

WORKERS

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ROLLS-ROYCE WORKERS FIGHT FOR BRITISH ENGINEERING

RAIL A new future

CUBA Fighting Covid

BREXIT We have the power

MONEY All change

NHS Self-sufficiency vital

FOOD Take control!

SNP Break the mindset

plus News, Book

BELARUS War drums beat

Review, Historic

HS2 Jobs and training

Notes and more

WORKERS



We have the power

WHEREVER YOU look in the world, you will see the green shoots of the future. And wherever you see them, you will see a working class – thinking, organising, acting.

Capitalism has had its day. All it can do is look backwards. Only workers are looking to build a future for humanity, and they are doing so despite a sea of difficulties.

This issue of *Workers* shows a small part of this rising force: engineering workers fighting for a future for their industry, the Cuban people as they take on Covid-19, the clarity combatting division in Scotland, the NHS workers organising to keep their service going.

And as we go to press, the European Union has been forced off its high horse and into negotiations over Britain's departure from its moribund mess. It would much rather not have had to negotiate at all. After all, its preferred mode of operation is to dictate.

So it tried to hold the line that if any agreement is to be reached all future moves must come from the UK and involve concessions on everything. And it failed.

Faced with the threat of no deal, its divisions – and its weakness – came to the fore. And, crucially, the European Union finally had to accept that its fifth column here, so rooted in the establishment, had failed to budge the resolve of the British people. We are leaving. It's as simple as that.

Ever since the great EU referendum result in

June 2016 – reinforced by the refusal to go backwards in the General Election of 2019 – the people of Britain have been pilloried by smug globalists at home and abroad. Every failure, real or imagined, has been dragged up as evidence that Britain is too small, too weak, too stupid to run its own affairs.

The government is not above criticism over Covid-19, but the sneering attacks from abroad (expats are particularly adept at this) on Britain's management of the pandemic are just code for an attack on Brexit. It's not as if France, Spain or Belgium were without problems themselves.

To the dismay of the empire builders in Brussels, workers in Britain have refused to be cowed, whatever odds seem to be stacked against them.

The truth is that with the referendum vote the British people stood up. Take Control is an extraordinarily powerful idea: it goes to the heart of the tasks facing the working class. We have regained control over our borders and our laws, yes. But workers want more: control over their workplaces and communities. We will not be the playthings of the multinationals, the slaves of profit.

Predicting the outcome of the Brexit negotiations is a fool's game. Many obstacles remain. The only sure thing is that a final agreement will be presented as a *fait accompli* (on both sides). But whatever the deal – and it's unlikely to be perfect – workers have the intellect and the determination to deal with it.

Cover image Rolls-Royce plc 2013



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EDDIE (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Hoyer fuel tanker.

Tanker drivers set to strike

FUEL TANKER drivers based at Stanlow oil refinery in Ellesmere Port, Cheshire, have overwhelmingly voted for strike action against redundancies. The workers voted by an impressive 96.2 per cent for strike action. Their trade union Unite is now planning 14 days of strike action, starting with 2, 4 and 6 November.

The 28 drivers are employed by Hoyer Petrolog, part of the transnational logistics company Hoyer. The key workers worked throughout the pandemic delivering fuel to petrol stations and supermarkets across the north of England and to John Lennon airport in Liverpool.

Their employer has been increasingly using agency drivers to fulfil delivery contracts and has now announced that 6 of the 28 employees are to be made redundant.

Unite regional officer Steve Gerrard said: "Unite's members have delivered a stunning mandate in favour of industrial action.

"Despite Unite giving Hoyer every opportunity to resolve this dispute through negotiations, it has refused to do so and as a consequence and as a last resort Unite has announced strike dates.

"Our members regret that their action will cause considerable disruption to fuel deliveries but believe they have no other option in order to save their jobs."

According to Hoyer's website, the company employs over 6,000 people across 115 countries with a turnover of €1.2 billion. ■

NHS

Getting ready

THE NHS is preparing for winter and a predicted second wave of Covid-19 infections. The service must also look at how it has dealt with patients referred for investigations and treatment for other conditions.

Early in lockdown doctors and nurses in emergency departments noticed that they were seeing far fewer patients. In other parts of hospitals elective (non-emergency) work was suspended. Staff were seconded to intensive care and acute medical units. These measures have largely ended. Ninety per cent of seconded doctors are now back in their old departments.

Trusts began some elective work again as early as April. Yet there is still much to do.

The lesson of coronavirus phase one is that restricting access to non-Covid services also carries a mortality risk. This must be weighed in the balance for the next phase.

The Royal College of Surgeons has drawn up a framework to help manage the backlog of elective operations and called on its members to implement it locally. This comprises a guide to surgical prioritisation, guidance on pre-operative CT imaging and on how to prioritise and manage essential cancer surgery.

There are lessons for NHS manpower too. The idea that we can solve workforce shortages by importing other countries' trained staff is dead and buried. One consequence of the A-levels fiasco is that the cap on numbers of new students entering medical schools has been lifted. ■

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

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



ON THE WEB

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

Brexit, the internal market, and the law

The manufactured outrage over the government's Internal Market Bill cannot hide the fact that at stake is not the rule of law itself but whether EU law should override British independence.

On the brink

If there are still those who have not accepted the necessity of Britain's departure from the European Union, the behaviour of EU negotiators during the Transition Period provides a compelling justification.

Government's lack of energy ambition exposed

Britain needs a coherent energy policy. The government doesn't have one, despite Boris Johnson's promises to the Conservative Party conference.

RMT in second round of action in sleeper dispute

Union members brought Serco Caledonian Sleeper services to a halt in October, affecting journeys linking cities in Scotland with London and the south.

Migration rises again

According to official figures net migration for the year to March 2020 is back to the highest number, seen in 2015, the year before the EU referendum.

*Plus: the e-newsletter

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Simon Vayro/shutterstock.com



HS2 construction work, Great Missenden, Buckinghamshire.

Jobs, training as HS2 gears up

THE BUILDING of HS2 is finally moving from preparatory work to full-scale construction works, bringing around 22,000 skilled jobs along with over 2,000 high-quality apprenticeships. It will also support the creation of many other jobs, and will play a key part in supporting Britain's post-Covid-19 recovery.

Britain will eventually have a 21st-century railway that connects its key cities. And by transferring inter-city fast trains off the existing railway, much-needed extra capacity will be liberated for commuter services, and for many more freight trains.

At a time when the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in a massive contraction in the economy and large scale redundancies, this is a welcome development that begins the process of building a better future, especially for Britain's young people.

HS2 itself is recruiting 500 new staff. The first phase of HS2 construction from London to the West Midlands will see 7,000 new construction jobs with main works contractor Balfour Beatty VINCI. The contractor has stated that it will focus on recruiting young people under 25. A separate contract to build the new HS2 terminal in London at Euston will need another 3,000 workers.

HS2 estimates that there will be 400,000 supply chain contracts providing opportunities for British businesses in the first phase alone.

Trade unions welcomed this major milestone. General union GMB's National Secretary, Jude Brimble, said, "The UK urgently needs to deliver investment in infrastructure, and the start of main works is a critical step in the construction of HS2." ■

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

CUBA

Covid-19 vaccine trials

CUBA HAS begun trials of a coronavirus vaccine, known as Soberana (Sovereignty) 01. The vaccine project is being led by the Cuban Finlay Vaccine Institute. The vaccine is currently in a controlled and randomised clinical trial and is the first vaccine against the virus in Latin America to achieve certification by the World Health Organization.

The country's biotech and pharmaceutical management group, BioCubaFarma, says that the candidate vaccine is "capable of producing a strong immune reaction to a SARS-COV-2 infection". An industrial production strategy is being developed to build capacity to produce the millions of doses needed to protect its population.

While there is positive progress with the Soberana 01 trials, Cuba is also developing a second vaccine candidate, Soberana 2. This

is awaiting authorisation to move to the trials stage.

The development of vaccines for coronavirus is not a chance event, BioCubaFarma president Dr. Eduardo Martínez Díaz told *Granma*, the official voice of the Communist Party of Cuba, in October. The country has significant experience in development and production of vaccines, including the first vaccines for hepatitis B and type B meningitis.

More than 98 per cent of the population have been vaccinated for a range of diseases, resulting in the elimination or reduction of severe infectious diseases.

While the US continues to blockade Cuba, other countries have recognised the importance of the biotechnology sector, as evidenced by cooperation between Cuba and the French government on vaccines over the last two years. ■

• See also "Fighting Covid-19, Cuba-style", page 12.

