

WORKERS

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JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2024 £1



FOR BRITAIN – TIME TO CHANGE

Free Speech Under threat **Floods** Stop the chaos
Computing AI and control **Copper** The must-have
FE Sort out skill shortages **Energy** Nuclear now
Doctors Pay progress *plus* Historic Notes,
Review Materials matter News and more

WORKERS



Much done – but far more to do

WORKERS HAVE made remarkable progress in the past year in asserting the interests of the class. Yet we need to do more – defeating anti-union laws, and moving from action on pay to fighting for the future of industries and services.

This means saying no to the plunder of skilled workers from countries that desperately need them – and asserting the need for independence.

It means saying no to backsliding into the orbit of the EU. And no, too, to foreign wars, intervention, and – crucially – NATO membership.

Workers who look elsewhere for protection do so at their peril. There is always a high price to pay for surrendering responsibility. Do we not believe that people in Britain are capable of progress? Those who say we are not have lost belief in themselves and their class.

It is the British ruling class which must look abroad in the face of the strength of the working class at home – to the EU with its devotion to the capitalist freedoms across borders and above all to the USA, which preaches democracy yet denies it to people everywhere.

And there is great danger too in supporting interference in other countries. Aggression abroad by our ruling class will come back to create oppression here. It's as necessary to resist calls for foreign adventures as it is to take action for our industries and services.

The pretext is always that one group or another needs protection or that the rulers somewhere are becoming too aggressive. The reality is that such wars are fought for military and economic domination, against any country that dares to challenge capitalist domination – or just appears to.

And now with terrorism carried out by Hamas in the name of Palestine and brutish retaliation by the Israeli government – the British government trails shamefully behind the US in opposing a ceasefire. Weak and divided, it abstained in the UN Security Council vote. The newly resurfaced David Cameron says “too many” civilians have been killed – as if he has in mind an acceptable number of deaths.

People ask on seeing war and suffering, “What can I do?”. The answers as a working class are clear. Demand that Britain stays out of all these conflicts. Demand it spends money set aside for arms in those places (bringing more destruction) on rebuilding – and defending – Britain. And the toughest call is to demand withdrawal from NATO. That alliance does not serve Britain's defence.

The best actions workers in Britain can take for themselves and for workers everywhere is deal with the abject failure of our ruling class, and run the country for our needs.

Stop focusing on elsewhere. Stop foreign adventures and war. No to NATO. The fight for a future is at home. ■

Cover image TUC rally, London, May 2023. Photo Workers.



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

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

www.cpbml.org.uk [@cpbml](https://twitter.com/cpbml)
Issue 240, January/February 2024



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Workers

Striking nurses picketing University College Hospital, London, January 2023.

Almost all nurses from abroad

NINETY-THREE PER CENT of the 51,245 nurses who have joined the NHS in the past four years have been recruited from overseas. This startling fact was revealed by NHS England's chief nurse on 7 December.

Earlier in the same week ministers were boasting that they had met their 2019 election promise on nurse recruitment six months early. When the target was set there was an acknowledgment that international recruitment might make up about a quarter of the total, but no one imagined that it would be over 90 per cent.

The Nursing and Midwifery Council has also reported that a growing number of the international nurses are from "red list" countries, where active recruitment is or should be prohibited by the British government's code of practice. This includes significant rises in joiners from Ghana and Zambia and a steadily high number of joiners from Nigeria.

Given that the International Council of Nurses is reporting nurse shortages across the globe, any international recruitment – red list or not – is having an adverse impact on another country's health system. ■

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

ELECTIONS

Overseas voters sought

ON 16 JANUARY 2024 the eligibility of overseas voters in UK elections will change dramatically – allowing those who don't live in Britain to influence what happens here.

The government estimates this will mean around 3.5 million British nationals living overseas will now be eligible to register to vote in future UK national elections and referendums. This creates significant interference in British matters by people who have chosen to live abroad.

Until now overseas voters could be registered in the constituency where they voted before leaving Britain. Registration had to be renewed annually for up to 15 years. And those who left more than 15 years ago were ineligible to register.

The new legislation will remove the 15-year limit: it is being called the "votes for life" policy. And the government will actively encourage registration. ■

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

FACTS MATTER

At *Workers* we make every effort to check that our stories are accurate, and that we distinguish between fact and opinion.

If you want to check our references for a particular story, look it up online at cpbml.org.uk and follow the embedded links. If we've got something wrong, please let us know!

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



ON THE WEB

A selection of additional stories at cpbml.org.uk

Cruise operator withdraws conditions threat

Cruise operator Carnival quickly withdrew an apparent threat to fire and rehire over 900 maritime professionals. After urgent negotiations with their union, the company confirmed it will not do so.

Grangemouth refinery closure threat

Plans to shut Scotland's only oil refinery threaten skilled jobs and Britain's industrial base.

Migration continues to rise

Recent reports confirm that the government has lost control of immigration as the numbers coming to Britain, legally as well as illegally, continue to rise.

Fighting for workers' rights at Amazon

Amazon workers in Britain continue their struggle for better pay and conditions as well as trade union recognition. It's a long fight against the world's largest retail company, everywhere hostile to workers.

Open door to study in Britain

The number of overseas students coming to study in Britain has reached a record high. Universities and government welcome this, but it's to the detriment of British students.

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



Ofsted under fire

THE ASSOCIATION of School and College Leaders and the National Association of Head Teachers have called for Ofsted inspections to be paused immediately. This follows a coroner's finding that an Ofsted inspection had contributed to the death of head teacher Ruth Perry.

The school leaders' unions said the pause would allow time for meaningful action to be taken. They call on Ofsted to make a plan to mitigate the risk of future deaths and set out a timetable for addressing each area of concern raised by the coroner, in order for schools and colleges to have "even a modicum of confidence" in Ofsted.

Two enquiries have recently reported after considering the reform of the school inspection system in England. Beyond Ofsted, the inquiry headed by former Schools Minister Lord Knight, reported on 20 November. It called for "transformational" change in school inspection, since Ofsted was now seen as "toxic" and "not fit for purpose".

Carried out by academics from University College London, it considered several options for reform of the inspection system. It recommended that schools should make their own "self-evaluations" by working with an external "improvement partner" – an experienced school leader from the school's trust or local authority.

That was also one of the key recommendations of another report on school improvement released in November by the Institute for Public Policy Research. It also called for replacing single-word judgements with narrative-style evaluations. ■

TUC Special congress

THE FIRST special Congress of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) for over 40 years took place in early December. It considered how trade unions should respond to legal attempts to restrict their activity.

The Strikes (Minimum Services) Act passed into law in July, and regulations came into force on 8 December covering rail, border security and ambulance services. Proposals for children's education are being prepared.

The new law identifies additional sectors: fire and rescue services, nuclear installations and radioactive waste plants, and border security, as well as education and transport sectors more widely. The TUC estimates that 5.5 million workers would be affected, one in five of the workforce.

The inspiration for minimum service levels comes from Europe, where such restrictions are common, according to a briefing paper drawn up by the House of Commons Library, particularly France, Italy and Spain.

Even if workers vote for strike action, meeting all the strict ballot criteria, the

employer can issue a notice identifying workers who must attend work, to maintain an arbitrary level of service. The ballot result is ignored and the trade union involved can be required to tell their members to cross picket lines and attend work.

The Congress was remarkable for its unity: representatives of nearly every affiliated union spoke in the debate: all supported proposals from the General Council. There were no amendments proposed.

Speakers pointed out that employers daily flout safe staffing levels in health and transport. A Unison ambulance service convenor described emergency cover arrangements they had operated during their strikes. Union reps in control rooms made sure ambulances were deployed to anyone who needed them, with the result that there were no patient incidents on strike days.

Congress agreed to call a rally for 12 noon on Saturday 27 January 2024 in Cheltenham, home of GCHQ, where in 1984 Margaret Thatcher banned workers from even belonging to a union.

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

ENGINEERING

Alstom Derby at risk

BRITAIN'S ONLY train factory able to design, engineer, build and test new trains, the Alstom plant at Litchurch Lane, Derby, is once again at risk, with no confirmed workload beyond next March. Thousands of skilled jobs are threatened at the factory, and in the supply chain.

Alstom and its main union Unite have suggested that before the company is forced to dismantle its production line, more Elizabeth Line trains are ordered, given that the growth in passengers on the new line is

way beyond that forecast.

The government has insisted on withdrawing many older trains with no replacements. Yet passenger numbers continue to rise, leading to overcrowding on many services.

Cross Country trains are now so full that it has felt it necessary to ban staff and former staff using discounted and free tickets on many of its services.

Yet the government refuses to put in place a planned procurement strategy that will safeguard a vital British industrial asset and ensure that Britain's trains are steadily replaced or modernised. ■



BMA members lobbying the Conservative Party conference in Manchester, October 2023.

