

WORKERS

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ASSERT THE RIGHT TO STRIKE

Devolution The threat

Steel Britain's backbone

For peace Against war

NHS Waiting, waiting

Immigration They love it

Pay Victories nationwide

Net zero Net irrationality

plus Historic Notes,

Review Materials matter

News and more

JOURNAL OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY

TAKE CONTROL: BUILD THE NEW BRITAIN

WORKERS



Action, not elections

NO PARLIAMENT holds the answers to what workers in Britain need. Electing a different government and hoping things will get better is an illusion – one that comes around every time the Labour Party is in opposition.

The only way workers get progress out of parliament is when they take action and elected politicians follow. But it's becoming ever harder to take such action (see feature on page 6).

The first Labour government took office a century ago. Yet Labour governments have been reluctant to repeal a single clause of any anti-trade union law. The working class smashed the Industrial Relations Act in the 1970s. But since then successive governments of all parties have passed ever more anti-trade union laws.

Sunak's failing government must call an election this year. And then we'll endure blanket coverage from the media, as if the outcome mattered. Meanwhile Britain's industry and utilities, energy, transport, water, even football clubs, are increasingly foreign-owned.

Both political parties support aggression and war abroad. With the return of Cameron, and Blair lurking behind Starmer, there will be no change unless parliament is forced to look at Britain first.

We took a great step towards independence in 2016. Now the urgent task is to follow through the consequences of that decision. But no political

party standing candidates in elections has anything to say on the matter.

November's presidential election in the USA, and the ballyhoo that goes with it, is already feverishly discussed in the media. Its outcome matters not a jot to British workers. Yet we have imported some of the worst features of American political life: the growing politicisation of the civil service and the influence of religiously affiliated lobbies.

In Scotland, a Westminster election could be an opportunity to clear out the discredited and incompetent separatists of the Scottish National Party at Westminster and bury for good their agitation for another "independence" referendum.

Whatever the fate of the SNP at the polls, the Labour Party itself proposes "federalism". That is as much an attack on Britain's national unity as is outright secession (see feature on page 16).

Labour supports more devolution, not less. Even though it's unwanted, it wants to impose devolution on English regions, increasing the number of city mayors and their powers. And it wants more areas devolved to the Welsh and Scottish parliaments, including increased taxation powers.

There is too much to do to squander our class energy in electoral diversions. Workers have power when they organise and take action. Let's get started with demands setting out what we need. ■

Cover: Civil service union members march in Cheltenham. Photo Workers.



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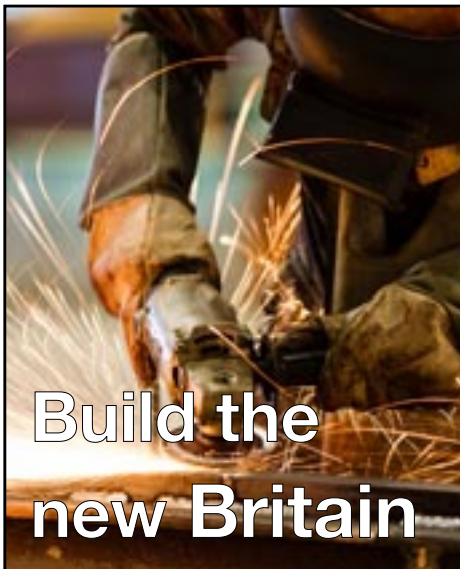
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Neill Terry/Alamy Stock Photo

Unite contingent at the TUC demonstration, Cheltenham, 27 January.

Pay victories across Britain

WORKERS ACROSS many sectors organised in Unite have recently secured over £430 million in additional pay and benefits because of successful disputes. For many workers conditions for wage bargaining remain good.

One example is the settlement for thousands of construction workers under the National Agreement for the Engineering Construction Industry. These workers won a 17.4 per cent pay rise over two years after a campaign that included the threat of coordinated industrial action. The employers originally offered 8.5 per cent for 2024 and 3.5 per cent for 2025.

Strike action in the Clyde shipyard at Scotstoun and at BAE Systems in Govan has brought further significant pay victories. Unite members working for CBL Cable Contractors called off their strike on 15 January after winning an increase of £3.05 per hour, and 22.8 per cent for the lowest paid. Offshore drillers employed by Odfjell Technology (UK) have won their demand for an improved working rotation, Unite announced on 26 January.

That same day Cheshire refuse workers secured a pay rise of between 7 and 11.1 per cent plus two days more annual leave after their vote for strike action. ■

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

STEEL

Fresh blow

IN ANOTHER blow to Britain's steel production, the Spanish company Celsa has put its Cardiff plant up for sale. The plant has been supplying steel for the construction of Hinkley Point nuclear power station, for the so-called Celtic Freeport and for offshore wind farms.

Celsa employs 750 workers in Cardiff and provides work for several hundred sub-contractors. Its website says it is the largest steel recycling company in Britain and that its electric arc furnace [see feature, p 18] is the lowest carbon technology way to make steel.

Although the plant has the capacity to produce up to 1.2 million tonnes of steel a year, recently it has produced less than a million tonnes. That, though, is still around a sixth of Britain's current output.

Celsa picked up the Cardiff site when Allied Steel and Wire went bankrupt in 2002. It received a £30 million emergency loan from the British taxpayer in July 2020, and it has been run by its creditors, led by Deutsche Bank, since September 2023. ■

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

No to war in the Red Sea

The British government, hand in glove with the US government, is attacking Yemen. This act of war dangerously widens the war in the Middle East. We should condemn it.

Measles epidemic follows cuts in health visitors

Measles was eradicated from Britain in 2017, but it has come back. That's due to a cut in health visitors, which needs to be reversed.

Britain's population set to increase sharply

The Office of National Statistics predicts that the UK population will rise to over 73 million by 2036, an increase of 10 per cent over 2021. This will be overwhelmingly due to immigration.

Devolution not a priority for Welsh workers

The Welsh government can't persuade Welsh workers that more devolution is good for them. A recent report by its own commission provides further evidence of that – and of its misguided ambition.

Fighting for the English National Opera's future

ENO artists have suspended strike action in their pay and jobs dispute, pending further talks.

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.

Gail Johnson/shutterstock.com



Sheep near village of Llanllechid, Snowdonia National Park.

Welsh farmers up in arms

THE WELSH government has come up with what it calls a Sustainable Farming Scheme. Driven by the UK government's net zero myth, this is set to come in from 2025 and states that farms must set aside 10 per cent of land to plant with trees and a further 10 per cent to be treated as wildlife habitat. Only then would farmers be eligible for support payments.

Farmers are not impressed with losing 20 per cent of their land from food production, and protests have been growing. At the Welshpool livestock market in the first week of February more than a thousand met to discuss the proposed changes. Farmers are angry.

Wyn Evans, the meeting chairman said: "Enough is enough. People have had enough that there's nothing happening in Cardiff Bay [where the Senedd is located]. They're not listening to farming families; they're not listening to farming unions." The Welsh government responded that it is committed to agriculture. Its their own proposals that would cut agricultural land by 20 per cent, but predictably it is blaming the UK government.

Two weeks after the Welshpool meeting an even bigger gathering of 3,000 farmers met at Carmarthen showground to discuss the planned reforms, some carrying a mock coffin with a plaque reading "In memory of Welsh farming". NFU Cymru president Aled Jones said: "It is clear that the current sustainable farming scheme consultation and the proposals it laid out are causing a deep sense of anguish and concern as members contemplate the future scheme and the implications on their own individual business."

Rural affairs Minister Lesley Griffiths has now invited the leaders of NFU Cymru and the Farmers Union of Wales to discuss their members' concerns. The question is, will she really listen and change the scheme? To keep the pressure on her, there was also a protest in Wrexham where farm vehicles along with pick-ups drove to her constituency office. They came from Denbigh, Ruthin, Corwen, Llangollen and Wrexham.

