

WORKERS

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MARCH/APRIL 2021 £1



SCIENCE AND INDUSTRY FOR AN INDEPENDENT BRITAIN

TRADE DEAL Mind the traps **NHS** Changes ahead
NI Perils in the Protocol **BUSES** Fight for future
SCOTLAND Unreality grips **UNIS** Fat cats purring
COVID Brussels blunders *plus* News, Book
FISHING A work in progress Review, Historic
SWISS New EU battle Notes and more

WORKERS

“Bad faith from Brussels

WHATEVER THE limitations of the final Brexit agreement negotiated by Britain with the EU – and there are certainly a good few (see page 6) – it is now blindingly obvious that the EU has never been happy with it.

It had thought it could browbeat Britain into a fake Brexit where we would remain bound by the terms of its single market and still under the thumb of its European Court of Justice. But Britain’s firm stand called the Brussels bluff, and in the end it had to settle for what is, in essence, the independence of a former member state.

And there’s a vast contrast between the Trade and Cooperation Agreement and the TTIP treaty with the US that the European Commission tried and failed to foist on the peoples of the EU five years ago. In particular, disputes about the agreement will not be handed over to binding arbitration by international lawyers.

International agreements, though, are meant to be followed in both letter and spirit. But the EU has shown it has no intention of doing this. The first months since the Trade and Cooperation Agreement entered into force saw a host of minor and major attacks on the cooperation and transparency the EU was supposed to have pledged itself to.

We have seen the extraordinary – if short-lived

– invocation of Article 16 of the Northern Ireland Protocol. A ban on British sausages being sold in Northern Ireland. Even the sequestration of a ham sandwich from a truck driver.

Meanwhile, containerloads of British pork have been held up for weeks because of over-complex customs forms, and the export of live shellfish to the EU has been stopped.

To cap it all, the vindictiveness shown by European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen and French president Emmanuel Macron to Britain’s stellar vaccination strategy underlines how desperately the EU wants Britain to fail.

We can expect that spite to intensify with every success Britain notches up, whatever the cost to the EU itself. That’s been particularly obvious in the response of the European Commission and leading national politicians to Britain’s clearly world-leading vaccination programme.

Talk about shooting yourself in the foot. The unscientific campaign waged against the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine has left Germany, for example, with hundreds of thousands of shots that none of its citizens want to take – while the pandemic rages there.

All of which raises the question: If the EU has been negotiating in bad faith, why have an agreement at all? ■

Cover image PopTika/shutterstock.com



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

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

www.cpbml.org.uk @cpbml
Issue 223, March/April 2021



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Workers

Newlyn Harbour, Cornwall

Newlyn sets out new plans

WHATEVER THE short-term issues with the EU blocking British fish and shellfish exports, Newlyn in Cornwall is planning for the long term. Newlyn Pier and Harbour Commissioners have unveiled a development programme for the port, one of the largest fishing ports in Britain. The plan includes a new breakwater and a deeper port to bring in larger vessels.

“By offering improved facilities, a better working environment and providing a base for marine skills, we can ensure that the way of life in Newlyn cannot just continue but flourish in a way we have not seen in decades,” a port spokesperson told *Cornwall Live*.

Harbour Master Rob Parsons pointed out that Newlyn lands in the region of 14,000 tonnes of fish annually with a value of £30 million. “We are in a great position now to build on that, and for local fishermen and fish producers to capitalise where they can, using Newlyn’s location to the prime fishing grounds to our advantage, ensuring the fish caught in our waters come through our harbour entrance and into our auction,” he said.

Two years ago, the port dropped plans to apply for EU regional development money for what many locally felt to be an inappropriate scheme. Parsons said at the time that although the port had worked hard on a bid for European funding by tailoring its strategic plans to meet EU funding criteria, it was in the public interest to go for a lower-key development focusing on what users want rather than what the EU will pay for. ■

EUROSTAR

Unions campaign

RAIL UNIONS RMT and Aslef are calling on the government to provide urgent support for Eurostar after the company said it was on the brink of bankruptcy.

Officials from Aslef met the Treasury on 20 February in a bid to secure backing for the country’s only high-speed rail link. It says it will now be working with the TUC to put together a formal paper to present to the Treasury.

The RMT is also organising a petition to transport secretary Grant Shapps calling on him to aid the struggling company, which like other transport operators has been badly hit by Covid-19.

The company is 55 per cent owned by the French government, but it employs 3,000 workers in Britain and is vital to the economy. But the minister seems to be washing its hands of all responsibility. “It is not our company to rescue,” Shapps told MPs on the House of Commons Transport Committee on 3 February. ■

SEAFOOD

New names from Cornwall

IN THE face of EU obstruction of British seafood exports, the Cornish Fish Producers Association is working to encourage more fish consumption in the home market. It is hoping to use the government’s new Seafood Innovation Fund to boost demand in Britain for “unloved” species such as megrim (a kind of sole) and spider crab through “rebranding” them as Cornish sole and Cornish king crab.

A thousand tonnes of megrim are landed in Newlyn each year, with 98 per cent currently exported. ■

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...

A bad week for Project Fear

The start of February saw a particularly bad few days for those who said Brexit would make companies flee Britain.

Steep cost of separatism revealed

A new analysis of the prospects for Scotland should the SNP succeed in detaching it from the rest of Britain makes grim reading for the separatists.

Chocolate's coming home

International food giant Mondelez is shifting the bulk of its Cadbury's Dairy Milk production back to Britain.

Covid-19: Russian lessons for British schools

Russia's main opposition party is campaigning for the "natural right" of children to go to school in the face of widespread closures..

Thousands write to contest universities pensions valuation

Universities staff have had enough of being forced to pay exorbitant pensions contributions.

No to the 'Asian NATO'!

The government needs to be reminded that we didn't vote for independence only to join in attempts to carve up the globe in the interests of imperialism.

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.

Walters-Stoyk Design Group



The Swiss parliament chamber, Bern.

Swiss face EU battle again

ONCE MORE, the EU is squaring up for a fight with Switzerland over how far European law should reach.

With the Brexit negotiations out of the way, the EU has now turned its attention to associated countries such as Switzerland which never joined the bloc but have close ties, created through multiple agreements.

The Swiss are a stubborn thorn in the EU's flesh. For seven years they have resisted attempts by the EU to consolidate their agreements into one overarching one – a so-called Framework Agreement. In the process, the EU has tried to impose restrictions on Swiss sovereignty and the country's right to control the flow of labour across its borders.

The EU did reach an agreement with Swiss negotiators in 2018 – only to find that the Swiss parliament saw it as a treaty too far. The country demanded changes relating to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice and to the conditions under which EU-based companies could bring labour into Switzerland.

Frustrated, Brussels has tried everything, including a hamfisted attempt in 2019 to stop Switzerland's financial centres from trading in European stocks and shares that only succeeded in increasing the Swiss share of market. But then, with all the EU's energies focused on Britain's departure, negotiations came to a halt. Brussels did not want to do or say anything that might affect its stance on Brexit.

Now that it has agreed – through gritted teeth – the Trade and Cooperation Agreement with Britain, the EU has put the Framework Agreement with Switzerland back on the table. And it's taking a hard line.

On Sunday 7 February, the EU's ambassador to Switzerland told a Swiss newspaper that the negotiations are "finished". The controversial areas that the Swiss want to renegotiate are not open for discussion, he said.

The Swiss government wants to settle things quickly, but it will have to reckon with growing hostility among its people to the deal. A survey by Swiss bank Credit Suisse in November 2020 found a 10 per cent drop in support for the agreement. And the Swiss media have been talking about "Brexit envy" from people wanting their government to follow Britain's example and take a hard line with the EU. ■

HEALTH

Breast screening returns

BREAST SCREENING has restarted. But almost a million women have missed mammograms due to the pandemic. Breast cancer is the most common cancer diagnosis in Britain. Despite a significant drop in mortality, it is still the second highest cause of cancer deaths for women.

Screening programmes offer the greatest benefit to catch conditions at an early stage when treatment is more likely to be successful. But the Covid-19 pandemic is having a "catastrophic" impact on cancer

treatment, according to the World Health Organization.

Screening diagnoses around 19,000 breast cancers a year in England. There is much to do to overcome the current delays and return to pre-pandemic service levels, given inadequate staffing numbers.

More radiologists are needed, which takes time, and a long-term investment plan to address workforce issues across the NHS. The National Breast Imaging Academy has moved to digital learning as part of its recovery plans, which is a start. ■

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

GIG ECONOMY

Defeat for Uber

THE GMB union is claiming a “historic win” after the Supreme Court ruled on 19 February that Uber drivers are not self-employed but are workers – and as such entitled to holiday pay, minimum wage and rest breaks.

