

WORKERS

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NO TO NATO'S WAR MACHINE!

NURSES More poaching **PAY** Time to fight
DEMOCRACY For real? **VACCINES** Plan ditched
TRANSPORT Class war **HOUSING** For people
SCOTLAND Unity vital *plus* Historic Notes, News
GPs Radical plan needed and more

JOURNAL OF THE CPBML

TAKE CONTROL: BUILD THE NEW BRITAIN

WORKERS



No to the war machine!

OUR CURRENT prime minister doesn't know if he'll still be in office by the end of the summer. But he does claim to know that the war in Ukraine will drag on for years. Parroting the prediction of NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg, Boris Johnson told the *Sunday Times* on 19 June we must "steel ourselves for a long war".

How come? Is it just wishful thinking on his part, or is he testing the water to see where the opposition might lie? Or more to the point, is Johnson saying it will be a long war because he plans to do all he can to make sure it will last for years and years?

He doubtless thinks that just as the Falklands War saved Margaret Thatcher's government 40 years ago, his flailing administration will be rescued by blood in Ukraine.

Johnson coupled his warning with a promise to deliver yet more "weapons, equipment ammunition and training" to Ukraine. He clearly reckons that a long drawn-out war will be good business for British and multinational armaments companies and the military establishment as a whole.

His call was swiftly followed by a "battle cry" from the new chief of the general staff, General Sir Patrick Sanders, in a memo that revelled in the reinforcement which war gives the British Army's mission of "being ready to fight and win wars on land".

All this will cost billions, and realistically there's only one place that kind of money will come from: the pockets of the working class. And this at a time

when incomes are being squeezed on all sides.

Already we hear warnings from ministers about the dire consequence of workers trying to keep up with inflation. That would create an "inflationary cycle", said Treasury secretary Simon Clarke. Never mind that the real inflationary cycle is being created by the war in Ukraine, leading to huge increases in the price of fuel and food.

Workers in Britain have no option but to fight for a pay rise, even though some are still keeping their heads in the sand. What is less acknowledged is that we must also fight to get Britain out of NATO – an aggressive, expensive and dangerous alliance which could drag the whole country into war, with Johnson leading the charge.

When the British people voted to leave the European Union they not only took a giant step towards real independence, they also deprived the EU of the skill and cunning of the British ruling class. The EU has been rudderless ever since.

Taking Britain out of NATO would have the same effect on that military alliance, removing the strategic and tactical nous built up by British imperialism over centuries (see feature article, page 6). Leaving NATO would not only save a fortune and make Britain a safer place, it would also be a huge contribution to world peace.

A truly independent Britain, with armed forces designed for defence rather than aggression, would have no need of it anyway.



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Cecil Dzwojwa, (CC BY-SA 4.0)



A nurse working in a government health outreach project in Harare, Zimbabwe – one of the countries losing nurses to Britain.

Nurse 'poaching' continues

BRITAIN CONTINUES to recruit nurses and other health staff from “red listed” countries, who have their own shortages – despite a government code of practice for the international recruitment of health and social care staff, updated as recently as November 2021.

The World Health Organization has an action plan for the health and care workforce globally. Countries it grades “red” have fewer doctors, nurses and midwives than the global median of 48.6 per 10,000 people.

Recently released figures reveal that last year 4,272 nurses from 47 “red list” countries joined the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) register. By far the greatest number, 3,010, were from Nigeria followed by Ghana (843).

The current nursing shortages are a direct consequence of previous government decisions. One dates back to the decision of the coalition government to reduce the number of nurses trained in England and Wales. At the same time in Scotland Nicola Sturgeon, then the Scottish health secretary, said, “A reduction in intake for the 2012 academic year is a sensible way forward”.

Later, in 2017 the number of nurses in training was badly affected by the abolition of bursaries for nurses and midwives. The current government has introduced a new reduced bursary, but nurses and midwives still have to pay tuition fees. ■

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

TRADE UNIONS

Membership drops

BAD NEWS on trade union membership: the proportion of the workforce belonging to a union is at its lowest level since the current method of calculation began in 1995, just 23.7 per cent in 2021 – as against 32.4 per cent in 1995.

The figures, in a statistical bulletin from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, reverse four years of modest increases in union membership.

According to the bulletin, the rise in the proportion of union members was driven by women joining unions. But it looks as if that has been almost wiped out by a fall among women members of 0.9 percentage points in 2021.

Most of the fall – among women and men – was in the public sector, where the number of union members dropped by 58,000, with a fall of just 4,000 in the private sector, to a total of 6.44 million.

Trade union membership levels reported by the unions themselves reached their peak in 1979, the year Margaret Thatcher came to power, at 13.2 million. ■

FACTS MATTER

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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!

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ON THE WEB

A selection of additional stories at cpbml.org.uk

The Elizabeth Line: a British working class achievement

The opening of London's Elizabeth tube line is a great achievement, to be celebrated despite delays.

Tube disputes escalate

The tube in London was shut down in June by ongoing disputes with tube workers. Station and revenue control staff were on strike against job cuts and attacks on their pensions.

Cuba battles against US social media subversion

Elizabeth Ribalta Rubiero of the Cuban Friendship Institute visited Britain to give an update on the situation in Cuba as the country emerges from the coronavirus pandemic, with the 60-year US blockade still in place.

Oppose the government attack on rail unions

The government plans laws to make rail strikes illegal unless minimum staff levels are maintained. This aims to make industrial action ineffective – and will not stop with rail workers.

The cost of fishing

In April a memorial was unveiled in the Sussex port of Newhaven to fishermen who lost their lives off the Sussex coast.

Plus: the e-newsletter

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Heathrow departures: don't expect it this quiet over the summer. Photo Workers.

Avoidable air delays hit hard

AIRLINE TRAVELLERS have suffered several months of cancellations and long delays at airports. On one day in late May, 377 flights were cancelled affecting 56,000 people. And Heathrow imposed a cut in passengers flying out at certain times of day until the beginning of July.

This prompted a round of blame and finger pointing. Government blames the airlines; they blame the government – and Brexit. Both government and the employers want workers to pay for it through government spending and worse employment conditions.

Grant Shapps, the transport secretary, pointed to the taxpayers' financial support during the pandemic, to the tune of £8 billion. The airlines, and others, say that the government's furlough payments were withdrawn too soon and should have been extended even though other businesses did not have that support.

In reality, airlines – notably BA and easyJet – and the airport operators, took a punt that they could get away with redundancies and that it would be easy to get people back when travel resumed. It's not turned out that way.

Oliver Richardson, Unite aviation officer, said that both the government and the airline industry had "failed passengers and failed people who work within the industry". The government didn't support the industry during the pandemic to the extent other countries like the USA and Spain had done. And after tens of thousands of jobs were removed it proved hard to recruit them back.

The industry is still wedded to short-term, unsustainable, reactions. Like BA, easyJet (and probably other airlines too) is using fewer cabin crew on flights, but removing seats to achieve a passenger/staff ratio that meets regulations. And many employers in the sector are calling staff to work more with extra overtime to sort out the crisis. ■

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

RAIL

Ticket office closures

RAIL UNION RMT has revealed plans for a large-scale cull of ticket offices on Britain's rail network. Over 1,000 offices are at risk of closure. The RMT found the information on the Rail Delivery Group website, under the obscurely named Ticketing & Settlement Agreement. It has pledged to launch a widespread campaign to protect ticket offices.

And TSSA, the union which represents many ticket office workers, is concerned about job security as well as pay rates falling behind inflation.

Rail travel fell during the pandemic. It should be in the interest of rail companies to bring passengers back. Staffed ticket

offices, apart from selling tickets and bringing in revenue for the train operators, play an important part in passenger safety and confidence to travel.

The RMT warns of a "muggers paradise" across the network and points out that disabled and elderly passengers will be particularly affected.

A spokesman for the Rail Delivery Group is quoted on the BBC News website as saying "many jobs will need to change to become more passenger-centric". What could be more "passenger-centric" than a staffed ticket office selling tickets and offering advice on the baffling ticketing systems passengers have to navigate?

The RMT will campaign under the slogan "Staff Our Stations". They deserve the support of other rail trade unions and the travelling public. ■

NATO may owe much of its military muscle to the US, but Boris Johnson is using it to further British imperialism's g

Britain – the brains behind

NATO Photo/WO2 Dan Harmer GBR Army/Public Domain



NATO troops from the Grenadier Guards take part in a joint air assault exercise with US forces in Exercise Noble Jump 17.