One Welsh farmer said in a video : "All I want to do is continue farming the land that we have done since 1903 and be able to pass that on to future generations. I get we need to change some farming practices. I get that. You always have to change, you always have to evolve. But what the Welsh government are trying to do is just kill us off – just completely wipe us out – just to fill their quotas, to fill their net-zero quotas, to tick a box." ■

ANTI-UNION LAWS

Cheltenham march

ON SATURDAY 27 January thousands of trade unionists from across the country assembled in Cheltenham for a TUC march and rally against the latest anti-strike laws. They know that the law is aimed at undermining their ability to organise and defend pay and conditions.

The unions most likely to be impacted by the legislation were well represented on the march – from the health service, teaching and railways. They are all targeted under the minimum service levels regulations. They were joined by others, including steel workers from South Wales.

Following a series of successful strike actions across the NHS and the rail industry, the government passed the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act at the end of 2023. This gives employers the ability to serve work notices on individual workers compelling them to return to work on a legally called strike day.

A worker failing to comply can be lawfully dismissed. This legislation is designed to isolate individuals and to undermine collective action. It also enables employers to victimise individual workers without recourse, as they are the judge of who is given a work notice. ■

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

EUROPEAN UNION

Farmers flex their power

AFTER YEARS of simmering discontent, farmers' protests are spreading across EU member countries. Thousands of farmers have been taking action, taking to the roads to demand that the EU supports food production.

There are specific national grievances, but the common demands are for changes in EU farming policies, measures to deal with huge rises in production costs (particularly energy), and measures to combat drought.

The EU's climate and environment

policies target the agricultural sector – tax hikes, increased costs for fuel and animal feed and the obligation to set aside land for biodiversity. EU policies are strangling small and medium-sized farmers with rising energy costs, unfair trade practices and free trade agreements.

And on top of all that, net zero policies look to farmers to reduce carbon emissions from their animals! In other words, to shut down livestock farms. This has caused political upheaval, particularly in the Netherlands.

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



Entrance to Teesworks, Redcar.

The development money tap

WHAT HAPPENS when devolved mayors, giddy with power, assume ownership over public assets was brought to light recently in an investigation into the activities of Ben Houchen, mayor of the Tees Valley.

Lack of accountability and scrutiny by Whitehall had allowed him to transfer an estimated £124 million in profits from former steel industry land at Redcar to two commercial property companies, JC Musgrave Capital, and Northern Land Management.

Their Teesworks Ltd (aka "Britain's carbon capture capital") was billed as the centrepiece of Britain's largest freeport, and as Europe's largest brownfield site, comprising 4,500 acres. It offered tax and customs incentives to businesses seeking to locate there.

Local people suspected a case of no more "muck", but still plenty of ill-gotten "brass". An inquiry, instigated in May last year by fellow Tory Michael Gove (so hardly independent), lay buried under the weight of its own paperwork until January 2024.

Legal nicety decided allegations of cronyism and corruption to be unfounded. But there is plenty of criticism of the mayor's South Tees Development Corporation, which in partnership with the venture capitalists secretly misused taxpayer funds and cherry-picked the most profitable parts of the old steel works. Promises to invest in job creation were found largely to be false.

The private property developers have ended up owning 90 per cent of the site. The report noted that they put no money into the scheme, but they have made money on the back of the public sector investment of more than £560 million.

More broadly, the review found a culture of excessive confidentiality and a lack of transparency at the development corporation.

The inquiry concluded that "inappropriate decisions and a lack of transparency which fail to guard against allegations of wrongdoing are occurring, and the principles of spending public money are not being observed."

In other words, hiding the truth – just one aspect of capital's war on workers.

WHAT'S ON

Coming soon

MARCH

Wednesday 6 March, 7.30pm

Bertrand Russell Room, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL

In person CPBML Public Meeting

"Who should govern Britain? And how?"

There is a contest underway for the soul of Britain. The ruling class manages stagnation and decay; the working class is challenging for a society that meets its needs.

Come and discuss. All welcome.

APRIL

Tuesday 9 April 7pm

Online discussion meeting (via Zoom)

"Materials: basis for independence"

Low carbon technology is enabling extraction of previously inaccessible minerals essential for modern life. But some insist the planet be left undisturbed. What do you think? Come and discuss.

Email info@cpbml.org.uk for an invitation.

MAY

CPBML May Day Meetings

"Stop the drive to war! Build a new Britain!"

Glasgow, *In person*: Wednesday 1 May, 7pm

Renfield Conference Centre, 260 Bath Street, G2 4JP

London, *In person*: Wednesday 1 May, 7.30pm

Brockway Room, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, WC1R 4RL

Manchester, *In person*: Saturday 4 May, 2pm

Upstairs at The Britons Protection, 50 Great Bridgewater Street, Manchester M1 5LE

Bristol, *In person*: Wednesday 1 May, 6pm–9pm

The Golden Guinea Function Room, 19 Guinea Street, Bristol BS1 6SX

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

The capitalist class wants to shackle organised workers. T minimum service levels. What can we do about it?

Assert the right to strike

UNDERSTANDABLY, A lot of people really don't like this government. They say it's venal, corrupt, unprincipled and vindictive.

Is anything changing? Under new legislation, it's promising adequate levels of important public services, and the extension of these improvements to even more areas of life: trains will run on time, ambulances will be available at a moment's notice, our borders will be permanently guarded, and the same guarantees will be extended to healthcare and schools.

Except that we'll only get these new minimum services levels (MSL) when we're on strike. Because the latest anti-trade union legislation isn't about service at all. The clue is in its name: the Strikes (MSL) Act. This is about strikes, and how to stop them or, to be precise, stop them being effective. It has nothing to do with levels of service.

Too effective

The government's problem is that workers have been too effective. We've won some important disputes by using strike action. In the rail industry both Aslef and RMT have wrenched concessions from the train operating companies.

And on a bigger scale, health unions, principally Unison, not only achieved a massively increased pay offer for a million workers – pandemic heroes, let's not forget – from a reluctant government but also established direct negotiations for the first time in a generation.

The government has changed the law precisely to stop us doing it again. This law puts a weapon in the hands of employers not, in the first instance, the state. It will be for employers to use this law to attack unions.

Where we are strong, we will work with

'In Britain unions were born and maintained in illegality...'



Workers

Education staff on the march at the TUC rally against anti-union laws in Cheltenham on 27 January

employers to ensure they don't issue the work orders which the Act provides for. But if we are weak in the six given areas of employment (health, fire and rescue, education, transport, nuclear decommissioning, and border security), employers can issue lists of named workers who must work on specified strike days; scab, as we used to say.

And unions that don't cooperate can be prosecuted, and fined up to £1 million for each offence.

Those unions covering those six areas should feel proud that they have been subject to this legislation. It is a massive, although unintended, compliment.

In Britain trade unions were born and maintained in illegality. As soon as they became visible to the employers and their state, they made unions illegal. It was a crime to combine. Just how illegal unions have been throughout history and their level of activity is a good way of gauging the balance of power between our class,

the working class, and their class, the ruling capitalist class.

When we were weak, at the start of the industrial revolution, union organisers were transported or even executed. With a million men under arms at the end of the second world war, workers could impose a kind of welfare state on an unwilling ruling class. We could have taken control then, but the political nerve was missing.

Of course, capitalism would prefer to completely eradicate unions. The new legislation has to settle for suppressing strikes, as every law applied to unions dating back to the sixteenth century has done.

Recent union experience, for example in the ambulance service, has been that on days of strike action the workforce and their union ran the service. That's true for any industry or service where the union is strong enough and numerous enough to impose itself.

Unions are well-versed in developing a minimum level of emergency service; it is

That's the whole point of its recent legislation on



ary.

not in their interest to see workers die or suffer through not being able to get emergency care when they need it.

On ambulance strike days we saw a service level no worse, and in some ways better, than on non-strike days. That was due to an efficient system of control and dispatch, close working with managers (mostly union members) and a lower call rate (due to the discipline of people generally).

