

WORKERS

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JULY/AUGUST 2020 £1

**FOUR YEARS AFTER THE
EU REFERENDUM, FOUR
YEARS TOO LONG**

**ON TO
SOVEREIGNTY!**

**ON TO
INDEPENDENCE!**

HEALTH Covid-19's lesson

RACE United we stand

UNIS New model needed

HK A colony no more

FINANCE Monetary mess

FISH Supertrawlers

INDUSTRY Plan needed

plus News, Book

SCOTLAND SNP wobble

Review, Historic Notes

TRANSPORT Jobs slashed

and more

WORKERS



Four years on – enough is enough

23 JUNE marked four long years since the people of Britain voted to leave the European Union. “The British people have spoken, and the answer is, we’re out,” said the BBC’s David Dimbleby at 4.40 am after a long night of magnificent results.

Yet we’re not out, not really. Instead, we’re stuck in round after round of negotiations, bogged down in a transition that entrenched interests are seeking to turn into a cul-de-sac.

But matters are coming to a head. The EU wants the UK to ask for an extension to the transition. And you can see why they want us to. However much the French and German governments see the British people generally as an unwelcome irritant, they need our money, and they need our markets.

In 2018 – the last year for which there are final figures – Britain had a balance of payments deficit of £66 billion with the EU. (Compare that with a balance of payments surplus with the rest of the world of £77 billion.) Bear that in mind when EU negotiator Michel Barnier talks about a “level playing field”.

They are desperate about money. The EU is heading into its new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) covering the next seven years and due to start on 1 January – without a clue of how much money it will need, only that it will need a lot.

The current pitch from the European Commission shows both the scale of its ambition and the depths of its difficulties. First, it wants member states to agree to its borrowing €750 billion on the currency markets to

finance (mostly) a Covid-19 recovery fund to be doled out by the Commission.

But several countries are dead set against the EU taking on that level of mutual debt, while others want grants (which the recipients won’t have to repay) to be double that.

Second, it wants to wade into other countries’ health policies on a massive scale, upping its health budget from an original proposal of €413 million to €9.4 billion – a 20-fold increase.

The Commission has no idea what the eventual outcome will be. Brussels is pinning its hopes on Germany, which takes over the six-month rotating chairmanship of the European Council on 1 July, being able to strongarm the rest of the EU. Even Germany may find this difficult.

Amid the chaos, the one clear fact – the only clear one – is that an extension to the transition would be a leap in the dark. There is no way that the UK would or could know what it would be letting itself in for.

Four years, and still no final agreement. If agreement with the EU were possible, it would have taken place already. No transition extension! Walk away, as we should have done four years ago. Let’s get on with the tasks that face us as an independent country at last.

On to sovereignty! On to independence! ■

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



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Photo courtesy RMT

Welding on the railway: Scotland desperately needs more electrified track.

Holyrood blocks rail renewal

AGAIN WE see divergent policies driving a wedge between Scotland and the rest of Britain. While important railway enhancement works have started up again in England and Wales, the devolved Scottish administration has not allowed workers in the sector to return, keeping it under lockdown.

In a letter – marked “urgent” – to First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, the Rail, Maritime and Transport union General Secretary Mick Cash emphasised that the necessary precautions against Covid-19 are now in place, with site safety control “second to none” and designated site marshals (including RMT representatives) having “full health and safety powers to ensure full compliance”. He said, “The health and safety of my members is paramount and my reps are now confident Scottish railway enhancement works can be recommenced safely as they have been in England and Wales.”

The decision not to restart the works is contrary to advice given by RMT and by Network Rail on behalf of the infrastructure contracting supply chain. Hundreds of skilled jobs could be lost and already there is drift to job opportunities in the reopened works in England and Wales.

These works stem from the Department of Transport's 2017 plan *A New Approach for Rail Enhancements*, part of the Moving Britain Ahead strategy, which creates a pipeline of ongoing investment in passenger and freight rail transport. But this was a strategy just for England and Wales, leaving Transport Scotland to devise its own approach, which came in the form of STAG – Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidance. ■

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

STUDENT NURSES Call to scrap tuition fees

NURSING STUDENTS stepped up when they were needed in hospitals. Now their unions are calling for the government to scrap their tuition fees. This would complete the reversal of the disastrous decision in 2017 to cut support for student nurses and midwives, which contributed greatly to the current shortage of nurses.

Unions representing nurses, midwives and allied healthcare professionals are calling on the government to improve support during their training. This would recognise their contribution during the current coronavirus crisis and make a material difference to them. By abolishing future tuition fees and introducing student living grants, the government could start to tackle the shortage of nurses and others entering the medical professions.

On 6 May the Royal College of Nursing, the Royal College of Midwives, Unison and the National Union of Students wrote to the health secretary Matt Hancock. They have yet to receive an answer to their proposals. These were: to reimburse tuition fees already paid and forgive loan debts for current students; abolish the fees for all new students; and to introduce living maintenance grants.

Donna Kinnair, head of the RCN, said: “Before the pandemic, we had witnessed the devastating impact the removal of the bursary had on student nurse numbers... This is a major reason why the nursing workforce in England entered the COVID-19 crisis with almost 40,000 unfilled posts.” ■

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

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



ON THE WEB

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

Back to school, urge paediatricians

More than 1,500 paediatricians have signed a letter to the prime minister urgently calling for the government to publish a clear plan for getting all children back to school.

RMT attacks decision to axe Doncaster rail refurbishment jobs

The RMT union has condemned plans by American giant Wabtec to cut rail refurbishment jobs at Doncaster under the cover of Covid-19.

EU still trying to trap Britain in its net

Michel Barnier, the EU's chief Brexit negotiator is at it again, threatening Britain. But the threat is an odd one: reach agreement, or face no deal. As if that were a threat!

Don't let them bargain away defence!

We are told the UK's Brexit negotiators are insisting on sovereignty at every turn. That doesn't seem to apply to defence...

Take control of P&O to safeguard jobs and marine supply chain, says union

P&O Ferries has cut jobs on key ferry routes, while taking government support for Covid-19.

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.

Alan Murray-Rust/geograph.org.uk (CC BY-SA 2.0)



One of the 200 railway wagons built to carry wood pellets to Drax.

Not as green as it looks

BRITAIN HAS now gone for two months without burning coal. In fact, for the first three months of this year, coal contributed a mere 4.6 per cent of the country's energy. At the same time nuclear provided 17.2 per cent, gas 33.9 per cent and (drum roll) renewables 43.5 per cent, a record high.

But the picture is not as green as it is painted. For one thing, the pandemic lockdown, with much of industry shut, offices closed and public transport sidelined, has led to a 20 per cent drop in energy demand. Factor in that some of our energy was imported from fossil fuel generation elsewhere, and the jubilation of the eco-enthusiasts looks somewhat premature.

In addition, it has become clear that biomass, the wood pellets burned in power stations as a substitute for coal, which is the biggest single source of renewable energy in Britain, is far from the carbon-neutral fuel its advocates claim.

Britain's biggest power station, Drax in North Yorkshire, took over 7,300 tons last year of pellets harvested from trees in Russia which can take 150 years to regrow. Coupled with the tree felling and destruction of bio-diversity in the southern US, the appetite for biomass is damaging the environment.

Tellingly, it is an EU directive, enshrined in British law, which defines biomass as carbon neutral and justifies the huge subsidies it enjoys. During 2019, Drax "earned" £789.5 million in renewable electricity subsidies, according to biofuelwatch.org.uk.

HEALTH

EU power grab

THE EUROPEAN Commission is making a concerted power grab to give itself the right to intervene in member states' health systems – which current treaties designate as lying within nations' own competence.

In May a leaked copy of yet another re-draft of the EU's budget revealed its thinking. "Experience from the ongoing crisis has demonstrated that the EU would benefit from an ambitious stand-alone Health Programme that is fit for purpose," it said.

The document goes on to talk about an enhanced role for the EU in "prevention, access and treatment" – which covers just about every aspect of health. In addition, there would be new powers to give the EU

"greater capacity to act in health emergencies."

Then a top Commission official confirmed the plan to the European Parliament. She was speaking to a friendly audience. The parliament has consistently pushed for greater powers to be granted to Brussels, most recently in a resolution adopted in mid-April. "Not only must the European Union emerge stronger from this crisis, its institutions should also be empowered to act when cross-border health threats arise," it said. The motion was carried by more than 2 to 1.

The move by the European Commission is yet another example of the perils of extending the Brexit transition, during which Britain would have no say at all about new EU law but would be treaty-bound to apply it.

