

# WORKERS

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## CREATING A CRISIS TO PUSH FOR FREE MOVEMENT

**WALES** Forced federalism

**STATS** Who's counting?

**FREE SPEECH** Under attack

**COP26** Strike wave

**FISH** No Brexit dividend

*plus* News, Book

**HOUSING** Buy-to-let ruin

Review, Historic

**MONOPOLIES** A new path

Notes and more

# WORKERS



## Who wants this forced federalism?

THE WELSH government, led by Labour, has announced what it calls an “Independent Constitutional Commission”. Labour’s manifesto for the Senedd (Welsh parliament) election earlier this year supported “far-reaching federalism”, and First Minister Mark Drakeford has previously referred to “home rule” and wants more devolved powers.

The commission will be co-chaired by Professor Laura McAllister and Dr Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury. It is not clear how McAllister can be considered an independent chair, given that she has written for pro-Labour *WalesOnline* and that she once stood as a candidate for the Welsh nationalist Plaid Cymru party.

The announcement came at a time when across Britain – wherever you live – there is a huge consensus that the two most important issues for the population at the moment are the questions of health and the economy. Constitutional arrangements do not even register in the list of issues raised by the public.

Yet McAllister says, “We’ll think boldly and radically about all potential options for the future of Wales, in the context of the increasing pressure on the Union.” Williams said, “We want to make sure that the governance of Wales is effective, accountable and imaginative, and look forward to hearing what hopes and visions are animating people around the country.”

It seems there is a determined attempt by the

Labour Party to make an issue of the constitutional arrangements of the UK and of different ways of fragmenting the country – something it has already done to itself.

The Labour Party is itself divided into three elements: a UK Labour Party, Scottish Labour and Welsh Labour. The UK Labour Party has already said it will set up a UK-wide constitutional commission, a call which Welsh Labour is supporting. Now Welsh Labour sets up its own commission. Fragmentation within the fragmentation.

At the Senedd elections in May 2021 Plaid Cymru stood on a platform of Welsh independence. It gained only 20.5 per cent of the vote. So the vote rejected independence.

That did not stop McAllister announcing that the commission will look at independence as an option, on the basis that it is going to examine “all progressive options to strengthen Welsh democracy”.

So according to Welsh Labour separatism is now a “progressive option”, and the vote in May’s election is to be overruled. Plaid Cymru has welcomed the commission – no surprise there.

What matters now is how the people of Wales react to the commission. Will they ignore it? Will there be weary resignation? Or will there be a growing sense of anger that there is money for a commission which overrules democratic decisions they have taken, while the real priorities of health and employment are neglected. ■

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Workers



## Strike wave greets COP26

ROAD CLOSURES and police cordons reminded people in Glasgow of the reality of hosting the city's biggest ever gathering, the COP26 climate conference. At the same time disputes between workers and the SNP-led city council and the wider SNP-Scottish Greens coalition were reaching boiling point, threatening to disrupt proceedings in a city already struggling to save its reputation from litter strewn streets and soaring drug related deaths.

The RMT union has persisted in its long running campaign for better wages and conditions. With over 30 Sunday strikes since March, momentum has grown. In a mid October ballot of over 2,000 members across all grades, 84 per cent voted in favour of industrial action between 1 and 12 November during COP26.

With the lack of hotel accommodation in the city some visiting delegations are having to stay as far away as Newcastle. The absence of trains would add to the difficulties of attending, on already clogged roads. Strike action by Unite union members is also scheduled after around 1,000 workers in the Stagecoach Group voted to support it. This would affect bus travel in central Scotland.

GMB union members in Glasgow also voted overwhelmingly (96.9 per cent of returned ballots) to strike from 1 November. Over 1,500 workers in Glasgow City Council cleansing, refuse collection, school catering and janitorial jobs are involved in this Scotland-wide pay dispute. Chris Mitchell, GMB Cleansing Convenor in Glasgow, had a clear message for the Scottish Government and local councils: "We were called Covid heroes and essential workers. This is when low-paid workers take a stand against [the councils] and say enough is enough, because these heroes deserve a pay rise. Stand with us, not against us." ■

## TUITION FEES

### Scrap them, says UCU

AHEAD OF the Spending Review, the University and College Union (UCU) has written to Secretary of State for Education Nadhim Zahawi warning against plans to lower the salary threshold for repaying student loans, currently £1,657 a month.

The Treasury is said to be looking to reduce its exposure to the £141 billion of student debt. Now is the time, UCU says, to move away from the tuition fee system and towards a public funding model.

The union argues that the tuition fee reductions proposed in the Augar Review of post-18 education would represent the "worst of all worlds", leaving students still graduating with "significant debt" while causing institutional income to fall, affecting the quality of courses on offer.

The union is also demanding that the government does not extend the debt burden onto students in further education through its Lifetime Skills Guarantee. The system, based on loans and debt will, the union says, deter those wishing to gain new skills and retrain. ■

## 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](http://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](mailto:workers@cpbml.org.uk)



**ON THE WEB**

A selection of additional stories at [cpbml.org.uk](http://cpbml.org.uk)

**Union and employers attack relaxation of restrictions on foreign hauliers**

The government is to allow foreign HGV drivers entering the country with a load from abroad unlimited licence to spend two weeks collecting and delivering goods before they return.

**Just six months left to save ScotRail, say unions**

Four trade unions came together to demonstrate in Edinburgh. Their message: that there are just six months left to save ScotRail.

**Walkout at Stagecoach South West averted as union receives new offer**

Stagecoach bus workers in the South West suspended planned action so that they could consider a new offer.

**Refinery workers vote for action on pay and pensions**

Essar picked a dispute at Stanlow refinery during the petrol panic, trying to go back on a pay deal and worsen pensions – provoking a furious and united response.

**Still no plan for energy**

This government’s refusal to plan for Britain to be self-reliant in energy has produced a crisis.

**Plus: the e-newsletter**

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

Dr Neil Clifton/geograph.org.uk (CC BY-SA 2.0)



The Rolls-Royce factory in Barnoldswick, Lancashire.

**Barnoldswick fight goes on**

NATIONAL NEGOTIATIONS between the GMB, Unite and Rolls-Royce over the future of the Barnoldswick jet engine turbine plant are at a virtual standstill. The talks centre on implementing January’s Memorandum of Understanding – intended to secure the future of the plant.

A joint union statement at the end of September noted extensive discussions, but said that despite initial positive signs the unions had been unable to reach agreement with the company. The unions are clearly concerned that the company is being obstructive even though trading conditions have improved. Rolls-Royce is back in profit, and its planned sales have all gone through.

The statement added, “Furthermore, we have seen the reopening of international air space and transatlantic routes which will deliver an increase in our engine flying hours.”

These developments, say unions, are reinforcing the sentiments expressed by the Rolls workforce in a nationwide ballot in August that they will not settle for any cuts to pay, and contradict the “company narrative that it will have no money to invest in its future unless the workforce pays for it”.

In August, 19 engineers at the plant went on strike after the company refused to provide “tangible commitments to new work” or to suspend work being sent elsewhere – something the union says is taking place at an accelerated rate. ■

**UNIVERSITIES**

**Pay and pensions ballots**

THE UNIVERSITY and College Union has begun balloting its members in universities over action on pensions and pay, in two separate ballots.

The first is over cuts to the Universities Superannuation Scheme pensions, the second over declining pay, the use of insecure contracts in the sector, unsafe workloads and serious equality failings.

The union warned employers that they have until 4 November (when the ballots close) to come to the table with improvements. And it is making extensive use of texting and social media to ensure the required 50 per cent turnout is achieved

in each institution.

The ballot over pensions comes after the employer body, Universities UK, voted in August for what amounts to a cut of 35 per cent to a typical member’s annual guaranteed pension and guaranteed lump sum – already worse off from changes made to the scheme between 2011 and 2019.

Pay for university staff fell by 17.6 per cent relative to inflation between 2009 and 2019. Since then employers have made further below-inflation offers, despite university income from tuition fees growing by a third in the past five years.

The latest pay offer from the University and Colleges Employers Association was just 1.5 per cent, a red rag to a bull after the monumental efforts of staff during the pandemic. ■

## NURSERY FUNDING

### Stop cuts, say staff

“STOP CUTS to nursery school funding” demanded the lead banner, as over 200 nursery school staff marched from Parliament Square to Downing Street on Tuesday 19 October.

They were carrying a 2,300-signature petition in advance of the budget, calling for secure and long-term funding for the sector.

Maintained (state) nursery schools, employing specialist early years teachers, are acknowledged as the gold standard for the education of the under-fives. They have been living a hand to mouth existence in recent years and have suffered particularly badly during the pandemic.

