted the Shah, calling his "great leadership" "an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world." The CIA reported in late 1978 that the Shah would continue to hold power for at least the next ten years. But the economy was moving into crisis. The price of oil dropped after 1976 and inflation was rampant. Auster economic measures created increased unemployment and suffering for workers.

Despite the bloody repression, protests exploded in the workplaces, mosques and universities, among the poor masses, and in the myriad of stalls and traders in the bazaars.

In 1977, 50,000 urban poor people

blocked bulldozers sent to clear slums in Tehran. The shooting of theology student protesters in the holy city of Qom in January 1978 sparked a general strike.

After mid-summer the situation escalated dramatically as textile, machine tool, sanitation, car assembly, paper mill and other workers took action. Major strikes took place in Tehran, in the province of Fars and in Khuzestan, and especially in the city of Ahwaz.

Increasingly demands went beyond pay and redundancies, calling for democratic rights, 'Death to the Shah,' 'Vengeance against... his American imperialist friends.' Others wanted a 'socialist republic based on Islam.' October saw the steel workers from Esfahan in central Iran call for the expulsion of all Savak and military personnel from the plant.

Striking Khuzestan oil workers were only producing fuel for necessary uses. A desperate Shah sent in the troops and 3,000 protesters were massacred in Jaleh Square, Tehran.

Workers responded by widening the general strike. Rail workers stopped the army elite and others from travelling. Customs workers only allowed essential products like medicines and baby food into the country. The masses were rallying behind the oil workers' call for regime change and for the Shah to go. With the army increasingly fraternising with the crowds, the monarchy was doomed and it fell on 11 February 1979.

Workers' leaders

So how did a movement led by right-wing political Islam prise power away from the Iranian working class? Comprising three to four million among a 35 million population, the working class was numerically bigger than it was in Russia in October 1917. Crucially, the Tudeh had not grasped the lessons of Trotsky's theory of the 'Permanent Revolution,' that was confirmed by events during the Russian revolution, relating to semi-industrial countries like Russia and Iran.

Trotsky explained that a weak national capitalist class, reliant on landlordism and imperialism, was incapable of carrying through the historical tasks of its own capitalist revolution, ie introducing democratic rights, a representative parliament, land reform, etc. This task would fall to the working class, bringing the peasantry with them. But once achieved, workers would not want to hand over power to the capitalists but would want to struggle to bring about a workers' government and socialist society.

Instead of leading the Iranian working class in a struggle for power, the Tudeh were in the straitjacket of the Stalinist 'two-stage' theory. It argued that the struggle for socialism was postponed to a future date after the establishment and development of a capitalist state. Subsequently the Tudeh only called for a 'Democratic Islamic Republic' and rallied behind the capitalist Islamic clerics. Their leader was even nicknamed 'Ayatollah'.

Other significant left radical groups



Protesters outside the US embassy in Tehran in 1979. Behind them is a banner written: "Long live anti-imperialism and democratic forces" PHOTO: PUBLIC DOMAIN

also failed to organise within the ranks of the working class. The Fed-ayeen came from youth supporters of the Tudeh, who took up armed struggle with guerrilla tactics after the failure of the 1953 coup.

Suffering military defeat in the mid-1970s, they re-emerged on 10 February 1979 to defeat the Shah's Immortal Guard and drive the final nail in his regime. The Islamist Mojahedin-e Khalq guerrillas called for an Islamic society without the clergy. Neither group could show a way forward by coordinating the movement nationally and disarming the Islamist clerics politically and militarily.

Religious movement

The failure of the Stalinist bureaucracy, along with left Arab movements, aided the growth of political Islam. They aped those capitalist nationalists who portrayed themselves as playing a progressive role by advocating 'Arab socialism,' while not fundamentally challenging the capitalist system.

So when the Shah's 'White Revolution' started to dispossess one of the biggest landowners, the Islamic church, of its land, it was forced into opposition to the regime and a process began which enabled the clergy to eventually take power.

With all political organisations banned under the Shah, opposition tended to gather in the mosques. But the clergy had a well-organised network with 10,000 mosques, 180,000 members, 90,000 mullahs and 50 ayatollahs. Khomeini's letters and tapes were smuggled in, copied and distributed. With half the population living in rural areas and two-thirds illiterate, the poor and dispossessed were stirred by the radical sermons.

They interpreted the call for the overthrow of the Shah as a struggle against totalitarianism and the demand for an 'Islamic Republic' as for a 'republic of the poor.' Even an oil worker commented to a US correspondent: "Khomeini... will take power from the rich and give it to us." An image was portrayed of an Islamic state where freedom and democracy would replace corrupt western and non-Islamic influences.

Added to this, the bazaars tended to flourish around the mosques, paying a zakat (tax) to them. When the Shah attacked the bazaars, blaming them for rampant inflation, Khomeini exploited the situation and drew in their support.

Social centres also gathered around the mosques and they played a crucial role in offering support and food to the dispossessed peasants streaming into the cities. This pushed some clergy in a left direction, with one cleric calling for public ownership of industry and a classless society.

Workers' councils

But across Iran workers had taken matters into their own hands, occupied their workplaces and organised strike committees or shoras. Before the collapse of the regime, a committee representing the Khuzestan oil workers demanded "workers' participation in the political affairs

of the country," as the only way for a "genuine construction" of an Iranian republic.

Delegates from shoras across the country met in Tehran at Khane-ye-Karegar or Workers' House, organising a massive demonstration on May Day 1979. But there was no real national coordination among the different sections of workers. The Tudeh party even actively agitated against the shoras' existence.

In the poor urban districts, shora-ye mahallat or 'neighbourhood councils' appeared, organising such things as delivering bread to the elderly and infirm. In spring 1980, 70% of Esfahan was run by shoras. Homeless families and poor tenants occupied luxury hotels and villas, setting up shoras. While in Kurdistan and the Turkomen area of Golestan, peasants reclaimed land.

As the spiritual leader of the Shi'ite masses, and with the militant clergy the only force with clear political aims, organisation and a strategy, Khomeini was able to take the leadership of the revolution, imposing his newly formed Islamic Republican Party (IRP). Mehdi Bazargan, leader of the liberal capitalist National Front, was named as prime minister for a few months, and with the backing of the Tudeh, the clerics organised a new regime.