EPIDEMICS

Africa now polio-free

THE WORLD Health Organization has certified Nigeria and Cameroon free of polio, a crippling disease that usually affects children under five.

The UN body is expected to go on to

declare that all of Africa is free of the wild polio virus.

Nigeria's head of primary health care agency Dr Faisal Shuaib said that this was a "proud moment for us and indeed all Nigerians".

Afghanistan and Pakistan are now the only countries in the world with cases of the wild polio virus. ■



Saf Suleyman/Greenpeace

Supertrawler Margiris fishing off Brighton, October 2019

Supertrawler menace

A GREENPEACE investigation into supertrawler fishing in protected UK waters has reported that they doubled their activity last year.

Jeremy Percy, director of the New Under Ten Fishermens Association, which campaigns for small fishing vessels under 10 metres long, said that the supertrawlers might be trying to establish a track record in order to argue for continuing access in a new fisheries agreement post-Brexit. This certainly appears to be the case.

The 25 Polish, Dutch and Russian vessels in question (none is UK-owned), each more than 100 metres long, fish intensively using nets up to a mile long to Hoover up hundreds of tonnes a day. The vessels include Dutch giant factory ship *Margiris*, which at 456 foot long was banned from Australian waters in 2012.

In 2019 these mammoths spent 2,963 hours in the protected zones, a huge increase on 1,388 hours in 2018. One of the most heavily fished areas was the Southern North Sea Special Area of Conservation off the east coast of England. Such intensive fishing there is limited by few rules, with these massive vessels greatly damaging fish stocks and reefs, also catching 1,100 protected harbour porpoises in nets in 2019.

A Greenpeace YouGov UK poll published on 18 Jun) found that more than four out of five people wanted supertrawler fishing banned from UK protected waters. This result was consistent across the three main political parties, with very little variance between leave and remain voters.

Greenpeace says that the UK's Exclusive Economic Zone is the worst affected by EU supertrawler activity in the world. On the call for a ban, it says: "Britain's departure from the Common Fisheries Policy [CFP] is the perfect opportunity to do this".

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs commented that the CFP currently restricts the UK's ability to implement tougher protections. Government often blames the EU for policies which it could act on now – the test will be what action it takes when we leave.

Campaigning organisation Fishing for Leave, which represents the interests of smaller UK fishing fleets and communities, is holding government to its commitments.

Only by leaving the CFP in its entirety, says FFL, can we adopt our legal right to become a fully independent coastal state. If this happens by the end of 2020 – as it must, with no Transition extension – we can fully control the activities of these foreign vessels in our waters.

Now it seems the EU negotiators might be ready to concede to Britain's strongly stated position on the CFP. Let's make sure this happens. ■

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

FIGHTING COVID-19

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

Treatment breakthrough

THE "RECOVERY" trial started in March, involving 11,500 patients drawn from 175 hospitals. It included 2,100 recruits randomised to receive treatment with dexamethasone. Early results from this particular arm of the study were conclusive to the extent that researchers have recommended the intervention becomes part of standard care with immediate effect.

A ten-day course of the drug reduces the risk of death in patients requiring mechanical ventilation by 40 per cent and in those needing oxygen by a fifth.

Dexamethasone is inexpensive and widely available in the NHS in both oral and injectable presentations. It has been in use for several decades. Side effects and adverse reactions are marginal and well documented.

Had the drug's potential been understood at the start of pandemic, 5,000 lives in the UK might have been saved.

This is a genuine triumph for British scientists and will have world-wide implications. But dexamethasone has no antiviral activity of its own and is only useful during the later stages of the disease when patients are hospitalised.

Studies are in the pipeline that might enable earlier intervention aimed at preventing the disease from establishing itself, through the use of medicines with proven anti-viral properties. ■

Covid-19 has revealed the evil effects of the criminal fragmentation of the internal market has failed. Workers must ensure that we n

We need a discussion, n

THE DEATH, illness and disruption caused by Covid-19 are not over, even if much diminished. Yet even before the lockdown ends, speculation and blame have been rife. There are significant long-term lessons for Britain and our working class which will take time to implement.

The debate has only just started, but it's too early for any tastelessly named "post-mortem". And while there's no gain in hindsight without looking deeper, there is plenty we can say already about how our health and social care systems are set up and managed.

Many facts and more information will no doubt come to light. The British people will have to address, among other things, the manufacture and stockpiling of PPE, the manufacture and supply of ventilators, the number of intensive care beds, and the need to increase our capacity to train health workers rather than depending on a supply from abroad.

Investigation into the structure of health and social care is clearly now crucial. The 2012 Health and Social Care Act was a disaster, as we've reported in *Workers* over many years. Now it can be seen as something worse than we imagined: the cause of unnecessary deaths.

Blunder

The Act abolished strategic health planning and the Strategic Health Authorities which carried it out. That was a terrible blunder – philistine, short-term and unforgivable. They will have to be replaced.

The SHAs' functions were dispersed to a myriad of new "Arm's Length Bodies" (ALBs), Public Health England, Health Education England, NHS England, the list goes on – joined by their equivalent shadows in Wales and Scotland.

The Act also abolished Primary Care Trusts even as they were showing a growing organisational capacity. They were replaced by the entirely untested idea of General Practitioner Commissioning, which as predicted at the time soon became the playground of accountants and consultants. The safe pair of hands that patients could expect to find with their family doctors was replaced by the ethos of service commissioning.

Workers should ask how much better



PPandV/shutterstock.com

The new normal: 16 June 2020, and a deserted Piccadilly Circus, London. Bold decisions will have

prepared the NHS would have been to face the Covid-19 pandemic had those structures not been abolished in 2012. And if government or anyone else is unwilling to answer, we will have to demand they do so.

In the past eight years we have seen thousands of experienced health workers made redundant and new, untried systems put in place. – eight lost years of further development in expertise. That entirely unnecessary upheaval will have reduced NHS capacity. The question is what should we do now to avert another calamity.

The impact of earlier disastrous decisions on pandemic preparedness will have been far more detrimental than any temporary shortage of masks or a few days delay in ordering lockdown. Indeed, it is the very

lack of strategic planning that is responsible for the shortages of PPE and the failure to provide a coordinated response of anti-pandemic measures.

Within the NHS there are those who have over the last few years been quietly countering the criminal fragmentation of the 2012 Act, rebuilding a more unified service and delivery structure. This restructuring has brought together the Clinical Commissioning Groups (GP Commissioning) which replaced Primary Care Trusts.

More significant is the creation of Integrated Care Systems. These organisations can potentially go beyond even the former SHAs because they bring together the providers of Acute Healthcare with a putative planning system.

mentation of Britain's health and social care. The so-called
ever again face such a calamity...

not a postmortem



to be taken.

This planning approach reaches back even further in time than SHAs to an organisational model without an internal market. The direction of this change, if sustained, offers the prospect of sweeping away Thatcher's market-based chaos. It is positive and radical, yet many have not even noticed that it is happening or grasped its significance. That goes for most health workers and trade unions, and naturally the parliamentary opposition parties.

At present it is not entirely clear whether the last three months have slowed down the process of integration because all hands have been on deck. Or things may have speeded up, precisely because all hands have been on deck. It may well be the latter.

Difficult decisions are in the offing. For

example, the pandemic response relocated much elective surgery away from general hospitals, or suspended it altogether, leading to the burgeoning of intensive care capacity within those hospitals. Where work was transferred elsewhere to facilitate this expansion the question now arises as to whether that work should go back to the hospitals that originally undertook it.

Is there virtue for example in transferring all paediatric work in North Central London to Great Ormond Street? ICU and other acute work could then be concentrated at the large general hospitals in the sector. We can now plan these things rather than rely on Thatcher's "internal market" – but only if we grasp the nettle. The shift from elective surgery was so successful that it was not necessary to fully utilise the Nightingale Hospitals. But we should recognise the planning and organisation shown by the Army in creating those facilities in a few weeks.

The idea that we cannot return to normal is abroad. Few are saying yet what should happen instead. We, patients as well as health workers, will have to be bold enough to take far reaching organisational decisions which that operational pandemic planning has shown is needed. That's the next stage to grapple with alongside the direct medical and public health issues such as contact tracing and vaccine research.

And then there is social care. The NHS is fragmented and subjected to competition, but the fate of social care was far worse. The health service has little or no direct responsibility for provision of social care but is affected by it. Poor social care provision brings about more ill patients and too often makes discharging patients difficult.

It is hardly surprising that a large number of Covid-related deaths occurred in care homes. The real surprise would have been if it had been otherwise.