Organised by the National Association of Head Teachers and supported by teaching unions and early years staff, the petition was signed by almost all maintained nursery schools in the country. ■



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## Swiss nursing referendum

THE SWISS Nurses' Association, backed by doctors and patients' organisations and the country's trade union confederation, has gathered sufficient support to force a national referendum on nurse training and pay and conditions. The referendum takes place on 28 November.

The first demand of the “strong nursing initiative”, as it is called, is for the government and cantons to train enough registered nurses in Switzerland to meet the country's nursing needs. If this demand were implemented, it would end the current reliance on staff trained in other countries.

Second, it says the profession needs to be properly valued, which would be achieved by the government guaranteeing appropriate working conditions and salary rates. According to an Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) health survey published in 2019, the pay of nurses compared to the average salary in Switzerland is one of the lowest amongst member countries.

The government has come up with a compromise solution, which it says it will implement if the vote goes against the initiative. It may be in for a shock: results of an opinion poll announced in the middle of October show 82 per cent in favour and just 11 per cent against.

Debate inspired by the referendum move has made the Swiss population much more aware that nursing shortage is global. The World Health Organization's first State of the World's Nursing report, published in 2020 but using data gathered before the Covid-19 pandemic, revealed a global shortfall of 5.9 million nurses.

Almost 90 per cent of these nurse shortages were in low- and lower-middle income countries (where Britain recruits thousands of nurses), with huge gaps in countries in Africa, South-East Asia and the eastern Mediterranean. If the study were to be repeated now the pandemic impact of nurse deaths and long Covid would make the shortfall even greater.

Relatively rich countries like Switzerland and Britain have never in modern times trained sufficient medical and nursing staff to meet their own needs. In Switzerland a staggering one-third of its nursing staff are foreign nationals. ■

• A longer version of this article is on the web at [www.cpbml.org.uk](http://www.cpbml.org.uk).

## WHAT'S ON

### Coming soon

CPBML public – physical – meetings are not currently taking place. But we are holding a series of online discussion meetings via Zoom. To keep up-to-date as things change, make sure you're signed up to receive our electronic newsletter.

#### NOVEMBER

Tuesday 9 November, 7pm

Discussion meeting (via Zoom)

“Energy security for independence”

What would it take for Britain to be sure that industry, services and the people can always have the energy they need? Is this essential, whatever the cost? You're welcome to take part or just listen in. Email [info@cpbml.org.uk](mailto:info@cpbml.org.uk) for an invitation and a link to the discussion.

#### JANUARY

Tuesday 11 January, 7pm

Discussion meeting (via Zoom)

“A working class needs modern industry”

Can a working class without real employment create progress?

## BRIGHTON BINS

### Drivers win victory

HGV DRIVERS on refuse, recycling and commercial waste lorries for Brighton Cityclean have won a dispute with Brighton and Hove council over unilaterally imposed daily changes to rounds, and the removal of drivers from long-standing rounds.

The drivers, members of the GMB, voted unanimously for action in a ballot, on a 79.6 per cent turnout, and the strike began on 5 October. The council, run by a minority Green group with Labour support, caved in.

After thirteen days, the drivers won pay increases, not only for themselves, but for other council staff, and an end to the round changes. A planned further round of strike action was called off.

The council's rubbish collection had been contracted out to the French-owned Sita group, but was brought back in house under the Cityclean name after strike action and an occupation of the depot in 2001.

Bin workers throughout the country kept working during the pandemic in difficult and dirty conditions, and often had to put up with poor equipment and a fleet of lorries prone to failures and breakdowns. ■

Increasingly, media ownership and a growing unwillingness to support a free press are threatening open debate for our class. It's an unwelcome

# Free speech and open d



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FREEDOM OF speech is a vital freedom, but it is under attack. The freedom to speak, write or broadcast, to express one's thoughts, even to state facts, cannot be taken for granted.

In one respect little has changed. Karl Marx noted in 1844 that civil rights, the rights of the individual, the atomised individual, are "completely destroyed" when they come into conflict with the political rights assumed by the state. That's always happened, and still does.

The state even has a formalised mechanism for restricting the press, the Defence and Security Media Advisory Committee, which tells British newspapers and broadcasters what they can and can't say. D-notices, as they are called, have been used several times to hide the extent of government monitoring of private communications, and associated collusion with the US.

And of course, capital, the private ownership of the means of mass communication, limits freedom of expression because it seeks to monopolise it and because the owners of mass media dislike attacks on the basis of capitalism.

### Exposed

Some newspapers do at times publish hugely important ideas or information. It was the *Daily Express* which in 1967 exposed government snooping on private communications, for example.

What's more, the right to say what you think of the behaviour of other persons – and in law across Britain that includes the behaviour of corporations – has always been limited by the laws of libel and slander. And money (or rather the lack of it) means that in general only the rich can go to court to pursue or defend a libel action.

The newer, social, media that enable

people to communicate directly with many other people are privately owned as well. Does that matter? Yes, it does, because they are accountable not to society but to their shareholders.

One of the most unaccountable is Facebook. It claims to have 42 million users in Britain, so it matters a lot.

A speaker in an online briefing held by the Association of British Science Writers this summer noted: "...Facebook's rules have become increasingly opaque, arbitrary, complex and as a result our reach over Facebook has declined dramatically, for reasons we can't control. Facebook already charges you to reach your own audience. Yet now promoted posts are frequently blocked due to policy violations.

"We can't see what these violations might be. We can't appeal without risking account suspension, and if you appeal this is counted against you."

ss among a minority to tolerate diversity of thought are  
and damaging development...

# Discussion under attack

That was no subversive speaking. It was the managing editor of a website run by an intergovernmental organisation that provides information and advice on agriculture and science for developing countries.

## Fake news

Governments and the media are being urged to bring in regulations to clamp down on fake news. Of course, there definitely is fake news. But who can be confident in the good will or even ability of governments and corporations to define it?

Look, for example, at Facebook's banning of suggestions that the Covid-19 virus might have originated in the Wuhan Institute of Virology – because that's what Donald Trump was saying. But after Joe Biden started saying that the idea should be investigated, Facebook lifted its ban.

The Brexit referendum campaign was a clear example of what the establishment considers fake news. That's why the campaign against fake news is not beneficial, but is in reality a threat to freedom of speech – and ultimately limits the working class from freely associating and discussing ideas.

Now there is a new, insidious threat to freedom of speech. It's coming not from the traditional enemies, the state and capital. It is coming from within society, mostly from an admittedly small number of workers who should know better. It is enabled by social media. And it is very much a 21st-century problem.

In 1999, when the Internet was in its infancy, a high court judge ruled: "Free speech includes not only the inoffensive but the irritating, the contentious, the eccentric, the heretical, the unwelcome and the provocative provided it does not tend to provoke violence. Freedom only to speak inoffensively is not worth having."

According to a report for the Adam Smith Institute last year, this view "no longer prevails among the English judiciary".

At first sight, nothing has changed. The Racial and Religious Hatred Act of 2006 explicitly says that nothing in the Act "...prohibits or restricts discussion, criticism or expressions of antipathy, dislike, ridicule, insult, or abuse of particular religions, or the

beliefs or practices of its adherents."

But that ignores changes in case law: judges have been making grey areas larger and greyer, specifically around language that can be said to be abusive or cause distress.

Five years after the 1999 case, for example, judges upheld a conviction against an evangelical preacher for showing a sign saying "Stop Immorality. Stop Homosexuality. Stop Lesbianism" on the grounds that a few individuals had felt either insulted or distressed by the sign.

Now we also have the new Hate Crime Act in Scotland, which massively expands the areas where you can be legally liable for insulting and distressing others: not just about religion but also age, disability, sexual orientation and transgender identity.

But note, the Act does not protect non-transgender identity: Holyrood rejected an amendment to protect women as a group, presumably because it is now phobic in some way to say that women exist. And these offences can now be committed in private in your own home, in Scotland, even if no one outside the home can hear what is said – a first for Britain.

## Criminalisation

What is driving these changes in law, this drift into criminalisation of the expression of opinion? Is it what people want? Or is it a tiny vocal and unrepresentative minority amplifying their voices through the media?

Communists are used to expressing opinions that others don't agree with. But it feels like things have changed – and that the change began (though its roots may well lie earlier) with the Brexit referendum campaign of 2016 and its aftermath.

Those who lost could not accept that the people of Britain had been in their right mind when they voted to leave. So began the narrative of toxic lies, the myth that the British people had been conned.

A new myth was created: since most people had voted for Brexit it meant that most people in Britain were bigoted at best, racist at worst, xenophobic, and downright nasty – and that there could be no discussion with this dangerous majority, no debate. We'd had the referendum, and the establishment and its supporters have

**'What is driving these changes in law, this drift into criminalisation of the expression of opinion?'**

decided that discussion and debate yield the wrong answers.