Within two days Khomeini had ordered the shoras to disband. But he had to tread carefully. As one metal worker put it: "After the revolution, the workers noticed that the country belonged to them." Khomeini was forced to adopt radical left phraseology and an anti-imperialist stance, especially towards the US. Returning from exile he announced "a government for the people." In effect dual power between the shoras and central authority existed.

Khomeini balanced between the classes; he was compelled to make concessions to workers, introducing free transport and medicine and subsidising essential goods, but he was determined to smash their organisations. In March, women were ordered to wear headscarves. Protests followed this decree. By April Khomeini had achieved a 99% victory in a national referendum, where the only choice was 'yes' or 'no' to an 'Islamic Republic.'

Regime tightens grip

In July 1980 with state finance in crisis and unemployment at 25%, the first nationalisation decrees were issued, leading to the majority of industry being taken into state ownership, although private property was still 'respected'.

'Revolutionary courts' were established, with executions of military and political leaders, police and Savak agents from the Shah's regime. But up to ten-year jail sentences could be imposed "for disruptive tactics in factories or worker agitation".

Shora-ye eslami or Islamic councils

were developed under strict central control and established alongside the shoras. Strikes were banned, and by late 1980 the Pasadaran or 'Revolutionary Guards' toured the factories crushing the shoras.

Ethnic minorities make up a third of Iran's population; severely repressed under the Shah, this continued under Islamic rule. In the Turkomen region of Gorgan, the Arabic speaking oil region Khuzestan, and especially the Kurdish Kordestan region, rebellions broke out and were brutally put down.

Despite strikes and other actions, by 1982 the new regime had secured its grip. Khomeini suppressed all opposition as traitors to the revolution. The regime exploited the 444-day occupation (and hostage crisis) of the US embassy by Islamic students started in November 1979 and the Iran-Iraq eight-year war, after the US-backed Iraqi regime invaded in September 1980.

Khomeini used the war to whip up fervent nationalism, and thereby strengthen his power. Tens of thousands of opponents were executed, hundreds of thousands imprisoned. By 1983 the Tudeh and Fedayeen parties were totally crushed.

In the initial stages after the revolutionary wave and against a world backdrop of the distorted planned economies of the Stalinist states, Iran's regime had to adopt a left character. But as the revolution faltered it moved in an increasingly rightward direction, and nationalised sectors were privatised.

The Iranian working class is again showing its strength. But without the building of an independent workers' party with a determination to struggle for a socialist society, as part of a socialist federation of the Middle East, there will be no end to the war, poverty and repression that blights the country.

• See 'Iran: The revolutionary youth movement faces the challenge of organising' and other articles at socialistparty.org.uk for more on the current movement



Housing care workers strike against bullying bosses

NICK AUVACHE
UNITE ORGANISER

Care workers at Hestia LIFE in Hounslow, west London, who provide independent living support to vulnerable people, are striking on 12 and 13 December. The strike is over pay, workload and travel expenses, as well as union recognition.

Unite the Union members are not only fed up with low pay, they are also fed up with unmanageable caseloads. Hounslow LIFE is one of Hestia's larger services and supports over 600 of the borough's vulnerable adults.

Hestia has a deeply committed workforce in Hounslow. To go on strike is a big step, but they are angered by management's refusal to listen to their reasonable concerns, or to engage with them and their chosen representatives.

Hestia refuses to talk

The conciliation service ACAS has approached both Unite and Hestia. But while Unite is happy to talk, Hestia management has refused to engage in conciliation.

Unite Regional Officer Steve O'Donnell commented: "Our members believe that Hestia management have taken an arrogant and bullying approach for a number of years. For example, after their pay claim was submitted, they were sent threatening letters saying that even talking about union issues could lead to disciplinary measures. It is quite possible to resolve the issues in this dispute and to avert a damaging strike, but the first step must be negotiation."

Hestia management have refused

to negotiate over a number of important issues. When Unite members complained that they were paid less than the London Living Wage, despite the organisation's public claim to pay this minimum standard, management refused to talk. Only after a Unite campaign involving publicity, the intervention of the local authorities that fund Hestia schemes, and the Living Wage Foundation, was this matter resolved.

When Unite wrote to management to inform them of the strike dates and Unite's intention to fight for recognition, their response was to immediately sign a recognition agreement with Unison. Management claims that Unison understands the constraints placed on them! Unite's proud record of fighting for workers at Hestia shows that we first and foremost recognise the constraints placed on workers.

Labour council

Unite members have lobbied Hounslow Labour council to intervene. Unfortunately, they have so far declined to do so. However, Unite at Hestia has received significant support from workers in Hounslow, in particular from the local government branch of Unison.

Hounslow Unison Secretary Bill Reed said: "We have given our full support to the Hestia strikers and will be with them on Monday 12 December. It is unacceptable for the council to fund an organisation that bullies their staff and refuses to recognise their chosen union. They deserve to join the numerous successful disputes run by Unite."

We look forward to greeting them and other workers at our picket lines.



Shelter workers strike "3% won't pay our rent"

ROB WILLIAMS
SOCIALIST PARTY NATIONAL TRADE UNION AND
WORKPLACE ORGANISER

Over 600 Unite members at homeless charity Shelter have started two weeks of strike action. Management imposed a 3% pay rise, when RPI inflation is surging over 14%.

On picket lines around the country, workers were met with support from fellow trade unionists and passers-by, knowing full well the valuable work they do. Because of this, Shelter bosses will find it difficult to brand them as selfish, particularly when all workers are facing the brunt of the cost-of-living crisis.

As well as Unite flags and placards, workers brought their own homemade signs and banners. "3% won't pay our rent" showed that, without a real pay rise, they could be joining the growing list of homeless people.

One banner gave a perfect response to any idea that management can't afford to pay up: "Cut Shelter reserves not wages." Unite estimates that the reserves are £14.5 million, "substantially higher than its target reserves of £8.9 million."

Neil MacPherson, Unite picket supervisor at Shelter Community Hub, Sheffield, spoke to Alistair Tice:

"Shelter workers are at the sharp

end of the housing emergency. We are not immune from the cost-of-living crisis. We are struggling to keep a roof over our own heads. Shelter is sitting on a surplus of reserves. It needs to prioritise its workers, otherwise we will be turning to Shelter for advice to help us stay securely housed!"

A picket at Dalston, East London, said: "We are on strike so we can live. We have staff members worried about putting on the gas and electric. Some are accessing food banks because there's no food at the end of the month. If we are worried about ourselves, how can we help our clients?"

