

WORKERS

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WORKERS! TAKE CHARGE OF BRITAIN!

Ukraine Stop the arms

Excess deaths The cause

Union laws A brake on action

Water Dirty deals

Devolution Dangerous drive

Open spaces Save them!

May Day Meetings announced *plus* Historic Notes,

Research Where is Plan B? News and more

JOURNAL OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY

TAKE CONTROL: BUILD THE NEW BRITAIN

WORKERS



Arming Ukraine: no road to peace

UKRAINIAN PRESIDENT Volodymyr Zelensky stepped up efforts to further involve Britain and other NATO countries in his country's war against Russia. This makes escalation more likely, not less.

Zelensky told the UK and EU parliaments that he's fighting on their behalf. The prime minister Rishi Sunak said "nothing is off the table" – agreeing to send missiles and to begin training Ukrainian fighter pilots. And even though defence secretary Ben Wallace was more cautious, no one in Westminster questions the supply of arms to Ukraine.

Zelensky aims to join the EU. And next comes membership of NATO. That may not play so well – Article 5 of the treaty says armed attack against one member state is considered as an attack on all.

NATO powers have flooded Ukraine with arms, equipment and money. And now Ukraine wants long range, offensive airborne capacity. That can only lead to escalation of the conflict. Simply, Ukraine wants the ability to strike into Russian territory.

Russia's attack on Ukraine has increased the danger of a NATO war against Russia, not removed it. Last year President Biden promised not to send "offensive equipment" to Ukraine, because it would trigger war. Yet the US, Germany and Britain are now sending modern battle tanks.

The world is in even more danger than it was at this time last year. During a recent debate at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock

stated, "we are fighting a war against Russia."

Calls for peace come from some surprising quarters. The RAND Corporation policy think tank said in January that the consequences of a long war far outweigh possible benefits.

It argued that the US should recognise that the war is likely to end through negotiations and should work to overcome impediments to starting talks. Up to now the US, and their allies including Britain, have done the opposite.

The RAND paper concludes, "...avoiding a long war is also a higher priority for the United States than facilitating significantly more Ukrainian territorial control." That applies equally to other NATO members, Britain included, whose leaders seem oblivious to the war risks and in thrall to Ukrainian demands. An armistice or a settlement will reduce the dangers of disastrous escalation, and reduce the deaths, injuries and economic damage. That should be our demand.

Even the best settlement in Ukraine will not end the danger of war, even of nuclear war. These dangers will persist for as long as we allow imperialisms to exist, and for us here in Britain, that must mean that we get ourselves out of the NATO military alliance which emboldens aggressions by the ruling classes of the USA and Britain.

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



WORKERS is published by the Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist)

78 Seymour Avenue, London N17 9EB.
ISSN 0266-8580

www.cpbml.org.uk @cpbml
Issue 235, March/April 2023

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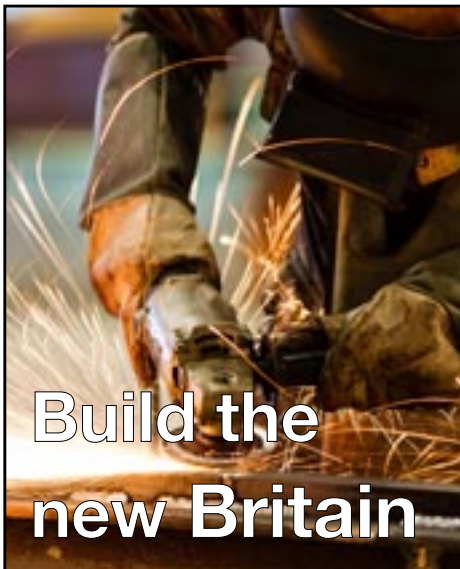
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Workers

RMT members on strike for the future of rail services, Glasgow July 2022. Photo Workers.

No answers on govt rail failure

MARK HARPER, prime minister Rishi Sunak’s new Secretary of State for Transport, recently gave a keynote speech to rail industry leaders. He failed dismally to give any real indication to those working in rail or to passengers that he will in any way adequately address the industry’s current problems.

Harper stated that “Britain is yearning for a modern railway that meets the needs of the moment...the railways need fundamental reform...” But his ideas for achieving this were a mixture of platitudes and recycling failed policies. “Enhance the role of the private sector,” he said, forgetting that the private sector was instrumental in creating the current crisis.

Harper called for more open access passenger train operators. He ignores the fact that the tiny number of services currently provided by open access operators are only commercially viable because they are subsidised.

The RMT union condemned the speech, saying: “It is no good for the Transport Secretary to extol the virtues of rail privatisation when the travelling public through its own experience recognises it’s been an unmitigated disaster.

“Many rail services that are already in meltdown will suffer even more because of plans to cut thousands of rail jobs and jeopardise safety standards...”

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

ROYAL MAIL

Postal workers fight on

AFTER COURT challenges from the employer, Communication Workers’ Union Royal Mail members have voted overwhelmingly to continue taking industrial action to defend their pay, jobs and industry.

General Secretary Dave Ward said, “After two national ballots, 18 days of action, constant management intimidation and scores of unjust disciplinary cases against their colleagues, postal workers have shown their dignity and determination once again.”

In their third ballot for industrial action, the union’s members at Royal Mail returned an emphatic result: 95 per cent in favour in a turnout of 77 per cent.

The result renews the legal mandate for industrial action for a further six months.

Postal workers are acting in defence of the Royal Mail service against the attacks of the now privatised employer.

The vote, Ward said, “is proof that workers loyal to a historic institution like Royal Mail will not accept it being turned into an Uber-style, bog-standard gig economy employer.”

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

Crisis in British semiconductor sector

British manufacturers use over a trillion chips a year. There is a chronic shortage, but the government has no strategy to deal with the crisis.

Physiotherapists' first-time strike

Physiotherapists and support workers over 60 NHS Trusts across England began a rolling programme of strikes on 26 January in pursuit of their pay claim – the first time they have ever taken strike action.

Pay cuts continue

Households are suffering the worst squeeze in real incomes since 1945. Real pay fell by 2.5 per cent in the last quarter of 2022.

London bus drivers settle for big pay rise

London Abellio bus drivers have won a big pay increase after a long-running dispute – an 18 per cent pay rise.

Strike action hits Diageo Leven plant

Engineering workers at Diageo's Leven plant in Fife took strike action over the first weekend in February in an escalating dispute over pay. They face pay cuts from changes to pay introduced unilaterally by the company.

Plus: the e-newsletter

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Workers



A clear message from RCN members on strike 19 January at The Christie, Manchester, one of Britain's leading cancer specialist hospitals.

Nurses escalate action

FROM 1 TO 3 MARCH Royal College of Nursing members at every employer in England with a strike mandate will be taking action including on night shifts.

The government has ignored every round of strike action so far which means nurses need to escalate. The union says: "The nursing profession, our patients and the NHS are in danger – we have to fight back together."

The crucial data linking nurses' pay to retention and the future of the NHS is well illustrated in the new RCN report *Valuing Nursing in the UK*. It showed an overall increase of 9 per cent in the numbers leaving the nursing register between 2020-21 and the previous year, and then a further increase of 3 per cent in 2022.

The trend which emerged post pandemic of an increase in those wanting to join the profession has now reversed. February figures from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) showed that applications for nursing courses in England fell by 19 per cent last year.

Everybody except the government is listening and speaking out. The NHS employers' organisation have called on the government to negotiate. On 6 February the chief nurses of ten of England's leading teaching hospitals called for a swift resolution.