AS THIS issue of *Workers* goes to press, NATO leaders are meeting in Madrid for a summit where they intend to map out a strategy for the next decade. Whether or not they succeed, the summit will mark a new era for the organisation with the first attendance at the meeting by a Japanese prime minister.

What on earth is Japan doing at a summit meeting of a body that gets its title from the Atlantic Ocean and which has historically focused on Europe? One answer can be found in a speech by Boris Johnson to the annual Munich Security Conference on 19 February.

“If Ukraine is invaded the shock will echo around the world and those echoes will be heard in East Asia and they will be

heard in Taiwan,” said Johnson. “When I spoke to the Prime Ministers of Japan and Australia this week, they left me in no doubt that the economic and political shocks would be felt on the far side of the world.”

Heading east

It was a thinly veiled call for NATO to expand its influence to the east. And it was not the first time that Johnson has called for engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. That idea looms large in the Global Britain policy that his government has been pushing for since it came to power.

And it's not just the Japanese prime minister, Fumio Kishida. The foreign ministers of Japan, Australia, New Zealand and South Korea are all due in Madrid for the

‘Little wonder that the besieged Johnson felt emboldened to send rockets to Ukraine, as he did on 6 June. There is no official opposition in Westminster...’

it was the brainchild of a Labour government. And now global ambitions...

and NATO

NATO summit.

Julianne Smith, the US ambassador to NATO, backed up this new focus eastwards – taking her cue from Johnson – with a speech on 1 June published by the US Department of Defense highlighting the need to consider the challenge of China as “part of the strategic concept”.

Johnson’s Munich speech came just nine days after a mind-boggling piece in *The Guardian* newspaper by Labour leader Keir Starmer. Calling NATO “a defensive alliance that has never provoked conflict”; Labour’s commitment to it, he said, was unshakeable.

But it was Starmer’s opening paragraph that really stood out. He hailed NATO as a legacy of the post-1945 Labour government under Clement Attlee that “stands out on the world stage” and which had brought “three-quarters of a century of peace”.

History ignored

He ignored NATO’s role in the brutal, bloody break-up of Yugoslavia, including its aerial bombing campaign in 1999; France’s murderous war in Algeria (the territory had been explicitly part of NATO since the alliance was formed) in the 1950s; the bombing of Libya in 2011; and Turkey’s invasion of Cyprus in 1974. Not to mention the Cod Wars in the 1950s and 1970s between Britain and Iceland.

And in a vivid demonstration of what democracy means to Starmer, he suggested to *Times Radio* on 3 May that Labour MPs who did not voice “unshakeable support” for NATO would be expelled.

No wonder Johnson, under siege from all sides over so many issues, felt emboldened to announce, as he did on 6 June, that long-range rockets are to be sent to Ukraine – despite the risks to peace: on the involvement of NATO in Ukraine, there is no official opposition in Westminster.

The SNP, too, is firmly wedded to NATO; support for it has been SNP policy since 2012. On 16 May this year Sturgeon told an audience at the Brookings Institution in Washington DC that she was “even more firm in her view today” that membership of NATO, along with EU membership, would be a “cornerstone” of

Labour’s lethal legacy

LABOUR LEADER Keir Starmer’s article in *The Guardian* on 10 February was a timely reminder that it was indeed the Labour government elected in 1945, and in particular its anti-communist (and anti-semitic) Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, that pushed for the idea of NATO in the first place.

Bevin wanted an alliance against the Soviet Union, which at huge cost had just saved the world from fascism. More than that, he wanted to push forward the idea of European integration, and NATO was a step in that direction.

That fact is acknowledged in the official history of NATO on its own website. NATO, it says, was not only formed to “deter Soviet expansionism” (which didn’t exist then) and to stop “revival

of nationalist militarism” – but also with the aim of “encouraging European integration”.

Starmer might also note the statement in the official history that the NATO commitment diverted money destined for the young NHS. That didn’t stop him ending his eulogy in *The Guardian* by referring to the “two Ns – NATO and the NHS” as two legacies of a Labour government that “we need to be proud of and protect”.

Support for NATO was carried on by the Churchill government that followed Attlee’s. So in 1952 the British politician and former general Hastings Ismay was appointed as NATO’s first secretary general, and the British Army on the Rhine was transferred to NATO control. ■

security policy.

A few years ago it almost seemed as if NATO were destined for the rubbish bin of history. Donald Trump was in the White House. His main interest in NATO was that the US’s allies should shoulder more of the financial burden involved; his tenure saw the US’s contribution to its budget fall from 22 per cent to 16 per cent.

Manoeuvres

The NATO hawks, Britain among them (as ever) have, over the past decade or longer, tried every trick, every manoeuvre, to use Ukraine to get at Russia. Finally this has succeeded.

Now Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has given NATO a new lease of life. In previously unimaginable developments, for example, both Sweden and Finland have applied for membership. And Denmark has dropped its 30-year opt out from taking part in EU security policy. Reaction breeds reaction.

And the more Russian premier Vladimir Putin says that territorially, under the Soviet Union, “Russia was robbed”, as he did in a long essay published on the Kremlin website in July 2021, the easier NATO finds it to

stir up feelings of insecurity in the countries bordering it.

Nor does it help when Putin talks, as he did in a televised address on 21 February this year, of “our compatriots in Ukraine” (the English is from the official translation). Or of “outright pillage of Russia”. (He’s talking about the creation of states such as Ukraine, not the actual pillaging of Russia post-1989 by Putin’s ex-KGB friends.)

But it’s clear to see where he’s coming from. He blames Lenin, explicitly: “...modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia, or more exactly, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia,” he said. On this one point Putin and NATO, Johnson and Starmer, Biden and Trump, all agree: whatever the issue, blame communism.

As the situation becomes more and more dangerous, with the threat of war spilling over into other countries, there is nothing the British working class can do about Putin. That, as we have said, is a matter for the workers of Russia.

NATO, on the other hand, is a problem we could and should deal with. Our task is to get Britain out of it. And by doing so we would be doing not only ourselves but workers everywhere a service. ■

Democracy literally means “rule by the people”. That’s not fit for purpose and it does not represent the people of Britain.

What is working class democracy?

WE’VE SEEN plenty of the opposite of democracy with the constant attempts of MPs and others to overturn the Brexit referendum result and keep Britain tied to the EU. Also the on-going attempts to break up Britain despite the 2014 Scottish referendum No result.

And we’ve seen it again with more recent government actions such as the deployment of 8,000 British troops and dozens of tanks in Eastern Europe over the summer of 2022. British workers have had no say over involvement in Ukraine. It does not serve the needs of the British people. It was not the result of democracy. Quite the opposite.

Are these aberrations of an otherwise democratic system?

Absolutely not. Parliamentary democracy has never been intended to provide democracy for the working class. It has always been used as a façade, a pretence at democracy, a rubber stamp of decisions made by the ruling class.

‘Unfettered’

In 1774 – before most workers even had a vote – Edmund Burke said: “The elected member should ...not (be) a mere delegate pledged to obey undeviatingly the wishes of his constituents. The electors are capable of judging his integrity, and he should attend to their local interests; but, more importantly, he must address himself to the general good of the entire nation, acting according to his own judgment and conscience, unfettered by mandates or prior instructions from those he represents.”

By the good of the nation, Burke means the good of the ruling class. This sense of entitlement and superiority has never gone away. For instance in February 2019, John Longworth, scientist, businessman and former director general of the British Chamber of Commerce wrote:

[This] “arrogance of the elite was brought home to me when giving a presentation in Brussels in January 2016 to an audience of senior EU officials. To my astonishment, the first question from the floor was to ask how we could possibly contemplate allowing people who are not college-educated to vote in a referendum...met by murmurs of approval from



Workers

Parliament vs the people: during the Brexit fight Westminster was the centre of anti-democratic actions

around the room.”

This is what the working class is up against. We will never achieve real democracy by tinkering with the current system. That will not tackle the root problem that parliament does not represent the people.

The 2016 EU referendum result shocked the ruling class to their core. What has happened since, and what happened after the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, helps us understand the ruling class reaction.

