

WORKERS

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WORKERS LEAD THE FIGHT

BREXIT No delay!

NHS Time for hard questions

BUS Use cash for services

LAS Reps take responsibility

CREATIVES Survival fight

ENVIRONMENT EU sham

WANTED Vaccines

WALES Time to unite

COVID-19 Cuba leads

plus News, Book

Review, Historic Notes

and more

WORKERS



Never underestimate the ruling class

THE RULING class, the establishment – call it what you will – has always underestimated the people of Britain. That can be a blessing: they would never have allowed us to have the EU referendum if they had thought for a moment that we would have the sense to vote Leave.

For our part, we should remember never to underestimate the establishment. For a glimpse – just a glimpse – of how it behaves, look at the operation of the government’s support scheme for small businesses.

As a thoughtful piece in *The Times* by Sky News economics editor Ed Conway explained, the scheme has hardly given out any money because banks don’t want to break EU rules on state aid. Worse, moves to increase the level of support are being blocked inside the Treasury because of...yes, you’ve guessed it...concerns over EU state aid rules.

You’d think we had never voted to leave the EU at all. And at a time when governments all over the EU are ignoring state aid rules, Schengen, the lot, EU supporters at the heart of Britain’s state machine are still in thrall to Brussels.

Underestimating the people can also be a problem. The government surely should have instituted the Covid-19 lockdown earlier, but it thought that things had to get worse before the people would show “compliance”.

As it happened, most people were already in advance of the establishment, self-isolating, social

distancing, working from home where possible.

And even when it brought in the lockdown, the government thought there would be just 80 per cent compliance. In fact, it’s around 95 per cent.

Clearly, they don’t trust us. Nor should we trust them. But the real question now is whether we trust ourselves. Covid-19 has transformed aspects of life in Britain. We have seen a resurgence of collective action, of working people taking the initiative. That must continue, and deepen.

Most importantly, the shutdown of thinking on Brexit, our most important project in living history, must end. People must talk about the future and how we should redesign our country.

We need to talk about training, skill, education, preparedness, health, natural resources, food, energy – about everything we need to make a success of independence. That job can’t be left to others. Most of the establishment would like to use the virus as an excuse to stall Brexit (see page 24).

Frightened of unleashing the people to do the job and wary of jettisoning their domination of the existing economic process, they find the idea of progress hard to comprehend. They are much more used to managing decline. After all, they’ve been doing it since midway through the 19th century.

Only workers truly understand and appreciate the idea of progress, real progress for the people, and the ability to achieve it – as the many examples in this issue of *Workers* demonstrate. ■



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Green Line bus, run by Arriva.

Use cash for services – RMT

TRANSPORT UNION RMT has called on the government to ensure that its support for the regional bus industry during the coronavirus epidemic will be used to protect workers and maintain services. The regional bus support package announced on Friday 3 April will total £167 million across the industry over the next three months.

The call came as the Unite union announced that five London bus drivers had died of coronavirus. More have died since then. “Unite has been working continuously with Transport for London (TfL) and the operators to ensure the safety of drivers and others in the industry who are performing a heroic job in getting NHS and care workers to their places of work,” said regional secretary Peter Kavanagh.

“Buses are an essential service being run for and by frontline workers. It is therefore crucial bus services are safeguarded whilst the health risk to both the workers that run the buses and the passengers who have to travel are kept to an absolute minimum,” said RMT general secretary Mick Cash on 3 April.

Cash noted that while the rail industry is at least seeking to adopt a joined-up approach to the coronavirus crisis, the national bus industry in contrast is “a complete free for all”.

The union is wary of the privatised bus and train companies’ pursuit of profit. It noted that on 11 March – the day that the 8th British citizen died of coronavirus – a conference call for FirstGroup investors heard company chair say, “At the moment, in my experience, this is one of the most exciting times, with potentially real deliverables there and money standing behind it.”

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

FARMING

The new ‘land army’

THOUSANDS APPLIED to become agricultural and horticultural workers after appeals by government and farmers for a new “land army” to help prevent millions of tonnes of fruit and vegetables going to waste during the coming period.

Job search engines reported massive spikes in workers looking for farming jobs – one saw 50,000 searches in one week alone in early April.

The British Growers Association calculates it needs about 70,000 British workers to fill the jobs usually filled by seasonal labour, mostly from Eastern Europe. The response was huge. One recruiter, charity Concordia, has alone signed up 10,000 would-be pickers to its Feed the Nation scheme.

There were howls from employers when Home Secretary Priti Patel warned in February that when we finally leave the EU importing cheap labour would no longer be an option.

Would they have to train British workers to do the work? Would they have to offer decent wages and conditions to recruit a native workforce? They said crops would rot unless they could recruit directly from Poland and Bulgaria.

Now the myth that British workers are too lazy to do the jobs has been exposed by the coronavirus crisis.

But some farmers haven’t given up so easily. A group of them organised a series of “socially distancing” flights from private firm Air Charter Service to bring Romanian farm workers.

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

If you have news from your industry, trade or profession call us on 07308 979308 or email workers@cpbml.org.uk



ON THE WEB

A selection of additional stories at cpbml.org.uk...

Never again

We are facing the Covid-19 epidemic with an emaciated NHS and an atrophied industrial infrastructure. So much for capitalism and the free market.

The people are turning to collectivism

So collectivism is dead? In times of crises, it seems people know better than their leaders.

Mortgaged to the hilt, universities look to cut jobs

Coronavirus has exposed the extent to which higher education has mortgaged its future to the international markets.

Musicians go online to keep link to audiences

Ingenious online schemes are keeping skills alive, encouraging others to join in, and raising morale in difficult times.

The economics of crisis

Yes, there is an economic crisis as well as the health and social crisis. But the politics of despair will get us nowhere.

Brexit means Brussels, says EU

Nearly four years after the Brexit referendum, the EU is still clinging to the hope that it can keep control of Britain.

Plus: the e-newsletter

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

LAS Unison



Southwest London, 11 April: ambulance workers in between jobs, still in full Covid-19 PPE.

Union reps take responsibility to keep ambulances running

MEDIA DESCRIPTIONS of “health heroes” often stops at doctors and nurses. At the front of the front line, though, are the ambulance services, taking patients from an uncontrolled non-clinical environment, usually people’s homes, to the controlled and sterile environment where those doctors and nurses can do their work, continuing the treatment already administered by highly skilled paramedics.

London, with Britain’s largest ambulance service, has been under particular strain. But it has not buckled. Key to the resilience of the service has been the acceptance of responsibility by the main trade union, Unison.

Unison reps have forgone agreed trade union facility time to work extra shifts, an initiative that other unions would do well to follow, rather than, as ambulance workers have told *Workers* one union has done, seek to increase the number of reps working from trade union offices. Critically the Unison reps also took responsibility for dealing with the growing crisis of PPE.

Demands on ambulance workers have rocketed during the Covid-19 epidemic. Twenty years ago the London Ambulance Service might have had to deal with a thousand 999 calls in a day. That leapt in April to more than 5,000.

On one day at the end of March, 11,800 calls were logged – and this at a time when almost 1,000 of the service’s workforce were off sick or self-isolating (650 of the absences were Covid-19 related). The strain, dwarfing the annual problems of New Year’s Eve, brought the service to breaking point. But it did not, and has not broken.

In the face of conflicting and unclear advice as well as uncertain and inadequate supplies, Unison decided to act. This action was not threatening or taking industrial action, nor even going to the press or moaning to MPs. It was to instruct its members, and to inform the service, that ambulance workers themselves would decide what level of PPE was appropriate for each job.

This system of “dynamic risk assessment” gives confidence to workers to trust their clinical skills, and at least partly stabilised a previously deteriorating situation. ■

UNIVERSITIES

Mortgaged to the hilt

CORONAVIRUS IS exposing how deeply higher education has mortgaged its future to the international markets.

The University of Kent is planning waves of redundancies, starting with 150 this year. Kent is £60 million in deficit, and foresees an abrupt fall in its income from foreign students as a consequence

of coronavirus. There are, for example, around 100,000 Chinese students at British universities, and some can pay as much as £40,000 a year in fees.

Sussex, anticipating a drastic loss of fee income, announced that “non-business critical” posts held by temporary or agency staff were to be axed and a recruitment freeze imposed. ■

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

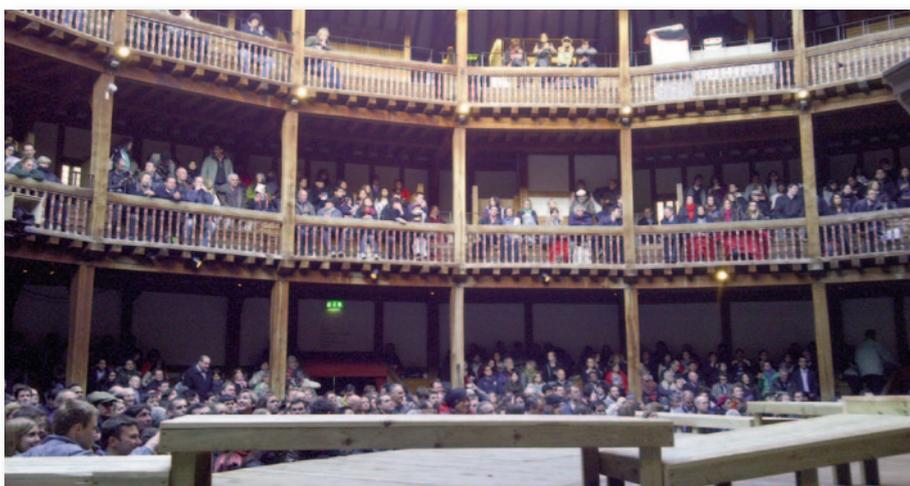
EUROPEAN UNION

Fake news? Really?

