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See you in court?

THE EUROPEAN Commission used to be seen as a voice of authority. But since Britain left the European Union, it has been overcome by a need to assert itself – representing as it does a fractious bloc of countries that suddenly lost 15 per cent of its GDP and saw its combined population slump from over 500 million to fewer than 450 million.

It used to be able to exert authority through its control of the purse strings and by keeping everyone else in the dark. No longer. The peoples and governments of Europe are becoming clued up, and restless. Even little Switzerland has told the EU to get lost (see page 5).

The Brussels vaccine procurement debacle hasn't helped – public exposure and humiliation of the worst sort. Nor did the Commission's ill-fated attempt to strongarm AstraZeneca, which ended in a Belgian court judgement on 14 June that effectively told the EU to go away and stop wasting its time. (The court ordered AstraZeneca to deliver the vaccines it had already delivered or was going to deliver anyway.)

Now the EU is taking legal action against its own member states, seven of them. This time it will be hoping for a better legal outcome, not least because the cases will go before its own European Court of Justice, which has already signalled that it is on the side of EU versus member state power.

Czechia and Poland stand accused of not

allowing non-nationals to join national political parties, Hungary of not accepting migrants as per EU orders. The Netherlands, Greece and Lithuania are being arraigned for not having suitable laws on hate speech and holocaust denial. All that on 8 June.

Two days later, the European Parliament dutifully followed suit by asking the European Court of Justice to deny Poland and Hungary access to the EU's €645 billion Covid-19 relief scheme until they change their stance on gay rights, media pluralism and the appointment of judges.

That scheme is financed out of borrowed money. Cue more woes for Brussels after the German constitutional court ruled in March that the German government could not sign up to the scheme, on the grounds that it breaches the country's fiscal rules.

This is no ordinary argument. Germany's court says that its constitution trumps the EU's. As Marc van der Woude, president of the EU's second-highest court, observed, "the logic of the [German] constitutional court could mean that each national court would be able to assert its own vision as to how European law would be applied...Ultimately, some may wonder whether this is a disguised exit from the EU without formal application [under Article 50]." Precisely.

The Commission will seek to divert attention by stoking tensions with Britain. That won't work. The EU is an idea whose time has gone. ■



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Contents – July/August 2021

News Digest

The Williams–Shapps Report: at heart, no change, p3; Glasgow libraries campaigners unite, p4; Free trade threat to farming, p5

03

Features

Race and working class unity, p6; Must care and health workers be vaccinated?, p8; Child care for profit, p11; Youth unemployment: the challenge for us all, p12; Watch out, there are freeports about, p14; Diet and obesity – an issue for the working class, p16; Science, technology and progress, p18

06

End Notes

Book Review: The Democrats' permanent war, p20; Historic Notes: 1945 – Labour's foreign policy, p22

20



- [RAIL](#)
- [SCOTLAND](#)
- [LIBRARIES](#)
- [HGV DRIVERS](#)
- [FARMING](#)
- [SWITZERLAND](#)
- [FACTS MATTER](#)
- [E-NEWSLETTER](#)
- [ON THE WEB](#)
- [WHAT'S ON](#)

- [At heart, no change](#)
- [Abellio fight continues](#)
- [Glasgow campaigns unite](#)
- [Why the shortage](#)
- [Free trade threat](#)
- [EU rebuffed](#)
- [References online](#)
- [How to subscribe](#)
- [More news online](#)
- [Coming soon](#)



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Dutch national rail subsidiary Abellio took over the East Midlands franchise in 2019. Foreign state ownership of rail is set to continue after the Williams-Shapps report.

Rail: at heart, no change

THE WILLIAMS-Shapps Plan for Rail – a government White Paper – has finally been published. And like too many of Britain’s trains, it arrived very late and was truly underwhelming.

The report carried with it a whiff of past times – Network Rail will be transformed (back?) into something called Great British Railways (GBR) which will remain in the public sector, using British Rail’s famous double arrow symbol in its branding. Rail and wheel will be re-united under GBR as one controlling organisation – now that the dead hand of EU law cannot prevent it.

But nothing fundamental will change. This was underlined within hours of the White Paper being published when First Group announced that it has already secured new rail contracts to run services that look almost identical to the South Western and Transpennine franchises that First Group has already been running. These are services which effectively went bust when Covid-19 arrived, and which the government has been propping up with taxpayers’ money ever since. Going forward, First Group will not have to bear any financial risk – that will be borne by us, the taxpayers.

The message is clear: the government has no intention of reducing the involvement of the private sector in running Britain’s train services. Indeed, it has no intention of even reviewing the way in which the new concession contracts will be structured. ■

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

SCOTLAND

Abellio fight continues

FURTHER STRIKES have been taking place in the long-running dispute between ticket examiners and conductors in Scotland and their employer, Abellio Scotrail. Their union, RMT, has been organising a series of weekly actions to achieve a measure of pay justice for all grades with enhancements for rest-day working. Now being added to the mix is the 2021 pay submission.

Discussions on this have yet to start, because Scotland’s SNP administration has not given the go-ahead to Transport Scotland, their department responsible for rail affairs. RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch commented, “It is extraordinary that the political leadership in Scotland – who hold a direct brief for transport – have allowed industrial relations on their railways to collapse.”

The dispute is likely to run on through the summer, with the RMT indicating it could affect large events like the Edinburgh International Festival (in August) and even the international climate conference, COP26, scheduled for Glasgow in November. ■

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...

Workers want cleaner air – but not Birmingham ULEZ scheme

Charges of £8 a day for drivers of highly polluting vehicles in Birmingham’s Ultra Low Emission Zone will hit some of the city’s most deprived neighbourhoods.

Universal Basic Income – no solution

A universal basic income sounds nice and fair, but behind the superficial attractiveness is the flawed concept that the future for our society will not involve productive work for all.

Bus drivers win victory over ‘fire and rehire’

Manchester bus drivers, members of the union Unite, defeated a plan by Go North West to fire and rehire them on worse pay and conditions, ending a strike that began at the end of February.

Setback for separatists

The much-trumpeted “super-majority” for Scottish separatists never materialised when the SNP and the Alba Party faced the voters in May.

Protocol denies life-saving drug to Northern Ireland

A hard border for medicines between Northern Ireland and Britain imposed by the EU denies the province early access to a new life-saving cancer drug.

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.



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Campaigners rally in George Square, Glasgow.

Fighting for Glasgow libraries

ON SATURDAY 5 June trade unions and local communities came together in a rally in George Square in central Glasgow. It was the first time in several weeks of campaigning against the closure of libraries and other venues, that the various action groups had come together in a united display of anger at Glasgow City Council – and its “arms-length” cultural body Glasgow Life.

The campaigners’ strength was emphasised by their keeping the weekly read-ins and picketing going at the local libraries under threat, while the rally proceeded. There was visible support from local branches of trade unions such as GMB, Unison and Unite, as well as from Glasgow Trades Council.

Many see their activity as part of the long running national campaign against library closures and rundowns, with one activist displaying the logo of a similar campaign in Devon. She is Ruth Gillett of the Friends of People’s Palace, Winter Gardens & Glasgow Green, fighting to preserve a large area of Glasgow long seen as belonging directly to the people of the city. She welcomed a photograph being taken of their newly created banner, and told *Workers* it was made by artist Stasia Rice. Their representative spoke at the rally before it marched the short distance to the City Council building.

An umbrella campaign, Glasgow Against Closures, has been set up to coordinate further action. ■

HGV DRIVERS

Why the shortage?

THE ROAD Haulage Association (RHA) has reported that there are currently 70,000 vacancies for HGV drivers, a shortage of “catastrophic proportions”. This is illustrated by Tesco’s admission that it is being forced to bin nearly 50 tonnes of fresh food every week because there are too few lorry drivers to transport produce to its stores.

At a time when unemployment is above pre-pandemic levels, the transport industry shows that poor pay and training are a drag on British productivity.

In its report, “UK Driver Shortage – RHA calls for action”, the association calls out the government (though not the industry), for the “long-term ineffectiveness of apprenticeships for lorry drivers”. But the report’s headline remedy for this crisis is to call upon the government to either place drivers on the Shortage Occupation List, or create a Seasonal Visa Scheme similar to

farm workers.

Such action is both backward-looking, with employers longing for the good old pre-Brexit days of importing cheap foreign labour, and unlikely to succeed, as there is an EU-wide shortage of drivers. Although the report details the requirements for a comprehensive training scheme, it fails to address the major cause of the shortage: poor levels of pay.

The report says that “respect for drivers and the vital skilled contribution they make for society needs to be better recognised”. That won’t happen until the industry pays wages that will recruit and retain British drivers, and is prepared to pay for proper training.

A similar shortage exists in the construction industry, which once employed many Polish and Lithuanian workers. Unless they can persuade the government to grant visa exemptions for foreign labour (which it might do), employers will be forced to take on and train British workers at rates of pay they can live on. ■



Cattle in the Hunter Valley, New South Wales, Australia.