This attitude has spread into questions of transgender identity. So we end up with a researcher, Maya Forstater, being sacked for saying a woman is a woman, that biological sex exists and there needs to be a discussion about the issue. And a high court judge saying that her approach is "not worthy of respect in a democratic society". That ruling was thankfully overturned on appeal.

And just as, in the main, trade unions in Britain took the establishment side in the Brexit referendum, they are doing so in the gender debate.

Professor Jo Phoenix from the Open University, writing in July, put it like this: "Where are trade unions when gender critical academics are under attack? Instead of supporting members, the unions form part of the problem."

Is she right? Events at the University of Sussex in October suggest she is. And if so, is it because with most unions it's not so much that the majority is silent, is it that the majority takes no notice of what's going on in the unions to which they belong?

Whatever the reason, the working class needs to assert freedom of speech. Not as a hollow freedom where anyone can declaim on a street corner while people walk blithely by, but as the indispensable condition for free discussion – without which there will be no progress in Britain. ■

• This article is based on the introduction to a CPBML discussion meeting in September.

# How wildly distorted statistics helped an unholy alliance of supply-chain glitch into a full-blown crisis...

## No fuel shortage, just a s

MORE THAN a year after Britain finally left the European Union, a battle is being fought out across the country's retail outlets as inefficient producers and shops seek to shift the blame for shortages.

On the one hand there are those who revel in any problems that Britain is facing, the handful of unrepentant referendum-deniers who want Brexit reversed. Standing with them are those who want the EU's freedom of movement – but only if it can be extended to the whole world. And the public is paying the price.

To go by some reports, our supermarkets are empty, fields are full of unpicked crops and Armageddon is just around the corner. Throw into the mix the “just in time” supply chains adopted by supermarkets and manufacturers and you have a perfect recipe for chaos.

Enter the Road Haulage Association (RHA), peddling wild stories that Britain is short of 100,000 HGV drivers. The figure was seized on by the Opposition and rapidly relayed throughout the media.

And what a neat figure 100,000 is. Much too neat, it turns out. As the BBC's *More or Less* programme explained on 1 September, the figure came from the RHA. Most of it is made up by the 60,000 vacancies that the RHA says were already there in 2019. To this it added 25,000 (the shortfall of new HGV licences 2020/2021 against 2019/2020) plus some 15,000 fewer EU HGV drivers.

### No explanation

But when Full Fact asked the RHA how it came to the figure of 60,000 for pre-existing vacancies, “it wasn't able to explain why it had estimated the historic shortage at that level. It told Full Fact it estimated this historic level at 50,000 drivers in 2015, but couldn't explain the figure further.”

While there may be little clarity on precisely how many drivers the industry is short of, what is clear is that politicians of all stripes have been exaggerating numbers and focusing on the wrong reasons. A report from a think tank run by HGV recruitment agency Driver Require rubbishes the 100,000 claim, and the idea that Brexit is the main cause of the crisis.

Instead, says the report, the Covid-19



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**Northampton, 26 September 2021: pumps out of action as the artificial panic set in.**

pandemic is the main reason why drivers have quit – and that efforts should focus on enticing back into driving for a living some of Britain's 330,000 HGV licence owners who have left the industry – 235,000 of whom are under 45.

Nor is it clear what the shortage of tanker drivers is, and whether it is sufficient to cause a crisis in delivery. What is clear is that a number of car drivers decided that panic buying was the way forward: *Sky News* on 6 October cited data from EdgePetrol that the average petrol purchase leapt by 5 litres in the week of 22 to 29 September – a period that according to driving app Waze also saw a 190 per cent rise in the number of people driving to petrol stations.

Never mind how many tanker drivers there might be, that sort of panic will create a shortage at any time of the year. And with the panic came louder and louder calls for the government to issue 10,000 “temporary” permits, in stages, to allow eager EU

HGV drivers to come to Britain to work.

But with an HGV shortage affecting the whole of the EU (and the US as well, with Walmart reported to be offering a \$12,000 signing-on bonus in some areas), there seem to be few takers for the emergency visa scheme. As of 5 October, just 127 had applied.

### Conditions

That shouldn't have come as a surprise to anyone who has followed the news about wages and conditions for HGV drivers. Many supermarket chains fail to provide proper washing and toilet facilities, or hot meals, or secure parking at their depots.

During the last general election, and since, the government made a public commitment to ending an open-door policy on immigration. Not until the Covid-19 pandemic comes to an end will there be any kind of reliable figures. But the prospects don't look good.

At the beginning of the year the govern-



of EU-adherents and enthusiasts for globalism to turn a

# shortage of honest facts



ment introduced its much-heralded immigration rules. These actually made it easier for employers to scour the world for skilled labour by abolishing the resident labour market test for skilled workers, meaning that companies no longer had to prove that they couldn't find skilled labour locally.

The crackdown came – or appeared to come – in the area of so-called unskilled labour. (Strange to relate, HGV drivers are deemed, officially, unskilled.) Now the government is backtracking on that too.

Greater clarity can be found among the trade unions. RMT general secretary Mick Lynch told a meeting at September's Labour Party conference the government was going backwards instead of recruiting from inner-city communities. "Instead, they want to bring people here from all over Europe, on poverty wages and poor terms and conditions," he said.

Unite's national officer for road transport, Adrian Jones, said: "By plundering workers from other nations, the govern-

ment is propping up a broken and exploitative system. Kicking these issues into the long grass instead of taking decisive steps now will only create worse disruption down the line."

A similar response came from Bev Clarkson, Unite's national officer for food and drink, on the threat that a shortage of workers will leave turkeys unplucked for Christmas.

"The poverty pay and insecure contracts on offer in poultry processing do not compensate for the physically draining and unpleasant work. That needs to change. What must not happen is the reestablishment of an employment system that relies on exploited migrant labour and pits workers against each other," she said.

## Hours

And right on cue, the government confirmed on 30 September that the pandemic-driven extension on maximum hours for HGV drivers is itself to be extended. Unite general secretary Sharon Graham was quick to respond: "This is yet another knee-jerk response to a crisis which has been building for nearly 20 years – and the blame for that lies entirely at the door of the employers, and their willing partners, the government," she said.

"Years of suppressing drivers' pay and attacking their working conditions has led us to where we are now. Far from tackling the current crisis, this latest extension on drivers' hours will increase the pressures of the job and, as a result, further endanger public safety on the roads. This expediency will end in failure."

Then, on 5 October, the union revealed that the government has not conducted a health and safety impact assessment on lengthening drivers' hours. "Drivers will not return to a sector when the hours on the road can be extended at a whim by government and with no proper regard to road safety," said Adrian Jones.

Driver Require suggested in its report that one helpful move would be "to amend the Working Hours Directive and Tachograph Hours legislation to limit working hours or enforce longer breaks".

Keir Starmer, meanwhile, stands foursquare with the employers. "It is a com-

**"The government is propping up a broken and exploitative system..."**

plete crisis," he said on *The Andrew Marr Show* on BBC on 26 September, parroting the RHA claims of a 100,000 HGV driver shortage and stoking the panic. "Would you as prime minister bring in 100,000 foreign drivers to solve this crisis?" asked Marr. "We're going to have to do that," said Starmer.

What's really panicking employers is that they are having to pay more for drivers. The supermarkets in particular are digging into their pockets, according to a survey by Retail Gazette.

Salaries are up £5,000 at John Lewis. There's a £2,000 sign-on payment at Marks and Spencer, plus up to £3,000 more in incentives. Poundland will pay the cost of getting an HGV Class 1 licence (for articulated lorries), and is paying £1,000 bonuses at some depots.

Tesco brought in a £1,000 signing-on payment, and raised pay at the Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire, depot of its subsidiary Booker Retail Partners by £5 an hour – though that is only a temporary move. Presumably Tesco is hoping that Keir Starmer's plan will be implemented and it can bring wages back down.

The employers may find that an uphill struggle. When the 40 drivers at the Booker depot in Thamesmead, south-east London, learnt of their Hemel Hempstead colleagues' success they demanded the same – and when denied it voted unanimously to strike.

The company has rapidly had to make a serious offer to the Thamesmead drivers, who supply 1,500 Londis, Premier, Budgen and Happy Shopper stores across London and the South East. ■

**Headlines about labour shortages don't give the full story lack of facts. But the statistics are clearly out, by several**

# Who's counting? Not the



Alex Segre/shutterstock.com

**The government has no real idea how many people live in Britain. And it shows little sign of wanting to know.**

TO RUN A nation, you need to know who lives there – and much more besides. Without that information it's impossible to run the economy and plan for housing, hospitals, schools, transport and more.