LOOKING FOR light relief in this grim situation? Then take a look at the latest publication from the European Union's External Action Service (EEAS). It indicts China and Russia for spreading fake news, including "claims that the EU is disintegrating in the face of COVID-19".

Really? Just listen to Jacques Delors, former president of the European Commission: "The climate that seems to hang over the heads of state and government and the lack of European solidarity pose a mortal danger to the European Union," he warned in a statement to a French news agency . ■

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



The Globe, London: currently showing premieres on YouTube.

Creatives organise to survive

WORKERS IN THE creative industries across Britain have sparked their trade unions into urgent action to save jobs for the future, act on behalf of freelancers threatened with destitution and safeguard the pay and conditions of full-time employees who are "furloughed".

Across the sector, the Federation of Entertainment Unions has started to coordinate action, bringing together Bectu, the Musicians' Union, Equity, the NUJ, the Professional Footballers Association (PFA), the Writers' Guild of Great Britain and the Artists' Union.

Bectu, a section of the Prospect union, represents over 40,000 who work backstage and in the many technical aspects of the sector. By mid-April it had negotiated an extension to the Job Retention Scheme with the government, enabling more of its members to access support.

Also by mid-April, Equity, the 40,000-strong union for acting and related skills, also concluded an agreement with the Society of London Theatre to support artists and stage management during the current total suspension of West End shows. The aim is to ensure long-term job security for performers and the eventual recovery of the West End – one of the most active theatrical areas in the world with 14 million theatre attendances every year. This model is one that can be rolled out across Britain.

Initiatives from the Musicians' Union include national measures to help both employed and freelance musicians to access financial support if laid off and advise on how to continue performing online.

There are over 20 major companies in the fields of orchestras, music theatre and dance companies – all with a high percentage of union membership and each needing tailored advice. Then there are myriads of freelance performers in jazz, clubs, pop, folk and casual entertainment whose work has ceased.

Other Federation members whose workers' livelihoods have ground to a halt or are in imminent jeopardy include The Writers' Guild of Great Britain (with 2,400 members), the PFA (with 4,000 members) and the Artists' Union, whose open letter to the Chancellor set a tone of urgency on behalf of its members – precarious at the best of times.

In sport, the PFA organised its Premier League players in a wide-ranging series of pledges to support the NHS, staff and players in other leagues, and action to ensure clubs survive if the pandemic goes beyond June. ■

WHAT'S ON

Coming...later

MAY

For obvious reasons, the CPBML May Day Meetings planned for Bristol, Glasgow, Leeds and London will not be taking place.

Normal service will be resumed as soon as possible. To keep up-to-date as things change, make sure you're signed up to receive our electronic newsletter (see the foot of the left-hand column, page 4).

FIGHTING COVID-19

Throughout Britain people are working out for themselves what they can do in the fight against Covid-19 Here are just two examples...

Teachers produce face protectors

In Bury, Greater Manchester, two teachers have been busy making plastic face protectors. Matt Grundy, head of Design and Technology, told the *Bury Times* he knew that his school had a well equipped technology department and that it would be wrong to leave this idle when it could be put to good use.

Working with fellow teacher Vicky Craig they put together a design over a couple of days. Using all available materials in the school dozens of face masks were produced and distributed to a local supermarket, care home and funeral parlour.

The school has appealed to local companies to supply polypropylene between 0.5 and 0.8 millimetres thick so that more masks can be made. Already a local sign-making company has stepped forward.

Mutual aid in Kent

IN KENT 23-year-old Francis O'Brien has set up a network to support Covid-19 Mutual Aid Facebook groups. O'Brien used his communications and events skills to ensure that people who need to self-isolate have community support to receive their medicines and shopping.

Having set up a mutual aid group in his own area, O'Brien was approached by others for advice on how to do the same in their own locality. There are now 15,000 people connected through a network of groups across Kent. Virtually the whole of the county is covered. ■

Workers in the NHS, and all of us who use it should insist epidemic with such limited resources...

Yes, it's a crisis. And time

IN THE current crisis there are voices which say the working class "must just get on with it" and not ask awkward questions. But constant questioning is how human beings learn and in this novel situation, suppressing questions is not a good strategy – especially when it comes to the NHS.

Big questions are being asked. They include (among many) why do we have so few acute beds, and why are we short of nurses? Why do we have so little personal protective equipment (PPE)? Why don't we have the capacity to produce our own supply? Similarly, with production of ventilators? How can we have so many eminent scientists working on tests, vaccines and potential cures but so little capacity to produce any of these commodities at scale? All good questions.

Asking these questions hasn't prevented NHS and social care staff demonstrating an exceptional industriousness, capacity and commitment during the Covid-19 crisis. They have more than lived up to the regard and esteem felt for those services by the general public.

Many NHS staff are working 12-hour days five days a week. More than 8,000 former nurses and midwives across all four parts of the UK who had left the profession responded to a call to re-join and are now on the Nursing and Midwifery Council's (NMC) Covid-19 temporary register.

A further 12,000 former NHS staff from other occupations have signed up to return during the crisis. Around 750,000 people have signed up to join the NHS volunteer register to support the service.

The Nightingale Hospital at the Excel centre in East London has been fitted out to accommodate 4,000 patients in a remarkable feat of collaboration of building workers, NHS staff, suppliers and the Army. Several more similar facilities are in preparation. So positive action and questioning can go hand in hand. But every ventilator needs a skilled nurse to manage it: a 4,000-bed facility is only as useful as the capacity to staff it.

Why the nursing shortages?

A mere nine years ago in 2011, the NHS was slashing the number of student nurses in training in England and in Scotland. Experienced nursing lecturers had received



Workers

Thursday 16 April: Staff at Whipps Cross Hospital, east London, during the Clap for the NHS. Inset: force to applaud their colleagues, blue lights flashing, and were applauded back. They were joined

redundancy letters. A motion condemning this was raised at the University and College Union's annual congress in May of that year.

It's hard to believe now, but staff were being called to meetings where the "over-provision" of nurses was being discussed.

The coalition government at the time anticipated a steady stream of nurses from the EU, and the trend of EU qualified nurses joining the UK Nursing and Midwifery Register was evident. That includes nurses from Italy and Spain, two countries that in recent weeks have called on those nurses to return home if they possibly can.

It takes three years' training for a nurse to become registered, so the devastating consequences of the 2011 reductions were really felt as the diminished cohorts qualified in 2014. To compound matters the Treasury (not the Department of Health!) under

George Osborne decided that from August 2017 student nurses and allied health professionals would have to take out loans to cover tuition fees of £9,000 a year, and even more for subsistence.

So, until the recent Budget announcement of some help towards subsistence, nurses have had to pay the entire bill for their training, even though they spend half their training time working for the NHS on clinical placement.

The members of that very 2017 cohort, who have spent the most from their personal pockets to qualify, are the third-year students volunteering to step up on to the wards to cover for the experienced colleagues deployed to cover the Covid surge.

The decision to introduce tuition fees was not the only attack on the nursing profession in 2011: the budget for "continuing

that never again can it be allowed to face such an

me to ask hard questions



Police and ambulance workers turned out in support of the NHS (at a suitable social distance) by local residents.

professional development” (CPD) for registered nurses was slashed too.

The general public might have seen this as the reduction of the occasional training day. But CPD for registered nurses is a vital part of the NHS infrastructure. Newly qualified registered nurses have many skills, but they are not critical care nurses, emergency department nurses or infectious disease specialists. Those skills require further training – typically undertaken by the registered nurse in post in those departments.

The attack on this type of post-registration training has had two impacts. The first is obvious: fewer staff qualifying with this type of qualification. The second is less obvious: staff working in those departments have left the profession altogether due to the stress of working without the requisite skill set.

At least the NHS was starting to ques-

tion the reliance on overseas staff, even before the crisis hit. NHS England chief Simon Stevens, speaking in March 2019, echoes what *Workers* and many others had been saying for some time: we must stop “denuding low-income countries of health professionals they need”.

Underestimating

But the attitude underpinning the attacks on nurse training and CPD is deeply ingrained. There is a long history of underestimating the skill level of registered nurses. No one questions whether a physiotherapist or pharmacist needs a degree, but it is common to do so for nurses. To meet budgets, managers often substitute less-qualified associate nurses, when the evidence shows that higher numbers of registered staff are linked to better outcomes for patients.

Nurses appreciate applause for NHS staff, but many say that what they really need is a different sort of “valuing of nurses”. Even a small percentage reduction in the number of registered nurses leaving the service prematurely would make a huge difference to workload.

So, one outcome of this crisis must be an NHS workforce strategy which addresses the pay and conditions of registered staff, including the urgent need to boost the CPD budget for specialist post-registration courses.

It is said the country owes the NHS a debt. One solution for nurses who have graduated after having to pay tuition fees would be a scheme whereby if they commit to work for the NHS for three years, the government will cancel their debt. The government could and should go further, and waive tuition fees altogether for student nurses who demonstrate a career commitment to the NHS over a realistic period of time.

