

WORKERS

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BRITAIN 2025

PEACE,

LAND AND

BREAD

Immigration A workers' view **Prisons** The crisis grows
Regulators Who's in control? **Pay** Outrage over review
Investment Key to Britain **Water** Muck and money
Families The capitalist attack *plus* Historic Notes,
War What can workers do? **News, Reviews and**
Rail Still private **more**

WORKERS



Peace, land and bread in Britain 2025

THE BOLSHEVIKS called for “Peace, Land and Bread” in 1917 at a time of crisis and transition in Russia. They aimed to unite a country weary of a war for rulers they despised and for aims they did not share.

Britain in 2025 is a different country with different problems, but we also need to live at peace and provide for our people. And British workers too are weary of our ruling class.

Peace was important. The First World War was being fought for imperialist aims, and not in the interest of Russian peasants and workers.

Land was important. In a predominantly agricultural country, it was the source of wealth. Yet land was owned by a few: many who laboured were tied as serfs. The call was for the people of Russia to control their means of production.

Bread was important. Feeding (and housing) the population had become chaotic. The state under the Tsar could not manage it. And the government which came after his abdication could not manage it, because they could not accept the need to cast off the old ways completely.

In Britain now, peace is important. Being ready to defend our country is prudent. But becoming involved in other people’s wars is quite different. It is not in the interests of Britain or those who live here.

The British people have allowed the prolongation of a war in Ukraine that we never agreed to

support. The government is determined to carry on funding the war, while they raise taxes and cut essential spending at home. We must demand that we exit the war, and not accept further escalation.

What of land in Britain? Labour acts as if Britain can do without farming. What it hopes to receive from inheritance tax will be swallowed up many times over by military adventures.

Thatcher’s attack on miners was an attack on all industry, not just coal. And likewise the attack on farmland is an attack on people and their attachment to, and affection for, Britain as a place rather than a commodity.

From the standpoint of workers, land is our food security and is critical to our defence in time of war. The attack on farming and farmland is an attack on the working class’s ability to defend itself and its national independence.

We need our bread too. The slogan “No Farmers, No Food” is an invitation to the whole working class to understand the significance of what is happening here.

And we should not stop there. Britain’s industries create our wealth and maintain our independence. The ruling class and their governments are intent on attacking our industries through free trade deals, net zero targets and want to fight wars with weapons bought overseas. They have nothing to offer for the future of Britain. ■



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Workers

Striking nurses making their point in Manchester, January 2023.

Pay review sparks outrage

IN MID-DECEMBER the government announced that the review bodies for public sector workers are awarding rises of 2.8 per cent for 2025. Timed just before a holiday, ministers hoped to catch workers off guard, looking forward to a rest. They could not be more wrong.

Unions responded swiftly and unanimously, denouncing the proposed award as a cut in real wages. Even the Institute for Fiscal Studies acknowledges that in real terms pay is still below what it was in 2010.

Calling on the government to drop its take it or leave it stance and reopen negotiations, Royal College of Nursing general secretary Nicola Ranger described the offer as deeply offensive. National Education Union general secretary Daniel Kebede noted that a “sky high workload and real term pay cuts has resulted in a devastating recruitment and retention crisis within teaching.”

Unions representing public sector workers are gearing up for a fight. They know that the pay awards secured over the last two years were forced from government with millions of workers involved in protracted strikes and other forms of action. And largely with public support. A whole new generation of unionists has recent memory of how powerful they can be when they choose.

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

WATER

Thousands march

ON 3 NOVEMBER, over 15,000 protesters gathered in central London for the National March for Clean Water. There were simultaneous demonstrations in Glasgow and Belfast. Marchers were responding to the rising tide of sewage spills in our waterways. According to the Environment Agency, in England alone there were 3.6 million hours of spills in 2023 – more than double the total for 2022.

Demonstrators knew that this was an underestimate, because many were undertaking their own water monitoring using their own funds and volunteer time. The importance of not relying on water companies, government and regulators to take care of our natural resources was a consistent theme.

The GMB union speaker at the rally in Parliament Square explained the many ways that the water companies had diverted the funding for our water system into private profit. The underlying message of so many contributions at the rally was that capitalism cannot provide clean water.

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



Reproduced with permission of Rolls-Royce plc © Rolls-Royce plc 2013



Rolls-Royce Trent aero engine, produced in Derby.

ON THE WEB

A selection of additional stories at cpbml.org.uk

More delay to nuclear power for Britain

The government is delaying the use of small modular nuclear reactors in Britain. And it is not committed to support Rolls-Royce as a provider, although it is a world leader in the technology.

Post Office closures

The Post Office has plans for job losses and closures in the wake of the Horizon scandal. The Communication Workers Union has called for a halt, and will fight the job losses if the plan goes ahead.

Budget: reality bites

Details of the Budget were widely trailed beforehand. But behind the headlines and promises there is much that should concern workers.

Change the climate of debate

The new government has shown that all parliamentary parties are essentially the same in their attitude to British workers – underlined by the government’s cowardly attack on the living standards of the more vulnerable section of our class.

Focus on Britain! No support for foreign wars!

Escalating military action in the Middle East worries British workers. Nothing good comes out of the involvement of our leaders in these conflicts. We should simply say “stay out”.

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.

Pay agreement at Rolls-Royce

ROLLS-ROYCE engineering workers have finally settled their pay fight in a multi-year agreement. The aerospace industry has often led the way with pay levels in the past. But this may not be the case now, with employers exploiting fragmentation of the industry thorough outsourcing and the use of contractors.

Another year of protracted negotiation by unions Unite and GMB with Rolls-Royce plc ended with all four bargaining groups settling. The Birmingham Solihull site narrowly accepted a revised local deal that included further talks on progression between and with grades. This came after a threat to hold a ballot for industrial action that would have seen engine production lines at Derby at a standstill.

The three year deal, similar to that agreed in other aerospace companies in the West Midlands such as Parker Meggitt and Collins Aerospace, generally means that workers failed to secure a rise that covers inflation for 2024. But they should be covered for 2025 and 2026, assuming inflation does not soar. With a continued skills shortage in the engineering sector, companies have been keen to limit industrial relations tensions.

The deal was accepted by 57 per cent of the membership on a 91 per cent turn out. It provides for staged rises for 2024 (4.5 per cent, then an extra 0.5 per cent from October) and 2025 (2.75 per cent and a further 2.75 per cent from October). The increase in 2026 will be matched to RPI.

These multi-year deals, with figures ranging from 9 to 13 per cent, are not always seen as a positive step for the sector. Some workers made their opinion clear that this was still a pay cut when inflation of over the years was taken into account.

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

THREAT OF WAR Campaign at Lakenheath

THE CAMPAIGN against the return of US nuclear weapons to British soil after a 15-year absence is gathering pace. There is growing evidence that the US government intends to use its base at Lakenheath in Suffolk as a major part of NATO’s nuclear weapons infrastructure in Europe. Of course, they will not confirm or deny whether the weapons are already there.

The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) has pointed out that US budget documents show the base’s weapons storage silos are being upgraded to store the new B61-12 guided nuclear bomb, and new dormitory buildings are being built to house additional military personnel. It is also known that the USA intends to double to

fifty-four the number of nuclear-capable F-35 aircraft it has stationed at Lakenheath.

Lakenheath is the largest US Air Force base in Britain and hosts the USAF 48th Fighter Wing – a force tasked to provide “worldwide responsive combat airpower and support”. It took part in bombing Libya in 1986 and launched combat and support missions for the US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

On 2 November there was a national demonstration outside the base. A coalition of local organisations from Suffolk, Cambridge and Norfolk called the Lakenheath Alliance for Peace is holding regular meetings outside the base and monitoring activity there. It is now planning a two-week peace camp from 14 to 25 April 2025. Then on Saturday 26 April they will host a national demonstration at the base with support from national CND.

GRANGEMOUTH Rally against closure

HUNDREDS OF oil workers from the threatened Grangemouth refinery, delegations from other refineries around the country, and their supporters, marched on Holyrood in Edinburgh on 28 November. The Grangemouth plant, on the Forth near Falkirk, is owned by Petroineos, a joint venture between the multinational Ineos and the Chinese oil and gas company PetroChina.

The refinery is due to close by summer of 2025 with the loss of 500 jobs at the site and around 3,000 jobs in the supply chain. It is Scotland's only remaining oil refinery, and its closure will leave Britain with only five major refineries, and increasingly dependent

on expensive (and polluting) imports.

Around 125,000 workers are employed directly or indirectly around Britain in oil and gas production; the industry is central to the country's energy security.

The Unite trade union has consistently campaigned against arbitrary and ill-thought out abandonment of oil and gas – "no ban without a plan". Holyrood's Just Transition Commission and Project Willow were set up to procrastinate while the refinery closes.