Jacob's factory workers battling greedy bosses

Workers at Jacob's Bakery in Aintree, Liverpool, are in the midst of all-out strike action.

GMB branch secretary at the site, Tim Collins, said: "We have taken strike action for ten weeks now, with this being the third week of all-out action. Ultimately, we are fighting for a fair pay claim."

Workers put themselves on the line to keep the company going during the pandemic. Yet, despite the cost-of-living crisis, Jacob's is expecting them to get by with a pay offer significantly below inflation, a real-terms pay cut. At the same time, the company is making millions in profits.

Pickets told us there has been at least one collision between a car crossing the picket line and a striking worker. The striker sustained injuries. The incident was reported in the Liverpool Echo newspaper, though only with a measly 66-word report hidden away on page seven, not on

the front page, where it should have been. Pickets were quick to point out that had roles been reversed, with a striking worker behind the wheel, it would not have been surprising to see the national media, let alone the Liverpool Echo, report the incident with more prominence!

Tim pointed out that he and his fellow pickets are struggling. Yet, when approached by a children's charity looking for donations to help buy Christmas presents for vulnerable kids, every picket put their hands in their almost empty pockets to help. Quite a contrast to the greedy bosses at Jacob's.

The weather is cold, times are tough, but the mood is high on the picket line. All visitors to the picket are asked to bring firewood to help fight the cold!

ALEX SMITH, HENRY SAVILLE, CHARLIE JARVIS AND DAN RITCHIE
LIVERPOOL SOCIALIST PARTY AND SOCIALIST STUDENTS MEMBERS

STEVE ION
MERSEYSIDE SOCIALIST PARTY

Unite members working for Biffa Waste Management, contracted by Wirral Labour council, are on strike for a week, initially.

These workers deal with refuse collection for homes and businesses, and street cleansing. They worked during the Covid pandemic and were rewarded with a pay freeze.

Well below inflation

Now they have been offered a two-year pay deal of 7-9%, which is well below RPI inflation of over 14%, plus a further erosion of terms and conditions.

Pay is normally agreed from April but the employer's offer is from June, not backdated, which already reduces the offer. An HGV driver is only on £11.95 an hour, refuse operatives on £11.50 an hour, and street operatives on £10.76 an hour.

The pay claim is for 15%, without strings. Members say they've been in negotiation since January and have put counter-proposals, but the employer hasn't met the union's demands.

Management want to introduce a scheme called 'day force', which will mean workers clocking-in on

Merseyside refuse workers fight poverty pay from wealthy bosses



their mobile phones. Management want an untested, blind agreement, but these proposals lack detail and could lead to an increase in workload.

It is also the bosses' intention to increase the number of loads a day, from two, or two and a half, to three loads a day.

Biffa is a very wealthy company and can well afford the increase. It has just recorded 38.5% growth, with a record revenue of £1.4 billion. It is

reported that the managing director has just had a £1.4 million bonus - which is 67 times the workers' average pay increase!

The ballot return was 97.2% in favour of action, and on day one the strike was solid, with a huge turnout in support of the picket line.

Pressure on the employer, alongside pressure on the Wirral council's controlling Labour group, needs to continue to bring a swift resolution to this dispute.

PCS strike plans: Broad Left Network meeting says we need a strategy to win



DAVE SEMPLE
PCS BRANCH SECRETARY, WIGAN, PERSONAL CAPACITY

On 30 November, as university and postal workers were taking national strike action, the Broad Left Network (BLN), a rank-and-file group in the civil service union PCS, held a successful meeting of activists.

Over 60 PCS members, from around the country and from a range of different civil service groups, joined the meeting. Many were new to the BLN, and all were angry at the decision of the union's national executive (NEC) to call only very limited strike action.

Mandate for action

At the beginning of 2022, PCS held a consultative vote to test members' willingness to strike for a 10% pay claim. This consultation, which finished in early March 2022, gave the executive a massive mandate to organise for action.

Nine months on, following an overwhelming 'yes' vote in a national official ballot, giving 100,000 members a mandate to strike, the union's leadership has only just announced action, starting mid-December, to support our 2022 pay claim!

Despite the fact that other unions around us are calling national all-members' action, which PCS could easily join in with, the PCS leadership has restricted itself to a series of small-scale selective strikes, with decisions on all-member action put off to the new year.

The meeting was chaired by PCS's BEIS group president Marion Lloyd (BEIS is a government department),

and addressed by Jim Halfpenny from the Scottish education union EIS, and Fiona Brittle, PCS national executive committee member and BLN supporter.

Jim outlined his union's programme of strikes, described great picket line support from parents, and declared: "We did not cause the crisis and we will not pay for it!"



Other unions around us are calling national all-members' action, which PCS could easily join in with

Fiona Brittle reported on her repeated efforts to get the PCS executive to make early plans for action. To adopt a strategy to win based on all-member action, supported by targeted strikes, and to ballot additionally for action short of strikes. She said she had supported the idea of a levy of members to help fund the action, but not the clumsy, bureaucratic way it is being imposed.

An application to call out PCS members working for the Scottish Government on the day of the Scottish budget had been rejected by the union leadership, she said, on the grounds of 'not enough detail' provided!

Fiona said that the BLN strike strategy, contained in the model motion to be put to the meeting, was in line with the position she had put on the

executive, for which she had been attacked by the Left Unity majority leadership.

The key points of the motion, unanimously agreed by the meeting, include:

- Support for a levy, following a proper campaign amongst the membership to raise awareness about why it's important, to gain their consent, and with an opt-out, if necessary.
- The call for an update to branches on discussions with all the other unions in dispute about coordinating action.
- The need to put ourselves in the strongest position to win this dispute. Whilst this should include targeted action, immediate and continuing all-member action is essential to unite members in all those 126 areas which have got over the anti-democratic Tory threshold.

Urgently rebalanced those areas which fell short of winning a mandate, and include a second question for action short of strike. Hold a further ballot on action short of strike in those areas which already have a mandate.

Confident to fight

Marion Lloyd said that the union's current Left Unity leaders start from a pessimistic view of what they consider to be possible. In contrast, the BLN strategy is based on what we need to do to win, and a confidence in the membership's preparedness to fight.

Marion pledged BLN support for all strike action called by the union, and urged those attending the meeting to use the model motion to put pressure on the executive to reconsider its strategy.