But the answer is not to integrate health and social care; old age is not a disease. The NHS is far too monolithic as it is and will need to focus on repairing the damage of the past decade. The issue is how social care is to be funded and organised in the future to complement the NHS.

Local government once ran most care homes. It was long ago stripped of that responsibility in the Thatcherite orgy of pri-

'The NHS has so far withstood its most severe test. The same cannot be said for social care...'

vatation. The result is a patchwork of for-profit ownership. The sector is notorious for low profit margins and business failures. National minimum wage employment, zero hours contracts and wholesale importation of workers from abroad abound. And yet costs are too high for many families to pay, and they will rise.

Any long-term stable reorganisation of healthcare planning and delivery must have at its core the coordination of health and social care provision. For example we need a funding structure for social care that enables discharge from hospital when patients are medically fit. At the moment that's often held up because of a lack of social care.

Good signs

The signs are good for the NHS as it has so far withstood its most severe test. The same cannot be said for social care, which will need to be taken in hand. The working class demand for dignity in old age, so much part of our past but less often articulated now, needs to come to the fore. Success in prolonging longevity of life is just that, a success; it should not be a burden.

We must as a country find the resources, the structures and the workers to run a service which is not a waiting room for the mortuary. It should be a safe and meaningful experience for workers who have contributed all their lives, and do not deserve a profit-driven chaotic system that they have to sell their house to pay for.

Health workers themselves need to take responsibility. They must not just stand and applaud, or for that matter stand and be applauded. The changes under way are occurring without the input yet of those most interested in their success – all of us! ■

No wonder universities are in a financial mess. Wedded to to bring in increasing numbers of foreign students, they are

A sustainable future for

BRITAIN'S UNIVERSITIES, open and working throughout the pandemic, are facing a double challenge in the next academic year. They have to provide face-to-face teaching as soon as possible in the academic year, within the constraints imposed by the impact of Covid-19, while simultaneously reorienting their current business model, which is over-reliant on the income derived from overseas students.

The first challenge will be met by hard-working university staffs, who during the pandemic have ensured that teaching could continue, and examinations could be conducted. Now they are turning their creativity and expertise to ensuring that teaching is delivered effectively from the beginning of the academic year, in most universities through a blended learning model.

Face to face

This model is designed to allow a gradual shift from online to more and more face-to-face teaching as soon as possible – not least because there is good research to show the limitation of online alternatives. In addition, many university programmes, such as healthcare, performing arts and most sciences, require access to specialist equipment; for others, such as community development, the inclusion of a placement is essential in order to qualify.

Universities UK, the voice of university employers, and the University and College Union (UCU) need to reassure new students applying to undergraduate degree programmes that they will not only be safe but also that during their degree they will get the

‘New students need to be reassured that they will get the experience and learning opportunities they need to graduate.’



PhotoItalia Studio/shutterstock.com

Graduation ceremony, University of Portsmouth, 2015. Remember when students gathered together

experience and learning opportunities they require to graduate. One-year Master's programmes present more of a challenge and many may be moved to a January start.

Both Universities UK and the UCU have issued measured and careful guidance on how to proceed. The principles for emerging from lockdown published on 3 June by Universities UK are encouraging in that they expect institutions to provide “as much in-person learning, teaching, support services and extra-curricular activities as public health advice and government guidance will support”. The UCU has in place “five tests” for moving forwards.

Given the evidence on pre-symptomatic and asymptomatic virus carriers it seems sensible to have temperature checks and an easily accessible testing facility, especially during September and October, at places where people from all over the world normally would collect in their thousands, often in very close proximity to one another in packed lecture halls. The University of Birmingham, for example, though not the largest, has 7,300 staff and 35,445 students.

In England, the Office for Students has emphasised the need to reduce permanent damage and ensure that the sector and students can get back to normal working as

a business model that relied on speculative investment
 re going to have to re-focus on Britain to survive...

higher education



ther? Those days must return soon.

quickly as possible. While many universities have good joint university/union agreements in place, such as the one at the University of Glasgow (see Box), the employers will be totally reliant on their staff for meeting the challenge, and the disputes over pay and pensions which preceded the pandemic will not magically disappear.

There is a fine line for the employers to tread here because the other challenge is firmly in their court – how to reorient the current unsustainable business model reliant on the inflated fees paid by overseas students. One survey suggests that half of overseas students may defer.

Universities cannot expect to rely on

fees from overseas students indefinitely. This was always a feeble strategy, which this health emergency has proven to be a broken reed.

Overseas students typically pay up to three times the fees of domestic students, making them a vital source of revenue both for those universities which are cash-strapped, and for those wealthier universities desperate to sustain wildly ambitious building programmes undertaken so that they can expand further to accommodate even more of the cash-cow students.

As *UK Construction Online* notes, universities fund their building programmes using private finance including bank credit, income from research grants, capital endowments, PFI, charitable trusts, private corporations and sponsors and fees from overseas students. The fees are crucial to enable them to keep up the cut throat competition they wage against each other, expanding out of all recognition.

Higher education is in trouble and has been for some time, as Timothy Devinney and Grahame Dowling explain, writing in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*. They cite “the pressures that come from demands for greater efficiencies and concerns over value for money. For the most part, university management has addressed these pressures by raising revenues through expanding and diversifying recruitment; geographic and programmatic expansion; squeezing efficiencies out of the teaching function (via casualisation and increasing student-to-staff ratios); raising debt in the bond markets; and, where possible, fundraising”.

Building boom

The amount of money ploughed into university building projects over the past four or five years is staggering. Over this period, construction began on 593 separate schemes for the 24-strong Russell Group of leading research universities, with the University of Manchester alone pumping £625 million into 47 projects, including the £350 million Mecanoo-designed Manchester Engineering Campus development. Other recent big-spenders include Swansea University (more than £550 million) and the universities of Edinburgh and Cambridge (both £330 million-plus).

‘The amount of money ploughed into university building projects is staggering...’

Now universities in the UK face the prospect not just of redundancies but of closures. Loss of overseas students is being translated into redundancies as some university managements have already indicated they are unable to cope with the financial implications of dramatically lower student numbers and are trying to cut back on staff.

The University of Roehampton, for example, has recently announced a voluntary redundancy scheme for academic staff. It has proposed pay cuts for all staff (grade 7 and above) to start from 1 August, along with an increase in workloads and a suspension of all upcoming research sabbaticals.

At the School of Oriental and Asian Studies, management is addressing a financial crisis with plans for wholesale job losses and cutbacks. Liverpool University has announced the blanket ending of 600 fixed-term contracts, while Imperial College’s contraction plans threaten up to 156 jobs.

Financing

The way universities are financed is going to have to change – and there are already some positive signs that it can. A report by London Economics titled “Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on university finances”, commissioned by UCU and released on 1 May 2020, includes a key finding “there are very significant incentives for HEIs to replace losses of international students with domestic students ...”

The number of school leavers in Britain is set to rise by a fifth between 2018 and 2030, leading to a growth in home demand for higher education. In this difficult situation there is an opportunity to address both challenges and put the whole sector on a much more sustainable footing.

Continued on page 10

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The horrible distortion of higher education in our university system pushes out British students. Of the University of Birmingham's 35,445 students 30 per cent come from outside the UK (HESA, 2020). The number of university students from England fell by 15 per cent from 2017-18 to 2018-19.

In Scotland, international students (both EU and non-EU) accounted for 22 per cent of students at higher education institutions. At postgraduate level, they accounted for a staggering 58 per cent of students on postgraduate courses in 2016-17.

We educate and train far too few of our young people. To rebuild our economy and our society after the pandemic we need to invest in education and training. Shockingly, under Cameron and May, spending on these fell from 4.9 per cent of GDP in 2012-13 to 4.1 per cent in 2017-18.

More, not less

In the three years since the referendum the number of EU students fell, so universities had to amend their business model to suit the changed market. We need more education not less (not least to help recover from the pandemic). We need many more home-grown educated and skilled people, not fewer, as will other countries.

Yet many universities are turning their backs on our young people. A new report, *No Room At the Top*, written by Neil O'Brien for think tank Onward, notes that the decision by Oxford and Cambridge universities not to expand their numbers means that for every additional overseas student joining, a British student loses out.

Like other universities in England, Oxbridge has recruited more overseas students. The proportion of students admitted to Oxbridge from the UK fell from 88 per cent in 2008 to 78 per cent in 2018. The proportion of overseas students at the two universities, at about one in four, is still lower than in many other institutions.

