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JOURNAL OF THE CPBML

TAKE CONTROL: BUILD THE NEW BRITAIN

WORKERS



A country fit for young people

WHAT KIND of system turns its back on the young? Only one where the short term reigns, where planning for future generations is an unaffordable luxury. That is capitalism at the start of the 21st century.

The A-level grades fiasco, so damaging to many tens of thousands of young people, is also a symptom. It shows carelessness in every sense – not just slipshod, but lack of care, abandonment of care.

Even before Covid young people were bearing the brunt of capitalism's decline – priced out of housing, deep in debt from higher education, working for free for months just to have a chance of a paid job, forced by financial pressure to delay having children themselves.

Then came Covid. Swift to close schools and universities, slow to open them again once the low levels of risk were known, the establishment simply didn't care that a whole generation was missing half a year's education.

Or take apprentices – young people learning a trade (see article, page 10). While roughly a quarter of British workers have been furloughed, it looks as though around half of all apprentices have been put on the government's scheme.

And not just education and training. Young people's physical and mental health have also been hit.

We face huge job losses and deep cuts in public spending. Who will pay the bill for slump, for the furlough, for the bailouts? It will be all of us, the

working people of Britain, but mainly the young.

That doesn't have to be their fate, our fate. From 1 January 2021 we become an independent country once more, free of the shackles of the EU. Free to invest in our own future, to build a country fit for young people.

This is no time to be passive, to allow the interests of profit to continue to dominate. We cannot allow subservience to the free market of the EU to be replaced by subservience to the untrammelled global market.

Take Back Control was one of the slogans of Brexit. But we need to do more than take control back from Brussels: the people of Britain must take that control for themselves.

We can do this. This is the same working class which asserted itself by spurning the EU in the 2016 referendum, which refused to be cheated of its decision by the ensuing overwhelmingly pro-EU parliament and establishment. Which showed its care for the young by fighting for a decent future.

It is the same working class which has shown its intellect, courage, skills and knowhow in dealing with the Covid crisis when government floundered.

Big changes are coming. There will be a great struggle between the forces both for and against progress. Whether workers were for Brexit or not, it's now time to pull together. Courage is needed. Let's put the interests of the young at the heart of our plans for the future. ■

Cover image Salci/shutterstock.com



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Border Force vessel returning to Folkestone.

Borders: out of control

SUMMER HAS seen the predicted surge in people trafficking across the Channel, with the Border Force helpless to prevent over 5,000 known illegal arrivals, making a mockery of government promises in the General Election to control our borders.

In July Michael Gove announced a “£705 million funding package for border infrastructure, jobs and technology...” But £470 million of this is for port and inland infrastructure needed for new customs procedures and controls.

Only £10 million is for the recently depleted Border Force personnel. Earlier promises to recruit an extra 900 have not been met, and the workforce in 2018/19 was still lower than in 2014/15.

Meanwhile the trade in people increases by the day. Home Secretary Priti Patel fumes ineffectually but left it to 8 August to appoint a “Migrant Czar” to coordinate 15 agencies involved. But Dan Mahoney was already chief of the Joint Maritime Security Centre so it sounds like re-branding. Patel calls for the Navy to be used, but what of the Border Force? It has five cutters to protect the entire UK border, an impossible mission. Finally in April this year a contract was awarded to supply them with the communications equipment they need.

The strategy of the traffickers is based on emotional blackmail. Overload the dinghy so that it is dangerous and then wait for “rescue” by the Coast Guard. So Border Force and Navy vessels are not blocking them: the problem is not sorted out. ■

ENERGY

Interconnector stalls

BRITAIN HAS become embroiled in a legal row over a new interconnector bringing electricity from France through the Channel tunnel. The French are pressing for British go-ahead, but we appear to be having second thoughts.

Whether the government has genuine safety concerns or is simply holding out for a British-based project is unclear, but again, the long arm of the EU is reaching out beneath the waves.

In the absence of a strategy to be independent in terms of energy production, the British government has for some time been banking instead on a series of “interconnectors” on the seabed, linked to energy suppliers abroad. We have current or planned links from France, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, Belgium, Norway and Denmark.

This strategy is defended by Ofgem and the Government as providing security of power supply. Notionally, when output from renewables is low, we can import, for example, French nuclear power, and when it is high we can export it.

In reality, it is the importing of power which is the point here. Why create more capacity at home when we can buy it on the international market, the argument goes. And benign as these foreign countries are, many remain under the sway of the EU, and may find their ability to trade with us compromised. ■

- Our imminent departure from the EU is creating panic in Brussels, which is threatening that without a deal, trains may use the Channel tunnel for a further three months only.

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...

Speak for the children

The case for opening schools to all children in September is compelling. We know how the benefits for children of attending school vastly outweigh any risks.

Britain takes on EU over plant safety

Britain is refusing to give way to an EU instruction that it must reverse a government decision to enforce stricter regulations on the importing of some plants and the banning of others.

Rebuild the economy – create value

The government's response to the coronavirus economic crisis lacks vision. It's up to the working class to provide it.

Fightback against Nissan pensions attack

Workers at Nissan Sunderland are fighting for pension rights shortly after celebrating the plant's long-term future. They are angered at the opportunistic attack by the company and refusal to consult.

Devolution gathering pace

In July devolution in South Yorkshire became law, and attempts to devolve spending plans for the nation's capital to the mayor are now being mooted.

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.

Workers



Volunteers who run Clevedon Pier, Somerset – dubbed “the most beautiful pier in England” by poet John Betjeman – have come up with a beautiful method of social distancing. They installed 50 pots of flowers down the middle, ensuring one-way movement for visitors. It was thanks to Betjeman and fellow campaigners that the pier was saved in the 1980s after stress tests in 1970 had brought part of it down. The same campaigning spirit is evident in the commitment to save it now.

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

Trump golfing hotel under fire

ALTHOUGH UNITE represents most workers in the job-threatened hospitality industry, there is a legacy of the RMT organising in the former railway hotels. One is now the focus of its attention – the Trump Turnberry golfing hotel on the Ayrshire coast in southwest Scotland.

The Trump Organization treats it like a flagship resort. But it is treating the workers there abysmally, with widespread job cuts and large reductions to wages, conditions, staff benefits and sick pay.

Launching its campaign, the RMT said, “It has become clear during the consultation that the Trump Organization has been hoovering up British taxpayers' money in furlough payments, whilst plotting to axe large numbers of those very same staff, at odds with the Government's objectives for the job retention scheme.”

This iconic hotel was built in 1906 as a 5-star resort and re-opened in 1951 after military use during the Second World War. Acquired by the Trump Organization in 2014 at a cost of over \$60 million, investments there have been around \$200 million and the Pentagon is reported to have spent around \$200,000 there since 2017.

Donald Trump himself resigned his directorship in advance of assuming the presidency of the USA in 2017, but already had caused controversy with his building of a similar resort at Menie on the Aberdeenshire coast. This has resulted in the stretch of rare sand dunes there losing their status as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

That scheme, with its unfulfilled promises of a £1 billion investment and 8,000 jobs, had been pushed through by Alex Salmond and his Scottish administration in 2007 when relations between Salmond and Trump were rosy. In the past year there have been protests and petitions calling on Aberdeenshire Council to apologise for its role in the debacle.

Mick Cash, RMT General Secretary, has now written a strongly worded letter to Nicola Sturgeon, the current Scottish First Minister, calling for an urgent condemnation of the cuts and urging intervention. With the background of growing numbers now holidaying within the UK, he accused the Trump Organization of “shamelessly using the global pandemic as a guise for slashing terms and conditions of workers in Scotland”.

All of this is the tip of an iceberg, with up to 100,000 hospitality jobs in Scotland threatened at such well known chains as MacDonald Hotels, Apex Hotels, Marriott, InterContinental Hotels Group, and resorts such as Auchrannie, Aviemore and Crieff Hydro. The unions Unite and GMB are pursuing this wider struggle. ■

- An RMT petition to stop the cuts can be found at www.megaphone.org.uk/petitions/stop-the-job-cuts-at-trump-turnberry

NHS

Fiddling with email

THE NATIONAL Health Service has a national e-mail service, using the domain nhs.net. Most NHS organisations, trusts, GP surgeries and commissioners, use it. It offers a secure service, so that patient-identifiable and sensitive information can be sent between users.

Now the NHS in Scotland is

abandoning this: all its email addresses will use the suffix @nhs.scot. .scot is not a true country code top-level domain, as they are known, but is contrived to look as if it is.

