

WORKERS

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JOIN THE FIGHT FOR THE FUTURE

Rail Agreement sabotaged

Amazon First strike

NHS Asserting control

Brexit Not done yet

SNP Referendum retreat

New year New spirit

Net Zero Time to discuss

plus Historic Notes,

Research Where is Plan B?

News and more

WORKERS



New year, new spirit

IN MANY WAYS the situation facing workers in Britain is as dire as it has been at any time since the Second World War. Inflation is rampant, services are crumbling, food banks have become a growth industry. But there is a shining light: the working class is fighting.

In that struggle lies the key to survival, the opportunity for progress, the hope for a future. The army of the working class is on the move.

Nothing has been more depressing over recent years than endless moaning about pay and staffing coupled with widespread refusal to do anything about it. Now workers are starting to take responsibility for their workplaces.

For the first time in their history, nurses are on strike. They know they are not just striking for pay. They are also striking for the NHS. They understand that without collective action to make the service attractive to new staff and able to retain the staff who are there, the NHS will wither and die.

That understanding, that link between pay, conditions and a future, is common to all the fights – big and small – that are rippling around Britain.

We communists know that the struggle – widespread as it is – must grow. Far too many are sitting on their hands, unwilling to commit to action, hopeful that if others win pay rises then they too will reap the benefit.

And yet over a million are taking action or contemplating doing so. Action is breaking out in

companies that have invested fortunes in suppressing the growth of unions – Amazon warehouse workers in Coventry, for example, voting for the first strike in that giant's British operations (see page 4).

The flames of struggle are a cleansing fire. They transform the dire mumbling about "low morale" – always a precursor to defeatism – into the rather different morale that comes from fighting for a future.

We see also – and here lies the greatest hope of all – the beginnings of an understanding that workers cannot sit on the sidelines, least of all in their own industries and areas of work. They must take charge where they can, just as surgeons have done to ease waiting lists (see page 9).

Now more than ever it is essential that these fights are well conducted. There will be advance and retreat. No one can stay on strike for ever.

Above all, the battles must be under the control of those involved. Nothing good can come of handing coordinating powers to the TUC.

Workers must assert control. No one knows all the answers to the mess we are in, but workers know most of them, and can work out the rest. Struggle will be the teacher.

The government is, predictably, lashing out, threatening yet more restrictions on the right to strike. But it – and capitalism as a whole – is floundering. Everything it touches turns to crisis. And there's a reason for this: the working class is on the march.



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Sign at Richmond train station, Surrey.

Government sabotages rail deal

RMT GENERAL SECRETARY Mick Lynch has slammed the government for scuppering a deal which could have prevented rail strikes in the run-up to Christmas.

It is now clear that, at the last minute, the government insisted that the letter sent by the train operating companies to the rail unions setting out a potential deal included the imposition of an extension of driver-only operation of trains – in the full knowledge that the RMT could not accept it. The extension of driver-only operation would result in thousands of redundancies among guards, and would be a less safe way of operating – but the government wants to sacrifice safety to save money.

Trains without guards are a problem for many people with mobility difficulties, who would be unable to use the large number of stations that are either unstaffed, or not staffed for part of the day. And many women have voiced concerns about travelling in trains late at night with no guard on board.

Industry commentators have pointed out that it was unnecessary to raise the issue of driver-only operation as part of the dispute settlement, given that it will take many years to put the necessary infrastructure and other measures in place to allow more trains to operate without guards.

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

VACCINES

Strategy obliterated

THE JOINED-UP thinking that characterised Britain's immediate response to the need for a Covid-19 vaccine in 2020 is now just a memory – despite its stunning success in helping to protect the population.

The latest blow is an announcement from US biotech company Catalent, which took over the Vaccine Manufacturing and Innovation Centre at Harwell, near Oxford when it bought out the government's shares in April 2022.

Catalent promised to invest £120 million to complete building the centre, which already had more than £200 million of government money invested in it.

Now, in a move revealed by *The Times* newspaper, Catalent says it's "pausing" construction. According to Fierce Pharma, the company is cutting expenditure in the face of a slowdown of income from Covid-19 products.

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

FACTS MATTER

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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

Civil servants fight for decent pay rise

Government workers across several areas were on strike in December for better pay. After years of pay restraint they have decided that they have little choice but to act.

Semiconductor industry left hanging after sale order

The government has failed to protect Newport Wafer Fab, Britain's biggest silicon chip maker, putting a vital part of our technological infrastructure at risk.

Unprecedented strike action sweeps universities

Three days of strike action hit virtually every university in the country in the biggest walkout that the University and College Union has ever taken.

Autumn statement – no change, no answers

The Autumn Statement changes nothing for workers, who must take matters into their own hands. Fighting for increased pay is essential, but on its own not enough.

Instituto Cervantes workers strike

Administrative staff at the Spanish government's cultural centre abroad took strike action for better pay and conditions.

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



9 December: postal workers demonstrate in London as part of their pay fight.

Amazon faces first strike

FOR THE FIRST time in Britain, Amazon workers are exerting their trade union organisation in pursuit of higher pay. GMB members at the company's Coventry site have voted to back strike action for an increase to £15 an hour.

GMB has been campaigning and organising on working conditions at Amazon since 2013. The union has also been prominent in exposing the tax affairs of the company – which is alleged to exploit bogus self-employment and not to pay its share of UK taxes and . Now it is taking on the world's largest giant online retailer over pay.

In a second ballot 98 per cent voted for action on a turnout of over 60 per cent. An earlier ballot did not reach the turnout threshold. The Coventry workers held a short unofficial stoppage earlier in the year, resulting in a small increase in the hourly rate.

Amazon, which directly employs over 33,000 people in Britain and over 1.5 million worldwide, is notoriously anti-union. It has fought attempts to organise in the USA, where most of its employees work. Learning from earlier setbacks, the newly established Amazon Labor Union has made a big step forward by gaining union recognition at a warehouse in Staten Island, New York.

In both Britain and the US the level of union organisation is low so far, but growing. In the end Amazon workers will have little choice in the face of an aggressive employer which hides behind the law when it suits (to deny union recognition) but which is apparently not so keen when it comes to health and safety or taxation. ■

FINANCE

More deregulation

CHANCELLOR OF the Exchequer Jeremy Hunt announced a package of financial sector reforms speaking in Edinburgh on 9 December.

Dubbed "Big Bang 2.0" after the notorious 1986 deregulation of the City of London, Hunt is undoing some of the regulation created after the financial crisis of 2007-2008.

Among other measures he wants to ease the separation between retail and investment banks, reduce the capital requirements backing insurance companies, and pave the way for a UK Central Bank

Digital Currency.

The sector generally welcomed the announcement; hardly surprising as finance capital always wants less regulation. But not everyone was convinced. John Vickers, responsible for the post-2008 banking controls, said that making regulators also responsible for growth and competition was either "pointless or dangerous".

The government's line is that there is really no increased risk and it's time to look again at regulation as it has learned the lessons of 2008! Hunt is presenting this as taking the opportunities of Brexit, a claim that looks thin when he goes on to list the supposed benefits. These reforms are all about freeing capital markets. That's not going to help Britain and our industries. ■

MEDICAL SCHOOLS

Only for foreign students

THE GOOD NEWS: new medical schools are operating in Britain. The bad news: they are unable to accept British students, and will be recruiting only applicants from abroad.

Brunel University's new course welcomed more than 100 foreign students in

September. Meanwhile, Chester University has been advertising for foreign students only.

"It is heartbreaking that we are having to turn away bright British students with straight As who want to be doctors," cancer specialist Karel Sikora told *The Times*.