Last September the TUC Congress supported a motion demanding that the government stop its freeze on new drilling licences in the North Sea oil fields. Meanwhile the government gives away, through its UK Export Finance programme, €700 million (about £578 million) of taxpayers' money to Ineos to build an ethane cracker in Belgium. ■



Vladislav Gajic/shutterstock.com

...between government promises and the real world...

Nationalisation...or not

THE LABOUR government proposes to return most of Britain's passenger rail services to public ownership. This will not of itself bring about changes and improvement to those services. New transport secretary Heidi Alexander said that existing private operators will now be transferred to the government-owned passenger train company at an average of one every three months.

On 25 May 2025, South West Railways will join existing operators LNER, Northern, TransPennine and Southeastern in public hands when the contract held by First Group and Hong Kong based MTR expires.

Alexander told parliament, "I will be monitoring very closely the performance of all existing train operators who run services under contract..." But the Labour government has an inconsistent approach to returning passenger rail services to public ownership and control. And its plans are silent on some key services.

The Govia Thameslink Railway contract, which covers Southern, Gatwick Express, Thameslink and Great Northern trains across a huge swathe of south east England, expires on 1 April 2025. The Chiltern contract for services from London Marylebone expires on the same day. Neither has yet been slated for renationalisation.

Renationalisation will in any case do nothing in itself to significantly improve services for the passenger. Trade union Unite, for example, has continually warned about the risk to jobs and the wider rail industry with stop-go order books and private companies in control of investment decisions. ■

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

WHAT'S ON

Coming soon

JANUARY

Tuesday 14 January 7pm

Online CPBML discussion meeting (via Zoom)

"Why industry matters"

The government has overseen the closure of blast furnaces at Tata Steel. It is against British industry, skills and jobs. Come and discuss. Email info@cpbml.org.uk for an invitation.

FEBRUARY

Wednesday 12 February, 7pm

In person CPBML discussion for Workers readers, London

Join us for an informal discussion in a central London pub. Email info@cpbml.org.uk for details

MARCH



Wednesday 5 March, 7.30pm

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

In person CPBML Public Meeting

"Food for the people"

Britain's farmers have drawn attention to the threat to our food security posed by capitalism. Our land is taken over by speculators and taken out of production. What we eat and how it is produced affects us all.

Come and discuss. All welcome. Free entry.

To keep informed about upcoming CPBML meetings, make sure you're signed up to receive our electronic newsletter (see page 4).

What can workers do to stop the growing threat of war? P stop it?

The growing threat of wa



Workers

A demonstration at the US air base at Lakenheath, Suffolk, where nuclear weapons are to be deployed for the first time in fifteen years.

WE ARE being led by a series of warmongers, including leaders of the Labour Party. Pre-election, John Healey, as shadow foreign secretary, indicated Starmer was following Sunak's path of promoting the idea that war is inevitable. There was no anti-war choice.

Yet, according to YouGov surveys, the majority of workers do consistently support the foreign policy of successive governments – but under the impression that NATO promotes peace. Workers don't actually want war, though they fear it may happen. But there are some within the working class, argue for Britain's increased involvement in the wars currently raging in the world.

The “do something” brigade

We are regularly given exhortations to be more involved. Everywhere you go, at work, in the pub, in the park, when the topic of war comes up, there are people who will say but “when you look at Russia, at Iran, at Syria...” – the list is long – “we must do something.”

But must we? What would be their response were you to turn the question around? “Can you give one example since 1945 where Britain's involvement in a foreign conflict has improved the situation?” Think of Iraq and Afghanistan in recent years.

The reasons given for involvement in Afghanistan included, for example, the restrictions on the rights of women. And now it's much worse than before Britain (and the USA) became involved.

In answer to the question “What can workers do?” the first thing is to resist the “must do something” argument: British involvement can exacerbate a situation. The “must do something” approach is the thinking which leads someone to rush and help at the scene of an accident without any assessment of risk, only to end up adding to themselves to the casualty list.

The other good thing about challenging the “must do something” position is that it soon brings up the topic of Britain's membership of NATO. The argument goes that “we” have to do something because “we are members of NATO.”

In a sense they are right, membership

Perhaps the first question we to ask is: do they want to

War: what can workers do?

of that organisation obliges Britain to support the dominance of the USA as a world power. There can be no peace while we are members of NATO.

That's why the CPBML says Britain must leave NATO. We have called for this since our foundation in 1968. We think the need to leave NATO has never been greater. And the current government is determined to be the hardest working member of this organisation.

What do we know?

How much does the working class know about NATO activity? Understanding of, and opposition to, NATO may be limited in our working class but we are certainly not alone. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament also says "No to NATO", with a briefing showing how much more widespread opposition to NATO is than our so-called political leaders want people to know.

The second thing workers can do is learn more about NATO and why we must leave it. *Workers* magazine has published many articles and the CPBML website has a host of resources. These include a useful history, "Britain – the brains behind NATO", and an excellent online editorial about Britain's role in the Middle East.

What is happening in Britain now is often described as warmongering. The definition of warmonger is a politician or other leader who encourages a country to go to war. The current Labour government has already been involving itself directly in overseas conflict. They are actively warmaking.

Who benefits?

Who does war serve? War for the working class is always a disaster. What are the consequences of our government's actions? We cannot look away. What can we do to stop it? How many probing questions have you heard about Keir Starmer's warmaking and his swanning around the world stirring this up?

On the question of war in Europe, it has been a case of continuity from the previous government. Vote for change was the Labour election manifesto line. But on the question of war in Ukraine, what we have is a seamless continuation of previous policy.

On one day in September 2024, Starmer was in the USA urging an escalation of war in Europe, pleading for British missiles to be used deep into Russia. At the same time Boris Johnson was in Kiev saying Britain "wasn't doing enough". A grotesque double act on two continents.

The third thing workers can do against the warmongers is to make visible what is happening – circulate the arguments from organisations exposing the warmongers and promoting peace. This party, CND (see above), and Stop the War are just three.

The incessant international travels and lobbying by Starmer, as well as contributions from armed forces and MI5 leaders, show how busy this government has been on the warmaking trail since it was elected. Much of this has passed British workers by, with their focus understandably on attacks on their standard of living, cuts to the winter fuel allowance and more.

War at home and abroad

Governments tend to attack their own citizens at the same time as waging war abroad. Yet there may be a positive in the present reaction in Britain. All this warmongering and warmaking is not distracting us from the real issues of the cost of living and the war on the working class at home.

Thatcher used an invasion of the Falklands to revive her flagging popularity. Starmer wants to paint himself as a European statesman in a sharp suit but absolutely no one is taken in.

The fourth thing we can do, and probably the most important: bring the cost of living issues and the question of war abroad together. For example, we cannot keep our population warm but we can give "cast iron" guarantees on defence spending which is largely being used to fight a war – not on defence of Britain at all. There is a terrible black hole in the public finances but the war coffers are bottomless, it appears.

A National Audit Office Report published in September 2024 said, "The UK has committed £7.8 billion to military support for Ukraine, between January 2022 and March 2025. The equipment provided includes air defence missiles, drones, cruise missiles, tanks and ships, as well as clothing and personal equipment. UK

'Membership of NATO obliges Britain to support the dominance of the USA as a world power. There can be no peace while we are members of NATO...'

forces have trained at least 42,050 AFU (Armed Forces Ukraine) personnel, including new recruits, frontline commanders, instructors and those in specialist roles such as medical staff."

Funds for war

This money comes from the Treasury reserve not the Ministry of Defence budget. The reserve is described as a centrally held fund that can be used to pay for unexpected financial pressures. And even more appalling: "The MoD is planning for longer-term support for Ukraine in line with the government's commitment to provide £3 billion a year in military support until 2030-31, and for as long as needed."

In answer, then, to the question what can workers do to stop war there are four clear ways forward, each ensuring workers get access to accurate, honest information for discussions in the workplace and our trade unions, as well as for when we go about our leisure time in the pub, or the park, or the gym or wherever workers are worried about war whether for themselves or for their children – and make no mistake, if workers were made to join up the women would be called too. ■

• This article is based on a speech given at a CPBML public meeting in October 2024.

It is a precious thing when workers are able to talk to one another, and more importantly listen to the ideas of others, and understand the issues faced by workers in other industries and regions. This discussion more needed than over the movement of labour.

Immigration: how workers

IT IS A precious thing when workers are able to talk to one another, and more importantly listen to the ideas of others, and understand the issues faced by workers in other industries and regions.

Open dialogue has never been more needed than in dealing with the issue of immigration, but is routinely suppressed for fear of the label “racist” – usually unfounded. Only through this discussion can our class build the unity and strength to exercise control.

The working class knows this issue is important but is frustrated in clarifying its real cause and impact, and in formulating an appropriate response.