At University College London, the London School of Economics and Imperial College London, for example, the proportion is 50 per cent. Between 2014-15 and 2018-



Workers

24 February 2020: a month before lockdown, UCU members were picketing the University of Glasgow in their dispute over pay and pensions. Now they have reached agreement on a way forward for tuition in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis.

Looking forward

At the University of Glasgow, where at the beginning of this year lecturers were out in force fighting over pay and pensions, the university and the union have reached a joint agreement about coping with the new situation which commits all to:

- Strive to ensure that the University's position and its reputation are protected and enhanced
- Do everything we can to protect the jobs and livelihoods of members of staff
- Treat all members of staff, at all lev-

els regardless of contract type, fairly and equitably

- Work together to ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of all members of staff and their families
- Work together to support members of staff adapting to new ways of working and to continue making a positive contribution in these changing circumstances
- Continue to share information and ideas regularly, in a spirit of openness and transparency. ■

19 the dozen universities with the highest entry requirements in England added 4,895 first-year students from abroad but only 350 from the UK.

The 'public good'

Now is the time to take a good look at how UK higher education, which is currently designed to educate our competitors, can instead be directed again to what in the USA

they call "the public good". So-called globalisation (a fancy, classless name for virulent international capitalism) has gone a long way towards destroying the public spiritedness of higher education.

We need a return to the founding principles of universities – to provide a high level and standard of education for the young people of Britain. This must be the basis of a decent and civilised future for our country. ■

Boris Johnson wants to give citizenship to three million Hong Kong residents of the former colony. Why?

A colony no more

IN RESPONSE to China's introduction of new security laws which will criminalise offences such as sedition, subversion and foreign interference, Boris Johnson has pledged to give three million Hong Kong residents British citizenship – even though Britain quit the former colony more than two decades ago.

The move comes after the recent civil unrest in Hong Kong. The unrest began with some sections of Hong Kong's residents mounting opposition to an extradition law proposed by the Chinese government to prevent the former colony from becoming a safe haven for those wanted for crimes, such as homicide, that have been committed in other countries.

Any decisions under the new law would have been made case-by-case by the Chief Executive and the Hong Kong courts that together would have had the final say on extradition requests. So Hong Kong would have been able to ensure that people accused of crimes based on politics or religion would not be subject to extradition.

Withdrawal

But this did not stop claims of a threat to Hong Kong's autonomy. To prevent further escalation of civil disorder by the opposition, Carrie Lam, the Chief Executive, announced the withdrawal of the extradition bill on 4 September 2019.

Despite this the riots have continued, with calls on other countries to implement sanctions against China. On 22 May 2020, a draft security bill was submitted to China's National People's Congress. In accordance with the "one country two systems" arrangement Hong Kong's basic law requires the Hong Kong legislature to ratify national security to prevent sedition, subversion and

'The British government should abandon its anachronistic neo-colonialist policy...'



Hong Kong skyline

foreign interference.

Excluding four years of Japanese occupation Hong Kong had remained a British colony up until 1997, when it was returned to Chinese sovereignty under the Sino-British joint declaration agreed by the UK and the People's Republic of China.

Commenting on Boris Johnson's pledge to Hong Kong residents Chinese Foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said at a recent press briefing, "The UK has no sovereignty, governance or supervision over Hong Kong ... Therefore the UK has no right to lecture or interfere in China's internal affairs under the pretence of the Joint Declaration."

Zhao Lijian also said, "There is no single word or clause in the Sino-British joint declaration that entitles the UK to any responsibility for Hong Kong after its return."

Johnson has chosen to ignore China's right to protect and secure its national borders and, he is not alone, as he's been joined by other players such as the US and the EU.

The Chinese position with regard to

these latest cases of foreign interference is better understood in a wider historical context. For years after the end of the Korean War the United States military has been filling the Pacific region with warships, bombers and island bases for missiles, armed with nuclear warheads, all pointed at China.

Barack Obama, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, committed trillions of US dollars to building and updating a nuclear arsenal along with all sorts of the latest smart weaponry to be deployed across the Pacific region. A war with China would be a truly horrific prospect, but that hasn't deterred the US and its allies from continuing with their hostile, provocative and potentially dangerous attitude.

The British government should abandon its anachronistic neo-colonialist policy toward Hong Kong and seek to build relations based on good diplomacy and mutual respect, especially since Britain is about to regain its sovereignty and become an independent trading nation at the end of the transition period in December 2020. ■

A union plan called Manufacturing Matters has been launched. We need a plan for a manufacturing-based recovery – we also

How about a real industrial strategy?

AMID THE catalogue of job loss announcements in the past month or so – from Rolls-Royce and British Airways to numerous retailers – it is clear that the Britain will see significant reduction in value creation from the manufacturing sector caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Covid-19 crisis has not stopped discussion about the future of British industry. In fact, in many ways it has made the discussion even more relevant, and even more intense. But is there a current UK industrial strategy fitted to meeting the current industrial challenge?

While some manufacturing employers such as Rolls-Royce have reacted by slashing staff and investment, unions have been spurred on to press the need for a strong manufacturing base. It's a welcome change from endless broadsides – largely ignored by their own members – against Brexit. In fact, the concentration on industry has opened the eyes of many to the advantages of an independent Britain free from the EU.

Under the campaigning banner of Manufacturing Matters, Unite Assistant General Secretary Steve Turner has placed before the union's membership a plan to recover and rebuild our manufacturing base. It deserves wider circulation and discussion throughout the trade union movement.

The plan – launched in November 2019 – implicitly rejects EU state aid legislation by calling on the government and the devolved administrations to be “brave” by investing now, using equity stakes and public procurement as strategic tools, and bringing forward public projects to meet unions' wider social policy objectives.

This plan has also been presented to government at recent meetings. It puts the case that any strategy for the economy to recover from the impact of Covid-19 must

‘Unite is calling for the government to take the lead by investing directly...’



Prapham Jampalaj/shutterstock.com

Welding robots on an automotive industry production line.

put British manufacturing at its heart.

Unite is calling for the government to take the lead by intervening directly to provide support for Britain's “manufacturing capabilities, capacity and resilience as we reposition our economy to address the challenges ahead”. That includes not just rebuilding manufacturing, but expanding it.

World class

The truth is that the service sector cannot survive and thrive without a sound manufacturing base. Unite's plan recognises that Britain can only afford the NHS and other public services if it has a “world class, high value, exporting manufacturing sector”.

But that won't happen on its own. As Unite recognises, only through a coordinated industrial strategy can Britain meet the union's objective of “levelling up our

economy; protecting and enhancing jobs, upskilling our workforce, offering apprenticeships to coming generations, supporting our families and defending communities in a just transition of our economy”.

A link to the climate lobby is also made by the reference to the need for the “million plus green jobs” that can be created to meet wider social policy and climate change commitments. But that requires a recovery plan with manufacturing at its core, as well as “ensuring that we manufacture the products we need here in the UK, while training and deploying an army of installers and maintainers”.

Unite repeats its call for “direct, strategic state intervention” as the way of meeting the challenges of Covid-19, Brexit and climate change head-on. And, the union says, success will require the state's “genuine collab-

ched. With Covid-19 and Brexit, we not only desperately
 o have the opportunity to implement it...

rial strategy?



“A sectoral approach must be introduced with the introduction of sector-wide skills councils and a new National Skills Task Group to support new entrants, apprentices and the upskilling of the existing workforce to ensure a ‘just transition’ of our industrial base.”

There are working examples to follow, such as the rail school set up in Birmingham to feed the hunger for trained engineers in the new HS2 rail connections.

Unite has called for the establishment of a National Council for Recovery, and Regional Development Councils to work collaboratively with government, industry and unions not only to rebuild from Covid-19 and repurpose for climate change, but also prepare our economy for the opportunities from Brexit.

“To avoid mass unemployment and the social, as well as human, devastation that will follow,” it says, “we have an opportunity to create a confident, long-term stable environment for jobs and business with sector deals and state guaranteed loans based on a clear understanding of the challenges they face.”

Focus on apprenticeships

To this end the union is advocating the creation of a jobs guarantee scheme and sector skills councils, overseen by a National Skills Task Group with emphasis on skills and knowledge retention, with apprenticeships to support our young and the upskilling of those already in work.

“Those entering the labour market today will drive to transform our economy, but only if we nurture and use the power and capital leverage of the state in a strategic way to develop an economy to support them,” it says.

The idea that the current apprenticeship arrangements are woefully insufficient is not new. Back in July 2014 an article in the *Guardian* on apprenticeships quoted a report from Dr Martin Allen and Professor Patrick Ainley from the University of Greenwich which said, damningly, that rather than helping to boost young people’s economic prospects, most apprenticeships are “low skilled” and “dead end”.