Free trade threat to farming

BRITISH FARMERS are concerned at the implications of a trade deal “in principle” with Australia agreed on 15 June and being rushed through by the government. The National Farmers’ Union has warned that the impact of the removal of tariffs could be devastating, particularly for Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish farmers.

The agreement has not been published, but it appears to offer tariff-free imports on beef, lamb and sugar from Australia, to be phased in over 15 years. Currently beef imports attract tariffs of 12 per cent, with a surcharge of £1.40 to £2.50 per kilogram, varying according to cut. The Australian Agricultural Company (AACo) predicts that the removal of tariffs would allow it to increase beef exports to Britain tenfold from the current 1,567 tonnes a year, according to a report in the *Financial Times*.

The quantities involved are relatively small – we currently produce around 900,000 tonnes of beef and veal, importing 253,000 tonnes, so 15,670 tonnes is a small proportion – but the danger is that Australia would export high quality beef, such as strip loin, which would compete with British small farms producing similar cuts.

Australian beef farming is conducted on huge ranches. AACo farms around 340,000 cattle across 18 properties in Queensland and the Northern Territory – in all 7 million hectares, more than a quarter of the UK’s landmass. The average British beef cattle herd is between 28 and 50 animals. And Australian farmers are free to use hormonal growth products banned in this country – 40 per cent of their cattle are fed on such products.

There have been rumours of a split within government on the agreement, between aggressive free trade ideologues, and those who understand, to some extent, the threat it poses to British agriculture and food security. The world wars of the 20th century exposed the reliance on food imports from the dominions and colonies as a fatal error, with tens of thousands of merchant seamen dying from U-boat attacks, mostly on ships carrying food.

The free-traders were desperate to rush to conclude a deal before the G7 meeting in Cornwall in June, at which Australia was an observer. This arbitrary deadline, plucked from the air, was an attempt to set a precedent for free trade agreements without anyone having a say about how they should be negotiated. It seems to have succeeded.

“What is worrying... is that the UK Government is pushing ahead with a trade deal without any public discussion about what trade policy, what kind of economy and what kind of national food production they are pursuing, if there is any strategy at all,” said Professor L. Alan Winters from Sussex University’s UK Trade Policy Observatory.

- Meanwhile, the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs announced payments to farmers of up to £100,000 to encourage them to leave farming. While the scheme is aimed at older farmers, environment secretary George Eustice said when launching the scheme, that it also wants to persuade young people from farming families to leave the land. The programme has no protection to stop agricultural land ending up with developers.

Small tenant farmers, it seems, are an inconvenient obstacle to the multinational capitalists who would like to consolidate further their stranglehold on our food markets, or exploit our countryside in other ways, for example by property development.

It is said that people shy away from careers in the countryside. Farmers who have given decades of their lives to the land, and their skills and experience, are vital to our ability to develop British agriculture so an independent country can feed itself securely and safely. ■

WHAT’S ON

Coming soon

For obvious reasons, CPBML public – physical – meetings are not currently taking place. But we are holding a series of online discussion meetings via Zoom.

You’re welcome to take part, or just listen in. Email info@cpbml.org.uk for an invitation and a link to the discussion.

To keep up-to-date as things change, make sure you’re signed up to receive our electronic newsletter (see the foot of the left-hand column, page 4).

JULY

Tuesday 6 July, 7pm

Discussion meeting (via Zoom)

“Defence, not aggression”

What does the defence of Britain mean? An opportunity to discuss war, peace and our place in the world.

SWITZERLAND

EU rebuffed

TO THE DELIGHT of the country’s leading trade union federation, the Swiss government abandoned talks in May with the European Union over replacing Switzerland’s 120-odd treaties with Brussels with one overarching “framework” agreement.

The deal had been seven years in the making. Now it is broken. It had been agreed as a draft three years ago, but opposition within Switzerland forced the government to go back for improvements.

The three main sticking points were wages protection, state aid rules and access to welfare benefits by EU citizens. And the EU, overconfident as ever, refused to make any changes at all to accommodate Swiss reservations.

The ball is now in the EU’s court, but it looks like the Brussels bluff has been called. However, it may well try again to exert pressure as the individual treaties become due for renegotiation

The SGB/USS (Swiss Trade Union Federation), the largest umbrella body of unions in the country, issued an immediate statement welcoming the government’s decision on the grounds that it guarantees Switzerland’s existing wage protection laws against EU-based companies that sought to undermine them. ■

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

The Sewell report has not gone down well with those comm of skin colour. Above all, it's optimistic – and with good reason

Race and working class



Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities: The Report

Cover of the report from the commission chaired by educationalist Tony Sewell.

IN A LANDMARK report, issues of race and ethnic relations and achievements in contemporary Britain have been examined by a distinguished panel of commissioners, which acknowledges that the situation is by no means perfect and that there is much left to do.

But read on: “The country has come a long way in 50 years and the success of much of the ethnic minority population in education and, to a lesser extent, the economy, should be regarded as a model for other White-majority countries,” it said. The optimistic and forward-looking flavour is notable.

That report came from the Commission

‘The report is based on science, not on anecdote...’

on Race and Ethnic Disparities, chaired by educationalist Tony Sewell. It was commissioned last summer by the government in the wake of the Black Lives Matter furore. It was asked to examine the state of race and ethnic disparities in this country, why they exist and what should be done to eliminate or mitigate them. The ten commissioners were drawn from a variety of fields of expertise including science, education, medicine, policing, economics and broadcasting. All but one were from ethnic minority backgrounds.

The commission used a mass of data compiled by the Cabinet Office’s Race and Disparity Unit, first set up in 2016, together with evidence from other experts and by speaking to communities. The report, published in March this year, is based on evidence rather than anecdote.

Findings

Looking particularly at the areas of education and training, employment, crime and

policing, and health, the report comes to a number of main findings and 24 recommended actions. It describes some areas of continuing obstacles, but also the need to build on many successes.

It boldly states that: “The evidence shows that geography, family influence, socio-economic background, culture and religion have more significant impact on life chances than the existence of racism.” Racism has too often become a catch-all explanation, implicitly accepted rather than examined, it says.

The report tells us to reject a “fatalistic narrative” and recognise that it is hard to create a successful multicultural society. Racial disparities will occur along the way, but our country’s progress to a successful multicultural community can be a “beacon to the rest of Europe and the world”.

What’s more, to deal with poor outcomes identified for some groups – for instance, for Afro-Caribbean and white boys in education – the broad answer is to

mitted to the politics of “identity” and division on the basis son...

unity

take action to improve outcomes for everyone. The report carries a clear message: everyone needs to feel part of Britain and work together to create better lives here.

It's not surprising that the report went down badly among those who are invested politically, financially and emotionally into the notion that Britain is overwhelmingly divided racially, that no progress has been made over the past decades, and that white people are to blame. They want well known educational findings such as that white boys are achieving among the lowest educational results, that children of black African families are among the highest achievers, to be pushed aside. Particularly upsetting to them is Sewell's call for an end to the guilt-inducing “decolonising of the curriculum”, and that all children should be taught about the making of modern Britain, and to see it as their own heritage.

On health disparities, Sewell calls on black and Asian people to take part in health trials to enable data to reflect the whole population. The report shows that health outcomes are worse for some white groups than for many ethnic minorities. Stop and Search policing is not rejected but rethought, in part to protect young black men – major victims of homicide in cities – more effectively. This reflects the views expressed by many mothers of young murdered men in London.

Sewell calls for an end to the term BAME – Black, Asian and minority ethnic – given the complex picture of the population of Britain. The catch-all term, he says, obstructs genuine investigation of differences in research. And the report rejects victimhood, calling on people to take responsibility by pushing for and grasping opportunities.

Reaction

Even before publication, the 258-page report was beginning to be heavily criticised for fear of it coming to the “wrong” conclusions. And it was met by a torrent of shaming and abuse when it actually appeared, mostly from people who had not had time to read it but had heard about it and knew they couldn't agree with it.

Probably its worst sin was coming to the conclusion that, overall, disparities were

‘Probably its worst sin was the conclusion that disparities were not due to “institutional racism” ...’

not due to “institutional racism” but to a multiplicity of factors.

Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer quickly stated that although he had not read the report, it couldn't be right because of its rejection of “structural racism” as the most important element in disparities. And the national secretary of the GMB union Rehana Azam accused the commission of being “cynical”, “immoral”, and “irresponsible” because “institutional racism exists”, her evidence being that ethnic minorities are dying in greater numbers from Covid! Norwich Labour MP Clive Lewis even presented the commissioners as the Ku Klux Klan in a tweeted photo.

The commission members have been subjected to vile racial slurs and received death threats. In the week after publication the commission expressed its shock at the refusal to even read the report or discuss the findings on their merits.

Toxic voices from the race relations industry called Sewell “a token black man”, and worse. The UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent (like other puffed up UN organisations which claim the right to sit in judgement on British society), in a grossly irresponsible charge from an international organisation, accused the Commission of rationalising “white supremacy” and called for it to be disbanded or reconstituted.

On 20 April, defending the report in parliament, equalities minister Kemi Badenoch denounced such “appalling abuse and false assertions” and accused hysterical opposition MPs of attacking the

report “for daring to think differently”.