Debate

They will do everything they can to thwart all attempts to repeat such rare democratic instances. Then there was intense debate among the people leading to a vote in

which every participant could sense that their vote mattered – and where clear decisions were made.

This reaction doesn’t mean we throw in the towel – that’s exactly what they want. But to successfully replace or transform parliamentary democracy to a system that works, we have to understand what we are up against.

Parliamentary democracy is not a universal timeless ideal – it reflects the needs of the ruling class. It is designed for the government of a capitalist state. It can’t at the same time meet the needs of the working class.

Let’s ask the question again: What is working class democracy?

The working class makes up the vast

What our current parliamentary democracy does. It's not
tain...

Democracy?



chemes to overturn the will of the British people.

majority of the British people. Working class democracy is government by the majority of the people, for the people; a system that allows working people control of our country and economy.

An essential part of this would be lively and widespread participation in debate, a structure of representation where delegates are directly accountable to their electorate and respect majority decisions. The Chartists in the 1840s demanded instant recall of representatives, understanding that general elections every few years do not guarantee democracy.

This idea of democracy was well understood by British workers in our history. The first trade unions in the world were created in Britain in the late 1700s

and early 1800s in the face of severe repression. The Combination Acts, passed in 1799 and 1800, made trade unions themselves illegal.

After many twists and turns and much working class activity, the 1871 Trade Union Act recognised unions as legal entities entitled to protection under the law. But since then the ruling class have made many efforts to peg back that gain.

Perhaps because of such battles for existence, the structure of representation within many unions was based on the idea of delegates being elected from a constituency of members who had the opportunity to judge candidates on their record.

Branches elected delegates to region; regions elected delegates to a national body. No need for manifestos. If someone rose to the dizzy heights of the national body of the union they still had to be rooted in their own branch – in touch with members. If they lost the respect of their branch and were not elected to regional level they could no longer be on the national body. Accountability to members was built in.

Interference

But the 1984 Trade Union Act made it a legal requirement for all voting members of a union's national body to be directly elected by the entire membership. Workers could not stop that attack or other acts of interference in how we should organise.

The Thatcher government certainly understood the importance of trade unions being accountable to their members, the importance of democracy in our organisations. Not all workers were as clear.

What could life in Britain look like if we had working class democracy, working class control – what would we be aiming for? This list might be a start, though it's the working class, the whole population, that would have to decide.

- A Britain where communities and workplaces are involved in the decisions affecting their lives.
- A Britain with secure and affordable energy supply.
- Secure food supply.
- Short supply chains.
- Secure borders.
- Control of British waters and fishing.

'Parliamentary democracy is designed for the government of a capitalist class...'

- British-owned and -controlled essential infrastructure.
- Clean air and water; real, nutritious food; a desirable environment.
- Good quality, affordable housing.
- Dynamic education services which enable children to discover all aspects of their potential.
- Highly responsive public services which address the causes of problems, not symptoms.
- Support for individuals in crisis while minimising dependency.

How do we achieve working class democracy? Above all, workers need to take responsibility and take control. That means starting where we work and where we live. Talking to people. We need to understand the size of the task facing us and the inevitable attempts to stop us succeeding.

Working with other workers on issues important for a sector, an area, or for the country can be a way to help spread the understanding that parliamentary democracy is a sham, and that the party political system and its elections are froth, hiding how decisions are made and where real power currently lies.

We need a new system if we are to have democracy. The exact format of that system will emerge as we find ways to combine with other workers to pursue our own interests – including no involvement in war. None of us can do everything but we can all do something. ■

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- This article is based on the introduction to a CPBML discussion meeting held online on 10 May 2022.

There is surely now no doubt about the government's hatred for the public transport workers that provide Britain's train, bus and tram services...

Public transport: the battle



Workers

Leading the fight: RMT banners on the TUC march in London, 18 June.

BORIS JOHNSON and his transport secretary Grant Shapps are now engaged in naked class warfare against transport workers. They are exploiting every opportunity presented by the Covid-19 pandemic to axe existing services and to cut back on previous railway investment commitments, including HS2.

Shapps in particular has shown himself to lack knowledge and understanding about how railways work, manifested in unworkable policies adopted by the government. His disregard for safety was graphically shown when he criticised the industry for cancelling trains in the face of serious storms – and by his suggestion that agency staff could safely replace trained, experienced workers on strike.

Thousands of rail workers, including maintenance workers, now face the prospect of being thrown on the scrap heap. Government-directed slashing of maintenance and renewals investment along with fewer maintenance staff will lead to lower safety standards. And fewer station and ticket office staff will degrade service standards for passengers.

Sound bites

Johnson has previously talked in terms of better and more environmentally friendly buses, reducing car usage, levelling up, and improving the quality of life for millions. These are no more than sound bites, forgotten once uttered.

Johnson and Shapps are in reality

overseeing wholesale cutbacks in bus and rail services and encouraging greater car use. By seeking to deny rail and bus workers' pay increases at a time of rampant inflation – now over 11 per cent – while tax revenues and profits soar, they are openly

'They are making the rich richer while dramatically reducing the buying power of wages...'

ed of public transport and the highly unionised workers

tle unfolds

and deliberately making the rich even richer while dramatically reducing the buying power of workers' wages, ensuring a big reduction in their quality of life.

RMT rail members have responded by voting overwhelmingly for strikes across most of the national rail network and on London Underground. White collar union TSSA has now begun balloting its rail members. Train drivers in Aslef are also being balloted, and some have already voted to strike.

Unite also looks set to ballot its rail members. It has already campaigned to raise wage levels among poorly paid bus drivers, winning some important victories along the way. Bus drivers employed by Arriva in West Yorkshire are currently out on indefinite strike in pursuit of better pay.

Pandemic

Much has been made of the downturn in rail passengers as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Yes, commuter traffic and business travel have been much slower to recover than leisure travel. And before the pandemic, rail companies (and the government) relied on these passengers for much of the industry's revenue.

But now both commuter and business travel are growing. The government's own rail company LNER which runs inter-city services on the East Coast Main Line is forecasting business travel will reach 80 per cent of pre-pandemic levels by 2027.

What will happen with commuter numbers now? The signs are that office workers who were working from home during the pandemic are now going into offices, even if not for five days a week. In London, tube passenger numbers are up to 87 per cent of pre-pandemic levels.

Rail services were dramatically reduced during the pandemic; they are still down at around 85 per cent of pre-pandemic levels. This has resulted in overcrowding at peak times, especially outside the London area.

Transport use statistics show rail passenger numbers climbing back, especially for leisure. In the week ending Sunday 22 May 2022, for example, rail passenger numbers were 92 per cent of those before the pandemic. Easter 2022 saw greater fare revenues than were taken at

Scotrail shambles condemned

PASSENGERS IN Scotland face months of disruption after the ScotRail announcement that 700 services each day will be cut out of the timetable from Monday 23 May. Many people rely on trains for commuting to work.

Kevin Lindsay the Aslef union Scottish Organiser said: "It is disappointing that we've seen the Scottish government sanction a massive cut in the services of Scotland's railways. They should have been encouraging fair and open negotiations between ScotRail and Aslef. We certainly don't want a strike. However, we are being forced in that direction by the Scottish government."

Aslef members will not work rest days, overtime or additional Sundays. Lindsay demanded to know "How can any business be so reliant on overtime?" Chronic driver shortages have been compounded by lack of recruitment and training for new drivers.

Scotrail has added to the misery by severely curtailing late trains. Some lines like Glasgow to Dundee and Inverness will have no services running beyond early evening. This has alarmed organisers and fans of sports fixtures and concerts. It has led to protests from the prime festival city, Edinburgh, that audiences would be badly affected by the lack of transport for people to go home after events.

In a letter to the Scottish government, Kevin Lindsay expressed his disappointment that they had ignored the joint trade

union report *A Vision for Scotland's Railways* written by Aslef, RMT, TSSA and Unite. The vision of these unions following the nationalisation of the former Abellio-owned business has been rejected by the SNP-led government.

Lindsay described the situation in these terms, "Pay negotiations have been shambolic, the timetable has been slashed by one third, the economy is suffering and passengers and communities have been left isolated."

He added "The language and behaviour of Scottish Ministers has too often been inflammatory, unreasonable and factually incorrect."