Acute beds

That Britain has fewer acute beds per head of population than other comparable European countries is another process which has occurred over a number of years and which has been well documented by *Workers*. As the provision of intensive care beds and specialist equipment is related to the number of available acute beds, no wonder we are deficient in those areas too.

‘The attitude underpinning the attacks on nurse training are deeply ingrained.....’

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the emerging NHS had a significant supply of specialist beds for infectious diseases. But a sloppy mantra (taught on medical and nursing courses) was that the risks of infectious disease were receding. The new norm was the need to focus on disease caused by lifestyle factors.

This thinking led to the closure first of many infectious disease hospitals, then of all of them. The idea was that the NHS could get by with providing a few “flexible” beds within general hospitals where the “limited number” of infectious patients could be treated.

So we have several questions to address now. What shall we do with the capacity and equipment in the emergency Nightingale hospitals once this crisis passes? How do we evaluate the risk from infectious disease now?

The last election saw a promise to build new hospitals, but this was largely intended to improve the standard of existing stock rather than to expand bed numbers. In addition to a workforce strategy, NHS planners need to review their provision of acute beds.

Beds need equipment

Another set of urgent questions relates to the provision of the equipment – and these questions need to be addressed way beyond the health sector. In a few short weeks the whole country knows that PPE stands for personal protective equipment. Suddenly everyone has seen videos showing that much PPE is made in backroom sweatshops in Asia (like many of the clothes we wear, if we are honest).

One positive indication is the way that workers all over the country have shown that

Continued on page 8

Continued from page 7

they have the skill to produce PPE here – from the small clothing companies that have switched from sports kits to scrubs or the Royal Mint, which switched production from coins to full face visors in a little over 48 hours.

Despite the years of manufacturing industry decline there is still, remarkably, a reservoir of skill residing in small companies and design and technology departments in schools and colleges. The stumbling block is the lack of capital investment in plant to allow manufacture at scale. Capital has gone elsewhere on the globe, following the cheapest labour to maximise profit.

All the trade unions have been involved in the PPE debate, rightly so, as the involvement of the people who need to wear it is vital. Consider the aprons which work fine in hospital but blow around uncontrollably if used by ambulance staff in outdoor locations. Or look at the facial bruising experienced by staff who wear visors for four hours or more.

Now those end users need to maintain that involvement and demand a factory-to-ward process under our control that is secure and dependable in a crisis or in war.

Skill and innovation

Similarly, there is a reservoir of engineering skill and innovation in ventilator production. When this crisis started there were only 8,000 ventilators in Britain, compared with 25,000 in Germany. Few of us had even thought to ask how many we had but we do have workers whose job title is Emergency Planner: had they sought to alert us?

Since March we have seen companies such as Unipart, Rolls Royce, JCB and Dyson collaborating to produce the ventilators that the NHS needs. Clinicians at University College London are working alongside F1 engineering teams, setting their competitive differences aside, to produce Continuous Positive Airway Pressure Devices (CPAPDs) that might actually obviate the need for ventilator mass production at some time in the future.

How many ventilators will we have by the time this present crisis runs its course?



Park Hospital, Davyhulme, near Manchester, on 5 July 1948, the first day of the NHS. Good publicity for health minister Aneurin Bevan (second from left), but the true foundations of the NHS lie in a generation of questioning health workers.

A questioning generation

THE BRITISH working class has a good history of “doing the 24-hour job” and asking the questions at the same time – during the Second World War, for example. Some members of that generation are still alive to tell the tale.

Although the origins of the NHS are often attributed to a named politician, the true foundations of the NHS lie in a generation of questioning health workers who provided the emergency hospitals scheme during World War 2. These were workers who had experienced the pre-NHS system with all its difficulties, and who found it wanting when war broke out and there were many civilian and military casualties.

During the war these health care staff experienced the advantages of centralised planning to bring about improvement and

they vowed it must never go back to the old system. Even while the war was raging the discussion was raging too, evidenced by the book *Health for All*, which was published during the war in 1942.

The book’s third chapter includes this interesting observation: “Until war became imminent it was only with the greatest difficulty that anyone could be persuaded to regard the chaotic and anachronistic structure of medical practice and hospital services as of any real importance to the nation. Weaknesses were admitted but were generally excused as being part of our traditional British method, and anyone who suggested serious changes was considered either to be personally disgruntled or politically a revolutionary.”

Something similar is happening now. ■

More importantly, how much manufacturing capacity will we have to produce at scale? Too few staff. Too little training. Not enough beds. A shortage of equipment. Never, ever

again can we leave ourselves so exposed, so dependent on others, so far short of what we need to run our own health service in time of emergency or war. ■

No one can say Britain wasn't warned about its vaccine capacity, and yet very little was done...

Wanted: vaccines

"WE NEED protection. Major epidemics and pandemics are not a thing of the past. A few years ago the threat of avian flu enjoyed a spell in the headlines. Public interest waned but the threat has not gone away. The UK needs the capacity and the speed of response to provide vaccines at the required scale quickly in an outbreak."

That was business secretary Greg Clark, speaking in December 2018 at the launch of the Vaccine Manufacturing and Innovation Centre UK (VMIC). He pledged £66 million in government funding for the project.

It sounds like a lot of money, but the scientists involved had been hoping for more. "It's probably not quite big enough, and it's not built yet. For an extra £20m you could have got one that did what it needed to do," Professor John Bell told *The Times* in March 2020 (as UK Life Sciences Champion he reports to the prime minister).

Progress has been slow – with hindsight, desperately slow. The ambition was only to have the first products emerging from the VMIC in the Oxford Science Park some time in 2022. And the scale of ambition seems slight, too: "The centre ... is expected to create up to 50 jobs in the local area..." said UK Research and Innovation in a statement.

Clark spoke about developing a large-scale vaccine manufacturing capability, and the idea has figured in government reports. A working group has been set up. But there have been no reports of action.

Developed here

And this in the country where the science of vaccines was first developed, by Edward Jenner at the end of the 18th century, and which used to have a thriving vaccines industry. When polio vaccination was introduced in the 1950s it was produced by two British companies, Burroughs Wellcome and Glaxo. Smallpox vaccine was produced by the Lister Institute at Elstree, Hertfordshire.

Now there is little left of a once large industry – just two small plants in Speke, near Liverpool, nowhere near sufficient to supply what is needed for Covid-19. GSK, the British-based company formed from the merger of Glaxo with SmithKline Beecham, is still a major producer of vaccines. But the vaccines it sells here are made in Belgium.

To underline the country's dependence



on vaccines from abroad, when the VMIC was launched, its industrial partners were two foreign multinationals: Janssen, a Belgian subsidiary of US corporation Johnson & Johnson, and another US corporation, Merck, Sharpe & Dohme.

And the good news that a Brighton-based startup company, Stabilitech, has gained funding from China to develop a vaccine against Covid-19 has been tempered by the realisation that it will be made outside Britain (probably elsewhere in Europe). According to a report in the *Daily Telegraph*, "Stabilitech fears that British families will be among the last to benefit from its treatment."

Britain's lack of vaccine production capacity could cost lives. A report in *The Times* on 15 March spelled it out: "There are concerns that drugmakers preparing to produce a vaccine for the coronavirus may not

be able to meet demand, meaning countries with manufacturing plants could refuse to export to the UK."

Finding a vaccine that works may prove difficult. Some 17 years on from SARS and 7 years after MERS there are no commercially available vaccines against these two coronaviruses despite numerous concerted attempts across the globe. If one was to be developed against Covid-19 the virus could still mutate, necessitating a new vaccine every season.

When he developed the smallpox vaccine Jenner was already a Fellow of the Royal Society, having gained election for a paper he wrote revealing how the baby cuckoo (and not, as previously believed, its parents) ejected its hosts' eggs from the nest. He might, perhaps, have been quick to see how the cuckoo of finance capital has thrived by ejecting industry from Britain. ■

Keen to profit from the Covid-19 crisis, transport companies while ensuring that workers bear the brunt of the reductions

Transport safety takes a



L8NEK/shutterstock.com

Liverpool Street Station, London, during the lockdown.

AS WITH so many other industries, Britain's transport industry has been hit hard by the Covid-19 emergency. Many operators along with their employees face an uncertain future, and the airlines have effectively shut down.

The first casualty was airline Flybe, already in deep financial trouble. Covid-19 delivered the coup de grâce, and thousands were made redundant. The long-term viability of some airports is also in doubt.

The government's offer of bailouts has really got the scum rising to the top. First in the queue with his begging bowl was Richard Branson, laying off Virgin airline staff from the safety of his private Caribbean island while sitting on millions made from his

airline, rail and other interests.

The reaction to the crisis by Stena Line, the company that runs many of what used to be British Rail Sealink ferry routes, was to stop its staff receiving sick pay, followed quickly by the withdrawal of a paltry pay increase. It then announced that 600 staff would be put on the government's "furlough" scheme, which allows an employer to lay off staff at no cost to them with the government paying those staff 80 per cent of their normal pay.

Redundancies

Stena refused union demands to top up furlough pay to 100 per cent. More worryingly, the company also announced that talks with

unions would begin on making 150 staff redundant.

Not to be outdone, P&O Ferries announced that it would reduce rates of pay, change the terms and conditions of its seafarers, add no-strike clauses, and replace any existing British seafarers with foreign crews. P&O's owner is the global corporation, DP World, which is based in the United Arab Emirates, and scheduled to pay a \$332 million dividend to private shareholders on 29 April.