On Sky News commission member and space scientist Dr Maggie Aderin-Pocock expressed horror at the, to her, unexpected hysterical outrage. “We need debate, we don't need to be hurling insults,” she said. To the charge that the report puts a positive spin on slavery, she replied, “The intention was to say that despite slavery, the human spirit of the black people involved in that triumphed over that adversity.”

As in the USA, and largely imported wholesale from there despite Britain being a very different society with a different history, a poisonous race industry has grown up in this country. Great sums of money are made by purveyors of “unconscious bias” training courses to be flogged to workplaces. Companies and institutions are falling over themselves to send their employees to corrective education, largely to demonstrate their own virtue often while doing nothing practical to examine and take action on their own discriminatory practices.

Spurious

Universities and colleges spend precious funds on spurious academic posts examining the “institutional racism” supposedly pervading the whole of British society. Politicians like Keir Starmer and public organisations like the Football Association feel obliged to demonstrate their correctness of thinking, or hesitate in fear of saying the wrong thing. An accusation of racism can end in the sack or blight a career. Better to hide away and say nothing. Sowing division among the people has become a profitable industry in itself.

There has been genuine criticism of aspects of the report and particular recommendations, but overall it has been welcomed. So let's celebrate the publication of a report which rejects the grievance mongers, with their promotion of a perpetual miserable victimhood, and which calls for genuine debate and appreciation for the relative health of British society and how far it has come, and for unity in the face of its problems. This report examines race in Britain and finds a decent people doing its best. ■

The Covid-19 pandemic has taught us – if we needed to be there is such a thing as collective responsibility for the health

Must health and care workers

HEALTH SECRETARY Matt Hancock has announced that Covid-19 vaccinations are to be made compulsory for all workers in care homes in England, and that consultations are to commence on extending this policy to the NHS in England. The government will require care workers to have both jabs within 16 weeks of the necessary regulations being approved by Parliament. If they refuse, they could lose their jobs.

Hancock has admitted that the vast majority of staff in care homes have been vaccinated, but told Parliament that compulsory vaccinations in care homes and hospitals would protect not only the individuals vaccinated but those around them, and would save lives.

NHS and care home staffs' unions Unison and GMB have both condemned Hancock's move. Yet both have also failed to provide a cogent explanation as to why they did so. Both suggested that staff would rather leave their jobs than be vaccinated – exacerbating existing staff shortages – but that seems unlikely. Both extol the virtues of persuading rather than coercing workers, and in common with nearly all other unions both encourage their members to be vaccinated.

So is Hancock going over the top by insisting that care and health workers have the jab? Certainly, the fact that up to a quarter of care staff in London are still not vaccinated must be a serious concern at a time when Covid-19 infections are rising again after restrictions were eased, albeit from a very low number. Nationally, around 15 per cent of care workers are not vaccinated. The figures for NHS staff are similar.

Refusals

Remember that all these staff were given priority for receiving the jabs, so these are individuals who are refusing vaccination rather than workers who have not had the opportunity. Campaigns by government

'Talk of "zero covid" is fanciful in the extreme...'



Alexey Federenko/shutterstock.com

Not just a museum: the vaccination centre at the Science Museum has been open for business

and trade unions to persuade them to be vaccinated have clearly not completely worked.

On 14 June the government postponed the ending of all Covid-19 restrictions despite giving clear signals that it would do so on 21 June. Prime Minister Johnson is now talking in terms of "living with the disease", conveying a much more realistic assessment of how the pandemic must be managed in the future.

After all, the uncomfortable fact is that Covid-19 probably won't be eradicated in our lifetimes. Talk of "zero covid" is fanciful in the extreme, like talking of "zero flu".

The failure to meet the target date of 21 June to end all restrictions has understandably caused despair for many longing to

get on with their lives. The pandemic has created greater levels of unemployment, it has seriously damaged the education of many, and has caused increased ill health. The lockdowns in particular have resulted in greater mental illness, and the intensified pressure on hospitals has seen longer waiting times for patients. For some, the wait was too long, and they died – not recorded as Covid-19 victims, but killed by the virus just as surely.

Notwithstanding, massive steps have been taken towards beating Covid. Since the last lockdown ended in April, restrictions have eased considerably. The vaccination programme has been a success.

But the recent predominance of the highly infectious Delta variant of the

taught – that there is such a thing as society. And that
 th of the country...

Workers be vaccinated?



since 11 March.

Covid-19 virus first recorded in India did reverse the downward trend in infections – which is why the government decided to postpone what it had called “freedom day”.

Protection

It is encouraging that the vaccines seem to be providing effective protection against the Delta variant. Most of those being admitted to hospital or dying in June were those who had not been vaccinated, and there is strong evidence to show that the vaccinated are at much lower risk of infection. If they are infected they are very unlikely to need hospitalisation, or die. Until recently there was a clear correlation between cases, hospital admissions, and deaths. The mass vaccination programme

now seems to have broken that link.

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, lockdowns and restrictions have been imposed on the British people in order to control and limit the spread of the disease, with two express aims; to minimise deaths, and to avoid the NHS being overwhelmed. Around 5 million people have been infected with the virus in Britain, with 470,000 of those admitted to hospital with Covid-19. 150,000 have died having tested positive for Covid-19. At the peak of the pandemic, daily positive tests were around 80,000, with 4,000 a day being admitted to hospital, and 1,300 a day dying having tested positive.

And a growing number of those infected are experiencing “long Covid”, where the effects of the disease persist for months, causing many to be absent from their workplaces on a long term basis, often leading to them losing their jobs.

The figures for deaths should be treated with some caution. The deaths recorded are of those who died within 28 days of having tested positive with Covid-19. This is not the same as the number who died as a result of having been infected. A small number of those who have died as a result of Covid-19 were not tested, and were therefore not recorded in the official figures.

It seems likely that far more died for another reason but their condition was either exacerbated by Covid-19, or the virus played little or no part in their demise. So the official figures for deaths have been inflated. The fact is that while there is no doubt that a small number of young healthy people died from Covid-19, the vast majority that died were over 60 years old, and most had other medical issues that made them particularly vulnerable to the Covid-19 infection.

A better picture of what has been going on is provided by “excess death” figures. These figures compare the average annual death rate with a particular year. In 2020 there were 697,000 deaths in Britain, nearly 85,000 more than the average. This would support the view that deaths actually caused by Covid were greatly exaggerated by official figures.

And at present this year, excess deaths

‘The figures for deaths should be treated with some caution...’

are actually lower than the average.

From mid-April 2021 to the middle of June the official Covid daily death rate was below 20, and the daily number of hospital admissions has been below 150. While infections are rising rapidly again, hospital admissions and deaths are not. Hospital admissions have risen slightly, but by mid-June deaths were actually down to around 10 a day.

Inevitably, there is now much debate about how to manage the pandemic in this new situation. The vaccination programme is clearly responsible for this turnaround in our fortunes, but many scientists are concerned that until at least another 20 per cent of adults have received the second vaccination, the virus may still again increase out of control.

It is this situation that has prompted an evaluation of the mandating of vaccination for care and NHS workers. Alongside this, debate rages about allowing those vaccinated much more freedom than those that have not been jabbed, including the freedom to travel abroad.

Some care home employers have already made vaccination compulsory – having already decreed that staff either agree to be vaccinated or lose their jobs. Many other employers, not just in the health and care sectors, are thinking of doing likewise. In some workplaces, many workers are now expressing concerns to their employers about having to work alongside colleagues who are not vaccinated.

There are various reasons why some refuse to be vaccinated. Most but not all are bogus, though there are valid concerns from, for example, people with serious allergies. Fuelled by misinformation on the

Continued on page 10



richardjohnson/shutterstock.com

Closed building site: safety in the workplace requires a high level of vaccination.

Continued from page 9

internet and in the media, some believe that vaccines are inherently harmful – even that the vaccines have the ability to alter their DNA or their minds. This nonsense is exposed as such now that 8 out of 10 adults in Britain have received at least one jab. The evidence is overwhelming and clear.

Risks

Some believe that the risks of the vaccine are as great as the disease. No vaccine is 100 per cent safe, but there is overwhelming data showing that the risks associated with contracting Covid-19 are huge compared to the risks of vaccination.

For example, Covid sufferers are 8 to 10 times as likely to get blood clots – a condition known as CVT – as people who get the AstraZeneca vaccine, according to researchers at Oxford University, where the jab was developed.

And some are persuaded not to be vaccinated by superstition or religious or even political beliefs. It is hard to counter irrational beliefs.

There is no doubt that the Covid-19 vaccinations are as safe as they can be. In

Britain, they have now even been cleared for use with pregnant women and children over 12 years of age.

But some individuals have no interest in collective health and wellbeing or society. They would not be vaccinated even if failure to vaccinate enough people resulted in a pandemic that would kill most of the world's population or devastate the world's economy.