There's no guarantee that having accurate data means it will be used well, but without it there's little chance of making the right decisions. And there are clear signs that official figures for migration and the total British population are inaccurate, principally due to uncertainty about the number of EU nationals working in Britain but also because of what's happened since the start of the pandemic.

The debate has become mired in views about migration policy and the number of illegal immigrants entering Britain – very few of whom are being sent back to their country of departure. But that focus has obscured the fact that the government doesn't even know who's here legally.

The British population has increased rapidly in the past 20 years, the result of the policy of all governments to rely ever

more on migrant labour, aided by EU membership. Importing labour discourages training and innovation in Britain and makes the country vulnerable when conditions change – which is precisely what has happened with the coronavirus pandemic.

The EU's fundamental principle of the free movement of labour makes things worse. It facilitates migratory workers and makes it hard for any nation to plan or track what's happening. Meanwhile, Brussels reckons that two in three people working elsewhere in another member state return to their own country.

## Market in charge

That's bad for nations at both ends – leaving them unable to plan and vulnerable to changes – whether recession or pandemic. In effect it puts the market in charge, and not the needs of the people of either country.

Now even the Office for National Statistics (ONS) is being forced to confront its failures. In 2019 it finally accepted that

its quarterly migration reports are “experimental” and should not be designated as “National Statistics”.

The ONS concedes that it has underestimated net immigration from the EU and overestimated immigration from elsewhere. But it is still saying the overall figures are broadly correct. Others doubt this.

In 2018, analysis published by the independent Economic Statistics Centre for Excellence (ESCoE) raised doubts about the ONS migration figures – they simply did not tally with population estimates. While population estimates over the eight years to 2017 suggested a rise of 1.5 million in the number of people born in the EU and living here, migration statistics showed net migration from the EU of 950,000 over that period.

This matters – because people coming from the EU had unfettered rights to work and live in Britain – and could just as easily pack up and go home if they wished. And that's what seems to have happened since the start of the pandemic.

# about migration – it’s a complex picture, obscured by a million. What’s gone wrong?

## government

Early in 2021, the ESCoE published another analysis which looked at a reported 1.3 million decrease in the population since the start of the pandemic and suggested large numbers of people originally from the EU had left.

ESCoE looked at employment statistics from ONS, which appeared to suggest an increase over the previous year of more than a quarter of a million people working in London and born in Britain – despite the pandemic! It then looked at other information, particularly about migration. Its conclusion: that many job losses during the pandemic fell on non-UK workers, which resulted in return migration rather than unemployment here.

And the Migration Observatory, based at Oxford University, came to broadly similar conclusions. Its work suggests that the total number of EU immigrants entering Britain between 2012 and 2020 was 1.6 million higher than the previous estimate of two million.

### Impossible

The impossible result for London’s population numbers is precisely that: impossible – a statistical artefact created by unfounded assumptions. Believe it or not, the ONS methodology actually “creates” new British-born people to “replace” those born abroad who have left the country and to grow the population to the previously forecast level.

So the figures are being made to fit the model, rather than the other way around.

London stood out because it has the largest share of foreign-born residents, the largest share of those who appear to have left, and was – under the pre-pandemic projections – expecting to see significant population growth. Yet the ONS model assigned the largest share of the “new” Britons to London!

The lack of accurate population figures directly affects Britain’s response to the coronavirus pandemic. Published vaccination rates are based on GP registrations, which differ from population estimates. If population figures are wrong it is likely, nationally and locally, that the effectiveness of the vaccination programme is being overestimated – or in some cases underes-

**‘The lack of accurate figures directly affects Britain’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic...’**

timated, particularly if foreign workers registered with GPs have actually left the country.

The ONS is working to improve its statistics, as it must. Firstly, knowing about population migration matters, and it’s not always straightforward to tell what’s happening. Secondly, large scale movements can disrupt plans and forecasts, especially as seems to have happened, where EU and non-EU nationals working here have behaved in different ways in response to the pandemic.

Initial results from the 2021 census will be available in 2022. That may tell us more. But in Scotland, where full responsibility for the census was devolved from 2001, Holyrood decided to defer the census until 2022. That’s a further limitation to understanding and planning for the whole of Britain.

The number of people resident in Britain but not born here more than doubled between 1991 and 2011 – from 3.8 million to 7.9 million – rising from 7 per cent of the population to 13 per cent. Most of that increase came after 2001. The trend has continued, though at a lesser rate.

The number of people newly in Britain is high, even if many have returned home recently. Distribution across the country is extremely uneven. Analysis published by the ONS in September 2021 suggests that in 15 London boroughs more than a quarter of residents are foreign nationals, and in 13 more than 40 per cent were born abroad.

Unsurprisingly London saw a high level of applications for the Home Office EU

Settlement Scheme. And these figures reveal a high level of EU nationals in some other British towns and cities – in Boston, Peterborough, Leicester, and Corby more than one in five residents are EU nationals.

The scheme allowed EU nationals living here to register and retain the right to reside and work. The deadline was 30 June 2021, but it remains open for applications. The outstanding feature from the statistics is that there were millions more applications than the Home Office predicted.

When the scheme opened in 2019, 3.5 million people were thought to be eligible. By 30 September there had been 6.2 million applications. Excluding repeat applications, around 5.5 million individuals applied, with 4.9 million being granted settled or pre-settled status so far (around 94 per cent of the concluded applications).

### No idea

In short, the government had no idea how many EU nationals were working here. The underestimate was around 1.6 million according to a *Daily Telegraph* analysis last June, based on work by the Migration Observatory.

The number of EU nationals who have yet to apply to the settlement scheme isn’t known. Their future is uncertain. Some will leave Britain. Others will fall into undocumented work alongside illegal migrants.

The failure to acknowledge the extent of migration has not just been a failure of government. Employers and unions have also shied away from the realities. Professional statisticians brought this up four or more years ago, but have been ignored. Asking these questions is right, not “racist”.

Enthusiasts for the free movement of labour, including most parliamentary politicians, want to deny the reality that far more people came from the EU to work here than anyone knew. The scale of those who have come to work in Britain or be with their families places demands on the nation to plan for and integrate them.

Denial, or not discussing the issues because it appears discriminatory, serves no one well. It simply leaves workers open to market forces and an unplanned, uncontrolled labour market. ■

**Free agent or not after leaving the EU, Britain's fishermen are (at least) of outrageous concessions ceded in the government**

# Fishing: where is the Bre



Anna Jastrzebska/shutterstock.com

**Brixham, Devon: pretty as a picture, but failures to secure the benefits promised by Brexit and to invest in facilities for port repair and maintenance**

BRITAIN IS now an independent nation. A “newly independent coastal state”, in the government’s formulation. Last winter saw, for the first time, a fishing deal with the EU in which Britain was able to act as a free agent.

But free agent or not, Britain’s fishermen are still bound in legal chains. The 1,200-page fisheries annex to the Trade and Co-operation Agreement, concluded in January of this year, falls short of the hopes of the fishing industry, and those who supported them.

On the plus side, the EU’s bid to fix access to British waters and consequent quotas in perpetuity was quashed, though

EU boats will continue to have access until the end of June 2026. Only then will Britain have the right to exclude them. Quotas are to be negotiated annually, with increases in the British share to be phased in.

The quota that boats from the EU may catch in UK waters will be reduced by 15 per cent in the first year, and then by 2.5 per cent each year after that. And quotas don’t consider the realities of fishing at sea: it is perfectly possible for a boat to catch its annual quota of a species in a day.

## Unchanged

Quotas are worked out species by species. The quota for Channel cod, for example,

remains unchanged, leaving EU boats with more than 90 per cent of the catch.

“Additional quota shares secured from the EU came nowhere close to what any self-respecting coastal state might expect as their legal right,” declared the National Federation of Fishermen’s Organisations in September, nine months after the new agreement came into force.

The association has published a Brexit Balance Sheet with eight demands to safeguard fisheries to 2026 and beyond. Crucially, these include developing a strategy for a “major renegotiation” of the agreement in 2026.

Under the United Nations Convention

are still bound in legal chains, locked into another five years  
 of the government's agreement with the EU...

# Brexit dividend?



France have clouded the horizon.

on the Law of the Sea, Britain – now that it is out of the EU – has sovereignty over its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Previously that EEZ was pooled with those of the other EU member states to form “EU waters”. The UN convention states that a “...coastal State shall determine the allowable catch of the living resources in its exclusive economic zone”.

That zone extends 200 nautical miles from Britain’s shores, or the median line where another country’s shores are nearer. This doesn’t include the area from the shore to 12 nautical miles, known as our territorial waters.

Since January, several developments

show that waiting for 2026 is not an option. It would compound the damage that the EU inflicted on our fishing fleets, and more will leave the industry.