In 2022 government re-imposed its cap on the number of British students it will support after lifting it in 2020 and 2021 in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.



Workers

Nurses at Great Ormond Street Hospital, London.

Nurses expose ministers' lies

ON 15 DECEMBER nurses conducted the first-ever national strike in the 106-year history of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN). It was followed by a second strike day on 20 December. The government is so far unmoved and avoids meaningful negotiations.

RCN members formed well organised picket lines across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Rather like a well-run ward, there was a picket line supervisor in a dark coloured tabard and other picket line members in their white tabards.

Each line had an attendant demonstration of support of up to 100 RCN members, including those who had come in from maternity leave. These were very youthful picket lines.

Before the strike Conservative Party chairman Nadhim Zahawi said their action was "exactly what Putin wants to see" – a statement met with widespread ridicule. Then they were briefing that the strike will cost lives, as if all was otherwise well with our health service.

The government sticks to the mantra of "we have followed the recommendation of the pay review body." But as the Institute for Government points out, "The government is not bound by the review bodies' recommendation. The prime minister and relevant secretaries of state decide how to react to the advice provided."

At the end of the first day of action RCN general secretary Pat Cullen described it as a significant turning point for nurses, saying, "Ministers find themselves under fresh pressure from unexpected places – their own MPs, NHS leaders and a former chair of the Pay Review Body. Each of these groups, for different reasons, wants the government to stop hiding behind its current fig leaf." One of those MPs was Steve Brine, newly elected chair of the parliamentary Health and Social Care Select Committee. He said that thinking again would be the "sensible" response.

One of the NHS leaders was Ruth May, Chief Nursing Officer for England, who went to support the picket line at St Thomas' Hospital in London. Naturally the government tried to distance itself by saying that she did not represent them.

Cullen also noted that on a bitterly cold day, the public warmth towards nursing staff was immense. She said, "For my members, this has been about professional pride, not personal hardship – speaking up for nursing, patients and the future of the NHS." ■

WHAT'S ON

Coming soon

JANUARY

Tuesday 10 January, 7pm

Online discussion meeting (via Zoom)

"Is Brexit done?"

Six years after the vote to leave the EU, is the United Kingdom really free of its clutches? How much EU control remains, and can we trust government to see the vote through? Email info@cpbml.org.uk for an invitation.

FEBRUARY

Tuesday 21 February, 7.30pm

In person CPBML public meeting

Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL

"How in practice can the working class assert control?"

The ruling class is clearly incapable of governing Britain. Where does that leave the working class? Come and discuss. All welcome.

MARCH

Tuesday 14 March, 7pm

Online discussion meeting (via Zoom)

"Why national unity is vital"

Discuss why attempts to break up the unity of Britain are an attack on the working class. 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).

NORTHERN IRELAND

Legislation stopped

PRIME MINISTER Rishi Sunak has stopped the passage of a vital piece of legislation designed to bolster the independence of the UK, the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill. The move was first flagged in a promise to US president Joe Biden – as if the US has any business with Britain's treaties with the EU.

The Protocol effectively allows the EU to treat part of the United Kingdom as if it were in the EU single market rather than the one voters had said they wanted, the UK single market. And it has created serious problems ever since. The bill had been set to allow Britain – if necessary – to unilaterally override the Protocol. ■

The railway industry and its workforce enter 2023 with uncertainty. They are prepared to stand and fight for their interests, together with their unions.

On the right track



Workers

Aslef picket outside Marylebone Station, London, 26 November 2022.

THE RAIL trade unions have waged an intelligent and astute campaign of industrial action across the industry for over seven months during 2022, and in the dying days of the year there was at least some meaningful progress in negotiations with state-owned infrastructure owner and operator Network Rail.

After weeks of negotiations, Network Rail significantly improved its offer to the unions, so much so that both TSSA and Unite members voted to accept the deal on offer. But most union members in the company belong to the RMT, and nearly two-thirds of the RMT's members who voted in a referendum, rejected the offer.

Inevitably, the media, employers and government used this apparent division in the ranks of Network Rail's unions to accuse the RMT of being unreasonable given that two other unions have ended their disputes with the company.

Bizarrely, ministers castigated the RMT for not putting the deal to its members when other unions had done so. Days earlier, the same ministers implied that the RMT's referendum result meant that sup-

port for industrial action was waning, and pointedly ignored the thumping majority voting for strikes in a ballot of the RMT's Network Rail members only days before.

That ballot was forced upon the union by anti-trade union laws that require mandates for rail strikes to be renewed after six months. And the government is proposing to make those laws even more onerous (see page 24), by requiring a minimum train service to be run, even though the rail employers think such provisions would be unworkable in practice.

No redundancies

The deal accepted by the TSSA and Unite includes a no-compulsory-redundancy agreement until 31 January 2025 and a minimum pay increase of at least £1,750 or 5 per cent (whichever is greater) backdated to 1 January 2022 (a rise of over 5 per cent for anyone earning less than £35,000). That makes the rise worth at least 7 per cent to staff earning £25,000 or less.

There will also be another 4 per cent pay increase from 1 January 2023, as well as no unagreed changes to terms and con-

ditions of employment, and a significant improvement in staff rail travel provision.

This deal is one that is very much better than that originally tabled to the unions.

So why is the RMT opposed to the deal? Unite represents a very small number of very specialised engineering staff, and the TSSA only covers around 3,500 of the staff covered by the offer, again in particular roles. It had already reached a separate deal for its manager members months ago. In contrast, the RMT covers tens of thousands of staff, for many of whom it has sole bargaining rights.

What works for TSSA and Unite members hasn't found favour with RMT members. For them the concern is that the deal still gives Network Rail room to cut large numbers of their jobs by axing 50 per cent of maintenance tasks, which they consider will undermine safety. It would also mean that Network Rail will be able to force around a third of them to work more unsocial hours.

Infantile accusations of TSSA and Unite treachery ignore the fact that at the end of the day this is a trade dispute, and each

certain futures. So far rail workers have shown they are with those of the industry...



union's membership must take a view as to whether they can live with a deal on the table. They are under no obligation to carry on a dispute just because the RMT's members have issues with the offer. And the RMT is big enough to look after itself!

It is vital that the rail unions, including drivers' union Aslef, maintain unity in dealing with the other side of the current rail industry dispute – the train operating companies that fall under the direct control of the Department for Transport.

Passenger numbers have continued to rise since the Covid pandemic, despite the strikes. Leisure passenger numbers are

**'The trade unions
have made it clear
they will not accept
the undermining of
jobs or safety...'**

well above those before Covid. And overall numbers are close to 2019 levels despite fewer commuter and business journeys.

If government was to invest in the industry and its staff, it would have a success story on its hands. This is the approach being taken by many countries across western Europe.

But in Britain, the industry is still suffering from the legacy of a failed franchise system that was imploding under the weight of its own contradictions long before Covid came along, despite ever rising passenger numbers. That is why so many franchises were handed back to the government.

Risk-free

The new arrangements now in place mean that the private operators and the foreign state-owned railway corporations that run many of Britain's passenger services no longer have to take any cost or revenue risks – their profit margins are built into the new contracts. It's the taxpayer who bears the risks, though you don't see that mentioned in the media.

Even now, many fewer passenger trains run compared to pre-pandemic, despite the recovery in numbers. Passengers are complaining about overcrowding like never before.

Yet the government, which now controls decision-making relating to services, is saying that costs – and therefore very likely, train services – must be cut when the new financial year starts in April.

