

WORKERS

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JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2026 £1



WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE BRITISH?

2026 Forwards, not back

EU The plot against Brexit

Juries Speak out to save them

Critical minerals A small step

Covid The costly inquiry

Rail Nationalise in full!

Britain Our fight is here

PFI Coming again?

Farmers On the road

plus Historic Notes,
News, Reviews
and more

WORKERS

Cover photograph of crowd in London's Oxford Street by Alex Segre/shutterstock.com

“ Look forwards, not backwards

JANUARY IS the month of Janus, the two-faced god looking backwards and forwards. It's also time to reflect on coming anniversaries; their importance lies in learning lessons for the future, not in nostalgic reflected glory or in distorting past events to fit a different narrative.

In this issue we look at the Wapping print dispute 40 years ago, a turning point in trade union activity. And like the 1926 general strike, it ended in defeat. The hard lessons are about the necessity and inevitability of struggle against employers and the limitation of trade union power under capitalism.

One anniversary stands out – ten years since the vote to leave the EU which rocked the ruling class. It compromised their wish for the free movement of labour and capital, embodied in a remote and unaccountable transnational organisation.

The vote challenged the view that somehow workers benefited from this arrangement, that somehow progress could be achieved without struggle. Workers did not vote how they were told.

Most union leaders and officials, wedded to the Labour Party and its social democratic politics, were as dismayed as the ruling class. Over the years they had come to hope that somehow EU institutions could mitigate the policies of British governments.

That turned out to be either a massive miscalculation, or a brazen attempt to mislead their members. Or both. British workers went along with the illusion but dissatisfaction and unease found little

focus until the 2016 referendum.

Yet what happened after British workers called the bluff of the EU capitalist club? They sat back! They left it to others!

The result was the long-drawn-out wrangle over the terms of departure. Most of those in parliament tried to sabotage the vote by egging on the delayers and procrastinators or questioning its validity.

Yet workers still had power. Politicians paid lip service to honouring the vote. But it took the 2019 general election to show that the British people were fed up with the shenanigans and delay. And then what happened? They waited for the opportunist politician they'd voted in to do the right thing!

Since then, governments have come and gone. Little has changed. Britain is still limited by ties to the ECHR and to NATO military structures. Net zero crucifies industry. Foreign owners buy up British manufacturers and live high on public service contracts.

Unease is growing again. Workers may choose to remain passive, but they don't believe the lies of a desperate government on things that matter – jobs, pay, housing, energy, immigration and so on – and suspect a government sneaking us back into the EU.

It's time for change in 2026. Don't sit back and hope, against all experience, that something better will turn up. Make a start this year, wherever you are. Shout loud about what you need, what Britain needs for the future, and how things can be different.



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It's coming back

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The new Royal Liverpool University hospital being built in 2014. The PFI contractor went bust. The hospital opened partially, in 2020, and fully in 2022.

The return of PFI

THE GOVERNMENT is grappling with how to revive Britain's infrastructure. It seeks private investment funding to do so, seemingly oblivious to the damaging legacy of the Private Finance Initiative (PFI).

The Chancellor, Rachel Reeves, is looking back to the ideas of the Blair/Brown Labour administration. They took a Conservative policy, that private companies could be contracted to build and run public service projects, and hugely expanded its use.

PFI was controversial from the start. But it became the only game in town to fund public buildings. Its damaging financial legacy lives on with public money still pouring out. And many of the long-term contracts coming to an end are mired in expensive litigation.

As long ago as 2017, the National Audit Office found, to no one's surprise, that there was no evidence that these schemes are value for money. That should have been the end of PFI, but existing schemes carried on, with no call by politicians to stop them.

Now 40 Labour MPs have written to Reeves to ask that no new PFI schemes be introduced. A timid step, given the wealth of evidence justifying the opposition of unions in the NHS and elsewhere from the outset.

• A longer version of this article is on the web at www.cpbml.org.uk

TRAMS

Striking for safety

GREATER MANCHESTER'S tram drivers took strike action in the run up to Christmas to improve working conditions and safety.

Drivers are required to work up to 450 hours over a 12-week period, with some working six days or for 50 hours without a rest day.

In 2024 there were 51 collisions between trams and other road vehicles in Greater Manchester. The drivers fear for their safety and that of their passengers.

The union has repeatedly attempted to raise the issue with management without positive response. Unite balloted the 320 drivers and they voted for strike action.

The employer KeolisAmey Metrolink Ltd responded in early December with proposals to improve conditions within two years. Action was postponed while considering that offer. Drivers voted overwhelmingly to reject it – they feel the issue needs tackling more urgently.

• A longer version of this article is on the web at www.cpbml.org.uk

FACTS MATTER

At *Workers* we make every effort to check that our stories are accurate, and that we distinguish between fact and opinion.

If you want to check our references for a particular story, look it up online at cpbml.org.uk and follow the embedded links. If we've got something wrong, please let us know!

If you have news from your industry, trade or profession call us on 07308 979308 or email workers@cpbml.org.uk



ON THE WEB

A selection of additional stories at cpbml.org.uk

BAE engineers in pay fight

BAE aerospace workers in Lancashire are in dispute over pay. The company turned to the courts to stop strikes but lost. Their union, Unite, has announced continuing action during December.

BBC in crisis and under threat

The current crisis at the BBC is unlikely to subside soon. Unless those working for the broadcaster are able to exercise more professional control, and to prevent political interference, it will probably worsen.

Pointless industrial dispute

Not all workplace disputes are positive. One ongoing in Sheffield where Unite is claiming membership in a GMB area seems particularly pointless and divisive.

Who owes the IMF money?

The IMF is central to the way finance capital runs. It's instructive to see how it controls the international economy through debt.

Nuclear power: go ahead for SMR welcomed

The government's overdue decision to build small modular nuclear reactors in Wales with British technology is a positive step. It's an opportunity for to begin the revival of the nuclear industry.

Plus: the e-newsletter

Visit cpbml.org.uk to sign up to your free regular copy of the CPBML's electronic newsletter, delivered to your email inbox. The sign-up form is at the top of every website page – an email address is all that's required.

Courtesy Unite Scotland



Scotland Demands Better march, Edinburgh, 25 October.

Grangemouth fights to live on

IN A CELEBRATION of workers' organisation, the Scottish TUC held a march in Edinburgh in October. Workers in struggle from across Scotland joined in – among them firefighters, teachers and public service workers, with banners under the slogan Scotland demands better, highlighting the loss of skilled jobs and lack of investment in infrastructure and public services.

Workers from Grangemouth, where hundreds of jobs were lost when Ineos closed the refinery, were present in numbers. Grangemouth's petrochemical plant, also owned by Ineos, is now at risk.

When the closure was announced, the government put forward the idea of Project Willow, to turn Grangemouth into a low-carbon energy hub. They claimed that £200 million would be invested from the National Wealth Fund. None of that has yet materialised.

Such measures miss the point. Britain's energy security requires us to be able to exploit our national oil reserves and build our capacity to refine oil. The government's adherence to the cult of net zero damages us, through higher and higher energy prices, and a dangerous reliance on imports.

Recent research by the STUC shows that the offshore and onshore wind sector, so often hailed as provider of new green jobs, delivers just one new job for every £1 million of turnover. By contrast oil and gas delivered 13.4 jobs per £1 million in 2023.

MIGRATION

Smoke and mirrors

THE GOVERNMENT has dishonestly seized on migration figures to suggest that Britain's immigration crisis is improving.

The fall in "net migration" to 204,000 for the year ending June 2025 was described by Prime Minister Keir Starmer as a "step in the right direction". Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood trumpeted, "Net migration is at its lowest level in half a decade and has fallen by more than two-thirds under this government."

Focusing on net migration conceals and distorts the reality. Just under 900,000 people, mainly from outside Europe, moved to Britain during that period. In total over five million have done so in the past five years. That is not far short of the entire population of New Zealand – or Scotland!

The number of people arriving legally dwarfs those arriving illegally on small boats

(43,000 in the year ending June 2025). And inevitably Keir Starmer blames illegal migration on Brexit and Reform UK.

But the number of Channel crossings continues to climb under the Labour government, more or less back to the peak in 2022-2023. While asylum applications are slowly processed, many are held in costly hotels – and that number is growing, around 36,000 at the end of September.

According to the National Audit Office this all cost about £4 billion in 2024-25. Government promises to change things have had little impact. All they do is point to lower figures than a couple of years ago, ignoring current trends.