NOBEL PRIZE

Rebuke for ECJ

THE AWARD of this year's Nobel Prize in Chemistry to Emmanuele Charpentier and Jennifer Doudna for the invention of CRISPR gene editing technology is a welcome recognition of the importance of the field.

It is also an implicit rebuke to the European Court of Justice, which two years ago ruled that all gene editing had to be

subject to its onerous regulations on genetically modified organisms, even though the technology is entirely different.

In July, the Italian Associazione Luca Coscioni joined 129 other organisations to call for the EU to end "the obsolete and unscientific European regulations on the use of molecular genetics in agriculture".

Welcoming the prize, the association noted that in Italy the Nobel prizewinners would have been jailed for their work. ■



Simon Macfarlane

Council workers in East Dunbartonshire on strike against cuts in public services in 2018. Now a document for the Scottish TUC seems to suggest increased Westminster funding for services in Scotland are a plot to weaken devolution.

STUC: public spending 'plot'?

A DOCUMENT prepared for the Scottish Trades Union Congress's annual meeting on 17 November, being held online, has been leaked to the Sunday National.

The document says: "Public services desperately require more funding, but the intention of the UK government to increase direct spending in Scotland in areas of devolved competency is a clear attempt to weaken the devolution settlement."

Why would the Scottish TUC even consider opposing Westminster's plans to increase direct spending in Scotland claiming that it would "have a negative effect on workers"? For decades, our unions have called on successive governments to increase public spending, but when this government plans to do just that, the STUC wants to stop them doing so.

The STUC even contradicts itself in another statement in the same document that: "No-one in Scotland can afford to wait for the outcome of a future referendum, rebuilding the economy and the people's recovery must begin now".

The document is disingenuous about the STUC's position on a second referendum or the outcome. It argues on the one hand that "it is difficult at this point to imagine the trade union movement in Scotland emerging with a consensus for a particular option in a future referendum" while at the same time it is vociferous in its opposition to "any moves which reduce the powers of [Holyrood]". It says it will campaign "for the extension of devolution in agreed areas such as employment law, equalities and aspects of immigration".

The same leaked document also said that the STUC believes that if "there is evidence of a majority in support of independence" and if the new 2021 parliament has a majority of members in favour of a second referendum, then the case for a second vote would be "unanswerable".

The SNP has no right – least of all a legal right – to call a referendum. Only the UK government can do that. A devolved electoral process cannot deliver a mandate for the reserved matter of the Union of Scotland and England (Scotland Act 1998 Schedule 5 Part 1 (b)).

According to the Institute of Government the devolved administration only has a mandate for devolved matters, not for a secession referendum, still less for a secession. ■

WHAT'S ON

Coming...later

For obvious reasons, CPBML public meetings are not currently taking place.

Normal service will be resumed as soon as possible. To keep up-to-date as things change, make sure you're signed up to receive our electronic newsletter (see the foot of the left-hand column, page 4).

NOVEMBER

Tuesday 10 November, 7pm

CPBML discussion meeting (via Zoom): "The unity of Britain and the fight for independence"

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

Wednesday 18 November, 7.30pm

Brexit and Beyond (North West England) discussion meeting (via Zoom)

Guest speaker Joanna Williams, author and *Spiked* journalist. For details, email brexitandbeyondnw@gmail.com.

RESEARCH

EU funding grab

BRITAIN'S NORMALLY pro-EU academic establishment has been getting increasingly edgy as it absorbs the implications of the EU's negotiating position on membership of its multibillion-euro Horizon Europe research programme.

The EU wants Britain's entry fee to be set according to its GDP, which would imply a contribution of around €15.2 billion over the seven years of the programme.

But there are three catches. The first is that to recoup that investment British researchers would need to win fully 16 per cent of all Horizon Europe grants, as against the 12.7 per cent it wins now. Second, if they win more, the UK's research budget will have to pay it back.

Alarming, if they win less, there is no mechanism to pay Britain back for its excess contribution. "Even we don't think that looks fair," said Universities UK International director Vivienne Stern giving evidence to a Lords Brexit subcommittee on 22 October.

Robin Catlow, vice-president of the Royal Society, while telling the Lords that a modest net contribution would be acceptable, added: "But we need a fair and equitable system." ■

A Lancashire town steeped in engineering history is the focus of a campaign to retain its expertise in Britain, rather than see everything the workers

Rolls-Royce workers take

ROLLS-ROYCE workers at Barnoldswick in Lancashire are fighting to keep their jobs in Britain. Three weeks of targeted strike action begin on 6 November against the company's plan to move production offshore.

The factory makes blades for the Trent

series of jet engines. Blades are one of the most technologically advanced aviation products and an essential engine component. Rolls-Royce is a world leader in developing this technology, and the Barnoldswick site has played a key part.

Rolls-Royce revealed in August that it intended to move fan blade production to Singapore. One of the two sites in the town – Ghyll Brow – would close, leaving the long term existence of the other – Bankfield – in jeopardy.

In 2009 Rolls-Royce assured the Labour government and the workforce that setting up a fan blade site in Singapore would not lead to the closure of Barnoldswick or job losses. The company was then seeking government support during a crisis, as it is now.

Faced with the loss of 350 highly skilled jobs on top of 230 losses announced in June, Barnoldswick workers in Unite voted 94 per cent in favour of action. The company has not begun consultation, although it has done so for other closures, such as Annesley in Nottinghamshire.

The company's announcement on 26 August came as it reported over £5 billion losses for the first half of the year. Like the rest of the aerospace industry, Rolls-Royce has been hit by the coronavirus pandemic. But the workers believe that the move to Singapore is a strategic choice and not a short-term reaction to the economic crisis.

Jet pioneers

Barnoldswick has been at the heart of jet engine development since the 1940s. The government set up facilities there during the Second World War for Frank Whittle to complete his pioneering work. Barnoldswick built the engines for the Gloster Meteor, the first British jet fighter and the second in the world. These early engines established Rolls-Royce at the front of jet technology.

Later the factory helped develop the RB211 engine (RB standing for "Rolls Barnoldswick"). Although development caused severe financial problems for Rolls-Royce, the RB211 was a leap forward in engine design and power, paving the way for the efficient engines in use today including the Trent series. Rolls-Royce was nationalised in 1971 to save it from going bust (and sold to Vickers in 1980) – and with the RB211 became the world leader in aero engines.

But the Rolls-Royce workers, former workers and the town as a whole are not backward-looking. They recognise there will always be change in engineering, especially



Matti Blume (CC BY-SA 4.0)

Rolls-Royce Trent XWB engine, which powers the Airbus A350, at the ILA Berlin show in 2018. The fan blades are made at Barnoldswick.

ocus of a struggle to keep manufacturing jobs and
s have built up be shipped out to Asia...

Up fight for engineering

with advanced technology. They point to their record of innovation and quality stretching over more than 70 years. Barnoldswick has unrivalled expertise and the ability to meet new challenges.

Rolls-Royce workers have made a 24-minute video about the importance of Rolls-Royce to Barnoldswick and the fight to save it. Rolls-Royce not only supports local companies in the supply chain, but the area's skill base is the foundation of many local manufacturing firms like Hope Technology (see Box, right). Once those skills have gone, they may never return.

Damage

Workers, their unions and the town are asking why the government would permit Rolls-Royce to inflict such damage. An exchange in the House of Lords on 14 October reveals all. Lord Greaves, formerly a local LibDem politician, quite reasonably asked what the government was doing to ensure that the company keeps advanced manufacturing jobs in Britain.

The junior government minister and former MEP Lord Callanan said that the government was in "dialogue" with Rolls and "...will continue to engage to understand what can be done to save jobs and capabilities...". He hoped that £9.5 billion over the next three years to the aerospace and aviation industries would help to create new, well paid jobs in the future.

When pressed for firmer commitments to retain jobs and skills in return for our money, Callanan's reply was that "...Rolls-Royce is a global company and it is having to make some very difficult decisions about its footprint everywhere...". He pointed to

'Workers, their unions and the town are asking why government would permit such damage...'

Made in Barlick

INSTEAD OF looking abroad, Rolls-Royce would do well to follow the example of another local company, Hope Technology, which employs over 150 people in the town, which is known as Barlick to locals. Founded by two former Rolls-Royce engineers in the 1980s, it makes quality high-end bicycle components.

Starting with innovative disc brakes at small scale, Hope has consistently invested and expanded. It now produces a full range of components using the latest technology, including carbon fibre. Hope has begun limited production of complete bikes in the past couple of years and has now entered into a design partnership with Lotus Engineering.