In addition, the failure to negotiate agreements with Norway and the Faroes for 2021 – included in the Brexit Balance Sheet demands – restricts our access to Arctic cod and has led to those countries unilaterally declaring massive increases in their mackerel quota for the North East Atlantic.

In May the French threatened to cut off power to Jersey during a dispute over access to fishing grounds. Those threats have been revived more recently, as France adopts an aggressive posture over fishing rights.

Jersey, the focus of the row, licensed 47 fishing boats to operate earlier in the year and has now added an additional 64 full permits and 31 temporary ones. These concessions do not seem to be enough for President Macron.

## Threats

France has now added to its threats to cut off energy supplies. It is now threatening to block the Channel Tunnel, and to refuse to cooperate with arrangements to police the people-smuggling from the north-east French coast to Kent and Sussex. But then the record numbers of people arriving in boats this year (4,500 on 160 boats known to have crossed in September alone) has always thrown into question France’s will to do anything about the problem.

Several EU member states have signed a joint statement attacking Britain on the question of licences. This underlines what we always knew: that the EU would not willingly give up exploiting British waters.

And while some of the signatories of the statement are predictably those countries which border the North Sea and English Channel, the presence on the list of Latvia, Lithuania and Malta is revealing. The Lithuanian-registered trawler *MV Margiris*, for example, achieved notoriety for plundering fish stocks.

The EU is far from united on the question, though. France’s aggressive posture has embarrassed other states, with one source quoted anonymously in the *Daily*

**‘The indisputable reality is that the new agreement is not bringing the gains British fishermen expected ...’**

*Telegraph* as saying that the French are demanding “more licences than there are fish in the Channel”.

The indisputable reality is that the new agreement is not bringing the gains British fishermen expected – not least as regards inspections.

British fisheries protection officers can board vessels at sea to ensure catches are within quota and that only permitted equipment is in use. But the burden of inspections continues to fall unequally on British fishermen. Scottish fishermen estimate that they are five times more likely to receive the attentions of fisheries protection officers than French or Spanish boats fishing in the same waters.

On the environmental questions that have bedevilled the industry, whitefish stocks are at their best levels ever. The government claimed they wanted a “co-managed” approach to fisheries, in which government and the industry would work together. No longer would policy be imposed from Brussels, but would be made in consultation and co-operation with fishing organisations.

But the government continues to hide behind environmental excuses to restrict further British fishermen, rather than going after the exclusively EU-owned super-trawlers that lay waste fish stocks and the seabed with methods such as fly-shooting.

With no support forthcoming from government, small fishermen and others have

*Continued on page 14*



*Continued from page 13*

formed an alliance with Greenpeace, demanding an immediate ban on super-tractlers in Britain's ten offshore Marine Protected Areas in the English Channel, and a ban on pelagic (deep-sea) trawlers over 55 metres in the entire English Channel and the southern North Sea.

One thread in the argument over fishing has been that Britain eats little of what it catches. True, much is exported, not just to the EU, but worldwide, taking advantage of freezing and preservation techniques.

This is not a matter of ignorance on the part of the population, though you might think it is to listen to some of the media chefs and cookery writers who hold forth on the subject. The fact is that stimulus is needed at all stages in the supply chain from the sea to the consumer's kitchen, and more independent fishmongers should be encouraged.

Seafish, or the Sea Fish Industry Authority as it is more formally known, has launched social media campaigns to encourage people to eat more fish. But, while these may be lucrative for the agencies which pick up these contracts to run these campaigns, web page and social media hits alone are not enough.

Certainly, the Covid-19 pandemic does not appear to have had any kind of a permanent negative effect. Seafish's most recent quarterly review, covering January to March 2021, shows a remarkable return to pre-Covid levels of activity in sales in fish and chip shops. In a quarter which is usually quiet for food outlets of all types, visits to these shops exceeded by far those to other fast-food outlets such as those selling hamburgers and pizzas.

Visits were only 0.2 per cent below the same period of the previous year. In the early stages of the pandemic, fish and chip shop visits had been down 77 per cent (April to June 2020 compared to 2019).

There has been much hand-wringing by politicians and the media about the plight of coastal communities. But it is precisely politicians who are to blame for the blights caused by declines in fishing, ship-building and seaborne trade – all linked to poor housing, education and employment opportunities.

Many of these towns have been used, by councils far away from them, as dumping grounds for undesirable tenants, with former hotels and bed and breakfasts turned into so-called Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs). This has resulted in poor quality housing for large numbers of transient people, often with multiple physical and mental health problems, including drug use and dealing, and other anti-social and criminal activities.

### Running costs

Running a fishing boat is a complicated and costly undertaking. Better finance and credit arrangements are necessary to stop the costs being prohibitive. And here (as elsewhere) financial institutions have not covered themselves with glory.

Fishermen's organisations report prejudice and unwillingness to listen when they approach banks for loans. Indeed, many so-called high street banks have removed themselves from the high streets of coastal towns altogether, closing branches here, there and everywhere.

A revival of Britain's fishing industry would not just be good news for fishermen and their families. It would breathe new life into coastal towns, boosting investment in the port and harbour infrastructure to support fishing.

It doesn't stop there. Gear and ships need to be serviced and repaired, and boats fitted out with equipment. Failures to invest in this area were recently highlighted in Brixham. New boats are needed (under the EU many British boats were scrapped) and must be built. Crews need to be housed, fed and dressed, and new entrants to the industry trained.

## 'A revival would breathe new life into coastal towns...'

Other sectors, such as transport, stand to benefit. Links to get fish to market need to be improved: rail, in particular, has been badly neglected. And there is fish processing, best carried out close to where fish are landed.

In the fish processing industry as elsewhere, big capitalist concerns historically failed to invest in modernising factories, equipment and processing, because the EU gave them a plentiful supply of cheap labour. Now they must face up to the necessity to pay wages that attract people to the industry, and modernise.

A series of measures are needed, all of which would provide new employment: the systematic modernisation of ports, harbours and other landing sites; research into, and the adoption of, new technologies in both catching and processing; and a new look at education and training for those entering the industry.

Our fishermen need to know they can fish as safely as is possible. Where the activities of Greenpeace interfere with reasonable fishing practices, they must be curtailed. Foreign vessels that recklessly seek to challenge British fishermen who are lawfully fishing must be prevented from doing so – and effective enforcement is key. A requirement that catches landed in British ports are landed from British-owned boats is a must.

Above all, a national, unified approach is needed. The devolution of powers such as inspection to fisheries authorities in the regional administrations, part of the Fisheries Act 2020, was a mistake, and continues to prove to be so daily. Fishermen's organisations find themselves having to negotiate with multiple bodies for England, Wales, Scotland and Britain as a whole. That must end. ■

**British seafarers are becoming ever rarer as low wages and immigration waivers bedevil the industry...**

# Fall in British ratings



Anita van den Broek/shutterstock.com

**Container shipping in the port of Southampton.**

THE RMT has released figures revealing a massive decline in the employment of British seafarers, compounded by poverty wages in the maritime sector.

The figures show that in 2012 UK ratings held only 9,330 (17 per cent) of the total number of seafaring ratings jobs while 52,960 (78 per cent) were held by non-UK ratings.

Fast forward eight years, and in 2020 the balance has shifted even further. British seafarers held only 9,060 (13 per cent) of ratings jobs while 65,670 jobs (84 per cent) were held by foreign ratings.

The union fears the day is rapidly approaching when only 1 in 10 ratings jobs will be held by British seafarers.

The RMT notes that the lack of action to protect jobs here has spread to the off-

shore sector. It adds that “since 2017 the Home Office has repeatedly issued temporary waivers from immigration rules for offshore wind employers to import overseas crews to work on construction and maintenance projects in UK territorial waters”.

In 2017, the Home Office released a temporary waiver from immigration rules for offshore wind employers to import crews from non-EEA countries. Another five temporary waivers have followed.

The current waiver was issued in July 2021 in what was described as an “11th-hour” U-turn. It does not expire until July 2022.

## Poverty wages

And while prime minister Boris Johnson is making noises about a high wage economy, the RMT says that the failure to preserve maritime and offshore employment has been underpinned by the government giving the green light to poverty wages, with examples of rates of pay below £4 an hour in the offshore and maritime sector.

The national minimum wage was extended to cover seafarers in UK territorial waters and to offshore installations on the UK Continental Shelf on 1 October 2020. It remains legal to pay seafarers below

national minimum rates on international routes from UK ports, including the ferries sector.

The RMT says that Irish Ferries, which operates between Wales and the Republic of Ireland and on another logistically critical route, Dover–Calais, pays non-UK ratings as little as £5.51 per hour on its Cypriot registered fleet.