Meanwhile, Aslef's sister union RMT has declared an overwhelming mandate for national strike action on Britain's railways. This includes RMT members based in Scotland working at Avanti West Coast, Cross Country, LNER and Network Rail.

At ScotRail RMT has announced that its members in Scotland will be balloted on strike action following what was described as a "derisory offer" of a 2.2 per cent wage increase. This announcement was coupled with an expression of the union's anger at ScotRail's proposed timetable cuts, labelling them "a kick in the teeth" to its members.

ScotRail later made an improved offer to Aslef including a 4.2 per cent pay increase and no compulsory redundancies for three years. This will be put to the drivers, said Lindsay. ■

Easter 2019.

It is hard to ignore the continued growth of road traffic, along with the attendant problems of congestion and pollution. Traffic is now at around 10 per cent higher than pre-pandemic levels.

Some took to cars as an alternative to public transport to protect themselves from infection, and are still not confident about mixing with people in confined spaces. That's understandable given the crowding

on reduced rail and bus services. Bus services have been cut by a quarter in the past decade.

Commuters are less likely now to accept the overcrowding they regularly experienced on pre-covid commuter trains and buses. Many are already calling for the government to use the pandemic as an opportunity to permanently improve the lot

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of public transport users.

Many motorists faced with rapidly increasing fuel prices will see public transport as a better option for them, despite rail fares rising by nearly 4 per cent. The rise was criticised by many who said that it was not going to help to get people back on trains, and was contrasted unfavourably with the subsidies given to motorists.

Unlike our own government's treatment of public transport, the German government has subsidised fares for the summer to help ease the burden of fuel prices and to get more people back on trains, trams and buses. The offer is unlimited travel on public transport (except inter-city trains) for €9 a month (about £7.70).

If not now, when?

Noting that the rail industry is recovering from the effects of the pandemic, rail minister Wendy Morton recently told a rail industry conference – “now is not the time to take industrial action”. This of course poses the question “if not now, then when?”

Most rail staff would need a pay rise of around 15 per cent to restore the buying power of their salaries to that of 2019. The government and media continually paint a picture of all rail staff as well paid or over-paid. They mention only train drivers despite the fact that most of these highly skilled workers are Aslef members rather than RMT or TSSA, and they have mostly not yet balloted for action on pay.

Thousands of rail workers are paid much lower salaries than drivers. TSSA highlighted the salaries of some of those working for publicly-owned LNER, who are paid an annual salary of £18,805, just

above the minimum wage of £18,278. Their salary is so low that they had to be taken out of the pension salary sacrifice scheme to stay above the minimum wage when that increased.

Many station staff, vital to the safe and secure operation of passenger services, are on salaries of around £24,000. In contrast, rail bosses are on some of the highest pay packets in the country, with Network Rail Chief Executive Andrew Haines on £590,000.

The government has argued that there simply isn't the money to pay a decent increase to rail workers. Yet many still work for private companies that have seen their fortunes improve considerably during the pandemic. For example, First Group's rail division recently announced a £107 million profit, much of which will go to shareholders rather than rail workers.

Profits are booming because the government has abolished the discredited passenger rail franchise system. Several private companies handed back their franchises to the government to run because they couldn't make enough profit from them. So rather than franchises the government has now awarded contracts to private operators that guarantee healthy profits. It would rather do that than take services back into public ownership.

The rail workers' challenge has stung Johnson and Shapps, who have responded with threats to legislate to force workers to provide a minimum service during a strike, and to allow their replacement with agency workers. Neither threat is likely to be effective, even if followed through.

HS2 was planned for over 15 years, with the first phase now under construction between London and Birmingham. But the wider project is suffering death by a thousand government cuts. *Workers* has previously commented on the £35 billion worth of cuts made to HS2 in November 2021. A project originally envisaged to transform the railway network and to add considerably to its capacity is now mired in uncertainty and confusion.

The planned HS2 “eastern leg” that would allow high speed services to run from London and Birmingham to the East Midlands, Yorkshire and the North East

‘Private rail companies have seen their fortunes improve considerably during the pandemic...’

was axed last November. That was despite numerous statements from Johnson that HS2 would be built in full – some made only weeks before!

The alternative of upgrading existing railways would mean decades of engineering works with massive disruption to train services. The need for those upgrades seems to have recently registered at the Department for Transport, which may know more about railways than Shapps.

Shorter, cheaper

A new version of the HS2 eastern leg is planned, but it looks like a much shorter, cheaper version. Cities like Derby and Sheffield will lose out on HS2 services, while the much needed extra capacity will be virtually non-existent.

Not only was the vital eastern leg axed, but that was followed by a decision not to build what is known as the “Golborne link”. This would have allowed HS2 trains to join the West Coast Main Line near Wigan, avoiding a congested stretch of track north of Crewe.

The extra capacity gained by that link would have allowed three HS2 trains every hour to Scotland. Without the link this will be reduced to one an hour, and running at much lower speeds on existing tracks. This effectively means no HS2 trains to Edinburgh.

The outlook for rail could and should be a rosy one. But it will require rail workers to be resolute and united in resisting government attacks on their pay, conditions and the future for their industry, supported by those people – and businesses – who use the trains. ■

During the pandemic the government promised strategic investment. Now it's walking away from it...

Vaccines plan in tatters



Vaccinating cattle. Animal diseases can also be a threat to human health.

TENDERS ARE now open for the construction of the new Veterinary Vaccine Manufacturing Innovation Centre at the Pirbright Institute in Surrey. On the face of it, that's good news for Britain, helping researchers to stay ahead of threats to animals – and to people from animals – from new diseases.

It's one result of the government's apparent conversion to planning and the development of a national capability to design and produce vaccines, born of bitter experience at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. It should be completed in 2025.

And it couldn't be sited at a better place. The Pirbright Institute, formerly the Institute for Animal Health, has been going for over a century, and has a superb track record. It is the UN Food and Agriculture Organization's reference centre for foot-and-mouth disease.

'The government is ditching its dalliance with the planned economy...'

But at the same time its companion laboratory dealing with human health, the Vaccine Manufacturing Innovation Centre (VMIC) at Harwell, near Oxford, has been hived off to the private sector.

The sale of VMIC and other developments, strongly suggest the government is ditching its dalliance with the planned economy and the idea that the health of the nation is an aspect of national security. In that light, how long a future will the veterinary centre in Pirbright have?

Protests

Despite protests, including from local MPs, the government sold off the Oxford VMIC at the start of April. It is now in the hands of a large US company, Catalent.

From its inception in 2018 the VMIC combined investment from government with funding and support from Janssen, the Belgian-based arm of US corporation Johnson and Johnson, and from two other US companies, GE Health and Merck Sharpe and Dohme. So commercial and foreign investment are not new.

But if its announcements are anything to go by, Catalent seems prepared to put vaccines development on the back burner. The company says it will invest £120 million in the VMIC to complete its building (it's not yet fully open) to develop and manufacture

"biologic therapies and vaccines".

Catalent president Mike Riley's press release announcing the purchase did not mention vaccines at all. He spoke only about "a facility that provides opportunities to transform innovation into real treatments for patients across the United Kingdom, Europe, and beyond".

Vaccines are not therapies, treatments for a disease, but protection against disease. Although Catalent has a track record in producing vaccines it has a longer one in making biologic treatments (a biologic is produced in or from a living organism, often using DNA technology).

And this rowing back on commitments given during 2020 and 2021 is not unique. It follows the government's abandonment of vaccine manufacturer Valneva's new facility in Livingston, Scotland, when it cancelled an order for millions of vaccines.

That abandonment came while clinical trials of Valneva's new Covid-19 vaccine were still under way – and just weeks before the trial results showed that it worked exceptionally well. Having backed it at first, the government simply dropped it for no better reason than to save money.

The VMIC decision, said the former UK vaccines taskforce leader Kate Bingham in a lecture at Oxford University, set aside "the need to build resilience in the UK in pandemic preparedness capability through a new flexible state of the art manufacturing plant, able to manufacture vaccines of any format as might be needed, including flu vaccine."

"The result of contract termination was that these plans were instantly put on hold, discussions for supplying the EU were paused and 100 plus new jobs immediately lost," said Bingham, adding, "Government alleged a breach of contract, apparently as a means to avoid paying for the costs incurred up to that point, costs incurred at the request and for the convenience of the government. Some might consider this behaviour as acting in bad faith."