Pay progress for some doctors

NHS HOSPITAL consultants have secured an offer from the government in their fight for pay. Consultants' pay had been cut, in real terms, by 35 per cent since 2008-09. In a ballot, 86 per cent of British Medical Association members voted to strike on a turnout of over 70 per cent.

The offer will reduce the time it takes for a consultant to progress through the pay scales. It will give an immediate increase to those on the first point and at the top of the scales. New Local Clinical Excellence Awards will be consolidated into basic pay, making them pensionable, and subject to future annual increases as part of a consultant's total pay.

The offer will be put to consultant members of the BMA and the Hospital Consultants and Specialists Association in ballots with the results expected in January 2024. At the same time, the BMA is re-balloting its consultant members on further action, in case it is necessary.

Both then-health minister, Steve Barclay, and prime minister Rishi Sunak had insisted earlier in the year that the government's position was final. Barclay was also criticised for misrepresenting consultants' pension arrangements, claiming that NHS consultants' pensions were "tax-free".

The government further tried to blame NHS waiting lists, which now stand at 7.7 million, on the consultants' and junior doctors' strikes. But 7 million patients were waiting for treatment before industrial action began.

- Junior doctors have not yet received an offer, though the government's claim that their position is final looks even less convincing in the light of the offer to consultants.

Junior doctors will begin further strikes – from 20 to 23 December and from 3 to 9 January. They achieved remarkable results in their ballots, with 98 per cent voting for action on a turnout of 77 per cent in February 2023 with the same proportion in favour on a 71 per cent turnout in a summer re-ballot. Any action beyond early next year will require a further ballot. ■

WHAT'S ON

Coming soon

JANUARY

Saturday 27 January, 12 noon

Montpellier Gardens, Cheltenham
GL50 1UL

March and Rally

"Defend the right to strike"

TUC march and rally against new restrictions on the right to strike, the next stage of the continuing campaign against new anti-strike laws. It follows the special conference held in London in December.

This takes place at the home of GCHQ, where 40 years ago Margaret Thatcher banned workers from union membership.

Tuesday 30 January, 7.30 pm

Conway Hall, Red Lion Square,
London WC1

In-person CPBML public meeting

"Mass immigration – war on the working class"

Net migration reaches record levels, rising from 107,000 in 1997 to a record 745,000 at the end of 2022. The government blusters, but is determined to increase it yet further. The intent is clear: to flood the labour market – both skilled and unskilled – to depress wages and weaken workers' ability to act in their own defence. How should we respond? All welcome. Free entry.

FEBRUARY

Tuesday 6 February, 7pm

Online discussion meeting (via Zoom)

"Assert the right to strike"

Capitalism's response to the successful workers' action in health and rail is to make such action illegal through the medium of the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act, passed last year. The right to strike can only be asserted in practice, not won in argument, or legislated for in parliament.

Come and discuss. Email info@cpbml.org.uk for an invitation

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

Workers

Free speech is under threat – and in fighting for it workers and policies...

Free speech and discuss

HOW DO we solve problems? The first step is to recognise that a problem exists. The second is to decide what we want to achieve. The third is agreeing on the best way to achieve that aim, and so solve the problem.

To improve the lives of everyone living in Britain we need a productive, skilled nation. The working class of Britain, the vast majority of the people living here, has the ability to create such a country and such a future.

To realise that capability we must be able to practise free speech, not as an abstract, stand-alone freedom but as an essential tool for free discussion before deciding on action to be taken.

Free speech of workers has always been threatened. We've always had to assert the right of free speech under capitalism. Current attacks come from a number of directions and too many of us are staying quiet as a result – or being forced to keep quiet.

In recent years laws have been passed in Britain that purport to improve public discourse or remove harms. Instead they have reduced free speech and created subjective categories of hate speech.

Many of the laws on hate crimes and hate speech have been poorly drafted. They allow a crime to be defined as a hate crime if a victim or witness perceives the crime to be fuelled by hate towards race, religion, disability, or gender. But when perception is allowed to determine reality, no defence is possible. A statement by a witness who did not perceive the action as a hate crime would not count.

These laws have also created “non-crime incidents”, where something that

‘Hate crime legislation has created a weapon to threaten other workers...’



Jorm Sangsorn/shutterstock.com

isn't a crime can still be recorded by police forces if someone perceives it to have been fuelled by hate.

The Metropolitan Police resisted calls to ban pro-Palestinian marches in case slogans included some that could be perceived as hate crimes. Mark Rowley, the Met commissioner, said, “[a march] could only be stopped if there was a threat of serious disorder.”

Muddled

The interpretation of hate crimes has been further muddled by judges and case law – and by lobby groups with vested interests, such as Stonewall.

Far from improving public discourse, legislation has created a weapon for someone to threaten other workers for simply expressing their view or even raising concerns – resulting in fines, the loss of income or even imprisonment.

Faced with this, many people play safe rather than speak up at work or at union or other meetings. This is not healthy; we need to recognise it as a problem.

For a number of years, in higher educa-

tion and elsewhere, visiting speakers have been silenced. Described as de-platforming, invitations have been withdrawn because of claims by some individuals that they would find the mere presence of the speaker distressing or even harmful.

In these instances a vocal, aggrieved, minority not only bar speakers, but deny anyone else who might attend the event an opportunity to hear what is said and to respond.

Research published as *No Platform: Speaker Events at University Debating Unions* suggests that students and conference organisers are playing safe and staying away from topics that could be considered controversial. The research report found that a wide range of unlikely speakers had been prevented from speaking – from Alex Salmond and Tony Blair to Liam Neeson and Harry Enfield.

This too is not healthy for us as a class. Having others decide who we can and cannot hear weakens and enfeebles us.

During the Scottish referendum of 2014 we saw extreme behaviour from a small number of activists. They felt empowered

s can't allow themselves to be sidelined by divisive laws

tion – crucial to Britain



to drown out views they disagreed with – and to slander those that held those views.

We've seen such intolerance and polarisation repeated over many other issues: Brexit, separatism and devolution, Covid policies, net zero, transgender ideology, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, NATO, Israel and Palestine. People stay quiet for fear – of being labelled stupid and bigoted, of ruining relationships, or of expulsion from their political party.

Yet we need to be able to discuss any topic that affects Britain. We do not solve problems by hoping they go away. Or by shouting down views we don't want to hear. Instead, we need to hear views we disagree with, identify their weaknesses, and be prepared to listen and learn.

Behind this trend of polarisation and self-censorship, other ruling class actions are directly aimed at stifling dissent and the free speech of working people. They hope transnational finance capitalism can then rule unfettered.

After the collapse of financial markets and banks in 2007–2008, public anger about the damage done by large banks,

financial institutions, and multinational corporations was at an all-time high. The British and other national governments suddenly saw a need for checks on the gambling of financiers.

This was a hostile environment for finance capitalists, at least for a time. They saw their ability to continue freely increasing their wealth threatened.

Blackrock

By 2012 the largest investment corporation in the world, Blackrock, came up with the bright idea of rebranding itself as so virtuous and civic-minded that it could define its own regulation. The vehicle it has used to do this is Environment, Social and Corporate Governance, ESG for short. The aim was not only to give the multinational corporation access to limitless growth but also to gain quasi-governmental powers.

By refusing to invest in companies unless they have "good" ESG credentials, Blackrock has pressured companies around the world to jump through hoops. The UK government took little persuasion to fall into line. It passed legislation requir-

ing all British listed companies, all banking and insurance companies and companies with more than 500 employees to show ESG compliance in their annual reports.

But who defines the terms environment, social and corporate governance? An army of ESG specialists and advisers has sprouted. Many companies sub-contract their responsibilities to these organisations. Most advise that "environmental" means implementing CO2 reduction goals, that is, net zero. And "social" means anything related to the UN's stated social goals on issues such as gender parity, racial justice, and poverty reduction.

Debanked

One of the largest specialist firms is B Global Network, a network of organisations that provide firms with advice and accreditation. It was reported that Nigel Farage was debanked by Coutts bank so that it could retain its B Corp accreditation.

The more zealous supporters of ESG require companies of all sizes to police the political views of their customers – and their employees. Some companies now require their employees to undergo "carbon literacy" training.

And public sector bodies are keen to join in – from central government to schools and the NHS. The NHS, for example, requires its suppliers to publish a carbon reduction plan.

This dogma is a problem for free speech and an obstacle to workers in trying to create a productive and skilled nation. Organisations adopting this nonsense appear to have lost sight of their purpose – for example, making cars, transporting food, educating children, caring for the sick – at the expense of ticking ESG boxes.

The solution to these problems starts with more of us speaking up and taking responsibility, without making martyrs of ourselves. Companies and organisations can and should decide their own definitions of the terms environmental, social, and governance. That's taking responsibility, professionalism at work, and a great example of how ESG can be tamed – until we get rid of such tentacles of finance capitalism in our lives. ■

Floods are an ever-present risk in Britain. While they're not lessened. But not if government continues to fail to act...