Lawyers Leigh Day, fighting the case on

behalf of GMB, say tens of thousands of Uber drivers could be entitled to an average of £12,000 each in compensation.

Lead claimant Yaseen Aslam said, “During the six years of these proceedings, we have watched the government commission and then shelve a review of the gig economy yet do nothing to help us.”

Six years ago Uber lost its case at an industrial tribunal, and lost every appeal since then. ■



Oliver Keenan (CC BY-SA 3.0)

St Andrews University, where pay cuts for top administrators don't last long.

Uni fat cats purring again

AFTER HOLLOW gestures of solidarity with staff by offering pay cuts in a time of financial crisis, senior Scottish university administrators on obscene salaries have quietly returned to their old ways.

Last year the principal of St Andrews University, Sally Mapstone (salary £260,000) announced she and her senior team would take a 20 per cent pay cut in response to a £25 million black hole in revenues. They said it would last for at least four months. “At least” turned out to be “at most”. In February this year the university confirmed to *The Times* that Mapstone had been paid “as normal” since September.

Edinburgh University’s principal, Peter Mathieson (salary over £340,000), also announced last April that he would sacrifice 20 per cent of his salary because of the university’s financial crisis. He told BBC Scotland at the time “We’re trying to be honest and transparent with our staff, so we’ve said that at the moment we’re looking at things like limiting pay rises and limiting promotions in the next academic year because that will save us money.” It now transpires that the limitations didn’t apply to him. His salary has been hiked back up to its previous high level.

“Senior administrators like these are running universities as large international companies while pretending they are working for the public good,” a Scottish academic told *Workers*. “This pretence has been badly dented by the crisis brought on by the pandemic.”

This is generally true of universities across Britain, although Scottish universities have been particularly badly hit financially. They have relied substantially on income from abroad in the form of international students, including accommodation and fees. This source of funds has collapsed, and their vulnerabilities stand exposed.

When challenged, Edinburgh University explained that Mathieson had not had a pay rise since 2018. Staff are not impressed. They have already either lost jobs, or if still in work been warned they face pay freezes and further redundancies.

Students are also reserving their sympathy, as they continue to protest about having to pay rent or reservation fees for accommodation which they are not allowed to return to, with enforced online teaching from home. ■

WHAT'S ON

Coming soon

For obvious reasons, CPBML public meetings are not currently taking place. Normal service will be resumed as soon as possible. To keep up-to-date as things change, make sure you’re signed up to receive our electronic newsletter (see the foot of the left-hand column, page 4).

MARCH

Tuesday 16 March, 7pm

CPBML discussion meeting (via Zoom): “Energy: security for Britain”

If you’re interested in attending, please email info@cpbml.org.uk.

MAY

Saturday 1 May, time to be announced
CPBML May Day Rally (via Zoom)

Details will be announced in a forthcoming issue of the CPBML electronic newsletter.

BUSES

Manchester strike plan

MANCHESTER BUS drivers working for Go North West have voted overwhelmingly to take strike action against the company.

Go North West wants to fire and rehire workers on worse pay and conditions. In response to the company’s proposals and its bullying approach, 82 per cent of workers voted for strike action on a 77 per cent turnout.

Its parent company, Go-Ahead, runs bus operations throughout the country, making a total operating profit of £77.9 million in 2020. The figure is down on the previous year, under the temporary impact of Covid-19.

Now, under the cover of the pandemic, the company is attempting not just to recoup its losses from its staff but to impose permanent changes.

Drivers’ union Unite says that the “fire and rehire” plans put to workers in Manchester would result in: a 10 per cent cut in bus drivers; workers forced to work longer for no additional pay, resulting in them being £2,500 a year worse off; tearing up the existing sick pay policy, which will force workers to work when they are ill and needing to self-isolate.

As *Workers* went to press, the strike was due to start on 28 February. ■

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

The EU failed to stop Britain leaving its federation of failure far short of its ambitions. That, though, won't stop it trying

Brexit is done...but beware

FROM THE moment in June 2016 when we voted to leave the EU, the bloc and its allies within Britain have tried all sorts of stratagems for keeping Britain within the orbit of the European Court of Justice (ECJ). Those plots have all failed.

That's why the overriding achievement embodied in the Trade and Cooperation Agreement that sealed Britain's definitive departure from the EU at the end of last year is that it is based on international law. The right of the European Court of Justice to decide on UK-EU disputes is removed.

In its place the treaty provides for neutral arbitration which is the usual way for independent sovereign states to settle their differences. We are once again a self-governing nation. It's an achievement to acknowledge and savour.

But as the weeks since the agreement have shown, it is a treaty which cannot be seen in isolation from the Withdrawal Agreement. That piece of political skulduggery came into force on 1 February 2020 – and the EU is using it to disrupt trade and to frustrate everyday cooperation.

Vigilance

A sort of eternal vigilance is now upon us. The EU will try to make sure we stay under its regulatory oversight even when this does not or should not apply. That has certainly been the case for Switzerland (see News, page 4), which never joined the EU, and we must expect the same or worse treatment.

On the positive side the Trade and Cooperation Agreement excludes foreign policy and defence policy. These are now the sole prerogative of Britain as an independent country.

But even so the agreement's reach is wide. It includes trade, transport and fisheries (see page 14). It also covers law enforcement, judicial cooperation in criminal matters and the exchange of classified

'We are once again a self-governing nation...'



Lukasz Kobus/European Union

Happy now? Michel Barnier and Ursula von der Leyen announcing the Trade and Cooperation Agreement

information. It has a section on health security which is largely focussed on health needs of travellers between the EU and UK and cyber security.

It also discusses British participation in a range of EU programmes, notably that for research (see page 12). Finally, it includes an annexe on nuclear cooperation, focused on use of nuclear power generation. Except for Northern Ireland, an important exception, Britain now sits firmly outside the single market and the customs union.

The media is full of stories about increased bureaucracy, without mentioning that when we were in the EU all British firms – including the 95 per cent which did not export to the EU – had to comply with unnecessary and expensive EU rules. Now

they do not. And when we were inside the EU customs union there were taxes on imports from beyond Europe which British importers and consumers paid for.

Disruption

But the disruption to Britain's internal trade from the Withdrawal Agreement's Northern Ireland Protocol is not a teething problem. The Protocol is the EU's foothold in the UK, and a means of punishing Britain for having the temerity to leave.

The border in the Irish Sea is a political weapon, pure and simple (see page 8). Everyone, including the EU, knows that it does not need to be there.

The Trade and Cooperation Agreement means we will be free of the EU state aid

re, and was forced to sign a leaving agreement that fell
g to make up lost ground...

ware the traps



ment at a Brussels press conference, 24 December.

rules which successive governments have hid behind (often in a more draconian way than their European counterparts) to explain their lack of financial support for British industry. But not completely free to do what we like.

The treaty does require both Britain and EU to establish a system of subsidy control, along with courts or tribunals which will determine whether a given subsidy falls within the agreement. But crucially the treaty sets limits around what happens when one party thinks the other is abusing their precious “level playing field”.

First, only the British government or the EU can initiate a challenge to a state subsidy, meaning that interpretation of the treaty cannot become the plaything of

**‘How this works
out in practice is
yet to be seen...’**

multinational corporations with their armies of lawyers.

And neither side can challenge a state aid measure unless it can show, based on facts, a serious risk of a significant negative effect on trade or investment between the parties. And even then neither side can actually stop the other from implementing the subsidy – though it would be allowed at that point to use tariffs as a sanction.

Review

How all this works out in practice is yet to be seen. The agreement has a break clause: if one party thinks there are too many breaches, it can trigger a review of the whole trade pillar of the agreement. And if there is a total breakdown Britain and the EU could end up reverting to trade on World Trade Organization terms – not such a terrible thing.

One problem area is energy. About 12 per cent of the UK’s gas and 5 per cent of its electricity come from the EU via interconnectors, the pipes or wires that carry electricity or gas between countries. The UK has interconnectors with France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Ireland, while Northern Ireland has interconnectors with the Republic of Ireland and Scotland. Interconnectors linking the UK with Norway and Denmark are currently being built.

Britain has left the EU’s Internal Energy Market and as such, the mechanisms that were used to trade energy no longer apply. But the EU is still involved, and the Agreement commits both parties to develop and implement new, efficient trading arrangements by April 2022. That may not turn out to be a simple process, not least because energy trading with the EU is another area where Northern Ireland is in a different position to the rest of the UK.

It’s not a trivial issue. As recently as 2016 we had the experience of Storm Angus which disrupted energy supplies from France to England for a full year. If our

recent experience with vaccines teaches us one thing, it is the importance of being able to produce what we need on our own shores.

Rather than engage in lengthy negotiations with the EU, the government should ensure that we can meet all our energy requirements from within our own country. Then we won’t need any special energy trading arrangements.