Ironically, the Valneva vaccine has now been approved by the UK Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, the MHRA. Like the AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine, it does not need to be kept at ultra-low temperatures. ■

Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon's announcement of Scotland away from Britain (and back into the European U

SNP opts for division as



Courtesy Unison Scotland

Women trade unionists protest in George Square, Glasgow, over the implementation of the long-running £500 million equal pay settlement with Glasgow City Council, 2018.

IN SCOTLAND as in the rest of Britain, workers are in the midst of campaigns and actions against the cost of living crisis, falling value of wages and deteriorating conditions of work. The last thing that's needed is a divisive and spurious referendum that may well foster argument and splits among workmates and families.

But that's precisely what First Minister Nicola Sturgeon called for on 14 June with the first of a planned series of papers on the issue.

Just a few examples of united actions include Aslef leading the way with their settlement with ScotRail, Unison launching its strike ballot of 25,000 waste and cleansing workers and school staff, ongoing action on the railways by RMT and TSSA members and Unite supporting the strike by fishery protection workers at Marine Scotland over pay cuts.

Unite general secretary Sharon Graham commented: "The Scottish government has to come back to us with a more realistic offer at talks next week or strike action is inevitable in the coming weeks. Unite has zero hesitation in defending our members' jobs, term and conditions at all times."

Jobs axed

And the CWU Scotland regional secretary hit out at planned job cuts by the Scottish government, whose Spending Review for sets out "plans to cut between 17,000 and 40,000 public sector jobs over the next three years, with local councils again set to bear the brunt of the cuts".

A tremendous example was set during the two-year campaign in the 2014 referendum by the six trade unions that made a stand against separatism. That important contribution – by Aslef, Community, CWU,

GMB, NUM and Usdaw – should not be forgotten. They should rekindle their opposition to breaking up the British working class, and encourage other trade unions to join them.

Now is the time to prepare resolutions and motions in support of unity to the various annual conferences of the trade unions. Given that the month of the proposed referendum is October 2023, time to act is at a premium. Some unions – like those of teaching staff and the Musicians' Union – sat on the fence.

In a unifying rallying call, the Scottish Trade Union Congress – in partnership with The Poverty Alliance – organised a Cost of Living Summit for trade unionists on 17 June in Glasgow, bringing together over 40 trade unions and civic organisations. In conclusion the assembly declared "a cost of living emergency".

f plans for a second referendum in an attempt to break
(Union) must be rejected by trade unions...

workers unite in action

The STUC general secretary, Roz Foyer, referring to the SNP-Scottish Green alliance in Edinburgh, said “Their recent spending review plans to foist harmful cuts on our public services is utterly incompatible with the response needed to help those impacted by this crisis.”

She added: “The pandemic has exposed the deep-rooted inequalities across Scotland, exacerbated by a cost-of-living crisis not of workers choice nor making. We cannot – and will not – be held responsible for the negligence of our political class in their failure to tackle rising inflation coupled with falling wages.”

But circumstances are very different to the days when the former prime minister David Cameron meekly rolled over and accommodated the SNP’s designs for the 2014 referendum. Now it is unlikely that the British government will grant the required Section 30 powers to Holyrood to hold such a vote.

A referendum under these circumstances would have no legal force. So care should be taken by advocates of British unity of giving a wildcat (and possibly illegal) referendum legitimacy.

Positive

Some would argue that the best policy would be to boycott such a vote. Nevertheless, strong arguments against separatist actions and ideas have to be made. And what better way than to be positive about the benefits and potential of an increasingly united Britain.

It is unlikely that there would be an over-arching campaigning organisation this time like Better Together in 2014, but there are pressure groups such as Scotland in Union. And Scotland in Union (SIU) has started its fightback positively.

SIU’s statement opened with “Scotland’s positive future is as part of the UK, bringing together people and communities, keeping the pound, avoiding a hard border between friends and families, investing more in our NHS and schools, and creating more jobs.”

The consequences of a separatist outcome would be dire, but relentless listing of negatives is not the best way to counter its arguments. We need to hear more from the

‘Sturgeon implied the need for a hard border between Scotland and England...’

rest of Britain about why they would oppose the breaking up their country and the benefits of staying united.

It is not just Scotland that would be worse off out of Britain, and there is so much to be gained from settling this unnecessary dispute and building an indestructible unity within Britain.

Backward-looking

From today’s vantage point, nothing could be more backward-looking than a return to control by the European Union. But that’s what Nicola Sturgeon’s so called “independence” for Scotland would mean. She seemed to suggest getting into the EU’s single market sooner than full membership, which would entail years of harsh austerity.

And setting out her plans for a referendum Sturgeon implied the need for a hard border between her vision of EU member Scotland and non-EU England: “If we are in the single market and the rest of the UK is outside the single market then, yes, there are issues in terms of regulatory and customs requirements that need to be met.”

Leaving the EU was a decision of Britain as a whole, the Scots having voted decisively in 2014 to stay part of Britain. Her bid for an October 2023 referendum is only the start of a series of pronouncements.

Titled “Building a New Scotland”, the bid would set out the details of trade with the rest of Britain, prospective EU membership, new currency, a central bank and strategic relationships. On top of all of that a Referendum Bill has yet to be presented.

Most of the first document released at her press conference on 14 June was devoted to a wish list of desirable European

countries that she could aspire to, virtually saying “look what we could be like” (ignoring the EU austerity visited upon countries like Portugal, Cyprus and Greece).

Her rosy view belies the fact that during the 14 years of SNP rule (7 years of Salmond, 7 years of Sturgeon) much has deteriorated in Scotland – mainly in areas in which the SNP have direct responsibility. These areas include the NHS, education, industry, ferry procurement, growing drug and alcohol addiction and local council cuts.

Some £20 million is to be spent on this referendum – while over £2 billion remains unused from the British government pandemic grants given to Scotland over the past two years. That does not include the high costs that could be incurred in a legal fight with the British government to obtain a legal referendum.

Sturgeon’s document attacks the UK for having low expenditure on research and development while failing to point out that this is a responsibility that has been devolved to Scotland for years.

Deficit

Scotland’s estimated deficit (the difference between taxes raised and spending) more than doubled last year to 22.4 per cent of its GDP. This is about double that of any other countries in Europe. The limit needed to achieve EU membership is 3 per cent! Nowhere is this major problem addressed.

Meanwhile, millions of pounds are being spent on building up a chain of Scottish representative offices around the world, notably in Brussels, Beijing, Ottawa, Berlin and Washington DC. These amount to being unofficial “embassies”, and through them the SNP/Scottish Green alliance is running what amounts to an independent foreign policy.

Pamela Nash of Scotland in Union pointed out: “Overseas business networks are crucial in promoting our world-class exports, even though the rest of the UK will always be by far our most important market. There should be a joined-up global engagement strategy with the UK government, rather than the SNP government working in opposition on this important area.” ■

Across Britain people are finding it harder and harder to access GP services. It's just to see your GP. Health service workers must take the

Unequal access to GPs: a



David Dixon/geograph.org.uk (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Moorgate Primary Healthcare Centre, Bury, Greater Manchester. Such centres are the gateway to NHS health services.

‘Media coverage of GP services feels like a slanging match. Patients say they are finding it hard to access GPs. And GPs say they are working harder than ever...’

BMA reps, say they are working harder than ever and that more GPs are needed.

It is true that the demands on GP services are soaring, with the average patient visiting GP services eight times a year, more than double the level 20 years ago. And every month seems to bring new strategies – problem gambling, obesity and so on – that rely on GP intervention.

But it is also true that even before the pandemic the trend was for more GPs to work part time. Government and NHS leaders know this, as the independent health charity The King’s Fund pointed out in its submission to the parliamentary inquiry into the future of general practice.

Work patterns

Retired orthopaedic consultant J Meirion Thomas has highlighted the change in working patterns in GP practice. Nearly 60 per cent of GPs now work six half-day sessions or fewer – in other words less than three days a week.

The consequence is that two doctors now need to be trained to produce the equivalent of one fully qualified full-time GP. That process takes around eleven years to attain full competency. This means that all government figures about increasing the number of GPs in training need

ACCESS TO primary care (GP) services is a concern across Britain. It is now increasingly clear that those who work in the NHS must take charge of this emergency to rectify the situation, for the sake of patients’ health and their own.