RMT general secretary Mick Lynch said: “Boris Johnson’s bluster on Tories supporting UK employment and wage growth is blown away by statistics showing a massive decline in UK seafarer rating jobs, compounded by poverty wages in the maritime and offshore sector.

“...The failure to comprehensively tackle sub-minimum wages and repeatedly granting employers waivers from immigration rules are turbo charging the decline in UK employment and eating away at the domestic skills base just as demand is set to increase.

“It could be so different, as we should be creating tens of thousands of high-quality, high-skilled and high paid UK maritime and offshore jobs.”

Lynch is now calling on Johnson to agree to a summit to protect and create jobs in the maritime and offshore sector. ■

**“We should be creating tens of thousands of high-quality jobs...”**

**Areas around Britain's universities are being blighted as owner-occupied family homes are converted to multiple occupation – but communities are fighting back.**

# A community's fight against



**Cranbourne Road, Picton, Liverpool. This picture was taken in September 2021**

Picton is a predominately working-class area of Liverpool with a population of just over 17,000 at 2011 census. Like many such areas around the country, it has been changed over the years, through such measures as the sale of council housing by the Thatcher administration in the 1980s, and successive waves of immigration. Yet it has remained largely a cohesive commu-

nity of family homes, predominantly a mixture of owner-occupied and Housing Association properties. Many families have lived within the community through successive generations.

Now a new and greater challenge to Picton's survival as a community has emerged: the ever-escalating number of multi-occupancy homes, or HMOs (houses

in multiple occupation). It's a challenge that is continuing, and worsening.

These HMOs have been created through property developers buying up owner-occupied family homes as their original occupants die off or decide to move on. The new owners then gut these mostly two- and three-bedroom houses and convert them into flats for up to eight people.

Most of these conversions are aimed at Liverpool's ever-expanding student population – up from 50,000 in 2015 to around 70,000 today. Within walking distance of both the main university campus, and of Liverpool city centre, Picton is also well served by buses. That makes it a desirable location for out-of-town students, and cheaper than the (also) ever-escalating number of student flats closer to the centre of Liverpool.

## Lucrative

The rapid increase in HMOs is driven by property developers. Students, paying guaranteed rents in advance every term, make for lucrative business – more lucrative than in any other large British city, according to a report on buy-to-let profits published in August 2021 that showed average yields in Liverpool of 8.25 per cent a year.

But residents have been fighting back with the Stand Up For Picton campaign, founded in January 2019. Longstanding local resident Pam Smith has played the leading role in directing the campaign, with involvement from a solid core of active members and support from within the wider community.

Why was, and is, such a campaign necessary? What is the problem with HMOs?

Firstly, the community has been living for years within a seemingly permanent building site, with constant noise, ever-present and often overflowing skips, rubble, overflowing bins permanently parked on the pavement, and rubbish in the streets, including half-eaten food discarded by building workers.

Some families, including both those with young children and elderly residents, many of whom live alone, have had work going on either side of them, with all of the

Workers



## Stable populations are replaced by student lets and *Workers* looks at an example from Liverpool...

# Against buy-to-let profiteers

disruption to their peace and quiet and mental wellbeing that entails.

Even simple acts such as pushing a pram, or dragging a shopping trolley up to or from the nearby supermarkets, are impossible without walking down the middle of the road, putting people at risk from contractors' vans and other traffic. Precariously arranged piles of old bricks, often left unattended for days at a time, pose an additional significant danger, particularly to young children.

The impression is that developers and contractors do not see instilling into their workforce a sense of respect for the community as a priority. Rudeness, arrogance, bad language, blaring radios, the using of gardens and doorways as a toilet, an inability to tidy up at the end of a day's work or to comply with reasonable requests to modify their behaviour from residents, seems to be the norm from some.

On top of this, moving large numbers of students into a predominantly family area causes disruption in and of itself.

### Students

The Stand Up for Picton campaign has never been anti student. Most in Liverpool recognise that the student population brings great benefit to the community, economically, socially and culturally – and would agree that Liverpool being a desirable place for people to study reflects well on the city.

Most would also recognise that young people living away from their parents for the first time are entitled to do what young people do, and to enjoy the social as well as the educational side of university life.

But there are reasons why the student population of major cities has tended to be housed separately from the main non-student population, in university halls and student villages. Bringing large numbers of students into a family-orientated community is bound to cause friction – and this is exactly what has happened in Picton.

Some families and individuals, after already being forced to live through the process of conversion itself, find themselves sandwiched between two groups of seven or eight students and subjected to loud music and generally rowdy behaviour

into the early hours of the morning, with parties often spilling out into gardens and the street itself.

This behaviour has continued through the various rounds of Covid-related restrictions. Complaints to the students themselves often meet with indifference or abuse, and little action has resulted from complaints to the police, the city council or the universities.

### Ignored

Planning permission has always been required to convert family homes into seven- or eight-bedroom HMOs. Yet this legal requirement has been effectively ignored in Picton, with Liverpool City Council granting permission retrospectively when work is completed or almost completed. Stand Up for Picton has yet to find one of these requests being denied.

Local authorities can also prevent any new HMOs from being developed at all once a certain tipping point, set at 10 per cent of the total homes in an area, has been reached. This power is called an Article 4 Directive, and much of the early part of the community's campaign consisted of gathering evidence through photographs and the sharing of information by members of the campaign and the community to show that this point had already been reached.

Yet despite early support from two local councillors and the odd exception, the behaviour of the council, particularly of its leading members, has been obstructive and evasive.

Councillors, council officials, the previous mayor (currently awaiting trial on unrelated allegations of corruption and intimidation of witnesses), and the newly elected mayor, just pass the buck. They blame the government's relaxation of planning regulations, while not using the powers they do have to stop redevelopment until planning permission has been granted.

On top of this, they refused until just a few months ago to impose an A4 Directive to halt the further spread of HMOs; ignored emails and evidence; refused, cancelled, or truncated meetings with campaign organisers; and gave out false, contradictory or misleading information.

**'Even simple acts such as pushing a pram are impossible without walking down the middle of the road...'**

So, where are we now?

The A4 Directive is officially in place. Yet work on converting further properties continues unabated. Tenants, mainly students, are moving into newly completed HMOs, all in clear violation of the law (were the law applied as it should be, these students would be at risk of rapid eviction). The streets continue to be permanent building sites. Anti-social behaviour continues, causing ever more friction with long-standing members of the community.

### Positive

But the community fights on. Campaign organisers have had a positive meeting with one of the four commissioners appointed by central government in June 2021 to oversee the running of the city following a damning report on council services. But whether action emerges from the meeting to halt and reverse the spread of HMOs is another matter.

Picton's experience highlights the problems that result from the treating of housing not as a means to provide a secure home from where people can live in peace, raise families, commute safely to and from work, or enjoy a happy, productive, peaceful retirement, but as a commodity to be bought and sold for the profit of speculators.

More than that, it has shown the lack of involvement and democratic control that people have in the shaping of their communities. Whether it is ultimately successful or not, Stand Up for Picton shows that communities are finding ways to fight back. ■

**Free market economics is coming unstuck. Many workers' outcome. The question is whether workers will assert their**

# Monopoly and regulation

THE BREXIT VOTE in 2016 was a recognition that enough is enough. The capitalist chaos inflicted on us through the EU had to end. A more planned national economy is required. Yet a nationally planned approach has never really been considered in Britain, at least not to any depth.

Labour's nationalisation programme after the Second World War is a red herring. Back then, when a whole raft of industries from electricity generation to railways were nationalised, most of their existing value had been extracted through dividend payments to shareholders. Once the value had been taken the "entrepreneurs" saw no reason to reinvest back into those capital enterprises. So investment fell to public funding through nationalisation, creating industries once again attractive to private enterprise.

Now, following the onset of privatisation in the 1980s, a whole set of problems has emerged across sectors ranging from rail and water to gas and electricity. At the heart of these problems lies free market dogma.

Take the free market attitude towards monopolies – British monopolies, not foreign monopolies. The focus of the Monopolies and Mergers Commission of the 1980s right through to today's Competition and Markets Authority was to prevent merger between large British companies.

The reasoning has been that large scale British mergers would make this "free" market uncompetitive. But the real intention has been to prevent British-managed enterprises achieving critical mass within the British economy.

## Foreign firms

Perversely, governments have always considered it fine for foreign-owned monopolies to buy large British firms – while British firms have been stopped from amalgamating to achieve the necessary economies of scale to make them less vulnerable to foreign take over. This thinking, which in effect favours foreign management over British management, did not arise by accident. It has been by design.

Certainly, many areas need regulation. But equally certainly, the capitalist class is



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**Governments have always thought it fine for foreign-owned monopolies to buy large British firms. The**

not fitted for that task. And the skills of those working in the regulatory field could be better applied if freed from this type of class control.