In taking national action for the first time in its history, the RCN is taking responsibility for the NHS and asking us all to "fight back together", putting the onus on the whole working class to take responsibility too. The time for passive clapping is well over. In our history we have found ingenious ways to fight, and we need to draw on that history now. ■

UNIVERSITIES

UCU pay progress

FOLLOWING SIGNIFICANT progress in negotiations with university employers on pay, working conditions and pensions, the university staff's union, the UCU, is suspending for two weeks the remaining seven days of its planned 18 days of strike action.

This is to create a "constructive environment...(and) a period of calm". In case the employers are under any illusion, action scheduled after these dates remains in place and a ballot is under way for a mandate to continue action for a further six months.

The development shows the power of a united workforce. UCU general secretary Jo Grady told the union's 70,000 members: "Let us be crystal clear – you have delivered this". Many wonder whether the employers can be trusted not to take advantage of the suspension of action. To that she said: "they will fear us extending our mandate by another six months far more than they will the next two weeks of strike action."

As well as a pay rise to reflect inflation, UCU demands include restoring University Superannuation Scheme pensions, and ending casualisation and the use of involuntary zero hour contracts. ■

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

TEACHERS

On strike for pay

ON 1 FEBRUARY, teachers in the National Education Union (NEU) joined other public sector workers on strike, the first of six days of national and regional strike action throughout England and Wales.

Over 300,000 NEU members took a stand for education in their claim for an above inflation pay rise. There is widespread

anger over pay and school budgets.

The union held over 80 regional demonstrations on the day.

There is strong support among colleagues in other teaching unions for the striking NEU teachers. Many are frustrated that their own unions' votes for strikes fell short of the government's 50 per cent ballot participation threshold. ■

• See the full story online at www.cpbml.org.uk.



BAE workers rally for “no”, September 2014. Trade unions were vital to the vote to keep Britain united.

Sturgeon out in boost for unity

NICOLA STURGEON'S resignation is a blow to the separatist project. It comes at a time when working class struggle on wages and conditions shows a unity across Britain that simply undermines any separatist notions.

She became First Minister after the 2014 referendum when 55 per cent voted for unity, 45 per cent against. For eight years her repeated demands for separation failed to shift opinion one inch. Lord Ashcroft's 14 February 2023 poll found that 56 per cent supported unity, 44 per cent separatism. Yet she claimed in her resignation statement, “there is now majority support for independence.” Deluded to the last.

The obsession with the diversion of separation has been bad for Scotland. Prioritising another referendum to break up Britain meant indifference to the real problems facing the people of Scotland. So now Scotland's health services are in crisis, with record waiting times. The attainment gap between pupils from the poorest and richest families is just as huge. Council budgets are being cut, again. Drug deaths remain the highest in Europe. Life expectancy is going down. And transport is a mess across Scotland.

Her Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill was part of the separation agenda. But again it showed how Holyrood MSPs were mostly out of touch with the majority of Scottish people. Several hundred people attended a vigorous rally in George Square Glasgow on 5 February opposing the Bill. Public opposition seemed to be a last straw – Sturgeon and her backers had expected a public up in arms against a London government forbidding their divisive law.

The undemocratic usurping of the next general election for use as a separatist “de facto” referendum faced opposition by the people and within the SNP. So, after the Supreme Court ruled “no Indyref 2”, they couldn't use the next general election.

Relentless campaigning against separatism by dedicated organisations – and the firm stance on workers' unity by the trade unions who voted “no” in 2014 – have all contributed to this very serious blow to pro-EU separatism.

Now, with the separatist tide receding, those who have supported the SNP should turn to working for the nobler cause of rebuilding Britain. This is an opportunity to develop and put into practice ideas for improvements across all spheres of society, across Britain. Now there should be a surge of real activity. ■

WHAT'S ON

Coming soon

MARCH

Tuesday 14 March, 7pm

Online discussion meeting (via Zoom)

“Don't divide Britain: unity not devolution”

Discuss why attempts to break up the unity of Britain are an attack on the working class. Email info@cpbml.org.uk for an invitation.

Monday 27 March, 7.30pm

Britons Protection, 50 Great Bridgewater Street, Manchester M1 5LE

In person CPBML public meeting, Manchester

“Transport in the North – what's to be done”

Promises of improvement to rail, bus and other transport in northern England have been legion. The reality is decline. Only workers can change that. Come and share your thoughts. All welcome.

MAY

CPBML May Day Meetings

On May Day we take stock of Britain and the world. In the past year, many British workers have joined battle with the employers, showing discipline, unity and tactical ingenuity. The class as a whole is strengthened. How, then, to move forward?

Glasgow, In person: Monday 1 May, 7pm

Renfield Conference Centre, 260 Bath Street, G2 4JP

London, In person: Monday 1 May, 7.30pm

Brockway Room, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, WC1R 4RL

Manchester, In person: Monday 1 May, 1pm

Email info@cpbml.org.uk for details

Bristol, In person: Saturday 6 May 2023, 2pm

Room G01, Tony Benn House, Unite the Union, Victoria Street, BS1 6AY

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

Workers have always organised to defend their interests, but struggle does not stop...

Trade union laws: a brake



Workers

Workers from many unions opposing new strike laws at the rally held by the Scottish TUC in Glasgow on 1 February.

SINCE THE dawn of the industrial revolution in Britain workers have combined together to advance and defend their interests. Governments have sought to defend and advance the interests of capital by criminalising and restricting the ability of workers to do so, sometimes using the law and sometimes more subtle methods.

At first individuals were targeted for prosecution. This was successful in generating fear, but it also created unwelcome martyrs for the cause. The focus then switched to the finances of trade unions, making them liable for damages.

And now unions are forced to spend large sums on measures such as postal ballots. And ultimately they are still exposed to the threat of courts ordering seizure of funds or making punitive damages awards against them.

Yet at no time has legislation been completely successful in preventing workers

from taking industrial action. Strikes took place even when they were illegal (see Historic Notes on page 22 about a strike during World War Two).

Unions and workers have also been ingenious in finding ways around legislation. And sometimes governments, employers, police and courts have been reluctant to enforce the law in the face of public opinion.

More curbs

But workers and their unions now face further legal curbs on their ability to take industrial action. The government is rushing the draconian Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill through parliament in response to the current wave of public service and public transport strikes.

This proposed legislation is so wide in its scope that it will give ministers the power to write regulations for any services within six sectors (health, education, fire and

rescue, border force, nuclear decommissioning and transport) forcing workers to work during strike action.

Notices

Employers would then issue work notices naming who has to work, and what they must do – listing who could exercise their “right to strike” and who would be expected to cross picket lines and go to work regardless. This pointedly ignores the steps that unions already take to ensure life-and-limb cover is provided during industrial action.

Failure to comply with those notices would put workers at risk of dismissal, and open unions up to huge fines. Workers would be sacked for taking strike action that has been agreed in a democratic ballot.

In complex organisations, management would have a huge task to work out how to implement work notices. Unsurprisingly, employers are unenthusiastic about the Bill.

governments have always used the law to oppose them,

ke on workers' action

The TUC believes that forcing unions to send their members across picket lines is probably against international law. Government claims that the proposed legislation will bring Britain into line with other European countries are refuted by the European Trade Union Confederation, which has stated that Britain already has among the most draconian restrictions on the right to strike in Europe.

In addition to the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill, the Government is also examining how it can strengthen the provisions of the Trade Union Act 2016, which outlawed any strike where under 50 per cent of those balloted cast a vote, no matter how large a majority voted for striking.