We have first to understand the drivers of mass immigration in today’s capitalist Britain; secondly, we have to identify the impact that it has on the country and its working class; and finally, we must determine how we should respond.

No doubt every British worker has at some time been grateful to a migrant worker for a service they have received. For instance, it would be almost impossible in most parts of the health service not to be cared for by a member of staff who is either from a recent migrant background, or is a first-generation migrant.

Attack on wages

At the same time workers can recognise that mass immigration is used as a means to attack the working class through the lowering of wages and deskilling, and impacts on other areas, such as housing and public services. So our first question is, Why has immigration increased to such high levels? What are the drivers?

Net mass immigration took off with the election of the Labour government in 1997. It was 48,000 but rose extremely rapidly, almost trebling in one year to 140,000 in 1998; it was not to fall below 100,000 again. Between 1997 and 2010, the “New Labour” years, net migration averaged 200,000 per year, five times higher than under the Conservative Major government of 1990-1996.

It is now clear that overall foreign immigration between 1997 and 2010 was 3.6 million, while nearly a million British citizens emigrated giving total net migration of 2.7

million. A further boost happened when the Labour government introduced unrestricted immigration from the EU in 2004.

In 2015 net immigration was 330,000 a year, the vast majority EU citizens from Eastern Europe. This more than doubled in 2022, to 764,000. These were no longer EU nationals but came mainly from Asia and Africa. The year to June 2023 was higher still, last November revised up to 906,000. That is an astonishing one and a half million added to our population in just two years.

What then are the arguments given to support this mass immigration? “There are too few workers to do the work needed.” It is true that Britain is in desperate need of workers doing the work we need doing. But capitalism chooses not to use this valuable resource available here.

Never cheap enough

The cheapness of labour promoted through immigration encourages capitalism to use labour in the most marginal of activities. No matter what the level of immigration, it will not satisfy the thirst of capital to seize the chance to use cheap labour requiring little investment and minimum risk. The hunger for this labour will never be satisfied.

The impact of mass immigration is the creation of an available pool of cheap labour which then suppresses the wages of all workers. It results in the plunder of talent from around the world – a new form of imperialism.

Globalisation means the free movement of labour, and of capital, and capital now views the whole world as its “reserve army of labour”, a concept that Karl Marx identified as an essential feature of capitalism.

Those who might think that they should leave their own countries should instead stay and fight for their countries’ own independence, and build socialism at home. The solution is not to desert their own countries and become rootless victims of capitalism.

Labour power is a commodity traded like any other. In effect Job Centres no longer need to be in Brixton and Liverpool to have the required impact – they can just as well be in Bangalore and Lagos.

Since 2020 when EU workers could no



UK Border sign at Manchester Airport.

longer move freely to work in Britain, the number of work visas issued has exploded from 80,000 to 340,000 a year. The health and care sectors, by far the largest group of workers, have seen the biggest increase – 135 per cent last year.

How often do we hear that we need immigration to fill the skills shortage? There is no skills shortage other than that deliberately created by capitalism. Unable and unwilling to invest in skill, capitalism prefers to import skills from abroad, denying yet another generation the skills we need to rebuild Britain.

Another argument is that we need immigration to expand our economy. Recently, when immigration has been at its

another – and listen to the ideas of others. Nowhere is about across borders...

ers can respond



highest, the limited increase in GDP has been due to mass immigration expanding the population, not from any economic improvement. There is no improvement in productivity, rather a stagnating share of GDP per worker.

Profits

Immigration has encouraged capital to avoid investment and innovation, while still increasing its profits. Instead of economic improvements, we see a race to the bottom of low wages and low skill.

This is a desperate attempt to delay capitalism's terminal decline, but in the end is no solution at all. Such short termism and lack of forward planning produce an

increasingly unsustainable economy that will eventually collapse under its own contradictions into another financial crisis.

How then should the working class respond?

Firstly, by talking about it. So concerned are the ruling class and their allies at the strength of the evidence that they are trying to silence legitimate discussion amongst workers, dismissing genuinely held concerns as racism, bigotry and xenophobia.

This reached a peak during the Brexit debate, but the tactic failed, as it was bound to, when a confident working class holds its ground. The lies and abuse just strengthened workers' resolve.

'Abuse by governments of the Skilled Worker Visa system shows they do not want to take control...'

Riots last summer after the murder of three children in Southport, Merseyside have not made things easier. The actions of a few have been used to damn the legitimate criticisms made by many workers about the impact of mass immigration.

There has been an unholy alliance between those who call for the free movement of labour and those who call for mass deportation. Both undermine the security of people living here. Both sow confusion and disarray to stifle the clear voicing of legitimate concerns about mass immigration.

Posturing

Posturing by successive governments over reducing immigration is purely for show. Their abuse of the Skilled Worker Visa system shows that they do not want to take control. Well, if the ruling class won't take control, who will? In the end it can only be workers.

What are our trade unions doing about mass immigration? For the most part, not much. Although they may pay lip service to the issues of pay and training, they are frightened to tackle the related issue of immigration. For example, the TUC General Council at this year's congress, in its statement on racism and the "far right", failed to address workers' very real concerns.

The class knows that this is something that needs to be dealt with and will talk about it one way or the other. When a confident working class frames its opposition to mass immigration as a fight for our jobs, for wages and for skills to rebuild Britain, it stands on solid ground and others will have to take note. ■

The ongoing failure of regulation in the water industry poses a question of accountability of industries and utilities in Britain: how, and

Who controls the regulator



Workers

The state of the water industry demonstrates the failure of regulation. March, London, 3 November 2024.

THE CURRENT Labour government assumes zero responsibility for any business failure. Instead, it points to previous Conservative administrations. But a study of the role of an earlier Labour government reveals the rot at the heart of regulation. It was never intended to succeed.

Following Thatcher's handing over of publicly owned utilities including all ten water and sewerage authorities for England in the late 1980s, regulators were put in place to assure the public that these precious assets were in safe hands.

But it was Gordon Brown, the then Labour Chancellor, who oversaw the most

far-reaching review of regulatory bodies. It was published in 2005 with the telling title *Reducing administrative burdens: effective inspection and enforcement*.

Self-policing

This signalled a decisive shift away from control by law enforcement to self-policing by business. Brown himself described this policy shift as "not just light touch but a limited touch". Truly a case of the poacher being designated gamekeeper.

The profligacy and venality of the water companies is a matter of public record. Even more egregious is the failure of the

regulator, in this instance Ofwat, to hold these companies to account. The House of Lords, in its 2023 report on failures in water and sewerage regulation, mockingly titled *The affluent and the affluent*, put its finger on the problem.

It said "The Government has failed to engage sufficiently with the sector and its regulators. The Government and regulators, including Ofwat and the Environment Agency have not approached the key issues facing the sector in a joined up way, including reducing water pollution and securing future supply."

The outrage of water consumers and

poses a fundamental question about the governance and and in whose interest, are they regulated?

tors?

the spirited campaigns of anglers, swimmers and other water sports enthusiasts have kept the misdeeds of these companies in the spotlight. From the regulators nothing but weasel words.

If the future and wellbeing of a precious basic commodity like water can be treated with such contempt, can we be sure that the regulation of other vital resources is in safe hands? There are over 90 regulatory bodies in Britain, with a budget between them of over £4 billion, covering areas such as education, healthcare, financial institutions, social care organisations, transport, agriculture, food and many others. Too many don't stand up to scrutiny.

The energy market is a case in point. In December 2010 there were ten domestic suppliers. The regulator Ofgem introduced the price cap, designed supposedly to encourage competition and downward pressure on prices. This encouraged new suppliers into the market, so much so that by 2018 there were 70 of them.

Quick profits

With an eye on quick profits, many lacked the expertise or acumen to secure a permanent foothold in this volatile market. The rapid rise in wholesale gas prices in 2021 and 2022 resulted in 29 of these firms collapsing, affecting four million households, at a cost to consumers of £2.7 billion.

A National Audit Office report in 2022 found that Ofgem had failed to adequately monitor the viability of many of the new entrants to the energy market, and their instability led to their collapse. Taxpayers had to pay billions for the government to bail out the collapsed energy firms.

That same "light touch" regulation lay at the heart of the 2007-2008 financial crisis, the most severe economic crash since the depression of the 1930s. The chaos began in the USA where loosely regulated banks gave high risk loans to people with a low credit rating.

When those people entered the housing market with too-easily acquired finance, this created a housing bubble. Eventually, and inevitably, this burst when many people were subsequently unable to afford the payments on their loans. The financial

chaos which ensued swiftly spread to Britain because of the interconnectedness of global financial markets.

In Britain as in the USA, banks pursued quick profits, giving out risky loans and investing in high risk financial products without due diligence. The fallout was dramatic. Northern Rock, which had famously borrowed extensively from wholesale markets to finance its mortgages rather than relying on customers' deposits, ran out of cash when those same markets stopped lending.