One of the major problems is that too many people are taking an apprenticeship at

intermediate level – equivalent to GCSEs. According to Allen figures from the Skills Funding Agency showed that in 2012, 56 per cent of those on the programme were at intermediate level and provisional figures for the first half of the 2013-14 financial years showed it to be at 70 per cent.

What is the situation now? The take up of apprenticeships in 2019 is given in the table, showing over 75 per cent are at the lower two levels, both equivalent to secondary school qualifications.

| Apprenticeship Level | Starts 2019 |
|----------------------|----------------|
| Intermediate | 64,960 |
| Advanced | 87,620 |
| Higher | 46,050 |
| Totals | 198,630 |

While it is good to get anybody on an apprenticeship the numbers show clearly that there are not enough. And the higher numbers at the lower skill levels indicate a lack of investment in Britain’s future workforce.

Meanwhile, the government is still stalling on investing in the adaptability of Britain’s manufacturing to switch to products the class require now amid the Covid-19 crisis. It is resisting pressure from Unite to identify domestically based firms to manufacture personal protective equipment (PPE).

But that pressure has resulted in the Motherwell-based Honeywell factory being contracted by the UK government to produce more than 70 million face masks for frontline workers, creating 450 jobs.

Unite has also held meetings with the government’s PPE and testing “tsar” Paul Deighton, providing him with the information regarding manufacturers capable of quickly switching to bulk production.

The real wealth of a country resides in the skills of its people, and the government needs to be constantly reminded that we are a nation which needs to produce in order to buy products that we cannot make. ■

oration” with industry and trade unions as well as with government at all levels.

Young people have been hit hard by the Covid-19 crisis, but they are going to have to be the people to drive the recovery of manufacturing into the coming decades. Manufacturing Matters addresses this in its last section – which it might have been more appropriate to place at the beginning of the document.

“The current apprenticeship scheme (trailblazer and levy) is widely thought of as not fit for purpose,” it says. “We are in desperate need of a review of the apprenticeship levy, its objectives and use if we are to retain its credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of those who pay it. It needs to meet the needs of sectors and the transition of our economy, as well as companies of various sizes and requirements.

Unable to achieve its aims through democratic means, the see Scotland leaving Britain by stealth...

Separatists' fear of the k



Workers

Unity in struggle: workers protesting against the closure of Caley rail engineering in July 2019, marked by the SNP's failure to intervene.

WITH THE cancellation of their annual party conference, scheduled for mid June in Aviemore, the Scottish National Party is experiencing a groundswell of opinion in its ranks that is beginning to lead its policy in an anti-democratic direction.

Their "Plan B" surfaced in the wake of

**'A plan to leave
Britain, without a
further referendum.'**

the historic defeat of separatist ideas in the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. It has now been geared up again into a desire for "UDI" – a unilateral declaration of independence. In other words, the devolved administration in Edinburgh would plan to leave Britain, without another referendum. The scenario envisaged is one in which the British government refuses to organise another referendum on Scotland breaking away.

The demand would then be that the SNP manifesto for the 2021 Holyrood elections should contain the promise that the achieving of a majority by parties supporting

independence would give a mandate to start negotiations with the British government on a timetable for a separate Scotland. This proposal had been due to be debated at the June conference. In the absence of such a discussion the idea is gaining traction via backroom caucuses and online.

Unity is strength

Behind the new policy direction is an unrelenting fear of enduring the democratic process again, especially in the face of a stubborn majority in Scotland for British unity. Workers and their organisations must begin to recognise the importance of the strength

The SNP is edging towards a set of manoeuvres that would ballot box grows

of sticking together in this period of crisis.

It seems that quite the opposite line of thought has been adopted by the SNP administration. It is a line of thinking that seems to assume that separation has already been achieved. Thus a litany of policies designed to differ from British Government policy has emerged from Edinburgh over recent months during the current pandemic.

Quite apart from running what amounts to an independent foreign policy – well documented in *Workers* over recent years – nearly every pronouncement on emergency medical policy steers Scotland in a contrary direction. While the Scottish devolved administration keeps its eyes firmly on the horizon of globalisation, opposition politicians hardly oppose, carping from the sidelines while quarrelling among themselves or dreaming of fantasy federalism.

Confusion reigns

Announcements on re-opening schools, the wearing of face-masks, relaxing lockdown, transport policy, business grants, numbers of people allowed to meet, sports come-back, even the forbidding of the name “Nightingale” for the new emergency hospital in Glasgow, and on many other areas of life, never match the announcements coming from Westminster.

Depending on which radio, TV or social media outlet you listen to, the level of confusion can vary greatly. The SNP is taking advantage of the vacuum created by Boris Johnson, allowing the impression to grow that he is speaking no longer as UK prime minister but as some kind of “first minister” for England only.

It is in this free fire zone that the separatist policy makers have acted. They have taken the opportunity to drive more and more wedges between Scotland and the rest of Britain. Direct lines of communication between Scotland and the European Union to discuss a special relationship once British independence has been achieved are an ongoing attempt to undermine the prospect of a clean break from the EU. The same can be said about high level meetings with the Irish Republic.

But it is in the wide area of legal affairs where divergence is particularly growing.

‘Being part of Britain has enabled Scotland to weather the current storm...’

The planned introduction of a new law in Scotland that has been dubbed “the blasphemy law” goes against the spirit of the secular nature of British society. It is also widely viewed as undermining the British tradition of free speech that workers have fought for and established over past centuries.

The progress of this legislation can be traced back several years to well-meaning attempts to solve the problems of religious sectarianism associated with some football teams in Glasgow and Edinburgh. These plans were widely seen to have been poorly drawn up and as botched.

Yet the proposed new legislation is far more generalised than the very specific Offensive Behaviour at Football Act. The Hate Crime Bill seeks to criminalise the “stirring up of hatred” against a wide range of designated groups related to age, religion, race, gender and disability. This sounds worthy enough but there is a fine line to be drawn between legislating against behaviour and legislating against speech.

The Bill is being opposed even by those it purports to protect, such as religious bodies. As Stephen Daisley of *The Spectator* points out, “If it will be forbidden to abuse Christianity and Christians, why shouldn’t it be forbidden also to abuse Scottish nationalism and Scottish nationalists?” If there’s a bandwagon to jump on, the Scottish Government will make sure theirs is bigger, blingier, and more misguided than anything Westminster could dream up, and this bill is a classic example.

Divisive

The pros and cons of this legislation will no doubt be argued out for some time – but for

the unity of the British working class the important thing to argue for is one unified law. In other words, one law for all. Divergent laws feed into break-up.

In fact, the SNP and other separatists have encouraged such “stirring up” themselves. They opened a Pandora’s box of divisive identity politics in the recent decade, with their followers engaging in ongoing anti-English tirades. Mention of this most frequent of all “hate speech” in Scotland is noticeably absent in the Bill.

Away with separatism

It is saying something when Scottish first minister Andrew Wilson’s own economist behind her separatist plans frankly states that “Scotland’s economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic will be the worst in the developed world.”

Wilson was commenting following the publication of official data showing there had been a 2.5 per cent decline in Scotland’s GDP from January to March this year, compared to the previous three months. New data suggested the decline in June could be over 18 per cent. Andrew McRae, the Scotland Policy Chairman of the Federation of Small Businesses, observed that “these new numbers show the epic scale of the challenge ahead of us.”

The parlous state of the Scottish economy, with its failed banks bailed out by the British taxpayer for over a decade, and the paralysis of its oil industry and large tourism sector, would not have augured well for supporting workers and businesses during the current medical emergency.

Being part of Britain has enabled Scotland to weather the current storm. With over 628,000 workers on furlough schemes and 146,000 self-employed workers on support packages, Scotland has experienced the resilience of being part of the UK.

In a period when companies are under threat of default and bankruptcy, workers in all walks of life must stick together – in class unity as well as national unity. It is British independence and the resultant national control over our economy that will give us the only hope for survival. Anything standing in the way of this existential national survival – such as petty separatism – must be swept away. ■

The Covid-19 crisis has presented both opportunity and challenge for the pay, and conditions of well organised British workers at a

Transport firms slash jobs



Mr Chris Kemp/shutterstock.com

Bournemouth, 9 June 2020: Temporarily grounded British Airways planes parked at Bournemouth Airport, Dorset.

EMPLOYERS HAVE been quick to take their Covid-19 problems out on the workers they employ. Hit both in air and sea transport, those workers and unions are fighting back against the attacks.