While they may wish to take huge risks with their own health and lives, they cannot be allowed to put others at risk – and that especially applies in the workplace. Indeed, that is the basis of Britain's health and safety law; the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 requires employers to take all reasonably practicable steps to reduce workplace risks to their lowest practicable level, protecting the health and safety not only of the workforce but of the public. This last point is especially pertinent in respect of the care and health sectors.

The Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulations require employers to carry out a suitable and sufficient risk assessment to manage a risk, in this case the very serious risk of Covid-19 infection leading to hospitalisation, long Covid, or death.

The regulations compel employers to use a hierarchy of control measures that put actions such as the wearing of PPE and masks along with social distancing way below a measure that actually controls the infection itself – vaccination.

There is no doubt that the death toll among front-line workers not only in care and health but in other areas like transport would have been greatly reduced had workers been vaccinated.

Looked at from a standard health and safety risk assessment perspective, vaccination is by far the most effective means to control the risks of Covid infection. And such an approach in relation to infectious disease is not novel – the NHS already requires many front line workers to be vaccinated against other diseases.

It beggars belief that many will accept that workplaces can only end the measures introduced to control infection when the vast majority of their staff are vaccinated, but then not support moves to get more individuals be vaccinated. Control measures in workplaces generally work on the basis that there are rules in place to ensure the health and safety of the workforce as a whole. Individuals cannot opt out of those control measures. ■

Almost unbelievably, most children's homes in Britain are run by private equity companies...

Child care for profit

PRIVATE EQUITY companies have swooped on the children's care sector during the pandemic, a *Times* investigation has reported, seizing on the chance of a quick buck. This adds a dangerous factor to the financial stability of many children's homes, as the private equity model involves taking on high levels of debt to buy up property and resources, gambling on high profits to be made.

There are echoes of the risk-taking which led to the financial collapse of the huge private equity-backed Southern Cross Healthcare Group in 2011, in spite of its huge profit margins.

As it was with 31,000 mainly elderly residents of Southern Cross then, now it is the lives of children and young people being put at risk through unsustainable levels of leveraged debt. The equity companies have been swallowing up smaller private providers, aiming to resell at a profit.

Private care fees have been forced up as a result, from an average of £2,800 in 2013 to £4,100 a week per child by the end of last year. Their local authority customers, legally responsible for children in care, are effectively being held hostage to pay up because of a massive shortfall in places amid rising demand.

There is a long history of problems with the quality and safety of children's homes, but these have become significantly worse as they are increasingly seen merely as a financial investment. A number have opened and closed within months.

As Andy Elvin, chief executive of the Adolescent and Children's Trust, said recently, "The majority of children's homes now are owned by three or four private equity houses and they have a business model that's based on bed nights. Because you can charge . . . upwards of £5,000 a week from the point of view of the people at the top of the tree — the private equity analysts — if you can even get three or four weeks of that fee it was worth it."

Dubbed "get rich quick homes" by MPs on the education select committee in June, average profits for large providers are just under 18 per cent, with a rise of a sixth last year alone. One private equity-owned chain, the Witherslack Group, almost doubled its profits from £9.5 million to



Could the Southern Cross debacle be replicated in children's homes?

£18 million in 2020. Large private chains are buying property in northwest England, much cheaper than in the South, forcing councils to place children hundreds of miles from where they live.

In June Josh MacAllister, chair of the government's current review of social care, called the market for placements for vulnerable children "broken", and said that the levels of private fees and profits were indefensible.

Falling standards

And along with the rising profits comes a dangerous diminution in quality of care, reports the *Times*. While Ofsted suspended regular physical inspections due to the pandemic, 176 new homes were opened between April 1 and August 31 last year, a rise of a third over the same period in 2019. Reports for nearly a quarter of those inspected (mostly remote inspections only) have yet to be published. Almost a third were found to have failings, often charging very high fees for children with complex problems supervised by inexperienced low paid young staff working long shifts.

Ofsted found examples of children and young people in care being put at serious risk by the failings. At one home, children stole knives from the kitchen and took them to school. At another, staff dropped off a young person at a drug dealer's home in spite of police warnings about the area.

A scaffolder convicted of carrying an 8-inch knife behind the sun visor in his car,

John Lawrence, is co-owner of Capital Children's Care Ltd. This company bought a large house in Braintree, Essex, and opened it as a children's home last June. An Ofsted judgement of "serious and widespread concerns" revealed that directors and staff lacked the qualifications, experience and skills required to keep children safe. They had no first aid training. One staff member worked 72 hours without leaving the home, another worked a run of 14 nights in a row. Young residents were able to take dangerous risks, with instances of exhausted staff unable to cope. Essex county council paid the home £320,000 over seven months to look after difficult-to-place children with complex needs.

In-person "assurance" visits, where there were concerns, began in September 2020, and regular inspections from this April. Before the pandemic four in five homes were judged as good or outstanding in full inspections. Since then almost one in three newly registered homes have identified significant concerns.

They are expensive to run. Around 60 per cent of costs are for staff, so young inexperienced and unqualified support staff are common. Several of the new homes during the pandemic had no registered manager. The work is hard and staff turnover is high. Yet these are literally the homes of children and young people whose educational outcomes are among the lowest in the country. ■

During the Covid-19 pandemic young people have been hit hard. For young workers in particular, the economic recovery, which is going from bad to worse

Youth unemployment: a



Massimo Parisi/shutterstock.com

London delivery rider. Many young adults rely on casual work like this, but the gig economy has been hit hardest by Covid-19.

WHILE THE economy is said to be recovering, young people are finding it as hard as ever to get work. A batch of reports in the first half of the year have now been followed by official statistics on the labour market issued on 15 June. As the non-profit social enterprise Youth Employment noted in its analysis of the statistics, “the data shows that young people have not seen the same levels of recovery as all ages.”

To put that observation into context,

‘We’ve seen all too many of these vague, well-meaning schemes in the past...’

the “recovery” is minuscule as it is. The statistics, covering the three months from February to April, record a fall of just 0.3 per cent in unemployment across all ages. Meanwhile, young people – classified as those aged between 18 and 25 – are more likely than any other age group to be unemployed.

Before the coronavirus pandemic a high number of young adults were employed in hospitality, catering, leisure and retail sectors, as well as in the casualised “gig” economy. These areas were hardest hit; 47 per cent of all young workers were furloughed during the first lockdown. A research briefing published in March by the House of Commons Library gives more detail.

The report, titled *Facing the future - employment prospects for young people after Coronavirus*, was jointly produced with The Prince’s Trust. It says that in the economic downturn since Covid-19 struck, 60 per cent of the jobs that have disap-

peared are lost by workers aged between 16 and 24 years.

Around 1 in 6 of these young people will be unemployed this year. That figure will worsen next year even as the economy begins to recover. It’s expected that young adults will make up around 37 per cent of the total unemployed.

This will lower tax revenue to government and increase benefit spending. The cost is forecast to be £2.5 billion over this year, rising to £2.9 billion in 2022. The impact on the earnings and employment prospects of young adults will be high. The estimate for those entering the labour market in 2021 alone is more than £14 billion over the next seven years.

Impact

And among young workers, the impact of this will be greatest on the less well off, and those with no qualifications or those gained at lower levels. Employer demands for those with few or no qualifications are

t particularly hard. Now the prospects for all workers, but
se...

challenge for us all

expected to fall in the future. The prospects for many are bleak.

The TUC warned of this risk to young workers last June. It expresses support for the government's commitments to investment in housing, transport and new technology. But will these create jobs for skilled workers? Unless urgent steps are taken to provide training for young people so that they can gain the necessary skills to be able to take advantage of opportunities provided by that investment, those skilled workers will end up being drawn from other countries.

Hopes

The TUC pins its hopes on a job guarantee scheme, an idea also touted by think tanks like the Social Market Foundation. This looks superficially attractive with mention of the living wage, public benefit, "decarbonisation jobs" and so on. But at heart the premise is about jobs that aim to provide skills leading to permanent work. So possibly not "jobs" at all and possibly no "guarantee".

We've seen all too many of these vague, well-meaning schemes in the past. But the TUC is for once talking about developing skills for British workers instead of importing them. And it does make important points – any scheme should bring extra money, and be about new posts and not replacing existing workers. It should also reflect local labour market needs, linked to regional economic plans.

The government has done nothing effective in response to the warnings last year about the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on young workers. It's equally unlikely to take notice of the latest reports or "job guarantee" proposals unless forced to do so.

The Lifetime Skills Guarantee announced by Boris Johnson with a fanfare last September looks like a hollow shell. And without pressure from workers, it's likely to remain that way.

Demands

Unions must demand greatly increased spending by government in a decent future for our youth – otherwise too many will face a lifetime of casual work in the gig

Autism and unemployment

IF EMPLOYMENT prospects for young people generally are grim, for those with any kind of disability they are desperate. And worse still if that disability is autism.

When the Office for National Statistics released a report on outcomes for disabled people in February this year, it showed that only 22 per cent of autistic adults are in any kind of employment.

The report itself – the first proper analysis of employment among people with autism – was the result of years of campaigning by the National Autistic Society. "This is a shocking figure, which is even lower than previously suggested in surveys our charity has run," it said in response.