It is alarming enough that, in the middle of a pandemic, the NHS in Scotland should want to force through a disruptive email migration on clinicians and patients. That it should allow the SNP to use the NHS for separatist propaganda is extraordinary. ■



Duncan Harris (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Consett mine closes

THE FINAL lump of coal was extracted from one of England’s last remaining coal mines on Monday 17 August. The Bradley open cast mine in Consett, County Durham, had operated for almost 200 years.

Mine owner Banks Group was hoping to gain permission to extend extraction after planning officers gave their approval, but the council planning committee turned it down. The company claimed the site was no longer viable without the extension.

The mine produced 150,000 tonnes of coal a year, and the expansion would have seen an additional 90,000 tonnes being dug. It also provided fireclay for regional brickmakers.

Coal is still needed in the manufacturing processes of steel and cement, unless electricity is used, which is far more expensive. The current UK requirement for eight million tonnes of coal a year is now mainly satisfied by imports from Russia and the US, after the widespread decimation of the British coal industry.

The company claimed that rather than importing coal it is much better to produce in Britain what’s still needed – for economic reasons, but on ecological, social and environmental grounds too.

After a campaign to defeat the Bradley extension was launched in February by climate protesters Extinction Rebellion, there were demonstrations locally and in central London. More than 5,500 letters of objection were received by the council. Local paper *The Northern Echo* said that most objections were from people outside the area and abroad.

Mineworker Graeme Stott started an apprenticeship at Bradley two years ago. He was quoted by *Sky News* expressing his devastation at hearing about the closure. “My father worked for British Steel, and that industry’s gone. It’s awful. To think that there’s British lads there that can do the job. We’ve got all the machinery, we’ve got all the training. We’re probably more qualified than the rest of the world, but we’ve had it taken away from us.” ■

WHAT’S ON

Coming...later

For obvious reasons, CPBML public meetings are not currently 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).

And if you’d like to attend our online discussion meetings about current events, email info@cpbml.org.uk

FASHION

Boohoo factory

FASHION RETAILER Boohoo is to set up what it claims will be a “model factory” in Leicester following damaging revelations that its garments were being produced in the city by workers being paid just £3.50 an hour.

There had also been allegations that staff producing its clothes had not been wearing masks – linking the sweatshops to the new Covid-19 outbreak in the city.

Yet the factory will employ just 250 people – a small-scale model indeed for a company said to account for 80 per cent of the clothes made in Leicester. An estimated 10,000 people work in the city’s garment industry.

Below-minimum wages in the Leicester clothing industry have been an open secret for years, brilliantly documented by *Financial Times* journalist Sarah O’Connor. She also revealed that local and national government officials have long turned a blind eye to the practice. One local official even warned O’Connor that if she published her investigation she would be causing mass unemployment in the city.

Boohoo does not recognise trade unions, despite a promise to the House of Commons Environmental Select Committee from CEO Carol Kane. When she appeared before it in 2018 she told them that the company would recognise a union “if the workers would like it” – but it still refuses to engage with unions such as Usdaw, which has members at Boohoo’s Burnley warehouse.

“We continue to be inundated with calls from Boohoo staff concerned about working conditions. We again urge Boohoo employees to join Usdaw. We have to organise to make a difference,” said a union official in July. ■

The dominance of finance capital has dragged Britain deep into recession and the economy after the ravages of the pandemic will require a

Seizing the future for Br

THE COVID-19 pandemic has sent Britain into recession, with the economy shrinking by a whopping 20.4 per cent between April and June this year. National debt has reached record levels topping £2 trillion, and exceeding 100 per cent of GDP for the first time in over 50 years. This is hardly unexpected, given the lockdown, and shutdown of much of the country's economic activity.

With life awakening from its enforced hibernation, there is much debate about what will happen next, with a broad acceptance that whatever follows, we will not be going back to what existed pre-Covid; there will be a new normal.

The question is this: Will Britain's workers passively accept this "new normal", or will they act to shape what is to come?

On a positive note, Britain has now formally left the European Union, and the ties of transition will be severed from 1 January 2021. So workers are faced with the prospect of being able to determine what the "new normal" will be without being dictated to by Brussels – a once in a generation opportunity!

Staggering

The economic situation is obviously not a good one – but it was not good before Covid. Growth had slowed to a standstill in the last quarter of 2019. Britain staggered out of the financial crash of 2008 – and just kept on staggering.

It is looking like Britain has suffered a much greater slump than many other advanced economies, not quite as bad as Spain, but about twice that of Germany. Tellingly, Chancellor Sunak told the BBC that the British economy had performed worse than its EU counterparts because it was focused on services, hospitality and consumer spending. "Those kinds of activities comprise a much larger share of our economy than they do for most of our European cousins," he said.

Personal debt is growing again at nearly £1,000 per adult per year, after having levelled off in 2008. Even before Covid meant a private house was unaffordable for many young people, throwing them at the mercy of private landlords whose housing stocks seem to be rising exponentially. Much of it is former council housing. Only around 10 per



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The cuckoo in Britain's nest: too much of the economy is skewed by the overbearing power of finance

cent of people now live in municipal housing, down by over 60 per cent in the past four decades.

With young people, including graduates, forced to find precarious casual employment in what is described as the "gig economy" or in the low-paid leisure sector such as bars and restaurants, it is no wonder that homelessness is on the rise.

Wages were stagnating pre-Covid. Along with the growth of casual employment and zero hours and temporary contracts of employment, this resulted in an increase in the "working poor".

Under cover of an illusory prosperous City of London, the generally better paid jobs that were associated with manufacturing continued to ebb away.

Employment

By the end of August, at least 730,000 workers had lost their jobs since lockdown

began. Ominously, a massive 12 million more are now being paid by the government through furlough and self employed support, with many unlikely to return to their former jobs. They anxiously await the ending of furlough in October, with the government being criticised for not extending the scheme, especially to help workers in areas like leisure, travel and tourism that are still restricted.

And in addition to those 12 million workers, the government is in effect also supporting the jobs of those in public transport – buses, trams, ferries and railways. Despite lockdown being eased, passenger numbers are still only around 25 per cent of pre-lockdown levels. Although numbers are steadily climbing, it may be years before they return to previous levels.

As spending has fallen, high-street retail has found itself under severe pressure as cheaper goods are offered online. This has

up into debt, even before Covid-19. Rebuilding the completely different approach...

Britain's workers



Finance capital, exemplified by the City of London.

resulted in a vicious downward spiral, as the rush for cheaper prices has fuelled further high street closures, with more largely unorganised, low paid workers in warehouse jobs and driving white vans with impossible delivery schedules. Covid has of course greatly speeded up this trend.

Cuts

Since the 2008 financial crisis Britain as suffered has a massive programme of government by successive governments. This severely compromised the ability of both the NHS and social care, largely provided by local councils, to cope with a serious health emergency.

The NHS has seen the longest funding squeeze in its history, with nurses' pay frozen and then capped below inflation leading to 40,000 nursing vacancies. A welcome rise in training applications is reported, but decent pay and conditions will need to be

addressed.

Social care has been devastated, with millions of elderly people suffering as staff struggle to cope with very limited resources. This has taken its toll on professional social workers, the majority of whom are paid less than £10 an hour. Turnover is high, and there are 120,000 vacancies.

Meanwhile, many vital care staff are employed on casual and zero hours contracts, often effectively being paid less than the minimum wage. Standards in what are invariably private care homes are poor in many cases, and this is worsening. Small wonder that the pandemic has cut short the lives of so many elderly people.

This crisis is also becoming a housing disaster. The government suspended evictions of tenants in England and Wales, but this will end. A survey by homelessness charity Shelter indicated that more than 170,000 private tenants face eviction, while 230,000 have fallen into arrears since Covid appeared.

The threat of mass homelessness threatens to become a health and social care crisis all of its own, with the inevitable impact on the capacity of the NHS to deal with a second wave of Covid-19.

Trade unions

Although the last few years have seen a small increase in trade union membership, less than half the number of workers are unionised compared to 1980 when Margaret Thatcher was elected Prime Minister. And only about 20 per cent of workers have their wage increases determined by collective bargaining agreements.

The Covid-19 period has delivered many more members to trade unions. Many of those may have been put off by the pro-EU stance of most unions, but the need for a collective approach to managing the virus in the workplace, and also to addressing the pandemic's economic problems has shifted the focus. Having joined, these new members will need to insist on something tangible.

The annual TUC Congress, too often a bland talking shop, is to meet "virtually" on 14/15 September instead of holding its usual annual delegate conference.

It will be discussing the Covid-19 crisis,

'Britain staggered out of the financial crash of 2008 – and just kept on staggering...'

unemployment, and pay. That sounds like a meeting far more focused than has been usual in the past few years on the crucial issues facing Britain's workers. There will be lots of platitudes, but in all probability there will be few if any concrete proposals on those crucial issues.