When much of the world went into lockdown as the Covid-19 crisis gathered momentum and around 3 per cent of the usual international journeys were being made, the skies emptied and airports became jet plane parking lots.

Flybe, already in serious financial difficulties, went bust days after the start of the Covid-19 crisis. Since then, CityFlyer, Ryanair and Virgin Atlantic have all announced big job cuts, as has Heathrow Airport. Easyjet announced that around 30 per cent of its 15,000 staff would be sacked.

But the most eye-catching of the announcements was on 28 April when British Airways startled both the public as well as its staff by announcing that it was

making 12,000 redundant, having already furloughed 23,000 staff. Not only that, but it threatened to sack the remaining 30,000 staff if they did not accept a new and greatly inferior package of pay, terms and conditions.

The decisions of BA have been savagely attacked, not just by its unions Unite and BALPA (the pilots' union), but also by Parliament's select committee on transport.

In a damning report published in mid-June, the Committee accused BA of "a calculated attempt to take advantage of the pandemic to cut jobs and weaken the terms and conditions of its remaining employees".

Committee Chair Huw Merriman said: "The behaviour of British Airways and its parent company, IAG (International Airlines Group) falls well below the standards expected from any employer, especially in light of the scale of taxpayer subsidy, at this time of national crisis. It is unacceptable that

a company would seek to drive this level of change under the cover of a pandemic."

The Committee's report is just the latest in a long and growing chorus of criticism, ranging from the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State responsible for aviation and maritime transport, to various public figures. They have all expressed their shock at the company's misuse of the furlough scheme and Bank of England loans to fund the business while it fires and rehires every one of its 42,000 workers.

Global conglomerate

British Airways, once the state-owned national flag carrier, is now part of a Spanish global conglomerate listed on the London Stock Market. IAG also owns Iberia and Aer Lingus and is itself 25 per cent owned by the so-called "Royal Family" of the Middle East statelet Qatar. In 2018, BA made €1.95 bil-

over for the owners of transport operators to attack jobs, time when they are vulnerable...

Jobs under Covid-19 cover

lion profit, and its parent company IAG made €3.2 billion. Willie Walsh, the outgoing CEO, was paid £3.2 million in 2019.

Unite the Union also condemned IAG for singling out BA, which contributes 66 per cent of the group's profit, for its savage attacks on jobs and pay. The union highlighted the fact that the assault on UK jobs comes while IAG has purchased yet another airline, Air Europa, at a cost of €1 billion. Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey condemned BA for its "transparent effort to generate profits out of a crisis."

He went on: "BA is fooling nobody. The parent company easily has the cash and assets to weather this storm, and if it did not then it would not contemplate for one moment the one billion euro purchase of another airline."

When the Transport Select Committee asked Willie Walsh about why BA has been singled out, he gave the game away when he conceded that he had already forced through similar changes for Spanish staff in Iberia, admitting that this was his opportunity to bring British workers into line.

Unite continues its campaign "BA Betrayal" in support of its threatened members. It projected BA Betrayal images onto iconic landmarks across Britain such as the Houses of Parliament, the Angel of the North, Harrods and the Scottish Parliament, and it is pursuing a vigorous social media campaign using the hashtag #BABetrayal.

The transport select committee has urged all British-based aviation employers "not to proceed hastily with large scale redundancies or the restructuring of terms and conditions of employees", and called for the government to publish a strategy for the restart and recovery of the aviation sector.

But it is not just aviation that has seen workers attacked using Covid-19 as cover. Dubai Ports World, owners of P&O Ferries, has announced extensive cutbacks on its cross Channel ferry routes in May, with over 1,000 ratings and around 100 officers facing redundancy.

P&O operates ferries between Dover and Calais, and from Hull to both Rotterdam and Zeebrugge. The Hull route would see 60 directly employed British ratings sacked from their jobs on the company's Pride of Hull ferry, while 60 Filipino agency staff

working 12-hour days, seven days a week and paid just £4.50 per hour would be retained on the Bahamas-flagged ship. The Dover-Calais route would see the number of ships cut to just three.

P&O wants to reduce rates of pay and other payments, cut sick pay, remove completely any redundancy pay over and above the statutory minimum, introduce lay off clauses, and remove long service benefits and a profit share scheme. It also wants a "no strike" clause in contracts.

Seafarers' union RMT and ships officers' union Nautilus International have vowed to fight the proposals, supported by unions GMB and Unite that represent shore-based staff also facing redundancies.

The unions have highlighted the fact that P&O is paying £270 million in dividends to shareholders, and P&O's owners Dubai Ports World made profits of £1 billion last year. Yet the government is paying millions to the company, whose Chief Executive is Sultan Ahmed bin Sulayem.

Furloughed

P&O furloughed 1,400 staff as soon as the government announced the Job Retention Scheme, pocketing 80 per cent of their pay, worth £10 million.

Recognising the strategic importance of keeping freight moving between Britain and other countries during the Covid-19 crisis, the government announced on 18 May that it would fund operators of roll-on roll-off ferry routes that would not be viable without support. The Freight Support Grants were snapped up by P&O, with the company then managing to negotiate an increase to operate the Hull to Rotterdam route by a whopping 36 per cent to £4,779,369. The company currently receives £14.8 million, 41 per cent of the total British government Freight Support Grants.

Nautilus demanded that P&O drop its redundancy plans while it continued to take advantage of the Job Retention Scheme, while RMT has demanded that the British government should insist on P&O keeping its permanent British staff as a condition for continuing subsidy.

Unite went on to point out that under normal circumstances, an employer would dispense with agency staff before making

"BA is fooling nobody. The parent company easily has the cash and assets to weather this storm."

permanent staff redundant. The P&O unions also highlighted the fact that while P&O claimed it needed to make savings of around 20 per cent, its proposed redundancies would yield nearer 50 per cent. It also accused P&O of compromising safety standards in an operation already under scrutiny over recent fatalities.

RMT General Secretary Mick Cash wrote to Maritime Minister Kelly Tolhurst demanding that the government bring P&O Ferries into public ownership as a priority, outlaws pay discrimination against British seafarers on British-registered vessels, commits to returning British ferries to being British-flagged, and apply British employment law to British ships.

Tolhurst responded by advising the union that she had received assurances that P&O are committed to sourcing locals to its workforce when traffic picks up again and more staff are needed. What their pay and conditions would be like can only be guessed at, given the high unemployment levels in both Dover and Hull.

The negotiations began with P&O refusing to listen to union proposals that would deliver savings without the drastic cuts proposed by the company. As *Workers* goes to press, demonstrations called in both Dover and Hull have been cancelled in response to some degree of movement in negotiations.

There will be many more such struggles ahead as the battle begins in earnest about what a "new normal" will look like. Will the future be one where workers and their communities exert much greater power and control, or will it be one where the stranglehold of capital is tightened? There can be no bystanders. ■

**The Covid-19 crisis has made it even more essential to get
Britain's whole business model is wrong...**

Time to clear up the mess



THE GOVERNMENT must finalise our departure from the EU this coming December without extending the transition. The focus can then move to our production needs, free of EU control.

Some say that the Covid-19 epidemic has derailed the process. But the advocates of delay wilfully ignore one of the main advantages of Brexit – the opportunity to rectify the monetary mess after the crash of 2007/2008, when governments around the world created cheap credit in an attempt to re-start their economies.

And what a mess it is.

Since 2008 much corporate lending has moved from banks to bond markets. This March some unresolved consequences of the bailouts surfaced when the market for company debt held in bonds started to collapse.

Even before the full impact of Covid-19 hit, the debt markets had broken down completely. No one has known what borrowing rates should apply. Predictably, the companies that had borrowed heavily using bonds were the ones most at risk. They suddenly found themselves struggling to refinance their debt. Their access to capital loans had dried up or refinancing costs had soared.

Companies that had continually renewed short-term credit at record low rates of interest without any thought of repayment came unstuck. Who will pay the price? Workers in the companies, who stand to lose their jobs. And workers generally, who will shoulder the cost of the inevitable bailouts.

Disparity

This did not come about unexpectedly. The monetary mess re-appeared last September. Rates for overnight cash loans used to square the daily accounts of commercial banks and corporations suddenly shot up. There was a huge disparity between the official bank rate used as guidance and the actual rates available from the money markets.

The Federal Reserve, the US central bank, put several interim measures in place to narrow the rates mismatch, including a massive injection of money. By the year end things had been temporarily steadied. This enabled other countries' central banks, including the Bank of England, to consider

...t to grips with capitalism's monetary mess. Quite simply, monetary mess

the prospect of printing even more money to help bid down short-term rates.