The same applied to some of the earlier (but only the earlier) strikes of junior doctors – because work was covered by the more highly-skilled consultants.

Malignant

It's easy to make fun of the legislation. But its deeply malignant intent must not be missed. The aim has always been to make it impossible for workers to use their collective strength against employers.

The ruling class consistently opposes independent trade unions because they see in them the kernel, the possibility, of

something more – of disciplined authority outside their control. An authority which could give workers the idea that they can run society without their employers.

That is exactly what happens when you're on strike; you run the show. That's why employers hate it and that's why they'll do almost anything to stop it.

The problem is that workers are victims of their own success. Because they have found a way to carry on in spite of it all, they think that all anti-union legislation can be dealt with or lived with.

Even worse, they think that, especially in an election year, all they need do is vote Labour and the problem will be solved. All we need to say to anyone who believes this is ask, how much anti-union law did Labour ever repeal?

So how to assert the right to strike? Actually, there is no right to strike. Every strike needs the authorisation of one law or another, some putative right to strike legislation, whether domestic, European or from

the UN, won't trump that.

You can't for example, legally go on strike to get this most recent legislation repealed; that would be explicitly unlawful. This is starkly unlike the pinnacle of industrial action led by the Amalgamated Engineering Union fifty years ago. That action was effectively a general strike to prevent an anti-trade union law, the Industrial Relations Act, being applied.

In these times, for industrial action to be lawful, you need to establish a trade dispute. Then ballot – postal, not electronic, just to make it more difficult. Then get a majority, on a specified turnout.

Anti-guerrilla

Then you have to tell the employer when you're going on strike and precisely what you intend to do. In effect it's not so much anti-strike legislation as anti-guerrilla struggle legislation, because it's the telegraphing your intentions in advance, which can neuter the action.

Workers will still have to fight over the issues on which they have always fought: pay, conditions of employment, jobs. If they are strong, a canny employer will not use the legislation against them.

We have recently seen Aslef hit back at an employer who issued work notices. Government-owned LNER was the only train operating company which said it would impose MSLs. Aslef immediately focused on this company: LNER drivers would strike again for five days from 5 February. The company backed down. "Focused, united, smart" sums up the drivers' action.

The overall lesson must be that no matter how good we are at evading attempts to criminalise us, it is they, a ruling class intent on war with workers at home and war abroad, who are criminal; so we should criminalise them.

We may be adept at defending ourselves, but perpetual defence is perpetual subjection. We haven't come this far as organised workers to exist only at the whim of the world's oldest and most legally obsessed ruling class. ■

• This article is based on a CPBML online discussion group held in February.

Health workers and the rest of our class know that radical change is necessary. Where is the necessary leadership coming from?

Waiting on the NHS



Karl Black/Alamy Stock Photo

9 February: ambulances queuing up to discharge patients at the Royal London Hospital, Whitechapel.

THE LATEST data from NHS England shows that in spite of all attempts to reduce waiting lists remain stubbornly static at 7.6 million patients waiting to start treatment. The number waiting over two years rose by 55 to 282, while 13,164 patients have been waiting over eighteen months, though NHS England's targets were to have nobody waiting that long.

Waits longer than 65 weeks are supposed to end by 31 March, but those numbers have increased too, up 3,811 to 98,374. Only 58.2 per cent of patients are treated within 18 weeks. The 18-week treatment target has not been met since 2016.

In urgent care, patients routinely wait on trolleys in corridors and ambulances stand outside hospitals, unable to unload patients and go to their next call. This is no

longer just a winter problem but familiar all year round.

Four-hour waits are unremarkable – the maximum four-hour standard set in the NHS Constitution has not been met since June 2013. Indeed, twelve hour waits, a rarity ten years ago with 489 in the whole year, now average 1,440 a day.

Lethal

These waits for urgent care can be lethal. A study in the *Emergency Medicine Journal* published in 2022 found that “for every 82 admitted patients whose time to inpatient bed transfer is delayed beyond 6 to 8 hours from time of arrival at the ED, there is one extra death”. The Royal College of Emergency Medicine has called on the government to tackle the root causes of “exit block” and to act now to increase

staffed bed capacity.

There is also a shortage of emergency medicine staff. The RCEM, along with the Royal College of General Practitioners, Royal College of Physicians, Royal College of Psychiatrists and the Society for Acute Medicine, published recommendations at the end of the pandemic for improving services, but many of these have not been acted on.

In primary care, a 2023 report from Healthwatch, which coordinates feedback from patients, reported a lack of access for patients. Appointments are often unavailable, telephone or online contact difficult or impossible, service hours limited, and there is over-reliance on virtual contact with a GP or nurse. Transport difficulties can prevent access to services some distance away, and the high costs of long waits on

Changes are needed to ensure the future of the NHS.

the telephone and repeated calls can be prohibitive.

Research by the Nuffield Trust similarly found that, while more GP appointments are being offered in absolute terms than pre-COVID, in 2023 a lower proportion are offered within a week.

Central

Central to recovery in the NHS are the highly skilled clinical staff, doctors, nurses, and other professionals. Pay has fallen dramatically, leading to unprecedented strike action.

On 9 February, junior doctors announced more strike days at the end of that month, and opened a new ballot on industrial action, closing on 20 March, while consultants in England have voted by a small majority, 51 per cent, to reject an offer, and have reopened talks. While the junior doctors have until now won large majorities for strike action, they should reassess the sense of pursuing these tactics inflexibly.

On strike days locums, and numbers of International Medical Graduates (doctors imported from abroad) work normally, and on most days their consultant colleagues have provided cover. The current approach risks dissipating the unity the junior doctors have shown hitherto, and the support they have enjoyed from other workers and patients.

There are issues beyond pay. Doctors need to tackle the increasing use of Physician Associate posts. Originally called Physician Assistants, they were intended to free doctors in training posts, and others,

‘The maximum four-hour standard set in the NHS constitution has not been met for years...’

Decay in dentistry

THE QUEUES of would-be patients waiting to register with a Bristol dental practice that offered NHS treatment that hit the headlines in early February were a shocking reminder of the state of dentistry. Police had to be called to break up the crowds.

In 2023 a House of Commons report described a “crisis of access” to NHS dentistry. Research in 2022 by the BBC and the British Dental Association (BDA) found that 90 per cent of practices were not accepting new adult NHS patients. In many parts of the country, known as dental deserts, no practices would accept new NHS registrations.

One in 10 respondents to a YouGov survey had performed dentistry on themselves, while a BDA survey found that 8

out of 10 of their members had treated patients who had undertaken some form of DIY dentistry.

A government “Recovery Plan” published on 9 February met with a scathing reaction from the BDA, calling it not worthy of the title. The plan offers a patient premium to dentists seeing a patient who hasn’t undergone treatment in two years – but no new money for it.

It also raises the minimum value of the Unit of Dental Activity, the measure by which dentists are paid. But the BDA estimates that fewer than 900 of the 8,000 NHS contract holders in England will benefit from the increase. The BDA has launched a campaign under the slogan, “Save NHS dentistry and make it fit for the 21st century”.

from routine administration, so they could concentrate on clinical duties, and training.

Physician associates have two years of training, in contrast to the five year (minimum) medical degree required for doctors. Over 4,000 work in hospitals and general practice, and the General Medical Council estimates 900 new ones qualify each year.

In practice, employers have used associates to dilute the skills of the medical team. Some of these associates have misrepresented themselves to patients, with employers’ connivance, as qualified doctors.

Risk

In one case, an associate working in general practice twice misdiagnosed a patient with a blood clot, first as having a sprain, second as having long Covid and anxiety. The patient collapsed and died in hospital. In a BMA survey, 87 per cent of the doctors who took part said that the way physician associates and anaesthetic assistants currently work was always or sometimes a risk to patient safety.

Physician associates are not currently regulated, though there are proposals before parliament to bring them under the

aegis of the General Medical Council.