Congress has in the past been the point in the year when delegates talked about their union's visions of how much better their industries and the economy could be. Strategic thinking with clear ideas about the actions needed.

Unite the Union produced its plan "Manufacturing Matters" at the end of last year (see *Workers* July/August). It implicitly rejects EU restrictions on state aid which are probably not going to exist after this year. It is a plan to rebuild Britain's manufacturing base knowing that without it we will have no wealth and no products to trade with.

The TUC's *A Better Recovery* report on the Covid-19 crisis published in May this year contained some pertinent observations, identifying some of Britain's key problems.

The report highlighted the fact that the government was able to act relatively quickly and on a massive scale in the face of a national emergency that was compared to a war situation. That level of spending has illustrated that the means are available to borrow and spend if the political will is there. Of course, it is the workers that will have to pay it back!

The report rightly identified the fact that the best route out of the recession is to invest, a view that Boris Johnson has agreed with, promising spending increases on infrastructure projects in particular. We'll see.

Continued on page 8



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Empty ticket booths, empty stations: levels of public transport use may never recover.

Continued from page 7

Workers will certainly need to be vociferous in holding Johnson to his promises.

The report also observed that the “Everyone In” programme that brought homeless people off the streets in a matter of days shows that homelessness is not inevitable.

The TUC noted that this period has put the world of work centre stage, showing who really keeps the country going - it is workers and their labour that create the goods and services that people need. The

‘The rail unions need to ask what is their vision for the railways under state control?’

commitment of health, social care, transport, food and other essential workers to keep working while others stayed at home was inspirational.

Transport

The implications of home working on many areas of the economy are considerable.

Many still need to travel to workplaces but have been persuaded by government messaging that they are sure to get Covid-19 if they use public transport. So road traffic has returned to near pre-pandemic levels while public transport use is well below half of that – and may never recover.

Unions have a key role in the recovery phase in informing their members of the objective nature of the risks of contracting the virus and of the other risk factors they need to consider. A great example of this is the research carried out by the rail safety body RSSB. It has recently published findings which state that using a train, even with infection risks, is 25 times as safe as making the same journey by car, and a massive 400 times safer than cycling, the much vaunted

alternative means of travel extolled by some as a result of the crisis.

The rail unions have for many years been campaigning for the railways to be returned to public ownership. Covid-19 has delivered the *coup de grâce*, with the franchise system effectively ended, and private companies now being paid a management fee to run trains under government control. It is thought that the government is likely to use the already state-owned Network Rail which is responsible for the tracks as the organisation that takes over the provision of passenger train services – a move that would simply not have been possible under EU law.

The rail unions need to ask what is their vision for the railways under state control? In whose interests should they be run?

All unions should to ask this question about their sectors. What mechanisms can they use to influence the nature of the “new normal”?

The answer is simple. We must seize control of our workplaces and take advantage of the freedoms that we have now that the EU is an irrelevance. ■

Experiences during the Covid pandemic plus new technologies could help rebuild the clothing industry...

A future for fashion?

FASHION HOUSE Boohoo's announcement at the end of July that it is to set up its own factory in Leicester (see News, page 5) to make its own clothes has thrown the spotlight on the possibilities for the British fashion and textile industry after Brexit at the end of this year.

A number of brands are now looking at the advantages of local supply. Rather than have their clothes made in, say, Southeast Asia, they are now scrutinising the full costs involved in long supply chains.

We could – at last – be seeing a return to the days when retailers had their own factories, bringing employment back to Britain.

It's a development being tracked eagerly by Katie Hills, whose website Make It British has been a powerful voice calling for the government to source its PPE clothing in Britain. And as a live podcast at the end of July showed, experiences with Covid are pointing the way to how to future-proof Britain's textile industry.

When Covid hit in the early part of the year, Hills was instrumental in putting together a group of textile companies ready and willing to meet demand for the protective equipment needed in hospitals, care homes and many other places.

Uphill task

That experience showed how willing people were to collaborate. But it was an uphill task, not least because the government often seemed to be unaware that there actually was a textiles sector in Britain.

"People stopped going out to buy things, that's the negative," said podcast speaker Richard Jessup from Gerber Technology. "But actually, the big positive that came out of it was that the manufacturers that are in the UK really stepped up." Key to this was making a local connection between supply and demand.

"We can't just take what works in Asia and expect it to work here."



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Clothing on a rack in a London store. It should be made here.

At the outset, everyone seemed to assume that clothes could only be made in Asia. That's not surprising given that the offshoring (as it's called now) to Asia began back in the 1980s. It set the scene for a massive reduction in the price of clothing – and massive waste as well.

Over the decades since then the amount of clothes produced for the British market has rocketed – by 400 per cent, according to Scott Walton of Kornit Digital, a podcast participants. But as he pointed out, look more closely and the true costs are much higher.

"It's important to understand the actual costs of goods sold, rather than the costs of goods made," he said.

Along with cheapness came bulk orders and disposability. "30 per cent of what we put on the shelves today is never sold. Another 30 per cent is either heavily discounted or returned," said Walton.

With the new focus on sustainability as

well as on shorter supply chains, Britain is ideally placed to take advantage of new technologies that could see items of clothing produced locally in microfactories, with fabrics digitally printed on demand.

Gerber called on the textile industry to take a leaf out of Nissan's book. The motor manufacturer set up in Sunderland with a network of suppliers within a 10-mile radius of the plant, enabling it to react swiftly to any issues that arise.

But it will take investment and innovation. "We can't just take what works in Asia and expect it to work here," he said. Gerber noted that many Portuguese factories were ahead of us, fuelled by EU grants that aren't available to Britain that allow businesses access to the latest technologies.

"We need government investment here," noted Mills. Yes. Indeed. And with Brexit, the government will not have the excuse of having to abide by EU state aid rules. ■

The ability of a nation to support itself in the long term depends on providing proper apprenticeships to every young person

Why high-quality appren

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (CC BY-SA 2.0)



Apprentice Beth Pickering checking part of an Airbus wing. High-class apprenticeships such as hers are vanishingly rare.

YOUNG WORKERS need opportunities to develop through training and education and to have jobs to apply those skills. But there is a vast gap between what Britain needs and what is happening in our workplaces and colleges. Apprenticeship training illustrates this clearly. “Seizing the opportunity of Brexit” or “recovering from Covid-19” are empty rhetoric without radical change.

Governments are good at rhetoric, but hopeless when it comes to long-term planning and following through. Parliament does not hold government, or employers, to account on education and training any more than it does for other essential services.

Fanfare

Apprenticeships have suffered particularly badly. They are held up as the way forward, especially if described as “modern”. In 2017 the apprenticeship levy was announced with a fanfare as a key part of the “aspiration” to have 3 million apprenticeships by 2020. Instead the number and quality of apprenticeships has declined.

Covid-19 is not the main culprit here. It

has just made a dire situation even worse.

In January this year, before a single Covid-19 case had been identified in Britain, a former advisor to first Michael Gove then Nicky Morgan at the Department for Education detailed how £1.2 billion had been wasted on “fake apprenticeships”.

A report by think tank EDSK showed up the train wreck that is the government flagship training policy, the apprenticeship levy. The facts speak for themselves: in England, 564,800 learners started an apprenticeship in the 12 months before the levy began operating in 2017. A year later the figure slumped to 364,000.

And within these numbers lurk huge numbers of people who don’t fall into any category that most would recognise as apprentices. The most popular “apprenticeship” in the country, according to the report, is to become a “Team Leader/Supervisor”.

On its own this designation accounts for 1 in 10 of all apprenticeships, and has eaten up over £134 million of levy funding since 2017. Close behind come training for “Chartered Manager” and “Department

Manager”, which have accounted for around £100 million each.

Chartered Manager courses, and similar, are doubtless high-quality training – though they are not for the 16- to 18-year-olds who most of us think of when we hear the word “apprentice”. But they are the simplest way for firms to spend the cash in their levy pots, normally in conjunction with a university.

And universities have been quick to cash in, setting up courses around the country on money provided by the skills funding agencies – up to £27,000 for each “apprentice”. According to the EDSK report, some £448 million of money for apprentices has been spent on inappropriately rebadged courses.

It goes further: 23 university-level institutions, including Oxford, Durham and Imperial College London, have relabelled some of their own academics as “apprentices”. This is “an overt attempt by these organisations ...to use up the university’s own levy contributions”, says the report, adding, “The fact that you typically need a PhD to be accepted onto this levy-funded training course confirms that it bears no relation

depends on renewing and rebuilding skills. That means
 suited for one – not the current mess...

Apprenticeships matter

whatsoever to any genuine apprenticeship.”