Flooding shouldn't have



Martin Hurton/shutterstock.com

29 October 2023: flooded road and footpath in Durham as the River Wear rose after heavy rains.

IT WAS a wet and often windy autumn across Britain – again! Storm Babet in October 2023 caused extensive and prolonged flooding across the country, with areas as far apart as eastern Scotland, Suffolk and Derby being particularly badly hit.

Recent reports from the National Audit Office (NAO) into flooding and weather resilience in England have strongly criticised a lack of long-term planning. The NAO sets out the problem quite clearly, “the government wants to achieve greater resilience to flooding in the long term but has no measure for resilience and no target for the level of flood resilience it expects to achieve.”

In other words, national government is

failing to ensure that flood risk is adequately managed.

Parts of eastern Scotland along with much of England saw over 150 per cent of the 1991-2020 long term average rainfall. Eastern Scotland (with 135 per cent) had its seventh wettest autumn since 1836. For northern England and southeast England. it was the ninth wettest.

Agriculture

Flooding due to natural phenomena like heavy rainfall, high winds and high tides is nothing new. Human activity has also increased flooding and the risk of flooding over many centuries – from deforestation to land reclamation and changes in agricultural practices.

Recently Britain has been experiencing severe winter storms, resulting in extensive coastal damage and widespread flooding. These have become more frequent over the past 60 years according to academic studies. The cause and connection to a changing climate are the subject of debate, outside the scope of this article.

Flooding often leads to devastating consequences for huge numbers of Britain's workers. That's been especially so in the past few years as homes have been destroyed, or more often badly damaged. People can spend up to a year in temporary accommodation while their homes are repaired.

Businesses and workplaces are also adversely affected by flooding. This results

For ever good news, their impact can be managed and to be a disaster

in job losses and causes serious financial difficulties for those businesses.

The many workers affected by flooding are bound to ask whether enough has been done by government – both national and local – to manage and mitigate flood risk. Responsibilities are split – complicated by devolution.

In England, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) is responsible for flood and coastal erosion risk management. Its policies are mainly delivered by the Environment Agency (EA) in conjunction with numerous public bodies and agencies. It has a strategic overview of all sources of flooding and coastal erosion and works with the Met Office to provide flood forecasts and warnings.

Scotland has the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency, reporting to the minister for “Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition”. And Scottish Water has overall responsibility for flood risk management there. Natural Resources Wales plays that role in Wales.

Accuracy

Weather forecasting has developed so that it is now much more accurate at local level. This has proved invaluable in allowing the EA to provide flood warnings to individuals and organisations. It has also been very useful to Network Rail and Highways England and local councils, allowing them to accurately predict likely trouble spots and plan appropriate mitigation.

The EA asserts that every £1 spent improving protection from flooding and coastal erosion avoids around £5 of property damage. It also estimates that between 27 and 57 per cent of the economic costs of damage due to floods are costs to businesses. Despite this, the private sector has contributed less than a tenth of the total partnership funding for flood risk mitigation.

The EA estimates that 5.7 million properties (60 per cent of the total) are at risk of flooding, and that key infrastructure is at risk – up to 77 per cent of rail infrastructure, 51 per cent of water supply infrastructure and 25 per cent of gas infrastructure.

Worryingly, of the 96,000 flood defence assets looked after by the Environment Agency, only 94 per cent of what it

describes as “high consequence systems” were being maintained at the required condition in summer 2023. That’s below the 98 per cent which the EA regards as optimal.

This is because government is failing to provide sufficient money. The EA assessed the shortfall in its maintenance funding for 2022-23 at £34 million. This is the extra money it would need, on top of the £201 million allocated in the 2021 Spending Review, to maintain those high consequence assets at the required condition.

More concerning is the failure on the part of government to fulfil its commitments to substantially improve the number of properties protected. In 2020, when the capital programme was originally announced, government committed to spend over £5 billion to better protect 336,000 properties by 2027.

In the first two years of the programme, EA has “better protected” 59,000 properties, spending £1.4 billion. EA now forecasts that only 200,000 properties will be better protected by 2027, a 40 per cent shortfall.

The NAO says that delivery of the capital programme is slowed by capacity and skills shortages both in the EA and in local authorities. It hints that the salaries of skilled jobs are not enough to attract suitably qualified staff in a highly competitive external jobs market.

The NAO report also accuses the government of creating uncertainty by failing to set out clearly the respective roles of central government, local government, the devolved administrations, the private and voluntary sectors, and the public.

Failure

The report also criticises the failure of central government to “pressure test” the systems and provide itself with the necessary assurance that the existing flood mitigations will actually be as effective as they are meant to be.

In response to the NAO report, Hannah Cloke, a Professor of Hydrology at the University of Reading, said, “In terms of future resilience and preparedness, I would say we are not very well prepared in some places even now. At some locations in the UK, climate change means that existing

‘There is currently no statutory duty on fire and rescue services to respond to flooding risk...’

threats will become more likely and more dangerous, such as on some coasts as sea levels rise, or in areas prone to landslips or river flooding.

“Resilience to storms means taking action to prepare for the worst possible conditions while the going is good, and that can seem expensive and unnecessary to many people when the sun is shining.”

Firefighters have been in the forefront of tackling the flood emergencies up and down the country, protecting lives, homes and infrastructure. But, unbelievably, in England there is currently no statutory duty on fire and rescue services to respond to flooding risk.

The NAO calls for this to be remedied, and for those services to have the necessary resources to adequately deal with that risk, a call which has been wholeheartedly supported by the Fire Brigades Union. The union points out that since 2010 fire and rescue services have lost one in five jobs and had central government funding cut by 30 per cent.

The government has already identified the need to build much greater resilience to flooding by avoiding inappropriate development in flood plains, using natural solutions to control flows of flood water, better preparing and responding to incidents, and making properties and infrastructure more resilient to future flooding.

But such is the short-term nature of the current and previous governments that make them both unable and unwilling to carry out the necessary actions to protect from flooding the lives, property, services and jobs of Britain’s people. ■

After decades of developments in computing laboratories mainstream. Is this good news or bad?

Capital, not computing, i

WHEREVER YOU turn, people are talking about “artificial intelligence” (AI), and whether it is a boon for society or a danger to democracy. Some deny that there is such a thing, and say that only humans can be truly intelligent.

But call it what you like, the ability of software programs to collect and analyse data, and to generate new insight and new data, has never been greater.

Ask any secondary school teacher and they will tell you how many times they have spotted children using the generative AI program ChatGPT to write essays. At the other end, look at the Google-owned company DeepMind, based in London, which used AI to determine the three-dimensional structure of proteins simply from the sequence of their amino acids.

DeepMind has partnered with the Cambridge-based European Bioinformatics Institute to make all its predictions – covering most of the roughly 200 million known protein sequences across all life forms – freely available to scientists looking for new drug candidates. That’s the kind of fact beloved of the AI optimists. AI, they say, will bring huge benefits to society.

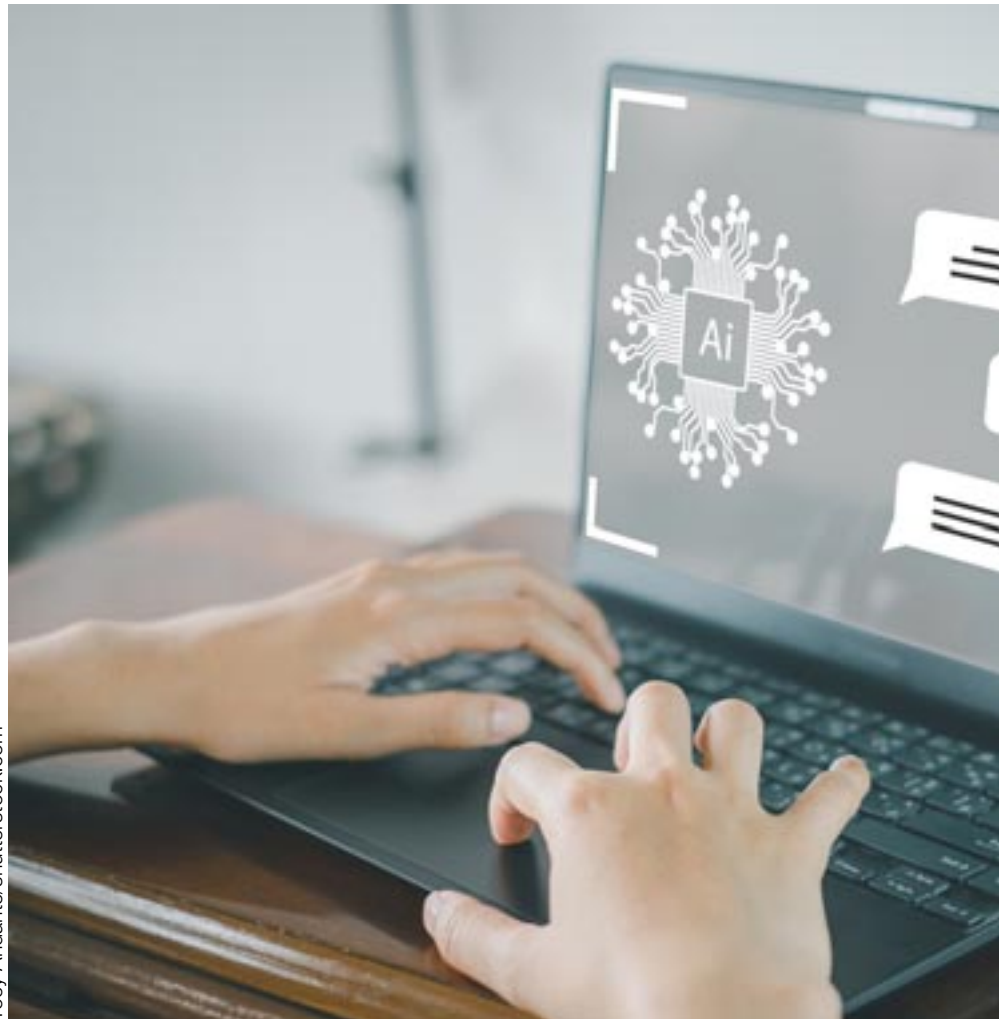
Dangers

But will it, overall? What are the dangers to privacy and democracy? And how many jobs will be lost in the process?