The proposed new law would require at least 40 per cent of those eligible to vote in favour of the proposed industrial action for it to be lawful. This would apply to "important" public services such as rail workers and NHS staff.

In recent ballots where a clear majority has voted in favour of action (and with at least a 50 per cent turnout), in some cases fewer than 40 per cent of those eligible have voted in favour. So the new law would apply.

Unions often respond to not meeting legal thresholds by balloting again and often the vote has been achieved. But this means considerable costs and delay in pursuing action.

Support

For any union it's desirable to ensure that calls for industrial action are supported widely by union members. In the past some strikes have been called after low ballot

'Legislation has never completely prevented workers from taking action...'

Anti-union law: a brief history

AS WORKERS began to challenge the power of capital and employers at the start of the industrial revolution, trade unions were simply made illegal by the Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800. As with every law since, they hindered action but did not entirely prevent it.

The Combination Acts were repealed in 1824, but another act in 1825 prohibited collective bargaining and made strikes effectively illegal. That was swept away in 1871 by an act legalising the status of trade unions and (on paper) decriminalising strikes, but it left strikers open to prosecution for criminal conspiracy.

Infamous

In 1901 the infamous Taff Vale judgement ruled that a trade union could be sued and compelled to pay damages for taking industrial action. That ruling lasted five years, until overturned by legislation following the 1906 general election.

After World War Two, Labour governments invited trade union leaders into the corridors of power, hoping they would keep their own members in check. That was only partly successful.

The Labour government's 1969 White

Paper *In Place of Strife* proposed a return to coercion. Opposed by unions and workers, it was never enacted, but formed a template for the Conservatives' 1971 Industrial Relations Act. The next Labour government replaced that with the 1974 Trade Union & Labour Relations Act, without the worst excesses of the 1971 Act but still based on *In Place of Strife*.

Thatcher

The 1980s Thatcher government passed no less than six acts increasingly restricting unions' ability to take lawful industrial action. Secondary action was outlawed and pickets were restricted. Secret ballots were mandated, and from 1993 had to be postal.

The increasing complexity of trade union law gave employers the opportunity to obtain injunctions to stop union action, and the means to sue unions for damages.

Despite union pressure, the Blair/Brown Labour government failed to repeal any of the previous anti-trade union law. The return of the Conservatives to power saw a further Trade Union Act in 2016, the current legislative position. ■

turnouts, and poor organising. Too often such actions have failed to achieve anything due to lack of support.

But unions are being forced by law to use expensive postal balloting carried out by an independent organisation for strike ballots, a measure designed to eat into union funds. It is notoriously difficult to get large numbers of union members to vote in postal ballots and this is made worse when – as happened recently – ballots are being conducted to tight time frames during a postal strike.

Time limits

Not only does the law now impose onerous conditions on balloting, but the 2016 Act sets a six month time limit on mandates for industrial action. Many of the unions now

engaged in protracted industrial disputes will have to ballot members again.

When the law permitted ballots to be carried out in workplaces, turnout was much higher. As an alternative to workplace ballots, unions have called on governments to allow ballots to be carried out by much cheaper electronic means. This has been refused on the spurious grounds of voting security, and yet electronic voting is known to produce much greater levels of participation.

Government will do its utmost to stop workers challenging the interests of capitalism by any means that it feels it can get away with.

The time has come for workers to question the existence of such laws and not just live with restrictions on class activity. ■

The increasing number of deaths in Britain is a concern. V evidence that Covid vaccines are to blame. Quite the cont

Understanding ‘excess d

MORE THAN 650,000 deaths were registered in the UK in 2022 – nine per cent more than in 2019. It represented one of the highest levels of excess deaths outside the pandemic in 50 years. These figures should be of concern to workers, and it is right that we should ask why it has happened.

The term “excess deaths” can sound like a heartless description but it is an important statistical term that deserves to be better understood. At any given time of year there will be a “usual” or expected number of deaths – “excess deaths” means numbers above this level.

When the figures came out in January there was a surge of social media activity blaming the rise on the Covid vaccine. While it is perfectly reasonable to think a new factor may have triggered a rise, assertions need to match the evidence – and there is no such evidence for a vaccine effect.

Focus

The government may be pleased about the focus on vaccines as the cause of increased deaths, because that obscures more worrying trends which need attention.

The rise in cardiac problems has been highlighted by some as evidence that Covid vaccines are driving the rise in deaths. But this conclusion is not supported by the data. It is true that in rare cases (mostly not fatal) one type of Covid vaccine has been linked to a small rise in cases of heart inflammation and scarring (pericarditis and myocarditis).

Yet this particular vaccine side-effect was mainly seen in boys and young men, while the excess deaths in the UK are highest in older men – aged 50 or more.

“The scale of long waiting times for Emergency Care...is associated with patient deaths.”

Likewise close analysis of the figures for the first half of 2022 actually showed that unvaccinated people were more likely to die than vaccinated people.

So what is causing the excess deaths?

First, there is evidence that crucial aspects of health care have been omitted, compounded by lack of emergency care when the consequences of that omission occur, such as a heart attack or stroke.

It was always a worry that restricting access to NHS health care during lockdown would result in the neglect of patients who needed treatment for other reasons. The extent of that neglect was revealed by a major British Heart Foundation study published in January 2023.

As a result of the huge reduction in diagnosis, monitoring and treatment of high blood pressure and high cholesterol, nearly half a million people in the UK missed starting on medication to help prevent heart attacks and strokes.

The authors of the study show that, alarmingly, the detection of high blood pressure and high cholesterol have still not returned to pre-pandemic levels.

We learn from this that in our rush to prevent deaths from a new infection, our actions raised the risk of dying from the more well-known killers of undiagnosed high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

It is clear that emergency planners thinking about the next pandemic should be prioritising how the routine screening for high blood pressure and high cholesterol can be maintained in a pandemic period.

Pressures

The second major factor which may be contributing to the national excess deaths figures is the waiting time to be seen in an emergency – the result of acute pressures on the NHS. Added to the increased risk of heart attack and stroke is the risk of not being seen in a timely manner when that particular medical emergency strikes.

Speaking on 12 January Dr Adrian Boyle, President of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine (RCEM), said: “December’s performance figures are truly shocking, more than 50 per cent of all patients facing waits over four hours and nearly 55,000 patients facing 12-hour waits



Workers

Nurses on the picket line outside University College

from the decision to admit. 12-hour waits from decision to admit obfuscate the truth and are only the tip of the iceberg, we know the reality is far worse. We know that the scale of long-waiting times for Emergency Care is causing harm to patients and is associated with patient deaths.”

The reason that the RCEM uses the phrase the “tip of the iceberg” is that the current 12-hour performance figures published by NHS England are measured from

We need to ask why – and recognise that there is no
 rary...

Deaths' – and their cause



at the Hospital, London, on 18 January.

when the decision to admit the patient was made rather than their time of arrival at the Emergency Department. Although data on time of arrival is collected throughout England, there has been no indication of when this data will be published.

In their effort to better understand these long waits masked by the decision to admit metric, the RCEM submits monthly Freedom of Information requests to NHS England and NHS Digital in its campaign on the extent of extremely long stays in

emergency departments in England.

Focusing on the shortcomings of the NHS as a cause of rising deaths could obscure other, more fundamental, problems. The health of a nation does not rely on its health service – rather it relies on good nutrition, good housing and so on. Poverty is the big killer and there is clear evidence to link life expectancy to it.

Data from the Office for National Statistics show that men born in the poorest areas of England and Wales are now

expected to live almost 10 years less (73.5 years in the period 2018 to 2020) than those in the richest areas (83.2 years), and women eight years less (78.3 versus 86.3).