The government, through the Bank of England, spent billions to prevent its collapse. And billions more on the partial nationalisations of Royal Bank of Scotland and Lloyds Bank to keep them afloat.

Of course, in the government's eyes it was unthinkable that the banking system should appear reckless and shaky. So it was propped up at the cost of jobs, savings and homes of so many people. In 2009, Chancellor Alistair Darling was compelled to reveal that the cost of bailing out the banking system brought about the largest budget deficit in British history.

In the aftermath, the Financial Services Authority, the regulator which was looking the other way when those British banks were spending so recklessly, was ditched in 2013. It was replaced by the Financial Conduct Authority and the Prudential Regulation Authority, but the Bank of England, which has overarching responsibility for the conduct of the banking industry, escaped censure or change.

Burden?

Politicians, business leaders and their tame journalists often lament the excessive burden of regulation which they say inhibits investment and stifles growth. And it is true that unnecessary bureaucracy can be an obstacle to progress. But all too often, when businessmen and financiers talk about wanting less regulation they mean no regulation. They want total control – to determine what is appropriate and what is not, what is safe and what is not.

The Grenfell Tower inquiry, which should have been completed in short order with huge fines and prison sentences for those responsible, eventually demonstrated

**‘“Light touch”
regulation lay at the
heart of the
2007–2008 financial
crisis...’**

the consequences when proper regulation is rendered "light touch". We should be demanding not more regulation but better regulation with real, effective power.

An example of a regulator which does its job well is the Adventure Activities Licensing Authority (AALA), now an arm of the Health and Safety Executive. AALA is responsible for ensuring that outdoor activity centres offering climbing, caving, water sports and other potentially hazardous activities to young people employ well qualified staff with appropriate supervision.

Schools and other organisations can be assured that a centre with a current AALA licence is a safe place for their children to be. AALA arose following a Lyme Bay canoeing tragedy in 1993, when four teenagers drowned as a result of inadequate, negligent supervision at an outdoor centre.

Despite the successful prosecution of the company and the centre manager, the government at the time was reluctant to legislate for tighter regulation of the outdoor industry until people of the area, including the parents of the children who died, demanded change, and pressed their local MP to bring a Private Members' Bill.

This resulted in the formation of AALA, which issues licenses to outdoor centres and individuals offering activities to young people. Centres are inspected regularly and failure to show compliance with agreed standards leads to loss of license. Not league tables such as Ofsted's, but active monitoring and prompt corrective action when required. We need more such regulators, who enforce to meet public need, not what business seeks to get away with. ■

Many of our prisons are at breaking point. This has not happened in the current circumstances including the actions and inactions of successive governments.

They can't even run a prison

CAPITALISM IS a hard and cruel master with no interest in people who can't cope or who behave badly towards their fellow workers. Until recently, unless you worked or lived in a prison or had an incarcerated family member, you may not have been aware of how the prison service has been staggering along at risk of malfunction, if not total breakdown, at any moment.

The government's use of early release of prisoners on two occasions since July has now brought the issue into sharp relief for us all, with their admission that the prison system is on the verge of collapse.

Prisons should be a deterrent that removes violent or predatory individuals from the rest of the population. But they should also be places where the incarcerated can be diverted away from criminal behaviour and given hope and opportunity, for example learning new skills that will enable them to become gainful workers and members of society.

Reoffenders

That is far from what currently exists. According to David Gauke, former Conservative justice secretary appointed by the current government to lead their sentencing review, nearly 90 per cent of prisoners are reoffenders.

Prison cannot be taken in isolation from other aspects of the criminal justice system such as sentencing policy or how the court system is functioning. Neither can prison be detached from the causes of offending. Many factors have interacted to create the current situation: they all deserve examination (see Box, page 14).

Overcrowding and low staffing ratios plus inexperience of staff mean that thousands of prisoners are forced to share a cell designed for one person and often prisoners are locked up for more than 22 hours a day.

Thirty-four years after the Manchester Strangeways Prison riot in 1990, the 2024 Inspection report on the riot described the prison as rat-infested and overcrowded. A nineteenth century prison warden would recognise the working day of prison staff in 2025.

Officers working in several different prisons told the *Guardian* they felt manage-



Russell Hart/Alamy Stock Photo

HMP Manchester (formerly Strangeways) high security prison in Manchester.

ment did not take seriously the abuse they suffered from inmates. They were frequently told to "grow up" and "deal with it". This suggests that the number of assaults on staff may be even greater than reported in official figures.

How has this come about?

Many factors have contributed to the deplorable state of the prison service – but the driving force behind the capacity pressures is the increased length of sentences.

In October 2024 the government announced a review into sentencing, saying that the average custodial sentence length "now stands at nearly 21 months, up from about 13 months 20 years ago" and that it "has undoubtedly had a profound impact."

This increased length of sentencing coincided with the first Blair government's "Tough on Crime" period and continued throughout the 2010 to 2015 Coalition government. The Starmer government has now

happened overnight but is the result of a cocktail of successive governments...

Prison service



had to launch a review of sentencing hoping to end the prison crisis and ensure no government is forced into emergency release of prisoners again.

However, the “sentence inflation” sanctioned by politicians of all parties since the mid-1990s is not the whole story. Reversing this trend will not of itself resolve the crisis in the prisons.

A second huge contributing factor was the government attack on the probation service – which plays a key role in rehabili-

tating offenders. Unison, the union representing probation staff, has described how before 2014, the probation service was high performing and award-winning, rooted in local communities. The service was run by 35 independent probation trusts, each with its own chief probation officer.

Disastrous

In 2014, the government pushed through Chris Grayling’s disastrous “Transforming Rehabilitation” reforms. This split probation in two: centralised high-risk work in the Ministry of Justice, the rest privatised. As predicted, those reforms were a complete disaster and resulted in the government having to bail out the failing private companies.

Although the service was re-unified in 2021, it remains centralised in the civil service. Unison feels strongly that this continues to damage the ability of probation to work with local partners, and probation staff continue to suffer unmanageable workloads because of the staffing cuts which are the legacy of the private companies. Also, between 2010 and 2020, probation staff salaries rose by only 1 per cent.

Between 2010 and 2013 the number of front-line prison staff was cut by 30 per cent. These were deep and fast cuts with a significant loss of experience in controlling and working with offenders.

Drugs

A third factor is the ready availability of illegal drugs in prisons. In 2015 the then Chief Inspector of Prisons told the *Guardian* that this was having a “devastating impact” across the 130 penal establishments in England and Wales. This situation was, and continues to be, exacerbated by the arrival of synthetic drugs that were initially undetectable by drug tests.

Organised crime jumped on the opportunity to exploit the literally captive market of prisoners living in squalor, fear and boredom. Paramedics and ambulances are called to attend to inmates who have fits, blackouts or other adverse reactions to drugs, putting additional strain on these services’ ability to serve the local community.

On occasions, local health trusts have

‘Many factors have contributed to the deplorable state of the prison service – but the driving force behind the capacity pressures is the increased length of sentences...’

withdrawn their staff from a prison because drug use was so widespread that health workers suffered from second-hand smoke fumes. Prison staff are also affected – leading to high rates of sick leave. In turn that adds to the huge increase in periods where inmates are locked in their cells, and workshops and classes go unused. This all encourages the vicious cycle of boredom and drug abuse to continue.

A fourth factor is the proliferation of gangs within prisons – localised “post code gangs”, organised crime gangs and also Muslim gangs. All three types of gangs are involved in violence, drug trafficking and attempts to take control from staff.

There are concerns that Muslim gangs in some prisons may be recruiting inmates to Islamist terrorism. Ian Acheson, who conducted a review of Islamist extremism within prisons for the Ministry of Justice, has said there is strong evidence that people convert as a pragmatic response to who controls power and space in prisons.

There are also concerns that Islamist extremists could succeed in carrying out a Jihadi murder in a prison. Alarmingly these concerns are well founded. In 2019 at HMP Whitemoor two prisoners attempted to murder a prison officer while shouting “Allahu Akbar”, and in 2020 at HMP

Continued on page 14



Continued from page 3

Belmarsh, convicted Islamist terrorists attacked two prison officers.

What can be done?

Progressive thinking about workers who commit crimes and end up in prison won't come from capitalist governments. It comes from unionised officers in the prisons, from the probation services, and from prisoner-oriented agencies and trusts. They are the ones who help prisoners to become productive when they leave prison, rather than reoffending.

They have forced the government into announcing a sentencing review, which is a start, but it must be accompanied by significant improvements in staff pay, in training and in conditions of service. The crucial Probation Services must be repaired. Without these changes the unremitting disaster that is the prison service will continue.

'Crime is a problem for the working class, which cannot be delegated to politicians, well intended or otherwise...'