While the British government has so far resisted calls to bail out the ferry companies, the Irish government has recognised the importance of its ferry links by sinking €15 million into maintaining key routes over

s have been eagerly queuing up with their begging bowls,
s in services...

back seat to profit

the next three months. Maritime unions Nautilus, the RMT and TSSA have all pressured the British government to follow this lead.

Britain's rail industry has fared somewhat better. With the private franchise holders that run passenger services facing financial meltdown as passenger numbers plummeted to less than 5 per cent of normal levels, the government has effectively nationalised them. The franchise holders were given five days to choose between full government takeover and a management contract – they all went for the management contract.

So the government is now directly running two franchises, Northern (which was taken over only weeks before the crisis began) and LNER. It effectively runs the others via the management contracts.

So Covid-19 has killed off the system of rail franchises in place since 1996 when British Rail passenger service railways were privatised. No one expects it to return, not least because it was imploding under the weight of its inherent contradictions, with many franchises in deep financial trouble. It is thought that the long-awaited Williams Review into the future of the railways was going to recommend the ending of franchising anyway.

Emergency agreement

The government quickly brought the rail operators and Network Rail together with the unions to conclude an Emergency Measures Agreement. It contained commitments such as no redundancies, designed to ensure industrial peace, with all parties committed to keeping the railways running.

Perhaps inevitably, that industrial peace was short-lived. With the government's mes-

'Covid-19 has killed off the system of rail franchises in place since British Rail was privatised...'

sage being "Stay At Home", a skeleton timetable was adopted to allow key workers to get to work. Many rail staff have been told to work at home where possible, and many others have just been sent home.

Lip service

It soon became clear that many train operators and rail contractors were taking a "business as usual" approach. The government's advice, bolstered by the Health & Safety Executive and the Office for Rail and Road (the rail industry health and safety enforcement authority), is that social distancing – a minimum distance of 2 metres between individuals – must be maintained at all times. Yet a good many employers initially ignored it, and then paid lip service to it.

Rail staff were complaining to unions in droves that their employers were not taking steps to keep adequate social distancing. Many employers have clearly not undertaken appropriate risk assessments and put in place control measures required by health and safety laws.

Not only that, but many ticket office and revenue protection staff were being forced into work. Yet because in many cases there were more of them than passengers, they were twiddling their thumbs for most of the time.

The rail unions pointed out that many staff being forced to attend workplaces were not needed to run a safe and secure railway at this time, resulting in them being exposed unnecessarily, particularly when travelling to and from work. Indeed, a number of them have now died from Covid-19 and that number is likely to rise steeply.

Cannon fodder

Government ministers and senior rail managers have thanked the staff in videos from the safety of their living rooms for being on the front line of the fight against Covid-19, but many staff feel they are being treated as mere cannon fodder.

Pressure from the unions has resulted in a significant reduction in staffing. But the government and the employers remain accused by unions of putting commercial considerations before the health and safety of rail employees, by insisting that some ticket offices stay open and staff continue to

'Rail staff were complaining to unions in droves that their employers were not taking steps to keep adequate social distancing...'

check tickets. Yet if the railway were a free service, the additional losses would pale into insignificance against the massive costs already being incurred by taxpayers to keep services running.

Network Rail also came under pressure to reduce the number of major engineering works scheduled for the Easter period. Some jobs were indeed postponed, but the suspicion remains that some were going ahead with commercial considerations being put before of health and safety. And it is unclear whether the necessary Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) will be made available to allow tasks to be performed which require workers to be less than 2 metres apart.

The government's somewhat less than firm message to "Stay At Home" clearly hasn't got through to many other employers who continue to force staff who are most certainly not key workers to turn up to work, and this has impacted on the transport system particularly in London.

The London Underground reduced its services, not only in the face of a drop off in passenger numbers, but also because at one point around a third of its workforce was either off sick or self-isolating. Large numbers of commuters continued to turn up, notably construction workers and cleaners, security guards, street cleaners and postal workers. The resultant and unhealthy crowding has been seen in photos plastered all over the media.

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Uxbridge tube station, 12 April: a clear message.

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RMT General Secretary Mick Cash commented that “since this unprecedented crisis unfolded, London Transport workers have responded magnificently and are a credit to the City. Engineering and station staff, cleaners, train drivers, control staff, Docklands Light Railway, cable car, river boat, support staff and the rest of the huge team that move London’s essential workers around the capital have risen to the occasion.

“Let’s be clear ‘all in it together’ means nothing without full support for the workforce who have kept London moving since this crisis began. All of the issues RMT has outlined are critical as the emergency continues and we will not rest whilst our members in the front line are still raising concerns with us. All of them have to have their safety, health and livelihoods properly protected and that is exactly what we will continue to fight for.”

London bus workers have become

“‘All in it together’ means nothing without full support for the workforce...”

increasingly concerned about their health and safety after several of their colleagues died from Covid-19. Bus drivers all over the country have been expected to perform their duties providing a vital service to get NHS staff, shop workers and care staff to work, but most are doing so without the protection of screens or PPE.

Rail unions RMT and TSSA issued advice to rail and bus members that they should either refuse to start work or stop work on health and safety grounds if employers do not provide adequate protection from Covid-19.

Furlough

While the passenger franchises and their employees are now enjoying the cosy warmth of government protection, the open access passenger rail operators Grand Central and Hull Trains have been forced by the crisis to suspend all operations and lay off their staff on the furlough scheme with no top up. Aslef and RMT have demanded government intervention and financial support, while TSSA has called on the government to nationalise the companies by taking them into LNER.

Many other rail operators look to follow suit and lay off staff on furlough leave. The rail unions are determined that all furloughed staff have assurances that their wages will be met in full with no detriment to their service or other employment conditions.

RMT described as “heartless” a decision

by Select Service Partner (SSP) to lay off low-paid catering staff employed across the railway network in station outlets such as Ritazza and Upper Crust. They were left high and dry by their employer at a day’s notice, and told that SSP would not pay them while they waited for the furlough scheme to be up and running. The union complained bitterly about SSP’s unwillingness to engage with officials over their decision.

Mick Cash said, “In an outrageous show of contempt for their hard working employees, SSP has chosen to protect its own interests rather than support its low paid workers during this crisis. This is the textbook definition of a ‘bad boss’.

“SSP workers now have no idea how they will pay their bills and make ends meet until the Government’s scheme is operational.

“Staff employed at one of SSP’s subsidiaries, Rail Gourmet, now have security that 80 per cent of their income will be paid by their employer during this time. This must be extended to all of SSP’s rail caterers as a matter of urgency.”

Cash called on the owners and managers of rail stations (Network Rail and passenger franchise holders) to demand that SSP look after its workers. “That SSP has so far refused to protect its workers during this period of uncertainty proves once and for all that their time on the rail industry is up and their workers should be brought in-house, to ensure they receive the basic protections that they deserve.”

As this Covid-19 emergency unfolds, there are bound to be further battles ahead to protect transport workers as the end of lockdown draws nearer, both from the virus, and from the callous employers that will seek to make them pay for the crisis.

In transport, as in many areas of the economy where people simply cannot work from home, workers are having to grapple with issues such as how do we continue to work while ensuring minimum reasonable risk to ourselves and other workers?

Trade unions are dealing with these problems, and the key to a successful approach is to take responsibility for a workplace. Some unions will have to up their game if they are to adequately respond to the challenges. ■

The European Union poses as the protector of the environment – despite a disastrous record...

EU vs the environment



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17 June 2019, Weisweiler, Germany. Aerial view of brown coal power plant close to Aachen, the most polluting plant in the country. For all its image of green awareness, in 2017 Germany alone was responsible for over a quarter – 26.4 per cent – of the EU's entire energy-related greenhouse gas emissions

IS THE environment, including action to mitigate the effects of climate change, at risk following Britain's withdrawal from the EU? This, we are told, should be our main concern about the environment. The straight answer is no, it is not at all at risk. That should be obvious, yet to many it's not.

The EU is the only national or supranational government that has the principles of free market capitalism written into its founding charter. Its default approach is that the free market works. And that is precisely why it has been a disaster for the environment. And having left – formally at least – we absolutely must not repeat its mistakes.

Let's start with global warming. The EU loves global warming because the emissions that contribute to it cross national boundaries. That allows it to muscle in and take over from national governments. And that's what happened with carbon dioxide (CO₂)

emissions and the dieselpgate scandal.

The origins of the diesel scandal go back to the 1970s, when the European market for heavier oil products was shrinking as households turned to natural gas for heating, and a raft of French nuclear power stations started coming onstream. Desperate for new markets, the oil industry started looking at the market for diesel cars.

As luck would have it – luck for the oil companies, that is – emission-led global warming started to become a political issue in the 1980s (it had been a scientific issue for at least a century), leading to the formation of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (the IPCC) in 1988.

From an oil industry perspective it was really fortuitous: all the focus at the time was on CO₂. There was no attempt to control so-called "black carbon", sooty particles, known at the time to be harmful to health but

not identified as a greenhouse emission, nor nitrogen oxides.

But with the climate panic in full swing, human health took a back seat. The EU duly switched to encouraging diesel in a big way.

That brought us rising quantities of black carbon – not even listed as a climate problem in the UN's Kyoto Protocol when it was adopted in 1997. Scientists now believe that black carbon from a variety of sources is second only to carbon dioxide as a contributor to global warming. It's a killer, too.