When the Health Foundation published a major new study into health inequalities in 2022 its director, Jo Bibby, commented:

“The NHS wasn’t set up to carry the burden of policy failings in other parts of society. A healthy, thriving society must have all the right building blocks in place, including good quality jobs, housing and education. Without these, people face shorter lives, in poorer health. This has a big economic impact, with many older workers now leaving the labour market due to ill-health.”

The study found that a 60-year-old woman in the poorest areas of England has a level of “diagnosed illness” equivalent to that of a 76-year-old woman in the wealthiest areas, according to new research by the Health Foundation. For 60-year old men in those areas it was not quite as bad: the equivalent was to a 70 year-old in the wealthiest areas.

The squeeze on real incomes has pushed more people into those “poorest” groups with the consequence of increasing sickness at an earlier age.

Behind the “excess deaths” headline is a chain of causes – first, poverty causing greater ill health. Add to this serious ill health not being detected and treated. And then when an emergency occurs, there can be life-threatening delays in treatment.

NHS action

Industrial action by NHS staff has brought the problem out in the open and into the public domain for at least one of the steps contributing to excess deaths – the delays in emergency treatment.

The action of staff in different parts of the service was originally over a pay dispute. But it has given them a platform to discuss and explain the patient safety issues which are daily occurrences. One of the greatest ironies of the paramedic dispute is that the safety measures staff have negotiated have actually made it easier for the service to prioritise life-threatening cases during strike days compared with non-strike days. ■

Devolution is a threat to workers across England, as well as breaking up Britain into competing regions...

The dangerous drive to c



Julius via Wikimedia (CC BY-SA 3.0)

Extra layers: Manchester has a fine town hall, but the mayor and combined authority have separate offices nearby.

THE NORTH EAST of England is the current target in the government's rush to divide and regionalise Britain. Given their abject failure to govern the country they must think the time is ripe to impose what the people of the region refused when asked in a referendum in 2004.

The lure of "levelling up" funding is similar to the ten previous devolution deals in England. The new authority will take a range of powers from existing combined authorities and central government.

This deal will cover Tyne and Wear, Northumberland and County Durham and will have a directly elected mayor. In

exchange the government will provide funding and will allow the new body to borrow and sell assets – all subject to Treasury control.

The extra layer of government will be responsible for aspects of housing and regeneration as well as education skills and training. It will take over the transport executive for Tyne and Wear, but not other areas, and will be able to create a local transport plan and award bus franchises.

The new authority will have to reach agreement with councils in the area and Northumberland National Park on other

matters remaining within their responsibility. This patchwork of powers was negotiated in private with the existing council and authorities in the same way as the previous deals.

Following on from the February 2022 Levelling Up White Paper, at least six other regions, including York and North Yorkshire, East Midlands, Norfolk and Suffolk, are promised devolution deals. Not wanting to miss the bandwagon, other areas such as Essex are scrambling to join in. And Cornwall wants to upgrade its current deal to gain an elected mayor.

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is the arm of government promoting devolution, backed by the Treasury. In every case the inducement is purported additional funding for housing, transport and adult education.

Self-promotion

The mantra is always "local people know best what their area needs". A democratic-sounding slogan; in reality "local people" means civic leaders eager for self-promotion. And the headline funding tends to be reallocation rather than new money.

The government says that devolution deals will not be confirmed without local consultation. But that assurance lacks clarity about the way the consultation will be carried out or what happens if the outcome is against the deal.

Remembering what happened in the 2004 referendum in the North East, neither the government nor the regional politicians really want to ask the populace what they think.

Despite the best efforts of politicians, the church, union leaders, the local press, and local celebrities, the people of the North East rejected the proposal overwhelmingly by 696,000 to 197,000. They were suspicious about imposition of a further tier of government, and unconvinced of any financial benefit or improvement in areas that really mattered – de-industrialisation, unemployment, loss of skills.

Predicted savings with one unified authority were based on a fallacy – they did not take into account the cost of transition, redundancies, new IT systems and buildings and so on, estimated at over

as in Wales and Scotland, with the government bent on

devolution

£440 million. This disingenuous approach had been evident in previous local government reorganisations. The people of the North East smelt a rat and kicked the proposal and its sleight of hand accounting into touch.

The current round of devolution does not even pretend to make savings by abolishing councils – they might object. Instead deals are tied in to the spreading web of funding powers and responsibilities.

Unaccountable

This does not bring government closer; instead it distances people from where decisions are made. A directly elected mayor sitting at the centre of this web is not in practice accountable to the electorate. People living in London and the other cities with mayoral combined authorities will testify to that.

Mayoral power is centralised in one person. Celebrity syndrome and dictatorial attitudes grow, and the opportunities for corruption increase. It is easier for disgruntled citizens to unnerve and change the mind of a disparate body of councillors.

Need

The government renamed the department responsible for housing and local government the “Levelling Up” department. Workers across Britain see the need to stop the decline across the whole country (not just northern England) without the patronising renaming of a government department.

Trumpeting the aim of reducing imbalances across the country, the new department has set about accelerating the break up of Britain. In practice, all

“Levelling Up” amounts to is ever more direct government control of local affairs, enabled by obliging, opportunistic and zealous local bureaucrats.

When asked, people generally oppose local government reform, knowing from experience that it will lead to higher costs and lower efficiency. But this juggernaut is rolling; people will have to stir themselves to oppose it. There are some indications this is already happening.

Court threat

In Norfolk, four councils are threatening to take the county council to court over its devolution ambitions. In Truro, protesters gathered outside Cornwall County Hall when the council deliberated whether to pursue devolution, but insisting no vote be taken. The protesters’ placards read, “Let the people decide.”

The council cites cost as a reason for rejecting a referendum. And in London some borough councils are resisting the Mayor’s plans for vast expansion of the ultra low emission zone.

The Labour Party offers no alternative viewpoint. While attacking this Conservative Levelling Up program, it proposes something identical dressed up as another slogan, “Take back control” – meaning the opposite.

In early December the Labour Party unveiled the report from its grand-sounding “Commission on the UK’s future”, headed by former prime minister Gordon Brown. Like the Conservative “Levelling Up” agenda, it pretends that the problem for areas suffering from unemployment and deindustrialisation is that “power, wealth and opportunity” are unevenly spread

‘They say deals will not be confirmed without local consultation. But there’s no clarity about how the consultations will be carried out...’

through the country. Of course Labour can blame “Westminster” because they are not currently in government.

So Keir Starmer, speaking on 5 January, pledged that “Massive devolution will be the centrepiece of Labour’s first legislative program in Government... We will spread control out of Westminster”. For that, read “The tentacles of Westminster will spread out ever further”.

Solution

The two parliamentary parties are as Tweedledum and Tweedledee on this question. Voting for, or against, either will not resolve it. Their solutions for decline amount only to more decline – unless you are on the devolution gravy train.

The only way to challenge the devolution bandwagon is for people to raise their voices and demand to be listened to – not ignored and patronised. That would reverberate. ■



CPBML online discussion meeting

Tuesday 14 March, 7 pm, via Zoom

“Don’t divide Britain: unity not devolution”

Discuss why attempts to break up the unity of Britain – through both separatism and regionalism – are an attack on the working class.

Email info@cpbml.org.uk for an invitation.

With strikes hitting levels not seen for three decades, our have been out and about to record the action...

Photographs from the front



Clockwise from top left: Ambulance workers picket outside the London Ambulance Service HQ, Waterloo, 10 February; Rally in Glasgow against proposed new anti-union laws, 1 February; Sign at teachers' rally, Manchester, 2 February; maths test, NEU march, Piccadilly Circus, London, 1 February; striking physiotherapists outside the Royal London Hospital, east London, 9 February.