Prisons: the facts

THE PRISON population in England and Wales has doubled over the last 30 years. It now stands at over 86,000: Britain has the highest incarceration rate of any Western European country.

While the prison population has expanded, the number of prison staff has not kept up. In 1990 across England and Wales there were around 45,000 prisoners and 20,000 staff and now in 2024 the number of prison staff is only about 23,000

In addition to a lower ratio of prison officers for each inmate, the proportion of experienced staff has fallen dramatically. Channel 4 FactCheck reports that in

2010, 80 per cent of prison officers had five years' experience but today only half of them do so.

Overcrowding and staff shortages have made prisons unsafe places for prisoners and staff. In the 12 months to June 2024, the number of assaults (prisoner on prisoner) was 29,254, up 18 per cent from the previous year. Assaults on staff increased too. In the 12 months to June 2024, there were 10,281 assaults on staff, up 23 per cent to a new peak.

Last November the *Guardian* reported that these figures are almost triple the equivalent for 2005 and the number of sexual assaults against staff has increased over four-fold. ■

The safety of prisoners and prison staff must be paramount – this should not need saying, but it clearly does. The staff union, the Prison Officers' Association (POA), is calling for all officers to be issued with PAVA incapacitant spray.

They argue that if prisoners are made aware that officers have this spray it will reduce the number of assaults and the number of injuries that can occur when physical force is used as a last resort to restrain prisoners. The POA are also calling for staff to be issued with stab utility vests.

Safety

The Prison Governors' Association, representing managers, is equally clear about the safety risks arising from overcrowding and lack of capacity and the detrimental impact on rehabilitation.

The drug culture in prisons needs to be firmly tackled. For example the low resource tool of analysing the wastewater of all prisons for the presence of drugs is successfully used in Australia and the US. It provides an accurate record of the type and prevalence of drug use unit by unit.

Corrupt staff who endanger colleagues by bringing drugs into prisons could be tackled by a strict, time limited amnesty if they provide full disclosure and intelligence.

The government needs to listen to staff, their trade unions such as POA and Unison, and effective support agencies such as charity Tempus Novo on strategies which stop reoffending, help prisoners into work, and tackle gang culture. They have a 95 per cent success rate in getting offenders into jobs.

It's a truism that the victims of crime are more likely to be people from areas with high rates of crime. In other words, it's a problem for the working class, which can't be delegated to politicians, well intended or otherwise.

We need a whole society approach to address the causes of crime – such as addiction to drugs or gambling. That often leads to opportunistic theft such as shoplifting or burglary and is associated with being without a job or a home. High quality support programmes need to be available to offending addicts as part of non-custodial sentences.

In short, the current chaos needs to be replaced with control, order and hope. It is only workers that can drive these changes – they won't be gifted by governments which have no interest in the welfare of workers who have fallen on difficult times or who need support to become useful members of society. ■

The water industry is in crisis, like the rest of capitalism...

Muck makes money



Marching for clean water, London, 3 November 2024.

THE FACTS about the water crisis speak for themselves. Severn Trent is not going to meet its target water quality – in line with its long-standing failures. Last year it was fined more than £2 million for polluting the River Trent near Stoke-on-Trent in late 2019 and early 2020. Yet its profits tripled to £141 million for the half year to September 2024, and it raised its interim dividend by 4.2 per cent.

Thames Water, our country's largest water provider, is over £16 billion in debt – and not because it has invested adequately in the much-needed improvement of its infrastructure. Instead, it is guilty of long-

term underinvestment.

Thames says it has a possible rescue plan, drawn up by BlackRock and other US asset managing firms. This rescue depends on Thames Water getting a £1.5 billion loan, to be paid back at an annual interest rate of 9.75 per cent, plus fees. And then on taking out a further £1.5 billion loan, but only if it gets regulatory permission to raise its bills. Water industry regulator Ofwat has provisionally said customers' bills will rise by 21 per cent by 2030.

How else could Thames Water possibly pay back these loans, plus these exorbitant interest rates and fees, except at the expense of its long-suffering "customers"? Yet even more debt will be incurred, to the exclusive benefit of the lending banks.

If the two cash injections come through, and that is not certain, then Thames thinks it may be able to keep operating until May 2026. Of course the quality of the water and the welfare of the public hardly even figure as secondary matters when profit is king.

The one certainty is that Thames's high levels of pollution, high and rising bills, high dividends, and soaring executive pay and bonuses are all set to continue.

Several other water companies are also seeking yet more loans to make payments on their huge debts. Severn Trent is accused of complex financial engineering to mask the true position. A similar charge was made against Thames.

David Black, the head of Ofwat, has admitted that the water companies need to make "changes across the board", and that they should never have been allowed to rack up huge debts.

Echoing the government's mantra about change, Black told a parliamentary committee, "The issues around public anger over storm overflows, sewage discharges, concerns about companies' corporate behaviours, very clearly signal the need for change...we should have had tighter controls."

Even after citing the dismal record of the companies over which Ofwat has regulatory responsibility, Black said that he "wouldn't agree" that Ofwat has failed. And he tried to blame the public for the underinvestment, saying, "But it is a challenge in terms of a lot of the criticisms of the sector. That does unsettle investors."

Corrupt

James Wallace, CEO of River Action, commented, "Of course it's difficult to raise investment for a corrupt water industry whose name is dirt for killing our rivers, lakes and seas.

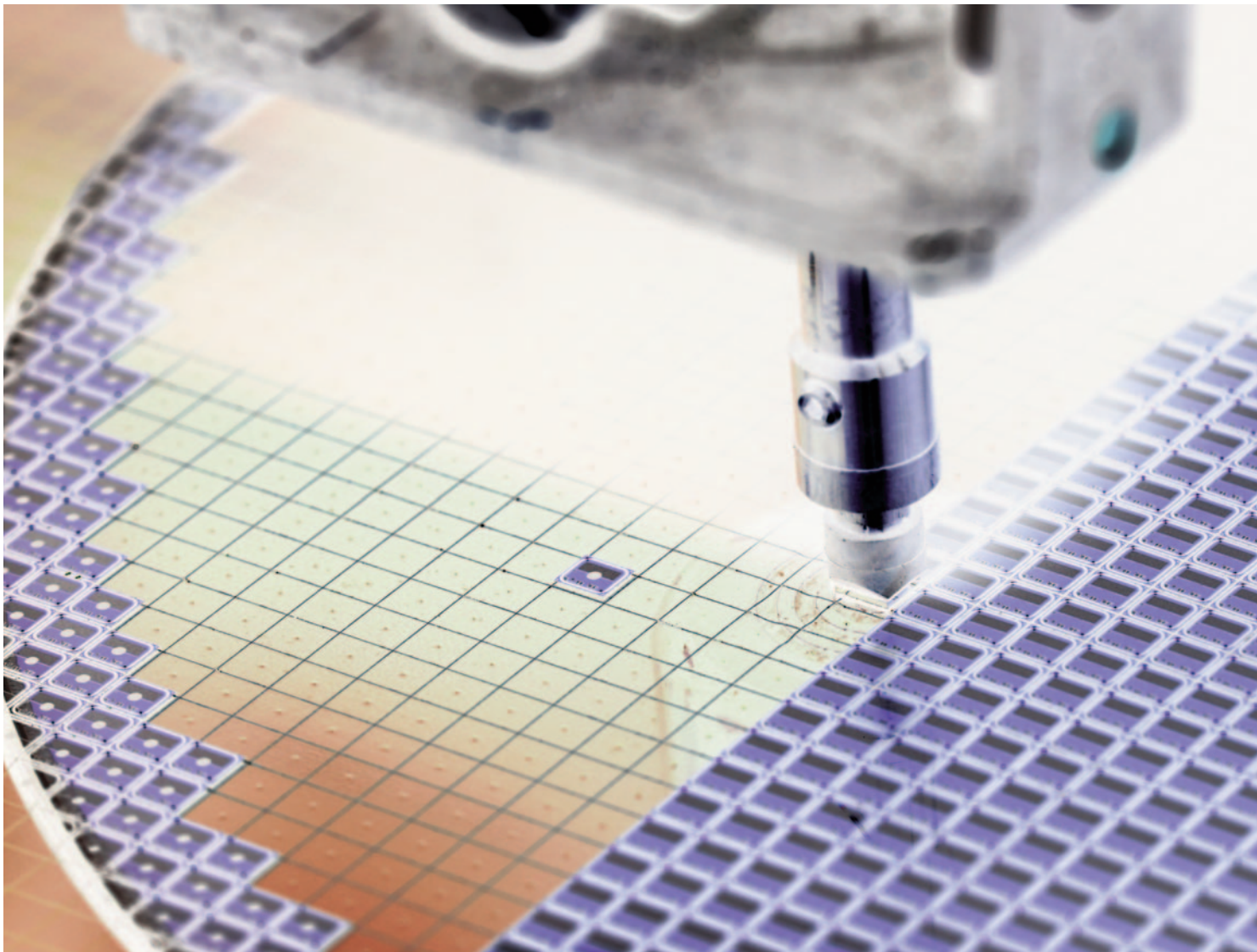
"International investors have picked over the remains of water companies like vultures on a decomposing carcass, and proven the privatisation experiment has failed. We need the new Government to show leadership by dealing with the root causes of the sewage pollution scandal, not appease these rapacious, faceless investors."