Unite sector conferences: Build on the union's fighting lead

SOCIALIST PARTY MEMBERS IN UNITE

"I bring you the solidarity from 450 picket lines," said Unite general secretary Sharon Graham in the plenaries to the recent industrial sector, retired members, and Unite Community conferences. 80% of those disputes have been won, and Unite now has a strike fund of £50 million to back up future disputes, including Unite members involved in national action.

Labour

Both from Sharon Graham, and in questions from delegates, there was criticism of the union's relationship with the Labour Party. In the Coventry bins dispute, she said that she treated the council as a bad employer. She will support Labour in the election, but there was no point in them being in office if they don't do what they are supposed to do, i.e support the working class. The rich, she said, already have a party - the Tories.

In a session with manufacturing delegates, Labour shadow minister Ed Miliband dodged a question on why Labour MPs were being dissuaded from attending picket lines. He said he had sympathy with workers facing the cost-of-living squeeze and expressed 'solidarity'. However, another frontbencher, Anneliese Dodds, has since said "nobody supports strikes". That leaves little doubt about which side Labour is on.

No longer in the rules regarding

action is the phrase 'within the law', about which Sharon reminded the government if action was needed in response to legislation limiting the right to strike.

Socialist Party members played an important role in the Unite Community conference, including in the debate on the NHS, which urged Unite not to back Labour candidates who challenge Unite health policy or have links to private sector healthcare.

Pay

In the health industrial sector conference, delegates voted to scrap the Pay Review Body, which health workers feel does not act in their interests. In local authorities, an emergency motion urged Unite to lead the campaign against the 'appalling proposed cuts' outlined in Sunak's 'mini-budget', and that if Labour does not support the union's fightback against austerity, the executive council should be asked to reconsider Unite's level of support for the party.

Unite has an official position to support no-cuts budgets and a fight for the necessary funding. Unite is obliged by rule to affiliate to Labour, but all other financial support is discretionary.

2023 will see the executive council elections, and both rules and policy conferences in Unite. The industrial and other conferences have set the scene. It is vital candidates are elected next year that will continue and extend the union's industrial and political trajectory.

Readers comment on broken Britain



Jane's Buckland estate in Newton Abbot LEWIS CLARKE/CC

Where is the support for working-class people?

JANE HADEN
DEVON SOCIALIST PARTY

I live in Devon. Not a place where most people expect to find poverty and desperation. But like every area of the country, this Tory government has decimated hope here too. This is a personal account of the human cost of this government's policies where I live.

Buckland in Newton Abbot is considered a 'rough' and 'deprived' area. There are 3,000 homes on the estate, with many housing association tenants with both physical and mental health needs, including various addiction issues.

We are an area where people are advised not to buy a house. However, we are a community, who know each other, and help where we can.

Over the last few years, my family,

particularly my daughter, have lost friends - six deaths, probably preventable, and two attempted suicides. Most of these people are in their 30s, with many more years to live, given the right to or, indeed, any support.

Two of my daughter's friends took overdoses, but survived. And the support offered? A leaflet was given to one. She was told that she wouldn't be able to access the self-referral service, because she needed more help than they could give. But she was not referred to any other service.

Non-existent help

Help for mental health is just about non-existent here. You may get an assessment. But for any actual treatment to start, there are long delays.

According to a friend, who is waiting for help for her son, the wait is 18

months. Help is needed now, not in 18 months' time. People die waiting.

Another friend died from a seizure after trying to give up alcohol, without proper support. At hospital, they gave him information. But no tangible support was offered. He was promised an appointment at some point.

Another of my daughter's friends died through lack of quick medical attention after a long wait for help after an accident.

That's six deaths of people that we know. How many more are there?

We need a new party with compassion, that puts people before profit, and understands that things can be different. A party that will base budgets on the need in communities, rather than the needs of big businesses, who can well look after themselves.

Merton hostel residents treated like animals

The eleven residents of Amity Hostel in Wimbledon, south London, were given just one week's notice by their landlord to vacate on 1 December. Socialist Party member Alex Forbes, an Amity Hostel resident, explains what is happening.

Nobody is getting any help from Merton Council. We feel left on a sinking ship.

I am a low-paid teaching assistant. I have lived here over two years, and paid nearly £15,000 over that time. I have lived in Merton for most of my 38 years, and grew up here.

Merton Council refused to offer any help. For example, there is a vulnerable woman on the top floor with severe mental health problems, who shouts and talks to herself all day.

The building has been deemed uninhabitable. Despite this, for the last two years, the council has been taking vulnerable people with

alcoholism from the streets, and placing them here, in conditions you wouldn't put an animal in.

There is a shower with its electric wires exposed. A fire door has been off for months. Another has been missing a glass pane for months.

The fire brigade closed the top floor for a few weeks due to concerns after a fire. There are water and rain leaks all around the building.

Bailiff

Clearly the council don't check regularly - except when a bailiff, on behalf of the council, came stamping around the corridors one morning demanding payment of a business-rates debt. With a tablet device in hand, he threatened the staff on reception with taking their computers, and interrupted a TEFL English class, making it move.

What a caring council, a Labour council, we have, that values money more than people. The landlord,

Wallhill Ltd, has done zero repairs. It's treating the building, and its vulnerable residents, as a cash cow, while waiting to build their new hotel here, which the council gave consent for last year.

No extension time was offered by the landlord. And even on eviction day, there was too much stuff still here. My neighbour needed a van, for example.

And nobody has been rehoused, despite all the promises from the council. The council told one resident to just move to another London borough. And another is still sleeping rough almost one week later.

I tried going through Croydon County Court to stop the eviction date. But like the council, I was blocked from getting to who I needed to deal with. I was told to go online, phone a number, and shove paperwork through a letterbox - only to be told I'd put in the wrong form.



School student climate strikes in 2019 PAUL MATTSOON

I've found a home in Socialist Party Socialism could save environment, and so much more

JAMES BROCK
BRISTOL SOUTH SOCIALIST PARTY

I've been interested in learning about socialism because of climate change. The capitalist profit system's drive for unplanned growth and rampant extractivism lie at the heart of it.

I was interested in environmental campaigning. But as important as that is, it is still a one-issue movement. A socialist society could deliver on the environment, along with so much more.

I joined Bristol University Socialist Students. We were active on the campus and at protests.

Then, I had more hope in the electoral system. I was inspired by the ideas in Jeremy Corbyn's Labour manifesto.

However, since the 2019 election, and Keir Starmer's increasingly

abhorrent purges of socialist MPs from the Labour Party, I'd been looking for a new political home, rather than give in to apathy and despair.