What about the young people? The outlook on apprenticeships is, if anything, worse than it has ever been, even before coronavirus. The number of starts in England for the 6 months to January 2020 was 210,000, down 11 per cent on the previous year. The number of starts for under 19s was under a third of the total, and down by 15 per cent.

Then came Covid. In May 2019, according to an analysis by *FE Week*, 22,300 people started an apprenticeship. Of these, only 2,900 were under 19, while more than half were over 25. With Covid, the young have been almost obliterated – just 600 started an apprenticeship in May 2020.

The outlook is even grimmer. In a survey conducted by the *TES* at the end of June, almost 75 per cent of companies that took on apprentices in 2019 said they expected to cut back or axe apprenticeships leading up to September.

History

Traditionally employers provided apprenticeships as work-based learning for manufacturing and related industry. The number of apprentices declined as manufacturing jobs were decimated during the 1980s. Aerospace, nuclear, automotive and other high-tech industries maintained apprenticeship training, but elsewhere poor employer engagement has become endemic.

Several different apprenticeship schemes have been set up by government since the 1980s. Each has avoided the links between apprenticeship and manufacturing.

A framework was developed with government contributing to training costs outside the workplace, up to 100 per cent for apprentices under age 25. The stated intention was to integrate apprenticeships with

‘The stated idea was to help older people into work, but the effect has been to sideline the young...’

Rebuilding requires builders

PRIME MINISTER Boris Johnson announced a “New Deal for Britain” at the end of June with the mantra “Build build build”. But as the Unite union says, you can’t build without builders – and the government won’t get far unless urgent action is taken to avert a crisis in skills and apprenticeship development.

Unite points to “a lethal combination” of employers’ longstanding reluctance to invest in apprentices allied to widespread redundancies because of the pandemic and a reluctance to recruit new entrants owing to uncertainty about the future. It reckons at least half of all electrical construction apprentices are now furloughed.

“For decades the construction industry

has failed to recruit and train sufficient apprentices but the skills crisis has been masked by the heavy reliance on migrant labour,” says Unite. After Brexit that option should no longer be so easily available.

The solution is to hire young people here. Despite the chatter in the media about the young not wanting to do heavy work such as construction, Unite assistant general secretary Gail Cartmail reports that there are 1,000 applicants for each good-quality apprenticeship.

Government should help through using its procurement muscle to ensure the recruitment of high-quality apprentices. That’s something we can and must do once free of EU state aid regulations. ■

mainstream education, again without any real plan to back it up.

Worse, devolution to Wales and Scotland has created an uneven spread of initiatives and different rules, none of them coordinated across Britain.

And inevitably, the schemes have failed to either deliver the skills industry needed or create enough opportunities for youth.

This is not a new phenomenon. As the Nuffield Foundation noted in its 2015 report *Does apprenticeship work for adults?*, it goes back to the Labour government under Blair and Brown, which introduced the idea of “adult” (25+) apprenticeships.

The stated idea was to help older people in work, but the effect has been to sideline the young.

As early as 2008 the House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee noted: “We established during the course of the inquiry that the majority of apprentices were not new recruits to a business but existing employees who are in work and who ‘convert’ from their current jobs to apprenticeships with the same employer.”

The main source of training has been private sector providers, with a reduced role for further education colleges. It’s a model that has created an apprenticeship industry serving profit-seeking companies and

greedy universities but has not delivered quality training. It has not served the young, and it has not served Britain.

On every measure apprenticeships are not providing the entry for young people to skilled manufacturing and allied jobs. Worse, the proportion of starts in manufacturing and construction is very low, and not much better in IT. Banking, accountancy and the public sector dominate.

What, then, can we make of the government’s July announcement of money and incentives for firms taking on apprentices and young people between 16 and 24? If history is anything to go by, the lion’s share of the cash will be garnered by companies more concerned with gaming the system than providing proper apprenticeships.

The unmistakable conclusion is that we need regime change. Britain cannot afford to leave the education and training of its young people – the future of its industries – in the hands of rapacious employers, money-obsessed higher education institutes and governments more concerned with headlines than realities.

Instead, workers must place themselves – force themselves – into the heart of the process. They must use their unions to take control of the format and content of courses, ensuring high-quality training and job protection for young people. ■

How can an island with an ideal climate for growing food feed so many millions of its people living in food poverty on the

Poverty and riches – the

FOR THE FIRST time in over forty years, Britain will be free to decide its future food strategy when we leave the EU. Yet so far what government and the food industry have come up with fails to rise to the challenge. Should the focus be on trade, or on production? A recently published first part of the National Food Strategy (see page 14) notably fails to provide the right answers.

War, disease, economic crises and natural disasters can expose hitherto unseen vulnerabilities in a nation's political economy, nowhere more so than in agriculture and food production.

When Kipling wrote his poem *Big Steamers* shortly before the start of the imperialist world war of 1914-18, economic historians calculated the British population's total annual consumption as 52.5 billion calories. Of this a mere 21.4 billion were produced at home.

Imports

At that time British capitalism relied on vast imports from the colonies and dominions, a strategy vulnerable to naval blockade. In 1916 the German high command's intensified campaign of submarine attacks on shipping coincided with poor harvests in Britain, and in North America, our main suppliers of grain.

Before the Second World War, we imported 50 per cent of our meat, 70 per cent of our cheese and sugar, 80 per cent of our fruit, 70 per cent of cereals and fats and 91 per cent of our butter. Again, blockade, a favourite weapon (compare the USA and Cuba) was used. More recently, the April 2010 Eyjafjallajökull volcanic eruption grounded air freight and imports rotted at airports.

In the same way, the Covid-19 pandemic and the measures adopted to control it exposed the fragility of our 21st-century food supply. The supermarkets, which had

'Some blithely suggest that the market will provide...'



ian Francis/shutterstock.com

Open-air food market, Leicester.

created "just-in-time" supply chains, saw these unable to meet the need.

Shortages of basic foodstuffs occurred. Supermarkets imposed rationing. Flour mills, for example, continued to produce flour, but could not get it to the customer, because demand for the small bags in which flour is sold in supermarkets far exceeded supply.

Panic buying no doubt took place, yet the problem was not that supplies were insufficient: it was that distribution systems could not get material to customers. The government was considering introducing official rationing. War economies may have lessons for us after all.

Vulnerable

An island is peculiarly vulnerable to blockades. The extent to which it can withstand them depends on how self-reliant it can be.

Take fruit and vegetables: these items make up our biggest trade deficit in food.

Thirty years ago, 83 per cent of the vegetables we ate came from the UK. Now it is 54 per cent, says the National Food Strategy. The Food Foundation estimates that we could increase the amount of tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, lettuce, mushrooms, peppers, spinach, courgettes, cherries, broccoli and cauliflower we grow here, and reduce our dependence on imports.

Some blithely suggest that the market will provide. Embrace free trade, they argue, and everything will be fine. Famine is a thing of the past (except in the Horn of Africa) thanks to free trade, they argue.

In fact, advances in agricultural science, along with public health measures such as better housing, water supply, sanitation and immunisation, had more to do with the end

be so dependent on imports on the one hand, and have the other?

the sad tale of Britain's food



of famine in most of the world.

The advocates of “liberalisation” in any case have a curiously selective approach. Your tariffs are a backward restraint on trade, mine are necessary protection for a vital industry. British imperialism fought the Opium Wars to bring the benefits of free trade to China: to destroy their industry and turn an independent country into a dependent market for goods.

The history of free trade, that is to say of capitalism, gives the lie to their approach. In the Irish Famine ships full of grain sailed out of Irish ports while the peasants died. How well did the market meet their needs?

The potential for changing food production for the better is ignored by the free traders. And the question of the ownership of the means of production and distribution is ducked.

We cannot afford for our land to be in the hands of foreign investors or hobby farmers. The big supermarket chains - the US-owned Asda, Morrisons, Sainsburys, Tesco, and the German budget chains of Aldi and Lidl, and the UK's Coop, control food distribution with a market share of over 90 per cent.

Could we do better?

Science and research have a major part to play: food science, soil science, agricultural research can all find solutions. Computer models developed in astrophysics can have applications in studying crops and understanding how best to plant in the future, for example.

In the Second World War county and district agricultural committees brought together the interested parties to ensure pro-

duction was directed towards the national goal of feeding a nation at war: a better model than commissions of cronies, and a better way to enforce standards of welfare and hygiene – remember the EU never accepted these. Those who wanted to control the live export of animals to the continent found themselves at loggerheads with the four “freedoms” and the European Court of Justice.

Some 2.2 million British workers live in what is called food poverty (sometimes called food insecurity). In early April that figure rose to over 8 million who reported food insecurity in the previous five weeks. Food bank usage increases year on year, with 1.6 million people needing one in 2011-19.