The bad news doesn't end there. The reduced "net" migration figure was achieved partly because a quarter of a million Britons left the country, mainly young people between 18 and 35. Many seek opportunities for training and career advancement that Britain is failing to provide.

AEROSPACE

Victory at Westland

THOUSANDS OF workers at the Italian-owned aerospace and defence company Leonardo, which runs Britain's only helicopter factory have won a pay increase worth 8 per cent over two years. The planned further action was called off following the improved offer.

The future for the workforce of over 3,000 is not secure. Leonardo CEO Roberto Cingolani has threatened to close the Yeovil factory if the government fails to award a

new contract to the company. Closure would mark the end of aircraft manufacturing at the Yeovil site, founded as the Westland Aircraft Works in 1915, and the end of helicopter manufacture in Britain.

Leonardo proposed its AW149 model for the New Medium Helicopter required by the Ministry of Defence. After long delays by the government in deciding the contract, defence minister Luke Pollard claimed on 25 November that "a decision [will] be made shortly as part of the upcoming Defence Investment Plan."

• A longer version of this article is on the web at www.cpbml.org.uk



Farmers and their families demonstrating in London on Budget Day last year.

Farmers on the road

BRITAIN'S FARMERS are maintaining their campaign against government food and agriculture policies. Tax changes make the headlines, but other issues threaten the industry, particularly costs.

Farmers showed their anger in demonstrations in central London on 26 November, Budget Day. The Metropolitan Police imposed a last-minute ban on agricultural vehicles entering Whitehall. Some farmers were already on their way, and many tractors made it into Whitehall with large crowds of farmers and their supporters.

Another tractor convoy demonstrated in London on 10 December. Outside London many participants in traditional Christmas tractor runs decorate their vehicles with slogans calling for support for farming and food.

This followed farmers' demonstrations at political party conferences, and a Day of Unity on 24 November with co-ordinated protests throughout the country.

The Budget offered little on the changes to inheritance tax announced a year ago, dubbed the "family farm tax". A concession allowing transfer of allowances between spouses was described by the NFU as "nowhere near far enough" to alter the impact.

There was nothing on energy costs (affecting many industries). And one change to sugar beet quotas will undercut British growers according to the NFU.

No wonder farmers are cross, and they are under pressure from financial markets too. Wheat prices have fallen to half the levels of 2022; the costs of fertiliser, fuel and machinery remain constant or rise.

• A longer version of this article is on the web at www.cpbml.org.uk

WHAT'S ON

Coming soon

JANUARY



Tuesday 13 January, 7pm

Online CPBML Discussion Meeting (via Zoom)

"Britain's economy: we need a new direction!"

Finance must become the servant of productive industry for the country and not an end in itself. British workers have two choices: continue as we are, or strike out in a new direction.

Come and discuss. Email info@cpbml.org.uk for an invitation.

FEBRUARY

Wednesday 4 February 7.30pm

Bertrand Russell Room, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL

In-person CPBML Public Meeting

"Britain's economy: we need a new direction!"

An opportunity to discuss in person the importance of British industry – and why it requires a fundamental shift.

Come and discuss. All welcome. Free entry.

MARCH

Tuesday 3 March, 7pm

Online CPBML Discussion Meeting (via Zoom)

"How to stop the slow slide back into the EU"

Bit by bit, but with minimal fanfare, the government is taking Britain back under the rule of the European Union and its European Court. It has to be stopped. But how?

Come and discuss. Email info@cpbml.org.uk for an invitation.

Top of the government's excuses for the dire state of the economy up to the EU continues, Brexit is being slowly stolen...

Euro creep: what the gov

CHANCELLOR RACHEL Reeves has a whole litany of excuses for the dire state of the economy and why, supposedly, she needs to put up taxes. And up there at the top of the list is, predictably, Brexit.

She and Keir Starmer are doing everything they can to undermine the 2016 referendum result, short of actually calling another referendum. Starmer is busy negotiating the so-called "reset" with Brussels. This will involve handing billions to the EU while losing sovereignty over swathes of the economy.

Betrayal

And the only way to attempt to justify this betrayal is to claim that Brexit is ruining Britain. Any argument will do. We have been told productivity is failing...due to Brexit.

As former Brexit minister David Frost recently pointed out, "Successive governments and the public sector economist blob have argued repeatedly since 2008 that British productivity is about to pick up again, and repeatedly been proved wrong. Now it seems they will finally acknowledge reality – and justify it with the convenient excuse of Britain's exit from the EU."

But their reasoning is fanciful, based on zombie statistics – a useful term defined by Wiktionary as "a piece of information frequently cited by experts and institutions, despite having no basis in research or reality."

Simon Dawson / No 10 Downing Street via Flickr (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)



Keir Starmer and then foreign secretary David Lammy meet European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen in April 2025.

'Unsubstantiated figures of Brexit-induced productivity loss are now being used to justify the cost of bringing the British economy back under the control of the EU...'

The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) is seen as the fount of all economic knowledge. But it is as prone to error as the rest of the financial establishment. In November 2024, for example, it admitted that it had overestimated public sector financial liabilities by £18 billion.

The OBR estimated before the referendum that leaving the EU would result in a permanent hit to UK productivity of 4 per cent. In March 2023 it said it stood by those estimates.

The trouble is that those estimates are just that – estimates. Worse, the OBR arrived at the figure of 4 per cent by taking an average of 13 models, only four of which were above 4 per cent. The highest was from the World Bank, not known for its

accurate forecasting. It said the hit would be 10 per cent.

Unsubstantiated

These unsubstantiated figures of Brexit-induced productivity loss (losses, as Frost said, that were there way before Brexit) are now being used – and will be used repeatedly – to justify the cost of bringing the British economy back under the control of the EU. And no surprise, the government is keeping quiet about the cost of the Brexit reset, which will be real.

The EU, on the other hand, has made its ambitions clear: it wants billions and billions of pounds. The government, keen to extort billions from the British people in the budget, is understandably not keen to have

economy is, predictably, Brexit. But as Starmer's creeping Government can't admit



Ursula von der Leyen in 10 Downing Street, 24

headlines about billions being siphoned off to Brussels. It might – heaven forbid – give the impression that taxes are rising because the government wants to snuggle up to the EU.

What's more likely is that the payment to the EU will never appear as one sum. It will be attached as a separate item to everything that Britain agrees to. One payment for rejoining the Erasmus student scheme, one for joining the EU's electricity trading scheme, another for the agri-food agreement. And so on.

Why Britain should pay to rejoin Erasmus at all is a mystery. At its height in 2018/2019, according to official EU statistics, 17,955 British students and trainees used it to spend time in the EU. That com-

pares with 29,805 coming into Britain from the EU. It's clear who should be paying whom.

Yet in August the Department for Education alerted contractors to the likelihood of a £20 million contract just to run the scheme. That cost would be dwarfed by the actual cost of subsidising EU students coming to Britain – estimated by the government in 2021 to be £2 billion over seven years.

The price tag for signing up to EU regulations on food and farming is not known, but the scope of the impact is starting to become clear. In November it was revealed that oatcakes made with British oats could be banned from sale, crazy as that might seem.

Nor has the bill for joining the EU electricity market been publicly discussed – although it is clear that the EU will want money. And the *Daily Telegraph* reported in November that the government is set to sign up to the EU's net zero policies by linking up emissions trading schemes.

Quite apart from other considerations, such a move could raise prices from gas-fired power stations – which generate 30 per cent of Britain's electricity – and hike consumers' bills by £112 a year.

The cost of being part of the EU's war economy, though, is taking shape. According to news site Politico, the EU is to demand between 4.5 and 6.5 billion euros for us to be part of the EU's rearmament scheme named, ironically, SAFE.

Summit meeting

All these discussions and negotiations were set in train six months ago with the UK/EU summit meeting on 29 May – the first since Britain left the EU. The joint statement issued after the summit talked ominously about “our shared values and our commitment to deeper cooperation”, and on what it called “the need to develop an ambitious, dynamic relationship”.

In plain English, the summit discussed sabotaging Brexit. But the government is so keen not to appear to be doing so, and not to be paying the billions that it will eventually be paying, that progress has been slow. Painfully slow for Downing Street and Brussels. The political will is there, but both Westminster and Brussels

‘The joint statement talked ominously about “the need to develop an ambitious, dynamic relationship” ...’

are strapped for cash.

Matters may be moving more swiftly now, following a telephone call on the evening of Wednesday 12 November between Starmer and EU Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen. No official statement on the call has come from Downing Street, but von der Leyen posted on X that the two “reiterated commitment to our renewed agenda”.