The most recent report was from the Nuffield Trust, which tracks many aspects of health care. At the end of May it showed that a shortage of GPs has left some areas of England coping with half the number of doctors compared to others.

There is no north-south divide here, as there are problems across the country. Some of the worst-affected places are Hull, Portsmouth, Brighton, and parts of Essex; all with fewer than 50 GPs per 100,000 patients.

Across Britain

And it’s not just England; GP services elsewhere in Britain are also under pressure. Scotland had on average significantly more GPs per head than the rest of Britain in 2019 – 76 per 100,000 against 60 overall – according to Nuffield Trust research. But even so, primary care in Scotland has suffered from the pandemic.

The answer, according to

an inquiry launched earlier this year by the Scottish Parliament’s Health, Social Care and Sport Committee is “alternative pathways into primary care”. The responses to a public consultation were mixed to say the least – and it’s not as if other areas of NHS Scotland are just waiting for more work. Nurses and others share the same pressure as GPs.

The overall NHS picture in Wales is different, as The Nuffield Trust reported in June. But GP appointments and numbers are a concern there too. The Welsh government entered into a new GP contract last December, but unlike England it is not encouraging a return to face-to-face consultations, apparently because of pressure on GPs.

The NHS careers website has no shortage of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion officer job vacancies with responsibilities for “getting it right for patients”. But with the gateway to the NHS, GP services, so unequal, how can the service even begin to “get it right” for patients?

Some media coverage of GP services can feel like a slanging match. Patients say they are finding it hard to access GPs. And GPs, including their Royal College and

ccess primary health services. It should not be a battle
lead in sorting this out...

a radical solution needed

to be reconsidered.

The changes in the GP contract (agreed under Tony Blair's government in 2004) means that GPs do not have responsibility for patient care at night. In combination with GP part time work, and the difficulty in getting appointments, this places ever more stress elsewhere with negative consequences on ambulance response times and A&E departments.

This has also fuelled the growth of parasitic locum agencies. They make big money from out of hours services and high hospital doctor vacancy rates. Locum work is precarious for the individual doctor, and reliance on locum cover is bad for GP practices, patients and NHS finances.

Honesty

The slanging match between patients and GPs must end. The embattled, defensive line taken by the BMA and the Royal College of GPs – that patients are being whipped into a frenzy by anti-GP media – is unsustainable. Patients have genuine concerns and deserve honesty about how the GP service is organised.

Many patients still don't realise that the NHS does not employ GPs. Instead, family doctors are self-employed (their practices are in effect small businesses) and they are contracted to the health service.

GPs can choose to work exclusively in private GP work despite their extensive

training having been publicly funded. And unlike most employees they have no limitations on working part time.

Salaried

A few qualified GPs have always worked as salaried NHS employees. They can be employed by a GP practice or by locum services or out of hours agencies. There is no obligation on these employers to follow NHS pay and conditions and pay. Many do but the BMA rightly fears this situation could be a means to drive down pay and worsen services.

The number of employed doctors has increased sharply over the past two decades, especially with the growth of large GP groups, owned by healthcare companies.

According to a BBC *Panorama* documentary broadcast on 13 June the largest of them, US-owned Operose, is operating with inadequate cover and is using less qualified (and lower paid) staff without the necessary supervision. The company denies the allegations.

On the surface it looks as if there is a problem with GP distribution across the country, but it is just the latest manifestation of a problem of GP funding dating back to the creation of the NHS.

Moving to more employed doctors

could be part of the solution to the inequalities in the service exposed by the Nuffield report. But to be effective they would have to be directly employed by the NHS – and not by agencies or healthcare conglomerates.

There was an initiative that used doctors directly employed by the NHS and integrated with other services. Known as polyclinics, they began with trials in London in 2008. Views about their value differed, but the initiative was killed off by the incoming 2010 coalition government – Andrew Lansley's first act as secretary of state for health.

The present government is reviewing health care across the board, but seems more influenced by think tanks like Policy Exchange and is not listening to health care workers.

The NHS does have the capacity and expertise to find a solution. It begins with openness about the facts including GP funding, patterns of part time work and the contract. And the disparity in approach to health between England, Scotland and Wales must be addressed.

As a nation we are not short of expertise about running complex systems. Accessing a GP in a timely manner is vital for our health. It is a problem demanding a radical solution. ■

'Two doctors must be trained to produce the equivalent of one full-time GP. That process takes around eleven years to attain full competency...'

Meet the Party

The Communist Party of Britain Marxist-Leninist's series of London public meetings in Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, WC1R 4RL, continues on Thursday 21 July with the title "Tech sovereignty and the working class". Other meetings are held around Britain. All meeting details are published on What's On, page 5, in our eNewsletter, and on www.cpbml.org.uk/events.

M We'll be out and about at the Tolpuddle Martyrs festival in Dorset on Sunday 17 July, and we would be delighted to meet subscribers and friends.

M As well as our in-person public meetings we hold regular discussion meetings on a variety of topic online via Zoom, as well as informal meetings with interested workers and study sessions for those who want to take the discussion further. If you are interested we want to hear from you. Call us on 07308 979 308 or send an email to info@cpbml.org.uk

Everyone needs somewhere decent to live – and to be able to afford it – so long that it seems there's no answer. It need not be that way.

Housing for people, not profit

THE GREATEST, and most damaging, changes in government housing policy were during the Thatcher administration in the 1980s. The effects are still with us – not only from selling off council houses through “Right to Buy” but from cutting public expenditure on housing and removing responsibility for social housing from local councils.

The Blair government that followed Conservative rule continued those policies – reducing council house building further and pushing tenants to private rentals – and then added fuel to the fire with buy-to-let mortgages. The result was increasing inflation in house prices over the decade of that government, with only a short period when they dropped after the 2007-2008 financial crisis – to which overvalued property prices contributed.

Like its predecessor and all governments since, “New Labour” was wedded to “the market” for economic solutions. A series of changes to housing benefit rules linking it to market rents just drove them up – pouring public money into the hands of private landlords, instead of spending it on building houses.

Politicians love to talk about “affordable” housing, now they have abandoned council housing and look set to do the same with housing associations. That's a misleading euphemism – and implies that workers deserve only basic accommodation by the grace and favour of government and developers.

The reality is that the cost of housing compared to wages is high and increasing, now over nine times annual earnings on average. And increases to interest rates will raise the cost of mortgages, or make buying a house unaffordable for many more.

About one in five of all dwellings are pri-



Wei Huang/shutterstock.com

The Aylesbury Estate, Southwark, London, is notorious for the bad standard of its housing.

vately rented. Rental costs compared to wages have been more stable in recent years. But in any case, people in private rentals are on average spending 23 per cent of their income on rent (2020 figures, the latest available). And rents are rising sharply now.

Overcrowded

Conditions and prices vary across the country, but there are no cheap areas or places free from housing problems. Rising prices and rents force more young people to live at home with parents, or to share overcrowded accommodation. Others live further and further from their workplace, incurring huge travel costs.

This can result in homelessness.

Official figures are acknowledged to undercount the number affected. Rough sleeping more than doubled between 2010 and 2019, and housing charity Shelter estimated that over 270,000 people were homeless at the end of last year. That number was expected to increase sharply this year, even before the recent increase in the cost of living.

Bad as it is, homelessness isn't the most widespread housing problem. Inadequate, unaffordable housing creates social issues, not only poor mental and physical health but reduced educational achievement and limitations on work opportunities. This affects over 8 million people across the country, according to a 2020 estimate.

‘There are no cheap areas or places free from housing problems...’

e to pay for it. But housing in Britain has been in crisis for
t way...

for profit



But even if you have somewhere to live and can afford the mortgage or rent, your problems may not be at an end. The Grenfell Tower fire five years ago was the most visible and tragic manifestation of poor quality housing – not just inadequate, but lethal. And it reveals a true crisis in building safety affecting public health.

The overall quality of the housing stock in Britain is poor and not improving. Repairs are often overdue or badly done, aided by the surge in private rentals and a shortage of public funds. According to one report this contributed to a significant number of avoidable deaths, particularly among older people.

These impacts are not spread evenly around the country. All areas are have

housing problems. Expensive and often substandard accommodation blights cities – and those councils are exporting families as it's cheaper to house them elsewhere. In rural areas, housing is less affordable due to generally lower wages, if it's available at all.