And then there's NO_x (nitric oxide and nitrogen oxide, also nitrous oxide). For years (2000 to 2014) EU regulations and the standards known as Euro 3, 4 and 5 allowed diesels to emit three times as much NO_x as petrol cars. Now – we're on to Euro 6 – it's just 33 per cent more. That has consequences for health and the environment. Nitric oxide and nitrogen oxide are serious atmospheric pollutants, leading to smog and acid rain. Nitrous oxide is a powerful greenhouse gas.

Dictating

But 20 years ago the EU was confidently dictating policy. Diesel was given tax advantages by governments across the EU (though not in Britain), and diesel car use rocketed: in Western Europe it rose from 13.8 per cent of passenger car registrations in 1990 to 53.1 per cent in 2014.

Even now, with diesel mired in scandal, figures from European car makers say it accounted for 35.1 per cent of new car sales in the EU as a whole in 2018.

So did the EU's shift to diesel help to reduce global warming? No, not according to two researchers from Luxembourg and Germany who looked at the total figures: they say it added to the problem, mainly because of the large number of diesels that entered the market not fitted with particulate filters. Also, they point to the higher carbon footprint involved in the production and transport of diesel.

And all the while, it turned out, the car manufacturers were fiddling their figures.

Still, the oil companies are happy. And so are the European car companies, because overwhelmingly the diesel cars sold

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were produced by them. Japan turned to hybrid cars instead, and achieved much greater CO2 savings.

Not only that, but with hybrid and electric cars the future, Japan gained a march in technology development. After making hay for a couple of decades, the European car manufacturers are now desperately trying to catch up.

The EU banned cheat devices in 2007, but never checked to see whether they were being used. It said it left that up to national governments. UK governments have never said whether they carried out any checks. Germany, Spain, Slovakia and the Czech Republic all said they had not done so.

There's a revealing chart in the European Court of Auditors' report on the scandal. It shows the divergence between test results for CO2 emissions and real-world results for new passenger cars from 2001 to 2016. In 2001, real world emissions were 7 per cent above the results from official testing. By 2016 that gap had soared to 40 per cent.

What are we left with after 20-odd years of the EU's flagship environmental policy? An avoidable increase in global warming. A growing technological gap with Japan. Untold damage to human health.

And large numbers of car owners in places like London who from October next year, if they live between the North and South Circular Roads and run a diesel made before 2015, will effectively be unable to drive the cars the government encouraged them to buy – unless they pay £4,450 a year for the privilege.

Lax

We're left with cities like London falling foul of the EU's pollution standards because their streets are full of cars produced and tested under the lax EU regime belching out levels of pollutants way above what the tests said they were. Some 60 per cent of the roads in Britain exceed World Health Organization pollution standards. If you live in a town or city in Britain you are 25 times as likely to die from exposure to air pollution as in a car crash.

Sickeningly, the EU is still posing as an

'The EU banned cheat devices in 2007, but never checked to see whether they were being used.'

ecowarrior holding Britain to account over its pollution record. It even initiated legal action against Britain, and other countries, for failing to fine Volkswagen!

There is a lesson here: a sovereign state charged with maintaining the health and safety of its people should never outsource its responsibilities to companies or supranational bodies – especially the EU, which has capitalism written into its constitution.

All this is ignored by organisations like Friends of the Earth. "80% of our environmental laws come from the European Union (EU). These laws may be weakened, removed, or harder to enforce if we're outside the EU. Therefore, Brexit could pose a serious threat to our natural environment and our health," it says.

Idiocy

Friends of the Earth obviously hasn't been reading the columns written by eco-warrior and self-proclaimed supporter of the EU George Monbiot. Here's a selection of his thoughts on the EU's Common Agricultural Policy: June 2016 – "All the good things the EU has done for nature are more than counteracted by this bureaucratic idiocy." October 2018 – "I'm a remainer, but there's one result of Brexit I can't wait to see: leaving the EU's common agricultural policy. This is the farm subsidy system that spends €50bn (£44bn) a year on achieving none of its objectives. It is among the most powerful drivers of environmental destruction in the northern hemisphere."

In a nutshell, the EU subsidises landowners by paying them for owning or using land. Just as long as they are not smallholders: you need to own at least 5

hectares, about 12 acres. Note it has to be open land, so get rid of ponds, wide hedges, trees big enough to form a canopy. As Monbiot says, it's "a €55 billion incentive to destroy wildlife habitats".

Friends of the Earth Scotland is equally misguided, saying, "It is largely thanks to 45 years of European laws on industrial pollution, water quality, nature protection and clean air that the environment we live in has improved."

Yet if that's so, how come a *Times* investigation last year reported that "Dangerous pollutants in England's waterways have reached their highest levels since modern testing began...with no river in the country now certified as safe for swimmers."?

Agriculture

And how come greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture in the EU overall have been rising since 2012, with the latest official EU figures, for 2017 showing emissions higher than they've been since 2005?

Globally, around a third of all greenhouse gas emissions come from agriculture. Unless we get to grips with that, low or zero net carbon will remain a pipe dream. That means using all the tools at our disposal, including GM crops and gene editing.

But irrational fears have held up progress in the application of GM technology. Thirty years ago, when GM was new, the fears were more understandable; not now.

Outside Europe, GM crops have been widely planted over the past couple of decades. Currently they are used in about 12 per cent of the world's cropland. Billions of people have eaten GM crops, multiple times, and scientists have conducted more than 130,000 studies on GM technologies, and there is no evidence of physical harm, no evidence of changes to human chromosomes, from eating GM food.

GM crops could significantly lower farming's carbon and greenhouse footprint by reducing tillage and fertilisers and the fuels used in using them. Yet we're still living with the EU's ancient, 17-year-old directive on GM foods – and with the European Court of Justice's unscientific ruling that the new CRISPR gene editing technique falls within

the ambit of that directive.

If you want to look at real, proven damage to the environment, look at the EU. If EU environmental policy is so great, how come populations of Europe's farmland birds are in freefall – down 55 per cent in the past three decades and at their lowest since records began?

Part of the problem – just a part but an important one – is the EU's approach to companies that transgress its laws: the remedy with the water companies is to impose financial penalties – such as the record £126 million imposed by Ofwat on Southern Water in June last year for dumping sewage onto beaches and into rivers and streams.

The EU loves fines. They garner headlines and give the impression, the illusion, that it is doing something about pollution. Not so. Companies just treat the fines as part of the cost of doing business – and pass that cost on to the consumer. Once again, the consumer pays.

Lock them up

There's a lesson for the environment here. Stop fining companies, or at least stop just fining. Instead, make pollution or Volkswagen-style environmental cheating by a company a criminal offence. Lock up boards of directors. Take the profit motive out of the provision of water.

The environmental catastrophists love to talk about risk in the abstract, especially the risks of Brexit. Friends of the Earth (those false friends, again) paid good money in 2018 for a "risk analysis" of UK environmental policy post-Brexit. Note, there was no opportunity analysis.

This so-called analysis concluded, among other things, that under any Brexit scenario – from "crashing out" to a Canada-

'If you want to look at real, proven damage to the environment, look at the EU.'



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Does the EU really protect water quality? Illegal sludge pouring into the Baltic Sea in Latvia.

style deal – habitats and birds were at "very high risk". How come? (Especially given that birds and habitats are demonstrably at extremely high risk inside the EU.)

Dig into the report and you will see that the "very high risk" status is not because there are any plans to tear up environmental legislation, or withdraw from the intergovernmental Ramsar Convention on wild birds. No, the authors claim "very high risk" partly because the Conservative Party is deemed to be environmentally unfriendly but mainly because the EU is not there to police our government!

That's not a scientifically determined risk. It's just political prejudice coupled with an assumption that the people of Britain will never demand and enforce higher environmental standards than the EU.

How can we protect the environment? When it comes to energy, keep on with nuclear, or the task will be impossible. Build more nuclear stations. Put money behind the idea of small nuclear reactors, where Britain – and Rolls Royce in particular – is a pioneer. Invest in carbon capture and storage for coal, free of the endless bureaucracy involved in getting the EU's permission for it.

We know how not to decarbonise the economy: by exporting the carbon footprint, getting goods made abroad. That's cheating the figures, looking good while adding hugely to the real carbon footprint.

If the EU is a disaster, what should we do to protect the environment?

It will take political action to force the energy companies, for example, to offset all their emissions and factor that into their prices and into lower profits – after all, nuclear power operators have to factor in disposal and storage of their waste products for thousands of years...so do the same for fossil fuels.

But remember dieselgate. Leave it to the EU and its capital-friendly testing regimes and we'll get official zero carbon but in reality pump out more of the stuff. To make real progress will take independent testing, repeated at random intervals, combined with real penalties for infringement.

Use reason not hysteria. Science not superstition. Steer clear of the EU's regulatory clutches. Never trust a capitalist monopoly. Take control. Take it back from the EU. Take it back from capitalism. Take control for ourselves. ■

During the global coronavirus pandemic Cuba is standing in solidarity but also of the expertise and treatments possible

Coronavirus: Cuba leads t



Years of investment in clinicians and in biotechnology and drug discovery have put Cuba into a strong position to fight coronavirus – and help

IN THE current fight against coronavirus Cuba has set the standard for international solidarity. While fighting the virus in its own shores, Cuba has so far sent 1,200 health workers to 21 countries – from the Americas to Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

It has not just sent medical staff. Its leading antiviral drug interferon alpha 2b has been used in Italy and China, among other countries.