She also revealed that negotiations on trade in plants and animals (see *Workers*, November/December 2025) and the electricity trading scheme would get going the following week. And in a nod to the row about SAFE, she said blandly that “we agree to continue the work together to achieve a mutually beneficial outcome”.

Surrender

The difficulty for opponents of the government's planned surrender to the EU is that it will not all be sewn up in a single summit or treaty. As noted earlier, the government is keen to avoid any mention of the total cost of the “reset”. Likewise – as explained by the House of Lords (pro-EU) European Affairs Committee in November 2025 – the reset is a process, not a single event.

In other words, Britain will creep and shuffle back to the EU in stages, none of them sufficient – they hope – to cause mass outrage. But at a certain point the establishment will turn around and say Britain is as good as back in.

All those who fought for Brexit, all those who care about Britain's independence, should take note. Brexit is being stolen. It's time to fight back. ■

In a world where rival imperialisms and globalist corporat
a precondition of independence. Yet some seem confused

What does it mean to be



Alex Segre/shutterstock.com

Crowd in Oxford Street, London.

WHAT ANSWERS do you hear from work-mates, friends and neighbours when you ask them, “What does it mean to you to be British?” Responses range through the usual self-deprecating stereotypes: “We avoid grumbling”, “We like to get in a queue”, “We are civil and polite”. The list goes on, but one telling observation resonates, “I have no choice, I live here, work here, my family are here, my roots are here.”

Nationality cannot simply be selected from a range of options like a pair of shoes or a car. It’s a more fundamental thing, to do with where you settle and make your life. You don’t have to be born here to be British. But you do have to accept that you are here for the long haul and embrace the way your fellow Britons live their lives.

This, particularly for those not born here, means recognising the importance of communicating in English. We know the damage that is done when this essential is neglected, or worse still, wilfully discouraged.

Division

Whole communities become divided along ethnic and language of birthplace lines, where even the supremacy of British law is challenged. The further consequence is a divided working class focused on what makes them different rather than on what unites them.

The rise of “multiculturalism” over the last 50 years, promoted by many local authorities and national politicians as a way to integrate non-native speakers, has

instead reinforced segregation and brought about “no go areas” in some of our towns and cities for some people whose history there goes back generations.

In some of our schools, the language in the playground, and even the medium of instruction in the classroom, is not English. All in the name of integration!

This is damaging to the British working class, because divided communities have greater difficulty in exercising control in their lives. We all want what’s best for our children, but if we are preoccupied with fighting or perhaps ignoring our neighbours, the prospects for future generations are diminished.

The informal responses mentioned above are, of course, indecisive, as all vox pops are. But they throw up some familiar

ions seek to cement their power, a strong nation state is about what being British entails...

British?

questions and concerns. Why is the stability of our community being undermined by mass immigration? Why is our British culture devalued? Why are we made to feel this is not our country? Why does the government put other national interests before ours?

These sentiments can be summed up along these lines. We are British workers, the vast majority of the nation. Why does the British ruling class hate British workers? Why does it actively promote the dilution of our once stable and shared values? Why does it promote the notion that national identity is fluid?

In essence, it is out of fear. Fear of what workers can do when they decide to move as one and make a change. Witness the Brexit vote, a moment when workers chose to assert national identity.

Independence devalued

Since then the assault on Britishness has intensified. Particularly the devaluation of independence and self-reliance. If we look at our industries and vital infrastructure – utilities, power, transport, ports, airports and so on, all are increasingly foreign owned. Why does that matter? Because it can all be taken away.

Look at our reliance on Norwegian power. They have problems of their own now, so it's not dependable. And if there's one thing you must have with power, it's dependability.

One illustration of the mess we're in when we don't prioritise self-reliance is the fiasco at the Scunthorpe steel works, which we reported in *Workers*. The Chinese owner threatened to close down the blast furnace unless Britain agreed to buy Chinese coal. The government was obliged to take over and ship coking coal from Australia.

And all while the mine in Cumbria, a potential source of the coal needed, was mothballed on government orders. In effect taxpayers' money paid Australian miners to keep Cumbrians out of work.

The particularity of Britishness, its uniqueness, springs from our long history of industrial advance based on scientific thinking, free from the dead hand of religion. In other words, materialist, with an instinct for independence.

In sharp contrast, the ruling class views Britishness superficially, with a focus on ritual. For example, being able to quote the second verse of the national anthem features in the written test when you apply for citizenship.

There is genuine diversity within Britain and the British people, alongside the thousand threads which unite us. And along with the attack on the idea of Britain come threats to the freedom of speech, threats which hamper our ability to communicate and discuss.

To be British is to live and work here in what is still an advanced industrial country.

'Why does the British ruling class hate British workers? Why does it promote the notion that national identity is fluid...'

We should assert what we have uniquely achieved as workers, most significantly the creation of trade unions. Organisation and unity have enabled us to secure vast improvements in working conditions, healthcare and housing, all tenaciously fought for and won, and all continuously threatened.

We are true to our unique Britishness when we determine that we will have a future as a modern industrial nation, at peace with our neighbours, but prepared to defend ourselves if need be, and putting the needs of our own people first. ■

• This article is based on the opening and discussion at a CPBML online meeting in November.



CPBML public meeting

Wednesday 4 February 2026, London, 7.30pm
Bertrand Russell Room, Conway Hall, Red Lion
Square, London WC1R 4RL

"Britain's economy: we need a new direction"

Finance must become the servant of productive industry for the country and not an end in itself. British workers have two choices: continue as we are, or strike out in a new direction.

Come and discuss our new pamphlet and the ideas it sets out. All welcome. Free entry.

Britain's railways are currently being re-nationalised. At least it's not really true...

Rail – partial nationalisation

WITH THE arrival of the Railways Bill and the launch of Great British Railways (GBR), most – but not all – passenger rail services are to be provided by the public sector. Nearly all services in Wales and Scotland are already run in the public sector by Transport for Wales and Scotrail under the control and ownership of their respective devolved administrations.

Many of the former franchise operators are already in the public sector, and they and the remaining privately-owned ones will join the already public-sector Network Rail under the umbrella of GBR by the end of 2027.

Services on Merseyrail, London Overground and London's Elizabeth Line are all provided under contract by private operators. A quarter of all Britain's rail passenger journeys are made using these three private operators when added together – and there are no plans to transfer these services to the public sector.

In December, Transport for London awarded First Group an eight-year contract to run London Overground and wants to run more local services – Moorgate to Welwyn and Stevenage – which will move to private contract.

Private

Transport for Wales assumed ownership of the rail routes serving the South Wales valleys from publicly owned Network Rail. But the maintenance and operation of these routes is managed under contract by private multi-national contractor Amey.

Open access passenger operators' services will continue to be private; their numbers look set to rise. Rightly described as "parasites" by rail union RMT, they can only turn a profit if they abstract revenue from public sector services. And it seems private open access trains are being given preference over public sector services, particularly on the West Coast Main Line.

Freight operators will remain in private hands. So will a huge swathe of engineering, cleaning and other functions that were once part of the core railway but are now outsourced. And the train leasing companies which have made vast profits since privatisation look set to continue to provide much of the rolling stock.



Sheffield station – Northern staff and 2 class 158 units.

That all means that shareholders – many of them foreign – will continue to siphon significant profits out of the rail industry.

The reunification of many passenger services under GBR is a positive development and one which will see a return of a "single guiding mind". This will integrate operations and centrally plan service provision, new train procurement and so on. Passengers will undoubtedly benefit.

But there are massive challenges ahead that nationalisation won't fix. Passenger numbers continue to climb rapidly; around 7 per cent annually. The West Coast Main Line in particular is begin-

ning to creak at the seams. Network Rail has stated that the southern end of the route is "already operating at the limits of its resilience".

The Regulator – the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) – told Avanti West Coast to stop running four weekday services and a Sunday service on 14 December. The reason was to allow an open access operator to start running new services, and there isn't sufficient capacity for all of them.

In particular, a busy and popular peak morning Avanti service from Manchester to London was ludicrously ordered to run empty from the start of the new timetable. The ORR cited concerns that allowing pas-

ast that's what the government would have us believe.

tion is not enough



with more regional and local services to operate on the existing line.

The Covid pandemic choked off passenger numbers, which only now are nearly back to the numbers previously carried. Just as well for the railways, as it meant that the looming capacity crisis was postponed for six or seven years.

But the HS2 project has now been reduced to a line between London and Birmingham and, if indeed that is all that gets built, may actually exacerbate the capacity problems that exist south of Crewe, particularly around Stafford.