Bond values were annihilated this March as Covid-19 spread. For several days, companies were unable to issue corporate bonds to refinance or increase existing short-term loans. The Fed responded, immediately creating an extra loan facility of \$2 trillion. The Bank of England followed suit, extending quantitative easing (QE) by at least a further 20 per cent.

These moves were followed by the European Central Bank, making its usual obfuscation noises, at pains to prevent the peoples of its member states discovering they are set to lose what control remains over their national finances.

Extortionate

The hospitality, travel and retail sectors, already struggling, are among those worst affected by the Covid-19 emergency. Private equity firms – which have a massive interest in these sectors – have been sucking the assets of companies they had bought, and replacing the cash with extortionate interest-bearing capital for annual repayment back to the very same private equity owners.

Yet the UK government has allowed private equity companies access to its emergency loan programme, where 80 per cent of the loan is guaranteed by the taxpayer. Happy days for private equity: private profit, public risk.

It's not as if private equity is an endangered species. Private equity firms worldwide have an estimated \$2.6 trillion in new capital waiting to be allocated towards new ventures.

There's been other help for corporations. The Bank of England had hitherto mostly confined QE to supporting various commercial banks by buying government bonds ("gilts"). Now the Bank has extended its Corporate Bond Purchase Scheme to other sectors by buying more and more corporate bonds.

So the government – in what it describes as "stimulus" – is quietly taking on the debt risks of even more companies and corporations. And the purchase scheme is expected to be expanded further in the coming months.

Workers should take note. The risk

transferred to them as taxpayers now includes numerous commercial companies from all sectors. It comes with the expectation that there will be a wave of bankruptcies over the next few years as companies default on their debts.

As if that weren't bad enough, the government's entire coronavirus bailout programme, plus QE as a whole, is being effectively underwritten by workers through various devices including occupational pensions savings – which are in danger of becoming worthless in years to come.

Since 2008 the government has effectively coerced the savings of pension funds into government gilts with interest rates so low that almost every occupational pension fund has been plunged into uncertainty about whether it can meet its future obligations. All this under the pretence of making the funds "safe".

The problems faced by British workers can only begin to be addressed within our borders and away from the EU's clutches. The first part of this process is to fully extricate Britain from the EU and complete trade negotiations by December or walk away.

Recent evidence highlights the importance of independent action. For some time Britain's sterling exchange rate to the euro had been overvalued, which led to Britain becoming a captive dumping ground for euro-denominated products. Good for exporters in Germany and France, for example, but bad for British industry.

However, since the end of 2015 the pound has gradually fallen by 18 per cent against the euro. As a result, the underlying productivity rates between goods produced in Britain and the eurozone are better reflected in their comparative prices.

This matters – because an overvalued pound results in a British product for British consumption becoming comparatively expensive. The result, regardless of relative productivity, is that buyers here will opt for a comparatively "cheaper" imported product of the same or better quality, despite Buy British campaigns.

National control

National control over our currency and the maintenance of our current euro exchange rate for the longer term must be a core part

'Our collective thoughts have been anchored to the EU and globalisation for too long.'

of our trading strategy. Yet control of itself is no simple panacea. We have to use our control to maintain independence. The problems we face are still multi-faceted. Here are just a few things we must think about as a nation:

First, a competitive currency devaluation alone has never made a country rich. There must be capital investment to raise productivity and to develop domestic supply chains. Since workers always end up paying for everything, the necessary increase in state investment will inevitably mean that workers have less to spend on themselves and their families.

Secondly, whatever the exchange rate, people will only be able to buy British if the products they want are made here. In many areas we no longer have that capability. In the short term we will need to establish which products we still have to import or where we can simply go without.

There are also downsides of currency depreciation. For example, it raises the relative price of any products still necessarily imported. And a fall in the pound also makes British firms vulnerable to foreign takeover.

Over the past few months even more people have realised that our collective thoughts have been anchored to the EU and globalisation for too long. Many who once believed that the basic conditions of life will not alter and that we should be governed by "elites" have changed their opinion.

Apart from coronavirus our minds are being concentrated on our financial wellbeing. Recognition is growing that in many sectors of our economy our whole business model is wrong.

Within this sea change the banner of Britain's right to self-determination is being raised with increasing confidence. It is this attitude that will see us right. ■

In a landmark book written before the coronavirus crisis, Tim Lang argues the importance of food security...

Food – we need a long-te

Feeding Britain: our food problems and how to fix them, by Tim Lang, hardback, 608 pages, ISBN 978-0241442227, Pelican, 2020, £25. Paperback edition due next year. Kindle edition available, £9.99.

THIS BOOK by Tim Lang, professor of food policy at City University London, explains the importance of food security. Written before the coronavirus crisis, it urges long-term thinking and planning for the common good.

Some think that we are food secure because we import lots of food from lots of countries. They think that we don't need a food policy: other people will always feed us. A Cabinet Office official told the author, "we don't need farmers, we can buy on open markets." Not so. Free trade will not make up for our domestic food production failings.

Paying for food imports puts a burden on the rest of the economy. Our food trade deficit in 2017 was £24 billion, and it has been steadily rising since the early 1990s. World food markets are uncertain and volatile. Relying on long food chains and distant supply sources is risky. Other buyers might have deeper pockets.

National policy

We need a national food policy and plan. Professor Lang is not advocating isolation, but nor is he embracing the globalisation that has caused so many of the problems we face. He does not want imposed "free" trade, where we rely on exploiting other countries' land, ecosystems and cheap labour. That is no more than warmed-up imperialism.

Lang says, "UK society is highly unequal. This inequality restricts our food progress. Inequality reduction must be a principle at the heart of UK food security pol-

'Free trade will not make up for our domestic food production failings.'



Workers

Grain silos, Suffolk. Photo Workers.

icy." The EU's Common Agricultural Policy has only worsened the inequality because it benefits the richest landowners the most. The richest 20 per cent of claimants got £1.6 billion of the EU's £2.3 billion single-payment budget. The poorest two-fifths received just 4 per cent of the total subsidies.

In 2018 Britain produced just over half of what we ate. We produce only 57 per cent of our vegetables and 12 per cent of our fruit. We should produce far more, nearer to 80 per cent, a level at which we could manage in a crisis.

We had 3,000 commercial apple growers in the 1950s. By the mid-1990s there were just 800. In 1991 parliament enforced the EEC's Apple Orchards Grubbing Up Regulations, paying farmers to destroy fruit capacity. We need a huge effort to produce more fruit – in particular apples, pears, and soft fruit, nuts and vegetables.

Britain should aim to have good food

produced by decently rewarded primary producers. That is essential to rebuilding our food security. Lang argues, "Unless there is planning, exploitation can run rife." We need to enhance food labour, not deskill it.

Lang notes that the effect of reduced EU migrant labour in the hospitality business was to push wages a little higher, though they were still far too low. He observes that "British employers are free-riding on the back of countries who have paid and trained staff only to see them migrate and take their skills elsewhere...This criticism applies not just to food, of course; the NHS free-rides on other countries' training of skilled workers."

Distorted

He argues for an integrated plan of land use. Our land use has been distorted by becoming a capital bargaining tool. Land is money. If food-growing land can be re-zoned as housing land, its value rockets.

food policy expert

erm plan

Instead, Britain should gear land use to public health. We misuse land to grow grains which are fed to animals rather than using it for horticulture and field crops. We should cut the production and consumption of high carbon footprint meat and meat products.

Planning must cover consumption too. All public and private food contracts should be required to apply new sustainable dietary guidelines. Thatcher abolished school nutritional standards in the 1980 Education Act, to ease her programme of privatising school catering.

When too many children eat poor diets, simplistic choice advocates like Thatcher blame consumers, meaning “inadequate mothers”. Lang calls this the “wrong consumer” theory (like the “wrong electorate” theory espoused by some EU enthusiasts).

He explains, “Far from the culture battle over food being controlled by a nanny state, the reality is that today we have nanny corporations dominating food messages.”

Thatcher also privatised publicly owned research facilities. The world-famous Plant Breeding Institute at Cambridge and a network of other institutions were destroyed and their skills dispersed. The PBI’s buildings were bulldozed in 2009.

This vandalism has not stopped. David Cameron’s government closed the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution and the Sustainable Development Commission, and also cut back the Food Standards Agency and the Environment Agency.

An independent review into developing a national food strategy is to publish its review this summer. Lang’s view is that to create a resilient food system for food security we need to integrate four goals: public health; environmental improvement; upholding the social and cultural value of food; and a new political economy of food, which provides decent wages and respected work via food at fully costed and fair prices.