But the new government, like the old ones, refuses to nationalise these dreadful companies or effectively police them. They will continue to force the taxpayer to bail them out, unless and until the people who work in the industry, and the public who depend on the industry, take control of it. ■

'Ofwat says bills will rise by 21 per cent by 2030...'

There is capital – plenty of it – that could be used for investment. But pounds are invested overseas. Meanwhile employment and

Britain must have investment



Macro Photo/shutterstock.com

Manufacturing is key to real growth.

THE BRITISH economy has not been kind to workers. The most significant economic legacy of the 2007-08 crash was a monumental pay squeeze. Wages flatlined for fifteen years, then inflation shot up. Pay battles over the past two years made some gains, eroded by a further rise in the cost of living.

Ministers used to claim that compared to other countries Britain hadn't done badly in the total goods and services produced. This was true but is mainly due to population growth through immigration (see fea-

ture, page 8). Growing our economy simply by having more people does nothing for our key need – to raise living standards.

The infamous and elusive “green new deal” will not transform the labour market to save us from hardship. Social democracy, echoing the World Economic Forum, tells us that net zero transition will bring huge numbers of good green jobs. But instead, workers experience the destruction of good productive jobs at Port Talbot, Scunthorpe, Grangemouth and so on.

The key problem with the capitalist

economy is under-investment. The solution is investment.

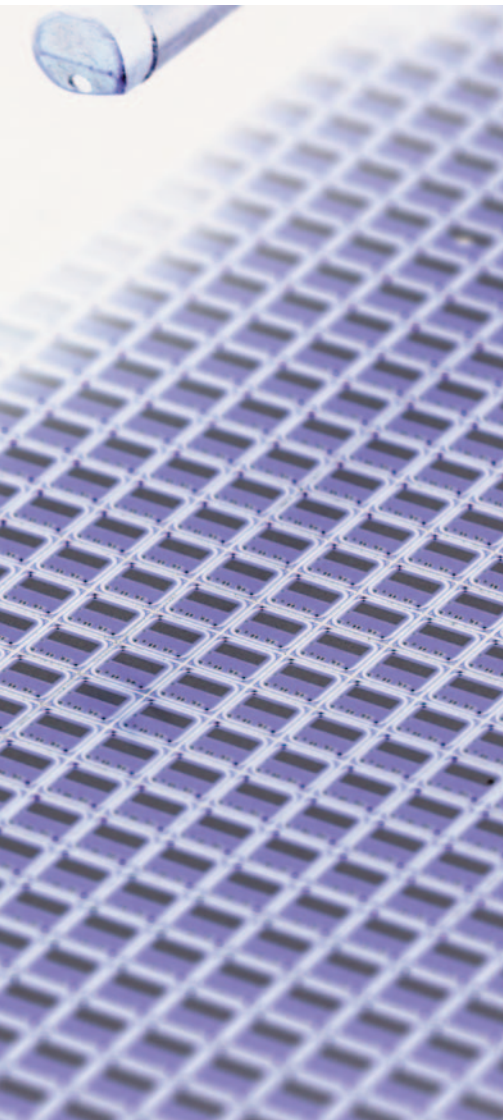
For the past four decades, Britain has consistently been among the lowest investors of OECD countries, generally in the bottom tenth. Fixed total investment has been the lowest in the G7, averaging just 19 per cent of GDP a year.

Debt

To disguise the capitalist aversion to investment in Britain, Labour's Treasury now insists that public investment depends

investment here in Britain but instead countless billions of pounds of living standards here suffer...

Investment



on public debt falling between 2028-29 and 2029-30. Treasury dogma under all governments has consistently opposed new public sector investment. That fell from over 5 per cent of GDP to below 1 per cent between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s.

Potential investment opportunities are offered to private investors, who often fail to deliver. The capitalist class runs off with profits rather than invest them in Britain. Private investment, like public investment, is also lower in Britain than it is in any

other G7 country.

We should be nurturing and expanding, not destroying, our areas of manufacturing expertise. Manufacturing industry is by far the main source of innovation, of producing better goods. It conducts 60 to 70 per cent of all research and development in Britain – the key to improving our productivity, which grew by just 0.5 per cent a year between 2010 and 2022.

But instead of investing to create new assets, too often British-based companies have taken on liabilities and sold existing assets. Foreign ownership of firms listed on the London Stock Exchange has increased to 56 per cent in 2020.

Energy

Britain needs to invest in producing energy. In 2013 Cameron told his ministers to “get rid of the green crap”. In practice this meant cutting back requirements on energy suppliers to install efficiency measures, such as cavity wall insulation. Installations fell by more than 90 per cent almost overnight – from over 2 million in 2012 to under 200,000 a year later. As a result, energy bills are far higher than necessary, and will continue to rise.

Britain needs investment in education. But spending for each pupil aged 16 to 18 has been gradually cut since 2013 – by 16-18 per cent for sixth forms in schools and colleges, and 8 per cent for FE colleges.

Since 2017, over 40 per cent fewer under-nineteens have started apprenticeships in England. The decline is 38 per cent for 19- to 24-year-olds. Between 2017 and 2022, employers funding or arranging any staff training during the previous 12 months fell from 66 to 60 per cent – and so on. The article “Not a skills shortage, more a training blockade in *Workers* November/December edition sets this out in detail.

The British population was around 58 million in 1996; net inward migration was relatively stable. But in 1997 the incoming Labour government imposed its open door policy. All successive governments maintained a sustained increase in net migration; by 2021 the population had reached 67 million.

This enormous population increase has wrecked housing availability. Developers

‘The key problem with the capitalist economy is under-investment. The solution is investment....’

flock to rural areas, covering farmland and natural habitat in housing, now goaded on by Labour’s mandatory housebuilding targets across the country – to be enforced by reforms to the planning system. But we need investment in truly affordable housing in our inner cities. That is how rent and mortgages could be brought down for future generations and still retain our countryside.

Investment of £20 to £30 billion is needed to improve our housing stock, £50 billion to meet our energy needs, and £8 billion to improve our water supply. And then there are schools, hospitals and transport to add.

Over £6 trillion of long-term capital is held in our pension and insurance industries, so the capital needed for growth is available. We could use the £60 to £70 billion a year of tax breaks for annual pension funds to encourage investment in British industry.

Yet British pension schemes have cut their investments. Transport for London, for example, has a pension pot of £15 billion, but only 0.5 per cent of this is invested in UK stocks, while 33 per cent is in overseas equities. In 2004, it had 39 per cent in UK equities.

The government is sticking to Treasury dogma – cut spending, raise taxes, to “balance the books” – the rules which brought austerity before and will do so again. The present Chancellor says we can’t invest until we grow, which is like saying we can’t grow food until we eat. We can’t grow until we invest, just as we can’t eat before we grow food. ■

It's getting harder and harder to build a family in Britain – house prices and low wages mean many are forced to wait

Families don't grow und

Nicholas T. Ansell/PA Images Alamy Stock Photo



Children and parents on their way to school.

FEWER CHILDREN are being born in England and Wales and the fertility rate is at its lowest level since records began in 1939. The number born has been falling for the last decade and is at its lowest since 1977, while the average age of first-time mothers is at an all-time high.

Women in Britain would need to have 2.08 children on average to ensure the long-term natural replacement of the population, but it is now 1.44 children. The population – that means the working class – is shrinking.

This is happening around the world, not just in Britain. But we are at the low end of

the spectrum, 177th out of 227 countries ranked in the *CIA World Factbook*.

A recent report published by the University College London Centre for Longitudinal Studies asked why people who wanted children, or more children, were not trying to conceive. Not feeling ready was linked with financial and work reasons as barriers to having children.

Declining fertility

At age 32, many still intended to have children, just later than previous generations. But their fertility will be declining from that time and conception more likely to be difficult.

Why does this matter for workers? We cannot have as many children as we want because there is not enough time or money. In the lead-up to having babies we struggle to secure a place to live, and to feed our children and ourselves. This is disappointing as it deprives us of a source of satisfaction and connection with the world.

We continue education longer. According to a report in the *Financial Times* last September, women aged 20 to 25 are three times more likely to be in education than raising a family. But the practice of making students pay tuition fees and their own living expenses puts pressure on

and in particular to start one before your thirties. High it longer than they want...

er capitalism

them to repay the loans. It prioritises earning over starting a family. The degrees students earn may offer little financial advantage, and often struggle to start careers in their chosen area.