The BMA is calling for the Health and Professions Council to regulate these posts. It wants the assistant part of the job title reintroduced, and a moratorium on their recruitment until their role and scope of practice is clearly defined.

Under the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan, to be welcomed since workforce planning has up to now been done in secrecy, there are proposals to reduce medical training to a four-year programme, via internships. This baffles medical educators, who struggle to fit the rapidly developing world of medical knowledge into the current curriculum as it is.

The plan further relies on the supposed benefits of applying artificial intelligence, AI, for which there is yet little real-world evidence. As the BMA points out, an overemphasis on technological solutions will not work – staff need training, skills and time to use new technologies effectively.

For every profession in the NHS, fighting for pay and to protect skill are inseparable; hard thinking is required to determine collective responses. The working class more generally must make its voice heard too.

The drive to net zero is creating problems without solving them and farming are impractical. It's time to expose the falsity

Net zero: a great fraud b

WHEN A legal deadline was set for Britain to achieve net zero in 2019, car manufacturers among many others were enthusiastic. Of course, some had diversified, even specialised in electric vehicles (EVs) already. But the prospect of an outright ban on diesel or petrol-fuelled internal combustion engines led them to foresee many more sales.

The same phenomenon could be seen across Europe and in North America. The same adherence to a carbon free future, with its inbuilt aversion to the use of fossil fuels, was driving policy.

But the far higher cost of EVs, along with inadequate infrastructure and the limited range of most models, meant that an initial surge in sales peaked once the more affluent enthusiasts had acquired their model.

Dilemma

Millions of ordinary motorists, who depend on their vehicle for long journeys or for work, figured out the costs for themselves and turned away. Now manufacturers faced a dilemma: their customers, in the main, did not want the electric option. And fleet operators are questioning the move to EVs.

A case in point is Addison Lee, London's biggest taxi company. In response to the requirement announced by Transport for London in 2021 that all private hire vehicles would face stricter emission standards by 2023, Addison Lee opted to invest millions in a new fleet of



Sign at an anti-ULEZ demonstration, London, September 2023.

electric cars and ordered 1,000 Volkswagen ID4s.

But their drivers – many still self-employed despite a court battle – were not convinced. The significantly higher prices and rapid depreciation, coupled with only 20 per cent of them having home charging facilities, was a huge deterrent. This prompted an about turn by the company.

Chief executive Liam Griffin, writing in the *Daily Telegraph* on 22 January, said, “We were very enthusiastic about the benefits of going fully electric....We were promised that the infrastructure would come on stream and facilitate the growing number of cars that were being added by the day, Unfortunately the experience didn't quite match the vision.”

The dramatic fall in value of used EVs is a huge deterrent for ordinary motorists as well as for private rental companies. According to trade magazine *Autotrader*, the annual depreciation of electric cars is 23 per cent compared with less than 5 per cent for petrol and diesel cars. At those rates, most motorists who value longevity in their vehicles will have their minds made up for them.

Struggling

In the USA, *Forbes* magazine reported on 9 February that car hire company Hertz plans to sell off 20,000 EVs and replace them with diesel or petrol vehicles. And Uber concedes it is struggling to get drivers to adopt EVs in the numbers it expected.

‘An initial surge in electric vehicles peaked once the more affluent enthusiasts had acquired their model...’

them. Changes demanded for vehicles, domestic heating in the casual idealism of government and policy makers...

egins to unravel



In Europe, VW has cut its EV production levels and cancelled plans for a new \$2 billion factory in Wolfsburg, Germany. The *New York Post* reported in January that Ford in America are doing the same.

The reality is that the demand for EV hasn't materialised – no amount of pleading, cajoling, or unfounded guarantees can alter that. Promises of a brighter, greener future have proved baseless too.

In Britain, those promises were reinforced by the government's Climate Change Committee (CCC). Its recommendations have been accepted by policy makers without question, but have been shown to be misleading.

Their calculation of the real costs of net zero only estimated the cost of maintaining

the net zero policy once it was achieved, not the cost of getting there. The costs of new boilers, new cars, less travel and so on were not factored in.

And now it emerges that CCC's assumptions about the extent to which the UK could rely on wind and solar power were based on wholly inadequate data.

Chris Llewellyn-Smith, an emeritus professor of physics and former director of energy research at Oxford University, has accused the CCC of only looking at the data from one year when assessing how much energy storage Britain would need to guarantee a constant supply of electricity.

On 24 January the *Daily Telegraph* revealed that the CCC had estimated that by 2050 there would be only 7 days in a year when wind turbines would produce less than 10 per cent of their potential output.

The actual data says otherwise: for example there were 30 such days in 2020, 33 in 2019 and 56 in 2018. The CCC grossly overestimated wind's contribution to the energy mix, and so underestimates the energy storage required as backup.

Volatility

The Royal Society study into this storage requirement, led by Professor Llewellyn-Smith, looked at 37 years of data. The study concluded that a vast network of hydrogen filled caves would be needed to guard against the risk of blackouts, due to the volatility of wind and solar generation.

The political establishment cannot continue to be indifferent to what people think. In a pre-election period, if at no other time, politicians must at least give the appearance of heeding popular concerns. Some evidence of a change is beginning to emerge.

Prime minister Rishi Sunak's move last year to postpone the moratorium on internal combustion engines and gas boilers was a belated recognition that people, voters, are not enchanted with this vision of a cold and stationary future. Also he decided to re-open the window for gas and oil drilling applications in the North Sea.

The Labour Party, keen to appear even more zealous about net zero than the Conservatives, have pledged to curtail

'The much vaunted "green jobs" boost has not materialised...'

such exploration if they are elected. When Rachel Reeves declared at the 2021 Labour Party conference that she was going to be Britain's first "green chancellor", she was roundly applauded. Now, the Labour promise to spend £28 billion a year until 2030 on green investment has been withdrawn.

The enthusiasm of business to pursue green policies begins to falter as inducements start to fade away. Last September the government reopened bidding for off-shore wind farms, with reduced subsidies. There was not a single taker.

Nor has the much vaunted "green jobs" boost materialised. The anger of people whose livelihoods and lives are blighted by this industrial destruction in the name of decarbonisation is growing.

The fury of Dutch and French farmers at the EU-imposed curtailment of agriculture in the interests of lowering emissions cannot be dismissed. And that has spread to most of the EU member states. The slogan "No farm, no food, no future" is widespread.

Farmers staged a slow tractor protest at Dover in early February on the same issues. Farmers in Wales and Scotland have demonstrated as well.

Britain is no longer required to adhere to the EU's Common Agricultural Policy. But our farmers still suffer under a government that does not invest in or appreciate the value of homegrown food. Instead it pays subsidies to solar farms and prefers the import of cheaper food from countries with lower horticultural and animal welfare standards.

All the parliamentary political parties agree on the drive to net zero. This raises a fundamental question: wouldn't it be so much better if workers were in control of the policies that shape their lives? ■

Many people wonder why successive governments have failed. The answer is simple: the government and the employers like it.

Why capitalists love higher

SOMETIMES BY accident politicians unwittingly reveal what they really think about working people. Gordon Brown, the then Labour prime minister was on a walk about in Rochdale, canvassing during the 2010 general election. It happened when Mrs Gillian Duffy, who had just popped out to buy a loaf of bread, spotted him and decided to take the opportunity to ask him a few questions.

After introducing herself as a lifelong Labour voter and someone who worked for the council supporting children for 30 years, she had a conversation with him lasting approximately six minutes. Immediately afterwards, while being whisked away in a car, and still wearing the *Sky News* radio microphone, he was recorded saying “She was just a sort of bigoted woman who said she used to be Labour.”

She had asked about taxes, pension credit, levels of crime and policing, the size of the national debt, university tuition fees, a lack of local services and the general need to look after the vulnerable in society. But out of all these topics raised by Mrs Duffy, Gordon Brown on being asked to explain why he had described her as a bigot, had immediately zoomed in on her question about immigration.