According to US banker Goldman Sachs, ChatGPT and related AI could threaten as many as 300 million jobs worldwide. With such AI, up to two-thirds of job occupations in the US and Europe could be at least partially automated, it says.

In the same article Goldman Sachs

‘Chat GPT and related AI could threaten as many as 300 million jobs worldwide...’



Toey Andante/shutterstock.com

says that AI could raise global GDP by 7 per cent over a decade despite “significant uncertainty” and some strange assumptions on the future. It also claims the jobs displaced by previous automation “have historically been offset by the creation of new jobs” – without real evidence that this will continue to be the case.

The idea of artificial intelligence was first put forward in the late 1940s by the British mathematician Alan Turing. But it could not become a reality without massive developments in computing power and, as importantly, computer storage. By 1997, AI had advanced to the point where an IBM computer, “Deep Blue”, defeated reigning world chess champion Gary Kasparov.

Now there seems no limit to AI.

Employers are using it to analyse the speech and non-verbal behaviour of job applicants, and to decide who to sack. Biomedical scientists used it during the Covid-19 pandemic to analyse patient data and point the way towards effective treatments. BT has announced that it is to reduce its workforce by 40,000 to 55,000 with 10,000 of those to be replaced by AI.

Detecting cancer

In September, news emerged that AI could detect more breast cancers than traditional examination of X-rays by two radiologists. Perhaps – the study itself has several caveats. But the question of whether machines can truly be more intelligent than humans, that “digital intelligence” can

, artificial intelligence has broken through into the

is the enemy of progress



surpass “biological intelligence”, may soon be answered definitively.

Yet AI is not infallible. Users of ChatGPT found that it can generate misinformation, incorrectly answer coding problems, and produce errors in basic maths. It makes up references that don’t exist. It once even insisted a living person had died and made up a reference to an obituary.

And recently a lawyer had to apologise to a US judge after using ChatGPT to identify case law in a personal injury case. The problem? That case law does not exist.

Against this backdrop, prime minister Rishi Sunak and US president Joe Biden discussed AI at their meeting in June, including the idea of a global regulation framework. (Naturally, this would be “light

touch” regulation, that is to say, only the appearance of regulation.)

The world’s great scientific advances have been made by workers, not governments, and often by workers keen to see the benefits flow freely throughout society. Witness the invention of the World Wide Web at CERN, the international particle physics laboratory in Geneva.

Similarly, ChatGPT was developed by OpenAI, founded in 2015 as a non-profit company. Aware of the implications for society, the founders were keen on the concept of ethical AI, with inbuilt safeguards for privacy, for example.

Then Microsoft took a stake. It now owns 49 per cent of OpenAI, and when OpenAI’s board tried to hold back the tide in November and enforce its ethical vision, sacking its CEO, Sam Altman, capitalism struck back. Altman was reinstated and his sackers were sacked.

“AI belongs to the capitalists now,” read the article in *The New York Times* reporting the reinstatement. And it’s quite an asset: estimates of its market value now run at \$80 billion.

There’s a lesson here for the utopians, the wishful thinkers, among us. You cannot be sure of controlling the forces of production unless you have control of the means of production. As with the fight for wages, any victory in the war to fight the adverse effects of AI will only be temporary.

The TUC has warned that many workers are being kept in the dark about how AI is being used to make decisions that directly affect them. It also said that the government is failing to protect workers from being “exploited” by new AI technologies.

In a manifesto, *Dignity at work and the AI revolution*, the TUC said in March 2023 that it believes an AI-driven technological workplace change can boost productivity and “offers an opportunity to improve working lives”. It also identifies the risks about inequality and discrimination as well as unsafe working conditions.

Calls for laws

As well as the TUC, some trade unions are concerned about how AI is used although the GMB also said that it is not anti-

“AI belongs to the capitalists now.” – *New York Times* headline

technology. But like the TUC many unions are calling for more legislation to control “the worst cost-cutting impulses of bosses”.

The call for a “statutory framework and industrial relations mechanisms” suggests unions have forgotten the history of such legislation: statutory interference in industrial relations either limits workers’ advances, or rolls them back. So TUC and union calls for legislation around AI to protect workers’ rights need to be carefully framed if they are not to make a bad situation worse.

The strongest protection will always be workers’ willingness to organise and fight. And here the best lesson comes from across the Atlantic, with the victory at the end of September of the Writers Guild of America over the Hollywood studios and the TV moguls.

After a 146-day strike, the workers gained not only pay increases but also assurances about the use of AI in the writing of film scripts. It is widely seen as the first industrial battle over AI in the workplace, humans versus machines. The problem, as it has been since the start of the industrial revolution, is that the machines are controlled by capitalists.

As an article in the *Los Angeles Times* makes clear, the concerns over the use of AI – while laid out in the writers’ claim – were not seen as central. Until, that is, the employers refused to agree to a clause banning the use of AI in the writing of original scripts.

As in everything that workers and their organisations do, a single victory is worth infinitely more than a thousand statements of concern, or motions at a conference. AI may be a new technology, but the truths of class struggle are tried and tested. ■

With the transition from traditional sources of energy to alternatives never before. And with it, the issue of national self-reliance

Copper. The metal we can't

THE BACKGROUND of war in Ukraine and the Middle East, and the simmering tension between China and the USA, with NATO stoking the fires, all make securing our energy vital.

Energy can't be considered without acknowledging a string of metals and minerals critical to its production. Heading the list are the manufacture of high-grade steel and the extraction of oil and lithium.

Tempting as it is to get excited about newly topical elements like lithium and rare earths, we should not forget copper. It's the one traditional material without which this electrical age cannot function at all. No copper, no green economy.

Copper is unequalled for its capacity to conduct heat and electricity, and its ability to be pulled and stretched. It is also resistant to corrosion and suitable for recycling.

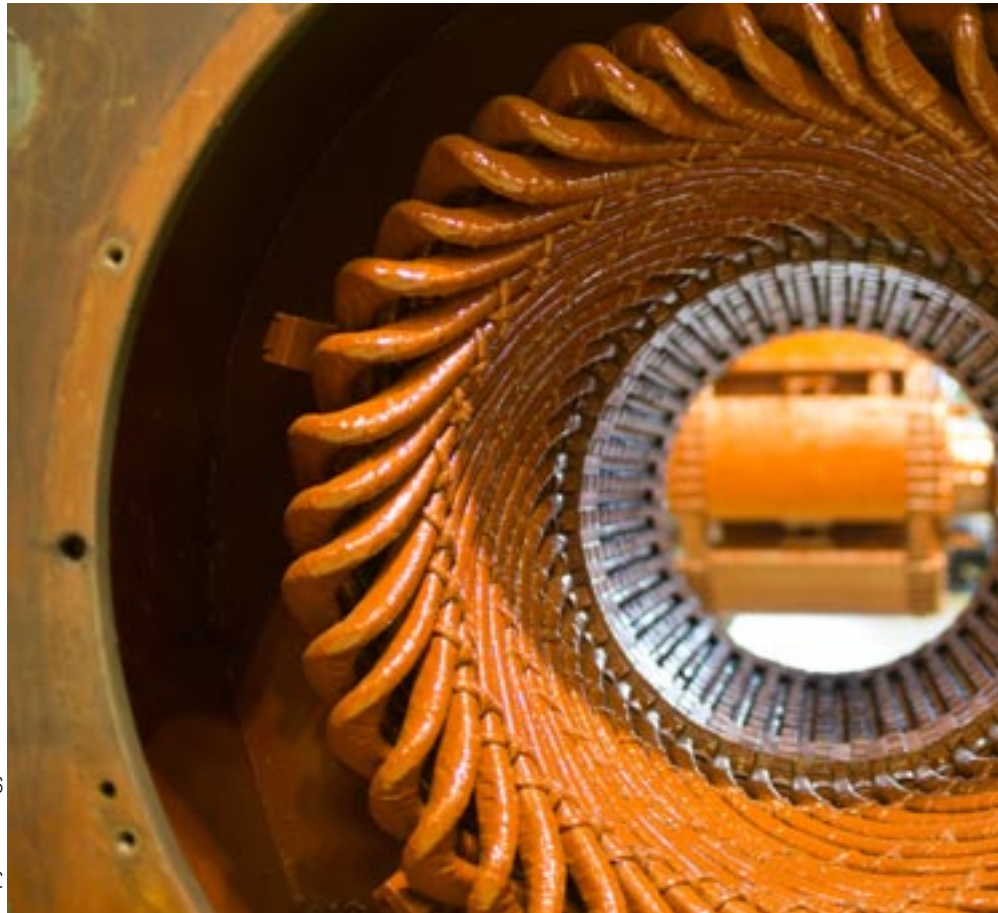
In 2022 the government finally recognised the importance of critical materials with the announcement of a strategy entitled *Resilience for the Future*. But like most government announcements, it was long on fine words and short on concrete action.