It is the government demand for cost-cutting that is driving the intransigence of the train operating companies in their dealings with the trade unions. Until recently, the employers were refusing even to talk with the unions. In November, strikes were suspended pending "intensive negotiations" but after several weeks these abruptly hit the buffers.

Progress had been made on issues covering modernisation, staffing, job security and ticket offices, but when the subject turned to pay and grading, the employers said that "we have no mandate from the Department for Transport to discuss this with unions."

Most rail workers covered by the

disputes have had no pay increase for three years, and with inflation now running at over 10 per cent, pay is a key part of the current rail disputes.

Ministers have often used the term "modernisation" as a euphemism for cuts in staffing, and the imposition of inferior rates of pay and conditions of employment. The unions have repeatedly said they are not against modernisation, but they won't see jobs or safety undermined – hence their opposition to the extension of Driver Only Operation of passenger trains.

A few weeks before the end of the year, train operators had an offer to put to the unions, only for it to be torpedoed at the eleventh hour by government insistence that the extension of Driver Only Operation should be part of any deal (see News, page 3). Because of this, among other issues, all unions have scheduled strikes across passenger services well into 2023.

The TSSA has pointed to the Network Rail deal and contrasted it unfavourably with the lack of progress with the train operators, stating that if a realistic offer is made, there is every chance a deal can be reached. RMT general secretary Mick Lynch has also been rather more conciliatory recently, making much the same point. As *Workers* went to press, the government seemed to be more amenable to direct talks with the unions.

No strings

The unions have highlighted the pay deals made with Scotrail and Merseyrail, reached a long time ago, and RMT announced the deal with Transport for Wales just before Christmas where its members had accepted pay rises between 6.6 and 9.5 per cent, but with no strings. The unions contrasted these deals with the refusal of the Department for Transport to authorise similar deals for the train operators that fall under its control.

Workers in the rail industry have got to this point because they have been prepared to take action to defend their interests, together with the interests of their industry, and fight for a decent pay rise at a time of spiralling price increases. They must maintain that determination and resolve into 2023. ■

**The NHS is a prime example of what happens when government cuts
Now the government is attacking the very people struggling to run it**

NHS: collective action is

SEVERAL FACTORS have contributed to the current crisis in the NHS. But the chief problem is one that is not within the gift of NHS staff to solve: the failure to address provision of social care for elderly people or those with disability. One in three NHS beds is occupied by patients well enough to be discharged from the health service if social care were available.

Just imagine if that could happen. The bed capacity of the NHS would increase by a third, the patients stacked in the emergency departments could be transferred to beds. Patients who have been in the ambulances in the car park could be moved to A&E. And patients on the waiting list could be admitted. Indeed, the all-important flow of patients through the NHS could be started.

This failure to address social care long predates the pandemic. It is now more than ten years since the last serious effort to address the problem with the recommendations of the Dilnot report.

Beds

But social care is by no means the only issue. The loss of a third of bed space to social care needs is compounded by a wider problem: there are too few beds. According to the King's Fund, Britain has fewer acute hospital beds relative to its population than many comparable health systems.

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic there was a big shortage of beds, and the

epidemic has had a significant impact on their availability and use.

Meanwhile the population is growing. While the NHS has an almost unbelievable 44 per cent fewer beds than in 1988/89, the number of people in Britain has soared by over 9 million.

And don't forget the toxic legacy of the last Labour government's Private Finance Initiative scheme, which means that when local areas receive their revenue budgets for the year, a percentage of their funding is already going out the door to service the PFI debt.

In the financial year 2020/21, hospital groups spent £2.3 billion on what are called "legacy PFI projects". According to an analysis by the *Guardian* newspaper, just under £1 billion went on costs for essential services such as cleaning and maintenance. A third of the remaining PFI spend – £457 million – went purely towards paying off interest charges. Some legacy.

How to assert control?

In such a situation, how do workers take charge? It is not easy. Exhorting the government to govern doesn't even begin to cut it. One starting point is for NHS workers to value themselves, given that it is quite clear that government does not.

But valuing ourselves is not enough. It's just a start. It must be linked with positive, collective action. Otherwise the result will only be the despairing exit of workers saying, "I had to leave as I valued my health/sanity etc."

As described in a recent *Workers* article, many nurses have historically pursued an individualistic strategy of self-preservation by leaving a permanent position to work as agency staff to control work pressures. Others have left the profession altogether, a loss to patients and a waste of their hard-won skills. Over time these nursing staff are impoverished when they lose pension and other benefits.

The solution cannot come from external support campaigns. Health care staff value public support, but as the general secretary of the Royal College of Nursing said in November 2022, "Gratitude is not enough – it doesn't pay the bills and it doesn't stop nursing staff leaving the profession..."



15 December 2022: nurses in high spirits outside

The only response must be organised collective preservation – like the decision to take action for pay and patient safety in the NHS by nursing and ambulance staff.

It will not be easy, with the government seeking to close off all routes to effective strike action. Recycling old threats, prime minister Rishi Sunak announced in early December that he wants to legislate to prevent or limit essential workers taking action (see page 24).

In this situation the members of the Royal College of Nursing and Unison currently taking action would be described as lawbreakers. How is the whole working

'While the NHS has an almost unbelievable 44 per cent fewer beds than in 1988/89, the number of people in Britain has soared by over 9 million...'

governments refuse to govern or indeed make any decision. ...
 ...to keep providing care in a mess of its own making...

the route to control



Great Ormond Street Hospital, London.

class going to respond to that threat? Unlike politicians, most workers at any time can be described as “essential”.

Take charge

A key feature of the current disputes in nursing and the ambulance service is the fall in wages relative to the private sector and even other public sector workers. That has made the pay fight a key part of the battle to retain existing skilled staff.

Retention of experienced staff is step one. But it is equally important to ensure you pass your skills on. So, step 2 in taking charge must entail making the job attrac-

tive to new recruits and protecting their learning experience on the job – something hard to do in the current situation.

And yet across the health service experienced staff are taking steps to do just that.

In the ambulance service, for example, the public focus has rightly been on the experience of the patient who spends twelve hours in the back of an ambulance. But these delays also lead to a deskilling of experienced staff and, critically, an almost complete absence of training opportunities for student paramedics.

The current delays risk deskilling a generation of recruits. A student paramedic needs to undertake so many electrocardiograms or intravenous cannulations. This is one reason why we see senior paramedics trying to reorganise work within the current constraints to ensure students get the learning they need.

Another example of taking charge in the workplace is the way that NHS surgeons are using their Royal College. They have argued for the formation of surgical hubs as a means of tackling long waiting lists.

In doing so they have also found a way of protecting surgical expertise and of training new staff for the whole surgical team: doctors, nurses and technicians including all the surgeons whose exams were

‘In the ambulance service the current delays risk deskilling a generation of recruits...’

postponed during the pandemic (see Box).

In a recent review of how health care staff managed to reduce the median waiting time for surgery between 2000 and 2008 to a mere five weeks, a King’s Fund report concluded that the key factor was “valuing the people working in the NHS and investing in them”.

Now in 2023 the number of people waiting longer than one year for planned treatment stands at 387,000. Around 2.75 million people are waiting longer than the “legal standard” (to quote the National Audit Office) of 18 weeks.

And against this background we have a belligerent government trying to blame the workforce. The only way for progress is for NHS workers to take control of the situation themselves. ■

Surgeons take the initiative

THE IDEA of separating emergency and elective (planned) care is not new but the genuine determination to improve services after the Covid pandemic has given this impetus.

In summer 2022, the Royal College of Surgeons of England released a report, *The case for surgical hubs*, to lay out the benefits of separating emergency and elective care for patients and the wider health service.