No existing mainstream party presented the ideas I hoped for. So I took my time to improve my knowledge of socialist theory, and looked for answers to my questions.

Then, one day in Bristol, I came across a Socialist Party campaign stall, and spoke to Socialist Party member Amy Sage. Since that day, I've found myself getting more involved with building the party, and have finally found a new political home that gives me hope.

Do you agree?
JOIN THE SOCIALISTS
socialistparty.org.uk/join

AREA	£ RECEIVED	£ TARGET	Q4: OCTOBER-DECEMBER 2022	DEADLINE: 3 JANUARY 2023
Eastern	2,966	1,200		247%
South West	3,948	1,800		219%
London	7,364	4,600		160%
Wales	3,205	2,300		139%
East Midlands	2,381	1,850		129%
Yorkshire	3,114	2,550		122%
North West	1,354	1,150		118%
Southern & SE	2,423	2,350		103%
West Midlands	2,669	2,600		103%
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Other	7,740	3,850		201%
TOTAL	37,651	25,000		151%

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London TUSC meeting What options now Labour has abandoned working class?



RMT members on strike at Hackney Downs Overground station

MARK FINUCANE
SOUTH WEST LONDON SOCIALIST PARTY

1 December was the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) meeting in London - 'Enough is Enough: But what do we do at the ballot box?' This is a question that has persistently been on my mind, as I'm sure it has for many others.

I recently joined the Socialist Party, which is part of the TUSC. I reached out on the day of Kwasi Kwarteng's budget disaster.

I was hoping to learn about what options we have now that Keir Starmer's Labour has all but abandoned the working class. The meeting didn't disappoint.

Carlos Barros is an RMT union rep, who stood as a TUSC council candidate. He captivated the room with his description of the ongoing RMT workers' struggle for fair pay and working conditions.

Carlos outlined the need for a workers-led political voice, and the potential that would have, drawing on representatives that are known and trusted in local communities,

and who genuinely wish to represent working people.

Andy Walker is a former Labour councillor, who has also stood for TUSC. Andy said that TUSC stands to support the working class. And that in TUSC, all people have a voice.

The Socialist Party's Hannah Sell addressed some of the questions bubbling up in my mind, before I even had a chance to ask them, like how can a small organisation hope to win in our two-party political system?

All political organisations have to start somewhere. In December 1910, the Labour Party only won 42 seats, and its forerunner - the Labour Representation Committee - got only 1% of the vote when it first stood in 1900.

100 candidates

Standing 100 candidates at the next general election would give TUSC a platform on political debates. The name Trade Union and Socialist Coalition has its benefits too. It's a good time to be affiliated with the trade union movement right now, especially when Labour is refusing to support the strikes.

TUSC is democratic. There's no call to submit your questions three days in advance here. Many of the 60 attendees at the meeting took the opportunity to ask questions and offer contributions.

One contribution I found particularly compelling addressed the concerns that support for TUSC could split the left. Keir Starmer is already accepting the Tories' pro-austerity spending limits, and people on the left are already looking for a new political home to throw their support behind.

Supporting TUSC is not going to stop Labour winning the next general election. But we can ensure, as Hannah said, that we "keep Starmer looking over his left shoulder instead of to the right."

I left the meeting hopeful and invigorated. Next, TUSC is planning follow-up meetings in local areas across London to prepare for a general election challenge.

If Starmer's Labour isn't going to represent us, at least there is an organisation that will.

• tusc.org.uk

Poll tax book launch

ERIC SEGAL
AUTHOR, 'COULDN'T PAY, WOULDN'T PAY, DIDN'T PAY'

Two and a half years ago, the owner of 'The Chambers' coffee house and bar in Folkestone agreed to host the launch of the book 'Couldn't Pay, Wouldn't Pay, Didn't Pay' about the poll tax. But the Covid pandemic cut across the launch.

This year, industrial battles have raged in south east Kent, since illegal mass sackings of 786 workers by P&O management. On the picket lines,

workers assessed the lessons of past battles, in particular the year-long miners and P&O strikes of the 1980s. And they were eager to discuss socialist ideas.

This is the reason that 20 people from Dover and Folkestone came to listen, discuss and contribute to the eventual rescheduled book launch meeting, which I introduced. It was chaired by the former local Fire Brigades Union (FBU) secretary. The meeting included striking rail and postal workers, channel tunnel workers, and university lecturers.

This book is proving to have its own history. The delayed launch meant a discussion on the relevance and lessons of the anti-poll-tax struggle to the current wave of strikes, government crisis and political turmoil.

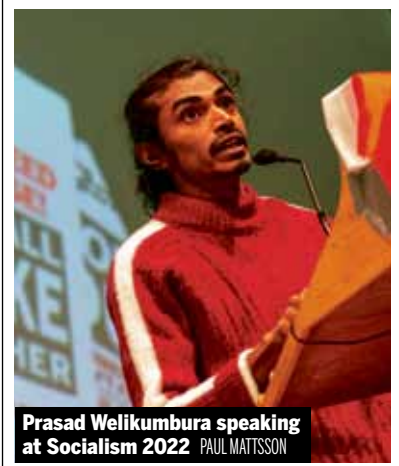
The final copies of the book, and four copies of the Socialist, were sold. The meeting agreed that this would be the first step locally in organising a fightback against the bosses' system.

'Couldn't Pay, Wouldn't Pay, Didn't Pay' is available from **LEFT BOOKS** leftbooks.co.uk



Protests in Sri Lanka NAZLYAHMED/CC

Hearing first-hand from movement in Sri Lanka



Prasad Welikumbura speaking at Socialistism 2022 PAUL MATTSOON

HENRY HILDER
SOUTHAMPTON SOCIALIST STUDENTS

Prasad Welikumbura, a leader of the mass revolt in Sri Lanka, met with us in Southampton Socialist Students on 30 November for an insightful talk about taking part in the mass movement.

I did not know much about Sri Lanka's situation, but Prasad explained how the movement formed - largely among students and workers - and how it came into confrontation with the police and other attempts by the government to suppress the uprising.

Prasad also explained how the movement's lack of planned organisation meant that the successes it had achieved, such as

toppling its authoritarian and oppressive regime, were only short-term accomplishments.

The country's current economic crisis means little to no access to healthcare, widespread malnourishment, and serious inflation. And acting with harsh aggression and damaging people's human rights have been the government's priority.