The health benefits of open air sports have been known since the 18th century in Britain today...

Defending Britain's open spaces

NOT ONLY are open air sports healthy, they foster social cohesion too. The playing fields of Eton cemented ruling class solidarity. "Play up, and play the game", with its imperialist overtones, was the watchword of many a public school.

Industrial workers, knowing the importance of sticking together, applied communal ideas of team spirit and cooperation to their leisure time. In the mid-19th century sports, notably football, began to be played on proper pitches instead of waste ground.

The charity Fields in Trust (FiT) – now under the trusteeship of the National Playing Fields Association – was set up. It recognised that workers' children were in dire need of space to play. Parks and green spaces, playing fields and nature reserves, would need legal protection in perpetuity.

FiT stated its intention that "every man, woman and child in Great Britain should have the opportunity of participating in outdoor recreational activity within a reasonable distance of home during leisure hours".

Local authorities were urged to adopt a minimum standard of at least four acres for every thousand people, "for team games, tennis, bowls and children's playgrounds".

Later upgraded to the six acre standard, two acres being dedicated to children, this has provided the benchmark standard up to the present. It was updated in 2015 to include sustainability and the local environment.

Asset

Under the umbrella title Open Space, such land is recorded as a community asset, with devolved versions for Scotland and Wales. FiT also advises the Department for Education (DfE) on the disposal and change of use of playing fields and school land.

But children's sports fields on educational land are not recorded as Open Space. They do not have the same degree of protection. even though the DfE must approve such changes of use.

Despite protections and government assurances, many open spaces have been lost to speculative development such as housing. Hundreds of others remain under threat.

After the banking collapse of 2008, publicly owned assets worth tens of billions of



Photo courtesy G20 Youth Works.

Open spaces are not just about sports. A gardening tutorial at the Children's Meadow in Glasgow was part of the successful local campaign to secure such spaces.

pounds were irreversibly offloaded by councils to plug a widening hole in their budgets. Playing fields, football pitches, community centres, libraries, youth clubs and swimming pools were sold off.

Village greens, those quintessentially English grass sports and recreation areas since medieval times, were eyed up for development. The Commons Act of 2006 and the Growth and Infrastructure Act of 2013 recognised this threat to communities (even-handedly also the risk of devaluation to developers!).

These acts provided for a limited period during which people could register their town or village green or common land for protection, "before it goes the way of the pub and the Post Office" as campaigners warned. But land already earmarked for development could not be registered, and some local authorities missed the boat entirely.

In May last year the FiT green space index recorded a decline in provision, many areas have less space than the standard, particularly those prioritised under the

since ancient times, but they are under threat for children

n spaces



Law for the G20 Youth Group, just one outcome of

Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill going through parliament.

FiT found that whereas in 2014 three quarters of local authorities met the guidance, now only four out of eleven regions of Britain – Scotland, Wales, the South-East, and the East of England – met the six-acre standard.

Under capitalism the law is deceptive. It gives with one hand and takes with the other. The Localism Act of 2011 provided for “assets of community value” to be listed for preservation, backed up by the community

right to bid on the open market for assets not protected by local councils. In practice, however, sports fields bartered away do not have to be replaced with outdoor facilities, nor do they have to be rebuilt on the same site.

Physical inactivity is blamed for avoidable premature deaths and absence from work on sick leave. The London Playing Fields Foundation has invented a way to maximise community use of sports fields: its free of charge Green Hearts scheme, piloted in Brentford and Walthamstow, enables residents who are unable to take part in vigorous sport to gain the health benefits of walking or jogging along a designated path around playing fields. Provided, that is, the playing fields still exist.

Whatever the merits of alternative use, such as housing, it frequently to some degree entails a loss for working class families. And often the loss is imposed by stealth and corrupt practices. Too many local authorities take the easy way out, siding with government and developers while pretending to advance the interests of residents.

Pretext

For example, the former London and Midland Railway football club land in Crewe was once home to Crewe Villa, and many local leagues. When in 2021 the land was sold to “affordable housing” developer Guinness, it was on the pretext of ploughing back Section 106 compensation money into new facilities such as a park for the people of Crewe. Instead, presided over by Sport England, resources were diverted to neighbouring Middlewich.

Housing infill is another threat to green space. In November last year *The Guardian* described how council officers were seen scouring social housing estates for apparently unused patches of land, including playing areas and communal gardens, where blocks of flats could be built to relieve the pressure on bed and breakfast hostels.

In Lewisham and Brent, gardens had already been lost, and mature trees felled. In Southwark residents were told not to speak to the press: in effect, gagging orders were imposed.

Residents in Shrewsbury await the imminent decision of the Supreme Court regard-

‘Shrewsbury council ignored the legal right of residents to be consulted...’

ing the council’s sale of part of a recreation ground for luxury housing. Their council ignored the legal right of residents to be consulted. Furthermore it lied about the sale, describing the land as “adjacent to” the park, whereas deeds uncovered by a persistent resident show it to have always been part of the park.

The case has already been to judicial review. But the judge said public rights could not be enforced, despite the council being found to have acted unreasonably.

The failure to fund schools adequately has resulted in desperate measures to maintain the fabric of school buildings. Public land is sacrificed to developers to compensate for lack of income.

This is not a new phenomenon – the refusal of capitalism in Britain to properly fund the nation’s schools has inflicted enormous loss of land, including sports fields, since at least the 1980s. But a shambolic parliament since 2016 has sharpened the crisis.

When it was reported that the playing field sell-off had reached a 3-year high, Boris Johnson pledged tens of millions of pounds for new football pitches, as part of his “levelling up” policy. A sports field, he trumpeted, would never be more than 15 minutes away; a typically empty boast, it turned out.

Johnson was reacting to a report, just hours earlier, from the DfE, exposing the sale of 236 sites since 2010. In August the DfE admitted that since January 2015 the playing fields of 94 more schools had been sold. And that was not really news; the GMB union and others have previously highlighted the issue.

Campaigners can take heart. There have

Continued on page 16



Continued from page 15

been exemplary successes where local people have refused to be hoodwinked by monetarist arguments and decided to take control. The list includes: Stretford Public Hall, Manchester; public baths in Birmingham, Leeds and the Wirral; the Linskill education centre, North Shields; and Shotley Pier, Suffolk. When councils in Brighton and Eastbourne tried to flog off part of the South Downs they were forced to back down.

To judge by the passion with which people up and down the country defend their open spaces, calls for more housing no longer seem to carry weight. And maybe the great “affordable” housing con-trick may have had its day.

Among many ongoing campaigns to preserve “assets of community value” are struggles to save the Braunstone youth centre, Leicester; Victoria Park Lodge, Bristol; and Oundle Primary school playing-field.

The fight to save playing fields in Totnes, Devon, is instructive (see Box). One local parent told *Workers* “The very fact that schools are forced to sell off school land for housing in order to pay for a leaky roof is outrageous. The education secretary guide-

‘Workers are exposing the increasingly corporate and globalised theft of our land...’

Totnes vs the land grabbers

EVENTS AT the King Edward VI Community College (KEVICC) in Totnes demonstrate the need for scepticism when purely economic arguments are put forward. Reported in April 2022 on social media and in the Totnes press, the college governors proposed selling off around 14 acres – half its playing fields – to fund repairs and maintenance.

Devon County Council said that it would cost £3.9 million to make the college buildings safe. Governors cited the contentious concept of Best Value in support of flogging off school land for housing.