Hubs can be integrated – based within a hospital but with beds and resources ringfenced for elective care – or they can be standalone, based in a

separate building. In some instances, a whole specialist hospital or site can be dedicated to elective surgical care.

From the patient perspective it reduces the awful experience of last-minute cancellation. For staff it means much more efficient use of time and a predictable training opportunity to ensure skilled staff for the future.

There are now 91 hubs up and running with 50 more in the pipeline. One great advantage is that it is easier to make such premises “Covid secure” and to manage other infections more efficiently. ■

Short of options and short of money, the SNP/Green coalition referendum. Yet its budget is widening the tax gulf with the

SNP abandons referendum

IN MID-DECEMBER John Swinney, Deputy First Minister in the SNP/Scottish Greens coalition, presented the draft Scottish Budget for 2023-24. It will make Scotland the highest taxed part of Britain, continuing the trend since 2017 when some taxation powers were devolved.

This budget continues to keep Scotland on a divergent economic path from the rest of the country. Increased fiscal autonomy and distinct taxation in the devolved parts of Britain risks an uncontrolled drift to de facto separation and the break-up of a united working class.

Workers in Scotland are thoroughly engaged in the same or similar struggles on wages and conditions as their compatriots in the rest of Britain. This budget represents an estimated £129 million raid on their wage packets.

Anyone in Scotland earning over £27,850 will pay more income tax than those working in England or Wales. And the salary threshold for triggering the higher rate of tax is only £43,663 in Scotland compared to £50,271 elsewhere. A worker on a £75,000 wage in Scotland will pay over £2,000 more in tax each year.

Divergence

A downside for the SNP policy was highlighted by Dr Liz Cameron, chief executive of the Scottish Chamber of Commerce. She pointed out the disadvantages for workers and businesses, saying, "With over 350,000 people alone in the higher rate bracket, questions remain on the impact this will have on talent attraction, retention, consumer confidence and indeed depar-

'This budget represents an estimated £129 million raid on workers' pay packets...'



Courtesy CWU Scotland

Working class unity knows no artificial borders: postal workers' picket line in temperatures of mi

ture of workers to other parts of the UK."

The SCC said that the "further widening of the cross-border tax gap was exceptionally concerning." Reacting to the Budget, Simon Cockburn, the chairman of the Chartered Institute of Taxation's Scottish technical committee, pointed out that it "further entrenches the divergence between the income tax regimes in Scotland and the rest of the UK."

The Budget for Scotland also announced cuts in spending that bit harder than those elsewhere in Britain. The Institute for Fiscal Studies concluded that overall spending on public services had been "cut by more than in England and Wales" with "substantial reductions in funding for areas other than the NHS."

There will be no restrictions on council tax rises in Scotland. This can be seen as an attempt to divert anger away from

Holyrood and onto local councils who, with ongoing cuts, will be hard pressed to avoid raising taxes.

With the closure of the Edinburgh Film Festival, Film Theatre and running down of the International Book Festival, this Budget heaps more cuts on top for a struggling arts sector trying to revive after the pandemic lockdowns. Composer and Musicians Union member Ben Lunn commented, "This is a sad shift, and shows the Scottish government have no vision. Just more cuts, which will see the whole creative sector struggling because of their neglect; time and time again, all bluster and no action."

Struggle over legislation

As a result of public anger and political pressure, £20 million that had been earmarked for spending on preparations for a

tion has effectively shelved its demand for an immediate
e rest of Britain...

um demand



us 11 at Wishaw, near Glasgow.

second Scottish independence referendum has been diverted into social care funding. This means that plans for such a referendum to be held in 2023 have now been abandoned.

However they may try to spin this move, Holyrood in effect has accepted the decision of the Supreme Court that its devolved powers did not extend to organising a legal referendum without the agreement of the British Government.

Nevertheless, the SNP/Scottish Greens coalition is still determined to press on with the drive for separation. It wants to present legislation calling for powers to be created allowing Holyrood to call such a referendum on its own initiative. That move would amount to unilateral overturning of the Scotland Act 2016 and other devolution law.

The start of 2023 will see a struggle in

Holyrood over the Bill for this legislation – as well as over the divisive Gender Recognition Act which the SNP and Scottish Greens are also trying to push through.

Brown pops up

Remarkably, just as the SNP and Greens were demanding a boost to their powers, former British prime minister Gordon Brown popped up with his long prepared blueprint for just that – he too wants more powers for the “Scottish Parliament”.

Devolution itself was described by the late Tam Dalyell when he was in parliament as a “motorway to independence with no exit routes”. The proposals presented by Gordon Brown are designed to create a super boosted version.

The House of Lords would be abolished, to be replaced by an elected “Second Chamber of Nations and Regions”. This would divide and regionalise the whole of Britain in a way similar to the vision of the European Union laid out in the 12 zone map of Britain that it produced.

A new council, one for “the nations and regions” would enable enhanced separate economic development with much increased borrowing and other financial powers. The Labour Party would pledge giving Scotland powers to join, in its own right, international agreements with the European Union, Unesco and the Nordic Council.

This plan would accept the already substantial independent foreign policy and activity of the SNP and Scottish Greens in Edinburgh. Their activities go well beyond domestic responsibilities into foreign affairs. The overseas presence of what their users dub “foreign embassies” now costs over £9 million each year and includes substantial offices in Berlin, Beijing, Brussels, Dublin, Ottawa, Paris and Washington. The total external affairs budget now exceeds £35 million.

The British government seems to have capitulated on the concept of the nation state. The Gordon Brown plan would effectively shatter it. The SNP/Scottish Greens coalition would inevitably use the opportunity to establish direct links with the European Union in their quest to abandon

‘Plans are being developed for a “two-tier” health service...’

Britain and rejoin the EU.

The Brown plan reeks of the back-room work of the neoliberal EU; it should not be countenanced by Labour Party members – who, in any case have not been consulted. Nor for that matter has anyone in Scotland been consulted – not trade unions, civic bodies or political parties.

Brown’s proposals would only strengthen the SNP and Scottish Greens at the expense of the Labour Party. Every time devolutionists like Brown give the SNP more powers, the SNP wins politically.

Threat to NHS

Meanwhile, plans are being developed for what has been called a “two-tier” health service. This coincides with the SNP National Care Plan being deemed unfit for purpose. The STUC General Secretary Roz Foyer said “The Scottish government is needlessly gambling with the future of social care in Scotland.”

Leaks in November revealed NHS heads had been in discussion with SNP representatives to abandon the concept of health services being free at the point of delivery. Resulting headlines such as “Privatisation of Scots NHS seems to be under active consideration” alarmed many.

The proposals under discussion for Scotland included the introduction of an ability to pay system. This idea menaces the NHS throughout Britain; it must be resisted.

Dr Iain Kennedy, chair of BMA Scotland, said: “It is beyond doubt that in order to avoid sleepwalking into the two-tier system that threatens this fundamental principle of free health care we rightly hold so dear, we need a proper, open conversation about the NHS and how we make it sustainable now and for generations to come.” ■

Workers magazine photographers have been out and about of the action and enthusiasm...

Struggle sweeps Britain



Clockwise from top left: nurses at Bradford Royal Infirmary; students show support for striking GMB members, Glasgow University; rail workers in Manchester; UCU rally, London; nurses at Great Ormond Street Hospital; postal workers, London.



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While the EU is increasingly devoid of direction and entangled steps needed to secure British independence...

How long before Brexit is



Yau Ming Low/shutterstock.com

Act now? The government should look at itself before giving advice to others...