Prasad's words were inspirational, informative and compelling. After Prasad's talk, we discussed how to incorporate his experience of a mass movement into fighting back against a failing government and inflation here too. There is discontent among students and workers.

I've only been in Socialist Students less than a semester. But each week I learn a lot about the different national crises and faults of capitalism, often unreported in the mainstream media.

As a student struggling with simple things - such as affording food, and the overhanging dread of student debt and rent - it is reassuring to be a part of the movement that aims to remove these issues from the lives of ordinary people.

Committee for a Workers' International
FIGHTING FOR A SOCIALIST WORLD
• Read more about the mass movement in Sri Lanka at socialistworld.net

• socialiststudents.org.uk



WHAT WE STAND FOR

Capitalism is an ailing, crisis-ridden system based on the exploitation of the majority of the world's population by a small, super-rich elite who own most of the wealth and the means of producing it. This way of organising society, in which the pursuit of profit comes before everything else, causes poverty, inequality, environmental destruction, wars and oppression across the globe.

The Socialist Party organises working-class people to fight against the attacks from this rotten system on our lives and livelihoods, and for a socialist alternative: a society which takes the wealth out of the hands of the super-rich and is democratically run by working-class people to meet the needs of all not the profits of a few.

Building fighting democratic trade unions in the workplaces and a new mass workers' party is a vital part of the struggle to change society along socialist lines.

Because capitalism is a world system, the struggle for socialism must also be international. The Socialist Party is part of the Committee for a Workers' International which organises across the world. Our demands include:

WORK, PENSIONS AND BENEFITS

- A £15-an-hour minimum wage for all, without exemptions. For the minimum wage to automatically increase linked to average earnings or inflation, whichever is higher.

- Share out the work. A maximum 32-hour working week with no loss of pay or worsening of conditions. The right to flexible working, under the control of workers not employers. An end to insecure working, for the right to full-time work for all who want it; ban zero-hour contracts.

- All workers to have trade union rates of pay, employment protection, and sickness, parental and holiday rights from day one of employment. End bosses using bogus 'self-employment' as a means to avoid giving workers rights.

- No to austerity through inflation. For all wage rates to be automatically increased at least in line with price rises.

- Open the books of all companies cutting jobs or claiming they can't afford to pay a real living wage. State subsidies, where genuinely needed, for socially-useful small businesses.

- For trade unions independent of the capitalist state, with members having democratic control over their own policies, constitutions and democratic procedures. For all trade union officials to be regularly elected, subject to recall by their members and paid a worker's wage.

- Reduce the state retirement and pension age to 55. For decent living pensions.

- Replace universal credit and the punitive benefit system with living benefits for all who need them.

- Visit socialistparty.org.uk/join or call 020 8988 8777
- or text your name and postcode to 07761 818 206

- to find out more today!

Help fund the fightback!
DONATE TODAY

- For local councillors who are committed to opposing austerity and all cuts to local services, jobs, pay and conditions.

- For a socialist NHS to provide for everyone's health needs, including dental and eye care – free at the point of use and under democratic control. Kick out the private companies! Nationalise the pharmaceutical industry under democratic workers' control and management.

- Renationalise privatised utilities – including rail, mail, water, telecoms and power – under democratic workers' control and management.

- Free, publicly funded and democratically run, good-quality education, available to all at any age. Abolish university tuition fees and write off student debt, end marketisation, and introduce a living grant. No to academisation. For all schools to be under the genuine democratic control of local education authorities, school staff, parents and student organisations.

- The right to a safe secure home for all. For the mass building of genuinely affordable, high-quality, carbon-neutral council housing. For rent controls that cap the level of rent. Fair rent decisions should be made by elected bodies of tenants, housing workers and representatives of trade unions. For cheap low-interest mortgages for home buyers. Nationalise the privately owned large building companies, land banks and estates.

- Oppose the dictatorship of the billionaire owners of the media. For the nationalisation of newspaper printing facilities, radio, TV and social media platforms. Access to these facilities should be under democratic control, with political parties' coverage being allocated in proportion to the popular vote at elections.

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

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all workers involved in the production, processing, distribution and retail of food.

DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS

- For united working-class struggle to end discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, disability, sexuality, age, and all other forms of prejudice and oppression.

- Repeal the anti-trade union laws and all others that trample over civil liberties. For the right to protest and to strike! End police harassment. For the police to be accountable to local committees, made up of democratically elected representatives of trade unions, local community organisations and local authorities.

- For the right to choose when and whether to have children – for the right to access abortion, contraception and fertility treatment for all who need it.

- For the right to asylum – with democratic community control and oversight of emergency funding resources. No to racist immigration laws.

- Expand democracy. For the abolition of the monarchy and the House of Lords. For all MPs to be subject to the right of recall by their constituents at any time, and to only receive a worker's wage.

- For proportional representation and the right to vote at 16.

- For the right of nations to self-determination. For an independent socialist Scotland and for a socialist Wales, both part of a voluntary socialist confederation of Wales, England, Scotland and Ireland.

- Oppose the dictatorship of the billionaire owners of the media. For the nationalisation of newspaper printing facilities, radio, TV and social media platforms. Access to these facilities should be under democratic control, with political parties' coverage being allocated in proportion to the popular vote at elections.