As it is, regulation is a prime example of the way Britain has been held back. Bodies such as the Competition and Markets Authority are not what they are made out to be: they are not independent. Their role is to try to regulate markets at the behest of the exploiting class. And often the desired objective is to halt technical developments that would be to workers' advantage.

Within this mix we now have the climate change regulatory agenda, which along with the recently introduced UK Infrastructure Bank is part of the government's push to reach net zero emissions by 2050. Though when it comes to this bank, we've been there before. The newly formed Infrastructure Bank – it opened in June 2021 – with its "mission" to tackle climate change, broadly replaces Britain's original

UK Green Investment Bank, which the government sold four years ago to the Australian firm Macquarie for a knockdown price of £2.3 billion.

The transaction is now described as daft by Kwasi Kwarteng, currently Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. No, it wasn't daft. It was another example of a long-standing trend of underselling British public assets to international concerns while hoping British workers don't notice.

A green-themed London investment summit in October attended by large global investors preceded the November UN COP26 gathering in Glasgow, where climate change is to be discussed. From here on in there will be much talk of net zero this and net zero that. But beware: this type of virtue signalling with its visions of perfection could well lead to oppressive corporatism.

Certainly, the type of corporate regula-

have always thought this would be the eventual  
own control...

# ...: a new path for Britain



...is thinking did not arise by accident.

tory thinking applied to resolve the 2008/9 financial collapse has made matters worse, which is why so many countries have now ended up in the wrong financial position all at the same time. This would have happened irrespective of Covid-19.

But there is hope. Britain's exit from the EU makes it possible to introduce new processes that can defend our national independence and strengthen the unity of our national territory. Notably (from an infrastructure perspective) the new UK Infrastructure Bank removes the EU's European Investment Bank (EIB) from our shores.

Britain as an EIB investor and as one of the few net contributors to the EU budget, meant most other EU countries were the beneficiaries of our contributions. Whatever remained from our contributions was then recycled back to Britain but badged up as if it were an EU regional investment.

This ruse disguised the fact the money

was ours in the first place. The trick worked particularly well in both Scotland and in "academic circles" where a common refrain was "if Britain leaves the EU we will lose EU funding".

A further positive is that the UK Infrastructure Bank aims to finance projects in every region of the country including Scotland. This should help unify British thinking by bringing about a more joined-up national economy. National unity could be further enhanced if our existing privatised infrastructure and utilities were to become a part of a more planned structure.

Currently the cash generated from these privatised concerns largely goes to their overseas owners. Instead, the cash flow could be used to help cover the depreciation costs of existing UK infrastructure as well as helping to fund new projects.

And then there's the National Security and Investment (NSI) Act, which comes fully into force on 4 January 2022. It heralds big changes. In broad terms a government screening process is to be introduced whenever a potential purchase of British industrial or commercial assets by a foreign buyer is announced.

## Screening

The screening is expected to take place over a minimum period of one month. The timescale, though limited, does give workers the opportunity to discuss whether inward investment is beneficial to Britain.

Workers should begin to use the NSI Act to heighten discussion and actions. For example, where a foreign takeover is announced, workers can see whether an merger between British companies in the same sector would be a better fit.

Better still to start thinking in advance about merging British companies and earmark additional institutional funding from within Britain to facilitate such moves. Another tack might seek to secure legally binding undertakings to ensure the acquirer will expand jobs for British workers. An agreement to expand locally based supply chains and maintain R&D facilities could be another feature to secure. Imaginative thinking rather than fatalism should be the spark.

**'The cash from privatised concerns largely goes to their overseas owners...'**

Within all of this it is obvious that British unity is essential for national independence. So it's no surprise that the SNP is plugging its own Scottish National Investment Bank, launched in 2020. Instead of this useless complication Britain should be looking to develop specialist investment banking facilities with detailed regional knowledge of each industrial and commercial sector across the whole country.

That approach would enable a balanced integrated process to be developed. Trying to find a way about within a regionally divided Britain is not a good industrial or commercial technique. Better by far to shift thinking from regional division to implementing national industrial and commercial strategies based on proven and affordable techniques.

One example: weighing up the real costs of environmental issues as well as the imagined benefits. In this context, the implications of the discovery of a billion barrels of recoverable oil just off the Shetland Isles needs considered discussion among workers rather than talking heads in the media who are invariably sponsored by various string pullers. Fully developed, this oilfield could provide a great additional income for Britain to help fund an effective recovery.

That conversation, a proper consideration of risks and benefits, should be free from unsubstantiated modelling and claims. It needs to acknowledge that current regulation in a great number of activities has done much damage. And it needs to start now.

The environment is important. But as in many areas, the capitalists who have caused the damage are not the ones who are going to put things right. Time for workers to take control. ■

A book published in paperback this year reveals a sorry tale of legislation fuelling speculation in land, paving the way for t

# Profit and the housing sh



John Gomez/shutterstock.com

**The burnt-out façade of Grenfell Tower, London...tower blocks resulted from soaring land costs and standards.**

*Home truths: the UK's chronic housing shortage*, by Liam Halligan, paperback, 384 pages, ISBN 978-1785906503, Biteback Publishing, 2021, £9.99. Kindle and eBook editions available.

THIS BOOK makes the case for radical reform of our housing policy. Far too many people have no homes or live in poor-quality housing. We need constantly to improve the quality of our homes. First published in 2019, it is now out in paperback.

Liam Halligan, the economist, journalist and broadcaster, tracks the collapse in house building by local authorities. In the 20 years to 1970 they built an average of 160,000 homes a year. Now it is less than 3,000.

Councils now account for barely more than 1 per cent of the total homes built and housing associations around 20 per cent – together under 30,000 in the 12 months to

June 2019. Yet 1.2 million people are on the waiting list for social housing.

The lack of social housing provision is the prime cause of the appalling level of homelessness and rough sleeping. And the effects are wider: inadequate public housing has a direct impact on education, mental and physical health and levels of crime.

**‘Local authorities responded to soaring land costs by building high-density tower blocks...’**

Government housing policy is to rely on the big companies to deliver the goods – but they don't. Polly Neate, the chief executive of Shelter, said, “Right now, only a tiny fraction of new-build homes are genuinely affordable social rent homes – a paltry 6,287 were delivered last year.”

Relentless housing demand in the face of slow supply pushes up land and house prices – and the profits of developers. Between 1995 and 2018 the value of land across England rose by more than ten times the general inflation rate.

Landowners and large developers have every incentive to sit on their land holdings – around 600,000 building plots in 2016.

Large developers are land speculators that build houses on the side. As the 2007 Calcutt Review admitted, “identifying, acquiring, preparing, developing and selling land is the key activity of all [UK] house building companies”.

The 1961 Land Compensation Act entitled landowners and land-holding developers to the full land valuation upside when planning permission is granted, including the “hope value” of any conceivable future development. This fuelled speculative investment in land.

Halligan argues that this single piece of legislation “explains why the prices of land for residential building – and, in turn, the cost of housing – has spiralled over the past half-century, resulting in our current affordability crisis”.

## Standards

Local authorities responded to soaring land costs by building high-density tower blocks and by allowing lower standards. In July 2019 there were still 328 high-rise social housing blocks with cladding like Grenfell's.

The Thatcher government oversaw an effective end to the large-scale building of social housing. It reduced subsidies and imposed borrowing caps on local authorities. Councils concentrated on maintaining ageing housing stock instead of new building.

Halligan writes, “The introduction of Right to Buy (RTB) under the Housing Act 1980 was a watershed, forcing councils to sell off their social housing stock... the promise that councils should replace social

le of 60 years of  
the housing crisis...

# ortage

**‘Government policy is to rely on the big companies to deliver the goods – but they don’t...’**

housing sold off, in order to maintain the overall stock of social homes, was never honoured. Under Thatcher, almost 1.2 million of the social homes sold off weren’t replaced.”

The situation worsened under subsequent governments, Labour and Coalition. Since 1990 around 50,000 local authority homes have been built, against half a million sold off. In 2012 Cameron’s government increased the RTB discounts available. Inevitably promises that homes would be replaced one-for-one with new social housing were broken.

Cameron and Osborne’s 2013 Help to Buy scheme pushed up prices and gave massive windfalls to Britain’s leading developers. Help to Buy hinders first-time buyers and pumps taxpayers’ money into the pockets of directors and a few already rich investors. Halligan calls for Help to Buy to be withdrawn.

## Landlords

The increasing reliance on private landlords to house social tenants forces up the housing benefit bill as rents rise. By 2017, four-fifths of government housing expenditure went on benefits – a direct transfer from taxpayers to landlords. Only a fifth went on building. Forty years earlier, the proportions were the other way round.