The inclusion of a specific date of April 2022 for these is a reminder that the agreement is very much a work in progress. The whole day-to-day operation of the agreement is to be overseen by a Partnership Council with 19 committees and 4 working groups.

The government summary states that the Partnership Council “will supervise the operation of the Agreement at a political level, providing strategic direction”. And decisions made will be by mutual consent.

Thankfully, the Partnership Council won’t be a building in Brussels with lots of flags, rather a term for the high-level discussion between the British government and the European Commission. David Frost, the government’s chief Brexit negotiator, will take the lead on the UK side.

Entanglements

So far so good. But experience teaches us that the Commission will try to use the council to entangle us in its regulatory mechanisms. It is a time to be watchful. The technical and legal expertise among those who fought for Brexit must not be relaxed and should keep close tabs on how each element of this process continues.

Already live British shellfish are being barred from the EU (see page 14). And this despite the government’s assurance in its summary explainer that Britain and the EU can maintain fully independent sanitary rules to protect human, animal and plant life and health, “preserving each Party’s right to independently regulate, while not creating unjustified barriers to trade”.

Even a French MEP, Pierre Karleskind, has pointed out that British waters didn’t suddenly become dirty after 31 December, and he wants the EU to find a short-term as well as a long-term solution. He must be missing his moules. ■

The NI Protocol was forced on the UK during Brexit negotiations. It's already causing problems...

A Protocol full of perils



6 February 2021: Lorry tractor units queuing at the Stena Line roll on-roll off Liverpool to Belfast ferry Terminal in Birkenhead.

THE NORTHERN Ireland Protocol has had a turbulent few months since the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (see page 6) was signed. No wonder there are already calls for it to be revised – or scrapped.

The protocol exists in theory to keep the border open between north and south. And at the EU's insistence it included customs controls between Britain and northern Ireland – supposedly to protect the EU single market.

But the Protocol says nothing about the integrity of the United Kingdom. NI remains part of the UK but the people of NI, without their consent, are living within the EU's single market with no say over the laws that govern them.

Disruption

Northern Ireland trades far more with Britain than it does with the Irish Republic. Trade between Britain and NI has been subject to EU customs rules since 1 January 2021. Severe disruption resulted to trade in both directions almost at once.

In early January Aodhan Connolly of the Northern Ireland Retail Consortium said, "We need the UK and the EU to sit down and talk about...a long-term workable solution because quite frankly this isn't it."

Concerns about the protocol heightened dramatically on 29 January. The EU Commission announced that it planned to invoke Article 16 – in effect border controls within Ireland. The pretext was to protect vaccine supplies. That convinced no one and attracted universal criticism.

The EU caved in within hours, claiming a mistake had been made. Northern Ireland First Minister and DUP leader Arlene Foster said that the move was not a mistake but an act of hostility. The DUP is calling on the UK government to invoke Article 16 and effectively end the Protocol.

The EU parliament commissioned a study in 2017 on how to avoid a hard border. This concluded that it was possible to implement a solution for expected post-Brexit volumes of cross-border traffic which could meet the requirements of EU customs legislation. The EU Commission has done its best to bury this study. Instead it has mocked suggestions that digital solutions to border control exist.

In a BBC documentary *Brexit: Behind Closed Doors*, first shown in 2019, Michel Barnier is caught on camera saying that EU negotiating tactics would include using Ireland to delay progress. To resist Brexit, the EU has undermined the peace achieved by the 1998 Good Friday

Agreement (GFA). It has ruthlessly exploited fears of the prospect of a hard border in Ireland and the risk of a revival of violence.

Mirror image

The EU's actions mirror tactics used by the British ruling class to thwart a newly independent Ireland a century ago. Rather than allow a possible ex-colony to thrive, Northern Ireland was created in 1921. There was no real demand within Ireland for the creation of an artificial border and a separate Province. Britain's "solution" was imposed, and the people of Ireland lived through the subsequent, dreadful divisions until they forged resolution in the Good Friday Agreement.

The fundamental principle of the GFA is consent. The Republic of Ireland agreed to renounce its claim to the territory of NI and Britain agreed that NI would remain part of the UK unless and until the population of NI decided otherwise.

The EU has made huge play of its support for peace in Ireland. The exact opposite is true. The EU's actions have resulted in breaching the GFA principle of consent. And by trying to invoke Article 16 the EU has exposed its arrogance towards smaller member states such as Ireland. ■

Another NHS reorganisation is on the cards. This one looks like doing some good...

NHS set to change



Workers

HERE'S A FRUITLESS exercise: determine who might be the worst Secretary of State for Health that there's ever been. The front runner is surely Andrew Lansley. Certainly his "reforms" (deformations would be more accurate) of 2012 take some beating.

Now the government is to reverse the reorganisation Lansley imposed on the health service, eliminating much of the fragmentation he introduced. Central planning is back on the agenda, finally.

While there have been several leaks, and an official announcement on 11 February that change is coming – including scrapping the requirement to put all services and contracts out to tender – workers in the NHS will be waiting for the full White Paper to be published. No firm date for publication has yet been given.

Calculated mayhem

As *Workers* has repeatedly, and in the early days uniquely, said, the destruction of a burgeoning planning regime by the 2012 Health and Social Care Act, with fragmentation and the creation of scope for more competition, was not an accidental mistake. Lansley had been shadow Secretary of State for six years, after all. It was calculated mayhem.

That the NHS, despite early signs to the contrary, didn't fall for the new structures, is to its credit. The same can't be

said for all the NHS unions.

While service-savvy NHS leaders (we use the word advisedly, as what they did was far from being merely "management") were busy trying to repair the damage by establishing Sustainability Transformation Plans (STPs) at least one union, not seeing the wood for the trees, described these as "Slash, Trash and Privatised". It must have taken a whole Communications Department to come up with that.

These STPs were themselves transformed into Partnerships, and are now finally becoming Integrated Care Systems. These are already being by those too blind to see what's actually going on.

The Integrated Care Systems would in the first instance bring together all the Clinical Commissioning Groups (a main plank of Lansley's so-called "GP commissioning") into a smaller number of integrated bodies.

In London for example this would collapse the 32 Clinical Commissioning Groups into 5 Integrated Care Systems each with the same boundaries as the Strategic Health Authorities abolished in 2012. That provides for the replacement of "commissioning" by planning.

The next step would be to integrate providers, NHS Trusts, into the same framework. Some say the prospect is fanciful, and no doubt it will be opposed by

'The structure will have the virtue of having been tested, in embryo at least, in the pandemic...'

those congenitally opposed to change. But it is now within our grasp, rolling back close to 40 years of Thatcherite mayhem and disorder, not to mention the intrusion into the NHS of capital in the form of privatisation.

Regrouping

Workers was the first to describe how the NHS was regrouping to defend itself against Lansley's attacks. We can now say that soon, perhaps as early as March, legislation will be introduced to repeal the 2012 Act and replace it with one providing for the integrated systems now being built.

Uniquely, this will be the legislative confirmation of a structure created, strictly speaking, without legal backing, rather than the imposition of an entirely untested system dreamt up in the fevered imaginations of think tanks and politicians. It will have the virtue of having been tested, in embryo at least, by the severest of tests: the pandemic.

Integrated Care Systems structures have already been used to deliver PPE and organise deployment of staff and allocate resources. Now one of the 2012 Act's signal creations, Public Health England, is for the chop, to be merged with NHS England, NHS Improvement and Health Education England, among others.

In the face of determination by at least a section of the (senior) NHS workforce, even a government considered by many to be hostile to the NHS will succumb. Out of the pandemic will come a restructured NHS, more fit for new challenges. But the service won't ever be either safe nor develop according to need unless workers at all levels in the NHS take responsibility and assert a measure of control. ■

The EU cannot hide its dismay at the success of Britain's vaccine. Britain to make up for its failure backfired spectacularly...

How the EU turned a vaccine



Yau Ming Low/shutterstock.com

London, 2 February 2021: one of the vast network of NHS vaccination centres.

REMEMBER THE warnings? Poor Britain, too small to go it alone in the big bad world. We'll be lost without the EU. And so on. Looking at the vaccines debacle currently engulfing the EU, it's hard to see how anyone could have been so wrong.

Critics were not hard to find when Britain decided in July last year to opt out of the EU's vaccines procurement policy.

"Walking away from the EU vaccines scheme is putting ideology ahead of public health," tweeted Layla Moran for the Liberal Democrats.

"At a time when the UK should be accelerating efforts to work with our EU partners towards finding a vaccine, it is concerning that the UK government has

instead rejected the opportunity to take part in yet another EU-wide programme," said the SNP's Shadow Brexit Secretary.

"We will be seeking official clarification on the reasons why the government has come to this decision and seeking reassurance that this will not lead to any supply issues or delays for the UK population," said David Wrigley, deputy chair of the British Medical Association, assuming the worst.