Alternative

Totnes town council put in a bid for the field, with an impressive list of alternative ideas to benefit the community, including a centre for sports. The deputy mayor described the school authorities as “locked into a set of private sector dreams and fantasies”, dispelling a number of myths about the financial competence and trustworthiness of developers (whose practices include land banking).

A petition of over 5,000 parents and local people in April 2022 showed overwhelming support (91 per cent) for the council, and passion for their locality.

Meanwhile, owners of the freehold, the Dart Valley Learning Trust, part of Education South West (ESW), remained ominously unresponsive. Both they and the administrative borough of Torbay had a vested financial interest.

The KEVICC governing body was diminished in size to a small clique, reportedly with no parent members. Its business advisor was also the college finance director: a stitch-up was feared. Undisclosed to the community, they were

in fact changing their articles of association, possibly in contravention of their own rules, in order to downgrade their obligations.

On 1 August 2022, in the middle of the campaign, the College became an Academy. An occupation of the school buildings took place on 15 December, to demonstrate alternatives to powerlessness, but bailiffs quickly intervened.



Dean Clarke/shutterstock.com

Football needs local pitches for games and practice.

It is now the impact on health that remains Totnes’s strongest argument. New housing entails considerable extra traffic and pollution. The A385, which runs alongside, is a designated Air Quality Management Area, due to excessive nitrogen dioxide levels. It is used by children to walk to school.

A victory appears to be on the distant horizon. Campaigners were advised that ESW was not free to sell off land or buildings for private development. The DfE also raised hopes, saying: “No consent to any disposal of land has been granted at this time. s” The Registrar of Companies House agreed to stop dissolution until a court hearing on 6 June 2023. Until then Totnes will not be resting on its laurels. ■

lines for schools to get “best value” for land, translates as sale to the highest bidder...”

Big fights, little fights, a big victory here, a small victory there – all defensive, but all significant. Workers are exposing the increasingly corporate and globalised theft

of our land, and the machinations of local vested interests. Don’t look to politicians in parliament or councils: subservient to capital, their interests are not the people’s. In the words of the Woody Guthrie song, “this land is your land”. ■

CPBML MAY DAY MEETINGS 2023

WORKERS! TAKE CHARGE OF BRITAIN!

Celebrate International Workers' Day 2023 at the CPBML's May Day meetings.

Workers of all lands, unite!

On May Day we take stock of Britain and the world. In the past year, many British workers have joined battle with the employers, showing discipline, unity and tactical ingenuity. The class as a whole is strengthened. How, then, to move forward?

In the world, war and the threat of war gather pace as the various imperialisms re-arm. Now Britain is out of the EU, the fight to leave NATO, the US and EU's military wing, must be taken forward.

The meetings will be the launch of a new document from the party, the Foundations of the CPBML, setting out what we stand for in 2023.

**Workers of all lands, unite!
Fight for independence!**



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Clean water and effective waste disposal are essential for companies regularly dump sewage into watercourses...

Dirty water – no good for



Workers

Seaford, East Sussex, residents called a protest this year against Southern Water's dumping of untreated sewage into rivers and the sea.

WATER COMPANIES tried to blame climate change for water shortages last summer, rather than their lack of investment and too many leakages. But they are failing badly on water quality too – and that certainly is in their control.

Raw sewage is all too often discharged into our rivers and coastal waters. In 2021, the Environment Agency recorded over 2.6 million hours of sewage spills in England and Wales – 25 times more than in 2016. It was even worse in 2022.

Local communities and other groups have been active in tracking these failures – with little effective response from the companies or the regulator, Ofwat. The government has an Environmental Improvement Plan, with “improving nature” as the top priority, but little idea on what to do about sewage spills – or much else either.

For example, on 12 January, environmental campaigners Surfers Against Sewage (SAS) flagged over 70 sites where sewage had been released within the previous 48 hours.

An SAS spokesperson said, “...regulation only permits sewage overflows to operate in ‘unusually heavy rainfall’. Yet, the government admitted sewage overflows ‘are being used significantly beyond their original purpose’. It is a blatant and outrageous disregard for our blue spaces.”

Crumbling

SAS alone exposed over 140 potentially illegal instances last year of water companies discharging sewage when there was no rain. They said Ofwat is “...allowing water companies to persistently exploit a public good for their private profit. Ofwat

stands by as they let infrastructure crumble and let our waterways die.”

As Dr Ruth Tingay, director of the nature conservation campaign group Wild Justice, said, “We are particularly concerned that a continued lack of action on Ofwat’s part will lead to a collapse in biodiversity, both within rivers and coastal waters, and, as a knock-on effect, in the areas surrounding those waters. This will be disastrous for nature conservation generally and wildlife in particular.”

After growing pressure, Thames Water, England’s biggest privatised water firm, created what it calls a “near real-time” interactive map showing the scale of its sewage dumping in inland waterways through storm overflows.

And that scale is vast, evidenced by regular reports of lengthy sewage dis-

a civilised society. Yet regulation is lax, and water

fish, no good for people

charges into water courses, even at times of low rainfall.

Dee O’Connell, of London Waterkeeper – which has been calling on Thames Water to provide real-time data on sewage releases, told *The Guardian* newspaper, “...this is important because it gives communities information and enables them to put pressure on the company to invest in local areas to stop this. With this knowledge people can hold the water company to account.”

After privatisation in 1989, the water companies were sold on periodically to new owners, initially to other utility companies, but later to consortiums of banks and private equity and sovereign wealth funds. These new proprietors were interested in cash flow, not water flow, in financial engineering, not hydraulic engineering. They were distant and unaccountable.

Tax free

In the ten years after Australian investment bank Macquarie bought Thames Water, it paid itself and fellow investors £1.6 billion in dividends. It loaded Thames with £10.6 billion debt, and paid exactly no UK corporation tax.

Over half the shares in Thames Water are now owned by a selection of overseas companies, including a Canadian pension fund, a Chinese sovereign wealth fund, and the Queensland Investment Corporation.

Between 1989 and 2018, the English water companies paid out £56 billion in dividends to shareholders. Three of them, Severn Trent, Yorkshire and Anglian, paid out more in dividends in the ten years to 2017 than their pre-tax profit totals. These companies became licences to print money.

Debt

And under the current financial structures, the water companies are now heavily indebted – adding high interest payments to their outgoings and leaving even less for improvements and investment.

In its last year under Macquarie’s control, Thames had to pay a record £20.3 million in fines and costs for dumping raw sewage. In 2018, Thames lost 645.6 million litres a day from leaks. In 2020, that figure

was still sky high, at 543 million litres – nearly a fifth of the water entering its pipes.

In 2006, Thames announced a plan to build a new reservoir south west of Abingdon. But it’s taking its time about it. The company’s latest plans are for the reservoir to be on stream by 2037.

Fined

In July 2021, Southern Water was fined £90 million for repeatedly, deliberately and illegally dumping millions of litres of untreated sewage into the sea and rivers over several years.

At privatisation, the government did not give the regulator, Ofwat, powers to prevent all this. In fact, the government gave the companies veto powers over any changes to the terms of a company’s licence.

And *The Sunday Times* reported on 13 February that Defra is about to open consultations that would give the water companies the opportunity of pushing back on increased fines. The government apparently fears that it would frighten off “investors” – like the ones who have already taken so much out of the industry.

The Environment Agency has never used its civil powers to fine polluting companies. Apparently it does not use current powers because the limit is too low to affect what the companies do.