Fight for wages

The problems of poor diet and obesity-related diseases are a direct result of low wages. Trade unions must turn their attention away from the myriad distractions they have allowed to occupy their attention, and focus once more on the fight for wages.

Charity did nothing to solve famine in the nineteenth century, though it may have allowed the church-going members of the bourgeoisie to assuage their consciences. Food banks are their modern equivalent. They tackle a symptom, not the cause of the disease.

The same can be said for all the tinkering with benefits systems, or anti-working class fantasies such as Universal Basic Income (UBI) – the telling word is “basic”. If our diet is poor, and we accept that the reason for it is poverty, then the solution is not to hector people about their “food choices” but to tackle the problem of poverty.

It is no coincidence, surely, that the rise of the food bank coincides with a fall in trade union membership – and the phenomenon of trade unions, in the main, deserting the struggle for jobs and wages for other modish concerns: the “rights” of an ever proliferating kaleidoscope of minority groups, opposition to popular democratic decisions, struggles on the other side of the world...the list goes on.

With thought and application we could ensure that every man, woman and child could rely on a secure supply of affordable nutritious food. No one else will provide it. ■

There's a new strategy for food – but it's not right for Britain...

Not what we need...



Workers

Limousin heifer, Wales. Almost 600 farms straddle the Welsh and Scottish borders with England, rendering separatism a hindrance to a national strategy.

THE NATIONAL Food Strategy's first report, published on 29 July, falls far short of what the country needs. Led by a businessman and member of the Dimbleby family (Henry), the report was meant to cover the whole food system, "from field to fork". Incredibly, it is the first report of this type produced in Britain in 75 years.

Despite its laudable purpose – "to set out a vision for the kind of food system we should be building for the future, and a plan for how to achieve that vision" – the report is piecemeal. Without the support of a wide-ranging and rigorous analysis of food production and distribution, it fails in its attempt to use Covid-19 to illuminate particular problems in our food supply.

The second report, not due for another six months, promises far more – to "examine the food system from root to branch, analysing in detail the economics and power dynamics that shape it, the benefits it brings and the harms it does." Also, "There will be much, much more on health and on the interwoven issues of climate change, biodiversity, pollution, antimicrobial resistance, zoonotic diseases and sustainable use of

resources." We won't hold our breaths.

After this, a government working party will take six more months to draw up a White Paper. And six months later, in 2022, Dimbleby will conduct a further review. Such slow policy making compared to that of our hospitals who transformed patient pathways, buildings, and procedures overnight even as they were being hit by the pandemic!

Disjointed

This disjointed, snail-like approach to a Food Strategy is further weakened by confusion about what constitutes the "nation". Pandering to separatism, the report is solely focused on England, and ignores Wales and Scotland. Not national at all then, despite the authors' admission that "the food systems of the UK are so tightly interwoven as to be indistinguishable in many ways. Almost 600 farms straddle the borders of Scotland and Wales to take one small example."

Holyrood and Cardiff may pontificate on food policy but have no say on the crucial issue of trade, one of just two topics covered in the report (the other being the diet of disadvantaged children – largely pre-empted by

the government's Tackling Obesity strategy, launched a few days earlier).

Ducking the question of how the British people can exercise control over what food we import (and hardly discussing exports at all), the report prefers to delegate setting "core standards" to the Trade and Agriculture Commission, established in July with a fixed life of six months.

There should be what it calls independent impact assessments, to be carried out possibly by consultants (more fees for the Big Four consultancy firms, no doubt) before new trade deals are scrutinised by Parliament.

The report's analysis of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic – our food system's "biggest stress test since the Second World War" – is useful for workers to consider.

During lockdown, the big supermarkets consolidated their grip on food supply as open-air markets closed. They increased their market share – 96 per cent of the market of calories consumed nationally. And remember that with hospitality industry shut down, the 20-25 per cent of food consumed outside the home vanished during lockdown, as people prepared that food in their own homes, so that market was even bigger. And, of course, they kept their grip on prices, though the report obscures this point.

It does highlight the drastic effect of Covid-19: workers in the food and retail sectors suffered some of the highest death rates, a higher proportion of furloughed staff, and expected redundancies.

The list of those involved in or consulted during the preparation of the report excludes any trade unions. One would have expected shop and food workers' unions Usdaw and Unite to have been involved, at least.

Even the TUC might, if pushed, have had something of value to add.

Instead, the Landworkers' Alliance was consulted. Part funded (of course) by the EU, its website is a word-salad of social justice buzzwords.

The British working class has no need to beg for representation on Dimbleby's Review, or any other body. It is clear from its first report that we should not pin our hopes for a robust approach to trade, rooted in our productive capabilities, on others. We should write the strategy ourselves. ■

The government wants to rewrite the Town and Country Planning Act...

Planning in turmoil

IN MARCH the government produced a paper entitled “Planning for the Future”. Updated on 6 August to take into account the pandemic, it is now out for consultation. It focuses on new infrastructure for towns and villages, new housing and amenities, and promises a visionary shake-up of the planning system.

Advisers include Bridget Rosewall, advocate of the City as capitalist powerhouse and expert on planning appeals; Miles Gibson, town planner, who warned of the negative effects of conversion from office space to residential; property developer Sir Stuart Lipton; Nicholas Boys-Smith, founder of Create Streets and critic of low-quality building; and Christopher Katkowski QC, who reassuringly believes that far from curtailing the powers of the local authorities and denying locals a chance to object to planning decisions, they/we have a chance to draw up “pattern books” for future standards. In other words, take control.

The government's argument about “building better, building beautiful” is seductive, and not a little romantic, with references to Georgian terraces and Victorian mansion blocks, and to Clough Williams-Ellis, designer of Portmeirion, the Italianate village in North Wales. But proposals to tear up the foundations of the planning system, the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947, are worrying.

Class

That Act has served us well. It had a class character. It transferred power to develop the land from the big landowners to local authorities, whose priority in the postwar period was provision of housing. It prevented ribbon development by introducing the Green Belt around cities. It protected the

‘Proposals to tear up the foundations of the planning system are worrying...’



Workers

historic heritage, set up a democratic appeals process, and encouraged public scrutiny. These aspects must be preserved in law.

The burning question is this: Will control be in the hands of the people, or will it pass back to the land-bankers, the profiteers and bureaucrats?

The government believes the Act has become too complex through accretions over time, and favours the big investors. Sounding plausible, it wants to draw up a system based on a simpler set of rules and core standards applied nationally, but with scope for locally produced design codes. This, it claims, will give more opportunities to small and medium size developers – to become big developers! It complains that planning decisions are often overturned, without pausing to consider that success on appeal might be for good reason.

The notorious Section 106, whereby developers were supposedly bound to provide a proportion of “affordable” housing within a luxury scheme, comes in for particular criticism. It never worked anyway, but it was a measure of good intention, which will now be scrapped without replacement by something better.

As millions find themselves without a job because of Covid, with their homes repos-

sessed, or evicted from private tenancies, a national plan for social housing is needed as never since the Second World War.

Sounding plausible again, and spurred on by the present crisis, the government promises a more democratic planning process in which young people will be motivated to participate through their “on-the-go smart phones”, digital neighbourhood groups and social networks. So away with notices attached to lamp posts! Or posted in newspapers and libraries (both under threat anyway), where ordinary folk who don't spend all their time online can see them. Is this more democratic?

“Data not documents” is the watchword. We must all learn the new language of PropTech, epitomised by the consultation itself. How is this as a sentence for people to get their heads around: “A new modular software landscape will encourage digital innovation and will consume and provide access to underlying data”?

We must not be too cynical. The consultation suggests some important measures – gentle densification around high streets, upskilling of planning departments, jobs growth in construction.

But let's not forget the simple demand for people who are not wealthy to have somewhere to live. ■

Dogged by EU rules on state support, bedevilled by government over decades, Britain's energy policy needs a radical overhaul

Time to end energy dependence



EDF

Unit 1 of the new Hinkley Point C station, under construction in Somerset.

THE FUTURE for energy production in Britain remains becalmed and uncertain. That's due to decades of government indifference and a lack of forward planning. This can't continue if Britain is to thrive.

The troubled Hinkley Point C nuclear power station in Somerset is a prime example. The site was selected in 2010, but substantive construction only began in 2017. During that time ownership changed, China became involved and the EU interfered over state aid rules.

French energy company EDF is jointly constructing the reactor with Chinese state owned firm CGN. In 2017 it expected completion by 2025. It now forecasts further delays due to the coronavirus pandemic, possibly until 2027. And even before that the construction cost had risen from £18 billion agreed in 2016 to an estimated £23 billion.