Cancelled

HS2 was supposed to address the Stafford capacity problem with a new stretch of track from the outskirts of Birmingham to just north of Crewe. But in a piece of political opportunism designed to assist his re-election, the then Prime Minister Sunak announced the cancellation of this section in 2023. The route currently remains safeguarded, the legal powers to build are still in place and a significant portion of the required land has already been acquired.

That remains an opportunity to provide much needed relief to the West Coast Main Line north of Birmingham. The deadline on compulsory land purchase powers for this section of HS2 expire on 11 February 2026, just weeks away. Once the powers lapse, land already secured for the scheme is likely to be quickly and cheaply sold off, and the groundwork for this key stretch of new railway infrastructure dismantled.

The government shows no sign of taking this opportunity and reversing Sunak's decision, or even safeguarding the route by extending land acquisition powers. A failure to act quickly means that the West Coast Main Line and much of the associated rail system will soon be completely overloaded, with no prospect of any solution for decades.

HS2 was supposed to be built with an eastern leg from Birmingham towards Derby, Sheffield and Leeds, providing additional capacity to relieve the very busy and rapidly filling Midland and East Coast Main Lines. But Transport Secretary Heidi Alexander has formally lifted safeguarding on the route. This effectively means the end

'Shareholders – many of them foreign – will continue to siphon significant profits out of the rail industry...'

for the project, and no solution to those capacity issues.

Transport policy group Greengauge 21 recently published a paper suggesting a relatively cheap stop-gap measure to connect HS2 to the existing Birmingham to Derby line. But even that looks unlikely to be taken up by the government.

Passenger security and staff assaults is also an issue that the government needs to urgently address. It was highlighted recently when an employee of LNER and several passengers were seriously injured in a knife incident on a train between Peterborough and Huntingdon.

Strike looms

In the wake of that event, rail unions have demanded that planned cuts to the British Transport Police are reversed, and that more staff are employed in stations and on trains. RMT has threatened a national strike over inaction following a number of other incidents.

Nationalising some of the rail services may be a positive step, but not enough. The reasons for doing so are equally valid in many other areas of the railway. And the huge problems of lack of investment, under-capacity, passenger and staff safety, and skills shortages, must be tackled by the government as a matter of urgency. Failure to do so will condemn the railways to years of managed decline and condemn passengers to overcrowded and increasingly unreliable services. ■

sengers to get on the train would "harm the overall performance" of the line. The decision was reversed two weeks before implementation – after a public outcry.

Full up

Aside from the issue of what will soon be public sector core services giving way to private open access services, this episode highlights that the West Coast Main Line is full. No more room for any more trains, passenger or freight.

HS2 was to be built to provide much more capacity along this corridor. The plan was to take fast trains off the West Coast Main Line and to allow more freight along

Ten years after the announcement of a referendum on EU
Workers looks back at the struggle...

Images of independence



PRIME MINISTER David Cameron, desperate to put a lid on the rising calls to leave the EU, went cap in hand to a meeting of the European Council on 18 and 19 February 2016, returning with a deal he said would address the “frustrations” of the British people. The next day, he announced a date for the referendum – 23 June. The stage was set.

The struggle was intense, and was to be prolonged – more than anyone could have imagined – as successive governments dragged their feet.

The BBC “called” the referendum at 4.40 in the morning of 24 July. “The British people have spoken,” said David Dimbleby with a grave face, “and the answer is, we’re out.”

In fact, it took three-and-a-half years. Independence Day, as many called it, was 31 January 2020, celebrated by a huge crowd in Parliament Square and in pubs and clubs and homes across the country.

The intervening period was filled with a protracted battle to stop parliament denying



membership,

the result of the referendum. In the run-up to the vote, Cameron said he would trigger Article 50, the formal process of leaving, "straight away". But the only thing he did straight away was to resign. It took eight months for Cameron's successor, Theresa May, to invoke Article 50. When she resigned in May 2019, it was left to Boris Johnson.

And now, of course, the Labour government under Keir Starmer is trying to creep back in. The struggle continues.

Images show (clockwise from top right): the ballot form, the national newspapers on the day of the referendum, 23 June 2016; jubilation in Parliament Square at the end of January 2020 as Britain finally leaves the EU; demonstrators marching along Millbank towards Parliament Square on 29 May 2019 to keep the pressure up after Theresa May's announcement five days earlier that she would resign by the end of July; dressed for independence, outside parliament on 10 December 2019; and another message from protestors on the same day. ■



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The prospect of the end of jury trials for thousands of accused to judge this important issue – sitting as a jury over the po

Stop the scrapping of jury trials



Ministry of Justice building, 102 Petty France, London.

JURY TRIALS in England and Wales will be scrapped for crimes that carry a likely sentence of less than three years if the justice secretary, David Lammy, gets his way.

'Critics, including almost all barristers, say the proposal won't help to reduce the backlog...'

Reassuringly, his proposal is far from popular. Yet sentiment alone is not enough. People throughout the land should voice their concerns and make sure this ploy is thrown out.

Lammy paints his proposal as a "bold, necessary reform" to reduce unprecedented delays in the court system. This will remove the right for defendants to have their case heard by a jury in many instances.

Only the most serious offences such as murder, robbery and rape would have a jury trial. The rest, including fraud and complex financial crime, would be heard by a new form of judge-only Crown Court, or by magistrates for lesser offences.

Critics, including almost all barristers, say that the government's proposal won't

help to reduce the backlog of cases. They claim that problem is a result of cuts to the Ministry of Justice budget, as well as other obstacles unrelated to jury trials.

Riel Karmy-Jones KC, Chair of the Criminal Bar Association, which represents specialist criminal barristers in England and Wales, has criticised the changes. He says they bring "a wrecking ball to a system that is fundamentally sound and has been in place for generations...Juries work – they do their job superbly, and without bias. Juries have not caused the backlog".

On 27 November, the Bar Council and the Criminal Bar Association issued a joint statement making similar points, emphasising that the key proposals – taking away the right to elect for a jury trial and introducing a new intermediate court – have not been piloted nor thoroughly modelled.

No evidence

Their statement continued, "There is no evidence we have seen (notwithstanding our repeated requests for the same) that it will significantly reduce the Crown Court backlog. But there is evidence that diminishing the constitutional principle of trial by jury will erode trust in our criminal justice system. We continue to argue that the government's focus should be on fixing the swathe of inefficiencies plaguing the system, which could be resolved and make a real difference now."

Greater attention to efficiency in the Crown Court system would have a profound impact on speeding up cases and hearings. This would include: better use of court rooms which often sit idle; more professional arrangements ensuring that interpreters are always available; emergency investment in better courtroom IT infrastructure which too often breaks down; recruiting more lawyers and caseworkers to the Crown Prosecution Service; better performance by prosecution and police in complying with court directions; ensuring that a CPS lawyer is stationed at court, empowered to make decisions about cases; a concerted programme of refurbishment and maintenance of collapsing court buildings that routinely cause closure and thereby delays; and speeding up police Digital Investigation Unit reports.

used people is a frightening one. The British people need politicians...

Jury trials! Speak out!

In proposing changes, Lammy relied on part 1 of a review of the criminal courts carried out by retired senior judge, Brian Leveson. Part 2, about efficiencies, is due out next year. It seems perverse to decide that jury trials should be restricted before considering how to improve them.

But this is not new. Leveson carried out similar work in 2015, the *Review of Efficiency in Criminal Proceedings*. It contains many sensible recommendations. Ten years on and most have yet to be implemented. Perhaps that is why those who know how courts work suspect that the government will cherry pick recommendations and ignore those they do not like.

Though jury trials will remain for the most serious offences, scrapping them for crimes with sentences of less than three years is the thin end of the wedge. It would make their total abolition at some future date more likely.

Erosion of trust

If decisions are concentrated in the hands of a single judge or magistrate, trust in justice will be eroded. There is evidence that ethnic minorities, for example, believe that they get a fairer hearing with juries than with magistrates alone.

Ripping up settled practice, overturning centuries of jury trials, and removing an essential democratic safeguard is a huge attack on a fundamental right of the people. And there wasn't even a mention of it in the Labour Party's election manifesto.

The beauty of a jury trial is that it gives twelve people the final say on the guilt or innocence of their fellow citizens. The jury system goes back 1,000 years in England and to the Anglo Saxons. It is long standing and deep rooted.

A thoughtful society wants its people to be responsible. Jury trials are responsibility in action, embodying an uplifting principle rarely seen elsewhere: they are an essential civic duty. Also they help to combat any drift towards authoritarian dictatorship. Juries, not judges or appointed officials, should continue to make legal judgements.