Workers need to provide housing for their families, but rented housing is in short supply and expensive, and buying is out of reach for the majority. Young couples are often pulled into a spiral of maximising their earnings and working for longer before they can afford to have a family, particularly when their income goes above the threshold for repaying student loans. House prices have been pushed up so high that two incomes are required to repay the mortgage.

Importing workers

The resulting reduction in population works to the advantage of the capitalist class. It reinforces the message that the working class cannot have the things it wants, and enables the tentacles of the ruling class to reach into every aspect of workers' lives, including the home. It gives the ruling class an opportunity to replace the lost workers by immigration, bringing in workers both unskilled and highly qualified.

The scale of immigration tends to diminish British workers' earnings, and to prevent their enjoying better working conditions, having better job security, being able to withstand manipulation by employers, and increasing their skills.

This is fine for capitalists, with the twofold impact of a dwindling indigenous population yet an increasing total population. There are more customers to buy products and a concocted housing crisis which gives the justification to cover the countryside with concrete, and to obliterate brown and green spaces in our cities. The dream of the ruling class is for landowners and builders to enjoy massive windfall profits.

All this need not be so. If workers took control of immigration, the production of goods for their needs, and housing, they could live however they wanted, in harmony with the world around them, having work and family life, and being part of the community.

Education sufficient to allow the young person to think could be provided without

charge until they are prepared to set out into the adult world, without the unnecessary requirement continually to obtain further qualifications.

Those who wish to develop their minds to a high level or prefer a job requiring greater intellectual demands would be able to. But they would be spared getting sucked into the present endless spiral of forever having to acquire additional qualifications. The educational syllabus would be determined by local teachers and lecturers, in consultation with parents – not dumbed down or made ideological.

We pay a heavy price for allowing the present capitalist system to continue. The effect on family life may not be obvious but Marx considered it to be damaging:

“The bourgeois clap-trap about the family and education, about the hallowed co-relation of parents and child, becomes all the more disgusting, the more, by the action of Modern Industry, all the family ties among the proletarians are torn asunder, and their children transformed into simple articles of commerce and instruments of labour.” *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, chapter 2, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, English edition of 1888.

But workers can turn the situation around and create a system adapted to ordinary human existence. We should grasp the opportunity because happy and healthy workers give rise to happy and healthy children.

Young people dream of getting married

‘Young couples are often pulled into a spiral of maximising their earnings and working for longer before they can afford to have a family, particularly when their income goes above the threshold for repaying student loans...’

and having a family. Allowing their dreams to come true would allow us to refresh the population to compensate for the disappearance of those workers who have got older. More than that, it would give weight to the idea that the world should be shaped to meet people's needs, not vice versa. ■

Meet the Party

The Communist Party of Britain Marxist-Leninist's series of Zoom discussion meetings continues on Tuesday 14 January on why industry matters to the future of Britain and the British working class. All meeting details are published on What's On, page 5, in our eNewsletter, and at cpbml.org.uk/events.

M As well as our Zoom discussion meetings, we hold regular in-person public meetings, with one in London on 5 March on agriculture (details on page 5), and informal meetings with interested workers – next one in London on 12 February – and study sessions for those who want to take the discussion further.

M 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

When women's rights in Scotland were sacrificed in the name of equality, Scottish women decided to fight back. A new book tells the story.

Sex, gender and women

Vuk Valcic / Alamy Stock Photo



Campaigners from Sex Matters and For Women Scotland outside the Supreme Court, November 2024.

The women who wouldn't wheesht: voices from the front-line of Scotland's battle for women's rights, edited by Susan Dalgety and Lucy Hunter Blackburn, hardback, 384 pages, ISBN 978-1408720707, Constable, 2024, £22. Kindle and eBook editions available. Paperback edition due out March 2025.

THIS FINE book ("wheesht" means "hush" or "be quiet") presents voices from the unprecedented five-year campaign by a large number of Scottish women who were determined to stop what they correctly saw as an assault on their rights. Their struggle helped to oust Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland's first minister who, at the height of her powers and with an iron grip on her party, unexpectedly resigned.

By 2018, organisations like Stonewall were promoting what they called a new "trans umbrella". It covered men who had made no change whatsoever to their bodies, but demanded to be called women and to get access to spaces where women were vulnerable, such as changing rooms and shelters, and to have access to jobs delivering intimate care to young, elderly or disabled women, normally reserved for

women workers.

In 2022 the SNP/Green alliance introduced the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill. It was designed to remove any medical requirement for legal gender recognition and change the basis to one of self-declaration. But if self-declaration of gender had become law in one part of Britain, women's sex-based rights and the very definition of female in language, policy and law would have been diminished across the country.

In 2004 Holyrood had agreed that the interaction between central and devolved government meant that the original Gender Recognition Act of 2004 was best handled in Westminster. On 16 January 2023, the Secretary of State for Scotland, Alistair Jack, invoked the 1998 Scotland Act to block the attempt to introduce separate gender recognition rules in Scotland because it would adversely impact on the operation of equalities legislation throughout Britain. Campaigners had warned from 2018 and earlier about a potential clash with the Equality Act 2010.

While the editors of the book write that "Jack deserves credit for having the political courage to use a Section 35 order to

act", they also point out that it was grassroots campaigning in Scotland that laid the ground for this action, which was acknowledged even by the government's equalities minister at the time.

On 30 January 2023, Sturgeon tied herself in knots in an ITV interview after double rapist Adam Graham/Isla Bryson had been initially sent to a women's prison. At a press conference on 6 February, Sturgeon referred to the double rapist as "her". She resigned on 15 February.

Woman's Place UK stresses the importance of distinguishing sex from gender. An individual's biological sex is an immutable characteristic. Admitting a third option to the question of sex would depart from scientifically-grounded theory of human sexual dimorphism.

The mother of a disabled daughter was concerned that her daughter's need for same-sex intimate care would be legally considered as bigotry. She thought her daughter's dignity and safety more important than the feelings of a grown man. There were those, politicians included, who viewed a female's refusal to have a man identifying as a woman deliver her "same-sex" intimate care as akin to racism.

Material reality

But the material reality of a man is not changed by how he perceives himself. Telling vulnerable women and girls to ignore their own discomfort to accommodate a man's perception of himself is unjust and demeaning.

Others believed that attaining an independent Scotland was the only priority. Women's sex-based protections were merely a side-issue, a distraction. "Wheesht for indy" was to be the strategy, and once an independent Scotland emerged, we might restore women's rights. Or then again, we might not. It was intended to divide Britain, to demonstrate how different Scottish laws could be.

Journalist Mandy Rhodes comments, "it's ironic given that identity is at the heart of all our politics that it was actual identity politics that destroyed Nicola. I do think it destroyed her; if this whole debate hadn't happened, if those pictures of Isla Bryson hadn't driven a coach and horses through

me of “progress”,
ir story...

n’s rights

‘Telling vulnerable women and girls to ignore their own discomfort to accommodate a man’s perception of himself is unjust and demeaning...’

the idea that there were no risks around self-ID, she could still be around.”

The editors note that Sturgeon was failing in her two major commitments – closing the attainment gap between children from the richest and the poorest households, and securing a second independence referendum – and may have been looking for an easy win. How wrong she was.

By early 2023, and in the wake of the Graham/Bryson crisis, Sturgeon’s stubborn adherence to self-ID weakened her so much that she had little social or political capital left to deal with other major issues: the police investigation into the SNP’s finances, her failing independence strategy and much more.

The book’s editors see this as a story of failure of devolved Scottish politics, as devolution approached its quarter-century. The democratic renewal promised by establishing the Scottish Parliament was largely absent, with a small but influential group of activists dominating the political process, from civil servants to the first minister, and across the parties.

Women’s rights were sacrificed in the name of “progress”. The SNP-led Parliament ignored public opinion and failed to properly scrutinise poorly conceived legislation. The campaign to resist self-ID exposed how distant Holyrood had become from its electors, even disdainful of those outside its bubble – the very charge laid against Westminster by those who had campaigned for devolution. ■

WORKERS

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No one is employed to write, edit and design it. It is the product of the labour, thought and commitment of Party comrades and friends who see the need to produce an independent, working-class, communist magazine in and for Britain in the 21st century.

Every two months Workers covers the issues of the day: measured, analytical, and clear – and deeply committed to the interests of Britain and the British working class.

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This year marks the bicentenary of the opening of the Stockton & Darlington Railway. It will rightly be celebrated with events throughout the year.

200 years of railways

IN THE EARLY nineteenth century roads were poor, little more than tracks. Transport, especially for freight, was difficult and most easily accomplished by water, a slow form of transport.

Railways, first in Britain and then across much of the world, were crucial to developing the industrial revolution, capitalism – and a working class.