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TV: Snowpiercer

Sci-fi series explores the class system and role of the state

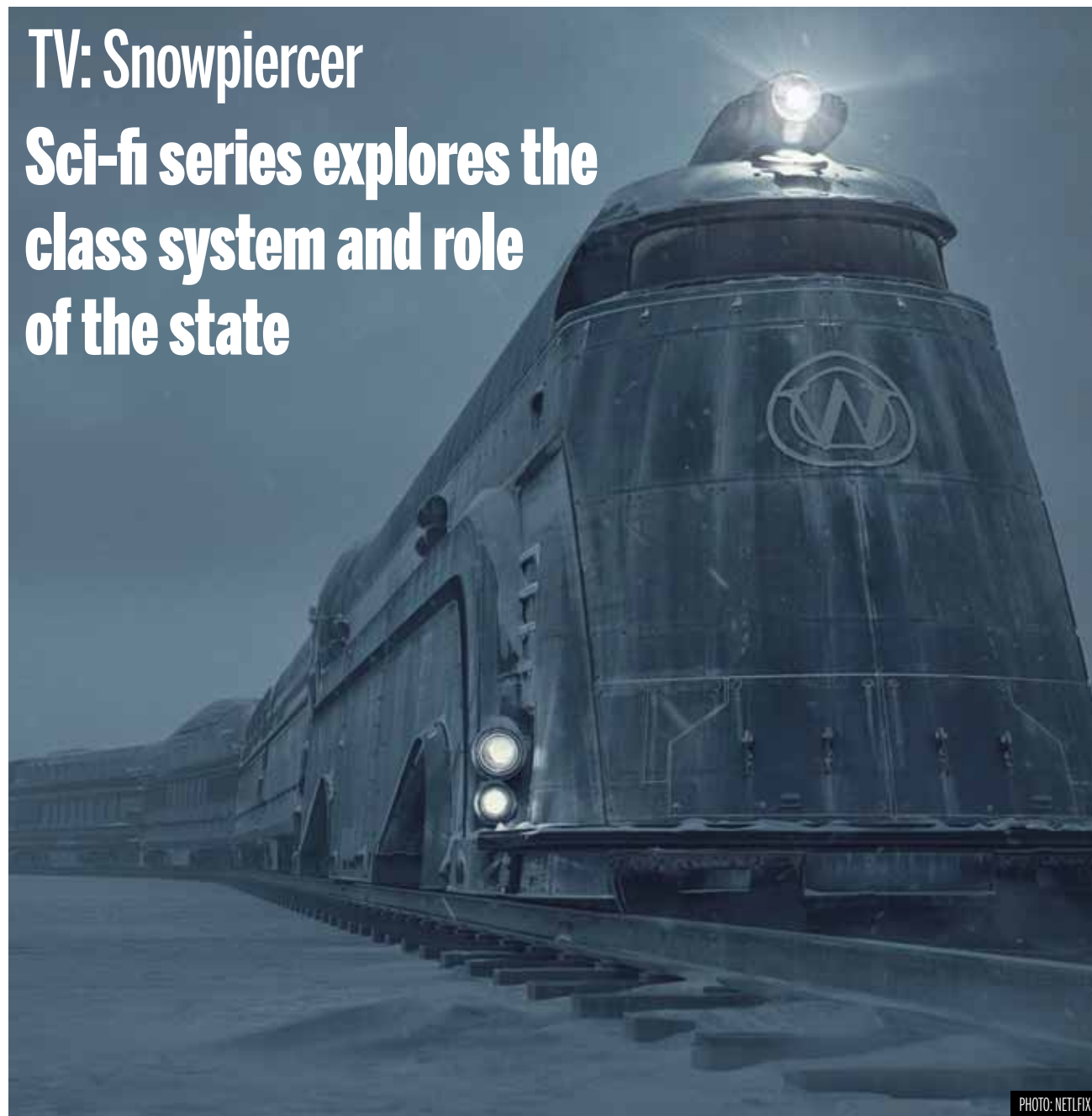


PHOTO: NETFLIX

JOE FATHALLAH
CARDIFF WEST SOCIALIST PARTY

Warning: contains spoilers

Snowpiercer is an American science fiction series broadcast by Netflix in the UK, starring the likes of Daveed Diggs, Jennifer Connolly and Sean Bean. It is mostly set in 2026, seven years after a quick-fix attempt to stop climate change through chemical injection into the atmosphere backfires and freezes the earth.

The only remaining humans, numbering a few thousand, live on a train circulating the world in effectively perpetual motion by extracting hydrogen from the snow.

The train, Snowpiercer, was designed by the opportunistic and sadistic capitalist Mr Wilford (Bean), and it was intended that only the rich would be able to afford tickets and survive. However, in the first episode, several unticketed passengers manage to force their way onto the train before it departs to survive the ice age.

The train enforces a strict class system, divided by carriages. First and second classes are the paying passengers, i.e. those who were rich enough to afford a ticket, and live in absolute (first) and relative (second) luxury. Third class is the workers, who were brought by invitation by Wilford. Those who forced their way on are locked up in dire living conditions in the 'tail', the back of the train, and are known as 'Tailies'.

The role of the working class in

changing society is a prominent theme in the series. In the first season, a group of Tailies led by former homicide detective Andre Layton (Diggs) organise a successful revolution to overthrow the class system, winning most of the third-class passengers over to their side. The regime had been highly oppressive, with a state apparatus willing to resort to measures such as cutting passengers' arms off, and putting them into long-term sleep in a lab, to maintain its rule.

Having overthrown Wilford however, the Tailies discover that he wasn't there at all, and had been secretly replaced by one of his functionaries, Melanie Cavill (Connolly), who had been using his recorded voice to mimic his presence. Melanie, and several other important figures in the regime, throw their lot in with Layton.

The relationship between the ruling class and the state which protects it is also an important theme. The first-class passengers, on discovering Wilford's absence, try to organise a coup against Melanie, but are beaten to it by the Tailies. While the first class live exuberant lifestyles, and are virtually above the law, the regime isn't afraid to remind them how lucky they are, if necessary.

In the second season, the newly classless society faces an invasion, and Layton is forced to abandon the young democratic system and impose martial law. In these circumstances, it resorts to political assassinations to remain in power. In

the war situation, the invaders led by Wilford used inside agents, and technical sabotage, to ultimately overthrow the Layton government and reinstate the class system.

The third season is less overtly political, focusing on the complex relationship between Melanie and her daughter Alex (Rowan Blanchard), and Layton struggling with the pressures of fatherhood alongside trying to lead the train. The class system is overturned for a second time, this time by the underground rebels launching a coup against Wilford without the mass participation of season one's revolution. Again, they find themselves targeted by a terrorist campaign on behalf of the rich attempting to regain control. Ultimately, Layton is able to lead some of the train's passengers to find a habitable spot on the outside.

Snowpiercer is very 'plot-heavy' and moves at quite a pace, sometimes with non-linear storylines, making it somewhat of a challenge to watch at times, but it's worth it. Some negative reviews have been written by TV critics, but I cannot agree with these, as they fail to appreciate that what the series explores isn't just the class system, but the role of the state and its complexities, with its sometimes-conflicting dual roles of protecting both the ruling class and itself. It's exciting, extremely binge-worthy, and well worth a watch.

• *Snowpiercer* is available now on Netflix

Non-fiction: Tales from the Debenhams picket line

Debenhams Ireland - lessons for future struggles against retail company closures

IAIN DALTON
LEEDS SOCIALIST PARTY

Less than one month into the Covid-19 lockdown in Ireland, retail workers at Debenhams received the stunning news that their jobs were no more, and the company was pulling out of physical retail in Ireland. This was all the more shocking for the workers because they had received an email saying that while the UK parent company had gone into administration, all was fine in Ireland.