Legislation will be needed before Lammy's changes can be brought in. So speak out! Deluge the House of Commons with opposition! Keep this ancient liberty! ■

The danger in Digital ID cards

CIVIL LIBERTIES groups are concerned that government might use Digital ID to intrude into people's privacy and data security, and to interfere in their lives. Eight organisations, including Big Brother Watch, have informed the prime minister that the plan will "push unauthorised migrants further into the shadows".

On the UK parliament website, over 2.9 million people have signed a petition against Digital ID cards.

Former Conservative cabinet minister David Davis said "no system is immune to failure" and warned that previous government and tech companies' failures to protect people's data show that the bill shouldn't be introduced.

Tony Blair's Labour government introduced voluntary cards in the early 2000s but the Conservative-led coalition removed the scheme in 2011 because it was expensive and intrusive.

Keir Starmer denied that digital ID would ever be used for surveillance – and said the scheme would "absolutely have very strong encryption". He claimed that for additional security, the ID would be held on individual devices rather than stored in third party data centres.

Britain has only had compulsory ID

cards during wartime. Although they stayed in place for several years after World War Two, Winston Churchill's government scrapped them in 1952 after criticisms about their costs and their use by police.

Digital ID's "Right to Work" and "Right to Rent" checks would push illegal migrants towards dangerous housing and exploitative work off the books. It would not stop criminal trafficking. Smuggling agents lie to migrants that they will have a high quality of life in Britain, and the migrants are usually unaware of policies and practices here.

Using a single unique identifier to record any interaction (including credit history, transaction data and browsing history) with public and private services via "BritCard", biometric data would allow sensitive data to be exposed, risking population-wide policing and surrender of our privacy rights.

A report by Big Brother Watch has challenged the government's claims that digital ID would tackle unauthorised immigration. The report also scrutinised ID's other proposed uses, and spells out the dangers to civil liberties, privacy, and other basic human rights. ■

Meet the Party

The Communist Party of Britain Marxist-Leninist's series of public, in-person meetings continues on Wednesday 4 February in London – on why Britain's economy needs a new direction. All meeting details are published on What's On, page 5, as well as in our eNewsletter, and at cpbml.org.uk/events.

As well as our in-person meetings, we hold regular Zoom discussion meetings – the next one, on the economy, is on 13 January at 7pm. Email info@cpbml.org.uk for an invitation. We also run study sessions for those who want to take the discussion further.

If you are interested we want to hear from you. Call us on 07308 979 308 or send an email to info@cpbml.org.uk.

The government has come up with a new strategy for critical minerals. It will take action to make the strategy a reality...

Critical minerals – a small step forward



Ben Salter, via Flickr, CC BY-SA 2.0

Parys Mountain Copper Mines on Anglesey.

HAILED AS an “Industrial Renaissance”, the government’s Critical Minerals Strategy, Vision 2035, was launched in November. Industry minister Chris McDonald linked it to Labour’s industrial strategy, published last June, which he called “a blueprint for 10 years sustained economic growth”.

In its language at least, if not yet in practice, this is a step forward from the previous strategy. Now abandoned, it lacked any sense of industrial purpose. And while critical minerals are key to modern industry, action is needed to make this new strategy a reality.

The strategy’s central aim is to end overreliance on imports of minerals such as copper, lithium, nickel and rare earths. The government wants to ensure that no more than 60 per cent of the Britain’s supply of any one critical mineral is imported from any single country by 2035.

Building on advice from the UK Energy

Research Council (ERC) at Imperial College, and assessment by the Critical Minerals Intelligence Centre (CMIC) in 2024, the government has compiled two new lists, comprising “growth minerals” and “critical minerals”. And there’s a third list of minerals expected to become critical in the future. Almost all have to be imported.

There is overlap, and inevitable confusion, between critical and growth minerals lists. The strategy explains that some growth sectors depend on minerals which are not currently assessed to be critical. These include beryllium used in aerospace and defence, chromium (aerospace), copper (advanced manufacturing, clean energy), uranium (defence and nuclear), and graphite (automotive).

Supply chains

In a November 2024 webinar about minerals specifically critical to Britain, CMIC

director Dr Gavin Mudd listed those at risk through disruption to supply chains, war, and other global shocks. They included: cobalt, a critical growth mineral indispensable in making jet engines and turbines; vanadium, critical as it is used to strengthen steel; and lithium, critical for growth.

What do experts mean by critical? In the context of materials and their sources, cobalt illustrates three criteria for criticality. First and most important is unique strength; without cobalt there could be no jet aircraft.

Aerospace manufacturers have experimented with substitutes. But, as the Cobalt Development Institute told parliament, “It is notoriously difficult to substitute for cobalt without suffering serious reductions in efficiency and performance”.

The second reason is country of origin. About three-quarters of the world’s cobalt comes from the Democratic Republic of

critical minerals, abandoning the previous one. But it will

all step forwards

the Congo, where armed militias use it to fund their operations. The third reason is export tariffs, subject to the whims and needs of other governments.

Other minerals listed as both critical and growth include aluminium, manganese, nickel, platinum group metals, rare earths, silicon, tin, titanium and tungsten. Critical-only minerals include bismuth, iron, magnesium, niobium, phosphorus, sodium compounds and zinc.

The ERC urged government to differentiate between minerals for rapid decarbonisation and those needed for long-term resilience. And to differentiate between supply chains contributing to net zero, and those unrelated to net zero policy.

The minister was rightly emphatic about the centrality of critical minerals to industry today, “Without them our lives would grind to a halt. Industries would shut down overnight and communities would not be able to function”.

Between now and 2035 it has been estimated that, yearly demand for copper will almost double in Britain, and demand for lithium will increase tenfold. Europe’s largest lithium deposit is in Cornwall. The aim is for Britain to produce at least 50,000 tonnes by 2035.

Potential

With its world-famous Camborne School of Mines, Cornwall has potential to be part of a thriving supply chain in high grade tin and tungsten. Tin production is dominated by China, Myanmar and Indonesia, but there is currently no tin mining in Europe or North America.

While it is unrealistic to think Britain could provide for all its own mineral needs, there are good reasons to develop domestic capabilities as far as possible. MacDonald cites North East England and Wales as prime examples of Britain’s strength in mining, refining and recycling critical minerals.

In Wales, Anglesey Mining is developing the Parys Mountain site, yielding deposits of zinc, copper, lead, silver and gold. One of the largest nickel refineries in Europe is in Clydach, Swansea. And there is exploration for rare earths in the North Pennines. All potential that needs to be

nurtured.

Labour promises to support investment, alongside local councils and the private sector. Through the National Wealth Fund, created for such purposes with Treasury reserves, it has begun investing in the South West England “critical minerals cluster” for tin and lithium.

In Feb 2025 the government announced investment of £28 billion in Cornish Tin and £54 million in Cornish Lithium, plus £24 million from the UK Infrastructure Bank for “opportunities to anchor important supply chains” here.

Also hoping for government support is the Hemerdon tin and tungsten mine in South Devon. Reliance on the private sector is said to have been frustrating. Although it is the second largest such mine in the world after China, which produces 80 per cent of world supply, Hemerdon has been operating at a loss.

The ERC pointed out that the private critical minerals sector was beyond direct government control. Britain was outgunned by other countries in the level of state support received. It suggested that a critical mineral fund is required; the strategy promises to do just that.

Firms like Tungsten Alloys and Tungsten Engineering in Warwickshire supply specialist stainless steel for pharmaceuticals and for ensuring food hygiene, for surface finishes and plating, welding tubular frames in vehicles and bicycles, folding and bending tubes.

Ongoing financial support for minerals like tin and tungsten is not, however, guaranteed. The strategy simply says, “We are exploring future support for these critical and growth minerals”. That won’t be enough.

Digging stuff out of the ground does not in itself translate into growth. And as though to put us off the scent, the government uses the word production interchangeably with processing and refining.

Labour’s self-proclaimed “Growth Mission” – making Britain “a world leader in technological innovation”, “a clean energy superpower” and so on – will need to be more than hyperbole and empty slogans. We’ve seen all too many of them.

Instead, British manufacturers and

‘British manufacturers and workers need not only to process raw materials, but to transform them into the manufactured products necessary to sustain modern Britain...’

workers need not only to process raw materials, but to transform them into the smartphones and computers, ceramics and turbines, and all the manufactured products necessary to sustain modern Britain.

Governments worldwide are searching for reliable partnerships other than with China. The focus is on security of supply, leveraging investment, and promoting responsible mining.