PRIME MINISTER Rishi Sunak has, according to newspaper reports, paused all progress on the Northern Ireland Protocol bill. And that, you can be sure, will mean all

‘How far could this government go in reversing the vote to leave?’

progress on anything related to Brexit will be halted as well (see page 5).

It's yet another move that raises the question: How far could this government go in reversing the referendum vote to leave the European Union? A series of newspaper headlines, sparked by an article in *The Times* headed "Britain mulls Swiss-style ties with Brussels" and citing (unnamed) "senior government figures" suggests an answer: as far as it thinks the people will allow it to go.

The idea is to have "frictionless trade" with the EU, as if that could be achieved

without accepting free movement of labour along with the supremacy of the European Court and obedience to the tens of thousands of EU regulations and directives.

Carry on regardless

In other words, "senior figures" want to carry on as if Brexit had never happened, as if the British people had never made their decision, as if democracy were merely a technicality, an inconvenience.

The Swiss-style reports were swiftly dismissed by pro-Brexit ministers, but it's hard to avoid the conclusion that people

gled in debt, the government is reluctant to take the is really done?

like Jeremy Hunt, the pro-EU Chancellor of the Exchequer, aren't testing the water. They'll come back for more, again and again.

Meanwhile, note the delays, time and time again, in implementing new legislation in agriculture, fisheries and the environment, for example. Or research and development (see page 17).

In agriculture, the government has once again delayed giving English farmers details of the new Environmental Land Management Scheme. Instead of providing clarity, Therese Coffey, the agriculture secretary, told the Country Land and Business Association on 1 December that the details would be provided "early in the new year".

The association's president responded by saying that confidence in the scheme was on the brink of "disappearing forever". He added, "It is unacceptable that payment rates for the new options in the Sustainable Farming Incentive and Local Nature Recovery have not yet been published, particularly for those that relate to 2023, which is less than a month away."

Vital

All this should have been in place for 2022. And government support is vital for British farmers. Previously, when it was provided through the much-criticised EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), Defra estimated that 42 per cent of Britain's farms would have operated at a loss without it.

Now, six years after the referendum, Defra is still essentially operating under the CAP's principles – just running it from Westminster. In Scotland, the SNP administration – no doubt ever hopeful of being able to hand over all independence to the EU at some time in the future – decided straightaway to keep the CAP regime until 2024.

British fishermen, meanwhile, continue to struggle with the consequences of the Johnson government's Trade and Cooperation Agreement with the EU. Fishing came badly out of the agreement, with government "red lines" being breached left, right and centre.

As a report published this year in the

Continued on page 16

The EU: a bloc of stagnation

VERY MUCH like capitalism in Britain, the EU is clueless about how to run an economy. A particular weakness is the European Central Bank, run by the famously helpless Christine Lagarde.

In October 2021 she said the bank's €3.3 billion (about £2 billion) quantitative easing programme would end in March 2022. That didn't happen. In the event, in March 2022 she said that it would wind down in the third quarter of the year, provided inflation looked set to return to below 2 per cent.

Now inflation in the EU is nowhere remotely near 2 per cent, but quantitative easing is ending. And the European Central Bank's main deposit rate doubled at the end of October. Growth is being abandoned, signalled the bank's vice president, Luis de Guindos, on 8 November. Belts will be tightened across Europe.

He spelled that out clearly: "We are going to increase interest rates, which is going to have an impact on financing conditions. It will reduce aggregate demand, both consumption and investment, but it's the only possible way forward that we have..."

So those calling for greater ties to the EU are in fact calling for closer relations with a block increasingly bent on stagnation and decline, a victim of its own debt policy. When it was expanding, drawing in more and more countries and taking its combined population over 500 million, it thought it could ignore the rising debt on which its expansion had been built. Not any more.

When Britain left the EU, at a stroke the bloc lost 15 per cent of its GDP and just under 13 per cent of its population. Now the "ever-expanding union" has not just failed to expand since 2007 and lost a vital member, it is even seeing its population decline for the second year running.

In fact, most of the members of the EU are running government deficits and



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accumulated debt so high that were they outside the bloc, they would be officially ineligible to join. In 2021, 15 of them had deficits above the 3 per cent limit, and 14 had government debt above 60 per cent of GDP, the EU's Eurostat body reported in October 2022.

Inflation in the eurozone jumped to 10.6 per cent in October and is expected to stay above 10 per cent in November. That's more or less on a par with Britain (which uses a slightly different methodology).

The Confederation of British Industry is forecasting that the British economy will contract by 0.4 per cent in 2023. Over in euroland, economy commissioner Paolo Gentiloni said in November that the EU was heading for "two quarters of contraction". So no salvation there.

Gentiloni forecast that overall the EU economy would expand by 0.3 per cent in 2023. But there were big provisos. Provided that the situation in Ukraine did not get worse. Provided that there were no gas shortages over the winter. Provided that the tightening of money supply did not induce "disorderly adjustments in financial markets".

These are big ifs – especially the final one, because the European financial markets are likely to be anything but orderly. Each of them will try as best it can to cope with local conditions, but will do so under the burden of the one-size-fits-all euro and the erratic control of the European Central Bank. ■



Continued from page 15

journal *Maritime Studies* lays out, there is still widespread EU access to British waters, even to the coastal zones which were supposed to be reserved for British fishermen. Despite some “symbolic” victories, say the authors, “in reality the UK has not taken back ‘full control’”.

“As an independent coastal state for the first time in 40 years, access to UK waters will be on our terms, under our control and for the benefit of UK fishermen,” trumpeted Defra’s Michael Gove in 2018. He forgot to add that “our terms” included surrender to the EU.

Running sore

And the Northern Ireland Agreement continues as a running sore. Once again a new Northern Ireland Secretary is proposing changes. Yet despite the agreement’s evident unworkability, nothing is actually happening. Instead everything is being strung out – six years after the referendum – to avoid fixing Britain on an independent path.

And it is against this background, this refusal to finally cut the apron-strings to Brussels, that the calls for a “Swiss-style” relationship with the EU are surfacing.

One great irony is that Switzerland itself

does not have the “Swiss-style” relationship that is so widely trumpeted. It used to, but not any more. And that relationship came with a cost.

“The deal with the EU was always a quid pro quo: barrier-free market access was and is only available at the price of the free movement of persons,” wrote Marc Leutenegger, German editor of *Swissinfo* (Switzerland’s equivalent of the BBC World Service) in November, shortly after the question was raised in Britain.

In an amusing article telling “Brits” to bury the dream of a Swiss model, he pointedly reminded readers that it no longer exists. “Bilateral relations are in agony,” he said. And, tellingly, he asked whether Britain wanted to be picked on by “playground bully” Brussels – considering how the EU has treated Switzerland.

Sabotage

Locked in a years-long fight with the EU over freedom of movement and disagreement about the reach of the European Court of Justice, Switzerland has found itself uniquely disadvantaged. It has been forced to pay vast amounts to the EU in the name of “cohesion” while seeing Brussels attempt to sabotage its financial centres, and being frozen out of participation in the EU’s huge Horizon research programme.

Brussels has been threatening Switzerland with increasing isolation as each of their more than 120 bilateral agreements reach the end of their term.

The EU has been insisting on one, and only one, overarching “framework” agreement to cover every aspect of its relationship with Switzerland, including full acceptance of freedom of movement and the

‘Switzerland has been forced to pay vast amounts to the EU in the name of “cohesion” ...’

supremacy of the European Court.

The negotiations between Switzerland and the EU to end the impasse make Britain’s dealings with the bloc seem rapid by comparison. The argument over a framework agreement has been going on since 2014.