Not everyone will agree with Halligan, though, particularly when he sets out his manifesto for change – capture land value, build new towns, more social housing, better planning, reform the green belt, more new-build homes, sell off some state land, land ownership transparency, end the four-year limit rule on planning enforcement, reform the industry to end its oligopoly. ■

# WORKERS

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**Marx's earth-shattering declaration is truer than ever – the necessary labour must take over the running of society**

# 1848: The Communist M

THE COMMUNIST Manifesto was published during 1848, a year when revolution swept across Europe – and it has changed our view of history. Before it appeared, the drivers and decisive agents of history were assumed to be kings and queens, nobles and aristocrats, bankers and merchants, industrial capitalists and bourgeois reformers. Control of society was seen as the preserve and plaything of the ruling classes.

The Communist Manifesto turned existing political assumptions upside down. It opens with the statement that “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” and sets out to explain how and why that applies to capitalism, the economic system we still live under.

It not only revealed the essential weaknesses in the capitalist edifice but also identified workers as the source of renewed progress. Capitalism cannot exist without the working class it created, but in doing so also created its own gravediggers.

## Exile

Karl Marx composed his programme for a small group of revolutionary German tailors and shoemakers living in Brussels, where he was residing in exile. Though the membership of the group was counted in tens, Marx did not think small. Instead he crafted a political classic that was universal in its scope, capturing the future aspirations of the entire working class.

Analysing the transformation from feudalism to capitalism, Marx showed that modern capitalist society had not done away with class antagonisms, but had simplified them. Society as a whole was increasingly splitting into two hostile camps with two great classes directly facing each other, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

**‘He crafted a political classic that was universal in its scope...’**

With remarkable prescience, Marx predicted all the huge changes taking place in the composition and extent of a working class, even though the trend was small when he wrote: “The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage labourers.”

Marx had anticipated revolution unfolding in the more advanced capitalist countries with organised factory workers leading the way, but it did not turn out that way.

A special period of impressive class struggle and cooperation across countries took place during the First International (1863 to 1872) when Marx was the guiding force in the working class movement. But workers in the advanced capitalist countries generally opted for a more limiting struggle.

Working class revolution did break out later in unexpected places – Russia, then China. The Russian revolutionaries in particular based their thinking on Marx’s writings and the ideas set out in the Manifesto.

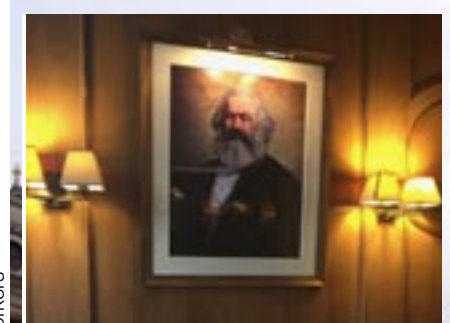
As outsiders it is always hard to assess, but it appears that in the USSR at least too much power was invested in the communist party and not enough vigilance taken to ensuring that debate, control and power came out of an ascendant working class. The people must be in charge, leading, not just in name.

## New challenges

Revolutions of the future will take note, will be better off and more durable as a result. Communism will have to rise to the new challenges of working people struggling to keep their heads above water, and prove its worth anew.

Triumph and defeat in class struggle are ephemeral, constantly changing sides between the two contesting classes. On a worldwide scale capitalism is terribly unstable and full of whirling crises. People everywhere find survival with dignity impossible because the policies governing their lives suit finance capitalism and the big capitalist monopolies.

This has been the case in Britain for many decades. As a result the people want



Main picture magro\_kr (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0). Inset: Workers

**The Manifesto was largely written in the Swan Place, Brussels. Inset, portrait hanging today in the**

change, hence the push for Brexit and real independence from profit and market forces. There is a strong desire to create a society that serves the interests of the working people. In the Manifesto Marx stated that after the bourgeois destruction of feudalism, capitalism wanted to “create a world after its own image”. The working class today should do the same.

## Enduring

The Manifesto is not an archaic document: its analysis of class has enduring relevance. It’s pertinent, for example, to taking control of the independence movement in Britain. Marx’s message clarifies the task of today: “The proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself the nation.” In other words, take control of independence, shape the destiny of the country.

Marx wrote, “The proletarian movement

ose performing all  
ty themselves...

# Manifesto



brasserie in the building on the right, on the Grand  
the brasserie on the ground floor of the building.

is the self-conscious, independent move-  
ment of the immense majority, in the inter-  
est of the immense majority.”

The vast majority in Britain are working  
people, though they may not always admit  
it. If unity can be constructed across the  
class, we are many and they are few.

The Manifesto warned that historically  
class struggle is “a fight that either ended in  
a revolutionary reconstitution of society at  
large, or in the common ruin of the con-  
tending classes”. Let it be the former.

• Print copies of the Manifesto are available  
via [cpbml.org.uk/manifesto](http://cpbml.org.uk/manifesto). It can also be  
read online at, for example, Marxists  
Internet Archive, or on Kindle.

• Friedrich Engels is jointly credited as  
author, but he always acknowledged  
that “The basic thought running through  
the Manifesto...belongs solely and exclu-  
sively to Marx” (Preface to 1883 German  
Edition). ■

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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** (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.

**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.

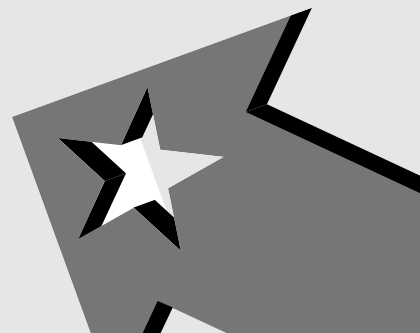
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# The value of academic freedom

**'UCU members at Sussex and elsewhere must make the union's officers stand by its policies, or stand aside for those who will.'**

EXTREME ANTI-FEMINIST activists at the University of Sussex have waged a campaign of harassment and threats against a distinguished analytic philosopher, Professor Kathleen Stock, demanding in posters and social media posts that the university sack her. Posts include images filmed with a backdrop of fire and smoke, and references to Britain as a "colonial shithole" and a "wretched island".

Stock has reportedly been advised to take a security escort when on campus. Her crime? To have commented publicly on philosophical questions about sex, gender, and sexual orientation in ways that these anonymous activists disagreed with.

The university vice-chancellor issued a statement in support of her, of academic freedom, and of the right of their staff and students to be free from harassment and intimidation. But the branch officers of Sussex University and Colleges Union (UCU) took a different view.

Rather than support her, they issued a bizarre statement "in support of trans and non-binary communities at Sussex" which criticises the vice-chancellor's statement and calls for an investigation into "institutional transphobia".

The statement contains the puzzling assertion that "appeals to both employment rights and academic freedom are often instrumentalised", a curious thing for an organisation self-identifying as a trade union to say. Sussex UCU's officers completely failed to support Stock herself. UCU nationally has sided with its local branch committee.

The introduction of undergraduate tuition fees in 1998 by the Blair government – currently up to £9,250 a year – has encouraged some students to claim paying for tuition allows them to dictate the views they can be exposed to and, it would seem, demand the sacking of those they disagree with.

The harassment has been widely condemned by past and present Sussex students and staff. And more than 200 of Stock's fellow philosophers have circulated an open letter to the university's Dean of the Faculty and the Head of the Philosophy

Department to express "our solidarity with Sussex in its support of Professor Stock's academic freedom in the face of recent attacks". Separately a group of trans people wrote to *The Times* to defend Stock against "an unprincipled campaign of harassment and abuse".

In 2009 the UCU passed a clear policy on academic freedom at universities. Still in force, it says that the union believes that "the freedoms to conduct research, teach, speak, and publish without interference or penalty, are increasingly under threat in UK universities and colleges". It states that academic freedom includes the rights to "freedom in teaching and discussion", "freedom in carrying out research without commercial or political interference" and "freedom from institutional censorship".

The union had in mind the increased pressure on the academic and intellectual freedom of university teachers from a number of sources, government and private funders among them but also, increasingly, a deliberately engendered consumer mentality among students.

UCU members at Sussex and elsewhere must make the union's officers stand by its policies, or stand aside for those who will.

The importance of free speech for trade unions is simple: debate in a union branch needs every member's point of view, every perspective to be heard before a decision is reached. That done, members then know they can rely on everyone to carry it out, whatever position they took in discussion.

In scientific and academic discussion, too, the alternative to free debate is enforced adherence to dogma, and the suppression of new thinking.

As workers around the country debate how to build a new independent Britain, freedom of discussion becomes ever more important. We need universities to teach the workers of the future and to research new solutions to the problems that face us. That requires free discussion, most obviously in science, technology and medicine, but in the arts and humanities as well. ■

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