But EA chairman Alan Lovell spoke out against the government’s reported wish to increase the limit for those powers from £250,000 to £250 million – describing that as more than what is needed. But as Ashley Smith of Windrush Against Sewage Pollution, pointed out, “The upper limit of £250 million does not prevent the penalty being applied at a lower level.”

Ofwat’s first director-general, Sir Ian Byatt, wrote – long after he had retired – “Customers have been overcharged; dividends have been excessive.” He wrote of Thames Water, “Nearly everyone on the board are investors and one cannot resist the idea that they are more concerned with money than with serving the public.”

Corporations by legal definition, that is, by design, are anti-social beings. The corporation’s legally defined mandate is to pursue, relentlessly and without exception,

‘The Environment Agency has never used its civil powers to fine companies.’

its own self-interest, regardless of the often harmful consequences it might cause to others. As a result, left to their own devices, shareholders will enrich themselves and let society go hang.

Underspent

Ofwat warned in December that the water companies are not investing as much as they pledged to improve sewage treatment and reduce spills. Between 2020 and 2022, 14 companies underspent their budget for improving their water network, and eight underspent their budget for improving their wastewater network.

Yorkshire Water spent just 20 per cent of its wastewater enhancement allowance. The main areas of underspending were drought resilience, improvements to sewage treatment works, improvements to storm tank capacity, and reducing spill frequency.

Scottish Water was not privatised, but its performance and that of the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency is deteriorating too. Though its problems aren’t due to excessive dividends, it bears a heavy cost from interest payments on debts from earlier PFI contracts.

While the Scottish agency does try to blame excessive sewage discharge on climate change, its evidence for that linkage is scanty. As with England and Wales, the infrastructure is not up to the job.

The theft and waste of public resources, the continued fleecing of the public, the lack of research and development, of investment, of improvement, are a major scandal. Of course, the question is why we put up with it. ■

Britain's coronavirus vaccine taskforce was successful, but thwarted its aim for future resilience...

How the vaccines were



Alexey Fedorenko/Shutterstock

Vaccination centre, South Kensington, London, 2021.

The long shot: the inside story of the race to vaccinate Britain, by Kate Bingham & Tim Hames, hardback, 326 pages, ISBN 978-0861545643, Oneworld Publications, 2022, £18.99. Kindle and eBook editions available.

THIS IS the story of how public and private sector bodies worked together to produce the vaccines that saved so many lives. A vaccine was “the only reliable long-term route by which Britain and the wider world could be saved from the horrors of deaths and lockdowns.” But as the authors say, “no vaccine had ever been successfully developed to combat any human coronavirus. Ever.”

On 6 May, Boris Johnson told Kate Bingham that the Vaccine Taskforce (VTF) she was to lead had three objectives – to secure vaccines for the UK, to ensure vaccines would be distributed equitably around the world, and to make the UK more resilient for the next time.

Bingham writes of this second goal, “This was immensely important to me, not just because it had been made a VTF goal.

Morally and practically, I could not see how we could truly bring the Covid-19 crisis to an end and be confident that it would not flare up again later without a genuinely global vaccine campaign.”

Bingham says there was far too much “vaccine nationalism”. For example, the USA’s Food and Drug Administration suspended an AstraZeneca trial for two months after an adverse reaction was suspected in one participant. When a US company’s trial had the same experience, the FDA suspended its trial for just one week.

France’s President Macron suggested that the vaccine did not work on the elderly. German Chancellor Merkel agreed, saying that she wouldn’t take the AstraZeneca vaccine. As the authors note, “Not content with claiming that the vaccine didn’t work, the EU leaders then alleged breach of contract in early 2021 and sued AstraZeneca for non-delivery of the vaccine.”

“Consistency didn’t seem to trouble the EU. The consequence was that 1.4 million doses were left unused in Germany when thousands of people were dying in early 2021... There is no doubt that politically

motivated and ignorant comments, amplified by hysterical headlines in the media, slowed the vaccine roll-out on the continent and cost lives.”

On 9 November 2020, BioNTech and Pfizer announced that their vaccine was more than 95 per cent effective. 43,000 people in six countries had taken part in their Phase 3 trial, so this was a stunning and unambiguous result. It took 266 days from the moment that the Pfizer CEO had taken on the task of finding the vaccine to its first approved injection.

By 1 March 2021, Britain had vaccinated 35 per cent of its adults, including nearly all in the most vulnerable groups, while the EU was stuck on 7 per cent and struggling for supplies because it had not placed orders in time. By June, 82 per cent of British adults had received one dose, and 60 per cent had received two doses.

Sir Jeremy Farrar, Director of the Wellcome Trust, had strongly favoured a pan-European vaccine policy, but later graciously wrote, “While I was initially disappointed that the UK had opted out of the European Union procurement scheme, the UK’s Vaccine Taskforce [VTF], led by Kate Bingham, has been one of the standout successes of the country’s pandemic response. While I don’t like saying it, it was the best possible example of British exceptionalism approaching a challenge with a mixture of urgency, risk-taking and pragmatism...”

By the end of 2021, AstraZeneca produced the most doses globally of any vaccine. It supplied two billion doses to 178 countries within a year of first approval. It was sold on a non-profit basis, so it was given to those who needed it around the world.

Contracts

In July 2022 *The Economist* noted that “Covid vaccines saved around 20 million lives in their first year...those produced by AstraZeneca-Oxford and Pfizer BioNTech... accounted for more than half the lives saved by vaccines.” Bingham notes, “These were the first two contracts we signed for the UK.”

The arrival of the Omicron variant did not make the vaccines ineffective. In early 2022, society was reopened and infection rates soared; the number of deaths did

ut government has

delivered

“It was the best example of approaching a challenge with a mixture of urgency, risk-taking and pragmatism...”

not escalate similarly.

But Bingham’s third goal – making us more resilient for the next pandemic – was not achieved. The VTF had planned an advertising campaign to support a large-scale push for people to sign up to the NHS Covid19 Vaccine Research Registry, through which the public could show their willingness to participate in clinical trials of vaccines. But the Cabinet Office blocked the necessary spending from the VTF’s budget.

No backing

The VTF was unable to achieve its goal to build permanent pandemic capabilities in Britain. It did not get government backing for an industry partnership to build bulk antibody manufacturing capacity, despite significant interest from several companies to build new facilities.

The VTF had invested £5 million to support training people in North East England in specialist skills needed to manufacture advanced therapies and vaccines – but that was wasted without new facilities.

As a result Britain does not have a secure supply of bulk antibodies. Without this capability, our ability to cope with future pandemics is seriously weakened.

The government has sold the Vaccine Manufacturing and Innovation Centre to the US company Catalent, as reported in *Workers* previously. But that facility now looks unlikely to provide the range of scaled-up manufacturing capabilities and development resources needed to explore new vaccines. ■



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Employers have always tried to make strikes illegal and ineffective of workers stood up to intimidation in the middle of war...

1942: Betteshanger Colliery

WHENEVER WORKERS take effective action to defend wages and conditions, as they are now, employers look to hamper and thwart them. Aided by the state, the threat of legal action and banning strikes is never far behind the employers' universal cry of being unable to afford pay rises.

Trade unions were born and grew in conditions of illegality. Today, unions face innumerable obstacles to industrial action, and yet they fight. One remarkable example, the 1942 strike at Betteshanger colliery in Kent at the height of the second world war, shows that legislation does not prevent industrial conflict.

Betteshanger, the largest mine in the Kent coalfield, was opened in 1927. Deal, a small seaside town, was never going to supply the 1,500 or so miners the huge pit required. Instead they came from other parts of Britain, some from exhausted coalfields, and many who were blacklisted in their own areas because of their union activity during the 1926 General Strike.