Refresh?

Then in March 2023 came an update, a "Refresh", intended apparently to firm up areas of action and make it clear precisely what the government would do. Yet, as the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee noted in its report published on 15 December, it failed to do this.

"Government repeats that it will 'encourage investment along the whole critical mineral value chain' without addressing where within the value chain the UK should position itself," said the committee.

'Decreasing our carbon footprint means increasing our copper footprint...'



Kopyfin Georgy/shutterstock.com

Copper is vital for electric motors and generators.

In other words, there's no clarity in government at all. That's par for the course. Jeff Townsend, Director of the UK Critical Minerals Association, told the committee he'd first raised the question with the government in 2012, adding, "I've been banging my head against a brick wall ever since."

And as Townsend's Association noted in its response to the strategy, a number of minerals deemed critical in many other countries (including the USA) don't figure on the UK list. That, astonishingly, includes copper.

Between 2020 and 2050 the proportion of energy derived from electricity is forecast to rise from 20 to 50 per cent. Electric vehicles will need three or four times as much copper as conventional vehicles – half going into the motors, half into the wires

and battery.

At the core of the generator of the world's most powerful steam turbine at nuclear station Hinkley Point C is coil upon coil of copper, turning motion into electrical current. It's the same for all means of generating electricity.

Offshore wind turbines need ten times more copper – for electromagnets – than a conventional power station, to generate the same amount of electricity. Solar panels would need roughly seven times as much.

In short, decreasing our carbon footprint means increasing our copper footprint. This is an inconvenient truth for the advocates of net zero – and for those who oppose all mining, anywhere.

Britain was once a copper producer, primarily in Cornwall. But it was Swansea

Oil-electric, Britain's security of supply is in question as e...

n't do without



which became the smelting centre – because of coal. Swansea had no copper, but showed it was possible to dominate production without having any metal in the ground.

Today China follows suit, smelting and refining half the world's supply of copper. Britain is now entirely dependent on outside sources for its critical minerals, primarily China. That gives China enormous political leverage.

The world will need more copper to increase the supply of electricity, but there's a problem. Mining operations all over the world are under threat because of environmental opposition.

Companies will not always meet the costs associated with green mining. And courts are agreeing to limit extraction of the very metal needed to wean the world off

fossil fuels. "Just Stop Copper" would be tantamount to "Just Stop Electricity".

Copper mining once took the tops off mountains, but mining is now mostly underground. It's highly automated: the whole operation can be controlled remotely. But with so few at the pit face, how can future generations, with no hands-on experience, learn about materials and production?

Extraction of metals may yet pass from land to undersea-based mining. Since 1872, with the laying of the first transatlantic telegraph cable (which itself used a lot of copper), it has been known that a massive underwater mountain range exists in the mid-Atlantic.

Abundance

Scientific research deep in the ocean there has confirmed the existence of copper in abundance – an estimated 230 million tonnes, equal to more than ten years' current output. There's also iron, zinc, selenium and chalcopyrite (up to 20 per cent copper). Under the Pacific too, high-grade cobalt and nickel, manganese and copper have been found – metals critical to production of high-performance batteries.

These estimates are being revised after the most recent exploration of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge in the Sargasso Sea. Intended as a joint UK–Russia undertaking, it ended up as a UK-only mission in late February 2022, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Therein lies the challenge, and it is a question of control and cooperation. Who owns the seabed? And who has rights of exploration and ownership of its minerals?

Modern submersible technology (deep sea rigs) would allow Britain to take part in undersea mining. We would be up against stiff competition, because much of the seabed has already been claimed: China has four contracts, South Korea and Russia three each, Germany, France and Britain two each.

Almost unbelievably, Britain sold its two undersea copper mining claims to US defence company Lockheed Martin in 2013. But the story doesn't end there. In March 2023, Lockheed sold the claims to a Norwegian company. Control has effec-

tively passed from Britain to the global marketplace.

Of course, the sea bed might not be mined at all. The International Seabed Authority (ISA), the UN body charged with managing most of the ocean floor, has dawdled in drafting the necessary rules, giving time for environmental concerns to reach the courts. In 2022 Chile, already nervous about its copper mining on land, called for a moratorium on deep-sea mining and was joined by Fiji, France, and other nations.

As recently as 28 November 2023, Panama's Supreme Court, overturning a law passed only the previous month, ruled that the Canadian mining company First Quantum's contract to operate a lucrative copper mine in Panama was unconstitutional.

Economic consequences inevitably flow from closure of mines, not least for the cost of electrification as shortages push up prices. At the same time scientific curiosity in the little-known marine world is growing. Biologists and miners will need first to come to an agreement among themselves, then take their united professional opinion to the ISA and the public.

Markets

While the government continues to place its faith in the global markets, it has made no commitment to develop copper production in Britain itself. And there are sizeable potential reserves in Cornwall and Wales.

Work began in October at Cornish Metals' South Crofty site to pump water out of the old mine as a prelude to developing future production. Another company, Cornwall Resources, is developing a project in Redmoor with considerable promise for copper.

Admittedly, it will take many years to build up a sizeable copper-producing industry in Britain, but that's no reason for government not to play its part. Quite the opposite: it's a pressing reason to start right now.

In the meantime, with copper and with other strategic materials, Britain is in the hands of global markets. And as experience has proved, that's not a comfortable or safe place to be. ■

Turn on the news or read the newspaper and you hear “skills migration. But why is there a skills shortage and what is the

Respect FE – deal with



Workers

UCU further education college members rally for pay, London, November 2023.

THIS SHOULD be a time of great opportunity. Unlike many other countries we are in a decade when Britain’s population of 16- to 18-year-olds is increasing. The number in this age bracket in England is projected to rise by 18 per cent between

‘Britain has neglected the funding of post-16 education...’

2021 and 2030.

This should be celebrated as an opportunity to address skills shortages. But unless things change, it looks like the increased population of young people will mean less funding for each student in that age bracket.

Several major problems are linked to this. Over decades Britain has neglected the funding of post-16 education as a whole – and in particular pay for teaching staff in the sector. And the Further Education (FE) sector is expected to take on board any education which does not fit elsewhere.

Historically FE colleges were key insti-

tutions for the specialised skills training needed in industry, agriculture and so on. But they have evolved to become general providers of post-16 education such as BTEC and the new T Level courses.

Muddle

New qualifications have proved to be a politically inspired muddle. Few students have signed up to T levels, leading to courses closing. The government’s answer? To announce yet another change – the Advanced British Standard to replace A Levels and T Levels!

The colleges are also responsible for many general courses, like English as a

skills shortage”, and “shortage occupation list” for legal the national plan for addressing it?

skill shortages

second or additional language, and for giving a second chance to those who missed out on qualifications during secondary school.

But they have also sustained funding cuts, multiple and excessive demands, and political decisions to introduce new qualifications without adequate consultation or funding. Together these factors have combined to create what the National Audit Office (NAO) has described, with good reason, as a “fragile” sector.

Post-16 funding

The FE sector has undergone a long period of reduced funding. The Institute for Fiscal Studies reported in December 2022 that funding for the 16-19 age group had experienced the biggest drop in funding of any education sector. It contrasted this long-term funding decline with growth in primary and secondary schools.

The whole process of securing funding is complex too. FE providers are allocated funds from different sources depending on the type of courses they provide and on the age of their students. And there is a separate pot for capital funding, upgrading the college estate and similar improvements.

As a result the politicians who have presided over this complexity rely on briefings from the House of Commons Library to understand it. And as the NAO report points out, the costs of administering this complexity takes valuable finance away from the student – and it also creates opportunity cost, staff efforts directed towards finance and not education.

The NAO found that in February 2020, financial woes had forced 115 colleges (nearly half all colleges in England) into early intervention or formal intervention. The Education and Skills Funding Agency spent over £26 million on two college insolvencies between April 2019 and May 2020.