The focus of the book is the run-up to that announcement on 9 April 2020, and the struggle for over a year afterwards of Debenhams workers across Ireland. These workers initially fought to keep their jobs, but when this failed, they fought for the previously agreed redundancy payments, which the company announced it would not pay. The company instead directed Debenhams workers on how to apply for statutory redundancy via the government, a tactic that was subsequently applied to the Debenhams UK workforce.

In several ways, Debenhams was typical of the retail sector, particularly department stores. Many of these companies have been repeatedly taken over, loaded with debt, and had the stores sold and leased back. For example, Debenhams itself was bought in 2003 by a consortium known as Baroness Retail Limited, which invested £600 million, but also loaded the company with £1 billion

of debt. Not only did it sell off the buildings of 23 stores in 2005, raising £495 million, but was able to collect £1.2 billion when the company was refloated on the stock market within three years!

Debenhams had come to the south of Ireland in 1996, then took over the Roche department stores where Mandate, the main union covering retail workers in Ireland, was a recognised trade union. This meant, unlike in the parent company in the UK, Debenhams workers in Ireland had a collective trade union agreement.

Pivotal to this struggle was the way the workers themselves organised, and in particular their elected shop stewards. As the book describes, the shop stewards responded by creating a WhatsApp group to coordinate among themselves, and contacted their TDs (MPs), with active assistance provided by a number of left TDs.

Union leadership

While Mandate's national leadership had made the dispute official, with a 97% mandate for strike action from the Debenhams membership, the reality was the union's leadership sought to lower the sights of what the workforce should settle for at different stages of the dispute. This lack of confidence in the preparedness of workers to struggle, and therefore adopt tactics of concession bargaining, will be familiar to members of the UK retail union Usdaw.

A rebuttal to this mood was the

resourcefulness of the Debenhams workers themselves. Whether it was organising picket lines across the 11 stores, speaking to the media, organising rallies with support from other trade union and left activists, or even occupations of three of the stores, the Debenhams workers proved themselves more than capable.

12-hour and then 24-hour picketing became necessary as the dispute went on, and pickets realised their main leverage over KPMG - the liquidators appointed by Debenhams - was the stock still held in the stores, valued at around €23 million. On many occasions the workers successfully turned back vehicles which had come to take the stock away.

While the book showcases much of the solidarity received by the workers from various sources, a major omission is discussing the action taken by Debenhams workers in Manchester. Inspired by workers in Ireland, they held protests outside their store every Saturday for several weeks.

While some in Usdaw rallied in support of these workers and those in Ireland, including this author, Usdaw's then president Amy Murphy, and several members of the union's executive council, the response of the union was even more lacklustre than that of Mandate. Using the low union membership in what was an unrecognised company as an excuse, they failed to mobilise the union behind the members it did have who were taking action!

Spreading the action in Ireland

to the UK would have massively increased the pressure on Debenhams management to address the redundancy issues facing workers.

Ultimately the strike was beaten by a combination of two factors. Firstly, the repression of the state wielded on the side of Debenhams and KPMG. The Gardai (Irish police) tried to move pickets on using emergency Covid legislation, and then removed pickets under a court-imposed injunction. The Gardai was also used to remove workers from the two store occupations that took place in Dublin and Cork.

But even this stacked power of the state machine, brought to bear on the side of the employers and their liquidators, could have been defeated. What was missing was leadership from Mandate mobilising its membership and the broader trade union movement in support of the workers. Despite calls for action, the ICTU, the trade union federation in Ireland, never mobilised the wider trade union movement either.

Despite this, significant rank-and-file activists did support the Debenhams workers, including Karen Gearon, a leader of the 1984-87 Dunnes Stores anti-apartheid strike. If larger numbers had been mobilised, it could have posed the possibility of mass pickets able to make the injunctions won by KPMG unenforceable.

Instead, a majority of Debenhams workers who could see no way forward after rejecting previous poor settlement offers, felt forced to accept 'training scheme' funding which was a poor substitute for the redundancy rights they should have had.

The tremendous courage of the Debenhams workers is a lesson to all workers, and shines through in the book. This struggle is one that should inspire any workers facing the closure of their company and workplace, and deserves to be learnt from, so that next time such a situation faces retail workers they can win a substantial victory.

• *Tales from the Debenhams picket line* by Sue O'Connell and Fergus Dowd is available at debspickettales.ie

Debenhams picket and the book (inset) PHOTOS: DEBSPICKETTALES



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SUPPORT THE NURSES

Fight to save the NHS



RCN NURSE IN SOUTH WALES

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) will begin strike action on 15 and 20 December, the largest strike in its 106-year history, and I will be one of the nurses striking. During ten years of nursing, I have seen staffing levels, pay, and conditions deteriorate, and the Covid pandemic has been the last straw.

Nurses' pay has dropped by 20% in real terms in the last decade, so the RCN is calling for a pay rise of 17.6% (or 5% above RPI inflation). The Tories have called this "unreasonable and unaffordable", after they squandered billions on dodgy PPE procurement deals during the pandemic.

Trusts already spend millions on agency staff to plug staffing gaps, while NHS nurses increasingly have to use food banks, opt out of their pension contributions, and take up extra shifts on top of their full-time hours.

In response to the strikes, the Tories have asked us to remember our sense of vocation. During the height of the pandemic, I nursed colleagues on ventilators who had caught Covid while working on the front line. We often worked in inadequate and poor quality PPE.

Even before the pandemic, we often worked hours of unpaid overtime and through breaks. It's estimated that nurses in Wales alone work the overtime equivalent of over 900 full-time nurses. And the Tories dare question our sense of vocation!

The media has also begun sensationalising, reporting that operations and chemotherapy will be suspended due to the strikes, as if this isn't already happening on a daily basis due to short staffing! Many wards are frequently working at half the safe staffing level and patient safety is constantly compromised. During the strike, emergency and urgent care will continue. In Northern Ireland, RCN nurses struck in 2019 over pay (and won!) without harm to patients.

As nurses, we have a duty to advocate for our patients, and striking to ensure adequate pay and safe staffing is part of that. We have the public's support and together we can win!

• see more page 3

WHAT WE STAND FOR: THE SOCIALIST PARTY'S MAIN DEMANDS ▶▶▶ see column on p14