With sales of £18 million a year Hope does not compete with global leaders SRAM (USA) and Shimano (Japan), which manufacture bike parts worldwide. But it consistently exports about half its growing production, split equally to Europe and the

rest of the world.

The company's success relies on both product development and control of production. It sponsors and works closely with bike racers. Their own workers ride Hope products, contributing to development and new lines.

Manufacturing is kept in house to ensure quality and flexibility. Co-founder Ian Wetherill explained to *The Times* in August that rising UK demand for parts earlier in the year could not be satisfied from long supply chains. Hope being highly automated was able to up production; their sales are up 25 per cent year on year.

"We've been pushed over 30 years to go offshore, where we could make more money," Wetherill said. "There's an obsession with doing only high-value manufacturing [in the UK]. But someone's got to do the basic stuff. Why get small parts made in China? Every nut and bolt is made in our factory here." ■

the large amounts that Rolls-Royce has received under various Covid schemes.

In other words, as well the cost of immediate crisis support, British workers will have to pay for our jobs and skills being moved elsewhere. That did not go down well in Barnoldswick, where people are well aware that their skills set up the Singapore plant in the first place.

On 19 October the RR National Trade Union Group, Unite and GMB, wrote an open letter to company CEO Warren East. They want Rolls-Royce to withdraw the plan to move blade production offshore, or else for the plant to retain the same number of workers, with absolute guarantees on long-term commitment to the site.

No standing by

The unions say that they cannot stand by waiting for death by a thousand cuts undermining the viability of the site and point to the disproportionate loss of jobs in Britain in the present plan. They have stated a wish to consult and negotiate, as they have done

from the outset of the crisis and earlier.

Barnoldswick workers have accepted changes to terms and conditions as well as voluntary redundancies in earlier years. They also agreed to a 10 per cent cut in pay at the start of the pandemic and were discussing short-time working to save jobs and the site.

Instead of building on the workers' commitment, the company chose to eliminate any possibility of the workers' proposals happening. The announced job losses mean that 150 workers would be left at Barnoldswick, raising questions about its viability. Two years ago Rolls-Royce employed over 1,150 at Barnoldswick. Against that background, the strength of the vote to strike is not surprising.

The Rolls-Royce workers and local people are building the campaign, tagged #battleforbarnoldswick. As Ross Quinn, Unite regional officer, said, "Barnoldswick was the birthplace of the jet engine, Rolls-Royce has been the principal employer for nearly 70 years and they are not prepared to let that disappear without a fight." ■

With nationalisation the only sensible option for rail, the government is looking to turn the industry upside down, with huge implications for workers.

What future for Britain's



Workers

York Station on the East Coast line.

IT NOW seems certain that Britain's railways and the workers employed to run them face the biggest upheaval in the industry since the railways were privatised in the 1990s. Not only is the structure of the industry going to change, but the staff and their unions are facing redundancies and a squeeze on pay, conditions and pensions.

The system of franchising rail passenger services, in place since 1996, has been effectively in intensive care for the last few years. A number of franchises already thought to be in serious financial difficulties at the beginning of 2020.

Subsequently, two went bust: Northern, and the Virgin-Stagecoach East Coast franchise. Both had to be nationalised, and there is no sign yet of any moves by government to return them to the private sector.

Then came Covid-19

And then the *coup de grâce* to franchising was delivered by Covid-19, which resulted in a significant reduction in both commuter and business rail travel. Any return to what, pre-lockdown, were record passenger levels is now looking years away.

The government moved to prevent a complete failure of the franchises which were additionally impacted by Covid-19 by putting in place emergency contracts for the existing franchise holders. This enabled them to remain solvent and continue to operate train services.

The measure was followed on 21 September by the government making the long expected announcement that it had ended the franchising of rail passenger services, and would be entering into 'short term' management contracts with the operators. Those private companies breathed a huge sigh of relief having been released from their financial franchise obligations, with the new contracts guaranteeing their profits into the future.

Such is the turnaround in the fortunes of private rail companies that Serco, never slow to spot an opportunity to provide rip-off public services, is keen to expand its rail interests now that profits are much more certain.

With the franchising system collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions, just over two years ago, the government was forced to appoint businessman Keith

Government is moving swiftly to avoid doing it. Instead, it
 implications for jobs, pay, conditions and services...

railways?

Williams to consider and report on what a post-franchise rail industry should look like.

While charged with looking at a successor arrangement to franchising, Williams was also told to find a solution to the lack of what has been termed “a single controlling mind” in the industry. It was this lack that was subsequently identified as the primary cause of the massive train service failures associated with a major timetable change in 2018.

Interestingly, the Williams report has so far failed to see the light of day, its delayed publication early in 2020 being blamed on Covid-19. Indeed, assumptions that Williams may have felt safe to make before the pandemic are clearly not safe now, and many assumed that Williams would be told to go back to the drawing board.

But despite the inevitable focus of government attention being on managing the pandemic, the good news is that the failure of the report to appear hasn't resulted in a hiatus in planning or implementing change in the railway industry.

Public ownership

Trade unions and campaign groups have argued that the only way forward given the crisis is for the government to nationalise the remaining rail franchises as they were forced to do with Northern and East Coast, returning them to public ownership and control.

There were credible rumours that the government was considering handing over the rail passenger operations to state-owned Network Rail as a stopgap before more permanent arrangements could be put in place once the future of the railways post-Covid was more certain.

But it should be remembered that at the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, the Tory government then in power declined to nationalise the railways in the face of a serious national crisis, instead keeping the private operators in place throughout the war but under government direction. The modern Tory government, keen as it is to give the likes of Serco lucrative contracts, is perhaps even less likely to want to nationalise in such circumstances.

It is also pretty clear that the terms of reference that Williams was given by the government did not include any serious consideration of a return to a unified national

“The key change is that the government rather than the operators will take the revenue risk...”

railway, let alone one in public ownership.

Without waiting for Williams to write up a new version of his report, the government has moved quickly to avoid any more passenger operations having to be taken over by the state. It is currently negotiating with the private rail operators to put management contracts in place which will continue until post-Covid passenger recovery allows concession contracts to be rolled out.

The key change is that now the government rather than the operators will take the revenue risk.

Precisely when and at what point these lucrative contracts will be put out to competition rather than just being awarded to the incumbent operator is as yet unclear.

The explanation for the government's keenness for early changes is its apparent desire to make timetable revisions that remove many of the competing services that have been created under franchising, along with the allowed open access services. These are seen as wasting capacity on lines where it is at a premium, and ultimately adding costs to the public purse.

One example is the East Coast Main Line where four franchise operators compete with two open access companies for the same passengers, with another planning to join the fray.

Inefficient

Competition was one of the key reasons for privatising the railways in the first place, with the likes of Thatcher and Major promising that it would mean better train services. But the present government seems to have now accepted that head-to-head competition of the sort existing on the East Coast Main Line is actually inefficient and increases costs, something which the rail unions have argued

for a very long time.

The rail unions have also continued to argue that only a return to a unified and nationalised railway will ensure that there is an effective “single controlling mind”. The government seems more keen on a “single guiding mind”, a subtle but important difference in approach. The government wants to see the removal of layers of cost and complexity which “the industry can no longer afford” and there is a consensus with the private operators that a “single guiding mind” will be required to oversee the cuts to come.

And therein lies the threat and the major challenge faced by rail staff and their trade unions. Things have changed. No longer is the railway a boom industry, continually increasing in passengers and expanding its capacity. The leverage and power that the unions had before Covid-19 has diminished considerably. And the government has not been slow to realise that.

Time for a reckoning?

An informed source has told *Rail Business UK*, an industry journal, that “industrial relations will be the big issue; I think there is a view that everybody in the rail industry, including the management, is overpaid and it is time for reckoning. That will happen in the next few months, and I think it could get quite bloody.”

So next year, the unions will be faced with a government which has a large majority, four more years in power, and an appetite to take them on. With far fewer people relying on trains to get to work or to conduct their business, the government view is likely to be that now might be the best time to take on the unions and if necessary endure a prolonged period of industrial unrest.

The “single guiding mind” that is the government will probably make it a condition of the new contracts for the private operators to make the changes that it desires, including facing down union opposition if necessary.

Pensions is one area that the government and the operators are keen to attack. Don't forget that Stagecoach and Virgin were disqualified from bidding for

Continued on page 10



Transport for Wales service to Carmarthen pulling away from a call at Hereford.