"We are really worried that out of all disabled people, autistic people seem to have the worst employment rate. While not all autistic people can work, we know most want to."

That willingness to work was obvious when Workers spoke to two young people with autism about their experiences finding work. George and Idris* are both Londoners in their 20s, and as they sat in a café in north London they described a ramshackle system made up of numerous separate charities focused on the needs of young people with disabilities, but each with its own way of working.

The Covid-19 pandemic has not just cut down on job opportunities, it has made it harder for people like George and Idris to put across their skills and their willingness to work. "When the Jobcentre tells you about a vacancy, you just send off a CV," said Idris. "For me it just doesn't work. It doesn't fit in with how I interact with the world. I need to

meet people and adapt. Online is not like that."

The lack of any formal support for gaining employment makes things worse. "It's not what you know, it's who you know," says George.

When he can find work, George does casual shifts for a company in the security industry. "Anywhere the company can make cuts it is doing so," he says.

One example is ThumbTec, a technology where a fingerprint rather than a security guard confirms an ID. That can be combined with "soft" (remote) monitoring via CCTV whereby someone sitting in, say, Glasgow can provide access to workers in a building in London. And, as George notes, security is only one of many industries where technology is replacing human beings.

Before the pandemic Idris worked on a zero hours contract as a cleaner in a football stadium. He reckons that the work won't come back, at least not in that form. "They don't need casual workers like me [whom they have to train]," he said. Instead, the work will be outsourced to a professional cleaning company.

Things had anyway become much harder after the financial crisis of 2018, which wiped \$7 trillion off the value of global stock markets. As the pandemic comes (hopefully) to an end, people generally assume things will improve, but from where George stands that's just wishful thinking. "Actually it's making things worse: employers are even keener to make cuts," he says. ■

* Names have been altered to preserve anonymity.

economy. Or worse they will end up in the black economy where minimum wages, health and safety and job security simply don't exist, or turn to crime.

A lack of employment, money and a purpose in life will mean much greater levels of ill health and an increase in the numbers resorting to the escape provided by

alcohol or drugs. All this would instead mean increased government spending being needed even more by the NHS and social care – as well as police, courts and prisons.

Glib phrases like "perfect storm" don't do justice to this looming disaster. Avoiding it is everyone's responsibility. ■

**Freeports are a reality. Most workers have never heard of
within them will really matter...**

Watch out, there are free



Workers

Felixstowe Docks, Suffolk – one of the sites listed for England's eight freeports.

IN MARCH the government announced the location of eight new freeports across England. The eight were chosen following a bidding process which involved coalitions which had to include the relevant Local Authority (or authorities), local enterprise partnerships and large manufacturing employers as well as the port concerned.

This is a policy decision with big consequences. But few people know what freeports are about, even in sectors directly employed in the ports. Plenty of workers are asking, "What is a freeport"?

There is evidence that workers are already planning how to organise in this new environment. There is an urgent need for a wider understanding to aid that organisation. Yet the idea has not been hidden – freeports have been a favoured Conservative party policy for some time, and a particular favourite of the current Chancellor.

What is a freeport?

Good question. We have learnt that putting the adjective "free" in front of a word is a favoured government tactic. Think "free

trade" and "free movement of labour".

A House of Commons libraries briefing points out there is no single definition of a freeport, and they operate in different ways in different countries. But they all have features in common, such as "various concessions on customs, other tax and planning advantages and reduced bureaucracy".

The briefing also explains that while being within a country's geographical borders, freeports are effectively outside a country's custom borders. That's a crucial difference: in practice freeports can amount to little more than warehousing to areas where added value manufacturing occurs before goods are re-exported.

The stated ambition for the eight freeports announced for England is that they will become more like regeneration zones. The geographical area involved is greater than the physical port and freeports can be up to 45 kilometres (27 miles) across. It is planned that companies inside the sites will also be offered tax breaks, mostly lasting five years.

The Treasury documentation for the application process did focus on the

manufacturing element, explaining how firms are able to import goods without paying tariffs whereby producers "process them into a final good and then either pay a tariff on goods sold into the domestic market or export the final goods without paying UK tariffs."

There will be other financial benefits too for employers within freeports, who will pay reduced national insurance contributions for new staff. Freeport status will lead to "a wide package of tax reliefs", according to the government, including tax relief on purchasing land, constructing new buildings or renovating old ones, and investing in new plant and machinery.

Freeports are not all maritime ports –

'Putting the adjective "free" in front of a word is a favourite tactic...'

them, but they soon will – and workers' organisation

Reports about

'How does this policy relate to the industrial strategy? A good question...'

they can include airports. Indeed, one of the eight chosen freeport locations is East Midlands Airport, one of the UK's busiest cargo airports, second only to Heathrow, and handling over 320,000 tonnes of flown cargo every year.

As Unite the union pointed out to their members during the consultation phase, "Freeports are similar to free trade zones or 'enterprise zones'...The difference is that a freeport is designed to specifically encourage businesses that import, process and then re-export goods, rather than more general business support or regional 'levelling up' objectives."

Industrial Strategy?

You might be asking how this policy relates to the industrial strategy? Another good question. Until you remember that the UK does not have an industrial strategy.

These days a search for "UK industrial strategy" takes you to a government website telling you that the strategy has been archived. The site goes on to say that the government is "transitioning the Industrial Strategy into our Plan for Growth and its related strategies"

The site includes an introduction from the prime minister which talks about a "post-industrial era", as if such a thing were possible. Everyone relies on industry for everyday living, so the use of this phrase should always be challenged.

The Plan for Growth describes itself as being based on three core pillars: infrastructure, skills, and innovation. All important issues in themselves but a long way from a coherent industrial strategy which one would expect to begin with an analysis of what Britain requires to meet the needs of its population. So the freeports policy does not sit as part of an industrial strategy –

rather it is loosely connected to the "pillars" in the Plan for Growth.

Infrastructure plan?

So surely the freeports policy is part of the national infrastructure plan?

Another good question. And the answer is "No, not really". For a start, an underpinning principle of the national infrastructure plan is about the connectivity of the whole of the UK and freeports are only an English initiative.

The government originally aimed to create ten free ports, seven in England and one each in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland. But the devolved administrations would not support it. Holyrood now proposed "greenports", Wales has not made a decision and the Northern Ireland Protocol is a potential block on development there.

Locally the initiative has not been planned with other aspects of infrastructure. Maggie Simpson from the Rail Freight Group points out that "none of the free ports in the North of England have got the right rail connectivity at the moment", and those further south don't fare much better.

The only way to counter this now is to use the decision on freeports to demand better rail connections. For example, Stewart Swinburn, a Conservative councillor in North East Lincolnshire, whose patch includes the major port of Immingham, points out that HS2 will be vital for freeing up capacity on lines currently used for passenger services so that goods and materials can reach the Humber freeport.

The other vital planning consideration is that the UK has 120 commercial ports and proper infrastructure planning would not be about splitting off eight of them. Rather the focus would be on their quite different characteristics such as the fact that some are specialised container ports, only some can deal with agricultural goods and others are designed for specialised bulk traffic, such as coal or oil.

Impact

And what about the impact of the eight freeports on other ports? As Unite argued in the consultation period, there is evidence that freeports and zones don't create new economic activity "but rather relocate

England's freeports



existing work from other areas with the promise of tax breaks. The movement of jobs pits regions against each other, with the double impact of one area losing employment and revenue for local authorities, while employers in the freeport zone avoid tax." So, the risk is clear.

Under the slogan "From Free Zones to Union Zones" the Unite union has already begun a process of mapping and identification in the eight locations. It is identifying all the workplaces which will fall within them – be they the port, logistics or warehousing centres, manufacturing, or construction projects.

Unite will then identify areas of union density and those areas where recruitment is vital in a programme involving local reps working with the national industrial sectors and the research department. This can then lead to more specific demands around maintaining and improving pay and conditions.

Employers will see freeports as an opportunity to undercut wages and conditions, with negative impact on other ports. The union challenge is to turn that aspiration on its head, utilising the connections between sectors within freeports to workers' own advantage. ■

Obesity in Britain is increasing, especially in children. This is a global and persistent...

Diet and obesity – an issue



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Junk food, anyone? The supermarkets are chock-full of it – and much of it heavily advertised and promoted.

THE STRONG link between obesity and poor outcomes from coronavirus has caught the headlines. But there are many other impacts on health and mobility – as well as an increased incidence of social isolation and decreased rates of employment.

Why is this a concern to the working class? We should not live with low quality housing and high levels of pollution. Nor should we accept poor diet and a lack of quality food – two drivers of obesity.

Obesity is detrimental to our lives and is avoidable – and it's not simply a question of personal choice and responsibility. Fundamentally it is a social and political problem and not a medical one – although the health services must deal with the consequences.

The most common cause of obesity is

overeating associated with insufficient physical activity. But that simple truth hides a twist: in Britain – and many other countries – the food industry is in the hands of companies that pump their products with sugars and fats that we humans have been conditioned by evolution to crave.