The prolonged squeeze on FE finances has been described as the long decline, quite rightly. Between 2010-11 and 2021-22 the recommended pay increase for college staff was 1 per cent or lower in every year. The Institute for Fiscal Studies found that 40 per cent of colleges paid the 1 per cent, a small number awarded slightly more, and a third did not increase

staff pay at all.

The University and College Union (UCU), which represents FE teachers, calculates that real pay has fallen by 35 per cent in this period. Predictably, the squeeze on pay has in turn undermined staff retention.

College teachers are now far more likely to leave their profession than other public sector workers. The most recent data available showed that 25 per cent of college teachers left the profession after one year compared with 15 per cent of school teachers.

We can't address a national skills shortage when those teaching the skills are not being retained.

Respect FE

Under the slogan Respect FE, the UCU is conducting the biggest wave of strike action in FE colleges for years. They are fighting for a pay rise to match recent inflation, for improved workloads and national negotiations.

They have demanded a 15.4 per cent rise based on the January 2023 RPI increase plus 2 per cent. As well as pay they have demanded that college employers address excessive workloads. Furthermore, they want the current system of annual pay recommendations by the Association of Colleges to be replaced by binding national negotiations in future.

The campaign is already showing signs

‘College workers are now far more likely to leave their profession than other public sector workers, even more so than school teachers...’

of success, even without strikes in several colleges. Thirteen colleges settled even before the national ballot closed at the end of October. And since the November strikes were announced, UCU members have accepted a negotiated deal in twenty more colleges in England. Strikes took place at six colleges and two college groups in mid-November; the dispute continues.

Valuing and thereby retaining the skills of teachers in FE is an essential first step in a wider battle to rebuild an education sector which is the basis for skills development in young people and many adult learners who want to learn new skills. ■

Meet the Party

The Communist Party of Britain Marxist-Leninist's series of Zoom discussion meetings continues on Tuesday 6 February on the subject of the right to strike. All meeting details are published on What's On, page 5, in our eNewsletter, and at cpbml.org.uk/events.

M As well as our Zoom discussion meetings, we hold regular in-person public meetings, with one in London on 30 January about mass immigration and the war on workers (details on page 5), as well as informal meetings with interested workers and study sessions for those who want to take the discussion further.

M If you are interested we want to hear from you. Call us on 07308 979 308 or send an email to info@cpbml.org.uk

Asset management companies live off the wealth created profit from squeezing the assets or selling them on...

Parasitic capitalism – wh



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The New York headquarters of Blackrock, the world's largest asset manager.

CAPITALISM IS mutating ever further from any productive role. Institutional investors, like pension schemes, insurance companies and sovereign wealth funds use asset management firms to manage an ever-larger share of their capital.

When an asset management firm like BlackRock owns, say, an energy enterprise, it contracts out all the operations. It is not an energy company. It invests in (that is, it buys) such companies solely with the aim of maximising income and extracting it. This is no more productive than a landlord renting out property, arguably less so.

By 2020, the global asset management sector was managing \$103 trillion assets – over 40 per cent of the world's total \$250 trillion wealth. Asset managers charge huge fees for their services and have grown

powerful in their own right, operating outside financial regulation.

These companies invest largely in two types of asset – housing of all kinds and infrastructure: energy, water, transport, telecoms, social goods like schools and hospitals, and farmland.

Exploitation

Asset managers now own global housing and infrastructure worth at least \$4 trillion. They buy these assets not to run them, but to sell them on. The term “asset management” is a misnomer: these companies exploit and sweat assets – they manage them the way locusts manage crops.

In asset-manager society, a company like BlackRock not only owns your home, it also owns the land from which your food

comes, the wind farm that generates your electricity, the road you drive on to work, and much else besides.

In Britain, by the early 1990s, almost all the previously state-owned infrastructure that could be sold off had been. Once privately owned, these assets could be bought by asset managers.

Introduced by the Conservative government in 1992, Britain's Private Finance Initiative (PFI) really took off under Labour from 1997. It enabled private companies to make huge profits from creating assets which the public sector could have created far more cheaply.

This enabled Chancellor Gordon Brown to “massage” reported levels of public debt: the future government payments to the contractors did not appear on the gov-

by others. They buy not to produce things of use, but to

no needs it?

ernment's balance sheet. These assets too could then be bought by asset managers.

Does it matter who owns an enterprise? Yes: whether the government, a company or an asset manager owns it will affect service, investment, and prices. When finance capital gets its hooks into juicy meat, people suffer.

The *Financial Times* chief economics commentator Martin Wolf called Britain's privatised utility model "broken", because private owners' monopoly power was "an obstacle to investment". Cosseted by monopoly conditions, owners bleed their infrastructure assets rather than invest to improve them. And asset managers invested the least.

A prime example is the water industry. In 2013, its regulator Ofwat challenged Thames Water's proposed 8 per cent rise in customer rates, charging that the company had "underinvested on sewer flooding and on sewer treatment, and failed to adequately maintain some of its wastewater network."

The Environment Agency prosecuted the company for pouring untreated sewage into the Thames and other rivers, and it was fined £20 million. The judge criticised the company for "inadequate investment, diabolical maintenance and poor management."

In 2016-17, when the company utterly failed to reach its leakage reduction targets, it paid out £239 million in dividends. The

Australian asset management firm, Macquarie, its then owner, made between 15.5 and 19 per cent a year from its investment in Thames Water, twice the norm.

Saddling companies with ongoing interest payments suppresses the companies' taxable profits. So when Macquarie added £2 billion in debt to Thames Water's balance sheet, it paid almost no UK corporation tax for a decade.

Relentless

Asset manager firms are relentless in squeezing maximum profits out of all the assets they own. A 2021 study of 1,674 care homes in the USA found that those owned by asset managers billed 11 per cent more for each stay. And they spent far less on patient care with predictable results.

Going to a care home owned by an asset manager increased the probability of death (compared to other for-profit homes in general) by about 10 per cent for short-stay Medicare patients. So, asset manager ownership of care homes meant that over 20,000 US lives were lost between 2004 and 2016.

Asset managers of this type are an extreme form of private equity management, often specialising in leveraged buy-outs funded by debts. Nothing is safe from these pirates. For example they are now fleecing Britain's £2 billion veterinary services sector.

'Does it matter who owns an enterprise? Yes. When finance capital gets its hooks into juicy meat, people suffer...'

Ten years ago, almost 90 per cent of Britain's vets were independent. By 2021, just 45 per cent were, and six companies owned over half our veterinary practices.

The price of veterinary and other pet care services, such as kennel boarding fees, rose by more than twice the rate of inflation between 2015 and 2020. Pet owners face four-figure vets' bills for a pet's overnight stay in a clinic, and a single MRI scan can cost £2,500.

Asset-manager capitalism has little to do with production or service. It operates to put speculative profit over all else. Concerns about affordable access to a wide range of socially indispensable physical assets are irrelevant to them. Britain cannot afford to support them. ■

Erica Fischer via Flickr (CC BY 2.0)



CPBML public meeting

Tuesday 30 January London, 7.30pm

Bertrand Russell Room, Conway Hall, Red Lion

Square, London WC1R 4RL

"Mass immigration – war on the working class"

Net migration reaches record levels, rising from 107,000 in 1997 to a record 745,000 at the end of 2022. The government blusters, but is determined to increase it yet further. How should we respond? All welcome. Free Entry. For details, see What's On, page 5.

Electricity is vital for modern life, whatever contribution from nuclear power will continue to be an effective way to provide it for the foreseeable future.

The future has to be nuclear



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Sizewell B nuclear station, Suffolk – the only nuclear station not coming to the end of its life.

THE ANNUAL share of Britain's electricity provided by nuclear power has shrunk from 23 per cent in 2000 to under 15 per cent in 2021. The main reactors we use, second-generation Advanced Gas-cooled Reactors (AGRs), will all close by 2028. Only Sizewell B power station could have its lifetime further extended.

Will we need electricity in the future? Yes, and lots of it, not least for the computing needs of AI. Whether or not you believe all the claims made for its capabilities, AI will require more and more power-hungry supercomputers, which won't work if they're not plugged in at the mains.

And of course energy, the power to operate machines, to provide light and heat, is also fundamental to commodity production. To begin with, the human race had little more than muscle for transforming

raw materials, and the use of slave labour was widespread for many centuries. Animals were also used – horsepower, a concept invented by James Watt, measures how much a pit pony could lift in a minute.

Power

The industrial revolution, in which Britain led the world, required power. Water and steam power were key at first. But the use of electricity took industrial development to a new level.

In the early 1830s Michael Faraday built the Faraday disc, the first electric generator, and William Sturgeon invented a direct current electric motor for converting electrical energy into mechanical energy. By 1881 the first central station providing public power opened in Godalming, and in 1882

the first large-scale central distribution plant, at Holborn Viaduct in London.