Continued from page 9

franchises recently because they were not willing to accept the liabilities arising from the continuation of the defined benefit (often erroneously referred to as “final salary”) Railways Pension Scheme inherited from British Rail.

With discussions about the future of staff pensions in passenger franchises in limbo for several years, this is an outstanding issue

‘Why has the government now allowed Wales to nationalise the railways there?’

for government to settle. And if the indications made by Prime Minister Johnson about similar pensions in Transport for London are anything to go by, rail staff are in for a serious battle over theirs. Johnson’s comments about free staff travel in London also mean that national rail staff may have to vigorously defend their travel concessions.

The announcement by the Labour administration in Wales that it is to nationalise the rail services that it is responsible for providing seems to run counter to all of this.

The former Wales and Borders franchise, run by Arriva until two years ago, was handed over by the Department for Transport to a Wales “government” that wanted to run its passenger services directly.

But the May government refused to allow this, and instead put the Wales and Borders franchise out to tender, with French state railway subsidiary Keolis and Spanish infrastructure company Amey jointly winning

the contract. Also part of the deal was that most Cardiff commuter lines – around 10 per cent of Wales’s rail network – would be transferred to the franchise holders.

The massive drop in passengers and therefore revenue meant that the only way Keolis and Amey could continue was for the Wales administration to hand over large sums of subsidy. The more attractive option was to run it itself, as it wanted to originally.

So why has the Johnson government now allowed Wales to nationalise the railways there? Cynics are suggesting it may be a ploy to allow Johnson to starve Wales of cash and then do what he has done in London, blame a Labour administration for “getting in a mess” in running transport.

It remains to be seen whether Welsh nationalisation will turn out to be as attractive as it first appears. Rail unions will need to be prepared to act to defend their members’ jobs, as well as the rail services of Wales. ■

The EU and NATO are ramping up hostilities in eastern Europe...

War drums in the east

EU AND NATO governments have dramatically escalated the ongoing hysteria against Russia, beginning with a propaganda offensive launched against its closest ally, Belarus, in early August.

Alexander Lukashenko, a collective farm manager first elected as president of Belarus in 1994, was re-elected on 9 August this year with 80 per cent of the vote on a platform of maintaining the country's independence from the EU and NATO. Belarus has also escaped the worst of Covid-19, without the need to impose lockdown or social distancing measures.

But before the votes had been counted the pro-fascist opposition went into action, claiming that the election was rigged, and they received instant backing from the imperialist powers as happened in the "Euromaidan" pro-EU fascist coup of 2014 in neighbouring Ukraine.

Nazi collaborators

They took to the streets carrying the red and white flag of the Nazi collaborators in Belarus during the Second World War, hoping it would replace the current national flag from the Soviet era. Leading supporters of opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya were heard praising Hitler in speeches at rallies during the election campaign.

None of these facts has been mentioned once in the mainstream media. True to form, the EU awarded the opposition its Sakharov human rights prize on 22 October.

The "revolution" failed to materialise and Tikhanovskaya fled across the border into Lithuania, a country, like all EU and NATO member states in eastern Europe, with a problem of state-approved glorifying of Second World War-era fascism.

In the same month in Lithuania, lawyer

'Leading supporters of the main opposition candidate were heard praising Hitler...'



Second World War memorial in the Belarus capital Minsk recalls more progressive times.

Adam Jones (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Stanislav Tomas was sentenced in absentia to three months in prison and fined 2,200 euros for destroying a memorial in the capital Vilnius dedicated to Nazi war criminal Jonas Noreika, responsible for the murder of 14,000 Jews. The judges also convicted Tomas for "damaging the feelings of the Lithuanian people".

In a written appeal to Lukashenko and Russian president Vladimir Putin, Russia's communist party leader Gennady Zyuganov pointed out: "Belarus is the new target of the globalists. The opponents of the legitimately elected power are to play the same role as the 'orange leprosy' in Ukraine. It is not by chance that they have been led to raise the banner which the Nazi authorities already recognised as the official banner on Belarus's territory occupied in 1942. Today we see attempts to steer the people that defied the Nazi invaders along the path of colonisation and destruction of the economy and culture. As usual, this is being done under the pretext of making the country part of 'the free world.'"

These events were followed later in August by the alleged poisoning of Russian so-called "opposition leader" Alexei Navalny. In reality, Navalny had an approval rating of around 2 per cent in polls held in 2018, well behind the real opposition leader, Zyuganov of the communist party. Navalny has called

for Chechens and other national minorities in Russia to be killed like "cockroaches" and gave speeches at skinhead rallies as recently as 2011.

Navalny was then flown by a "peace charity" to Germany, the power behind the interfering EU. Angela Merkel's government and the German Army claimed that Navalny, despite regaining consciousness and being able to speak, was poisoned by "military-grade Novichok" and that "only the Russian government can and must answer" for what allegedly happened.

On 9 September, the Russian Foreign Ministry responded by stating: "The massive misinformation campaign that has been unleashed clearly demonstrates that the primary objective pursued by its masterminds is to mobilise support for sanctions, rather than to care for Alexei Navalny's health or establish the true reasons for his admission to hospital."

August also saw an escalation of NATO military activity, with Russian defence minister Sergei Shoigu saying that NATO had increased its number of spy-plane flights near Russian airspace by more than 30 per cent on the same time last year. Between 23 August and 2 September alone, the Russian Air Force flew at least 10 sorties to intercept NATO spy-planes approaching Russian airspace. ■

Socialist Cuba continues to demonstrate the inherent strength of its system Covid-19 infections under control – while continuing to improve

Fighting Covid-19, Cuba-

WHILE THE latest significant rise in infection levels in many European and American countries has not happened in Cuba, there has still been a low level but persistent spread of the virus in Havana. The Cuban approach to public health is to keep a careful watch and to act quickly to prevent any worrying developments. The way they are dealing with the rise in infections is illustrative of their resilience and strength in adversity.

Covid-19 has almost been eliminated by aggressive anti-virus measures and “shoe leather epidemiology” in the country as a whole. This painstaking method of inquiry into the origin of an infection by walking door to door to ask direct questions was famously used, successfully, by John Snow in 1850s London to investigate the spread of cholera in Soho.

Door to door

In Cuba, more than 90 per cent of all cases have been traced through following up the contacts of spreaders. Medical students have knocked door to door to screen for virus symptoms in homes, and checking on quarantine compliance.

By early September the population of around 11 million had suffered roughly a mere 4,000 confirmed cases and fewer than 100 deaths, among the lowest in the region, so the strategy was working well.

The rise in Havana from a few cases to dozens daily over the month of August meant decisive action needed to be taken.

From early September, a 7pm to 5am curfew was put in place, with people racing home in the evenings to make sure they

‘In Cuba, more than 90 per cent of all cases have been traced through following up the contacts of spreaders...’



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Havana, 21 April: two medical students walking down the street in Havana. Students are a vital

were not breaking the curfew. By the time it started, the normally crowded streets were deserted. Police were posted at road junctions around the city, stopping all traffic to check whether drivers had the necessary special travel permits which were only issued in extraordinary situations.

Most shops were forbidden to sell to people from outside the immediate neighbourhood, to reduce as much as possible the incentive for anyone to move around the city.

The usual requirements from people in many countries across the world in the period of Covid were strictly enforced – mask-wearing, avoiding large gatherings and maintaining social distancing. Breaking these and other Covid measures brought large fines and even prison for serious violations.

Now many measures have been eased

in Havana, as the situation has significantly improved, with the daily Covid news reporting a handful of new confirmed cases and almost no deaths. The government has announced a “period of new normality”.

Exceptional

How are such outcomes achieved? Cuba’s health service is widely acknowledged – including by the World Health Organization – as exceptional, with outcomes such as life expectancy and infant mortality better than or equal to those in the US. And all this during a 50-year economic blockade by the US doing its utmost to destroy Cuba. It is the most enduring trade embargo in modern history.

The global pandemic has not caused any humanitarian let-up in these efforts. In fact during the election period Donald Trump

length of its society through its capacity to bring a rise in
 innovate and resist the attacks on it from the US...

style



part of Cuba's track and trace strategy.

has increased the regime of sanctions to ramp up the pressure on the Cuban economy.

If the US blockade already makes life in general harder in Cuba, how are the Cuban people managing in the Covid period? There are the usual grumbles about the difficulties in everyday life caused by the restrictions, but there is a high level of compliance. Some western commentators put this down to heavy-handed authoritarianism on the part of the government, but this is to misunderstand how government works in Cuba.