Why? Why did he find dealing with legitimate questions on immigration so difficult, and why did he need to abuse one who had raised them? Mrs Duffy asked “What was bigoted in what I said?” She would later become angry, though, and not accept Brown’s grovelling apology. Such a

‘It is clear that British capitalism wishes to use mass immigration as a weapon against the working class...’



Guy Corbishley/Alamy Stock Photo

Lunar House, Croydon, south London, the headquarters of Britain’s immigration service.

peek behind the curtains at, not just the real Gordon Brown, but at the contempt in which ordinary people of Britain are held by its ruling class, would come to define the nature of the continuing debate on immigration.

It is a truism to say we are all in some way migrants. There is little benefit, and great danger, in trying to establish a pure bloodline for the British working class. In the end it is not the retreat into the silos of

the differences between us that will make us strong, but the acknowledgement that we all are one working class: we all have our part to play.

Unique

Through a journey that has lasted now for over two centuries, many workers have come from abroad and got on the bus with us, and some in time have taken their turn at the wheel. The British working class is

ailed to reduce immigration, or even control it. The immigration, because it weakens workers...

er immigration



not a collection of peoples, but a synthesis – a unique people in our own right.

It is clear that British capitalism wishes to use mass immigration as a weapon against its working class. It uses it both as a tool to try and attack British workers, and as a desperate measure to breathe life into an ever-moribund economy. In order to silence the growing concerns over the consequences of such a strategy, it employs the tactics of lies, abuse and confusion, to

divert the argument away from its underlying intent.

So why was it that Gordon Brown was so sensitive about the issue of immigration? Since the election of Labour in 1997 net immigration had immediately risen. In the year following his election, Blair had raised annual net immigration from an average of 100,000 to just below 250,000 a year.

Then, in 2004 when a number of East

European countries joined the EU, Britain refused to exercise its right of control over their migration, but instead bowed down to the free movement of labour. The government predicted it would bring 15,000 a year but six times that number came in the first year, increasing to 300,000 by 2015. Added to that there were the 200,000 non-EU immigrants that had entered every year since the Labour government had come to power.

No wonder Gordon Brown was so sensitive to the question, given that unemployment at the time was 8 per cent.

Purpose

It is clear that there is purpose in the use of immigration by the ruling class. They are not acting in the interest of the migrant nor is it an act of benevolence. They simply act out of self-interest. For them it is both a planned strategic weapon against the working class, and a desperate means of dealing with capitalism's decline.

Consider the question of pay. It is undoubtedly true that high immigration depresses wages. It has been particularly acute in the low wage economy in general and especially in certain sectors such as health and social care, agriculture, hospitality and transport. This last area is an interesting one, as it should be noted that, as soon as Brexit was finally introduced at the end of 2020 and the EU HGV drivers were restricted in their opportunity for employment in Britain, the wages of British HGV drivers rose by 12 per cent in the first year.

Marx and Engels described the unemployed as the "reserve army of labour", a necessary component of capitalist production, a constantly available reservoir of labour that ensured that in the battle between capital and labour, capital would try to keep the upper hand. For periods in the past, under Thatcher for example in 1984, it was wielded at a level of 12 per cent. Currently unemployment stands at about 4 per cent. A great improvement you might think. But things have changed. Through the aid of mass immigration, so easily facilitated as part of globalisation, capital now views the whole world as its

Continued on page 14



Continued from page 13

“reserve army of labour”.

Since 2020 when EU workers no longer had free movement of labour into Britain, the issuing of work visas has exploded – from 80,000 to 340,000 a year, an increase of nearly 400 per cent over the three years. The Work Visa Application Scheme lists occupations that need filling. On looking at the list however, you may be astonished to see what is thought to be a critical occupation.

When have you ever thought that this country is short of estate agents, or personal trainers, or disc jockeys, or scrap metal dealers, or amusement arcade owners? The list is so long and comprehensive that it would be difficult to find the few occupations that are not on it. This is of course deliberately so all-inclusive as to be no barrier at all to those seeking entry. It is also saying that British workers do not have the talent or skill to do these jobs.

Why is British capitalism not just incapable of producing sufficient home-grown talent but deliberately setting a course of deskilling its own workers?

One reason is that a well educated, skilled and confident workforce is one to be feared. It would have expectations on pay, conditions and a decent future, expectations that capitalism would be reluctant to grant. What better way to weaken such a position of power than by diluting it with more vulnerable employees. Work visas need to be sponsored by the employers; they have become the new form of indenture, tying the fate of the migrant worker to that of their employer.

The lie of labour shortages results from British capitalism’s unwillingness to invest in both the development of industries that would bring about an increase in

productivity, and in the training and education of its present workers to meet the demands of an advanced economy.

Since 2010 the productivity of British workers has stagnated. Productivity per capita has barely changed as employers attempt to extract profit, not through innovation and greater efficiency as would be expected in a classical model of capitalist production, but simply through the continuous input of cheap labour.

So relatively cheap has labour become that it has opened up new areas of activity that would have been unthinkable in the past, particularly in the gig economy and service industries.

At the same time, this depression of general wages driven by mass immigration means that essential jobs, such as care workers, are so poorly paid that they are increasingly only being filled by migrants themselves.

Disguised

Even Brian Bell, chair of the Migration Advisory Committee and the government’s own advisor, has accused it in the *Report on Adult Social Care and Immigration* of disguising its drive to low wage employment by allowing health and social care employers to be paid the minimum wage.

Bell goes on to speculate that this may become the norm in other areas of the public sector. He told the *Guardian*, “It is because we’re not doing anything on the wages front, and until we do that, then we are accepting that exploitation is part of the way that we’re going to pay for social care: and that just seems appalling.”

Immigration, far from meeting the demand for an increasingly skilled workforce, is in fact reducing skill levels. This is illustrated by the LSE’s Centre for Economic Performance report on productivity, which identifies falling skill levels and capital investment as the cause of Britain’s poor productivity.

The deliberate deskilling of British workers has the benefit of not only transferring the cost of education and training to less wealthy countries who can ill afford it, but also as a means of emasculating skilled sections of workers.

This war on British workers is often

‘More workers does not mean that we are better off...’

characterised as a necessary measure in building the economy. Far from it. Capitalism in Britain even fails to exploit the advantages it might gain from an increasing workforce.

Having more workers does not mean we are better off. Although there has been extremely modest growth in overall GDP, it is solely accounted for by the increase in population. Unsurprisingly, despite the evidence to the contrary, the head of the British Chamber of Commerce, Shevaun Haviland has attacked any restriction on immigration as anti-growth.

So British capitalism continues with the pretence that immigration enables growth, whereas real growth in Britain is stagnant and available resources have to be spread more thinly.

Skill shortages then are the result of the deliberate deskilling of British workers – they are no accident. There is plenty of talent willing to be educated and trained in vital occupations.

But it is important to discuss and agree on how we can oppose mass immigration. A confident working class that frames its opposition as a fight for jobs, wages and skills, is one that stands on solid ground and will be listened to by others. Like the Mrs Duffys, they know in their bones that there is something here that needs to be dealt with.

And to the would-be migrant we say, mass immigration has become the new form of imperialism. It is the plunder of talent from around the world. We say to them, your solution is not to desert your own country and become a tool of capitalism, but to stay and fight for your own independence, and build socialism at home. In the end that should be the destiny of every working class. ■

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Why is it that those in the working class most in favour of

Devolution – a serious th



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Buses in Hull bedecked with advertising for the devolution project.

THE ENTHUSIASTS for devolution also enjoy denigrating Britain and imagine that in doing so they are “holding power to account”. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Instead, they are helping those in power who seek to weaken or dismantle any nation state that stands up to predatory transnational capitalism. The world’s multinational corporations don’t want to deal with nation states that uphold their own sovereignty.

Separation, devolution, federalism, regionalism, localism, and deregulation all aim to break up Britain in one way or another. Breaking up Britain will let multinational corporations operate more freely.