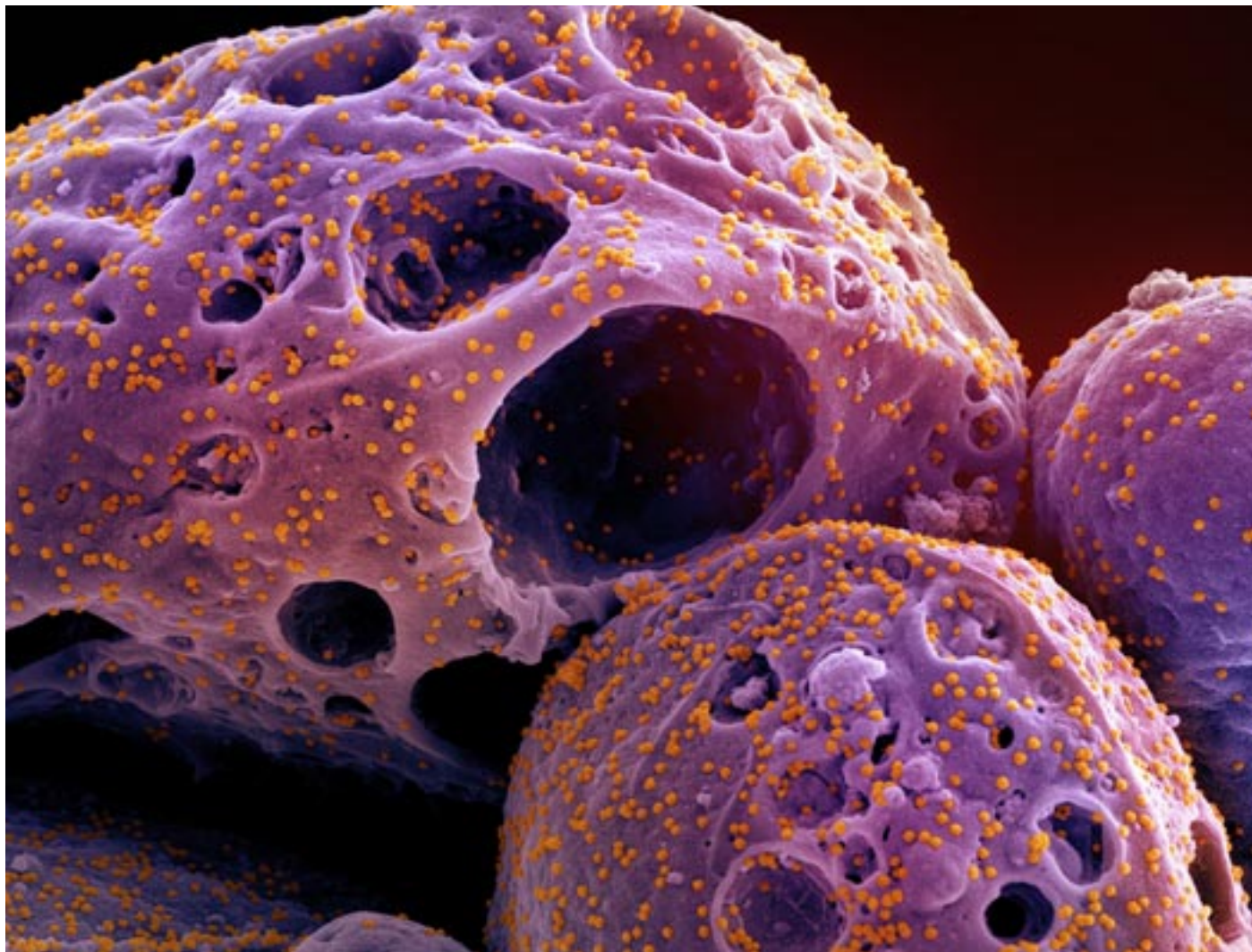
Inevitably the Labour government’s aims are set out in yet another strategy – on trade. This includes deals already struck with Australia, Canada, Japan, Kazakhstan, Indonesia, Mongolia, South Africa and Saudi Arabia, and a landmark agreement with India. Most are mineral-specific non-binding agreements.

Attempts to embed such agreements within more comprehensive trade deals are fraught with risk in the hands of a weak negotiator like Starmer. As his “reset” with the EU has shown, he gives away more than he takes.

If Britain is to develop as a manufacturing country, we would need to retain our own resources, based on analysis of our own needs, not trade away our metals, along with other assets. ■

Are we learning anything new from the UK Covid Inquiry? The country a lot of money...

Learning from experience



NIAD/NIH via Flickr, Public Domain

The bug that brought Britain to a virtual standstill: novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 (Omicron).

SINCE ITS launch in June 2022, the Covid Inquiry has cost £192 million to date and is estimated to cost over £230 million by its conclusion. The BBC reported that, in addition to these direct costs, the government has spent over £100 million in preparing its submissions.

The inquiry is split into ten modules. Hearings are expected to conclude in March and the final report is due by summer 2027. In addition to the costs of the Inquiry itself, Whitehall departments, devolved administrations, and others have spent millions in legal fees defending themselves at our expense.

Since the Inquiries Act 2005 came into effect, twenty-four statutory inquiries have been completed. The Covid Inquiry is by far the most expensive conducted under this framework. The overall bill is now close to the costs of building one of the smaller district general hospitals on the government's list of those needing most urgent replacement.

Reservations

Unsurprisingly, workers were already expressing their reservations about the inquiry's usefulness. The report for Module 2 (decision making and governance), published on 20 November, further increased those concerns.

The headline was that the UK government and all the devolved administrations had done "too little, too late" during the pandemic. This was not news. So the inquiry team added a specific figure alleging that if the UK government had locked down a week earlier, 23,000 lives would have been saved in England.

This was the cue for the media to resurrect stories about what Johnson and Cummings did or didn't do in 2020. These were not new either, but made for colourful headlines. The details in the report show a

The answer really matters, given the inquiry is costing the e? Are we?

different picture.

The 23,000 figure was an estimate based on one piece of modelling, for England only. Even the report's executive summary says it would be wrong to conclude that bringing in lockdown a week earlier on 16 March would necessarily have reduced the overall death toll. Many other factors could have reduced or increased the number of deaths as the pandemic progressed.

Less prominence was given in the media to the governance theme of module 2. It found that there were no clear structures to facilitate the UK government's working with the devolved administrations during an emergency.

The administrations in Cardiff, Edinburgh and Belfast were all criticised for "relying too heavily on the UK government" when the pandemic began – as well as trying to be different. And the UK government was condemned for failing to communicate efficiently as the months progressed.

This gives the lie to claims from the separatists that they handled the pandemic perfectly, unlike Westminster. Not surprisingly there was a recommendation, "To establish structures to improve communication between the four nations during an emergency". Not to "improve structures", but to "establish structures"! How long did it take to come up with that nugget?

Inability

The government does not have to adopt the inquiry's recommendations, but it must respond to them. We did learn that while Keir Starmer struts the world stage as the self-appointed leader of the Coalition of the Willing to further war in Europe, he leads a government lacking the ability to coordinate during a national emergency.

Those in areas of Wales and Scotland bordering England experienced different lockdown rules in 2020. Workers saw back then that there were coordination problems. The real question is, why are structures for improved coordination not in place five years down the line? Instead we have a weak recommendation awaiting a response from a weak government.

Will anything improve? Labour's manifesto promise was for more devolution

rather than increased national cohesion. This recommendation for better coordination does not sit well with their chosen policy direction.

Other key recommendations include:

- Improving consideration of the impact that decisions might have on people – both on the illness and by the steps taken to respond to it.
- Creating expert groups to advise on the economic and social implications of policy decisions, not just on the medical science.
- Ensuring decisions – and their implications – are clearly communicated to the public.
- Enabling greater parliamentary scrutiny of emergency powers.

These do not look like "new knowledge". Surely all have been discussed in workplaces, schools, care homes, hospitals, and on street corners since 2020? And with no mechanism for enforcing action on these recommendations, there is no guarantee of change or improvement.

Craven

This juggernaut of an inquiry will roll on, and to stop it will be difficult. It feels as if someone should at least say that the emperor has no clothes. But don't rely on the politicians or Westminster, Edinburgh

'Someone should at least say that the emperor has no clothes...'

or Cardiff, to do so. Their craven hope is to embarrass their political opponents and avoid criticism themselves.

There will probably be another pandemic: when and how severe, we cannot predict. We have already learnt the lessons of Covid-19: the successes of rapid vaccine development and deployment (despite government); the negative lessons of over-zealous lockdowns (Starmer wanted more); the bad effects of closed schools and enforced working from home.