The high level of "buy in" shown by the populace has been hard won, by democratic structures built over decades since the Cuban revolution. In health, for instance, the emphasis is on primary care and prevention. Cuban medical schools are government run and free to attend. Study includes primary

care, public health and the social determinants of health. Health promotion is prioritised over sickness control.

There is a robust system of community-based medical and mental health services with 100 per cent coverage for all citizens, including in the most remote rural areas. This system is based on local polyclinics and family medical offices which serve specific residential areas, so nobody is missed. These provide basic primary care services in both the local offices and on home visits.

Health promotion is an essential part of the role of medical staff, including screening, education and an understanding of family and social circumstances. In treating patients, physicians consider all factors in health, including education, housing, environment, nutrition and employment.

This system means that in a health emergency such as Covid the strong relationships between professionals and the people enable swift decisions to be made at both government and local levels, and the decisions can be quickly put into practice due to the trust built up by strong health education.

Preparation

This structure is similar to that for disaster planning and preparation. Four years after the 1959 Revolution, Hurricane Flora caused 1,157 deaths in Cuba, leading Fidel Castro to declare "Never again...a Revolution is a force more powerful than Nature!"

The real experience of risk and disaster in Cuba then led to a building of resilience within society itself, built on local and national risk reduction structures, and annual simulation exercises, but also on strong continuing education in schools and communities among a highly literate population.

Community officers visit residents to establish and list who are most vulnerable. When disaster strikes, people know exactly what to do, and they do it. As in health, the people of Cuba are its greatest resource in difficult times.

That this works is shown by the very low fatality levels experienced in Cuba in recent years even in the fiercest hurricanes. For instance, between 1996 and 2005, during the period of dire economic difficulties for the island, only 17 people died during eight

"Why the UK should have followed the example of Cuba" – Daily Mail headline

major hurricanes. During Hurricane Wilma (six weeks after Katrina), which caused massive floods along the Cuban coastline, 640,000 people were successfully evacuated, with just one death.

What are the lessons for us in Britain? Of course, we have a capitalist, profit-led society, but the example of Cuba can teach us a great deal about how we could do better in dealing with the pandemic. A *Daily Mail* headline on October 17 proclaimed, "Why the UK should have followed the example of Cuba"!

Cuba has a public health system staffed by appropriate numbers of its own doctors and nurses, instead of stealing them from other countries who desperately need them. In fact, Cuba sends its medical staff abroad to help out in crises, as they did for Italy when Covid attacked in March.

The country is also largely self-reliant in medicines and medical equipment, unlike here when our "free market" system left government scrambling to buy in PPE from across the world. Cuba's crisis preparedness puts to shame the short-sighted penny-pinching here, where the "Pandemic Preparedness Strategy" published in 2011 was subsequently largely ignored while austerity reigned supreme.

The creation of the NHS was a huge achievement by the British working class. Now that has been and is continuing to be undermined by a capitalist class putting profit above people. Faced with a health emergency, our government has largely mobilised the private sector. In Cuba, it is the people who have been mobilised to manage Covid through a practical, bottom-to-top tier collective approach across society. ■

There are now six months to blunt the axe of those who pushing for fragmentation are increasingly seeking to tear

Break the separatist mir



Workers

Demonstration in support of BiFab workers, Edinburgh, July 2019. Organised workers know Scottish government's dismal record.

WITH SIX MONTHS to go until the elections for the Holyrood parliament in Edinburgh, the future of Britain could be in the balance, even as the country prepares for its final departure from the EU.

Obtaining the majority of votes in that election, say the governing Scottish National Party, would be their starting whistle for a second attempt at winning a referendum on breaking Scotland away from Britain.

More extreme or "left" elements in the separatist movement, outside the SNP, call for such an electoral outcome to be a mandate for an actual declaration of "independence". An indication that their campaign is well under way comes with Mike Russell – the SNP Constitution Secretary – saying "there will need to be a referendum....I'm quite sure before the end of next year."

So centuries of building working class unity and achieving British independence following the successful Brexit campaign are to be jeopardised by this ideology of fragmentation. And this is happening in the middle of a medical crisis in which point scoring has become more important than public health – if Johnson has three tiers, then Sturgeon has to have five.

Act quickly or this contagion will spread to England too, where the arguing over lockdowns between different areas could all too easily morph into calls for regional assemblies and parliaments as dissatisfaction spreads.

A motley crew

However, those who push fragmentation can also fall victim to it. Some see the growing internecine warfare within the SNP as the beginning of the end for separatism, despite it riding high in recent polling.

Examples are the stifling of SNP MP Joanna Cherry's attempt to stand for and enter the Scottish Parliament, the legal contortions of the Sturgeon-Salmond quarrel, and the SNP MP who flagrantly broke her own quarantine regulations and stubbornly refused to accept her own party's call to resign.

In addition there are new kids on the block that may fragment the separatists' own votes in May. Readers may be surprised to hear of the existence of anti-EU, pro Brexit voices within the SNP, but it has been estimated that about a third of SNP supporters voted to leave the EU in 2016.

Well, now leading lights of that tendency have abandoned the party.

Chic Brodie (ex MSP) and Andy Doig (local councillor in Renfrewshire) have formed Scotia Future – standing for "real independence" outside both Britain and the EU. Another former SNP MSP, Dave Thompson, has formed a new party, Action for Independence, and there is the Independence for Scotland Party. Reacting to the formation of these new, more extreme parties, Pamela Nash of Scotland in Union said "whatever the brand, it's still all about dividing people."

Divisions in the ranks are what probably led SNP MP Kenny MacAskill, in an article for *The Scotsman* newspaper, to demand of his colleagues in October that the "SNP must make alliances". He was hoping for "some Labour voices breaking ranks" but his main focus was on winning the support of the Scottish Trades Union Congress, pointing out that "It should never be forgotten that it was the STUC who kept devolution alive in the 1960s, when Labour abandoned it."

Indeed it was the STUC's Campaign for a Scottish Assembly that sent much of the

Plan to break up Britain. But encouragingly, those who are for each other apart too...

Mindset!

trade union militancy and energy of the 1970s up the garden path. It was a fifth column for the EU in the Brexit campaign and is now heading for out-and-out advocacy of separatism (see article, page 5). And that's before it has properly consulted its component trade union affiliates.

The fightback

There is pride about the anti-separatist role played by six trade unions in the two-year campaign for working class, Britain-wide unity leading up to the 2014 referendum in Scotland. But we must hold those unions to account and encourage them not to waver this time, but instead to add more unions to their ranks.

The pressure is on to recruit them to the side of fragmentation and separatism, as MacAskill makes clear when he says, "Now it may not be possible to get all the union barons to convert, but getting them into neutral or accepting the will of their Scottish members is possible. Work on that must commence."

MacAskill knows the backbone role that those trade unions played in encouraging their members to vote for class unity in 2014. The six – GMB, USDAW, NUM, CWU, ASLEF and Community – have the opportunity in the coming six months to ensure their position is for unity, at their branches and conferences. MacAskill's derogatory reference to "barons" indicates his disdain for workers who are union members and who can very well think for themselves.

'It's time for pro-unity voices throughout Britain to step up to the task. Far too many simply accept that a break-up is coming...'

MacAskill went on to appeal that "...the forthcoming party conference must make independence and a mandate for action thereafter, centrepiece of the 2021 election campaign."

Legally and constitutionally, this is not possible. According to the Glasgow based think-tank A Force for Good, a majority of seats for separatist parties at a Holyrood election simply will not be enough to demand a second vote to break up Britain, held together at the level of the British parliament. And that's where a mandate for unity is found.

In addition, in terms of voter turnout in Scotland, the think tank's analysis found the UK parliament has considerably more democratic legitimacy than Holyrood, with an average, over several elections, of 66 per cent against Holyrood's 53.24 per cent. Devolution itself means that Holyrood is a subservient devolved assembly – despite its self-proclaimed title of "government".

Nevertheless, campaigning against separatism and for British unity needs to be revived and stepped up across the whole of Britain. Enough warnings have been given, such as the leaked strategy document from a Conservative Party consultancy firm finding that there was a "vacuum of leadership" which was "leaving the campaign to save the Union rudderless at a key moment."

The old Better Together campaign of 2014 is obviously no more – and probably for the better, as we remember the way that Labour, in the form of characters such as Gordon Brown and Eddie Izzard, started twisting the campaign towards the end into a "better together in Europe" outfit looking ahead to a projected EU referendum.