In Whitby, North Yorkshire, people are so fed up with second home ownership, they voted in June to restrict new building for use as a primary residence. Some areas of South West England have argued for the same action. This begs the question whether what's built is affordable, but at least it's an attempt to control the local market.

Levelling up?

The government's actions are not much to shout about. In February's patronisingly named "Levelling Up" white paper it said that by 2030, "...renters will have a secure path to ownership with the number of first-time buyers increasing in all areas" [whatever that means]. Its "ambition" is for the number of "non-decent rented homes" to have fallen by half.

The government had set up a review of the "Decent Homes Standard" in November 2020, but it covers only social housing. Progress has been stop-start, but it's expected to report soon. What it won't do is address the lack of enforcement of those standards and how any of this can be achieved.

The government says it will consult on the impact on the private rented market and particularly for those on the lowest incomes. They might save their time by looking at what's already been published and said about the housing market and the negative impact on people's lives.

Trade unions like Unite and Unison have been campaigning about housing, with coherent and detailed arguments setting out Britain's needs. So too have charities and policy research organisations with an interest in housing. None of them say the need for action is in doubt.

The government says planning is an obstacle to speeding up housebuilding, and is in favour of further loosening of regulations. Most developers agree, in spite of many of them owning large "land banks" –

seeing land already with planning permission as an investment, waiting while its value goes up and up. And we have seen what disasters can happen when building companies cut corners on regulations.

So do we really need lots more housing to be built? Existing poor standard older housing stock needs to be upgraded or replacing. Then there is pent up demand from those who have been unable over recent years to find a place of their own, with many young workers having to live with family or friends because they can't afford to buy or rent.

The population is growing, with official projections of growth indicating an increase of five million people to add to the present estimate of around 67 million. Where will they live?

With the present government policy of encouraging migration to Britain of the "brightest and the best" from across the world (instead of concentrating on educating and training our own people to fill skilled jobs), our islands are going to become ever more crowded.

Right to buy

Its latest headline idea is to extend the right to buy to those renting from housing associations – up to another 2.5 million homes, equal to the total sold under the Thatcher and Blair governments.

This policy focuses on the supposed benefits of home ownership. It ignores all the other issues – not only affordability, but the shortage of construction workers and the dismal fact that many right to buy properties end up as private rentals – over 40 per cent in London in 2019 according to a 2019 Greater London Authority report.

Too often the debate is either short term (politicians) or reacting to a bad situation (everyone else). There is a better way. Housing is an essential public good, and public provision and regulation should rule, including: a publicly funded building programme; revived construction skills training; direction and price control on the use of development land; and rent controls.

We should demand homes for workers, not profits; realistic action now and long term planning instead of unfulfilled promises. ■

Two of the Oxford scientists responsible for the AstraZeneca vaccine documented how it was developed – and sound a warning

Vaccines – lessons from the



Public domain

Vaxxers: A Pioneering Moment in Scientific History, by Sarah Gilbert and Catherine Green, paperback, ISBN 9781529369885, Hodder & Stoughton 2022, £9.99 or less. Kindle and eBook editions available.

IT'S BEEN a year since Sarah Gilbert and Catherine Green's absorbing and uplifting story of the creation, manufacture and testing of what has become known as the AstraZeneca vaccine first appeared. This paperback edition appeared at the end of May, with an additional chapter covering some of what happened in the intervening year.

And it's a great read, not least because it shows the two protagonists as real people, juggling research needs with home life and lockdown while dealing with the unaccustomed spotlight of public and media fame.

Gilbert and Green, both Oxford University professors, were responsible for, respectively, the design and manufacture of the AstraZeneca vaccine against Covid-19. In this book they explain the how and the why. This they do with great clarity, never condescending but never assuming too much knowledge.

Actually designing the vaccine was

fairly simple and astoundingly rapid.

But that speed didn't come out of nowhere.

It was a combination of previous experience, designing a vaccine against Ebola virus disease in 2014, and a vaccine against a Covid-like disease of camels called Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS for short).

That work resulted in a vaccine structure into which a particular gene sequence could be inserted virtually at will.

Once Gilbert and Green had the Covid virus gene sequence it was (apparently) simple to modify it so that our immune systems would find it more easily. It took just 48 hours from release of the genome by the Chinese authorities on 6 January 2020; they explain how in fascinating detail.

Speed

It took another 65 days to commission and have made the actual chemical construct (from a company in Italy) and then manufacture the first batch of vaccine. So what took them so long to get the vaccine into the general public's arms – the first NHS jab was given on 4 January 2021?

There are two very different answers to that question. The first is that today's systems of funding research and development

and of testing vaccines and treatments take far longer than they need to.

The second answer is that 12 months from a gene sequence of a virus to deployment of a vaccine was at the time stunningly quick – no one had done it for any vaccine within two years at the least.

How they managed that rapid deployment forms one of the key threads of the story, and it's one that shows research, development and regulation acting at its best. It begins with the team at Oxford, and the university itself, acting "at risk" – going full steam ahead with no guarantee of support from government or anyone else.

The Oxford team also managed to dramatically shorten the time to regulatory approval by working step by step with the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. Waiting until the end of the clinical trials and then dumping all the data on the agency would have introduced huge delays.

Even so, by the time the final stages of clinical testing began, the team had to scour the world to find populations with enough uninfected volunteers to take part. The process is going to have to speed up still more.

Misinformation

Another important theme is the role of information – or rather misinformation – during the pandemic. The authors deal, for example, with the surprising (and unsourced) story in a German newspaper that led some, including French president Emmanuel Macron, to say falsely that the AstraZeneca vaccine did not work in older people.

The authors strike a nice balance between acknowledging the international nature of the endeavour and the strengths of Britain's science. "I am proud of the international nature of my team, and of UK science in general. Diversity of ideas helps progress," writes Gilbert.

"At the same time, we all live and work in the UK by choice, and although I will not be happy if the government tries to take the credit, there is a lot about this country (the flexibility and creativity of the university, the cooperation of bioscience industry, the backbone of the NHS) that did contribute

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he front

‘The current research funding system is totally inadequate to deal with the threat of novel viruses...’

to the success of the vaccine, and I am proud of that.”

The new, final, chapter in the story up to April 2022, is wide-ranging, dealing with Omicron, vaccines and pregnant women, and the challenge of what Gilbert calls “Disease Y” – the next epidemic.

Disappointingly, there’s no comment in the updated version on two huge steps backward since the first edition: the shabby treatment of vaccine company Valneva in the autumn of 2021, and the sale of the Oxford Vaccine Manufacturing and Innovation Centre in April 2022 (see p13).

One lasting message from this book is that the current research funding system is totally inadequate to deal with the threat of novel viruses. It takes far too long to assemble the evidence that funding bodies need, and far too long for them to reach a decision.

That is going to have to change; the country or countries that do so first will gain a huge advantage. Britain would be well placed to be one of them, but that’s not guaranteed.

Back in June 2021 the government, looking to spice up its presidency of the G7, committed itself to a target of 100 days from identifying a virus to rolling out a vaccine. Gilbert has since reminded us of that target, though there’s been little (if any) action from the government other than pious statements.

With the pandemic pressure now receding and the government retreating from its commitments, it will need a concerted effort to ensure Britain takes proper advantage of the fantastic work of Gilbert, Green and their colleagues. ■

WORKERS

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WHATEVER HAPPENED TO ‘TAKE CONTROL’?

JOURNAL OF THE CPBML ✪

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TAKE CONTROL: BUILD THE NEW BRITAIN

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Today's world situation is similar to that of the pre-1914 years. Imperialist forces were also intent on dividing up the planet.

What caused World War

WORLD WAR ONE scarred the twentieth century. It was colossally destructive of human life with an estimated death toll of over 16 million people. Millions suffered disabling injuries and devastating psychological traumas as well.

How can this violent eruption into general war be explained? Was there an underlying reason that caused this gigantic conflict? Or was it down to an unfortunate combination of unnecessary military adventures?

Certainly the cause of the first world war was neither the assassination of an archduke in Sarajevo, nor the invasion of Belgium. These and similar explanations were no more than convenient excuses and trite pretexts to justify the ruling classes' clamour for war and to obscure their real motives.