It's looking increasingly like the critics – most of them clearly motivated by ideology, namely opposition to British independence – were wrong on all fronts.

"Little" Britain has actually invested more in vaccine preparedness than the

European Commission. By the end of 2020, according to a report in *The Guardian*, the EU had spent just €1.78 billion in "risk money" given to pharma companies, compared with €1.9 billion by Britain.

Care

Importantly, Britain had thought things through. The vaccines group led by Kate Bingham had taken care to consider how to ensure that the orders they had given could actually be fulfilled.

That is why investment flowed into building capacity at Oxford Biomedica, for example, in good time so that production difficulties – notoriously common for

vaccination programme. And its attempt to strongarm

ecines crisis into a fiasco

bioreactors – could be smoothed out.

In another smart move, the government financed the construction of and reserved 18 months of an entire fill-and-finish production line at the Wrexham factory run by Wockhardt. After all, there's no point in producing vaccine if you can't get it into a vial.

And while vaccination here is proceeding apace, the EU is way behind.

That is hardly surprising. The EU is interested in only one thing: how to increase its power. It has long been frustrated that health is a matter reserved to individual countries, and has been eyeing ways of getting more of a say.

Indeed, until this year its health directorate has been a backwater, overseeing a budget of less than €450 million (that's around 0.05 per cent of the total EU budget) over the seven years from 2014 to 2020.

And a backwater in expertise, too. The health directorate lacks staff and skills, from the top to the bottom. But the Commission saw the Covid-19 pandemic as an opportunity to vastly increase its own reach (and take away policy areas from member states).

So in the next seven-year budgetary cycle, which began this year, the health directorate has been allocated €5.1 billion – a more than elevenfold increase (though the Commission actually wanted an even more massive €9.4 billion).

The money could hardly be going to a less deserving recipient: the directorate, supposedly beefed up with a heavyweight deputy director general from the far larger enterprise directorate, has been overseeing the current shambles from the start.

That story has been told many times by many people – how an obsession with price and liability put the EU three months behind Britain in the race to get vaccinations up and running.

Yet the most instructive thing about the fiasco is not how it came about. That is a relatively mundane though desperately tragic (for the peoples of Europe) story of bureaucratic bungling, a ludicrous and unwarranted sense of power and competence, and the inbuilt inertia of a system that needs 27 countries to sign up to any

'The EU fell back on its instinctive reflexes...'

change. More important is what happened next.

If you wanted to be exceptionally generous, you could say that the EU was in uncharted territory and just made the wrong choices. But the reaction to failure has been devastatingly instructive. It has seen the EU falling back on all its inbuilt reflexes, lashing out at anybody and everybody, blaming all but itself.

Shoot the messenger

Its first move was to shoot the messengers, the pharma companies, for telling them the facts of vaccine production. Then came spite: like getting the Belgian government to send police to raid AstraZeneca's factory in Seneffe, 25 miles south of Brussels, in a desperate fishing expedition for evidence of skulduggery (no evidence has yet come to light). That kind of behaviour will only encourage pharma companies to set up shop outside the EU.

And then the control freakery really kicked in. European Council president Charles Michel declared that the EU might exert direct rule over the entire European pharmaceutical industry, forcing companies to share patents, processes and licences and overseeing all aspects of vaccine production.

The tool Michel said could be used is Article 122 of the treaties governing the EU – an article that hitherto everyone thought was about providing economic support to individual countries in urgent need, for example (as the article states) in an energy shortage. Apparently EU lawyers think it enables the Commission to do what it likes.

Then came sheer panic: the extraordinary invocation on the morning of Friday 30 January of Article 16 of the Northern Ireland Protocol to block the (apparently non-existent) export of vaccines from the republic to the north.

It turned out that the EU had not even

consulted the Irish government in advance of the move. Meanwhile, the Commission had achieved the impossible: not just the British government but all five political parties in Northern Ireland were united – in condemnation. By the end of the day, the EU had performed a rapid U-turn.

Now, it is undoubtedly true that if Britain had never left the EU it could probably still have set up its own vaccine procurement programme, and licensed vaccines through the British regulator, the MHRA. Difficult, politically dynamite, costly in political capital, but just about possible.

But the price Britain would have paid for staying in the EU is now clear. Had Britain remained, we would have been open to pressure to conduct EU-directed raids on British factories. Worse, much worse, we could be subject to EU control of our entire vaccine production capability.

And no, Britain could not have vetoed the imposition of Article 122 – it requires only a majority vote.

Whatever happens now in the pandemic, Britain will be in a much better position with regard to vaccines than it was before the virus struck. Then, back in February 2020, there were only two smallish plants capable of making vaccine: one in Speke, Liverpool, making seasonal influenza jabs, and another in Livingstone run by Valneva producing small quantities of a vaccine for Japanese encephalitis.

Now there are four companies making Covid-19 vaccines, plus another two "rapid response" centres. The Valneva vaccine is to be produced at Livingstone at a plant greatly expanded with public money.

And there is a much better mindset too. There's a new emphasis on making things here, in Britain.

That shift is epitomised by an observation from Imperial College professor Peter Openshaw to the *Financial Times* this February. Noting that the economics of vaccine production had led to different elements of vaccine manufacturing being distributed to different countries, he said, "Now it makes sense to have everything necessary for vaccine production within the UK borders."

That's a lesson being drawn throughout British industry, and not before time. ■

Brexit has left British research free to develop itself – but still left some strings attached?

Research and innovation

THE COVID-19 pandemic has shown how vital a first-class science base is to the health of a country, as well as to its wealth. More than that, it has shown that independence from the EU is a liberating force, enabling Britain to break free of the dead hand of Brussels and institute world-class, life-saving vaccine production and vaccination programmes.

But there's more to an economy than vaccines. As the prospects for defeating the pandemic grow, attention will turn to all the other areas of research that are essential to an advanced industrial and intellectual life. Has Britain really learnt one of the key lessons of Covid-19 – that it is not enough to have brilliant science, it must be linked to production as well?

Credit where it is due. Health secretary Matt Hancock's insistence last year that the Oxford vaccine had to be produced in Britain has paid dividends many times over.

Whether penicillin was in Hancock's mind is not known, but there was to be no repeat of that shameful history. Oxford chemist Howard Florey was unable to gain support from the British government or from British industry during World War Two to start antibiotic production in this country. Instead, he took the penicillin mould to the United States.

With the pandemic over, and Brexit achieved, an R&D environment geared to inventiveness and independence can really take off. But will it?

The Trade and Cooperation Agreement signed with the EU marks the end of the European Court of Justice's reign over how research is conducted in this country. Its signing was immediately followed by a government consultation aimed at restoring to scientists the freedom they had lacked

'Will Britain gain new employment, new opportunities for a young workforce?'

within the EU to create new products and processes with gene editing, for example. That, though, is not the end of Britain's involvement in the EU's research world.

Horizon Europe

A good part of the negotiations over the agreement centred on the terms under which Britain could take part in the EU's new Horizon Europe research programme. (It's not immediately obvious when you read the agreement as there is no mention of Horizon Europe, but see Part 5, dealing with "union programmes".)

At €95.5 billion over the seven years from 2021 to 2027, Horizon Europe accounts for some 9 per cent of the EU's entire budget for the period – regional support, Common Agricultural Policy, everything. It's a huge source of funding, and British researchers want to be eligible for grants under it.

One real question is whether the contribution Britain will have to pay to access the programme will be value for money. It looks like the fee will be around €2 billion a year. That's big money: to put it into context, it's equivalent to around 20 per cent of the UK's budget for research and development in 2021. And so far, no one has made it clear exactly where the money will come from.

But it certainly won't be new money: it will come from cash already promised to research. And it's a huge amount to hand over to the EU for participation in a programme where Britain does not get a vote on how programmes are designed nor on how money is disbursed. Rather like walking into a supermarket and having to buy whatever the store will give you.

On the plus side, the agreement does not promise any special arrangements for European researchers seeking to work in Britain for more than 90 days. Instead, they will be treated just like any other person from abroad, which is as it should be.

One part of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement deals with what happens if British scientists get more, or less, than our share (calculated according to GDP, and assumed to be 18 per cent of total funding). The arrangement has been politely termed "asymmetric".



Sandor Szmukto/shutterstock.com

The Francis Crick Institute, London – the largest

In plain language, if Britain wins 8 per cent more funding than anticipated it will have to pay more. But a rebate only applies if Britain gets 16 per cent less than anticipated – and then only if the EU agrees.

On top of all this, the British government has agreed that the ultimate arbiter of any disagreement about funding decisions under Horizon Europe is...yes, the European Court of Justice.