Ernest Rutherford and his team at the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge were the first to split the atomic nucleus, in 1932. Their experiments demonstrated the immense power of nuclear fission, at first used in atomic bombs.

The Soviet Union was the first country to use a nuclear power plant to generate electricity for a power grid, in 1954 at Obninsk. But Britain was the first to use a nuclear power station, at Calder Hall in Cumbria, for commercial-scale supply; it was connected to the national grid in 1956.

Between the 1955 White Paper *A Programme of Nuclear Power* and 1979, 17 nuclear power stations were approved. Sizewell B was the last nuclear reactor opened in Britain. Approved in 1987, it

From other renewable energy sources, nuclear power will be a viable future...

clear

came online in 1995.

It took 21 years and seven governments to approve another in 2016 at Hinkley Point C, but it's not due to come online until 2027. Discussions about building new reactors at Wylfa on Anglesey and at Moorside in Cumbria foundered but the government is in negotiations over another at Sizewell.

Recently, war and the price of gas have concentrated minds on the question of Britain's energy security. With all but one of our reactors, Sizewell B, coming to the end of their lives, Britain will be increasingly reliant on gas imports and on electricity imported through interconnectors. This has consequences for the security of supplies and for costs to industry and consumers.

Renewables shortfall

The claim that renewables will meet all our energy needs fails to take into account that the sun and wind occur intermittently. In December 2022, for example, when it was cold but the wind didn't blow, power prices shot up. The National Grid had to use its "demand flexibility service" to cut consumption at peak times. On other occasions, when the wind blows too much the National Grid has to ask for wind turbines to be shut down.

Nuclear fusion is acknowledged as a potential source of power. But even after decades of experimentation it is still many years before it could become an economically viable source.

More promising are developments like Small Modular Reactors (SMRs). They are,

'There's a new body, Great British Nuclear. But no one, government or industry, seems to know what its job is...'

relatively speaking, easier and quicker to build than stations like Hinkley C. They use factory-produced designs, and can be sited close to demand.

This form of construction is cheaper to build and reduces the risk of projects over-running. This should make SMRs easier to finance at a time when gigawatt-scale reactors have proved too much for commercial balance sheets to bear.

The international industry body the World Nuclear Association says that, "The UK has privatized power generation and liberalized its electricity market, which together make major capital investments problematic."

Britain once led the world in peaceful uses of nuclear energy. Now, through inaction over decades, we rely on Chinese, Japanese, American and French expertise to develop it. And EDF which operates most of our current facilities is French.

The government has been forced to acknowledge the problem, but its response is inadequate. The *British Energy Security Strategy* issued in 2022 isn't really a strategy. And *Powering Up Britain*, the energy security plan of March 2023, isn't really a plan.

The House of Commons Science Innovation and Technology Committee was not taken in. As it said, targets are not a strategy. And given the half-life of a government minister is so short, it would be unwise to rely on governments to plan anything for the future.

There's a new body, Great British Nuclear. But no one, government or industry, seems to know what its job is. But it's clear that the government has learned little from the past 70 years – it's looking favourably at US-based SMRs instead of Rolls-Royce, based here and an international leader in the technology.

We need a real strategy, then. What should it contain? Prospect, the trade union, made a useful start in their evidence to the committee. They propose the extension of existing plants where safe to do so, a full funding settlement for Sizewell C and future plants, a comprehensive skills and workforce plan and backing for the nuclear supply chain.

The civil nuclear industry directly

employs around 65,000 workers, with a further 160,000 jobs in supply chains. Two-thirds of those jobs, are in North West and South West England. They're highly skilled jobs – but where is the strategy to educate and train the future scientists, engineers and technicians to deliver the government targets?

Our energy strategy cannot be left to the market, as recent history shows. Hitachi and Toshiba pulled out of the Wylfa and Moorside projects in 2019. It's unwise to rely on EDF to continue to invest in Sizewell C.

Our only nuclear fuel manufacturer, Springfields at Salwick, near Preston, was under threat. The owner, Westinghouse, has now had taxpayer-funded grants from the Nuclear Fuel Fund to upgrade and expand the facility.

Change

So it's a complicated and difficult position to be in. But there are grounds for optimism. There's been a change in thinking.

You rarely see those yellow Nuclear Power No Thanks symbols at all these days. There has been a shift of opinion. A recent poll by Greenpeace, reported in *Workers* November/December 2023 edition, found that young climate activists have a much more positive attitude to nuclear energy than their elders. In the population more generally, only around 11 per cent oppose nuclear power.

Disruption to energy supplies caused by the pandemic and by war may have played their part in making us think harder about where our power comes from, how it reaches us, who owns it. Brexit opened our eyes to our potential for independence. And the recent upsurge in trade union struggle has fostered collective thinking about our future.

Power, both the power to transform raw materials, and political power, the power to transform society, are fundamental to the workers of Britain. Nuclear energy is fundamental to our future. ■

This article is based on speeches and discussion at two CPBML public meetings in November 2023.

We live in a material world in more senses than one. In fact, depends as much on sand and rock as is does on technology.

Materials matter



Martin Pettitt/Flickr CC BY 2.0 DEED

Ironbridge, Shropshire, in 1781 the first major bridge in the world to be made of cast iron.

Material world: a substantial story of our past and future, Ed Conway, hardback, 501 pages, ISBN 978-0753559154, WH Allen, 2023, £22. Kindle and eBook editions available. Paperback edition due June 2024.

THIS AMAZING book, which has won several awards, shows how all our social and distribution networks, all our services, rely wholly on physical infrastructure and energy sources.

Writer and broadcaster Ed Conway cites Albert Einstein's reply to a group of reporters who had asked him to explain his theory of relativity: "I can explain it as follows. It was formerly believed that if all material things disappeared out of the universe, time and space would be left. According to the relativity theory, however, time and space disappear together with the things."

Conway comments, "You might say the

same thing about the Material World. These substances are the fabric of civilisation. Without them, normal life as we know it would disintegrate."

He contrasts the world of ideas with the material world, "the best-kept secret of the modern economy is that these world-famous brands [the Walmarts, Apples, Teslas and Googles of the world] depend entirely on the obscure firms of the Material World to make their products and help their clever ideas, well, materialise. It is where ideas become a tangible reality."

Six key materials

The book examines six key materials: sand, salt, iron, copper, oil, and lithium, and explains how they are produced and how they are used. Conway says, "Given how much sand and rock we still blast from the planet, we are still firmly embedded in the Stone Age."

We now extract more materials from

the earth each year than the sum total of everything extracted from the dawn of humanity up to 1950. Every year, 43 billion tonnes of sand and gravel, 8 billion tonnes of oil and gas, 7 billion tonnes of coal, and 3 billion tonnes of iron ore are dug, blasted and pumped out of the earth.

Sand is a key component of cement, a product which makes a huge difference to our lives. Rather than having to form and fire bricks before laying them laboriously with mortar, you can pour concrete into a mould. A job that previously took days or weeks can be done in hours by far fewer workers.

When Mexico provided families with cement to cover dirt floors, parasitic infections fell by 78 per cent. The number of children with diarrhoea fell by half, and with anaemia by four-fifths. Children did better at school, and their mothers became happier and less depressed.

Coal was vital for the industrial revolution, used to produce iron and steel. By 1800 almost all of Britain's energy came from coal. But France was still reliant on wood. "No longer was Britain yoked to the organic limitations of how many trees could be grown on its landmass. And around this time, its income per capita, which for most of history had been more or less the same as France's, began to soar. By the early nineteenth century it was 80 per cent richer than France."

The energy-dense coal abundant in Britain allowed a rapid surge in iron production, leading to a series of other innovations that together gave birth to the industrial revolution. Coal then fuelled the machinery made of the iron it had produced.

Iron is a fossil fuel product. Each year we put more than a billion tonnes of coal into the thousand or so blast furnaces operating around the world, producing steel. Our world of today is made from steel, it is "...in the structures we inhabit, the infrastructure and transportation we use, and the tools that manufacture everything else."

Whatever we may do in future to reduce reliance on fossil fuels, at present we remain completely dependent on them. Most of the world's primary energy – which

our modern world
gy...

‘Coal was vital for the industrial revolution, used to produce iron and steel...’

includes electricity generation, transport, heating and industrial processes – comes from burning fossil fuels: coal, oil and gas. In 1980 the proportion was 85 per cent: dropping to 80 percent by 1990. It has remained at about that level ever since.

In 2020, 78 per cent of world energy was still from fossil fuels. Oil and gas provide about 55 per cent of our energy – a proportion which has remained the same for the past twenty years. Traditional biomass (wood) accounts for around 7 per cent, renewables 11 per cent and nuclear power 4 per cent.

Conway points out that oil and gas are difficult to substitute, being near-perfect sources of energy. Refrigerant gases (chlorofluorocarbons) were much easier to replace. And oil is almost irreplaceable as a feedstock for nearly every manufactured product – including textiles and medicines. He says, “Weaning ourselves off them will take far more than a bit of goodwill and a net-zero target.”