The real answers can be found in the 60 or more years preceding the outbreak of warfare in 1914. During this period all the great powers, both old and emerging, experienced a fundamental economic shift.

Great monopolies and giants in industry and finance had emerged. At some point their predatory and conflicting interests and objectives were bound to provoke wholesale war. Only the intervention of the peoples of the world to stop the momentum of the system of world capitalism could have prevented it. Unfortunately, nothing was forthcoming until the October Revolution in 1917.

From about 1860, the method of organisation of capitalism had changed drastically. The economies of the great powers outgrew and discarded free competition. Production became concentrated amid massive technological development and a remarkably rapid growth of industry in ever-larger enterprises.

That concentration led inexorably to the

'The heady mix of great powers provided the perfect ingredients...'

domination of monopoly enterprises over national economies. And the banks played a large part in this process, acting in a significantly different way from their earlier role of enabling trade and settling accounts.

As banking developed, it too became concentrated in a smaller number of establishments. Banks became supremely powerful monopolies controlling almost the whole of money capital as well as the larger part of the means of production and the sources of raw materials. Capital itself became the commodity to be traded – finance capital was born.

Monopolies

The sway of finance capital accelerated and intensified the trend for concentration of capital and the formation of monopolies. Inside each great power a few monopolists could and did subordinate the leading economic operations, both commercial and industrial, to their will.

Empires have existed throughout history. But with the transformation of capitalism into capitalist imperialism between 1860 and 1914, a new type of empire was born. This beast aggressively combined class war against workers domestically with the oppression and exploitation of those in foreign lands. Over the years the word imperialism has tended to be used only and loosely in describing actions in foreign lands, whereas it should apply equally to the capitalist heartlands as well.

What were the noticeable features of this new capitalist imperialism? Industrial production had become more concentrated and capital more monopolistic; these twin forces exerted a decisive dominant role over economic life.

Bank capital, once concentrated, merged with or subsumed industrial capital until oligarchies of finance capital were created. In marked contrast to the export of goods and commodities in earlier phases of capitalism, the export of capital across the world acquired exceptional importance.

These new international capitalist combines were impelled to either share the world between themselves, or to compete as rivals for mastery. Inevitably, their growth generated a bitter rivalry for the territorial division of the whole world between



Wellcome Images (CC-BY 4.0)

Collecting point for wounded soldiers, World War I

the biggest capitalist powers.

This headlong growth of imperialistic capitalism opened up an unsettled phase of increasing danger among the nations of Europe. It unleashed events and forces on the part of the competing powers that ultimately created the conditions for general warfare.

Domination

Five great powers dominated in Europe in the 100 years before 1914, namely Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, Great Britain and Russia. Elsewhere in the world, USA and Japan were up-and-coming great powers. Both had made startling industrial and financial developments in the decades immediately before 1914.

This heady mix of great powers – some well established, some new and rising, others relatively declining – provided the perfect ingredients for the outbreak of imperialist clashes in a world ripe for war.

The early years of the twentieth century saw a massive upsurge in working class struggle in many countries as people combated the domestic effects of imperialism. With the advent of world war, there was a terminal and immediate collapse in class

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struggle; workers started killing each other in warfare instead.

Rogue patriotism became the norm; this served the interests of finance capital and increased its spheres of influence. Workers – at least to start with – fell for the duplicity of engagement in “just wars”, which is an illusion.

There is nothing “just” about war. War is always an abomination and always the preserve of the ruling classes. When workers or peoples fight for social or national emancipation in revolutions or national liberation struggle, they are engaged in something far different from the degradations of war.

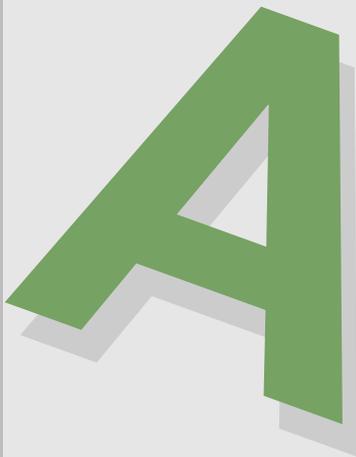
In the troubling world of today there are again rival imperialisms in unstable competition, just as there were in the pre-1914 years. If we don't distance ourselves from them or if we don't move to stop them, they will contrive to fashion another horror of war for their own exploitative ends but attempt to ruin us in the process.

We must pursue our own path. ■

• A longer, more detailed analysis of the lead-up to WW1 is online at cpbml.org.uk.

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ABOUT US

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

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

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

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

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We hold regular public meetings around Britain (Covid permitting), 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.

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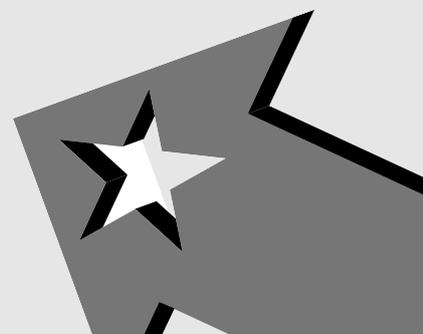
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Time to fight for pay

‘Unions must not be so wedded to “partnership working” that they fail to see their class enemies...’

AS INFLATION spirals upwards, more workers are lodging and fighting for pay claims. But too many are not; they fail to see themselves as part of a collective covering their trade, industry or job – and ultimately their country.

Whether or not it’s a result of Covid-related unemployment, last year saw the reversal of four years of (small) increases in union membership, with a particularly strong decline among women (see News, page 3).

At a time when price inflation is at its highest for decades, real wages are falling, and the need for collective struggle is greatest, union membership is at its lowest for a generation.

This feeds into a potentially lethal spiral for unions, and workers, whether members or not. Pay increases, especially those above inflation, are only ever won when unions take or threaten to take industrial action. And this is only ever effective if most of those affected by the claim are members, with very few exceptions.

Falling membership, then, fundamentally undermines unions’ ability to fight for higher pay. Worse, as well as workers not joining unions, some are leaving them to save money on union subscriptions.

What do we say to (for example) the long-standing Unison member who recently resigned membership in a large London hospital because “£18 a month [the union sub] is a week’s food”?

The more members who leave or new workers who fail to join, the less leverage there is on employers. The less leverage, the less chance of gaining a pay rise, which in turn encourages more workers to leave in an attempt to balance the books. It’s a vicious circle which could compound the decades-long decline in union membership.

Some unions have responded by not even formulating precise pay claims. Unison’s health claim seeks to be “inflation-busting”, whatever that might mean. And the Royal College of Nursing has, for the first time, formally withdrawn from the joint NHS unions pay claim to lodge its own. Disunity is weakness.

This will be difficult to turn around, but ways must be found. Workers and their unions must rediscover the plain tactical clarity of saying to the employing class, “If you put the bills up you

must pay us more”. If inflation is 10 per cent our claims must exceed this.

But we must use our common sense. The “our claim is bigger than yours” farrago, for example in last year’s NHS pay “campaign”, where unions tried to get a pay rise by setting unrealistic claims, should be a warning. Failing to achieve such claims, often without any real campaign, just looks stupid and weak.

NHS employers have even realised that the prospect of continued pay decline in the service is literally life-threatening. Schemes to combat “in-work poverty” are burgeoning, with a number of hospitals now hosting food banks for staff.

Assertive unions should be imposing workplace control on timid employers. Unions could start by fighting to end employment practices they have tolerated for too long: privatised contracts driving down the pay and conditions of the lowest paid; using bank and agency contracts rather than paying proper overtime and unsocial hours rates; reliance on unpaid overtime and excessive working hours.

But that would not be enough on its own; we must find new ways to fight. Massive bargaining units and remote ultimate financial control are a barrier, as are the vicious anti-union industrial action laws.

New organisations are around, calling themselves unions but often encumbered with sectarian and anarchist approaches. Much as existing unions have rightly resisted their incursion, they teach an important lesson: boldness in taking on an employer can be a virtue, and it can succeed.

Unions must not be so wedded to “partnership working” that they fail to see their class enemies. Not the managers we negotiate with – they are workers and often union members too. But those who stand behind them are our enemies: the ruling class and its financial oligarchy who run this country in their own interest. They are class conscious alright: a lesson for workers who think that’s somehow in the past.

If you’re not in a union, join. If you’re in a union, become a steward. If you’re a steward stand for higher office. And then fight. ■

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