In practice this may not matter much, provided all runs smoothly. Programme and funding decisions for previous Horizon programmes have traditionally been taken by consensus, not by votes. And the European Court of Justice has never (yet) been involved in funding decisions. But it could matter a great deal, and, worse, sets a poor precedent.

It also leaves some disciplines dangerously dependent on EU funding, especially in the arts and humanities. Although the

has the Trade and Cooperation Agreement with the EU

n for independence



concentration of biomedical research in Europe.

current position is unclear, the most recent figures available (from 2014) suggest that Archaeology, Classics, IT, Media Studies, Law and Philosophy all gained more than a quarter of their total funding from EU programmes.

It does no good for Britain or for British independence to have tens of thousands of academics dependent on the EU for their income. Nor for universities to employ – as they do – armies of support staff whose sole task is to sift through the entrails of Horizon programmes to find funding opportunities. Why not support researchers directly, where they deserve support?

What kind of future?

Whatever happens with EU funding, the government has committed itself to big increases in R&D spending. At close to £15 billion, the figure for 2021 announced by chancellor Rishi Sunak in his Autumn

Statement is itself an uplift of more than 50 per cent over the £9.6 billion it spent in 2018. The ambition is for public R&D expenditure to double to £22 billion by 2024-25.

This, if carried through, would set the scene for a massive advance in research in Britain. But like all governments, this one is great at making announcements, and poor at doing what it promises.

Success cannot just be measured in prestigious scientific papers or even Nobel prizes. Will Britain gain new employment, new opportunities for a young workforce (which will need training), new industries?

Here the track record is not impressive. The penicillin failure was not a blip. Finance capital in Britain has seldom wished to take risk and invest in new technologies, and neither have governments given them much encouragement.

Take biosciences, for example. There is

a government-funded programme called Biomedical Catalyst to back early-stage companies in this area. It's run by Innovate UK, but it's out on the periphery, and lacks any core funding. Instead, it relies on top-ups from the government.

In June 2020, in the wake of the pandemic, Biomedical Catalyst was "relaunched" (an implicit admission of failure) with an injection of £30 million from the government, but the money was just a one-off, with no guarantee of future funding.

A report in November from the UK BioIndustry Association illustrates the scale of failure. Using a Freedom of Information request, the association found out that fewer than 4 per cent of projects ranked worthy of investment received funding from the Biomedical Catalyst in 2019-20 – down from 31 per cent in 2014-15. The missed opportunities could have brought in £2.5 billion in private investment.

Under the terms of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, Britain is no longer part of the European Investment Bank, nor will it be involved in the part of the European Innovation Council's "Accelerator" programme that invests in shareholdings. So Britain will be free to make its own decisions about how to support promising hi-tech ideas

Scathing

But to take advantage of the opportunities presented by research, the government is going to have to do a lot more. On 3 February this year, the House of Lords Science and Technology committee issued a scathing indictment of its Catapult Network, run by Innovate UK and set up to help "transform the UK's capability for innovation in sectors of strength".

In its report, the Lords committee said that the country's research and innovation system "has the necessary components to be successful, but it lacks the scale to deliver a large increase in commercial exploitation".

The government, it said, needs to develop a "strategic plan for delivering its R&D ambitions" (that is, it actually doesn't have one at the moment) along with clear criteria for how it will select technologies and sectors to support. ■

The British fishing industry was strongly in favour of Brexit of leaving the EU. But that's not the end of the story...

A truly independent coast

IN THE WEEKS since the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement was signed, the fishing industry has been targeted by a storm of new bureaucracy and obstacles. And it will not see an immediate end to EU boats fishing in British waters.

Catch certificates and health documents are now required for exports to the EU, our biggest market – and also to Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK. They must be issued by a vet. Troublingly, it seems there aren't enough vets where they are most needed, especially at the major Scottish export hubs.

Arrogantly, the EU thought Britain would back down, but it lost a quarter of the previous entitlement to fish in our waters. Now it is being plain vindictive. And some at home are also trying to throw a spanner into the works.

Unprepared

The Scottish Seafood Association points the finger firmly at the SNP-dominated Scottish administration, where hopes of dashing Brexit still linger. Checks that should take one hour are reportedly now taking five times as long. Food Standards Scotland, responsible for issuing health documentation, seems not to have properly prepared for the new arrangements.

Any major change in trading arrangements will hit some snags. One of the first to come to light was incompatibility between French and British IT systems, causing delays to landing fish stocks in France. These have largely been resolved.

Then at the beginning of February the EU abruptly banned the export of all live bivalve molluscs – cockles, mussels, scallops and oysters – unless from clean Class A waters. There are very few around the English and Welsh coast. Molluscs from our Class B waters have to be cleaned before being deemed fit for human consumption.

Many shellfish companies, typically working in Morecambe Bay and North Wales waters, had previously exported their catch for cleaning on the continent. The EU will not allow this any more. Shellfish companies now find this route to market closed off, and a sector worth millions of pounds arbitrarily shut down.



Chris Lawrence Travel/shutterstock.com

Crab and lobster pots on the quayside at Torquay. At the beginning of February the EU unilaterally banned

With so much uncertainty, blame is being apportioned left, right and centre. For instance, fish hauliers have staged one or two desultory protests in central London, castigating the government for not achieving total access to our waters in one fell swoop. Some just wish we'd never left the EU in the first place and blame Brexit for the chaos, whatever the cause.

Instead the fishing industry needs a sense of perspective, as do all British workers when they look to the future. It wasn't Brexit that laid waste to our fishing industry and to so many communities – it was decades of decline and underinvestment. And that mostly happened while Britain was bound to the EU and its Common Fisheries Policy, whose quotas and one-size-fits-all policy denied Britain access to most of our own waters and the ability to manage stocks.

The Trade and Cooperation Agreement unquestionably leaves a lot to be desired as far as fishing is concerned. The weeks following its signing were always going to be a tricky period for fishing. And the pandemic has squeezed demand as restaurants are closed everywhere.

But with independence comes responsibility. We can no longer shrug our shoulders and point a finger at the EU. Britain has taken a big step on the way to returning our waters back to British control. We will have to hold our elected government to account as we seek to rebuild our fishing capacity and bring some stability to scattered fishing communities all round our coasts.

Fishing accounts for just 0.1 per cent of British GDP, but it proved to be a major hurdle during the protracted negotiations over the agreement. Soundbites such as "Taking back control of our waters" were repeated endlessly by the government as it sought to assure us that this traditional and iconic industry would thrive once again.

'We have declared that we will decide what happens in our waters...'

t, and the government trumpeted it as a big beneficiary

stal state?



banned the import of live shellfish from almost all the waters around Britain.

Now the agreement has been published, we should examine what it holds for fishing (and other sectors) in more detail.

The headline is the progressive reduction of total allowable catches for EU vessels in our waters over the next 5 years, up to 25 per cent of what they take now. Further variations are subject to annual negotiation. Certainly that's not taking back full control immediately, more a series of steps towards it.

The EU was holding out strongly for a 14-year transition. In that light the deal isn't quite the sell-out some insist. Negotiation, by definition, rarely concludes in outright victory for one party. But we have declared to the whole world that we will decide what happens in our waters.

The ball is in our court. Decades of decline mean that our capacity to catch, process and sell fish must be rebuilt if we are to land all of the fish in our waters. That decline started before Britain accepted the Common Fisheries Policy. Release from the EU is an opportunity and not a silver bullet.

The Trade and Cooperation Agreement reduces the scope of EU boats to fish in

our seas, but that's not the whole story. Substantial parts of the British quota have been sold to foreign boats sailing under a British flag. Half of England's quota, for instance, is owned by companies in Iceland, Spain and the Netherlands, accounting for some 130,000 tonnes a year.

Current rules permit this arrangement if the boats have an economic link to Britain, such as landing most of their catch here, or having a majority British crew. The trade agreement does nothing to ensure that the additional catch in our waters goes to British-owned boats and not just those flying the flag.

60 per cent call

This weakness must be addressed. Fishing for Leave, which played a prominent role in the Brexit campaign, has proposed a simple formula – "All British fishing vessels must be 60 per cent British owned, 60 per cent British crewed, and must land 60 per cent of their catches in Britain."

Control of British waters means protecting fisheries and conserving stocks. There are many steps that a resolute

government could take to preserve fish stocks and protect the marine environment.

The government has already banned pulse fishing, which targets flat fish with strong electric currents, but adversely impacts other species.

And there is growing pressure to ban the enormous supertrawlers, which Hoover up everything in their path, as well as bottom trawlers, which recklessly drag heavy fishing gear over the seabed.

Norway has given a decisive lead on protection. Earlier this year it reduced EU quotas for cod in the Svalbard island protection zone. Bully that it is, the EU declared its own higher quota for the area.