On 12 November, though, just a week before the “Swiss-style” headlines appeared in the British press, Switzerland’s chief EU negotiator said she had agreed with Brussels to aim instead for a series of bilateral deals.

The language is woolly – agreeing to aim for something is not the same as agreeing to do it – and apparently issues need to be clarified, “most notably on free movement”.

But if the report is true, it would represent a stunning victory for the Swiss, and a clear reminder to nations inside and outside the EU that Brussels is merely a façade of power and authority.

Behind the arrogance and strutting, the EU is a bloc of weakness, riven by disagreement, mired in economic stagnation and shackled by a failing currency. No one need bow down before it. ■



CPBML online discussion meeting

Tuesday 10 January, 7 pm, via Zoom

“Is Brexit done?”

Over six years after the vote to leave the European Union, is Britain really free of its clutches? How much EU control remains, and can we trust government to see the vote through? Email info@cpbml.org.uk for an invitation.

Nowhere has the reluctance to break definitively with the EU been more evident than in research...

So where is Plan B?



The European Commission, Brussels.

THE EU HAS been busy excluding Britain from as much research as it can, even under existing programmes which nominally should include British scientists. In November 2022 it even shut out British firms from participation in research on quantum technologies.

The move shows how far the EU is prepared to go to snub Britain, no matter what damage it does to itself. The EU is way behind Britain in quantum research, with the market value of British quantum firms more than three times that of the entire EU.

Blocked

The leaving agreement with the EU, concluded at the end of 2020, stated that Britain would be able to be part of Horizon, the huge European research programme – but Brussels has consistently blocked this.

EU research commissioner Mariya Gabriel finally came clean. She told the European Parliament in September 2021 that disagreements over the Northern Ireland Protocol had formed the stumbling block in progress on association to Horizon.

Now, with prime minister Rishi Sunak having apparently promised US president

Joe Biden that the Northern Ireland Protocol issue will be resolved by Easter 2023, delay has become the order of the day.

Every so often, it looks deceptively as though the government has been roused into activity. On 6 February 2022, science minister George Freeman announced – via an interview in the *Financial Times* – that he was coming up with “Plan B”, an alternative to British association with Horizon.

In the middle of July, nearly half a year later, Freeman published his Plan B. Governments come and go, of course, and science ministers too, but science is one area with an element of continuity. Freeman was part of the campaign to force out Boris Johnson, but he is back under Rishi Sunak. And yet Plan B has not been implemented.

In the interim, plenty more nothing is happening from the British side. After launching a disputes resolution procedure in August, the government held a meeting with the EU in September which failed to reach agreement.

Britain could go to court, or arbitration, over the failure to be admitted to Horizon. Instead, all we have from government is

‘Every so often it looks, deceptively, as though the government has been roused...’

silence. And now that the government has suspended the passage of its Northern Ireland Protocol bill, designed to allow Britain to act unilaterally, expect a lot more silence.

- An irony uncovered: the strength of Britain’s academic research, combined with EU funding approaches, means that major British firms are often shut out of collaborations funded under Horizon.

The result, according to a fascinating blog post by Professor Chris Warkup on the Innogen Institute website, is that the value of Horizon-funded research is “captured” by EU companies rather than by British ones. ■

Why is it so difficult to have a grown-up discussion – or any zero commitments? But as the costs hit home, discussion

The real economics of



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Wind turbine in winter. A calm scene, but cold winter temperatures in Britain are often accompanied by zero or light winds...

NET ZERO – the ideal balance between the generation of greenhouse gases and their removal from the atmosphere – has become an unquestionable dogma. It's hard to have rational discussion about it.

Yet the drive to "net zero" is distorting decisions on energy supply. And it fails to recognise the essential part energy plays in manufacture and industry.

November's COP27 conference in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, is an example of this thinking. We heard the repetition of doom-laden warnings, from the United Nations and myriad other self-appointed climate experts. "We're on the verge of disaster" they shriek, again. "Tomorrow will be too late, we must act now". Step forward presidents, prime ministers and other world

leaders to nod wisely and concur that something must be done.

With over 33,000 attendees, jamborees like this are big business. They gather a momentum of their own. COP27, as its name implies, was the 27th such meeting since 1995. The United Nations has a whole bureaucracy devoted to climate change, and it runs many other international meetings besides the main conferences.

No debate

But they are not really conferences at all, there is no debate. They are no more than a platform from which to declaim the same message. It's all about presentation. So when the new prime minister, Rishi Sunak,

announced he was too busy to attend, his colleagues, ever interested in embellishing their green credentials, pressured him to change his mind.

What all those attending agree on is that the world must stop burning fossil fuels. The problem with this view is that fossil fuels have been, and are, the engine for progress in the world. Coal, oil and gas are readily available and relatively easy to extract.

Since the industrial revolution fossil fuels have enabled a transition from predominantly land-based agricultural production, typified by feudal economies, to manufacturing production which dominates the world today.

Modern industrial manufacture relies on

Any discussion at all – about the government’s net carbon cannot be avoided...

‘net zero’

energy other than human or animal power. It has created a world where food production is at a level previously unimaginable, and it underpins all aspects of life we now take for granted – health, education, housing, science, technology and culture.

Pious aspiration and reality frequently collide where energy is concerned. For example, the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia announced it would phase out the extraction of coal by 2030, as did RWE, the energy company that owns the large Garzweiler mine there.

Now rocketing fuel prices and a dependence on Russian gas have caused a change of heart. In line with the country’s new coal policy, the mine is being expanded, at the expense of a wind farm!

In Britain, the correct decision to approve the construction of a new coal mine in Cumbria has provoked a predictable backlash. Friends of the Earth (FoE) responded that as steel makers move towards greener production methods, the mine’s coking coal would be unmarketable. This claim, repeated uncritically in many media reports, confuses what may be theoretically possible in the future with what is commercially viable now.

Unproven?

Ironically, FoE criticises the government’s 2021 net zero strategy, dubbed “Build Back Greener”, as based too much on as yet unproven technology! There’s plenty to say about the shortcomings of that document, not least the associated costs, which FoE does also point to. But alleging that one set of as yet unavailable technology is better than another isn’t the way forward.

The Climate Change Committee, advisors to government on climate change, joined the charge about the new mine. Its chairman Lord Deben bemoaned the “... damage to the UK’s leadership on climate change”. Even globetrotting John Kerry, now President Biden’s special envoy for climate change, warned that “... he was examining the decision”. He did not explain quite why the USA thinks it has any right to involve itself in the matter.

Trailing along behind as ever, Ed Miliband, shadow climate change secretary, says the Labour Party would “leave no

stone unturned” to stop the mine, “if elected” of course. And they would instead deliver green jobs, without saying what they might be and how they would appear.

The claims put forward to support the aspiration of net zero are not backed up with evidence. Rather, they are intoned as articles of faith. The irony that the proposed mine will be an industry leader in controlling emissions, and a significant step towards the greener steel industry they claim to aspire to, is lost on green fundamentalists and uninquisitive politicians.

The energy policy of this government, and its predecessors, appears to be in thrall to the climate lobby, who insist that fossil fuels must be wholly replaced by renewables – and they are not that keen on nuclear power either.

Wind power is the prime example. It is an intermittent power source – onshore or offshore. Other capacity must be on standby, especially when there’s little wind during a cold spell – as we experienced in December 2022. That means using fossil fuels, at least until Britain rebuilds its nuclear power generation, and the additional cost of maintaining standby capacity.