Cuba's Henry Reeve medical brigade, for example, has gone to Suriname, joining the more than 200 Cuban physicians already

there. The brigade comprises 51 health professionals, three-quarters of whom are women. More than half of them have previously carried out medical cooperation missions in other countries.

On 21 March members of the Henry Reeve brigade arrived in Italy to help to fight the coronavirus which had killed more than 4,000 people there. The Cuban doctors and nurses were to work in Lombardy, the country's worst affected region.

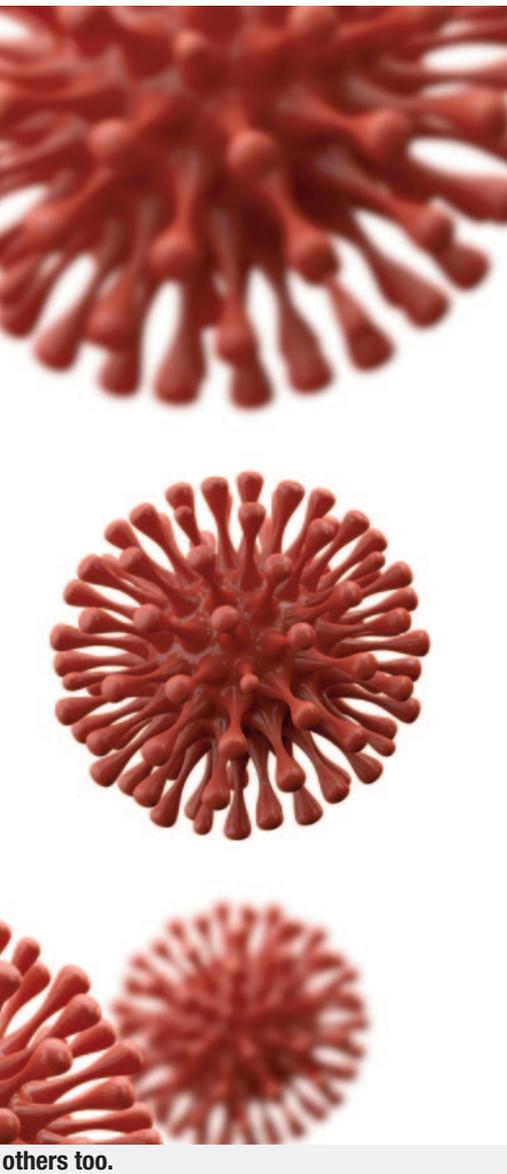
Britain too has had help from Cuba. Early in March, *MS Braemar*, a transatlantic

cruise ship carrying nearly a thousand passengers and crew, mostly from Britain, found itself stranded for a week in the Caribbean, after five of its passengers tested positive for coronavirus, and dozens more passengers and crew members were in isolation with flu-like symptoms.

Barbados and the Bahamas, both part of the Commonwealth, refused to let it dock. The British government then asked the USA and Cuba to allow it entry. The USA refused. The *Braemar* finally docked in the Cuban port of Mariel on 18 March.

out as a shining example not just of international
 e when a country is run in the interests of its people...

the way



others too.

Passengers who were well enough to travel back to Britain were taken to the airport in Havana. Those who were too sick to fly were offered treatment in Cuban hospitals, even though at that time there had been only ten confirmed cases in the whole of Cuba.

One passenger tweeted, “We should all remember what Cuba has done for us, stepping in when none of the British Commonwealth countries and protectorates in the region offered any help.” Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab also had the

decency to thank Cuba.

“Prevention and containment of new coronavirus require the efforts of the entire international community. Let’s reinforce health, care, solidarity and international cooperation,” said Cuba’s Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez.

In another contribution to human welfare in the fight against coronavirus, the Cuban pharmaceutical industry – one of the world’s leading biotechnology centres – is guaranteeing production of proven, high-efficacy treatment medications, including recombinant human interferon alpha 2b, as well as another group of drugs that are included in protocols for treating patients with this disease and with any ensuing complications.

Cuban technology is also being used to produce the interferon in Jilin, China, at the joint venture Changchun Heber Biological Technology facility.

Cuba supplies interferon to its own public health service and internationally. Cuba has been using it as preventive medicine as well as in treating patients confirmed as having the virus, via nebulisation, the quickest way to reach the lungs and have a beneficial impact in the early stages of infection.

Eulogio Pimentel Vázquez, general director of the Center for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology, says, “We have a total supply of the product that is practically equivalent to the amount needed to treat all those who were infected in China.”

Also included in Cuba’s protocols for treatment are 21 other drugs, including antivirals, antiarrhythmics, and antibiotics that may be used to treat complications that may arise in patients suffering from the virus.

Continuing care

The Ministry of Public Health has assured Cubans that this internationalism does not affect the number of specialists, resources or intensive care requirements needed to treat patients with the coronavirus or other diseases in the country. Cuba will continue to guarantee the care and treatment of its citizens with non-communicable diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular conditions or diabetes. This is because Cuba has 8.2 doctors for every thousand people, a far better ratio than the USA (2.6), South Korea (2.4), China (1.8) or Italy (4.1).

“Solidarity is the only way to beat this pandemic.”

Teams of medical specialists are providing constant care and monitoring. Cuba is carrying out a plan of intense activity, emphasising sanitary-hygienic measures, food production, the sale of cleaning materials, protection of children and the elderly, and national unity.

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the World Health Organization, has praised Cuba’s efforts, saying, “solidarity among all is the only way to beat this pandemic.” By contrast, the US government has demanded that countries refuse to accept the Cuban medical aid missions.

The US embassy in Havana falsely accused Cuba of sending these missions only in order to recover “money lost by countries that abandoned this abusive program”. It also falsely accused Cuba of “withholding most of the salary of doctors and nurses in international medical missions exposing them to terrible working conditions”.

In 2019, President Trump had, absurdly, added Cuba to a US list of countries allegedly failing to combat “human trafficking”, claiming that its overseas medical aid was a form of trafficking, and he set up a programme to discredit and sabotage Cuba’s healthcare efforts. Has anyone seen any US medical aid missions?

Cuba’s people have created one of the world’s best national health services. Cuba has not only educated enough doctors and nurses to care for its own people, it has also educated enough health care workers to care for people in many other countries. Since 1960, 400,000 Cuban medical professionals have worked in 164 countries, saving millions of lives and improving the lives of hundreds of millions of people.

At the time of going to press, the number infected in Cuba had risen to 923, with 31 deaths. The country’s international work continues. ■

In Wales – as in Scotland – shrill voices calling for more devolution needs any more devolution. The coronavirus crisis has made

Wales – more unity, not



Carl DeAbreu Photography/shutterstock.com

The Welsh Assembly in Cardiff, where the rules which specify its electorate have recently been altered.

EVERYTHING COMES under an intense spotlight in times of crisis. Things which we have taken for granted as part of the established order are suddenly thrown into sharp relief. Britain has got used to devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales, but when the going has got tough has devolution helped or hindered?

For a sense of what we're dealing with, look first at some of the history around Welsh devolution. In 1979 there was a narrow devolution vote in Wales for a Welsh Assembly (just 50.3 per cent agreeing). This was a much closer vote than the one in June 2016 when Britain voted to leave the EU, but after the 1979 referendum vote in Wales the process to form the assembly went ahead without any call for a "second vote".

In the 1975 Common Market referendum, 64.8 per cent of Wales voters chose a

Yes vote to remain in the EEC, and there were those who naively expected the 2016 vote to follow suit. In the event the 2016 EU referendum in Wales largely matched the overall UK outcome, with 52.5 per cent of voters choosing Leave on a turnout of 71.7 per cent.

After the vote to leave the EU in 2016

'The people of Wales were right to tell second home owners to return to their own areas..'

(and with no sense of irony that they owed their own positions in the Welsh Assembly to a much smaller majority in the Devolution referendum of 1979), a small but influential group of politicians put all their efforts into undermining the democratic decision.

Unlike many of those who still vote for them, the Welsh Labour Party campaigned for Remain and never really accepted that the majority of Wales's voters chose to Leave, especially in the South Wales valleys. The current First Minister, Mark Drakeford, even called for a second referendum. He also agreed anti-Brexit statements with the Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon.

The piggy backers

Those who were keen to overturn the Britain-wide 2016 referendum decision to leave the EU have also been prominent in

evolved powers. But many are asking whether Wales
 made the question even more important...

more devolution

‘After the vote to leave the EU a small but influential group of politicians put all their efforts into undermining the democratic decision.’

what goes under the nickname of the “piggyback movement”.

This is the thinking that Wales should take its lead from the SNP in Scotland and should call for an independence referendum. These people say it seek to emulate the tactics of the SNP and take a “piggyback ride” on what they perceive to be a wave of support for Scottish independence.

One such tactic is the recent renaming of the Welsh Assembly. It is now officially called the Senedd/Welsh Parliament. (“Senedd” is the Welsh-language term for parliament). However, most people in Wales still call it The Assembly and also refer to the elected representatives there as AMs (assembly members).

Recently the Assembly took a decision to give the vote in future Assembly elections to 16- and 17-year-olds. An amendment was added to give the vote to foreign nationals (only Scotland also does this). The Labour Party believes both decisions will help it in the next Assembly election in 2021.