They do it even with so-called slimming products, adding the weasel words about weight-loss “only in association with a calorie-controlled diet”. And animal fats and sugars are cheap. No wonder that the fast-food outlets that working-class families are blamed for using proliferate in the poorer areas of Britain. Healthy food is not cheap. Nor is it addictive.

Inactivity

Insufficient physical activity is an important factor in causing overweight and obesity.

Teachers noticed that children returning to school had become less active during lockdown. Even before the pandemic hit, Sport England found that only 53.4 per cent of children were getting an hour or more physical activity per day, and that reduced to 51.1 per cent in 2020. Sporting activity had largely ceased, though other forms of activity had increased.

Whatever the reason for obesity, it is the leading preventable cause of death in Britain, though for a small minority the cause is genetic, and hence not easy to prevent. It is a key risk factor in coronavirus patients, and lockdown has contributed significantly to sedentary life-styles associated with overeating.

The majority of adults are now considered to be either obese or overweight. In 2019 the Health Survey for England

is a relatively recent development, but the trend is clear

ue for the working class

estimated that 28 per cent of adults are obese and another 36 per cent overweight but not obese. Being mildly overweight in your 20s may not seem like a problem, but that is linked to a significant incidence of obesity by the age of 35. Even a weight loss of 5 to 10 per cent, maintained in the long-term, brings significant health benefits.

The direct health risks include joint problems, lower back pain, hypertension, high cholesterol levels, strokes, deep vein thrombosis and type-2 diabetes. Breast and colon cancer, stress incontinence, menstrual and respiratory abnormalities are all associated with obesity – as are depression and low self-esteem.

The cost of all this to the NHS across Britain is projected to be around £10 billion annually by 2050. And wider societal costs, for example people being unable to work or needing social care, are estimated at around £50 billion a year by then.

Figures before the Covid-19 pandemic hit show admissions for weight-related causes now six times the level of just a decade earlier. Prevalence was twice as high in poorer areas – where over a quarter of children are classified as obese.

Trend

This is a long-term trend. Obesity in adults almost doubled between 1993 (15 per cent) and 2018 (28 per cent). During that period the proportion of obese and overweight adults rose from 53 to 63 per cent.

What should workers as a class do about this? How can we collectively help to empower individual workers to address the obesity issue on behalf of themselves, their families, the NHS and, in particular, their children?

It's wrong to deny there's a problem or to assert that it's a matter of personal lifestyle choice – that condemns a large number of people to ill health. Fatalism in the face of these alarming trends isn't an answer either – that wasn't how our class responded to the pandemic.

Nor is it good enough for us to leave things to others. Politicians are fond of announcing strategies – as the government did in July 2020. The trouble is that they are hopeless at implementing them, even if they have good ideas, which is not

always the case.

The 2016 childhood obesity action plan had good analysis and high ambitions. But action has focused on tokens like junk food advertising restrictions, food labelling and the sugar drinks tax. None of this is producing results. That's not surprising when despite an overall reduction in sugar in drinks there has been an increase in the total sugar in processed food.

The National Child Measurement Programme looks at the weight of children in reception classes (aged 4-5 years) and again in year 6 (age 10-11). It found that the total of overweight children in reception is 13 per cent and obese around 10 per cent, with the total steady overall since 2006.

The picture is worse with the older children – over 20 per cent are obese, double the level in reception classes. And that figure is increasing. There is a marked and increasing difference in year 6 obesity levels between the least and most deprived – 14 per cent compared to 25 per cent.

Medical professionals have a role to play, but we can't leave things entirely to them. Much of their work presently deals with the direct and indirect results of obesity and not the cause. Bariatric surgery, operating on the gut to reduce food intake, is no answer.

Part of the problem was the transfer of responsibility for this area of public health from the NHS to local authorities as a result of the appalling Health and Social Care Act 2012. There are a few signs that the transfer is being reversed – for example in the 2019 NHS Long Term Plan and in last year's government strategy.

Positive

We need to create the conditions for positive change. That should be part of a wider response – to learn what works and what does not and to understand what is achievable. That entails holding elected politicians to account – and should also involve healthcare professional bodies and unions.

More widely, control of working hours and patterns and availability of quality food in schools and workplaces must play a part. So must consistent support for the school nurse programme. So should the wider availability of cheap good-quality

'People don't need to be treated as victims or be taught by their betters how to eat...'

food, and more action to reduce the ultra-processed food with high sugar and salt content heavily marketed by food manufacturers and supermarkets.

But people do not need to be treated as victims or to be taught by their betters how to eat. Stigmatising and stereotyping come in many forms. The government's illusions of behavioural control are typical also of its approach to obesity – just "nudge" people into seeing the consequences of weight gain – and how it affects others, and people will act once they see how bad things will get.

That's not much different from shaming people for their weight and assumes that only the enlightened can see the outcomes, and the stupid get fat through personal choice.

As with the pandemic, there's also the tendency to exaggerate and create scary headlines. The facts are bad enough without that approach – "you are all guilty" denies the possibility of specific, practical solutions.

We can't reverse all the failings at once. But it's time to make a start on what can be achieved and not be limited by the failed attempts so far. This needs resources and to be prioritised. Obesity is at least as much of a health problem as smoking and is less easy to manage.

There is no obesity without overeating and inactivity. There are no drug dealers without addicts and no capitalism without exploitation. The solution to all things is in our hands. The class has shown itself to be uniquely responsive to compliance with public health messages during the pandemic. This particular "epidemic" can't be vaccinated away. ■

As communists, we are for the development of all fields but the theme of science and technology for May Day – because

Science, technology and

WE LIVE in Britain, and Britain is a unique country (as indeed are all nations). It was here that the industrial revolution began, here where the working class was born, here where trade unions were first formed.

And here, in Scotland, that the beginnings of a primary education system were laid with no fewer than four Education Acts in the 17th century.

It's no accident that the birth of modern industry took place in Britain. Generations of schoolchildren have been taught that it was because of the availability of water, coal and iron ore. True, but it was also the result of relatively high degrees of literacy even among agricultural workers – the population from which the new urban working class was recruited. And crucially that the Catholic Church had no power here.

And here, in Britain – all this is connected – that the first independent (that is, non-state funded) formal scientific society was formed 460 years ago. The Royal Society, founded on experimentation and in the teeth of opposition from the Church.

Italy had by then had two stabs at creating scientific societies: one collapsed in 1630 after opposition from the Vatican; the other was disbanded in 1667 after one of its founders became a cardinal.

By the middle of the 18th century the Royal Society – free from church and state, though personal backing from Charles II was crucial – had become also a central clearing house for ideas from all over Europe.

Science took off in Britain (the Royal Society later degenerated, but that's another story). Remember the Lunar Society, "the Lunarticks", so called

because they met every full moon. They met in Birmingham – away from the corruption of Regency London – uniting talents such as Wedgwood, Erasmus Darwin (Charles's grandfather), James Watt and the artist Joseph Wright of Derby.

The key thing about the Royal Society was and is its approach. Its motto is "Nullius in verba", meaning "take nobody's word for it" (very close to Karl Marx's motto: "Doubt everything".) As the Royal Society today says, it's an expression of determination "to withstand the domination of authority and to verify all statements by an appeal to facts determined by experiment".

That has a good sound. An independent sound. Dogma, the authorised version of truth set in stone and handed down to the people, has never gone down well in this country.

Industry

The Industrial Revolution came from the application of science and technology. It created the liberating concept of progress, progress for the people, and it created the working class. Yet the big bourgeoisie benefitted most from it.

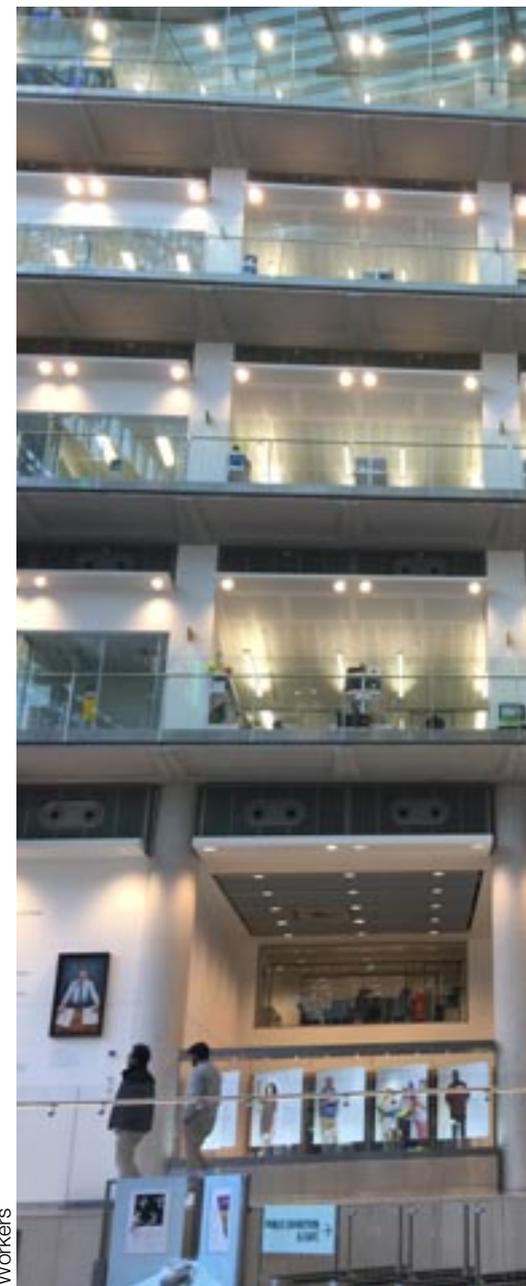
The new industry was built not just on the physical backs of workers, but on their intellectual backs too. James Watt, trainee instrument maker, transformed steam power. Abraham Darby, son of a yeoman farmer and locksmith, invented the pig iron process. Michael Faraday, apprentice bookbinder, who laid the basis for the electric motor. Just some of a whole list of working class intellectual heroes.