Rebellion

Sunak’s earlier decision to maintain strict planning regulations on the construction of more onshore wind farms has now been effectively reversed in the face of a rebellion of his backbench MPs and current high energy prices. Instead the government will consult on letting local authorities decide – the opposite of a national energy strategy.

The argument that wind power is cheap does not stand up. There is more to consider than running costs and output while the blades are spinning. Wind power is subsidised, yet companies are paid the market price for the electricity generated – currently almost wholly dependent on the spot price for gas, the main component of the energy mix.

Factor in the cost of manufacture, construction and transport, concrete for the base, steel for the pylon, fibreglass and plastic for the rotating housing and blades, all carbon intensive products in themselves. Then add the cost of connecting to the grid and power lost in transmission; the

‘We’re paying a high price for a form of power which is unreliable and cannot be effectively stored...’

windiest sites are often remote from cities. And turbines don’t last forever – renewal or replacement costs are not trivial.

Then there is the loss of productive agricultural land. Farmers can get more income from their land from turbines (or solar farms) than from keeping animals or growing vegetables. That increases our imports and reduces food security.

It’s a high price for a form of power which is unreliable and cannot be effectively stored, although there are inevitably promises that effective storage and reliable supply will be possible in future.

Net zero is touted as an unquestionable benefit. But it is cover for an attack on us all, at work and at leisure. Affordable and reliable personal transport will be outlawed, efficient gas boilers will be phased out, and so on. Food and manufactured goods will be much more expensive – out of reach for many, because of a dependence on “the market”.

Vague

There’s a vague, unfounded, hope that we can import what we need, when we need it and that solutions will appear, as if by magic. That approach is short sighted and unsustainable, as recent events have highlighted.

Aside from approval of the Cumbrian mine project, this government has done very little about energy resilience. But we cannot be complacent that it will even stick to that decision. Workers must make it clear that we do not believe the dogma, and that we are determined to make for ourselves a brighter future. ■

Issues around science are often high up in the news agenda and many players can be involved in bringing a story to the public...

Behind the science headlines



Yau Ming Low/shutterstock.com

Covid vaccinations: one of the areas where the Science Media Centre held briefings.

Beyond the Hype – The Inside Story of Science’s Biggest Media Controversies, by Fiona Fox, hardback, 256 pages, ISBN 978-1783966172, Elliot & Thompson, 2022, £16.99 or less. Kindle and eBook editions available; paperback edition due February 2023.

THIS BOOK is worth reading for anyone who is interested in the way that science and scientific ideas are used, and abused. Fiona Fox takes examples from her 20 years’ experience to illustrate the way that science stories appear in the mass media.

Significant misrepresentations of science and medicine happened well before the coronavirus pandemic brought science communication to wider attention. Such health scares and other unscientific myths can be misleading, and often damaging.

‘Fish genes’

For example, the campaign by Greenpeace and others against genetically modified crops in the 1990s described them pejoratively as “Frankenfoods” – and falsely claimed that “fish genes” were inserted in commercially grown tomatoes.

Far worse was how one renegade doc-

tor Andrew Wakefield and the uncritical media coverage of his fraudulent 1998 *Lancet* paper did profound damage to the MMR vaccine programme – and to the long-term trust in vaccines generally.

There were other controversial science stories at around the same period about topics such as BSE, cloning and the management of nuclear waste. Against this background the House of Lords Science & Technology Select Committee published a report in 2000 which concluded that public trust in scientific advice given to the government was in a state of crisis.

The Science Media Centre (SMC) is an independent press office, founded in 2002 in response to this situation. It seeks to provide “for the benefit of the public and policymakers, accurate and evidence-based information about science and engineering through the media, particularly on controversial and headline news stories when most confusion and misinformation occurs”.

Fiona Fox, the SMC’s founding director, wrote this book to mark its 20th anniversary. Nine of the eleven chapters cover a scientific controversy that surfaced during that period. The other two tackle

topics of science communication.

The focus is on the work of the SMC and the many players and stages involved before a science story gets media coverage and reaches us, the public. Inevitably some of the language is technical but Fox explains clearly where necessary. Her explanation of human hybrid embryos and stem cell research is particularly helpful.

Each chapter is interesting on its own, but two common threads run throughout. First, the importance of scientists engaging with the media to explain their work and encourage accurate media coverage. And secondly, the benefit to the population and to scientific research and development when this occurs.

Fox gives many examples of the work and efforts made to change the previous culture among scientists. They generally avoided contact with the media – which often led to unease or distrust among non-scientists. But she has not written a sugar-coated account. The book conveys a sense of “one step forward, two steps back” and the continued need for vigilance.

Chronic fatigue

One chapter tells a sorry tale about research into myalgic encephalomyelitis, otherwise known as chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS). By the early 2000s Simon Wessely, a researcher who helped develop the first therapies and NHS clinics in treating ME/CFS, was routinely receiving death threats and threatening calls.

The SMC has had little success to date in rolling back attacks on scientists involved on research into ME/CFS – who are reluctant to raise their heads above the parapet and, for many, are unwilling to continue research in the field.

Fox writes, “Thankfully the situation with ME/CFS is extraordinary and rare. But the principles involved are not. My real worry is that the collective failure of the medical research establishment to step into this row to publicly support the scientists, defend a body of evidence, and argue that we need all kinds of research to tackle this devastating illness will pave the way for the same thing to happen in other areas of science.”

The final chapter covers the Covid pandemic, including the Joint Committee on

das, but many

dlines

‘Some journalists decried the mixed messaging on the vaccination of children...’

Vaccination and Immunisations (JCVI) decision in summer 2021 not to recommend vaccinating children.

Fox outlines the reasons for this; she states that this was an independent advisory committee working exactly as it should. She advised the JCVI to arrange its own press briefing to explain its recommendations, whilst stressing that it would be equally valid for the government to reach a different conclusion.

The JCVI briefing took place. A few days later the chief medical officers reported their advice to vaccinate children and the government announced that this would happen within a few days.

Some journalists decried the mixed messaging, but Fox argues that because of the press briefings most took on board the reasons for the different approaches and their reporting was balanced. In her view it was an important step for independent scientists to communicate the reasons for their decision and the government to explain why it had decided not to follow it.

No doubt these differences made it harder for many parents and children to decide on whether to take the vaccine. But Fox points out that many media interviews at the time showed that people understood this was a complex issue.

Fox frequently says that science is “messy”, but that the scientific method is hugely valuable. Her hope, expressed in the introduction, is that her book is compelling reading for anyone interested in some of the big contemporary science questions or in the complex interaction of science with politics, culture, and society at large. She has undoubtedly achieved that aim. ■

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Finance capitalism keeps a malign stranglehold over the real economy, leaving only a tiny group of super-wealthy speculators. How did this happen?

The financialisation of capitalism

FINANCE CAPITAL is typified by the drive to increase profits and to subordinate the production of goods and services for people's needs. It has developed since the middle of the nineteenth century to become the malign global financial system we know today.

The greatest transformation of finance capital is quite recent. Increased financialisation of capitalism since the 1970s led to new ways of shaping the economy, further stifling productive industry.

Capitalism as it had operated since the end of the Second World War was not running in the interest of finance capital; it had to be overturned. The ruling elites across the world began to clamour for "free" markets. The increased strength of workers across the world was a threat – as were the existence of a socialist USSR and China and successful national independence movements at that time.

The liberalised financial sector, increasingly free of national control or influence, took off worldwide in the 1980s. It became increasingly complex, commandeering economies and in the process drastically altering the structure and functioning of the previous capitalist economic model, predominantly based on corporations.