Worse still, the terrible deal made by the British government in 2016 is likely to mean

that the power generated is uncompetitive. And we will have to pay EDF for the shortfall. In 2017 the National Audit Office estimated the cost to British workers at £50 billion over the life of the plant.

The French market regulator has fined EDF £4.5 million for deliberately concealing changes to its funding arrangement with the British government, artificially raising its share price. This shambles is the price we pay for a lack of control and not insisting on British design and British construction to meet our own energy needs.

The danger of pursuing a policy of dependence on other countries for the development of such a vital part of our infrastructure is further illustrated by proposals for the Moorside plant in Cumbria. Japanese firm Toshiba had originally been awarded the contract, but walked away in 2018 when it failed to find a buyer for its UK subsidiary NuGeneration, which would be

doing the work.

Copeland Council, which has plans for a "green energy hub" on the Moorside site, next to the Sellafield nuclear reprocessing plant, has received two bids for the project. One, from the Small Module Reactor (SMR) consortium, led by Rolls Royce, plans a low carbon power station with a small light water reactor. The other bid, unbelievably, comes from none other than EDF, which proposes to build two pressurised water reactors to the same design as the one at Hinkley Point C.

Unabashed by its own incompetence, EDF has also set its sights on new plants at Sizewell in Suffolk and Bradwell in Essex. This folly cannot be allowed to go on.

Giving the green light to the SMR bid at Moorside would be a shot in the arm for British engineering and begin to put this country back in control of its own energy.

Rolls Royce has been developing and maintaining small reactors for our submarines for decades. They can be manufactured on a production line to a proven specification, and have the potential to be built to scale for export, making a significant contribution to cutting global carbon emissions.

Demonised

The debate about energy is often polarised. Nuclear power is demonised. Greenpeace hailed Toshiba's withdrawal from Moorside as the last nail in the coffin of Britain's nuclear programme. For them it's a symbol of excessive industrialisation.

Yet we need energy to survive. Stop using it is no answer. Many of us have appreciated cleaner air in the absence of heavy traffic during lockdown. But that was due in part to a drop in economic activity – not sustainable in the long term.

Life must go on, goods have to be made and transported, people have to get to work. The practical, achievable way forward in the transition to cleaner energy is to plan ahead and invest heavily in new technologies.

We have a history of being a pioneering country, able to adapt to changing circumstances. The challenge for us is not to deindustrialise but to revolutionise the way we power industry.

For example the search is on for more efficient, reliable batteries. Battery powered

Government indifference
haul...

dependence

vehicles have come a long way. British technology has played a part, but we still lag behind countries like Germany, China and the US. The government wants Britain to be a world leader in this emerging technology. So far that is little more than rhetoric.

We must first appreciate what we have and then plug the gaps. For instance, in close proximity in the West Midlands are Jaguar Land Rover and the UKBIC, a battery research centre due to open later this year. Nearby is the Warwick Manufacturing Group's National Automotive Innovation Centre, already the largest auto research and development centre in Europe.

With pooled resources this one hub has the capacity to transform battery technology and build world beating electric cars. The missing piece is the batteries themselves, which presently have to be imported. Surely the case for constructing a battery production facility is compelling.

Investment

But the government has to play its part in deeds, not words. Investment in infrastructure, not least a huge increase in the number of charging points for cars, would address some British customers' scepticism about electric cars and strengthen the home market potential.

The government's "vision" for a zero-carbon future currently amounts to banning coal from power stations by 2024, stopping installation of domestic gas central heating one year later, and phasing out petrol, diesel and possibly hybrid cars by 2035.

The presumption is that almost all road vehicles will run on rechargeable electric batteries. But batteries have inherent limitations. The effectiveness of battery power for heavy-duty lorries and trains is questioned. And it's unclear whether ships or aircraft can practically be electric powered.

The supply of rare earth metals used in battery manufacture is limited and they are expensive. Disposal or recycling is problematic and they are weighty in relation to payload. And without efficient energy storage, renewables are much less attractive.

Current technology may not be the whole answer. We must also explore other potential sources such as hydrogen (see Box) for a cleaner future for Britain. ■



A hydrogen fuel cell bus at Stratford, east London – 16 years ago. Where is it now?

The promise of hydrogen

HYDROGEN HAS a huge potential to deliver clean energy. That's why our scientific community is pursuing an alternative vision, investigating hydrogen as a potential power source.

Hydrogen can generate energy in one of two ways. So-called "blue" hydrogen is made from natural gas; it is "clean" but not entirely carbon free. More interesting is "green" hydrogen as an alternative to batteries for some applications and without the limitations of that technology. It is made by using surplus energy generated by solar and offshore wind to convert water or seawater into a fuel that can be safely stored and transported.

Using electricity to generate hydrogen requires the application of polymer membrane electrolysis technology (PEM), capable of splitting water into hydrogen and oxygen. The world's largest PEM producer is a British firm, ITM Power Sheffield.

PEM variants are already in operation on the Humber to make hydrogen from sea water, using electricity from the Hornsea wind farms operated by Ørsted, the Danish state owned company.

There are other developments. The industry has a vision for liquefied hydrogen to displace diesel in buses and lorries during the coming decade.

Research is underway aimed at converting hydrogen into a synthetic fuel to power ships and aircraft. And a pilot project is about to be launched in Leeds using

hydrogen in central heating boiler systems. It is also considered to have the potential to displace coal and gas in the steel, glass, cement, chemicals and fertiliser production industries.

Like natural gas, hydrogen is expensive to store. But geologists consider that the use of abandoned salt caverns peppered along the East coast of England is possible. They are easily accessible and capable of conversion into hydrogen storage facilities at relatively modest cost.

The early indications are that Britain has the potential to become a global leader in clean hydrogen technologies and a net exporter within a relatively short time.

Freed from the anti-innovation, anti-progress clutches of the EU, Britain has the opportunity to invest in itself and its future. We showed what can be achieved during lockdown. People put their heads together to produce what was needed. There is a willingness to share and co-operate, thwarted only by bureaucratic interference.

Tomorrow's innovation is next year's relic. What will stand us in good stead is a culture of change, of never resting on our laurels. Centres of research twinned with manufacturing hubs is a model for a bright future.

Britain will need a technologically adroit, highly skilled workforce to make this a reality. Schools, institutions of education and employers also have a part to play in the future of energy. ■

“Working from home” has long been an option in many jobs, but for some the dream has turned out to be a nightmare...

Working from home: what's the reality?



Dirima/shutterstock.com

Unsurprisingly, research has shown that women have borne the brunt of the competing demands of homework and childcare.

IT IS HARD to overestimate the change involved since March 2020 when so many workers started to work from home. It's a complex picture, with some workers welcoming the change and others finding it highly stressful. Initially it was a necessity for employers, but many companies are now considering their options. Keen to offload the costs of an office, they are wondering if this saving can become permanent.

For workers and trade unions the shift has been sudden and significant, and some employers are now hoping to make the change permanent before anyone asks awkward questions about issues of equity, health and safety and transferring costs to the employees.

Whether you have a job at all is eclipsing discussion of where you work. But this question should not be avoided. Apart from the issues above, workers need to ask themselves: if I can do my job from home, could my job be done from anywhere in the

world where labour costs are much lower than in Britain?

True, the history of outsourcing work to different parts of the world has been a mixed one and some types of work have been “reshored” as employers found that the initial savings were eclipsed by negative impacts on their business.

But the sheer range of work now being done from individual homes has seen a huge expansion. The question of moving work to areas of cheapest labour will not go away.

How has it been for you?

Not surprisingly, workers living in larger houses with space available to designate an area as a home office coped better than most. For those who had long commutes to the workplace, homeworking has genuinely given them more free time.

But the experience of homeworking has been unequal depending on a worker's personal circumstances, nature of their housing,

gender, and age and number of children. If the experience in the workplace was this unequal, there would be uproar.

Workers who have found it highly stressful include parents who have been home schooling several children as well as doing their job – an impossible balancing act. For fear of losing their job, many parents have prioritised work over schooling. The Office of National Statistics (ONS) found that just one in eight primary school pupils took part in an online lesson during lockdown, which meant that the onus was on parents to do the teaching or the child had no lessons at all.

Similarly, only 28 per cent of 11- to 15-year-olds and some 44 per cent of 16- to 18-year-olds attended online lessons. Not surprisingly the ONS has found that pupils received a “significantly lower” number of hours learning when a child under the age of four was also in the household. A recent study from the LSE underlined the competing demands on parents, and how the

Jobs. Now millions of workers have found they have to. For Who benefits?

impact was more marked on women.

With schools fully reopening this aspect of home working should be less acute, but the school day is usually shorter than the working day and tensions between childcare and homeworking will persist for parents.

The impact of poor housing on homeworking could affect any age of worker but it was particularly hard for those in shared rental accommodation, many of whom were younger workers.