Violation

The response of the Norwegian fisheries minister speaks volumes. "Norway is protesting the EU's one-sided licensing of fishing quotas in the protected fishing zone around Svalbard," he said. "That's in violation of Norway's sovereign rights under maritime law..." He had "therefore made it clear to the EU that every single fish caught beyond Norway's own issuance of quotas will amount to illegal fishing and will be dealt with by the Coast Guard in the usual manner."

A national government, acting in a sovereign way on behalf of its people will see off any bully.

Britain will also need to be assiduous in safeguarding its newly reclaimed sovereignty. One focus must be on the Royal Navy's Overseas Patrol Squadron, the long-established unit responsible for patrolling our waters. Presently the squadron comprises four offshore patrol vessels and one helicopter. Measured against the 80,000 square miles of sea which is Britain's Exclusive Economic Zone, it is manifestly inadequate.

The likelihood of armed conflict at sea with other nations may be low, but protecting our fishing rights, and crucially, conducting routine inspections of fishing vessels in our waters, requires a force large and flexible enough to be capable of rapid response. We have seen the Army play a significant role in assisting with the vaccination programme. The Navy must be bolstered to deliver protection offshore. ■

While the SNP concentrates on eye-catching headlines, in kowtowing to EU state aid rules and a long-term agenda of

Unreality grips as separa

THE SNP administration in Edinburgh seems to have lost its grip on reality. What other conclusion can be drawn from Nicola Sturgeon's instruction that the EU flag, alongside the Scottish saltire, is to be flown at all government buildings? The union flag is allowed only once a year – on Remembrance Sunday. Its internecine battles may have led the SNP administration to flail about seeking distractions, and this one certainly grabbed the headlines.

The symbolism is clear: the SNP and its separatist supporters are determined to pretend that Scotland has not left the European Union along with the rest of Britain. Just when workers have a golden opportunity to strive for unity and a truly independent Britain, the SNP wants to split and drag a major portion of our island back to being a dependency of Brussels.

This has been a serious and long-term plan. A large team of civil servants were hard at work throughout 2020 to finalise the UK Withdrawal from the European Union (Continuity) (Scotland) Bill 2021. It was finally adopted by Holyrood and became law on 31 January this year. Scotland is the only devolved administration to enact this type of legislation, which gives Scottish ministers power to keep its laws similar to EU law.

This runs counter to British government efforts to pursue an independent course for the whole country. The new Scottish law actually allows for a new organisation to be set up to ensure that, for example, EU governance would continue on environmental policy and that compliance be enforced.

The Scottish Constitution Secretary, Mike Russell, confirmed that the new law would mean that, on devolved matters, Scottish laws could “keep in line with those in Europe”. He said that the new law would make it easier for Scotland to rejoin the EU.

Britain has the benefits of a common language, an established single currency, a central bank, the ability to furlough and an internal market that gives Scotland over five times as much trade with Britain than with the EU. This is the reality that the civil service should be told to analyse and develop instead of being instructed to engage with fantasy.

If this is happening with impunity under



Bill Kasman/geograph.org.uk (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Cold comfort for Scottish industry. Pictured, the BiFab site at Methil, Fife.

the current system of devolution, just think what splitting activities would arise under proposals for more powers for the Scottish parliament and so-called “progressive federalism”. Even now, the SNP administration maintains offices in Brussels costing millions, and separate facilities in most European countries. Much of this activity is facilitated by the UK civil service.

Opportunities ignored

With its continuing worship of all things EU, the SNP administration is in no fit state to contribute to the industrial vision needed at the forthcoming UN Climate Change Conference (COP 26) scheduled for

Glasgow in November.

Such a vision requires the government of a united Britain to muster an independent, integrated, detailed energy strategy and present it clearly. That can't be done while a tinpot administration in one corner of the country is acting as a block on progress. Nor when it is wilfully allowing Scottish companies to be destroyed, as it is in shipbuilding.

The SNP's handling of the procurement process for new ships was described in December by Holyrood's own rural affairs committee as “a catastrophic failure”.

For years that failure was blamed on EU state aid rules. Yet it is as if Scotland

Industry in Scotland faces a bleak future after years of
of fragmentation and privatisation...

Artists desert industry



were still in the EU, with Holyrood's fear of offending Brussels uppermost – allowing the last privately owned shipbuilding company in Scotland, Ferguson Marine, to go under. BAE Systems continues to fulfil UK naval contracts, but the great shipbuilding rivers of the past remain silent.

And this despite the need for new tonnage, particularly of small and medium-sized ships. These are lacking in areas such as supply vessels, fisheries protection and ferry services to the many western isles. The dearth of smaller cruise ships, for example, brought to an end the archaeology- and history-based cruises of the National Trust for Scotland. Post-Covid

such an industry could be revived if ships were commissioned.

The report from the rural affairs committee concluded: "The Scottish Government's approach to the procurement and construction of new vessels has been short-term, piecemeal and lacking in strategic direction."

Former MP Brian Wilson, who used to campaign for remaining in the EU, is now critical of hiding behind EU rules. In an article he wrote in February for *The Herald* newspaper headlined "Shipbuilding: There is a way to create a new golden age on the Clyde. Let's grasp the opportunity," he wrote, "It is at least possible that Brexit creates that opening.

"For decades, membership of the EU was blamed for our inability to use public procurement as a means of supporting our own basic industries – and none more so than shipbuilding...From my own experience, I think the EU was more of an excuse than a reason. In the CalMac case, there was a long-term civil service agenda in Edinburgh to fragment and privatise."

Wilson expressed the fear that of the nearly £1 billion worth of shipbuilding orders on the books most would be fulfilled abroad.

Now, out of the EU, it's not only shipbuilding that can be revitalised. Along with it would come the need for steel and new engineering technologies.

BiFab collapse

Further evidence of the Scottish administration's destructive approach came with the collapse of Burntisland Fabrications (BiFab – see *Workers*, January/February 2021). Nearly £40 million of taxpayers' money was invested in it, but the yards at Methil in Fife and Arnish on the Isle of Lewis, which were linked to BiFab and are dedicated to the growing renewables industry, are all that remains of the oil and gas boom from previous decades.

Now there is a new operator, InfraStrata. On 12 February this year it bought the sites for just £850,000. Previous acquisitions by this company have included Harland & Wolff in Belfast (taking it out of administration in 2019) and Appledore shipyard in Devon, which had closed in

"Thousands of jobs and billions of pounds have been outsourced around the world..."

2018. Its plans for wind energy construction seem to be stuck at the aspirational stage, and are not inspiring confidence in the workforce.

In a joint statement, the trade unions representing workers in the industry, GMB and Unite, welcomed the development but emphasised that "the story to date has been one of government failure" and pressed for guarantees that the use of local supply chains would be written into the contracts.

Scottish union secretaries Pat Rafferty (Unite) and Gary Smith (GMB) pointed out that while the facilities had remained closed, "thousands of jobs and billions of pounds have been outsourced around the world." InfraStrata is negotiating a 12-year lease for the BiFab sites.

Foreign ownership

On the railways, the SNP administration remains loyal to the Dutch state-owned rail company that owns Abellio, holder of the ScotRail franchise. The rail workers' trade union RMT objected that the administration was "set to reward failure and give Abellio a free ride to continue operating the ScotRail franchise from 2022". And this despite Abellio's "well documented poor performance."

RMT general secretary Mick Cash pointed out on 12 February that the "Scottish government is once again showing its bias in favour of a privatised railway...and has also refused to publish its response to the UK Government's Williams Review of Rail, choosing instead to hide behind a veil of secrecy."

It is clear the SNP has taken its eye off any industrial responsibilities. No wonder it feels the need for distracting headlines. ■

Before Covid-19, 4.4 billion journeys were made by bus each year in the UK's public transport system, but workers will have to fight to keep the industry afloat.

Buses – the fight for the future



Workers

Manchester is set to be the scene for a major battle over Go-Ahead's attempt to "fire and rehire" workers on worse pay and conditions.

NO ONE can predict with any certainty what the impact of the Covid-19 crisis will be on travel patterns and volumes. Encouraging early forecasts suggest the bus industry will eventually recover to around 80 per cent of pre-Covid-19 demand.

The industry is currently running nearly 100 per cent of pre-pandemic services but

'Money available for subsidies has been getting progressively smaller...'

with capacity reduced to a little over 50 per cent owing to the needs of social distancing. Despite the government's mixed messages about the safety of travelling by public transport, before the second lockdown buses were carrying around 55 to 60 per cent of pre-Covid-19 passenger numbers, a real achievement in the provision of vital services to key workers. This has been accomplished because the government has pumped large sums of money into the private operators to protect their financial positions.

Falling

Even before Covid-19, cuts in subsidies meant that passenger numbers outside of London had fallen to their lowest levels in 50 years. And while in London bus usage was still historically high, in other cities it has collapsed to historically low levels.