The leveraged buy-out – funded by borrowings – was a key technique that enabled financial speculators to take over even the largest capitalist corporations using borrowed money. The trick was that once the takeover was complete, debt on the loans was dumped on the targeted firm. In effect, the acquired company paid for its own takeover, and was then looted of its value.

'Speculative finance spawned a climate of financial euphoria with no root in the real economy...'

This was an enormous change to the old corporate capitalist universe. It forced firms to load themselves down with debt in order to be less attractive to the financial wolves looking for targets.

Control over the economy shifted from corporate boardrooms to financial markets. Corporations were now viewed as bundles of assets, the more liquid or saleable the better, rather than productive wealth-creating entities.

In turn this fed new outlets for money-capital speculation – making money from money. Financial markets were preferred over investment in capital goods which would provide future GDP growth. Effectively industrial capital, investment in production, became just one aspect of finance capital.

Concentration

The financialisation of monopoly capital has come to characterise world capitalism over the past 50 years. Ownership of the largest companies across the world is increasingly concentrated in a few hands. And those owners are predominantly the various forms of finance capital.

This financial explosion has brought unprecedented increases in company and sovereign debt – along with economic stagnation.

Finance capitalists turned to a separation of the real physical assets used in production from their underlying value. Corporate securities acquired the attribute of liquidity – instant convertibility into cash. Once this stage was reached, the way was open for limitless proliferation of new financial instruments – stock futures, options, derivatives, hedge funds and so on.

This speculative finance spawned a climate of financial euphoria with no root in production or the real economy. Financial bubbles inevitably burst in the end, as happened in 1987, 2000 and 2007-2008 with destructive financial crises.

These cycles of ever-larger speculative financial bubbles together with a run of underlying stagnation and declining growth rates are not accidental. They are increasingly interdependent.

A system geared to speculation needs constant new infusions of cash. Much of



Workers

The City: a conduit for siphoning money out of the real economy

that comes from the working population through drastic increases in exploitation and social deprivation. Real wages remain stagnant, taxes increase and public services decline. And without real investment, job creation weakens.

The City, the pinnacle of finance capital in Britain, serves no wider public, social or economic purpose. Its claims to place resources where they maximise growth are bogus. It claims to help the economy by directing investment into production and growth, but that's not been true for many decades.

Draining the economy

Instead the City takes money out of the economy, away from production and enables seizure of the wealth created by real work, as well as people's savings and pensions. The interests of amoral international capital conflict with Britain's real interests, particularly our industry.

Successive governments have embraced the treachery in the City. Instead, we need to put Britain, and Britain's industry, first. The idea of making finance serve our national interest of employing our people in useful work, making what we need is not radical – but the

al economy, serving
s come about?

Capital



e economy.

recent development of capitalism shows it is unable to do that.

Capitalism is heading in the other direction. Finance is a predatory monopoly feeding off the real economy. But the dreadful nature of finance capital goes further – it is both anti-democratic and a threat to peace.

Power is now wielded not by elected governments or parliaments, but by unelected figures in Wall Street, the City of London and other financial centres. The views and needs of an exceedingly small number of finance capitalists outweigh the needs of working people who are the vast majority of the population – and who are never asked.

This lack of democracy is the underlying reason for abysmal, aimless, government and why parliament is largely irrelevant.

Rival empires have always competed to carve up the world – but now those modern empires are the creatures of finance capital. Outside national control they start imperialist wars and even the threat of another world war. The stakes are high. ■

• A longer, more detailed analysis is available online at cpbml.org.uk.

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Worried about the future of Britain? Join the CPBML.



ABOUT US

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

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

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

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

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

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

We hold regular public meetings around Britain 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.

So why join the Communist Party? What distinguishes Party members is this: we accept that only Marxist thinking and the organised work that flows from it can transform the working class and Britain. We learn from each other. The real teacher is the fight itself, and in particular the development of ideas and confidence that comes from collective action.

Want to know more? Interested in joining or just in taking part? Get in touch by phone or email. If you just want to know more, come along to our next online or in-person discussion group, or join a study group.

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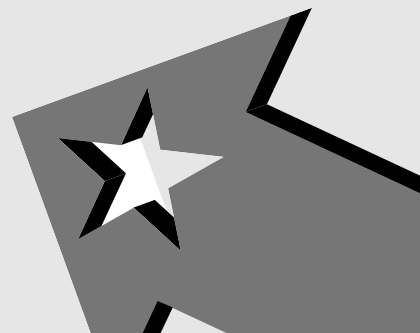
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Resistance breeds oppression

'The British ruling class was always and still is particularly suspicious about trade unions, because in this country – where they were born in illegality – unions grew from below....'

WHEN A STRIKE takes place, when workers withdraw their labour, they and their employers are confronted with the truth: workers are essential to capitalism.

They, not the owners of capital, are the ones who built and continue to build this country. They, not the employers, are the ones who create value.

The employers, of course have never been happy with their dependence on workers. And ever since trade unions were formed attempts have been made to render them either illegal, or ineffective.

In 1799 and 1800 the British parliament enthusiastically passed the Combination Acts, which made it illegal for workers to unionise as a group to ask for better working conditions. Supporters of the new laws included William Wilberforce, the campaigner against the slave trade, who considered trade unions a "general disease in our society".

The British ruling class was always and still is particularly suspicious about trade unions, because in this country – where they were born in illegality – unions grew from below. No politician decreed their growth, no church defined their membership.

And so, as ever, resistance bred oppression. New laws followed. The Combination Acts were repealed in 1824, then brought back a year later after a wave of strikes, finally being taken off the statute book by the Trade Union Act of 1871.

Since the 1960s governments (Labour and Conservative) have sought to reduce the power of organised workers.

Labour tried to tie the unions' hands with what it called a "Social Contract" in the 1970s. It promised reforms as long as unions guaranteed pay claims below the rate of inflation.

It was the old, old lie that wages fuel inflation, still repeated endlessly even though every prolonged period of high inflation has left workers worse off.

Now Rishi Sunak's government is trying another tactic: it wants to introduce legislation which would make it illegal for health and other essential workers to take action.

Ministers are now discussing the

introduction of what are known as Minimum Service Level Agreements to the emergency services. These would allow strikes to happen but impose a legal floor on how limited the resulting service on a strike day would be.

It's a typically grotesque move by a government that clearly doesn't understand the meaning of the word "irony". As waiting lists mount in the NHS, does the government realise that most services it is responsible for haven't been up to what most workers would consider minimum levels for years?

The idea of using "minimum service levels" as a weapon in the class war has been brewing for a while. Back in 2010, for example, the employers' organisation The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) was urging the government to consider a range of what it called "high stake options" if confronted with strikes in key industries.

In the Covid-19 pandemic, supermarket workers and lorry drivers were suddenly given the "essential" label by the government. Legislation in this area will cast its net wide.

But vicious though the threat is, workers should take heart. The government is only considering the idea because it is weak.

For decades governments have imposed, progressively, the tightest restrictions on striking anywhere in the industrialised world. It has made it as hard as possible for unions to obtain a legal mandate for industrial action.

And yet workers are taking action, in huge numbers. Worse for the government, "the public" appear to support the strikes.

That should come as no surprise. After all, "the public" is overwhelmingly made up of other workers, all of whom face rising and often unaffordable price increases.

The government's weakness is compounded by the justified fear of its MPs that many of them – and not just those in the "red wall" areas – will lose their seats at the next election. Already some are breaking ranks to demand fresh negotiations with the nurses.

More will break ranks, sensing the fear and indecision in Downing Street. Good news for the new year. ■

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