Labour Party politicians are central to the piggyback tactics. They even refer to themselves as “Welsh Labour”. But there is no such thing as Welsh Labour separately registered with the Electoral Commission, only the Labour Party. You may think these matters piddling but the leader of Welsh Labour Mark Drakeford is also First Minister. These separatist tactics are being played out at the highest level.

Wales does, of course, have what the Scottish Nationalist Party calls its “sister

party” in the form of Plaid Cymru (Party of Wales) which was formed in 1925. It holds 4 of 40 Welsh seats in Westminster Parliament and 10 of 60 seats in the Welsh Assembly.

Just like the SNP, Plaid Cymru advocates “Independence in Europe” and backed Remain in the EU Referendum. It organised a number of Independence for Wales rallies in 2019 (another example of emulating an SNP tactic) but despite the coverage and the hype, in the General Election of December 2019 Plaid Cymru got just 9.9 per cent of the votes in Wales, down from 10.4 per cent in 2017.

Helping or hindering?

The pandemic has brought the question of devolution into sharp relief. Under devolution health is a devolved responsibility – so how has it shaped up.

There were already examples where Wales needed to purchase bed capacity from English authorities to meet everyday health need. Now the concern is that it has fewer critical care beds per head of the population than the rest of Britain. And Wales having a growing and ageing population, and demand for critical care rising by 4 to 5 per cent each year.

So, has devolution worked for the health service in Wales? More importantly in a time of centralised planning, does it make any sense to plan beds for Wales separately from England? Most of the existing intensive care beds are in South Wales to reflect population distribution, but if there are cases in North Wales, why transfer them to South Wales – over mountain ranges or long distances around them?

In any properly planned scenario, intensive care beds would be organised for Wales and Merseyside in England as one area – especially as many people from Wales who currently need advanced surgery travel to Liverpool for care, with payment flowing from NHS Wales to NHS England.

So the people of Wales were right to tell the second home owners to return to their own areas and not to buy the limited stock in the local shops. Nor to occupy the limited beds if they got sick. As Dr Jack Parry Jones of the Faculty of Intensive Care Medicine said, “We know in Wales we have fewer critical beds than the rest of the UK, and the UK

has fewer than many countries in Europe. So that puts us more uniquely at risk of any surge in demand when we don’t have enough supply.”

Skill and hope

In this strange period when its beautiful countryside and beaches are emptied of tourists, the population in Wales is taking a hard look at itself. It has long known that it is overdependent on tourism for employment and it needs to diversify. How will it survive this crisis?

Despite the deindustrialisation of recent decades Wales has key manufacturing centres in two of the UK’s strongest export sectors – automotive and aerospace. In addition, major multinationals like Tata Steel have enormous local and regional impacts on the country.

Port Talbot Steelworks remains an integrated steel-making site using imported ore and coal. Together with Llanwern steelworks, the plants produced up to 3.5 million tonnes of hot rolled steel and cold rolled annealed steel coils a year, for a variety of different end uses. Output is taken by rail to Shotton in North Wales for coating (galvanised coil); Trostre in South Wales near Llanelli for tinplating; or direct to the Midlands for the motor industry and domestic goods.

All of these productive processes could contribute to materials urgently required for manufactured goods in the current crisis – whether ventilators or fridge freezers – and for key products required for Britain to have an independent manufacturing capacity.

There is still a reservoir of engineering and other manufacturing skill in Wales which if integrated into the British economy in a planned manner will be a source of future prosperity.

An example of this engineering ingenuity is the way the skilled workforce at the Royal Mint in Llantrisant in the South Wales valleys has already switched its production lines from coins to full face visors. It is to manufacture up to 4,000 medical visors per day to help protect NHS staff. Engineers developed a successful prototype in 48 hours and the first visors are already in use at a hospital in Wales – showing that Wales can be a land of engineering as well as of song. ■

The imperialists are blackmailing the nations of the world trade, it's free trade or nothing...

Trade, the new weapon

Trade is War: The West's War Against the World, by Yash Tandon, paperback, 240 pages, ISBN 978-1-682191-49-1, OR Books, 2nd edition 2018, £20. e-book & Kindle editions available.

BOTH THE USA and the EU force trade agreements on other countries in pursuit of economic and political domination. This book explains how, and why. And more importantly, how to beat them.

Its author, Yash Tandon certainly knows trade agreements inside out. Tandon is an experienced negotiator at international trade meetings, including those of the World Trade Organization (WTO), and he also holds honorary professorships at the University of Warwick and London Middlesex University.

The imperialist powers, says Tandon, are trying to impose trade agreements on every single country in the world. He argues that they represent the final stage in the complete takeover of the political sphere by the economic sphere. He writes, "Let's not be mistaken about it: the real aim of all those supporting the imperialist trade agreements is to transform the whole of society into a single market where democracy and elected governments will have no meaning anymore."

In Tandon's view the WTO is no more than an agent of US and EU trade and foreign policy. He explains, "Its assumption that development is a by-product of trade is based on an untenable neoliberal ideology. There is no empirical evidence to support this assumption."

Unfettered "free" trade does not iron out economic differences between nations: it makes them greater. Tandon points out, "Ironically, while the rich advocate free markets for poor countries, they practice protection, as...in the case of agriculture." Discourse about "fair trade" is a red herring

'It is wrong to only ever blame the USA – the EU is equally culpable...'



Mehr Demokratie (CC BY-SA 2.0)

17 September 2016: 65,000 people turned out in Berlin, along with hundreds of thousands in Germany

in the WTO context.

Smaller nations that do not "follow the rules" dictated by the big powers that control the WTO are both collectively and individually subjected to sanctions. Tandon says, "Sanctions are acts of war...the WTO – viewed in public media as a benign instrument of trade – is in fact a veritable war machine."

Nor is the EU a force for good standing against globalisation. Tandon shows that "US and EU agricultural subsidies are a major factor in increasing hunger in the Global South."

He points to a "a brutal change" by the EU in 2007, when it "...cancelled all the preceding agreements and attempted to impose on the ACP [African, Caribbean and Pacific] countries conventions called 'Economic Partnership Agreements' (EPAs). These EPAs are agreements of total free trade, liquidating all domestic market protec-

tion in the ACP countries."

Tandon observes that "because of intense pressure from the EU (including threats of sanctions, such as cutting off 'development aid'), most regions in Africa have signed the EPAs."

'Globalized fascism'

In summary the mega-regional trade and investment agreements driven by the US and the EU are "...all institutional expressions of globalized fascism. Under the pretext of creating regulatory coherence to facilitate 'free trade', they are, in essence, instruments of global corporations under the hegemony of the United States."

It is wrong, Tandon writes, to only ever blame the USA for these coercive agreements: the EU is equally culpable. He spells it out: "At the forefront of promoting the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment

– if you want to of war

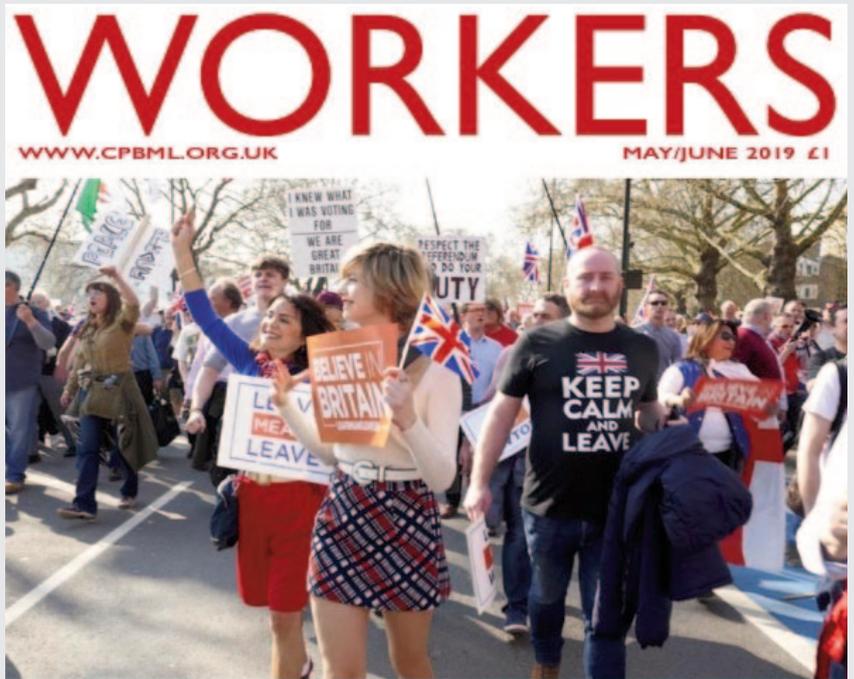


many, to demonstrate against plans for TTIP.

Partnership (TTIP) were, among others, the US corporate lobby, Business Europe, the Alliance for Responsible Commerce (ARC), and the EU Trade Commissioner.”

The only reasonable conclusion is that “...developed countries are not interested in the development of the rest of the world.” Tandon’s judgment is that “capitalism is unregulatable. It is essentially anarchic, and its major players – the transnational corporations and financial and commodity speculators – prefer an anarchic system which they can manipulate.”

Is there no hope then, no way forward? Yes, of course there is and Tandon spells it out: “the world knows that little Cuba has beaten the American Goliath. The American ambition to cage Cuba after the collapse of the USSR has been defeated. This is indeed quite remarkable. Cuba and Castro’s legacy continue to remain a beacon of hope for the countries and peoples of the South.” ■



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Britain took a halting step forward along the road to universal education in the 1870s – but not without ruling class opposition...