In London, the local authority (Transport for London) decides what bus services the city needs, and then invites bus companies to compete to run those services. TfL sets the fares and ticket types, which can be used on all services regardless of which company runs them. They also set the timetables, the quality of the vehicles, and even the colour they are painted – always the traditional red! It may not be public ownership, but it does represent much greater public control.

In the rest of the country, many services are run on a commercial basis, with companies competing with each other on lucrative routes. The local authorities step in to fund the less profitable or unprofitable routes, or even bus services run at less busy times like evenings and Sundays. And the money they have available for such subsidies has been getting progressively

Each year. Buses are the backbone of Britain's public and quality bus services the country needs....

the future

smaller over recent years.

In Manchester, the campaign group Better Buses for Greater Manchester was launched in 2018, highlighting the fact that bus firms had paid shareholders £1.5 billion in dividends in the previous decade, while fares had soared and services had been axed. They pointed out that fares had gone up by an average of 55 per cent during that decade, with some passengers seeing increases of 100 per cent.

The major bus companies – Arriva, FirstGroup, Go-Ahead, National Express and Stagecoach – carried 70 per cent of all Britain's bus passengers and paid an average £149 million a year in dividends during the 10 year period. Company records showed dividends being paid amounting to £48,077,200 from profits in the South East, £23,521,200 in the North East, £18,460,700 in the North West, £13,767,700 in the Midlands and £27,309,700 in London.

Franchise

In January 2020, just before the Covid-19 crisis, 11,000 people signed a petition, delivered to the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) by a protest march. It called on the GMCA to introduce a franchise-based system like that in place in London as a first step to improve Manchester's bus services.

The GMCA has understandably delayed making a decision about franchising, given that the impact and effect of Covid-19 remains uncertain. But the authority seems to accept that franchising will probably offer the best value for money solution available to it, not least to ensure a planned local bus network that would be fully integrated with its extensive tram system and local rail services.

The GMCA's move to franchising is thought to be unpopular with Manchester's bus operators, who see it as a threat to their profits. And GMCA's bus services are directly threatened by the greed of at least one of their operators.

Go-Ahead, new boys on the block, arrived in Manchester two years ago having purchased a massive bus depot and 163 buses from First Group for £11.17 million. Trading as Go North West, the subsidiary made an operating profit of £77.9 million in

2020. But clearly, that level of profit is not enough.

Even though the company is propped up by government subsidy during the Covid-19 crisis, it is pushing for significant cost savings. After sham negotiations with the Unite union, the company decided to get its managers to personally deliver letters to over 400 bus drivers with an ultimatum – sign a new and much inferior contract, or be sacked on 8 May.

Unite members returned an 82 per cent yes vote in favour of strike action, which will cause disruption to 30 bus routes throughout the Greater Manchester area and beyond. (See News, page 5.)

Unite bus driver members in London are also joining the fight against greedy bosses. Two thousand Unite members employed by the Paris-based transport company RATP, which operates three subsidiaries in the London bus network – London United, London Sovereign and Quality Line – will take strike action over the period from 22 to 24 February.

RATP wants its London United drivers to work far longer hours for £2,500 less each year. The company also threatens to introduce zero hours style contracts, which would result in drivers only being paid for when they are physically driving a bus, and not when they are actually at work.

Drivers at Epsom-based Quality Line are paid £2.50 an hour less than drivers at RATP's other subsidiaries. The company has offered another 7p per hour!

London Sovereign drivers operating bus services in North West London have been offered a pay increase of just 0.75 per cent, which is well below what has been offered by other operators.

Another bus workers' union, RMT, has accused employers of a "wild west approach" to Covid-19 safety regulations and measures, playing fast and loose with their members' health and safety.

A survey completed by over 900 workers highlights their concerns, not surprising given the fact that nearly 40 bus drivers in London alone have died of Covid-19 related illnesses.

The RMT survey reveals that 80 per cent of bus workers think enforcement of face coverings on bus services is inad-

'Employers are playing fast and loose with health and safety...'

quate, 70 per cent think enforcement of social distancing on bus services is inadequate, and only a quarter know who is responsible for enforcing Covid-19 safety measures on bus services. 60 per cent of bus workers said their employer had taken no additional steps to protect staff safety since the emergence of the more infectious strain of Covid-19.

The survey also found that the lack of an industry-wide approach to Covid-19 in the bus industry has created significant disparity in measures being adopted by bus operators to protect workers from coming into contact with Covid-19 at work.

Profit comes first

More than 4 in 10 bus workers do not have access to washing facilities at work or on their route, more than half report that their company has not put provisions in place to allow cashless travel, and less than a quarter have an exact fare policy at work to minimise cash handling. Nearly 7 in 10 bus workers believe their employer has put business priorities before safety during the pandemic.

As one member commented "The company is only worried about revenue, not employees."

The bus industry was mostly privatised in 1986. And in the years that followed, pay and conditions were trashed. Despite the severe weakening of union organisation, bus workers have over the years managed to organise and claw back some of those losses. That progress is now under threat.

The pandemic has clearly given employers a new confidence to attack their workers, and it will need enormous unity and considerable tactical nous if workers and their unions are to successfully face down the onslaught. Only then will they ensure that Britain has the quality bus services it needs and deserves. ■

There's a reason why the people of Wales have not succumbed to separatism. As a recent book shows, they are committed

Wales – integral to Britain

Wales – England's colony? By Martin Johnes, paperback, 196 pages, ISBN 978-1912681419, Parthian Books, 2019, £8.99. Kindle edition also available.

FROM THE very beginnings of Wales, its people have defined themselves in relation to their larger neighbour. Martin Johnes, Professor of Modern History at Swansea University, explores the unusual relationship between Wales and the rest of Britain.

Two acts were passed in 1536 and 1543 to create a single state and legal system. These were not imperial acts or the actions of a coloniser. The British state did not act as an alien imposition in Wales – as it did in Ireland.

Johnes writes, “Had the Acts been imposed on an unwilling Welsh people then they could be considered colonial acts but they were not.” They did not create the political union of England and Wales, which already existed in effect. But the acts removed the legal disadvantages of being Welsh. He explains that the Welsh saw them “...not as acts of assimilation but of liberation that ended the system of apartheid and the system of Welsh law which they felt was old-fashioned and disadvantageous.”

Welsh separatism can only succeed by breaking down national bonds of solidarity and tolerance, of mutual respect. They trade on divisiveness and disrespect. Johnes explains it in this way, “Blaming England for all the ills, past and present, of Welsh society is to forget how many of the Welsh were willing partners in British industrial, imperialist, cultural and political ventures. To dismiss this as false consciousness is to dismiss the Welsh of the past as stupid, unable to see or under-

“The exploitation that might seem to be about nation was often really about class.”



Chris Goddard/shutterstock.com

Tata steel works, Port Talbot. It was the industrial revolution which forged the British nation.

stand their own condition.”

Johnes observes for example that Welsh responses to the First World War were rooted in a very real British patriotism. He argues that it's simplistic and an insult to the intelligence of those people to dismiss that as the result of an educational system that distorted history and brain-washed Welsh children.

The people of Wales have shown no desire to leave Britain since the introduction of universal suffrage in 1928. As Johnes puts it, “Modern Wales was kept in the British union not by force but by the votes of the Welsh...modern Wales was British through choice rather than coercion. Most of the Welsh regarded themselves as partners in Britain, not victims of it.” In the 1999 referendum on devolution, only a quarter of the people of Wales voted for it.

To say that the English exploited the Welsh is false. Capital, as ever, exploited labour – irrespective of whether workers were Welsh or English. Johnes observes, “The exploitation that might seem to be about nation was often really about class.”

The capitalist class of Britain – not of

England or Wales separately – controlled the means of production and still does. Johnes again: “...those who argue that Wales' natural resources were taken from it are only telling a partial truth. The people of Wales never owned the bulk of the resources of the land. It was not another nation that denied them but an economic system of capitalism.” Johnes concludes that the UK state failed Wales because it was capitalist and not because it was dominated by England.

Dividers

Those who wish to divide Britain are again seeking to take Scotland out of Britain and also to take Britain out of Scotland. That would strip Scottish people of their British identity.

The people of Scotland, England and Wales each have their own cultural and social identity, but it was the industrial revolution which forged the British nation. The development of England, Scotland and Wales into a single British nation was a logical historical process. Britain was the first to go through the often brutal transformation of a predominantly feudal and

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agricultural society into one that is capital-ist and industrial.

Britain is one nation, a family of nations gathered into one. As one might expect with Britain, this arrangement is most unusual, if not unique.

The union is a success, and we should improve it even more now that we are independent of the EU. Britain is our place, our home – a unique model of unity and diversity, where we can all unite two identities: we can be British and English, British and Scottish, British and Welsh.