Workers need a united, independent Britain plus industrial self-reliance, wherever possible, if we are to provide for our needs. Yet politicians of all parties are doing their utmost to break up Britain, in several different ways – in England as well as Wales and Scotland.

In 2022 the government said that by

2030 every part of England that wants a devolution deal, backed up with long-term funding arrangements, will have one. But it’s not just an option – this is a key plank in the government’s misnamed Levelling Up strategy, tied to funding.

The Labour Party is equally committed to increased devolution, with calls for “double devolution” and permanent devolved self-government for Scotland and Wales. It proposes a “Take Back Control” law if elected to government, to increase the level of devolved powers throughout Britain.

Imposed

Devolved local powers in England are always imposed. The last and only time people in England were asked about devolution was in a 2004 referendum. The North East of England voted 78 per cent against it for their region.

Since then national and local politicians have pushed on regardless, increasingly determined to introduce devolution in various forms. But without a clue as to how it

could ever be an answer to the nation’s needs.

And since they ignore the views of the majority – on Brexit and net zero as well as devolution – people have little faith in politicians. In December, Ipsos reported that trust in politicians is at its lowest level since their annual poll began 40 years ago, with only 9 per cent of the public now trusting politicians to tell the truth.

Twenty years since the referendum, the North East is to have devolution imposed, with no vote. On 2 May there will only be an election for a mayor to lead a combined authority, along with similar elections for the East Midlands, and York plus North Yorkshire. Four more areas will be forced to follow suit next year.

Even so, some workers might be cheering these changes on for supposed local benefits. As a class we recognise that Westminster does not serve us and politicians are not to be trusted. Creating lots of mini parliaments – or mayors with presidential powers – solves nothing about the

the EU tend to also favour the break-up of Britain?

Threat across Britain

way Britain is governed. Rather, it makes things worse.

The Greater Manchester Combined Authority was set up by a devolution agreement in 2015. This was the result of a deal between national (Conservative) and local (Labour) politicians. This has set the pattern for devolution in England ever since.

The combined authority in Manchester has entered a series of deals with central government leading to further devolution. As with its original creation, the people of Manchester have not been involved.

The authority is led by a directly elected mayor. Turnout in elections has so far been low, at around 30 per cent. That's typical elsewhere too. In 2017 a Tees Valley mayor was elected on a turn-out of 21 per cent.

The leaders of the ten councils of Greater Manchester and the mayor jointly run the authority. They work through many committees, boards and panels. Such convoluted arrangements, with little clear accountability, belies the claim that devolution gives power to the people. Just as with the EU, devolution distances people from the decision-making that affects them.

Last year, Trailblazer Devolution Deals between central government and Greater Manchester and West Midlands were announced with great fanfare. The two combined authorities will now have a "single pot" budget from central government.

They will have flexibility on dividing spending between devolved services: health, transport, skills and employment, housing, economic development and, inevitably, net zero.

This does nothing to reverse decades of cuts to local council budgets which continue to devastate local services. It's a way of managing decline.

Back in 2015, the conceit of those involved in devising the Greater Manchester devolution deal was that local politicians would be able to make better use of reduced resources if central government had a lighter touch. That has not happened: overall resources have reduced further.

Additional tiers of government do not help towards the development of a national plan and priorities for the use of our resources. Devolution, by its nature, deliberately prevents that happening.

It has taken nearly nine years, but public transport in Greater Manchester is on the way to greater integration and regulation with the roll out of the Bee Network. This is to be welcomed but we had integration and regulation – without devolution – before Margaret Thatcher's 1986 deregulation of bus services outside of London.

Another claim made back in 2015 was that devolution would allow the people of Greater Manchester to benefit from the integration of health care and social care. But NHS England created 42 Integrated Care Systems in 2022; it did not need mayoral authorities. Integration of health care and social care can be part of a national plan without devolution. That goes for any service.

Freeports

Newly painted buses, as in Manchester, might be seen as a positive aspect of devolution. But freeports are the other side. They are to a great extent outside national laws and regulations. They show what really lies behind the breakup of Britain of which devolution is part – giving finance capital easier access to the wealth created by us, the people of Britain.

The TUC sees the risk to workers in freeports. But it does not connect that with devolution or the agenda of political parties to serve global capitalism rather than the people of Britain.

The government has created eight freeports in England, two in Scotland, and

'The mirage of local control is used to deliberately lead workers up a blind alley...'

two in Wales. They are aiming for at least one in Northern Ireland and are in "discussions with stakeholders in Northern Ireland about how best to deliver the benefits associated with freeports there." And naturally the EU is in the mix – for example we learn that Thames Freeport is "ideally located next to major population centres in Europe's biggest consumer market".

The mirage of devolution and local control is used to deliberately lead workers up a blind alley. It's promoted by opportunists and those wanting to further their careers, of course. But it is also the favoured policy of politicians and others who desperately seek ways to prop up capitalism, the cause of the problem, rather than confront it. The experience of workers across the "four nations" nonsense is that all devolution does in the end is to increase running costs, create opportunities for graft, and above all divide workers. ■

Meet the Party

The Communist Party of Britain Marxist-Leninist's series of Zoom discussion meetings continues on Tuesday 9 April on the subject of materials and independence. 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 6 March on who should rule Britain (details on page 5), and informal meetings with interested workers and study sessions for those who want to take the discussion further. And don't miss our May Day meetings, held in four cities this year (details on page 15).

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

Steel is vital for manufacturing and infrastructure. Production without a realistic plan for future steel production undermines

Steel: the backbone of industry



Workers

Cheltenham, January: marching for steel in the face of threats to close the furnaces at Tata Steel, Port Talbot.

STEEL IS a key material for the economy and industries of any country. It is used in buildings, ships, railways, vehicles, packaging and machinery of all sorts. No advanced industrial country except Britain considers moving away from producing virgin steel.

Any plan for a transition to electricity as our main source of energy must embrace the role of steel. It is used in many ways for electricity generation and transmission – in transformers, cables and pylons. There will be no green revolution without steel.

The first question is whether Britain needs to make steel at all – can we not just buy it? The answer is “no” – abandoning

security of supply and relying on imports for such a vital material is a risk to our independence.

Can we not just recycle scrap steel instead? Virgin steel – made from raw materials – is essential for some applications. And even opponents of steel making in Britain accept that at least 20 per cent of our steel usage (currently 15 million tonnes a year) would not come from recycled steel.

Exporting

The statistics on recycling make interesting reading. Britain creates around 10 million tonnes a year of scrap steel. But most is

exported to be processed elsewhere. Our net need for steel of all types is 5 million tonnes a year, but by exporting 8 million tonnes of scrap, we need 13 million tonnes.

About 7 million tonnes of steel is made here each year. That uses just under 3 million tonnes of scrap – half of which is fed to blast furnaces producing virgin steel. The other half is processed by electric arc furnaces. These use electrolysis: putting electrodes into scrap metal to melt at high temperatures instead of smelting to turn iron ore into molten iron for primary steelmaking.

The demand, in the name of reducing emissions, to ditch blast furnace

ing it is energy intensive, but closing blast furnaces ines Britain's self-reliance...

ndustry

production is short-sighted – a recipe for destroying the whole industry.

Presently the two main processes for making steel are integrated and interdependent. Both are energy intensive, to different degrees – a shift towards electric arc production is possible (especially if we exported less of the scrap produced). But those benefits depend on a supply of electricity.

The government has chosen to side with Tata by paying it £500 million to cut jobs and close blast furnaces. But there's no guarantee for the future of what remains without a fight from workers – starting with those involved and the industries that depend on steel.

Workers at Port Talbot want the government to take a stake in the industry and not pay companies to shut it down. The GMB and Community unions at Tata Steel, together with Unite, presented their multi-union plan on 17 November last year.

Vulnerable

The plan expressed fears that a simple 3 metric tonne EAF would lock them into a single technological approach. They feared the loss of many jobs. And what's left would be vulnerable as less green than its competitors.