We learnt too that the only measures that work in such a crisis are those that the working class itself devises and implements. Many workers took the initiative without being told, something Johnson and Starmer can't understand. The public must assert itself over public health. We trust capitalist governments for protection at our peril. ■



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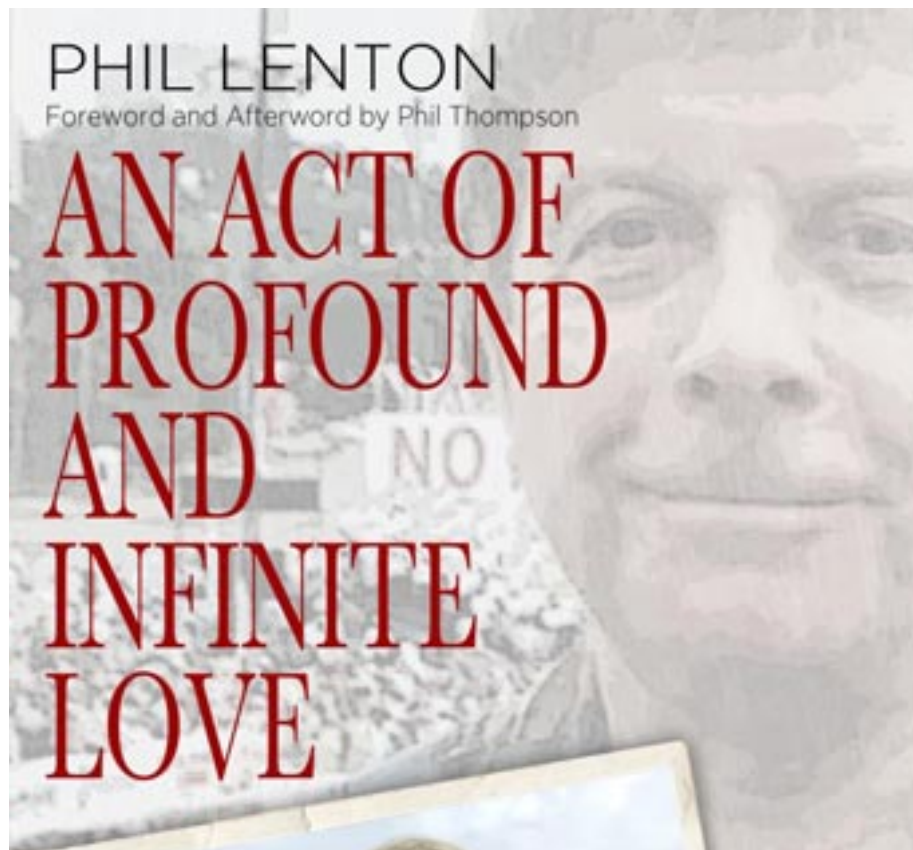
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A new book takes you from Britain to many other countries, the author helped organise the supply of medical aid to the b

Memoirs of a British com



An Act of Profound and Infinite Love, by Phil Lenton, foreword and afterword by Phil Thompson, paperback, 156 pages, ISBN 978-1916732735, i2i Publishing, 2025, £11.

PHIL LENTON, a lifelong communist, a proud member of the CPBML and trade unionist, wrote this book before his death in 2017 at the age of 71, brought together by his comrade and friend Phil Thompson.

The book takes the reader with Phil from Britain to Germany, Cuba, Haiti and South America, to South Africa and Mozambique and to Syria and Palestine. In its pages we meet Nelson Mandela, Fidel Castro and John Hurt, as well as many British workers.

Phil intended to write to remember his father, Wal, a plumber, later a national officer in the GMB union. Taken prisoner at Anzio during the Second World War, he was held in a German slave labour camp. Wal organised his fellow prisoners of war to

down tools at 5 o'clock in the afternoon, to the fury of the fascists.

Phil's own eventful life then takes over the narration. He describes his involvement with Cuba, with Africa, and Palestine and Syria. He was probably the only British trade unionist who could say he had shaken the hands of two of the twentieth century's leading revolutionaries, Fidel Castro and Nelson Mandela.

Cuba

Central to the book is Cuba. Phil's involvement with Cuba began as a teenager, demonstrating in London during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, under the slogan "US Hands Off Cuba". Decades later, in 1994, he was sent by his trade union Unison to South Africa to assist with the country's first democratic election. There he learnt of the role that Cubans had played in helping the Angolan people beat off attacks by the apartheid regime.

This led to his involvement in efforts to

support Cuba against the US imperialist blockade. Phil was the leading force in establishing Salud International, a trade union campaign to break the blockade with ambulances, buses, medical equipment, food, even footballs, all on a grand scale.

The planning and organisational skills required to secure and assemble all these items from around Britain and Northern Ireland, to store them in readiness for loading onto ships, and to get them to the docks on time, must have been daunting. In total, Salud sent two and a half ships' worth of vehicles and supplies to Cuba, on a scale never before attempted.

Leadership

There were doubters, of course, but with the same determination that workers had shown to support the NUM in the previous decade, Phil led them in overcoming every kind of obstacle, major or minor. Unison's London Ambulance Service branch, known to the Cubans as the *ambulanceros*, played a central role in this and became much admired and honoured guests in Cuba.

The reader will learn more about Phil's leading role in his trade union, both in the North East where he lived, and nationally. As a NUPE organiser he was central to organising workers to fight privatisation in the 1980s in health, local government, and the utilities gas and water, organising occupations not only of workplaces but of places like regional health authorities.

Three trade unions, NUPE, COHSE and NALGO, combined to form Unison in 1993. Phil worked hard at national level to build the new organisation. He brought together branches which, in some cases, were suspicious of each other and reluctant to merge, and sorted out the Byzantine financial details involved.

But this is more than an account of Phil's work. There is much humour to be found in these pages, characteristic of his own wit and that of British workers.

For Phil, the same self-determination and sovereignty that the Cuban people asserted was just as important for the British working class. Opposed all his life to the EEC, later the EU, he threw himself into the campaign for a Leave vote in the 2016

notably Cuba, where
blockaded country...

Communist

**“The best kind of
nationalist, an
internationalist, and
the best kind of
internationalist, a
lover of his own
country...”**

referendum and lived to see the outcome.

He knew that our struggle to force the implementation of that democratic decision would be just as tough and protracted as Cuba's fight against invasion and blockade. He was, as the book says, “the best kind of nationalist, an internationalist, and the best internationalist, a lover of his own country”.

The enigmatic title is a quotation from the Cuban trade union leader, Pedro Ross. In a speech to the TUC in 2004 he described socialism in Cuba in the striking phrase “an act of profound and infinite love”.

The book ends with a speech given at a memorial meeting for Phil in Newcastle in 2017, which concluded with Nikolai Ostrovsky's words from the novel *How the Steel Was Tempered*. These words appear on many memorials, individual and collective, to Soviet workers who died in the fight to expel the Nazi invader from their lands, and subsequently on memorials to communists worldwide. They read:

“Man's dearest possession is life. It is given to him but once, and he must live it so as to feel no torturing regrets for wasted years, never know the burning shame of a mean and petty past; so live that, dying, he might say: all my life, all my strength were given to the finest cause in all the world – the fight for the liberation of mankind.” ■

• *An Act of Profound and Infinite Love* is available to order online from the CPBML at <https://www.cpbml.org.uk/shop>.

WORKERS

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Forty years ago an epic industrial dispute erupted in nation when an entire workforce was sacked to boost a print ma

Wapping 1986: an epic

IN JANUARY 1986 some 6,000 print union members – not just printers, but secretaries, advertising workers, engineers, just about everyone – working for News International walked out on strike. And were immediately dismissed.

The story may seem strange to modern readers. It involves an industry that is unrecognisable now, unions that no longer exist, skills that have disappeared. But along with the miners' strike of 1983/1984, it came to epitomise an era in which workers discovered that under capitalism gains can only ever be temporary. Even, or perhaps especially, in the best organised workplaces.

The fight took place at News International, publishers of *The Sun*, *The News of the World*, *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*, accounting for some 40 per cent of all newspapers sold in Britain.

The strength of the print unions was legendary, and linked to the production process. Newspapers needed to be in readers' hands when they went to work in the morning. Delaying production by just a few hours could wreak havoc.

Print workers zealously guarded their own trades. If a journalist, for example, even touched the "stone", the lead block that would form a page of newsprint, it could spark an industrial dispute.

Employers put up with this union power because they had to. But the advent of new technology opened up the possibility of circumventing the unions.