But stalwart campaigning for unity is under way – with more cooperation and none of the rancour found on the separatist side. As well as AFGG and Scotland in Union, candidates opposing separatism are being put up by new parties such as Abolish the Scottish Parliament Party and the Alliance for Unity.

A united front would be a sure way of blunting the SNP axe, but pro-unity voices in the mainstream parties seem obsessed with their own narrow party gains. With his confused messaging, Labour leader Keir Starmer gave rise to headlines about

Starmer boosting Sturgeon's bid for independence

Now it seems he is seeing a vote for a second referendum at Holyrood as good enough reason for him to immediately concede one. And the Labour Party in Scotland is a prime mover of the notion of "progressive federalism" – another ingredient in the recipe for fragmentation and separatism.

It's time for pro-unity voices throughout Britain to step up to the task. There are far too many who simply accept that a break-up is coming, too many who are vacillating or despairing. An example would be the heading for Jeremy Warner's article in the *Daily Telegraph* on 18 October: "Our union with Scotland is dying, and we seem powerless to stop it".

Organised

In fact, we see that increasingly workers are not being paralysed by inaction. We see this in the campaign against the job losses at Rolls-Royce – with Pat Rafferty of Unite saying that in instances like this "the Scottish Government's record has been absolutely abject".

Ongoing action by RMT against SERCO on the sleeper trains issue links with its criticism of the Scottish Government relationship with the company. And the news that the deal for Burntisland Fabrications (BiFab) to build structures for a £2 billion offshore wind farm has collapsed has galvanised the GMB into action.

GMB Scotland secretary Gary Smith said "It's a scandalous end to a decade which started with promises of a 'Saudi Arabia of renewables' supporting 28,000 full-time jobs in offshore wind and now finishes in mothballed fabrication yards and no prospect of any contracts or jobs on the horizon."

The Scottish government response was to fall back on doing "everything possible to support the business while recognising the need for us to remain in line with state-aid regulations".

And all unions are gearing up to fight looming unemployment, especially among younger age groups. The backbone for all of this comes from Britain-wide solidarity, as must the fight to keep the country together in the face of the attempts to tear it apart. ■

Those who advocate a free trade deal with the US claim to have the horse. We don't need free trade – we need a strategy for

Time to take control of our

WITHOUT A regular supply of food human beings starve, and if that supply is completely cut off, they die. Nations too, without a secure supply produced domestically, or acquired through trade with other nations, cannot survive. Hence the popularity of sanctions and blockade as a means for governments to wage war by other means against their enemies, for example against the Soviet Union in its early days or, more recently, against Cuba.

But our starting point is not trade: it is production. Without agricultural production, and the industries that turn materials from the land and the sea into edible products and deliver them to the consumer at home or abroad, there are no goods to trade, whatever the terms of that trade may be.

What is the state of our agricultural production? The UK is around 62 per cent self-sufficient in all foods and 75 per cent in “indigenous type food” but our self-sufficiency has been declining over the past thirty years, and is still falling. It is worth looking at these figures in more detail.

We are more or less self-sufficient, or produce surpluses for export in many areas: chicken, beef and lamb, milk and eggs, and cereals. But we produce much less of the pork and vegetables we consume at home, and only 16 per cent of the amount of fruit we ate in 2019.

Flown round the world

Is this because our tastes have changed and we now prefer to eat exotic fruit flown halfway round the world? Or is it because the EU forced British growers to grub up two-thirds of our apple orchards? Of the counties which grew dessert, cooking and cider apples, Kent has lost 85 per cent of its orchards over the past 50 years, Herefordshire has just 10 per cent left and Devon has lost 90 per cent since the Second World War. Not to mention the decline in fishing.

To feed large modern populations requires the development of scientific, large-scale methods of food production. It is a huge industry, going beyond the farms where animals are reared and crops raised to encompass slaughterhouses, warehouses and food processing plants, to say nothing of those who work to transport, sell and



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Asda store in Livingston, West Lothian.

distribute food, and those in the service industries that feed us directly.

In our universities and research institutes, food science brings together elements of the engineering, biological and physical sciences, to understand and develop food production. It draws on agriculture, nutrition, food safety, food processing and behavioural science.

The food industry more generally is a large and important part of the economy, employing 4.1 million workers, and making up £120.2 billion or 9.4 per cent of Gross Value Added in 2018. Food manufacturing, processing and preparation is less the concern of small “artisanal” producers and more that of huge concerns, many foreign-owned.

Six of the top 30 UK food companies have US owners, most famously Kraft, which bought Cadbury's in 2010. McCormick & Co took over Reckitt Benckiser in 2017 and in the same year Post Holdings acquired Weetabix from its previous Chinese owners.

A further three are Irish owned, and one of our major biscuit brands is owned by a Turkish company, Yildiz. Even small producers and new arrivals are, if attractive, quickly snapped up. Gin producer Sipsmith is owned by the Japanese giant Suntory.

Food distribution and sale is concentrated in the hands of the big four supermarket chains Asda, Morrisons, Sainsbury's and Tesco, plus the German budget chains

g that it will lower food prices are putting the cart before
 or food production, and its distribution...

ur food



of Aldi and Lidl. Together with the Coop and Waitrose, they account for over 90 per cent of grocery sales.

Lack of control of our food industry is a major obstacle to establishing a coherent food strategy on the basis of which trade agreements could be examined and agreed, amended or rejected.

Those who have recently become so exercised about the prospect of the United States exporting chicken washed with a chlorine solution to Britain have missed the point in so many ways. Chlorine has been used for many years to safeguard all but “organically” produced salads, fruit and vegetables, worldwide, including in the EU, against microbial infections such as

norovirus, whose consequences can be serious and sometimes fatal.

Advances in food safety and the application of science to poultry rearing turned chicken from a luxury into a generally affordable food. Those who make such a meal of this practise the sort of snobbery that believes that anything made available for mass consumption is by its very nature bad – a way of thinking that is so much a part of the pseudo-environmentalist movement.

Selectivity

Many who shout loudly about food for mass consumption are extremely selective in the causes they take up. We heard little from them about animal welfare in European Union member states over the years, about the mass transport of livestock the length and breadth of the EU, and beyond, or about food safety scandals such as when, in 2013, products imported from EU countries as beef were found to contain horsemeat.

Horses slaughtered in Romanian and Polish slaughterhouses were transported to the Netherlands, relabelled as beef, and then included in products such as burgers and meatballs sold in Britain and Ireland.

The struggle for palatable, affordable, unadulterated food has been central to the survival of the British working class. British capitalists proletarianised the land early on. Unlike on the continent, where both a peasantry and a landed feudal class persisted, in Britain workers were driven from the countryside by enclosures to form the new working class in the towns, while those who remained in the countryside were landless labourers.

Unlike on the Continent, the more far-sighted landed aristocracy turned themselves into a part of the industrial bourgeoisie, becoming factory owners themselves or marrying into the newly wealthy families.

We understand how capitalism, left unchecked, would gladly have kept us at the barest minimum necessary for us to sustain our existence while remaining productive. We have had nigh-on two centuries’ experience of free trade.

It was in the name of free trade the Manchester liberals campaigned against the Corn Laws. But those same liberals presided

‘Lack of control of our food industry is a major obstacle to establishing a coherent food strategy...’

over the rampant adulteration of workers’ food in the 19th century.

There was alum in bread; strychnine and copper in rum and beer; sulphate of copper in pickles, bottled fruit, wine, and preserves; lead chromate in mustard and snuff; sulphate of iron in tea and beer; ferric ferrocyanide, lime sulphate, and turmeric in tea; copper carbonate, lead sulphate, bisulphate of mercury, and Venetian lead in sugar confectionery and chocolate; lead in wine and cider.

The Chartists had the measure of the free traders, who tried to enlist the support of the working class for cheap bread and the repeal of the Corn Laws, when all they were after was an excuse to lower wages.

Despite the low standard of debate in parliament, for the first time for nearly 50 years it can actually debate trade deals. But the question of Britain’s trade deals are too important to be entrusted to MPs, many of whom spent four years trying to sabotage Brexit. The debate about Britain’s food, the trade deals we strike, with whom and on what terms, are a matter for us all.

The EU we left was the embodiment of free trade principle: every commodity, labour included, was available to be shifted across the world, in the pursuit of profit. Now we can put behind us the anarchy of food production represented by butter mountains, milk and wine lakes, or set-aside, and the crazy logic under which farmers were paid not to grow crops.