These can be woven together to deliver high-quality food and diverse diets, attractive to eat and meeting sustainable dietary guidelines. Lang believes that could be carried out in a democratically accountable way. The policy should be subject to lively food governance at all levels – local, regional and national – as well as internationally with neighbours and the rest of the world. ■

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As the 19th century dawned, trade unions were made illegal and wages fell. Skilled workers led the fightback...

C19th London: skill and

IN 1793 THE government of William Pitt the Younger launched war against revolutionary France. The war ended in 1815 with the banishment of Napoleon, and his replacement by the Bourbons, who at once waged a "White Terror" and massacred French Protestants.

The war caused the destruction of the ancient republics of Venice and Genoa, imposed reactionary rulers on Norwegians, Poles, Belgians and Neapolitans, and established the Tsar's domination of Europe. Under his leadership all Europe's leaders combined in the "Holy Alliance" to crush liberty anywhere. The British government, through that most reactionary foreign secretary, Lord Castlereagh, assisted the Tsar's efforts.

But while the benefits of the war went to the ruling class, British workers paid, with their lives and in vast taxes, for the war against liberty, and then still after the war's end with more taxation. Corruption and oppression were as bad as ever.

Pitt introduced the Combination Acts in 1799 and 1800 on the pretext of suppressing Jacobins, supporters of French revolutionaries. But his greater aim was break up workers' organisation – the acts made trade unions illegal. Workers had begun to fight for higher wages as prices shot up. Political discussion groups such as the London Corresponding Societies had emerged and were also effectively outlawed.

But over time the working class fought back. Alongside many others, the Thames shipwright John Gast organised his fellow workers. The Thames shipwrights were

highly skilled, and they organised their trade with great discipline. They led the working class and won for themselves relatively good wages and conditions. Some have slandered such workers as "labour aristocrats". It implies that somehow greater skill means a worker is not exploited but shares "bounty" with the employer. Wrong!

Artisans across the country, framework knitters, cotton weavers, woollen weavers, and Yorkshire croppers, all fought to maintain apprenticeships. Many also took part in the Luddite movement, which had a high level of organisation.

Class power

Gast and his comrades were not against the new machines as such. They fought against the employing class who introduced the machines to increase the rate of exploitation and to reduce the numbers and wages of workers, all to add to their profits. Workers could see that the evil lay not in the machine, but in the class structure of power.

Gast and others launched the *Trades' Newspaper* in 1825, run by a committee of trades' delegates. Its approach was realistic: "Among masters there exists one general feeling to get work done as cheap as they can..."

Gast challenged "what right any man or men has to fix wages of labour, without the consent of the labourers." He believed that the poverty of the working class had nothing to do with the Corn Laws. He said employers wanted these repealed to lower the price of bread so they could justify paying lower wages. He observed that the supporters of repeal had not explained "how the working classes of society (would) be able to protect themselves against reduction in wages by their employers, which of course would follow, should the present Parliament repeal the Corn Laws."

Above all, organised workers fought against wage cuts, arguing that higher wages would increase the market for British products. They saw the crisis of "overproduction" not in terms of need, for many Britons needed the products of British industry, but in terms of spending power, for workers could not afford to buy these goods. They knew that workers would increase their spending power not only by



The Great Chartist Rally at Kennington Common, Kilburn (black and white with applied colour).

winning higher wages but also by ending the huge, unjust inequality of wealth.

Gast and his comrades also challenged the private ownership of land. The country had far too many uncultivated "waste lands", which could have grown the food the people needed but which did not do so because the landowners saw no profit in it. Workers rightly said that mass hunger, alongside waste lands, proved that the landowning class was not doing its patriotic duty to feed the people. This had become very clear during the war against France.

They also knew that free trade meant competition between British workers and miserably paid foreign workers. That was no different from employers using the cheap labour of less well-organised workers outside London or immigrants to London. A race to the bottom would benefit only the capitalist class.

In many industries the undercutting masters were those producing for export rather than the home market. Workers rightly saw free trade, the focus on overseas markets, and the employers' use of cheap

'They also knew that free trade meant competition between British workers and miserably paid foreign workers...'

gal, prices rose, class



London, 10 April 1848. Photograph by William

labour as threats. All led to wage cuts.

The shipwrights' union retained its control of the Thames throughout the nineteenth century. It rigorously enforced apprenticeship, it kept the gang contract system in full force, and it maintained the new day wage rate which had been secured, and the limitation on hours of work. It forced up the wages for piecework.

At the end of the 19th century, a member of trade union historians Sidney and Beatrice Webb's research team wrote of the Thames shipwrights that they had "remained for 100 years the same good type of stationary unprogressive body". Yet these skilled workers had kept control of their pay and conditions for a century. We would call this progressive and something to which workers everywhere would do well to achieve. ■

• For more on Gast and his comrades see *Artisans and Politics in Early 19th-Century London: John Gast and His Times*, by lowerth Prothero, Dawson. Reissued in 2014 by Routledge Revivals ISBN 9780415643702 at £33.99 in paperback.

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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, 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.

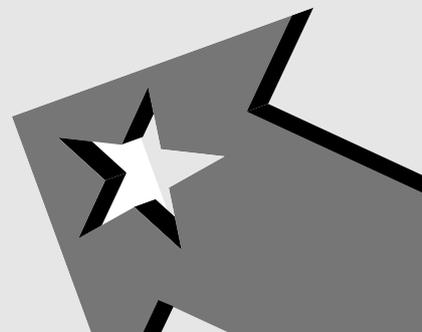
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United we stand

'The Empire was run and built by the capitalist class...'

A FILM of the police killing a black man, George Floyd, in the US city of Minneapolis has provoked a huge response of anger and revulsion across the world.

In this country, it has triggered a lively debate and desire to address the issues for black people, especially the young, of police harassment (a daily experience for many), and widespread discrimination – open or tacit – in employment, among other things. This reality for members of our class needs to be addressed.

The decision of Black Lives Matter London to call off Saturday 13 June's central London rally because of threats of violence by racist thugs demonstrated a desire to focus on the matter in hand.

A good starting point for fighting racism is to acknowledge that there is only one race: the human race. Unity, not division, must be our watchword.

Race is a social construct – but one that can have devastating effects on people's lives. Discrimination on the basis of skin colour is particularly easy for the prejudiced if it is not opposed and overcame.

Some have taken advantage of the BLM campaign to push false ideas about "white privilege", looking to the history of imperialism to claim that the (mostly) white working class of Britain was guilty of benefiting from the "crumbs" dropped from the tables of imperialists, particularly with regard to the vile crimes of the slave trade.

When exploring British history we must look at it fully from a class perspective. Everyone should know of the proud history of class struggle in Britain and the resulting culture and identity of the British people as it stands on the verge of independence from the EU.

It goes without saying that the British Empire was imperialistic and did much harm. But the Empire (including the slave trade) was run and built by the capitalist class, and the working class suffered enormously under it.

At the time, workers looked at the slavers and saw the same enemy they faced in the

factories and in the countryside. Then as now, anti-slavery was seen by many for what it was – a common fight.

Oppression abroad bred oppression at home. The period that saw Britain become the "workshop of the world" saw a sustained and brutal attack on British workers. By 1840, for example, 57 per cent of all working-class children in Manchester died before their fifth birthday. Around this time life expectancy at birth in Liverpool was just 15 years.

As the early industrial revolution unfolded, children as young as four or five were put to work in the mines. Working hours shot up, so much so that the Cotton Mills and Factories Act of 1819 had to limit working hours to 12 a day – but only for children between 9 and 16!

Bristol – the object of slaver Edward Colston's "philanthropy" – grew rich, but the riches were held tightly by the merchants and factory owners. In the early 19th century it was a large and dirty city full of slums and desperate poverty.

In 1832, a year before the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire, cholera struck. Spreading quickly among the tightly packed workers, the epidemic would kill more than 500 Bristolians before it was over; a further epidemic killed more than 400 in 1849.

The response of the advanced section of the British working class, the trade unions and the Chartists, to imperialism and slavery was to recognise the unity of purpose of black slaves and British workers, that they faced the same enemy, and to organise for the emancipation of the whole working class. We need that approach now more than ever.

Every worker here, regardless of ethnicity, is part of the British working class. An injury to one must be seen as an injury to all, rather than let those from the ultra-left or the openly racist ultra-right divide us.

Instead, we as a class must work in unity and take responsibility for the way Britain is being run and where it is heading. Together we must take control of our country, get involved and shape a future for the needs of all workers. ■

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