With unions organised throughout the chain of production and distribution, the task seemed too difficult for employers to contemplate. The unions themselves were

confident that it couldn't be done. They were wrong, very wrong.

Employers hated having to go cap in hand to the unions every time they wanted to change something, and none more so than the owner of News International, the Australian mogul Rupert Murdoch. He set out to destroy the power of the print unions.

The first stage of the plot involved setting up a plant at Wapping, done with the tightest security. The unions never even got in to take a look. Murdoch said that it would produce a newspaper called the *London Post*. That was a fiction, but enough to put the print unions off the scent.

Plotted

Next Murdoch plotted to dispense with his troublesome production workforce and replace them with workers who were more flexible, more malleable. This he did in collaboration with the Electrical, Electronic, & Telecommunications and Plumbing Trade Union, the EETPU. Hundreds of workers were recruited and secretly trained in Wapping, east London, and Kinning Park, Glasgow.

Money was an issue, of course. According to some estimates, simply sacking the workforce would cost some £40 million (more than £100 million at today's prices). Lawyers had already advised News International that the cheapest and simplest way of dispensing with the unionised workforce was to sack them while they were on strike. That would involve no justification, and no redundancy payments.

The strike was precipitated when News International management made the unions an offer they couldn't accept, including the end of the closed shop (whereby only union members could be employed), flexible working and a no-strike clause.

When the unions, predictably, went on strike, News International was ready. The unions had walked into the trap. Dismissal letters had already been printed – as recommended by the lawyers – and were handed to workers on 24 January 1986 as they came off shift for the last time.

News International had meticulously prepared for the dispute. Distribution, for-



John Sturrock/Alamy Stock Photo

Mass picket, Wapping, 13 February 1986.

merly done via rail and vulnerable to secondary action by rail unions, was switched overnight to a fleet of non-unionised TNT vans.

The police, too, had been forewarned and had prepared to clamp down on the mass picketing that took place for months. The Highway, the main road outside the Wapping plant, saw police horses in action evening after evening as pickets sought to stop lorries laden with newspapers leaving.

Refuseniks

Importantly, the majority of journalists, though urged by their union not to cross picket lines, did so. Without them, Murdoch would have found it hard to produce papers worth buying, at least in the short term. A brave minority held out, and were labelled "refuseniks".

The dispute ended after a year. The print union SOGAT, Society of Graphical and Allied Trades, admitted defeat. It ceased picketing on 5 February 1987.

The landscape of newspaper publishing had been changed. Fleet Street as the embodiment of national newspapers no

'The police had been forewarned and had prepared to clamp down on mass picketing...'

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battle



longer exists. Nor do the print unions. SOGAT and the National Graphical Association first merged together, then folded into Unite. Even the EETPU disappeared, merging first into the Amalgamated Engineering Union, then, also, into Unite.

The newspapers themselves have seen their print circulations plummet – in the early 1980s *The Sun* was selling 3 million copies a day. Now its circulation is estimated at around 550,000. *The News of the World*, which was selling 4.6 million copies every Sunday, has disappeared (it was closed in 2011 following the hacking scandal). Its successor, the *Sun on Sunday*, sells about 500,000 copies.

Independent trade unions are still not recognised by News UK, as News International is now known. In the latest attempt, the National Union of Journalists was told in May 2025 that it could not be recognised because the company had concluded a recognition agreement with the so-called News Union – which is 96 per cent funded by News UK and has been unable to obtain certification as an independent body. ■



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As communists, we stand for an independent, united and self-reliant Britain run by the working class – the vast majority of the population. If that's what you want too, then come and join us.

All our members are thinkers and doers. We work together to advance our class's interests. Every member can contribute to developing our understanding of what we need to do and how to do it.

What do we do? Rooted in our workplaces, communities and trade unions, we use every opportunity to encourage our fellow workers and friends to explore how Marxism can be applied to Britain now. Marx's understanding of capitalism is a powerful tool – the Communist Manifesto of 1848 explains the financial crash of 2007/8.

Either we live in an independent Britain deciding our own future or we become slaves to international capital. Leaving the EU was the first, indispensable step. Now begins the fight for real independence.

We have no paid employees, no millionaire donors. Everything we do, we do ourselves, collectively. That includes producing *Workers*, our free email newsletter, our website, pamphlets and social media feeds.

We distribute *Workers*, leaflets and pamphlets in a variety of ways, such as online or in our workplaces, union meetings, communities, market places, railway stations, football grounds – wherever workers are, that is where we aim to be.

We hold regular public meetings around Britain as well as online meetings, study groups and less formal discussions. Talking to people, face to face, is where we have the greatest impact and – just as importantly – learn from other workers' experience.

So why join the Communist Party? What distinguishes Party members is this: we accept that only Marxist thinking and the organised work that flows from it can transform the working class and Britain. We learn from each other. The real teacher is the fight itself, and in particular the development of ideas and confidence that comes from collective action.

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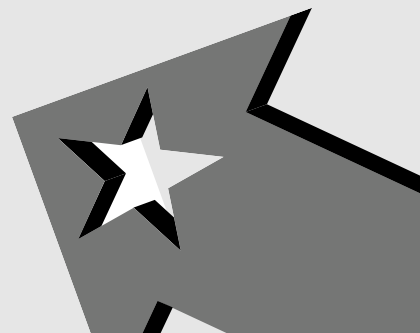
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Our fight is in Britain, not Palestine

‘Deviation from British secular working class traditions has been wrongly tolerated...’

OBSESSION WITH the appalling events in Palestine is to the detriment of workers here in Britain. And unless we force the government to stay out of the conflict, the obsession will not help the people of Gaza and the region.

In the aftermath of Hamas atrocities in Israel on 7 October 2023 and the horrifying Israeli response, many demonstrations, rallies, and other actions have taken place across Britain in support of Palestine.

Yet few have marched for British jobs, industries, and public services. Few have protested about energy prices here and the impact of net zero policy.

Too many individual trade union leaders and unions collectively are dangerously obsessed with Palestine. That is against the interests and concerns of their members, from whom they are increasingly alienated.

Many workers are moved by pity and humanitarian concern. The long-running conflict and its consequences for the people living in Israel, Gaza, the West Bank and the wider region, has appalled them for many years.

Demands on our own government to cease arming and materially supporting Israel are legitimate. So too are the less common demands that Britain stop arming Ukraine and stays out of foreign wars.

But a deviation from British secular working class traditions on many marches and rallies for Gaza has been widely – and wrongly – tolerated. Some contingents have segregated men from women, stopped to prostrate themselves in prayer, chanting for jihad and shouting antisemitic abuse, especially at Jewish passers-by. There is no place for such sectarianism here.

And on a demonstration last October in Whitechapel, east London, large numbers of black-shirted and masked Muslim young men marched – echoing the Mosleyites of the 1930s.

We have seen too much terrorist violence against British workers: the 7 July 2005 London bombings, the Glasgow airport attacks in 2007 and the murder of Lee Rigby in 2013. More

recent were the Manchester Arena bombing and three other attacks in 2017, followed by stabbings at Manchester Victoria station in 2018, at London Bridge in 2019, as well as in Streatham and Reading in 2020.

The last thing workers here need is more bloodshed. Workers should oppose those who want to bring overseas conflicts to our streets.

Nor should workers have any truck with anyone telling they may not see Israeli artists, sports teams, orchestras or dance companies. People trying to attend these events have to run a gauntlet of abusive demonstrators.

Such boycotts and attacks demonstrate the self-righteousness of those who advocate them. They do nothing for the cause they claim to support. By trying to silence and intimidate people with other views they divide the working class – fascistic, if not terrorist.

Apartheid eventually fell because of the struggle of the South African people in their homeland. It did not fall because musicians refused to perform in the country, nor because of demonstrations in Britain.

The roots of the Palestine conflict lie with imperialist meddling. In 1917, the British government declared support for a “national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine. This wasn’t altruistic, just carving up the world anew as the Ottoman Empire disintegrated. Britain held the area from 1920 to 1948.

But British workers are not tainted with guilt for the past actions of our ruling class. Nor can we atone for any supposed guilt by weighing in on one side or another.

We must hope that Palestinian and Israeli workers deal with the terrorists, bigots and imperialist allies who posture as their leaders. Only they can prosecute that fight.

Our priority is Britain. Our enemy is at home. Our task is to reverse our own government’s neglect of Britain and stop its warmongering abroad – the twin faces of capitalism. ■

• *This is a slightly edited version of the editorial that appeared online titled “Palestine: a dangerous obsession”.*

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