Attempting to take responsibility for the direction of their industry in the face of global pressure to decarbonise, their proposal sensibly allowed for Blast Furnace No 4 to continue to the end of its life-cycle in 2032, while one small EAF would be constructed, and later a second.

This plan also envisaged using Direct Iron Reduction (DIR) in future. Taken altogether it would fully decarbonise steelmaking in time, as well as ensuring Britain retained a strategic ability to produce virgin steel.

The Materials Processing Institute, a research and development centre based on Teesside, gave the unions' plan an unequivocal commendation. Stephen Kinnock, MP for Aberavon, called it "compelling".

But the three unions are not in agreement. Unite subsequently went its own way and withdrew from the joint plan. It unveiled its own grand plan, "To transform the UK

into the global green steel capital". It called for new procurement legislation – for all infrastructure projects to use British steel.

That's a good approach on supporting home produced steel. But in calling for the industry to be rebuilt Unite should clarify how it reconciles its emphasis on investment in green steel (produced by arc furnaces) with its declared opposition to blast furnace closures and the loss of jobs.

This difference must be resolved quickly. Divisions between unions will hinder the campaign for the future of the industry.

Pure steel is needed for the new technological age, but extracting it is a dirty business, energy and labour intensive. It does not come out of the ground all nice and shiny. It is an alloy of iron and carbon – impurities have to be removed before steel is made. Different steels depend on exact control of added metals.

Nor is it always possible to produce what we need. Generally speaking, high grade haematite (the most common iron ore) must be upwards of 65 per cent iron content. British ores are now mostly depleted and of poor quality; significant imports were from Norway and the USA in 2023.

Demand

There is still demand abroad for low-grade British ores. But on 6 November, Chinese-owned British Steel announced the closure of blast furnaces at Scunthorpe, with 2,000 redundancies. It was the latest in a long line of attacks on British industry. Sheffield steel had already been reduced to workshop-based niche products.

Steel was to return in a different guise, as "green steel", infinitely recyclable without loss of quality, so it is said, via electric arc furnaces. But the claim that recycled steel produced in this way is of consistently high quality is not entirely true: it cannot be used, for example, in certain parts of automobiles.

Electric vehicles require high grade steel, as does shipping. Recycled steel is vital to the automotive and manufacturing sectors: most cars have frames with 25 per cent recycled pure steel.

A single arc furnace requires a work-

'The demand to ditch blast furnace production in the name of reducing emissions is short-sighted – and a recipe for destroying the whole industry...'

force of only 250. Labour MP Andy McDonald told local people – thousands of whom had lost their jobs – to embrace the change and "all that goes with it".

The environmental argument goes that grid-based emissions can be drastically reduced through renewable electricity. Unite the Union spokesman Pat McCourt chose to emphasise the environmental aspect when he said, "What we need to see is a transition from carbon-producing, intensive steelmaking to utilising green energy to produce green steel".

Businesses and local people on Teesside joined with Unite to demand not only more investment in green steel but also greater use of British-made steel in public buildings.

There are hopeful signs. For example, the South Korean manufacturer SeAH is using British steel to build its offshore wind turbine factory at Teesworks. The plant is expected to produce up to 150 monopiles (foundations) a year for installation in the North Sea.

Steel is a national staple, a national necessity. All other industrial production depends on it one way or another. Outsourcing its production to countries where carbon emissions are not so tightly controlled does nothing to reduce global emissions. ■

Looking for someone to explain precisely what's wrong with net zero targets? A new book could help...

Net zero: an irrational ta



Doozeez/shutterstock.com

Unused EV charging places on a forecourt in Exeter.

Not zero: how an irrational target will impoverish you, help China (and won't even save the planet), by Ross Clark, paperback, 272 pages, ISBN 978-1800752443, Forum Press, 2024, £12.99. Kindle and eBook editions available.

This is a fascinating and well researched study of the prospects of implementing net zero policies, particularly as applied in Britain. Author Ross Clark scorns the government's approach of just setting a date to phase out carbon emission and expecting the market to deliver all the solutions.

The government, the Labour opposition and the Green lobby hoped that last year's auction for offshore wind power would show that wind power could compete with fossil fuels. But there were no bids because nobody could make a profit on the energy prices offered.

The auction fiasco should, in a sensible world, make the government, the opposi-

tion and the Greens realise that we have to license North Sea oil and gas drilling to keep the lights on. But there is no sign of any rethinking.

Sunak and Starmer alike still say they want a net zero carbon electricity system by 2030, and still oppose licences to drill for North Sea oil and gas. The Labour Party pledges to take fossil fuels out of all of our electricity supply by 2030.

So, net zero by 2030 or even 2050 is not going to happen. But the £3 trillion bill to supposedly get us there means denying us warm, comfortable homes, and denying us affordable travel by road and air.

Destruction

Net zero gives the government an incentive to destroy industry: the more industry it drives away from Britain, the lower our emissions, and the closer it gets to its net zero target. As Gary Smith, general secretary of the GMB union, recently said,

"We've cut carbon emissions by decimating working-class communities." Industry is not the problem: it is the solution, as Clark points out.

Our industries are at risk from current inefficient energy policies. For example, between 1997 and 2021 British steel production fell from 1.6 million tonnes to 710,000 tonnes. That's largely because we paid £46.60 per megawatt hour for electricity while German steel producers paid just £25. We now import over 60 per cent of the steel we use, risking our steel security.

Clark notes that closing steel plants and importing steel would reduce to zero the contribution of steel to Britain's carbon emissions. It would send these emissions overseas, most likely to China which in 2019 produced 56 per cent of the world's steel. Other transitions are tricky too. On domestic heating, Clark comments that the government plans to switch millions of British homes from effective gas- and oil-fired boilers to electric heat pumps. They are much more expensive and costly to run but less effective.

Switching to heat pumps and to electric vehicles will cause a huge rise in demand for electricity. To reach net zero, all this extra electricity must come from renewable energy or other low carbon sources. That means many more wind turbines and extra energy storage, plus huge investment in the electricity grid. And how energy-efficient is it for a vehicle to carry a half-ton battery around?

Britain's aviation industry is under threat too. The research body on resource efficiency UK Fires stated in a 2019 report that "there are no options for zero-emissions flight in the time available for action, so the industry faces a rapid contraction."

The government's Green allies openly call for "degrowth" – that is, a permanent slump. Scientifically dubious claims and hyperbole abound, such as "Our world is on fire." But satellite data collected by the NASA Earth Observatory shows that since 2003 the global area being burned annually by wildfires has fallen by a quarter.

One claim is that extreme weather events are on the rise. But the Royal Meteorological Society reported fewer occurrences of maximum gust speeds for

the government's

target

'Closing steel plants would just send the emissions overseas...'

the last two decades compared to the 1980s and 1990s.

Or we are told that the world is drowning. But the same report says that since 1900, mean sea levels around Britain have risen by 16.5 cm – just over 1.5 mm a year. We can cope with sea level rises just as we have done for centuries through good engineering and building.

But to make such adaptations we need people who know their industries to be running those industries. The Environment Agency, for example, has been led by an ornithologist, a maths teacher, a diplomat and a professor of environmental studies. But only once, briefly, by an engineer.

Small modular nuclear reactors (SMRs) are one option to move power generation away from fossil fuels without relying on wind and sun. They could be built relatively cheaply and quickly compared to conventional nuclear power stations.

Rolls Royce is developing two SMR designs which it hopes could be supplying power by 2029. Yet the government ignores the potential and continues to "trust the market". Which means using foreign companies, just like large-scale nuclear power.

We should use our North Sea gas – it emits half as much carbon dioxide per unit of energy as coal – as the transition fuel between fossil fuel and renewables. Instead, we import shale gas from the USA – which is compressed and refrigerated before shipping across the Atlantic, using more energy.

The Labour Party tells us that "throwing money at problems doesn't solve them." An excuse for not investing in our energy security. There is another way, without the irrationality of net zero. ■

WORKERS

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Every two months Workers covers the issues of the day: measured, analytical, and clear – and deeply committed to the interests of Britain and the British working class.