In the face of attempts to divide Britain, we need to reach a higher level of national unity, respecting and enjoying our different social and cultural achievements, yet committed to union.

We need more great transport, energy and infrastructure, projects to unite the whole country. Concrete achievements will strengthen our unity. Constitutional tinkering will not. Better to turn to a far more noble independence cause, that of building an independent Britain. Johnes clearly answers his question: Wales was not and is not England's colony. It is an integral – and treasured – part of Britain. ■

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With another set of reforms to the NHS in prospect, it's worth looking at what workers did for themselves in the past...

Workers' health in South Wales

BEFORE THE Second World War, the great majority of people gained access to medical care as individuals. A comprehensive system did not exist to manage demand and to coordinate provision. And the quality and availability of health provision depended on income and relative poverty.

At the end of the nineteenth century medical care came through different routes; these did not change much until the National Health Service was introduced in 1948. About 5 or 6 per cent of the population relied on basic local provision through the Poor Law, and 10 to 15 per cent had free care from charitable institutions. The most common arrangement, used by about three-quarters of the population, was mutual aid. The remainder, less than 10 per cent, paid fees to private doctors according to income or used prepayment schemes based on a fixed annual fee.

Unlicensed

Outpatient departments of the voluntary hospitals were greatly used. A government survey of 1910 showed many people turned to unlicensed medical practitioners as well, including chemists, bonesetters, Christian Scientists, faith healers, abortionists and so on.

Social solidarity was always indispensable for working class communities if they wanted to make improvements or gain a better existence. Collective rather than individual initiatives were undertaken. These offered a greater chance of advance in a political landscape of profit-making. And so it was with medical treatment.

South Wales is a good example, and it provided one of the inspirations for the NHS. The area was heavily industrialised

'Miners also set up health schemes such as the Tredegar Medical Aid Society...'

but had a boom and bust economy. That was mainly because it relied on a single industry – coal – which in turn depended on unstable and price-sensitive export markets.

The 1890s to the early 1920s saw a period of rapid expansion for coal. At its peak in 1921, the industry employed a quarter of a million men in Wales. But then came the recession as overseas markets began to shrink. Many pits closed and in others the owners sought to reduce costs by cutting wages, increasing hours and introducing mechanised cutting and conveyors. By 1933, employment in the industry was only half of the peak level.

The South Wales Miners' Federation began in 1898. By 1914 it was the largest union in Britain, reaching 198,000 members in 1921. The centre of pit village life in the mining valleys was the union lodge which fostered collective responses to many community difficulties.

The miners elected their own leaders to the Boards of Guardians which administered Poor Law relief, which helped at times. For example at the end of the 1926 lockout the Bedwelty Board provided relief for destitute miners and their families against government instructions. These guardians were eventually removed by the government.

Unrivalled

Miners also set up health schemes such as the Tredegar Medical Aid Society. These varied in coverage but typically provided primary and secondary health care, dentistry and midwifery services for all subscribers and their families. This was unrivalled in Britain at the time for working people. And importantly management of the scheme was organised entirely by the mine workers themselves.

The Tredegar Workmen's Medical Aid and Sick Relief Fund was founded in 1890. It brought together a number of schemes run by benevolent societies in the town and the Health and Education Fund that had been set up in the early 1870s by the Tredegar Iron and Coal Company.

There were a number of similar company-based schemes in South Wales at the time. Employees of mines, iron and coal



Geoff Charles/National Library of Wales (public domain)

Miners being trained at the Aberaman training centre

firms paid a small proportion of their wages. In return they received medical care when required, for themselves and their families. The scope of cover varied from scheme to scheme.

Following the merger of the town's schemes and the combining of their funds, membership of the Tredegar Workmen's Medical Aid and Sick Relief Fund increased, and by 1901 the Fund proposed that a hospital be built in the town. Built on land donated by Lord Tredegar and paid for by the Tredegar Iron and Coal Company, Tredegar Cottage Hospital opened in 1904 and was run by the Fund with weekly contributions from ironworkers. The influence of the company was quickly eroded with miners soon running affairs.

After the National Insurance Act of 1911 introduced unemployment benefit and sick pay, the Fund no longer provided sick pay. It became a benevolent society known as the Tredegar Workmen's Medical Aid Society.

In the same year the society opened a Central Surgery equipped with consulting

Worth looking at

in Wales



Centre near Merthyr Tydfil, 1951.

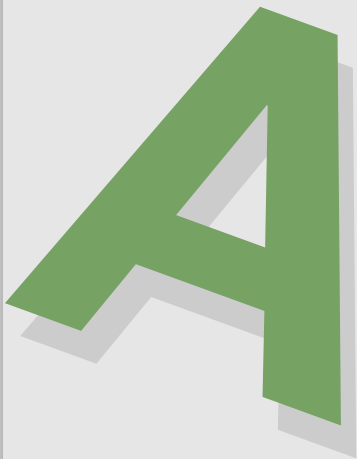
and treatment rooms, a pharmacy, a waiting room and accommodation for two doctors and their families. This was an important provision in a period where poverty was a reality or a frequent threat for a large majority of working people.

The society opened an office in the town and membership grew to more than 20,000. In 1925 it bought an old cinema and converted it into an extra surgery. By the 1930s the society was supplying medical aid to 95 per cent of the population – including members’ families and retired workers, employing five doctors and two dentists as well as pharmacists and nurses.

In the 30 years before the NHS existed the Tredegar Medical Aid Society catered for the medical needs of the people of Tredegar. The way it did so became a great source of inspiration for the creation of a national health service – notably the benefits of a health service free at the point of use. ■

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

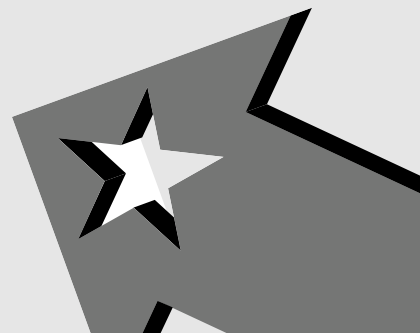
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Sense about steel

'Taking control means that what went before has to change. Steel production is fundamental to the capital projects that we will require...'

OUTLINE PROPOSALS for a new interventionist era for Britain by replacing EU state aid regulations with a home-grown subsidy scheme are one of the first benefits of Brexit. The proposed reduction in bureaucracy should make it easier to direct public money into areas essential to national sovereignty.

We've already seen how vital swift support can be. Companies that focus on innovation, research and development have already been targeted during the pandemic. Other areas that have benefited are energy and food security.

The proposals are out for consultation. They mention energy, agriculture, research and development, transport and skills, for example. But there are startling omissions. There is no mention of manufacture. And no mention of steel.

That must change. Basic industries such as steel must be included in this vital strategic overview – in tandem with support for energy. Production is energy intensive and the UK steel industry pays more for its power than any international competitor.

A report from UK Steel published in October 2019 detailed how domestic producers are charged £49.57 per megawatt-hour for electricity compared with £30.59 in Germany and £27.55 in France. So much for EU rules on state aid. The steel industry in Britain makes a direct contribution to the economy of £2.8 billion per annum and supports 32,600 jobs.

But a significant proportion of our capacity has been forced to close due to global competition, from Europe in the main, with significant current and future opportunity consequences. And for every job lost in steel there are four others at risk in the wider economy.

The cost of decommissioning a steelworks can run into billions of pounds, all in the name of securing a marginal price difference in contracts loaded in favour of foreign competitors. Britain has become

overly dependent on imports at a time when independence is the pressing priority.

It's not as if Britain can do without steel. As UK Steel points out, "A resilient, stable and sustainable domestic supply of steel is required to build schools, hospitals, homes, road and rail networks, digital technology and energy infrastructure – not to mention the steel needed for machinery in the production of food and medical equipment, to renew our water and sewage systems and in flood and security defences."

Taking control means that what went before has to change. Steel production is fundamental to the capital projects that we will require if the government's "build back better" is to have any relevance at all.

And of course, because high-quality coking coal is a vital component part of the steel production process, it is to the government's credit that it has not tried to stop the establishment of the Woodhouse Colliery at Whitehaven in Cumbria. The purpose of the colliery is to enable the extraction of a coking coal that is vital for steel making due to its particular strength and density. It is not used in energy generation.

But again we need to be vigilant. Environmental lobbyists continue to pressurise Cumbria County Council. Evidence is that it is starting to dither. Trade unions need to make sure the councillors don't get cold feet.

If the objective is to lessen emissions, it's common sense to ensure that domestic manufacture does everything possible to reduce the global carbon footprint. Why transport coal across the world when what we require to fuel the steel making process is here, on our own doorstep.

The alternative would presumably be to cease manufacture, let another country pollute the global environment on our behalf and then have to buy their steel. That's not independence. Nor is it environmentally responsible. ■

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