Irony

It is an irony that pursuing environmental goals will, in the short and medium term, require considerably more materials and energy to build electric cars, wind turbines and solar panels to replace fossil fuels.

Conway concludes, “We are also capable of living far more sustainable, cleaner lives, diminishing our destruction and contamination and living in closer harmony with the planet. We will do so not by eschewing or dismissing the Material World, but by embracing it and understanding it. These six substances helped us survive and thrive. They helped us make magic. They can do it again.” ■

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Once again, the US is seeking to make even greater use of Britain. And once again, opposition is building...

US bases in Britain

THE QUESTION of sovereignty in Britain has been put into sharp focus by the likelihood that US nuclear weapons and bombers will once again be stationed on British soil. An article in *Workers* in September 2023 pointed to the persistent and concerted campaigning that led to the removal of this weaponry from the US air base at Lakenheath in Suffolk in 2008.

But the operational facilities were mothballed – not removed. And indeed Britain is once again on the list of countries prepared to host US nuclear weapons. The US Defense Department compiles such a list annually in its Military Construction Program. It indicates that RAF Lakenheath has now acquired nuclear status, with nuclear-capable F-35A Lightning II fighter bombers being deployed to the base, the first in Europe to get such aircraft.

In the 1980s, at the height of the Cold War, our predecessor paper *The Worker* used a cartoon of Britain as an aircraft carrier doing the USA's bidding. We are in danger again of losing control, with a foreign power deciding our fate on questions of war and peace.

Many people in Britain now recognise the perilous nature of this situation. Opposition to such domination is building once more. The role of NATO in ignoring democracy and sovereignty is becoming clearer.

Sophie Bolt, vice-chair of CND (which organised protests at Lakenheath base last year), pointed out the danger: "The upgrade of US nuclear infrastructure is

nearing completion, with bases across Europe set to receive the B61-12, if they have not done so already. NATO nuclear doctrine endorses a first-use policy, so these bombs – which use guided targeting for greater accuracy – are not intended for defensive purposes. Their method of delivery, the F-35, is a stealth fighter with a range of 2,200 km. This suggests that they will be used to target Russia – and therefore put us on the front line in any future US/NATO war with Russia."

Growth of US bases

The story of US infringement of Britain's sovereignty goes back decades. US forces remained after the joint efforts in the struggle against Nazi Germany in the Second World War. There has been a continuous presence of US military forces ever since.

British control over them seems to have been negligible. The 1951 Status of Forces Agreement provided a legal framework between Britain and NATO for the use of such bases, and the Visiting Forces Act of 1952 incorporated this into British law. These agreements allow foreign military forces to operate within Britain.

By the 1990s there were about 100 US bases here; 13 now remain – all nominally RAF bases. They are at: Lakenheath and Mildenhall in Suffolk; Alconbury, Molesworth and Upwood in Cambridgeshire; Croughton and Welford in Northamptonshire; Fairford in Gloucestershire; Feltwell in Norfolk; Barford St John in Oxfordshire; Fylingdales and Menwith Hill in North Yorkshire; and Blenheim Crescent in Ruislip, London. Not all host aircraft or missiles – Menwith Hill for example gathers signals intelligence.

The law allowing these bases reserves jurisdiction over US personnel to the US government, with public insight into their activities severely curtailed. Currently Britain is host to one of the largest groups of US armed forces posted overseas. There are around 10,000 military personnel, civilian staff and family members based here – and the number is growing.

Notoriously, the other major nuclear weapons system, the fleet of four nuclear capable Trident submarines, is also a hostage to fortune for its lack of full control.



USAF/Airman First Class Seleena Muhamad-Ali

10 October 2023: US airmen leaving RAF Lakenheath

The supply of components from the USA – and questions over who determines targeting and use – undermine the idea that this system is an "independent nuclear deterrent". It is based in Clyde Naval Base at Faslane in the Clyde estuary, with extensive underground storage facilities and bunkers in the hills around Couport.

Submarine bases

An earlier incarnation of a US nuclear armed submarine fleet saw the building of a US Navy base in the Holy Loch near Dunoon, again in the Clyde estuary, in the late 1950s. This became home to the Polaris submarine fleet and missile system which became operational in 1961.

After the cancellation of Britain's Blue Streak and the US-led Skybolt missile programmes in the 1960s, the USA began supplying Britain with Polaris missiles and other materiel including launch tubes and fire-control systems, while Britain would make its own warheads. This developed under the terms of the 1962 Nassau Agreement, facilitated by meetings

'The law allowing these bases reserves jurisdiction over US personnel to the US government, with public insight severely curtailed...'

of its bases in



h for an “undisclosed location” in southeast Asia.

between US President Kennedy and British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan.

Trade unions were prominent in the mass demonstrations that grew in opposition to the base. By 1962 several thousand people were frequently blockading it, many transported there by ships sailing from Glasgow. A spin-off was a folk music revival, with song books printed popularising anti-Polaris songs and poetry.

The Holy Loch base closed in 1992 with the introduction of the longer range Trident missile rendering US ballistic missile bases in Britain unnecessary. The Trident submarine fleet is the system in use today, based in Faslane and Coulport.

The USA is the only country in the world to station its nuclear weapons systems outside its own borders. Britain bears the largest burden of this policy.

Not only does the US nuclear presence render neutrality and non-alignment inoperable, it also undermines our sovereignty. And, by increasing NATO’s capability to wage nuclear war in Europe, it is destabilising and fatally dangerous. ■

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

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

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

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

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

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

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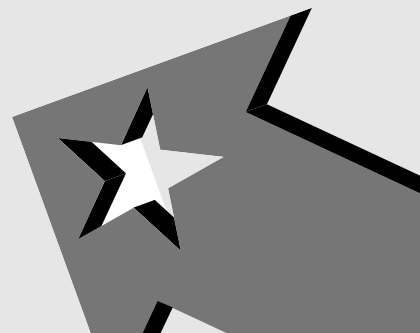
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Time to take up the challenge

The right to strike can only be asserted in industrial action, not won in argument nor legislated for in parliament...

A SHORT twelve months ago NHS workers and their unions were deep in preparation for what everyone knew was going to be a major battle on that most central of issues, pay and conditions. The workers would be joining transport and other workers who had been in dispute for some time on the same issues. We can say now, a year later, that these were successful disputes, possibly the most successful in recent years, especially within the NHS.

Why do we say these disputes were so successful? There are four reasons.

First, any dispute wresting from an unwilling employer that which it would not give should generally be considered a victory. The flat refusal of the government to move from its Pay Review Body fig leaf, or even to negotiate, was blown away by four days of concerted action, principally in Britain's ambulance services. Especially is it so when the employer is effectively the government, with all the issues of pride and petty politics such a defeat for them represents.

Second, although a fairly minor point, the dispute effectively brought down a Secretary of State. Health workers pointed out that they were there before Barclay, and would be there after Barclay. They were right.

Third, rail workers in their struggle showed exemplary tactical nous in knowing when to draw the line, to consolidate and prepare for the future.

Fourth, and most significant, we can see how successful it was because the government is changing the law to make it illegal. That is what the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act is about. It should be viewed as the huge and unintended compliment it is. That it is closing the door after the horse has bolted should not lead us to be sanguine about the vicious anti-working class nature of the legislation.

Employers will be obliged to issue lists of names of specific workers prior to industrial action, the failure of any of whom to scab will potentially remove the limited legal immunities which still apply to unions, and render them

liable to astronomical fines, up to £20 million. This makes the sequestration of the old Industrial Relations Act of fifty years ago seem paltry. Imprisonment for failure to pay is mooted.

The irony of workers knowing that they did indeed provide minimum service levels during strike days, and even that in some cases service levels were an improvement on ordinary working days, hasn't been lost on them. But let's not fool ourselves: if this legislation had been on the statute books a year ago, all our strikes would have been illegal. Are we ready for this? What should our response be?

December's special Trade Union Congress is a first step. But the right to strike can only be asserted in industrial action, not won in argument, nor legislated for in parliament. Those calling on workers to wait for the next general election are traitorous, as misguided as their forebears half a century ago.

All the relative recent successes bring new challenges, because the ruling class has not relished being set back in its schemes. So it is responding fiercely. In the face of the coming onslaught, the class cannot afford to repeat the diversions of the past.

We cannot put our trust in a possible future Labour government, even if the Labour Party now pledges to repeal this legislation. We ignore the stopped-clock follies of calls for a general strike or for regional assemblies to do the job for us. We know that our resistance brings repression, but we are not looking for glorious defeats and famous martyrs.

Workers making their unions do what their unions are there to do, to wage an economic struggle against the employers and the employing, capitalist class, is what will defeat this pernicious legislation.

But note just how far our class enemy is prepared to go to eradicate opposition. Each ratchet up brings us closer to a state in which the working class itself is outlaw. Which is where we started two hundred years ago.

Steady nerves and cool heads are the order of the day. ■

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