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Forty years ago workers at a government intelligence centre against a ban on union membership...

1984: GCHQ trade union

THE TUC march in January against the latest trade union laws came 40 years after the Thatcher government banned workers at the GCHQ intelligence centre in Cheltenham from being members of an independent trade union.

The ban lasted 13 years, despite widespread opposition, many demonstrations, court cases and a tireless campaign by sacked workers and their unions. But it was less a story of a few heroic martyrs, and more about workers seeing the threat if government could dictate which organisations they belonged to – and having the courage to do something about it.

Shock

The ban came as a complete shock to union members at GCHQ, to other civil servants and to union members across Britain. The reaction was immediate: workers saw it as a step towards limiting the ability of workers more widely to organise and fight for their conditions.

It put an unlikely and unassuming group of people into the front line of the conflict between workers and the Thatcher government.

The pretext for the ban was that being a member of an independent union created a “conflict of loyalties” for those working at the intelligence base – whose existence and role was only publicly admitted the previous year.

Union members at GCHQ were angry about that accusation. They were adamant that their actions had never compromised national security. A former minister later admitted that was indeed the truth.

‘Union members at GCHQ were angry. They were adamant that their actions had never compromised national security...’

The US security agency was behind the ban – then as now, its work is closely integrated with GCHQ. But there’s little doubt the Thatcher government was in favour, possibly of a wider ban across other civil service areas too.

The origin of the ban was the 1981 civil service pay dispute. Civil service unions had reached a dead end with government’s refusal to negotiate a reasonable pay deal. They called a one-day strike, followed by other action including selective strikes – not at GCHQ, but in key areas like tax collection. The government was able to ride that out, in part due to cash from areas like the Post Office – which, ironically, was later privatised.

Although the unions did not win their claims, they ended with greatly strengthened organisation and experience. In many areas, civil servants were deciding for themselves how their organisations would be run during the dispute. The government, for example, relied on a few senior managers to sort and deliver mail that no one else would touch, and tried to intimidate union officials with legal action.

Refused

Many of those threatened at GCHQ with giving up their union membership or being sacked reluctantly accepted what had happened. But 130 out of 7,000 refused to sign away their trade union rights and stood out against the ban. Few, if any, people saw the creation of the in-house GCHQ Staff Federation as any substitute for an independent union.

A group, GCHQ Trade Unions, quickly organised itself to fight the ban in a high-profile way. Its campaign began with well supported rallies and marches, and speaking at union gatherings across the country.

The ban was held to be in contravention of International Labour Organization conventions. GCHQ workers were denied any access to employment tribunals. Their unions took court action to have the ban overturned, at first succeeding, but eventually losing in November 1984 on unspecified grounds of “national security”.

GCHQ Trade Unions then knew it was in for a long fight, with its own commitment and the support of their fellow workers



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Cheltenham, 2024: still there, 40 years on.

being the way forward. The last 14 workers holding out and still working at GCHQ were dismissed between November 1988 and March 1989.

None of those sacked were found to have breached national security in any way. Indeed, the only wrongdoing in that period was the persistent victimisation of the 14 by GCHQ management.

Eleven of them had taken part in a two-day pay strike in June 1987. Three had voted against and did not take part as that could have compromised national security, a position accepted by the whole group.

Dignified

The nature of the campaign changed once no members of GCHQ trade unions were working there. But they were not finished. Always dignified and committed, they took whatever opportunity they found to build support for lifting of the ban and their eventual return.

It may seem odd that a small group of workers who remained committed to the

tre stood out ban



British government and its security alliance with the USA could present such a threat. It was their own commitment to what they believed right and their independence that was the threat – not any supposed “national security”.

Three of the workers returned to GCHQ (the others had retired or decided to stay with new careers), and a lifting of the ban was met in the same straightforward and determined way the campaign was waged: they marched back on their own terms. Full pension rights were restored and those sacked were compensated.

But there was a catch. Delicate negotiations had paved the way to the staff federation members joining an independent union. A “collective agreement” managing any security risks was much on the lines the TUC had proposed in 1984. As one of the 14 said, accepting but not endorsing the agreement, it did nothing more to assure national security than did the pre-1984 position of trust that GCHQ workers enjoyed and lived up to. ■

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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.

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.

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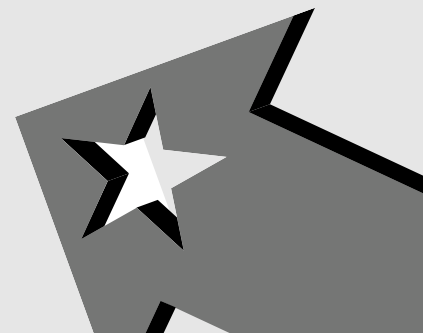
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Britain needs peace, not war

'Both parties say there's a shortage of money to make positive changes for Britain – yet will always spend it on war...'

OUR GOVERNMENT spends precious resources in two theatres of war, in Ukraine and the Middle East. The time has come to question its aims, and not to acquiesce in war talk. Our nation has many needs. Making war on Russia or arming Israel are not among them.

Along with the US, the British government continues to arm and support the Netanyahu government's murderous assault on Gaza. And along with the US, our government continues to bomb Yemen. The Labour Party supports it on both counts.

Government support for Israel is unquestioning, whatever it might say in public. Cameron said he was "deeply concerned about the prospect of a military offensive in Rafah". It took him four months to overlook his government's role and utter those weasel words – and the assault went ahead.

In Ukraine, the war is in stalemate, and people in all the NATO member countries are increasingly reluctant to keep funding it. Support is waning even in the US, which has already spent \$113 billion to prop up Zelensky's regime and its armed forces.

The current wave of NATO war talk is a back-handed acknowledgement that Ukraine cannot win. The head of the British army tells us we are all part of the "prewar generation" and that our country must be put on a "war footing". In a recent YouGov survey British workers under 40 disagree with that view, which would have them living their lives under constant threat.

The British government – echoed, as ever, by the Labour Party – proposes to drain off another £2.5 billion of our money to the lost cause in Ukraine, on top of the £4.6 billion already spent. Both parties say there's a shortage of money to make positive changes for Britain – yet will always spend it on war.

Many motions at the 2023 TUC conference declared that public services are on their knees. Workers don't need to be told that, but we need to force the government to act for peace and not war. Without clear opposition from organised workers this warmongering will continue unabated. It seems that the TUC might have some catching up to do, though, with its

defeatist stance: "the labour movement must do all it can to prevent conflict; however, that is not always possible".

The TUC's previous progressive defence diversification strategy was, regrettably, narrowly overturned in 2022. The strategy said that workers' precious engineering skills at a time of shortages should be used for peace not war – while still ensuring that we could defend our country if attacked.

That shift showed a serious lack of joined up thinking – coming from unions with members in the defence industry. They should be leading the call to harness skills and resources for the benefit of British people, not looking to expand military offensive capability.

And as things stand, the government is more likely to award contracts abroad and let British firms in the defence sector be sold to US companies than it is to build British warships with British-made steel, fitted with British-made systems.

Unions must tackle the cause of the decline in engineering, advanced electronics and so on – and not look to a war economy to do so.

What should workers make of all this? For starters, they should get on with fighting for wages and conditions. Every organised trade union action is a strike against war.

When teachers demand better wages and money for schools they are demanding that our precious resources be spent on peace not on war. They are working for peace. When doctors and nurses demand better wages and money for our NHS, they are working for peace. When railway workers demand better wages and a planned, integrated, modern railway industry, they are working for peace. The more such actions, the bigger the force for peace.

Our trade union movement can strengthen the peace movement in its struggles, but the demand for peace must be wider than that – embracing all of the working class whether currently in dispute or not.

We now need to say out loud "Britain needs peace not war" until the ruling class is clear they will not be using British workers for their wars. We must not stand for it. ■

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