Someone in this situation explained to *Workers* magazine: “Not long after lockdown my employer sent out guidance about how to make a ‘workstation’ in the home. I also received health and safety advice from my union about the type of chair and height of the desk etc. However I only have my bedroom in the flat and a shared kitchen which has worksurfaces but no table, so I couldn’t act on this advice.” This worker is still spending the working day sitting up in bed with her work laptop on a tray.

Back soon?

Several employers have made it clear that they are not expecting workers to return to their offices any time soon. Insurer Direct Line expects no more than 20 per cent of its 9,000 staff to return to offices this year. It has increased its investment in technology and cybersecurity to help staff logging in from bedrooms, living rooms or the local café. Its chief executive, Penny James, has said that the aim is to create a sustainable version of home working so that it becomes a long-term option for the business.

The chief executive of Schroders, the UK’s biggest asset manager, was quoted in the *Daily Telegraph* saying, “Flexible working is the biggest bonus we could possibly have for productivity in the long term. Let’s walk towards it and let’s figure out how we work differently in the future.”

The term “flexible working” is used to mean a variety of things but often a combination of home and office working. But the Schroders website carries an article which says something rather different:

“Probably the main reason that so many organisations continue to occupy offices is productivity. Despite all the advances in technology, the office is still the best place to communicate with colleagues, spark new

ideas, provide training, share values and meet with clients.”

Interestingly the same article contains references to research showing that home working can adversely affect mental health and opportunities for promotion.

In a recent webinar about homeworking by techUK, which describes itself as a membership organisation bringing together business and government to explore the benefits of digital technology, employer contributors to the debate talked about moving from “work/life balance” to “work/life integration”, as if this were a healthy development. This sounds like capitalism’s dream: wage slave availability 24/7.

A contributor from the USA talked about how supervisory staff would not be required as there were modern digital methods of “worker assessment” which made their jobs redundant. This “worker assessment” included tools which, for example, monitored the keystrokes of an employee on their work computer, and it would be more accurately described as worker surveillance.

Employers and the law

Not all workers are aware that their employer has the same health and safety responsibilities for those working from home as in the workplace. Whenever anyone is working from home the law requires an employer to consider how it keeps in touch with its workers, what work activity they will be doing (and for how long), whether it can be done safely, and whether it needs to put control measures in place to protect them.

Going by this, it’s obvious that those workers who are cooped up in bedrooms with laptops on their knees are not meeting any of the requirements for the Display Screen Equipment as required by the Health and Safety Executive.

If workers were united in insisting that this legislation were implemented, a good number would not be required to work at home as this would breach their conditions of work.

During the Covid -19 emergency it could be argued that the risk of infection outweighed the other health risks. But if working from home is to become a permanent arrangement, what can workers do? If an individual worker raises a concern, they

“I only have my bedroom in the flat and a shared kitchen which has worksurfaces but no table...”

could fear loss of employment.

Despite all the talk of equality in society, inequalities in housing will lead to a huge inequality in conditions of work too. “Equal pay for equal work” has long been a struggle. Should a new additional demand be “Equal work conditions for the same work”?

It will be argued that homeworking allows some to be involved in the workplace who couldn’t previously participate. This is true but prior to the pandemic many workplaces had a policy which allowed homeworking to be optional. Optional being the key word. There is an onus on trade unions to raise the questions of employee choice and equity.

Union organisation

During the period of lockdown several trade unions have seen increases in membership possibly reflecting workers’ concerns about their job security. But how will unions reach the legions of home workers? So much trade union negotiating focuses on conditions of work, now differing hugely.

What happens to training opportunities when workers are at home? Availability of online learning is the easy bit – how is equity in selection of workers for additional training managed? Many future workers will be recruited to their job via virtual interview and will not know any of their colleagues in person. How do they know which union to join?

In recent months trade union meetings have been using video conferencing tools for meetings, but how does a new worker get to hear about those meetings? Employers are thinking fast. Workers need to think smart too. ■

Rebuilding industry has to be the focus of rebuilding Britain after the pandemic, argues John Mills in two new pamphlets...

Recovering from coronavirus

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (CC BY-SA 2.0)



BMW Mini plant, Cowley, Oxford.

Manufacturing a recovery from Coronavirus, by John Mills, with a foreword by Caroline Flint, paperback, 46 pages, ISBN 978-1-9161347-1-3, published by the John Mills Institute for Prosperity, May 2020. Free download from instituteforprosperity.org.uk

The road to recovery: reviving manufacturing after Coronavirus, by John Mills, paperback, 53 pages, ISBN 978-1-912581-07-8, published by Civitas, June 2020. Free download from civitas.org.uk

THESE TWO pamphlets by the economist John Mills are a timely intervention in the debate about how we move forward from the present crisis. He urges us to focus on rebuilding industry and explains why we must do all in our power to prioritise our manufacturing industry.

The impact of coronavirus has taught us that Britain must be able to produce its own medicines and protective equipment, amongst other essentials. To recover that capacity we need to increase our manufac-

turing production from 10 per cent of GDP to more like 15 per cent. In 1970 it was over 30 per cent.

We have deindustrialised more than any comparable country. That damages jobs, the regional balance and productivity. Currently we are far less self-sufficient in manufacturing than most other developed countries. That needs to change. Or would we rather continue to depend on China for so many consumer goods, for personal protective equipment, for 5G communications and for nuclear power stations?

Investment

Manufacturing investment in Britain has been too low and falling for far too long. The shortfall is across all types of investment. Less than 3 per cent of GDP has gone towards the most productive forms of investment, in machinery and equipment. That level is lower than in 2008. And spending on education and training fell from 4.9 per cent of GDP in 2012-13 to 4.1 per cent in 2017-18.

Mills points out that “Since 2000, the cumulative value of the UK’s balance deficit has been close to £1 trillion. To finance this very substantial sum, which is equal to about half our annual GDP, not only have we had to borrow large sums from abroad, we have also sold off huge swathes of our national assets. These include most of our ports and airports, our football clubs, our power and utility companies, billions of pounds worth of commercial and residential properties, and much else.”

A 2014 study by the Office of National Statistics found that foreign-owned companies generated 29 per cent of our annual gross value added. That will be far more now. Public interest tests on any proposed takeovers from abroad, and tax penalties on the buying of property assets by foreign interests, would be a good start towards restoring the balance.

Instead, successive governments have followed Thatcher’s priorities – finance capital first, nothing else matters. High interest rates and tight money supply in the 1980s, followed by the liberalisation of capital imports in the 2000s pushed up the sterling exchange rate to nearly double the mid-1970s level.

Mills wants Britain to lower the pound exchange rate. Historically devaluation has worked. In 1931 Britain devalued by 24 per cent. By 1937 the economy was growing 4.6 per cent a year, manufacturing output was up by nearly half and there were 2.7 million more jobs.

What else? Mills argues we should make the nationalised banks invest more in productive businesses, discourage inward investment (which drives up the exchange rate), and impose capital controls. These are possible outside the euro and the EU.

‘Successive governments have followed Thatcher’s priorities – finance capital first...’

in after the virus

As he writes, “Nearly all our internationally-traded low- and medium-tech manufacturing has been driven out of business and there is insufficient high-tech industry – also subject to long term threat – to fill the gap.”

A key requirement for making sure that a competitive environment delivers the investment and export-led recovery we need is “to ensure that manufacturing industry has access on favourable and plentiful terms to the finance needed to make it happen.”

Mills explains: “Lending decisions which may be prudent case by case for banks do not, however, necessarily add up to a strategy which makes sense for the economy as a whole. This is because the total returns to the wider economy, especially on the most productive forms of investment, vastly exceed the private returns to banks. Bank lending to industry therefore needs to be firmly guided and possibly underwritten by the state, as has indeed been done to support companies generally during the current coronavirus pandemic....[This] should be primarily targeted at encouraging manufacturing investment across the board.”

We must aim “to make it worthwhile siting new manufacturing capacity in the UK rather than elsewhere, thus producing a quantum leap in the UK’s exporting potential and its import saving capability.”

High pound

How do we achieve this? The 40-year-long high pound monetary policy meets the needs of the ruling class. It knows quite well that a high pound destroys industry but will do that to destroy the working class which threatens its rule.

Now as independence from the EU approaches, we can begin to free ourselves from the demands of global capital which has been stifling all too many economies. While globalisation has accelerated in the last 40 years, the growth rate in the developed world has fallen.