1870: The Education Act

UNIVERSAL EDUCATION is a powerful force for workers' emancipation. The 1870 Education Act was a great step towards achieving it, after being held back by the ruling class and the power of the churches.

From the late 18th century Britain was transformed by the Industrial Revolution and a massive growth in population. By 1850 it was clear that the country was not investing sufficiently in its people. In particular, mass educational provision had not been developed by the state.

Only very limited schooling was available to the people, all of it constrained by the country's rigid class structure. Schools still belonged mostly to the churches and they were unable to provide either sufficient school places or proper education for all children.

By the 1860s complacency about the lack of educational provision had become less acceptable, aggravating further many of those who had long campaigned for improvements, especially for the children of the working class. The campaigners met strong opposition from an upper class fearful of government control of education.

The British government gradually and grudgingly acknowledged its responsibility for educating the people. Even then it only allowed educational expansion to proceed in a skewed manner that perpetuated class division and reinforced social separation.

In 1858 the government established a Royal Commission on the State of Popular Education in England. Its brief was to inquire into the state of public education and "consider what measures were required for the extension of sound and cheap elementary instruction to all classes of the people".

In 1861 few of the 1.5 million children on the books of religious schools were aged 12 or older, and even then attendance was irregular. And Commission surveys found

that many of those whose attendance was more regular failed to obtain a proper education due to inadequate teaching.

In its 1861 Newcastle Report, the Commission rejected any suggestion that attendance at school should be made compulsory or that it should be extended. It claimed the labour market required the employment of children.

The Commissioners disagreed about funding education. Some of them objected to government interfering with education on political and religious grounds.

The Report recommended that a grant should be paid in respect of every child who, having attended an elementary school, passed an examination in the "three Rs" – reading, (w)riting and (a)rithmetic. In 1862 the Revised Code of Regulations introduced a system of payment by results.

There was much opposition to the Code. Teachers objected partly to the method of testing, but mainly to the principle of payment by results because it linked money for schools with achievement of only minimum standards.

Rote learning

Higher-quality primary work which was beginning to appear in the best elementary schools before 1861, was seriously discouraged. Instead there was much rote learning and drilling in large classes.

Then, in 1870, the Elementary Education Act was passed by Parliament. For all that it was an untidy compromise that produced a dual system of board and voluntary (religious) schools, it did represent a step towards secularisation and state control, and paved the way for further positive steps. As such, the Act was a great leap forward in educational provision for working people.

It divided England and Wales into about 2,500 school districts. They were run by school boards elected by local ratepayers. The boards were specifically empowered to support the education of the poor, and they were the most democratic organs of local administration of the 19th century.

All ratepayers – including women – could vote for the school boards and serve on them. Many women were elected to this new sphere of public administration at a time when few opportunities existed for them in

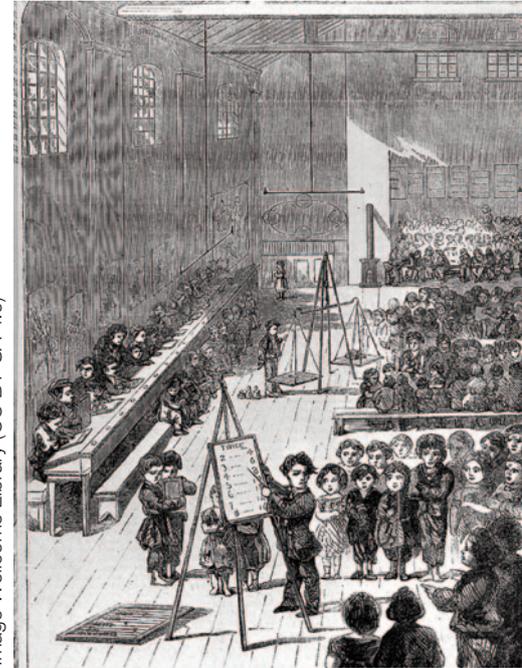


Image Wellcome Library (CC BY-SA 4.0)

Ragged School, Whitechapel, London. These schools were the only ones that showed the

political or administrative life.

The boards were to examine the provision of elementary education in their district. If there were not enough school places, they could build and maintain schools out of the rates. They could either charge fees or let children in free.

The boards varied in size. London was the largest, while some rural boards ran just one school. They were directly elected and independent of other local government.

The London Schools Board had 55 members and controlled almost 400 schools. It was not only the largest but also the most influential. The architecture and layout of its schools were widely copied, setting standards for others to emulate. It established a system of school attendance officers. And it appointed its own medical officer to report on the ventilation of classrooms and to examine provision for children with special needs.

For all its progressive features, the 1870 Act did leave the opponents of the school boards in a position of strength by conceding education that would have to be affordable, and acceptable to the many sectional religious interests. Overall the Act failed to

'The government grudgingly acknowledged its responsibility...'

Universal education in

et



schools provided free education for destitute demand for universal education.

resolve the problem of the participation of the churches in state educational provision. But with all its flaws, it laid the first foundations of a universal system. Education was no longer a charity but a right.

Two years earlier, in 1868, the ruling class had advanced its own interests with the Public Schools Act. In modern parlance these schools have come to be known as “Independent” or “Private”. That Act transformed the leading public schools and instituted new governing bodies. It got rid of many places for poor and deserving local scholars and created competitive examinations favouring pupils from preparatory schools mostly attended by the children of the wealthy.

The Public Schools Act systematised an entirely segregated system of education which had few parallels elsewhere in the world. It embedded separate schooling for the children of the governing class in upper class preserves, uncontaminated by children of the working class. ■

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

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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.

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

We are not an elite, intellectually superior to our fellow workers. All that distinguishes Party members is this: we accept that only Marxist thinking and the organised work that flows from it can transform the working class and Britain. The real teacher is the fight itself, and in particular the development of ideas and confidence that comes from collective action.

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Not a day more under the EU thumb

'What would be incomprehensible would be for the government to give in to the siren song that Covid-19 has made Brexit impossible...'

HAS COVID-19 infected the Brexit process? For diehard believers in the EU, it has become the excuse they were looking for. The government should extend the Brexit deadline "if necessary", says Keir Starmer – a master of the snide insinuation – clearly hinting that in his opinion it will be necessary.

Like a bad penny, Gina Miller turns up again to say she "now believes Britain's exit from the EU must be delayed", according to the *Daily Mail*. And (surprise, surprise) the EU has let it be known that it would agree to an extension if Britain asked for it.

The infection has spread to Tory ranks, too. Nick de Bois (Dominic Raab's former chief of staff) told *The Times* that the public would find it "incomprehensible" to push ahead with Brexit during the pandemic.

Actually, what would be incomprehensible would be for the government to give in to the siren song that Covid-19 has made Brexit impossible. On the contrary, the epidemic has made it even more urgent to extract ourselves from the economic destruction wrought on Britain's economy by the EU – and made any delay potentially even more damaging.

First consider that any delay would mean extending the transition period, under which Britain is subject to all EU rules but has no role in shaping them. Under which Britain is subject to all rulings of the European Court of Justice but has no judges sitting on its bench. Delay means extending this period of vassalage. The impact of that would be, literally, incalculable.

Who knows what directives will spew forth from the European Commission as it struggles to restore the very concept of a European Union? As it struggles to make itself relevant to anyone after revealing itself as impotent to stop the suspension of free movement, of Schengen? As it stumbles over every move to offer financial support to hard-hit economies?

Think what delay would mean to the fishing industry, already hanging on for dear life while EU ships plunder Britain's fishing stocks and EU regulations make it increasingly impossible for smaller ships to fish economically. It would be a death sentence for British fishing.

Further delay would mean being forced to

send further billions off to Brussels, money needed here to rebuild Britain. Worse, Britain is increasingly likely to be saddled with its "share" of the EU debt that has piled up, on top of the debt the government has already incurred.

And for how long? Covid-19, we are being constantly told, is likely to come back again in the autumn. Once you start a delay, when do you stop? (Never, you can hear the diehard EU lovers saying to themselves.)

All this at a time when Britain is seeking to conclude trade agreements with countries from Australia to the US – none of which will be happy to sign an agreement if they don't even know when it will start.

While Britain will still be a trading nation, attention is already turning to concepts of security. Energy security has been discussed for a while. To this we should now add health security.

What do we need to make here, or be able to produce rapidly, to cope with expected medical emergencies? Make your own list: gowns, face masks, rubber gloves, ventilators, vaccines, antibiotics.

What do we need to do to ensure food security? If farms can charter planes (half full at most to ensure social distancing) to import Romanians to pick crops, why can't they afford to pay British workers proper wages to pick them?

Who do we need to train here? When will we end the reliance on imported medical staff?

Out of the EU Britain be free to restructure the economy to make it more able to cope with future epidemics. Government action will be necessary to shift the economy away from its dependence on long supply chains. The last thing Britain needs is to have to go begging to Brussels over every move involving state aid.

What is clear from all the chatter about delay is that the enemies of Brexit have not given up. They will use anything, even the tragedy of Covid-19, to try to overturn the will of the British people.

The forces for Brexit cannot afford to sit back and wait for the Covid-19 crisis to blow over. We must demand, loudly: No delay. Not another day under the EU thumb. ■

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