Planning for production is desperately needed. An independent Britain can do so much better than we did when in the EU, ensuring a reliable supply of affordable, nutritious, cruelty-free food for us all. ■

In a world where much commerce is conducted digitally a
past, supplying notes and coins while credit is controlled

The future of money



Adam Gilchrist/shutterstock.com

The coronavirus pandemic has seen the use of cash falling to ever lower levels. What next?

SINCE THE coronavirus lockdown the amount of cash used to purchase goods and services has dropped. And there's been a corresponding increase in electronic transactions. Both trends were already happening, quite rapidly, but have accelerated dramatically with this year's events.

In effect, the buying of goods and services is becoming easier to administer. Within this change the potential capabilities of the Bank of England – which is after all a socially owned institution – to plan expenditure and investment should increase. Crucially for workers, the changes being contemplated could make control over the financial system far easier to attain and sap the current overwhelming power of finance capital.

For some time now the Bank of England – along with other central banks – has been

looking at how the methods of payment for goods and services have changed. This has prompted the Bank to start a series of talks on the “future of money”. As part of these talks the Bank has been consulting nationally and internationally on ways of introducing a digital pound both for commercial and retail purposes. The offering would be known as a Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC).

In October, the Bank was part of a grouping of the world's top state banks (including the US Federal Reserve) that issued a major report on CBDC. It makes for dense reading, but the message is clear: during the past few years CBDC has moved from the world of economic theory to active development. It is on its way.

The Bank has tacitly accepted that CBDC will be far easier to introduce now that Britain is out of the EU and its financial

control mechanisms. Others have seen this too. “England could realise such an undertaking relatively soon... Following Brexit, the country does not have to deal with European Union bureaucracy, nor is it a part of the Eurozone, giving it a certain amount of flexibility in its monetary policy and development,” noted *Cointelegraph* in July.

Credit is king

Currently companies and people looking for credit receive additional finance when the commercial banks (those in the high street, such as HSBC and Barclays) issue agreed loans. This loan activity is tantamount to creating money.

Here's an example. There is no existing money held in a credit card account before the user begins to spend. Instead of using money already in circulation the card user

and cash use is falling, the central banks are stuck in the by the private retail banks. But that could soon change...

generates new credit, which is how their extra purchasing power is acquired. This means the card user – whether a company or an individual – is able to pay for products many times in excess of the actual amount of money they could access hitherto.

In effect, commercial banks by facilitating credit loans actually increase the amount of circulating currency well in excess of the amount of money put into circulation by the Bank of England.

So it is the commercial banks – not the Bank of England – that determine the amount of currency in circulation by creating credits as a means of payment, limited only indirectly by interest rates and by the dangers of making unwise loans. Credit at present is therefore a deregulated system of money creation.

In contrast CBDC would potentially enable the Bank of England to determine the amount of circulating currency and credit, taking that role over from the commercial sector. In short, we would have one big bank using technology to facilitate real-time settlements and clear deposits not just between commercial entities but also directly with individuals. Who then would need commercial banks as they are currently set up?

The ancient and still current activity of banks clearing cheques and creating unregulated credits would end. At the same time as part of an overall planning process the role of commercial banks could be changed.

Compare this approach to what led to the 2008 banking collapse. It was estimated that British commercial banks had created credit five times greater than Britain's GDP, which at the time stood at around £1,600 billion [£1.6 trillion]. The result was that the amount of currency in circulation bore no resemblance to the annual productive value in the British economy – hence the eventual collapse.

The Bank of England is still trying to conceal this failure. That's evident in its current consultation paper. It seeks ways of supporting the commercial banks through "open competition". But later in the same consultation the Bank concedes that under CBDC workers and companies will want their digital bank accounts moved to the Bank of England and away from the insecure commercial banking sector – hardly

surprising given the financial shambles that the commercial banks have created.

Of course, credit does not in itself constitute a danger to the currency – but only so long as an increase in credit is accompanied by a commensurate increase in production.

Imagine a Britain where each bundle of short-term circulating credit is tied to a known quantity of newly produced British goods available for circulation. Where credit is granted when it makes possible a transfer of goods from one hand to another within the production and consumption process.

In that way the circulation of currency and the circulation of goods remain in equilibrium. That is – or should be – a basic principle of currency policy, however it is managed.

These days many workers and their representatives shy away from developing an understanding of banking and finance. They need to grasp the nettle. The people of Britain will never be able to take control of the country without taking democratic control of our national finances.

Opportunity

One of the fundamental opportunities – and challenges – from becoming free of EU hindrance is to fund productive work in the regions where people live. (Or are we still going to continue with the regional dog-eat-dog outlook fostered by Brussels?)

One approach to turn things around could be the drawing up of an annual credit plan. Each manufacturing and commercial sector would compile its anticipated credit requirements for the forthcoming year. As each year unfolds the plan for each sector would be further refined to allow for unexpected day-to-day production occurrences or emergencies – including pandemics.

Another key feature as part of a coordinated approach would be to ensure that credit was available between manufacturer and retailer so that the manufacturer was always able to embark on further production before the retailer has sold the first batch of manufactured products. Overall, this arrangement would take care of shorter-term working capital requirements within the national economy.

At the same time, British commercial banks could be given a new role as special-

“Many workers and their representatives shy away from developing an understanding of banking and finance...”

ist investment banks with detailed knowledge of a particular sector. For example, agriculture and horticulture for one bank, chemicals and pharmaceuticals for another and so on.

The task for each bank, according to the plan, would be to administer the longer-term grants and subsidies (fixed capital for investment in plant and machinery) to be allotted to each sector every year. This long-term fixed capital investment could be sourced from the annual increase in value created in the economy during the previous year.

A further innovation would be to anticipate the future increase in the value of production projected over say the next four years. The projected value could then be immediately released as credit for fixed capital investment. This would further help to accelerate production while mitigating the risk of inflation. It would also avoid the dead hand of a long-term plan projected well into the future that would only serve to paralyse immediate action.

Is this all too much to ask? Workers and their organisations have not always been so blind to the need to transform the financial system. The National Executive of the Labour Party said this in 1944: "...finance must be the servant and the intelligent servant of the community and productive industry, not their stupid master."

We've yet to achieve that. And in 2020 such thinking deserves to be the main trend in financing the country. After all, it's what Take Control demands. ■

A trenchant analysis indicts the abdication of state responsibility and the persistent belief in the power of markets to fix the current economic crisis.

Meet the new 'mafia' economic system



London Stock Exchange (CC BY-SA 4.0)

All very pleased with themselves. But it's we who are paying the price.

Money and Government: A Challenge to Mainstream Economics, by Robert Skidelsky, paperback, 512 pages, ISBN 978-0141988610, Penguin, 2019, £12.99. Kindle edition available.

THIS BOOK challenges the economic ideas held by our rulers. Author Robert Skidelsky observes "Ultimately, the ideas in power serve the interests of the class in power; since the 1980s this has been overwhelmingly the financial class."

Skidelsky is Emeritus Professor of Political Economy at the University of Warwick. Writing about austerity policies, he notes that the eurozone had the worst record of all the world's economies. He attributes that in part to EU fiscal rules mandating balanced budgets, with austerity imposed on eurozone governments as a condition of loans from the ECB and IMF.

Italy, Portugal, Spain and Greece all experienced double-dip recessions. Greece was hit worst. The British government, outside the eurozone, actually chose austerity.

And it seemed not to understand what it had done. The economy promptly proceeded to flat-line for two years.

As ever, workers pay the price. Skidelsky notes, "Ninety per cent of the population have not had a pay rise for ten years, and household debt is back to its pre-crash level." The delayed recovery and slow growth were a direct result of the fiscal contraction, not a side effect.

Unemployment in Britain had fallen to just under 5 per cent, the lowest since 1975. But as Skidelsky remarks, "...this excludes the millions of part-time workers who say they would work full-time if they could, those forced into precarious self-employment and on to zero-hour contracts, and those over-qualified for the jobs they do."

The vaunted flexible labour market has proved an illusion. On one measure over 10 per cent of the British workforce is under-employed.

Government macroeconomic policy is summed up, "It promised to boost output by raising the rate of inflation, while being neu-

tral on distribution. In fact, over five years (2011-16) it failed to get inflation up to target: it had, at best, a weak effect on output; and it was far from being distributionally neutral. After nine years of emergency money, the financial system remains as dangerously stretched as it was before the crisis, and the economy as dangerously dependent on debt."