Without the changes that Mills proposes, we are likely to have “another lost decade of stagnant or much more probably falling real living standards – combined with more long years of public sector austerity – for the bulk of the population from the beginning of 2020 to 2030.” Time for the people to assert themselves. ■

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British rule in Jamaica lasted over 300 years – and revolts plantation system helped bring an end to slavery across the

Jamaica: Britain and slavery

SEIZED FROM Spain in 1655 when Oliver Cromwell was Lord Protector, Jamaica was of little economic value at first. Cromwell increased the island's European population slowly with indentured servants and prisoners and the economy grew to depend on slavery.

With the Treaty of Madrid in 1670 Spain gave up its claims to the island and this was an incentive to planting and settlement, and led to an increase in the supply of slaves from Africa. This resulted in more protection and military support for the planters against foreign competition.

In the mid-seventeenth century, competition from the North American colonies had depressed the prices of cotton and tobacco so local growers had switched to sugarcane. Jamaica and other Caribbean economies boomed to supply the wealthy British, who used sugar in cakes and to sweeten tea.

Slaves

The number of slaves was low at first. It did not grow significantly until well into the 18th century as the sugar monoculture and slave-worked plantation society spread across Jamaica. Slavery existed from the beginning of British rule, and had been practised by the Spanish beforehand. By 1800 there were 300,000 enslaved people in Jamaica.

The sugar industry was labour-intensive. In all, the British brought hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans to Jamaica. It was a brutal period. Slave owners subjected slaves to many atrocities, prompting often violent resistance. Many died in pursuit of freedom. Others died from poor conditions – for example unstable food supplies during 1780–87 caused the death through starvation of 15,000 slaves.

When the Spanish colonists fled in 1655 they left a large number of their former African slaves in three settlements. Known as "Maroons", some had allied with Spanish guerrillas, while others served as a black

'Slavery existed from the beginning of British rule...'



Martin Fabisoner (CC BY-SA 4.0)

Sam Sharpe Memorial, Montego Bay.

militia for the British. A third group, who had previously escaped from the Spanish, lived and intermarried with the indigenous Arawak people.

Each of the three groups established distinct independent communities in the mountainous interior of Jamaica. They survived by subsistence farming and periodic raids on plantations.

During the First Maroon War in 1739–40 the Maroons took a heavy toll on the British troops and local militia sent against them in the interior. The war ended with an agreement between the Maroons and the British government. The Maroons were to remain in their five main towns living under their own rulers and a British supervisor. With the agreement the Maroons, admired by the British occupiers as skilled warriors, would serve to protect the island from invaders.

In May 1760, Tacky, a slave overseer, led a group of enslaved Africans to take over two plantations, killing their enslavers. They commandeered the munitions storeroom at Fort Haldane, before marching on to overrun two more plantations where hundreds of other slaves joined them. Eighty mounted militia and some Maroons were sent to suppress the rebellion. In the skirmish Tacky

was shot and his head cut off. The rest of Tacky's men committed suicide rather than return to slavery.

The Second Maroon War started in 1795 when two Maroons were flogged by a slave for allegedly stealing two pigs. When six Maroon leaders came to the British to present their grievances, the British took them as prisoners.

Bloody

This sparked an eight-month conflict, which ended as a bloody stalemate. The 5,000 British troops and militia outnumbered the Maroons ten to one, but the mountainous and forested landscape of Jamaica proved ideal for guerrilla warfare.

A treaty signed in December established that the Maroons would beg on their knees for the King's forgiveness, return all runaway slaves, and be relocated elsewhere in Jamaica. Suspicious of British intentions, most of the Maroons did not surrender until mid-March 1796.

The British used the contrived breach of treaty as a pretext to deport the entire Trelawny Town Maroons to Nova Scotia, Canada. After a few years the Maroons were again deported to the new British settlement

against its brutal the Empire...

very

of Sierra Leone in West Africa.

During the last quarter of the 18th century Jamaica's sugar economy declined as famines, hurricanes, colonial wars, and wars of independence disrupted trade. By the 1820s, Jamaican sugar could not compete with high-volume producers such as Cuba. Production plummeted; by 1882 sugar output was less than half that in 1828.

The British Parliament abolished the slave trade in parts of the Empire (but not slavery itself) in 1807. This made a major contribution to that decline. Unlike in the US slave states, plantation owners could not convert ex-slaves into a sharecropping tenant class. Planters became increasingly dependent on wage labour and began recruiting workers abroad. Many of the former slaves settled in peasant or small farm communities in the interior of the island, the "yam belt", where they lived by subsistence and some cash crop farming.

Rebellion

In 1831, enslaved Baptist preacher Samuel Sharpe led a strike among enslaved black workers demanding more freedom and a working wage of "half the going wage rate". When their demands were refused the strike escalated into a full rebellion. A rebel military group known as the Black Regiment advanced into estates in the hills, inviting more slaves to join while burning houses, fields and other properties, setting off a trail of fires through the Great River Valley.

The Baptist War became the largest slave uprising in the British West Indies, lasting 10 days. It mobilised as many as 60,000 of Jamaica's 300,000 slaves. The rebellion was suppressed by British forces. The reaction of the Jamaican government and the plantocracy was even more brutal, killing about five hundred slaves.

That brutality accelerated the process of emancipation. Because of the 1831 Baptist War rebellion, the British Parliament held two inquiries. They contributed greatly to the abolition movement and passage of the 1833 law to abolish slavery throughout the British Empire. ■

• A longer version of this article online at www.cpbml.org.uk takes the story forward to independence in 1962.

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ABOUT US

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

All our members are thinkers, doers and leaders. All are expected to work to advance our class's interests. All must help to develop our understanding of what we need to do and how to do it.

What do we do? Rooted in our workplaces, communities and trade unions, we use every opportunity to encourage our colleagues and friends to embrace the Marxist practice and theory that alone can lead to the revolution that Britain needs. Marx's understanding of capitalism is a powerful tool – the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 explains the crash of 2007/8.

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

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

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

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

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

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The long road to independence

'The only class that can transform Britain for the better is the working class...'

WIDESPREAD JOB losses are inflicting great damage, especially given the high levels of personal debt in the country. But what kinds of new jobs must be created? Where will young people find work?

The services sector, particularly financial services, dominates our economy. Yet financial speculation creates no new value at all – it just moves money around, mostly into the pockets of the very few.

Let's redirect the economy into real production which creates the goods and services which people need.

The provision of essentials – the primary responsibility of any government – has failed miserably during the Covid crisis, most obviously with the dire shortage of PPE and ventilators. "Just buy it in on the global market" didn't work at all, exposing the unplanned and dangerous just-in-time practices they relied on. We need instead the just-in-case security of planning for future needs.

And the importing of cheap, often shoddy, goods, like the importing of cheap labour, is not what we need. It's not just environmentally wasteful. Eventually, it leads to the importing of the same wages and conditions that produce the cheap imports.

Just look at the clothing industry in Leicester (see page 5), a cesspit of ultra-low wages (around half the minimum wage) and sweatshop conditions consciously tolerated by politicians national and local.

Reliance on foreign companies to provide our energy needs, materials, trains, cars – the list goes on and on – must end. Our national security depends on it.

We must increase our capacity to feed the nation. A farming policy which emphasises food production equally with protection of soil and environment. They are interdependent. An end to the increasing reliance on food imports!

We still manufacture many things here. Britain currently trades with 111 countries under WTO rules. As we leave the EU we do not need a trade deal or to be part of any trade bloc or US-led trade war. Rather

we need to invest in existing and new necessary industries.

Plan for long-term industrial expansion. End reliance on importing what we need. Stop being at the mercy of long overseas supply chains. Make it here!

Why do we encourage a cycling "revolution" but neglect that bicycles are hardly made here at all?

Significant money must be put into the training and skills required to achieve expansion. Industrial unions are calling for this, seeing the benefits that Brexit can bring. Crucially, we need high-quality apprenticeships – the present system is largely a low-paid going-nowhere joke (see page 10).

But it's not just – or even primarily – about money. The only class that can transform Britain for the better is the working class. Only workers know what we need. Only workers have the interests of their country, their communities, at heart.

Leave it to the employing class and they will suck every last penny of profit out of every grant they can. For all the talk of benefit fraud – which does of course exist – nothing matches the scale of the frauds, tax avoidance and tax evasion from the capitalist class.

From the posh clubs of Pall Mall lining up for the "eat out to help out" subsidy to the blatant twisting of the apprenticeship levy, from the offshore trusts to the hoovering up of EU farming grants, capitalists are past masters at getting something for nothing.

The employers and their masters, the finance capitalists of the City, are the ones that have dragged this country down to where it is now. They are hardly the ones to bring it back up.

Brexit is nearly done. We must turn our attention to the fight to resist the ravages of transnational capitalism and to forge an independent country which alone can provide a future as part of a real economy for our young people. The fight will be long and hard, but if we want a future, we are going to have to create it ourselves. ■

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