Illegal

Wartime legislation sought to outlaw anything which impeded maximum production – including coal mining as the key source of energy for industry. Most notably Order 1305 declared strikes illegal if not submitted to a National Arbitration Panel within 21 days.

The owners of the colliery opened up a new coalface, No 2 Face, in November 1941. The new face was more challenging and far less productive than the existing Eastern Face. The seam was at times only 2 feet high, requiring men to work on their knees. Equipment had to be constantly repaired, further eating into production time.

Consequently the miners were unable to meet the previously agreed and

achieved quotas. The management accused the men of operating a go-slow. They refused to acknowledge the difficulties in the new seam and ignored the men's grievances over reductions in pay.

Management sent for an arbitrator, who declared the target for No 2 Face was achievable. The miners disputed his finding, pointing out, among other things, that he could hardly have done a thorough inspection – as he had fainted almost as soon as he entered the pit, and was then brought out.

Nevertheless the owners insisted they would pay only piecework rates for coal produced. This incensed the miners as it went against an industry-wide agreement that guaranteed a minimum wage. The severely reduced wages were imposed on 8 January 1942. The men struck the following day.

The importance of the colliery for war production meant the strike attracted much press attention. Mostly unfavourable, newspapers echoed the company's declaration that the miners were unpatriotic for disrupting the war effort.

Angered

This angered the miners further. They had maintained production while being on the front line of bombing raids from Germany, even when the mine buildings themselves were hit. And many of them were volunteering for ancillary roles, such as air raid wardens, after their shifts ended. Some wondered why the owners had closed a productive seam for one difficult to work.

The government decided to prosecute the striking men. A trial was arranged at Canterbury to begin on 23 January. If this display of legal authority was meant to cow the men it had the opposite effect. They marched to the court with their wives and children and bands playing.

At the trial, the three branch officials involved faced civil charges for breach of contract as well as criminal charges relating to Order 1305. The civil charges came first, focusing heavily on the alleged lack of patriotism. But before the case against this trumped up charge could be made, the prosecution dropped it, robbing the miners of an opportunity to respond.



David Anstiss via Geograph (CC BY-SA 2.0)

The Waiting Miner statue commemorates the 1942 strike at Betteshanger Colliery, now sited near Betteshanger, on the approach to Deal.

The criminal case concentrated on the legal nicety of whether 21 days' notice had been given – and not the cause of the dispute. Unsurprisingly the officials were found guilty and sentenced to prison – one of them for two months and the two others for one month.

The 35 men working on No 2 Face were fined £2, and over a thousand others were fined £1 for supporting them. All faced imprisonment if the fines were not paid.

The strike had taken a heavy toll on the miners and their families, deprived of wages and with their subsidised coal withdrawn despite the coldness of that winter. But the trial had reinforced their sense of injustice.

The men took another vote and decided that the strike would continue. Other Kent pits staged sympathy strikes. The government rapidly capitulated, fearing further disruption in the industry and beyond. Farcically, it found itself having to negotiate with the branch officials detained

‘Prosecution did not cow the men, quite the opposite...’

fective. One group

ierery



work and sacrifices made by Kent miners. It is the Kent Mining Museum.

in Maidstone Prison!

As a result the mine owners were forced to restore previously agreed wage rates and to submit the issue of slow working to an adjudicator. With their original demands met in full the men returned to work on 29 January.

Released

As a final humiliation for the authorities fearful of further unrest, the three imprisoned men were released by royal pardon, and with only nine fines having been paid, all fines were remitted.

No one else was imprisoned for breaching Order 1305 during the war. Repealed in 1951, six years after the end of the war, the Order did not stop disputes – despite adding the weight of law behind employers.

Betteshanger colliery is no more. The last pit in Kent, it closed in 1989, but the memory of the defiance of those men and their families in their fight for justice will never be erased. ■

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Worried about the future of Britain? Join the CPBML.



ABOUT US

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sign up for our free email newsletter – the sign up button is on the right-hand side of our pages at cpbml.org.uk.

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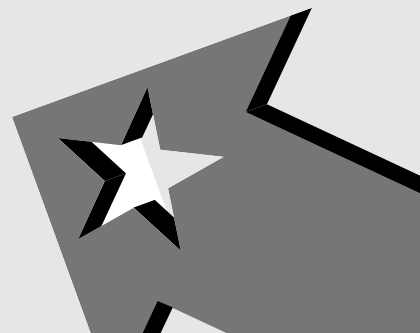
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The political economy of taking control

'For the owners of capital, their version of politics says they must boost their profits – extracted from labour – by using inflationary price hikes as a weapon...'

EVER SINCE the crash of 2008 successive governments have relied on a strategy of increasing the money supply through quantitative easing. Unnoticed by many, this has occurred with barely any discernible improvement in British productivity.

In the 25 years or so before the crash productivity grew at an average rate of 2.3 per cent a year. In the 15 years or so since the crash it has been growing at 0.5 per cent per year. Blink and you might not see any growth at all.

Last September, the National Institute of Economic and Social Research reported that this slowdown was “unparalleled in the period of the country’s economic history for which we have decent measures” – in other words, since the mid-18th century.

This imbalance between a huge increase in circulating money and credit on the one hand and static productivity on the other is the main cause of the current inflation. We now have a price bubble created by politicians made even worse by sanctions against Russia over Ukraine that are ramping up energy costs.

There are other strands to pull together to help make sense of what is happening in Britain today. For example, the labour time necessary to produce most commodities – such as cars, or computers, or houses – has fallen in the past 25 years. Yet despite technological innovations the rate of profit of British companies has fallen by more than 30 per cent since 1997.

The class in power, the owners of capital, understand the threat these seemingly contradictory changes pose to its way of life. So their version of politics says they must boost their profits – extracted from labour – by using inflationary price hikes as a weapon to impose all-round real-term wage cuts.

Clearly, demands by workers for a pay rise run counter to this type of political thinking. And just as clearly, these demands have both a political and economic aspect.

Britain’s economy has long-term contradictory trends emerging wholly independent of the will of those who think they run it. In turn this raises the question of control. It’s a question that inevitably acts as a spur for

workers to come forward with valuable discussions of their own.

There are no easy answers, no sound bite solutions. But if workers are to take the bull by the horns the challenge is not simply about wages alone: it is inherently political.

Are the profits generated from labour power to be used as fresh capital for investment in Britain, and if so, how? It’s the only way we can survive and thrive as a country. And here workers must assert their own political legitimacy. The idea of allowing a ruling class to appropriate wealth from labour is worn out. They will blight another generation and waste the talents of the British people.

All this is implicit when British workers say “Enough is enough” – a phrase which in a few words expresses an assertiveness wholly separate from and independent of the will of those who currently run the economy.

We are one working class. The various struggles for decent wages have sidelined the trumpeters of diversity who seek to split and weaken us. Small wonder that we now see the opponents of working class unity once more shifting their focus back to devolutionary notions which seek to divide the British working class into contending regional tribes.

Society becomes unhinged when like now there is a mismatch between the price and the value of products. What the working class needs is balanced, proportionate development where money and commercial credit are backed by the real value of goods produced in Britain, and where fresh capital generated from labour power is used to develop our economy.

This is the complete opposite to the way Britain’s political economy is currently run. At present once wages are paid, the greater value extracted from labour power goes to private rather than to our collective interests.

With struggle as their teacher, workers are once more establishing themselves as an independent class movement with the potential to pursue their own political economy. To the extent that this is happening, the working class is re-emerging as the decisive weight in the politics of Britain. ■

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