They carried coal from mines to where industry needed it for fuel. Electricity was generated at power stations and gas was made at gasworks, both fed by coal carried largely by trains. Rail moved most of the raw materials needed by industry, and transported most of the finished goods to where they were needed.

Trains allowed people to move easily from the country to the cities and towns, to take up jobs in industry. And rail carried the food needed to feed the population of these rapidly expanding towns and cities.

The new railways helped to spread new ideas, through easier distribution of books and newspapers. The needs of the railways boosted the development of the electric telegraph as instant communication was vital to the safe and efficient operation of trains. And the electric telegraph soon became the principal means of transmitting important messages and information over long distances for all purposes.

Steam power was integral to the development of railways. The first steam engines, used for pumping water from

mines, had been designed and built in Britain in the early part of the eighteenth century. Later that century, James Watt developed steam engines to power machinery.

Cornish mining engineer Richard Trevithick designed a high-pressure steam locomotive – a self-propelled engine – in 1804 for an early Welsh industrial railway. This was not successful due to the fragile cast iron track on which it ran, but the idea stuck. In 1812, the Middleton Railway in Leeds was the first to successfully use steam locomotives to haul trains.

Britain's railway industry is promoting 2025 as the 200th anniversary of the birth of the modern railway. But it's arguable that the opening of the Liverpool & Manchester Railway in 1825 – the world's first inter-city railway – was the true dawn of the modern railway.

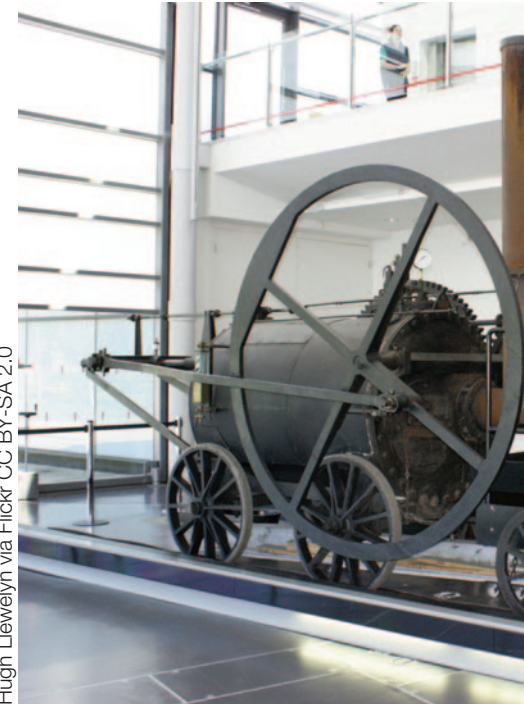
The Rocket

The Stockton & Darlington Railway opened in September 1825. The company's first engineer, George Stephenson, took railways beyond a primitive waggon way. A little later, in 1829, he won a competition with the famous *Rocket* at the Rainhill Trials run by the Liverpool & Manchester Railway. As a result, the company decided from the outset to use steam locomotives for its trains.

The new capitalists created by the Industrial Revolution were making huge profits from the exploitation of their workers. The success of the Liverpool & Manchester Railway led directly to a massive boom in railway building as those profits were invested to make still greater profits. Within fifty years a vast network of railways criss-crossed the country.

The railway companies went on to build ports for the export and import of goods, and they built large numbers of hotels to meet the massively increased demand for travel. Railway-owned ferries connected Britain with neighbouring countries, and connected towns and cities on lakes and rivers with the nearest railhead. As roads improved, they developed bus networks and road haulage.

Hundreds of thousands of workers were employed in railway-owned activities,



Hugh Llewelyn via Flickr CC BY-SA 2.0

A replica of Richard Trevithick's 1804 Pen y Darren steam locomotive on display in the Pen y Darren Museum, Swansea. The museum notes that, like the

many highly skilled. They soon organised effective trade unions to fight for safety, pay and better conditions.

But the commercial failure of duplicated rail routes meant that it wasn't long before discussions began about the need to plan the railways, run for the benefit of the nation, and publicly owned. By the First World War, all of the unions advocated nationalisation. The owners fiercely resisted.

The rot

Profits declined from the 1930s as roads improved, and cars and lorries became far more numerous. Eventually nationalisation happened in 1948, but did nothing to stop the rot. The dominance of road transport led to the massive rail cutbacks of the 1960s, in particular following the infamous Beeching Report of 1963.

British Rail managed decline until the 1980s, but started to turn things around as passenger numbers began to bounce back. By then the Thatcher government was contemplating the return of railways

'It wasn't long before discussions began about the need to plan the railways, run for the benefit of the nation, and publicly owned...'

ckton & Darlington ut the year...



Locomotive, on display in the National Waterfront
the original, it broke the rails on which it was set!

to the private sector.

Peripheral activities had already been hived off, and in 1994 the government started fragmenting an integrated core railway – then selling it off.

Privatisation was dealt a massive blow in 2001. The private infrastructure owner Railtrack went bankrupt following serious derailments. Publicly owned Network Rail took over. But the fragmented passenger services have staggered on for more than twenty years before a government has been forced into taking at least some action to address the industry's problems.

While Britain's rail network is now much smaller than it was and the volume of freight a tiny fraction of what it once carried, the number of passenger journeys made by train is now at near record levels and growing.

It is a vital part of the nation's public transport system and the current construction of HS2 designed for trains travelling over 200 mph, along with the reintegration of passenger services, could take the railway into a bright new future. ■



Worried about the future of
Britain? Join the CPBML.

ABOUT US

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.

Want to know more? Interested in joining or just in taking part? Get in touch by phone or email. If you want to know more, visit cpbml.org.uk/foundations, come along to our next online or in-person discussion group, or join a study group.

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Not left or right – but for British workers

‘We work to unite our class to fight for the interests of our class, the British working class. These interests are also the interests of Britain...’

COMMUNISTS AIM to unite workers, those who live by selling their labour power. Workers are put into competition with each other by their existence under capitalism.

But workers also cooperate with each other – not only working to produce goods and services but also combining against employers in fighting for pay and conditions.

All who live and work here are the working class, which comprises the vast majority of the British people. Whatever divides the working class works in favour of the employers, the ruling class.

Communists do not think or act in ways that divide our class. We are not “left” or “right”. We don’t divide our class into progressives and reactionaries. Communists are for the unity of our class. We work to unite our class to fight for what’s in the interests of our class, the British working class. These interests are also the interests of Britain.

By contrast, social democracy – the ideology of living with capitalism, typified by the Labour Party – embraces rootless internationalism. It denounces as “far right” those who embrace the national interest – cheap rhetoric that reveals their disdain for Britain and its people.

Social democracy holds that political life is divided into two: “left” and “right”, and that being of the left they are on the side of the angels. This facile division dates back to the time of the French revolution 220 years ago – it does not reflect real life in Britain today.

So it is said to be left-wing to support public investment, full employment, trade unions, good wages and decent pensions. All policies with majority support in the British working class.

And on the other hand, it is held to be right-wing to support using nuclear power to help to meet our energy needs, to oppose giving ever more powers to the unelected European Commission, to oppose prioritising identity politics, and to be in favour of controlling immigration. Again, all policies with majority support in the British working class.

In Germany now, two major political parties want to bring a swift end to the war in Ukraine,

the most dangerous war in Europe since World War Two. Both these parties want a peaceful settlement of this war. They both oppose sending ever more weapons to Ukraine.

Yet one, the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), is considered left wing as it is anti-capitalist and anti-austerity; it’s also anti-EU. The other, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), is described as right wing for its opposition to immigration. Both these parties are gaining support, quite unlike the collapsing social-democratic German government, and quite unlike the Labour government here.

Surely it is good when Germany, so often a belligerent in Europe’s wars, has two major parties rejecting war? Yet conventional social democratic opinion sees a joint threat from both parties as “reactionary anti-western, anti-NATO” parties “that reject western values”.

The European Commission, the Labour Party and social-democratic parties across Europe all claim to “oppose the far right” to try to justify their existence and legitimise their policies. But their slogan “don’t let the far right divide us” is itself divisive. And too many trade unions in Britain follow the same line.

The media over-emphasises the “far right” terror threat in Britain. And it labels as “far right” people who don’t accept the social-democratic political consensus (pro-EU, pro-NATO, pro-open borders).

A march in Glasgow held on 7 September last year was pro-Britain, anti-separatism, anti-SNP, pro-Brexit, and against mass immigration. The BBC told us that the march was anti-immigrant, and never mentioned its pro-unity and pro-sovereignty messages.

This self-defined left calls for “no borders”; the self-defined right calls for mass deportations. Both positions are anathema to the interests of workers; both deny security to those who live and work here.

The ruling class has always feared the working class. That is why it has always demonised the working class and its communism. The bigger the threat, the bigger the lies the rulers have to tell about it.

Take charge, take action in 2025! ■

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