They were all ready to make the world anew. Ready to withstand the domination of authority, whether from church or state (many were religious dissenters as well). They took nobody's word for anything.

Superpower?

The government is now talking about making Britain a "science superpower". Actually, we have been one since the 17th century. And we still are.

Poor "little Britain" – as some here like to denigrate us – ranks third in the world for the number of scientific publications a year (after the US and China), first for the



Workers

Crick Institute, London: with 1,900 staff the largest

proportion of its publications rated as "highly cited". With less than 1 per cent of the world's population, we produce 14 per cent of the world's top-rated science.

Our research impact, judged by how many other scientists use research done here, has been higher than any comparable country since at least 2008. Poor little

'Make Britain a science superpower? We've been one since the 17th century. And we still are...'

based on human skill and ingenuity. That's why we chose
 use it goes to the heart of the idea of progress...

progress



biomedical research centre in Europe.

Britain has won more Nobel Prizes than Germany. More than France, Italy and the Netherlands combined.

There are five British universities in the world's top 20, according to the QS Rankings, the most widely viewed and used ranking in the world, including four in the top ten. While Switzerland has two in

the top 20, the first EU-based institution, the Université PSL in France, creeps in at 44. The European Commission tried but failed to exclude Britain, along with Switzerland and Israel, from research programmes on quantum and space research.

The government is clearly raising the amount of money it puts into research. But where is the investment in the education of the people? Instead, it is content to see talent undeveloped here. Its new "Office for Talent" is exclusively charged with making it easier to import talent trained abroad.

And where are the new industries, the new industrial workforces? Not here, not in the quantity there should be. In 2019 (before the Covid-19 effect) investment in university spin-out companies actually declined by 9 per cent.

In a country dominated by finance capital, outstanding science is divorced from production. You'd think that science would be applied to making things that people need, but instead the proportion of our workforce engaged in manufacturing fell by 62 per cent between 1982 and 2018.

Progress

By 1848, Karl Marx was able to describe the existence and potential of the force called into being by capitalism and destined to destroy it, the working class.

But even though Marx could discern the shackles on progress that capitalism was starting to forge, he would surely have been shocked at the decline of the bourgeoisie, a class he described as being unable to live without revolutionising the means of production (and with them, the working class).

Has the British bourgeoisie stopped revolutionising the means of production? Largely it has turned to mere speculation, creating "wealth" through property bubbles and short-lived stock exchange booms. Capital, capital everywhere, and never a pound for production.

One episode crystallises this rotteness – the £24 billion sale of ARM Technology to a Japanese conglomerate in 2016. ARM designs small chips for phones, cars, computers, and so on – most of the world's small chips, actually. Yet the government hailed the sale abroad of our most

successful information technology company as "a vote of confidence" in Britain.

Class struggle does not necessarily lead to the victory of one of the contending classes. As Marx noted in the *Communist Manifesto*, it can end in the common ruin of both. In Britain now the bourgeoisie and the working class seem locked in a spiral of decline – the bourgeoisie because it has either abandoned production in favour of speculation, or decamped abroad; and the working class because it has failed to accept that only revolution can save it. Materialism is totally accepted in Britain. But not yet dialectical materialism.

Leaving the EU has been a huge step forward. Without it we would still be chained to a bloc constitutionally committed to the unrestricted market. Unable, also, to take forward new gene editing technologies fully, for example. If you want dogma, its high priests are to be found in the European Court of Justice.

We have a timely reminder of what freedom from the EU means with the Covid-19 vaccination programme. Britain could and did act with speed, while the EU did...the opposite.

We are far from fully liberating our phenomenal potential in science and technology. But the vaccine success is a two-edged sword for the government. People are asking, if we can do it for vaccines, why not for other parts of industry? Why not for all industry?

Manufacture, making things, is still essential to Britain. You can't eat a financial derivative. You can't live in a junk bond. New industries are essential to the future of Britain. The alternative is decline, for Britain and the British working class.

That need not happen. It must not happen. We have everything we need in this country to become a beacon of progress to the world. But we have to realise that it's not enough to repatriate control from the EU to Britain. For real change, real progress, the working class must take control itself. ■

• This article is an edited version of the introduction given at the CPBML's online May Day discussion meeting.

Happy that Joe Biden is US president? Just remember, he president for the full eight years. And look what happened

The Democrats' permanent

Obama's unending wars: fronting the foreign policy of the permanent warfare state, by Jeremy Kuzmarov, paperback, 343 pages, ISBN 978-1949762006, Clarity Press, 2019, £21.41. Kindle and eBook editions available.

MUCH AS his supporters like to present him as a new saint, US President Barack Obama continued and expanded Bush and Cheney's aggressive policies. In this excellent book, Jeremy Kuzmarov, a history professor at Tulsa University, Oklahoma, shows how the Democratic Party's leaders used Obama as cover for reactionary policies at home and abroad. Their liberal and humanitarian veneer tried to disguise the USA's permanent warfare state.

Obama imposed record military budgets and promoted seven wars of imperialist aggression – more than his Republican predecessors. He ordered the bombing of Pakistan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria, Libya and Somalia. He sold 50 per cent more arms abroad and ordered 10 times as many drone strikes as Bush. And Obama more than doubled special forces deployment – to 138 countries. Bush's illegal “extraordinary renditions” continued.

Aggression

Throughout Obama's entire presidency, from 2009 to 2017, his Vice President was Joseph Biden. Biden had voted for Bush's invasion of Iraq. Now Biden promoted every aggression and every reactionary act of Obama's presidency. Obama delegated to Biden most of the major decisions on Iraq.

'Obama sold 50 per cent more arms abroad and ordered 10 times as many drone strikes than Bush...'

Kuzmarov explains why the US government is so keen to back its ally Saudi Arabia in its war of aggression against Yemen. Socotra is part of Yemen, an island 380 kilometres off its coast, in a strategically important position between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. Control over Socotra could stifle China's vital oil imports and its exports to Western Europe.

US forces are directly involved in the Saudi war of aggression in Yemen, which included occupation of Socotra. *The New York Times* reported in 2018 that secret teams of Green Berets (US Army special forces) were training Saudi ground forces and providing intelligence for bomb targeting. US forces also assisted aerial refuelling of Saudi warplanes.

Obama provided more than US\$20 billion worth of new weapons to Saudi Arabia's forces after the war started. CIA analyst Bruce Riedel said, “if the United States and the United Kingdom, tonight, told King Salman [of Saudi Arabia] ‘this war has to end’, it would end tomorrow. The Royal Saudi Air Force cannot operate without American and British support.”

Syria

President Assad of Syria earned the enmity of the US government when in 2009 he rejected a pipeline project from Qatar to Turkey, which would have passed through Syria. Soon after he rejected the project, the CIA started funding opposition groups in Syria, including al Qaeda and ISIS. Besides Britain and Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, the UAE, Jordan, Libya and Israel all funded and armed the assault on Syria.

Obama's Middle East policy proved a disaster, achieving none of its original aims. His collaboration with al Qaeda and its offshoots failed to win support, unsurprisingly, as those terrorist organisations disintegrated. Anti-American governments now run Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan.

Obama shifted the US foreign policy focus to the Pacific basin, with encouragement from Hillary Clinton, his Secretary of State (foreign minister). This “pivot to Asia” was designed to disrupt China's rise by funding and backing secessionist movements, and to probe its borders and interfere in its territorial waters in the South



May 2011: a US sergeant takes a re-enlistment oath

China Sea. These are estimated to contain 213 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.

The Strait of Malacca in the South China Sea is a choke-point for China's trade, especially of its oil imports. The US government is trying to control China's trade routes; Yemen's Socotra at the western end and the South China Sea at the eastern end.

US front

Funding for these activities is channelled through the National Endowment for Democracy, supposedly a private organisation but in reality, a front for US government policy. It has little to do with democracy, created during Ronald Regan's presidency

was Obama's vice-then...

ent war



th at Al Asad Air Base, Iraq.

DVIDSHUB (CC BY 2.0)

in the wake of revelations about the CIA's undercover, sometimes illegal, activity.

According to William Blum, a US historian and foreign policy critic, the plan was to "...shift many of these awful things to a new organization, with a nice sounding name.". The idea was that it "...would do somewhat overtly what the CIA had been doing covertly for decades, and thus, hopefully, eliminate the stigma associated with CIA covert activities."

The NED's "Democracy Award" is predominantly given to groups agitating against governments that the USA does not approve of. China is a particular target – for example the award in 2019 went to three groups aiming to interfere with internal Chinese policy. ■

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The end of the Second World War could have ushered in a foreign policy for Britain. Labour ensured that it didn't...

1945: Labour's foreign p

IN JULY 1945, during the last days of the Second World War, a new Labour government was elected with Clement Attlee as prime minister. Its election manifesto called for "A world of progress and peace". Instead it at once adopted an aggressive pro-US and anti-USSR foreign policy.

Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin rejected the option of conducting an independent pro-British approach to international affairs. He took a hostile attitude to the Soviet Union, Britain's wartime ally, affirming the Labour government's continuity with Churchill's pro-Empire and anti-Soviet stance.

British troops across the world were ordered to assist in restoring colonial empires. This was not "cold war", but an aggressive colonial policy of attacking and thwarting national liberation movements.

As a result, the Attlee government maintained high levels of spending on the empire and on the armed forces – which in 1946 cost over 45 per cent of Britain's GDP.

Anti-Soviet

In January 1948 the Labour government set up a new Foreign Office department, funded by the secret service budget, to "pass over to the offensive" against the Soviet Union. The top Foreign Office civil servant, William Strang, said, "it is vital to the success of the operation that His Majesty's Government should not overtly appear to be conducting a worldwide anti-Communist campaign, and we must in no circumstances appear to be interfering in the domestic affairs of friendly nations."

In 1946, the British and US governments signed the UKUSA Security

Agreement. Britain's intelligence, espionage and covert action services would officially collaborate with the CIA and the FBI. This meant cooperating in US covert military action abroad.

In August 1948, the US government for the first time officially authorised guerrilla operations in the socialist countries. The CIA promptly launched operations into Soviet Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia.

In July 1948, the leading members of the government agreed to allow American bases and nuclear bombers in Britain, putting Britain in the front line of any future war. The Cabinet did not accept the principle that there should be permanent US bases in Britain, but was overridden. The matter was not even reported to Parliament. The British government had no control over the bases.

Then, in 1949, Labour collaborated in founding NATO. That permitted "visiting" armed forces to be stationed in another member country, legitimising the US presence in Britain.

Anti-union

In Britain, Labour kept the wartime Order 1305, which outlawed strikes, only repealing it in July 1951. Across the Empire the Labour government attacked trade unions. In Malaya it banned them, in Kenya it arrested trade union leaders and in Sierra Leone the Colonial Office "re-organised" trade unions. And it led the charge to break up the World Federation of Trade Unions and to create separate international trade union organisations, polarised against the USSR.

In the Middle East and elsewhere the government backed reactionary governments against socially progressive movements. It partitioned Palestine. It continued its brutal occupation of Libya from 1943 to 1951. It set in motion the coup plot to overthrow Iran's elected government, which Churchill and Eisenhower carried out in 1953.

In India Jawaharlal Nehru, who later became the country's first prime minister after independence, accused the Labour government of being no better than its predecessors: "This is the old game of British imperialism. Whoever might be at the helm



Prime Minister Clement Attlee (right) with Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin (left) discussing an anti-Soviet alliance with the United States and repression across the British Empire.

in England, its only object is to maintain its stranglehold over India and its colonies."

When the Labour government said it would impose partition it caused massive popular protest, including a mutiny by a quarter of the Indian navy. British forces repressed it, killing 223 sailors.

This revolt was key to the British government's reluctant decision finally to quit India. The British state then allied with the Islamist Muslim League to defeat the majority-supported Congress Party and ensure the country's partition.

Greek adventure

British governments had traditionally interfered in Greek affairs. The Labour government continued Churchill's policy of armed intervention against national liberation forces. By 1946, Greek resistance was proving too much for the British government – costing over £130 million a year (equal to about £5 billion today).

Worldwide, Britain's armed forces were overextended, trying to fight many colonial wars at once. In February 1947, Bevin

'Across the Empire the Labour government attacked trade unions...'

progressive policy



Secretary Ernest Bevin. Together, they forged and embarked on a systematic programme of

announced that the British government could no longer pay for troops in Greece. US forces moved in, though the last British troops were not removed until 1954.

In 1949, Attlee approved Operation Valuable, the attempted counter-revolution in Albania, which was a complete disaster.

And when the war in Korea started, Attlee at once put Britain's naval forces in the Far East at Truman's disposal. In July 1950, the Soviet Union proposed a cease-fire and withdrawing all foreign troops from Korea. The US and British governments rejected this.

The US government wanted to destroy the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Britain's Chiefs of Staff warned against this action. Attlee and Bevin rejected their advice.

Britain sent 100,000 troops to Korea and increased spending on the armed forces as its contribution to the US war of aggression. That war against Korea locked US and British foreign policy into an anti-communist straitjacket. We're still living with the consequences. ■



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, doers and leaders. All are expected to work to advance our class's interests. All must help to develop 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 colleagues and friends to embrace the Marxist practice and theory that alone can lead to the revolution that Britain needs. Marx's understanding of capitalism is a powerful tool – the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 explains the 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 online and in our workplaces, union meetings, communities, market places, railway stations, football grounds – wherever workers are, that is where we aim to be.

We hold public meetings around Britain (Covid permitting), in-depth 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.

We are not an elite, intellectually superior to our fellow workers. All that 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. The real teacher is the fight itself, and in particular the development of ideas and confidence that comes from collective action.

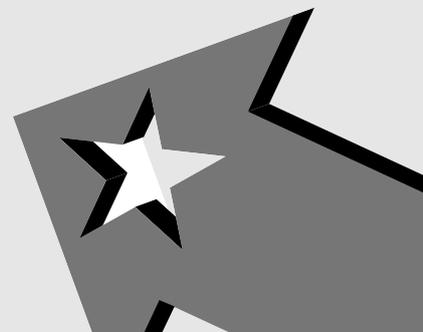
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No return to the Middle Ages

'We abolished the blasphemy laws. We are a secular society, forged by people who broadly take the view that material reality should drive all aspects of public life.'

TO ATTACK free speech in the name of religion is to harken back to the Middle Ages. Yet we moved away from stoning blasphemers, burning witches, locking up unmarried mothers. We abolished the blasphemy laws. We are a secular society, forged by people who broadly take the view that material reality should drive all aspects of public life.

The shocking events at Batley Grammar School in March this year should alert us to the constant need to defend this principle. A religious education lesson dealing with "blasphemy" triggered angry demonstrations, causing the early closure of the school before the Easter holidays.

Worse, the head teacher immediately apologised for the "offence" caused, and suspended the teacher involved. This craven submission was not enough for a bunch of bigoted protesters, most not connected with the school, who demanded the teacher be sacked.

One so-called community leader described the teacher as a terrorist. Others said he had insulted the whole muslim community. But tellingly, other local mosques refused to have any part in the demonstrations.

Now Batley Multi Academy Trust (BMAT) has published a summary of its investigation into the events there. The report acknowledges that the teacher "genuinely believed that the image [of Muhammad] had an educational purpose and benefit". With suitable hand-wringing about never using such images again, the report concludes that "the suspensions put in place will now be lifted".

It appears other teachers were found to have used similar images. Mercifully only one was publicly named, by a so-called charity named "Purpose of Life", which works in the school. In publicly naming him, they contributed to a toxic, fascist atmosphere in which the teacher was forced to seek police protection and flee with his family.

Disgracefully, that organisation has received thousands of pounds from the local National Education Union (NEU) branch, which still supports it. Even more disgracefully, the

union has been silent, publicly, about the unjustified suspension of one of its members.

And when a trade unionist in Bury, representing refuse collectors, put a motion to his trades council calling for support for the teacher, an NEU official tried to get him to withdraw it on the grounds that it was "unhelpful" to draw attention to the case. The motion was carried.

Many institutions in this country, government, councils, unions, media, seem to be in thrall to threats from religionists who seek to impose their views. BMAT could not have expressed this attitude any more clearly in its report. "The Trust will not avoid challenging subject matter, but at the same time is committed to ensuring that no offence is caused."

Extremists with a medieval mindset will welcome such developments; especially they will be encouraged by the bigoted assumption that all muslims are fundamentalists. And the narrative that muslims are everywhere victims implies that they cannot face freedom of speech. That's also a form of bigotry.

The evidence points the other way. For example, the British crime survey showed that nearly two-thirds of British Bangladeshis are worried about the threat of Islamic extremism.

Accusations of "islamophobia" have become a tool to allow an insidious fundamentalist agenda to creep into schools, at the expense of children's education. And more widely they are attacking free speech – the right of people to exchange and challenge ideas.

Fundamentalists and those who bow to them will try to use this situation to divide the working class and attack others who go against their reactionary ways. They insultingly claim to speak on behalf of all muslims and tell them they are not part of the British working class, promoting the myth that the "west" is at war with Islam.

To speak out without fear or favour is fundamental to our freedom of thought. We cannot stand by when it is reduced to pious words. ■

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