Writing about the banks he points out that, almost unbelievably, "the Bank of England's foremost macroeconomic model between 2004 and 2010 omitted the banking system from its grouping of key economic agents." That "...left the Bank unable to identify a burgeoning financial crisis in time, with an ensuing series of inaccurate forecasts and missed targets."

He explains that IMF rules resulted in banks holding far too little capital to back loans. Those thought of as low risk, such as mortgage-backed securities with an AAA credit rating, became very attractive. Banks preferred these loans without questioning how the ratings were arrived at.

Illusion

As we now know, that was an illusion and led to the crash. Speculators believed that default by any single borrower would not have an enormous impact.

To compound this error, the US Securities and Exchange Commission then ruled that AAA-rated mortgage-backed securities could be used as collateral for bank borrowing.

"Ultimately, the ideas in power serve the interests of the class in power; since the 1980s this has been overwhelmingly the financial class."

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Incredibly, even after the 2007-08 crash, the UK's Financial Services Authority's 2009 report stated, "Financial innovation can be assumed to be beneficial since market competition would winnow out any innovations which did not deliver value added."

Skidelsky explains the mechanics behind the crisis of 2007-2008 and subsequent recession: "most credit created by banks is not issued to finance new investment – the creation of new productive assets – but to expand consumption and speculate in real estate, currencies and stock markets. This leads to a volatile, destructive credit cycle."

More insecure

Even the IMF admitted in 2009 that boom and bust are not a sideshow of money moving round the world, but "...they are the main story". One result is London became the world centre of money-laundering. Skidelsky says globalisation "has rendered life in the market more insecure, more criminal and less legitimate. Markets without states are mafias."

Skidelsky makes the point that while economists and policymakers leave control of financial flows to financiers there is no incentive to do anything about imbalances between consumption and saving.

He concludes, "Flexible labour markets, greatly lauded by the conventional wisdom, are bound to slow down productivity growth, because it is more efficient for employers to hire cheap labour than invest in capital, physical or human. ... the fall in worker productivity must lead...to even greater macroeconomic instability in future, as the economy relies even more heavily on debt."

- This book was written before coronavirus and the pending economic recession. Skidelsky has written an excellent blog setting out the choices Britain now faces. Read it at robertskidelsky.com/2020/09/18/what-would-keynes-have-done-2/. He says "A sound principle in today's world is that all the goods and services necessary to maintain the health and security of the nation should be produced within its own borders, or those of its close political allies. If that means curtailment of market-led globalisation, so be it." ■

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Britain's nuclear power industry had its origins in outstanding scientific research and led to the first atomic electricity station in the capital

The rise of nuclear power

LONG BEFORE the development of the atomic bomb, research in Britain – especially at the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge – had established a formidable base of knowledge about the atom. It was there that J. J. Thomson discovered the electron in 1897, and James Chadwick discovered the neutron in 1932.

It was also at the Cavendish that Ernest Rutherford led the first experimental splitting of an atomic nucleus. A New Zealander, he had identified alpha and beta radiation while in Canada, and discovered the proton in Manchester.

Nuclear research was spurred on during World War 2. British and Canadian scientists worked together in a project known as “Tube Alloys” to produce a nuclear weapon. They joined the Manhattan Project when America decided to develop its nuclear weapon.

In 1946 the USA stopped sharing nuclear secrets with its wartime allies, despite their open cooperation. The British government was forced to find its own way to build a nuclear bomb. Two air-cooled reactors, called “piles”, were built at a wartime munitions site at Sellafield on the Cumbrian coast, later known as Windscale.

Plutonium and power

By 1950, the two large nuclear piles achieved fission, creating new elements including plutonium. By 1952 Britain successfully tested its first nuclear bomb. Christopher Hinton, in charge of the construction of Windscale and other key parts of Britain's nuclear infrastructure, recommended building a new, larger fission reactor that would both manufacture plutonium for the military and provide heat to create steam for power generation.

The project was given the go-ahead in 1953 with the building of Calder Hall on the Windscale site, the capitalist world's first nuclear power station. It was opened in 1956, two years after the Soviet Union's Obninsk power station. Despite a planned lifetime of 20 years it generated electricity until it was closed in 2003.

US non-cooperation meant that Britain had to develop its own nuclear technology. Nuclear reactors all require a way of controlling the fission (the “moderator”) and a

mechanism for transferring the heat from the fission to a boiler to create steam (a coolant). As in a conventional power station the steam drives a turbine which turns an alternator to generate electricity.

Without access to enriched uranium and heavy water, controlled by the USA, Britain had to choose the combination of a graphite moderator and a gas-cooled reactor, a design known as Magnox. At the time there seemed no disadvantage to this design compared with the water-cooled reactors used in the USA, but it became a dead-end later on.

In the early stages, the British electricity industry didn't contribute to the project (indeed, initially all of Calder Hall's electrical output was used in making plutonium). The UK Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA) controlled military and civil nuclear matters. It was independent, received government funds through a separate “vote” and could take rapid decisions.

By the middle to late 1950s, nuclear energy looked more appealing. Coal then couldn't meet power needs and imported oil was expensive. The Suez crisis of 1956 exposed the dangers of reliance on external oil supplies. A government working party backed nuclear power for the future. That declaration was often repeated subsequently but in reality it was never effectively pursued.

Hurrying into plutonium production while in possession of incomplete knowledge was potentially dangerous. That became clear in October 1957 when one of the Windscale air-cooled uranium piles caught fire. That led to a serious leak of radiation over the Lake District and a radioactive plume that spread across Europe.

Fortunately air filters had been installed

‘US non-cooperation meant that Britain had to develop its own nuclear technology...’



The Sellafield Nuclear Plant in 1986 with, left, the

on the chimneys, which greatly reduced the impact of the accident. They were added only late in construction and at considerable cost, on the insistence of nuclear scientist John Cockroft. Without the filters large parts of the north-west of England may have become uninhabitable. The full official report was kept secret and only released in 1992, but the fire did lead to safety improvements at the Magnox power stations.

The Central Electricity Generating Board was created in 1957 to run the nationalised electricity industry. Six nuclear Magnox power stations were constructed in the mid-sixties, then the largest programme in the world. Later the number of nuclear power stations increased to ten.

Energy security

The Magnox programme was justified mainly on energy security grounds, though by the early 1960s both coal and oil were relatively abundant. The CEBG ran the Magnoxes, which performed reliably and safely over the next four decades. Today they are now silent architectural reminders of a more optimistic past.

By the mid-1960s the British government decided on a second nuclear programme based on advanced gas-cooled reactors (AGRs). That was ultimately a

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the cooling towers of Calder Hall Power Station.

disastrous decision. The AGRs were built late, hugely over budget and never performed at the level they were designed for. By now the USA was marketing water-cooled reactors, which were technologically in the lead and cheaper to build.

Criticisms of the AGRs grew in the 1970s. The Conservative government of 1979 decided all nuclear stations would have pressurised-water reactors (PWRs). Publicly, government declarations were pro-nuclear and anti-coal (mainly because of their hatred of the miners' union). But there was little new nuclear power construction for two decades under either Conservative or Labour governments.

The Sizewell B nuclear power plant from the PWR programme, built between 1987 and 1995, is in fact the most recent nuclear plant to be constructed in Britain. Significantly in 1989 the energy industry was privatised. Strategic national consideration of the need for nuclear power lessened under the pressure of commercial interests. ■

• In the past forty years there has been little progress in developing a revitalised nuclear power industry based on British know-how and technological expertise. Our longer article online at cpbml.org.uk focuses on these missed opportunities.

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ABOUT US

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

All our members are thinkers, 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.

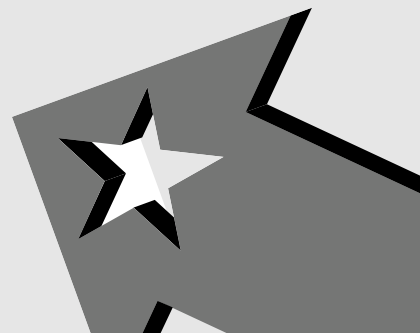
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NHS: self-sufficiency is the answer

'The ethical dilemma created by our dependence on EU staff is still evident...'

HEALTH SERVICES have relied on imported workers for too long. It is unethical and in the long term unproductive. Challenging international recruitment would be a first step towards workers taking responsibility for the future of the NHS.

On 25 September NHS England wrote to Directors of Nursing and Regional Chief Nurses with details of international recruitment. The letter described, "...the extensive package of measures to support you with your nursing international recruitment (IR) with details on how you can apply for funding." Have they learnt nothing?

Our collective response and a concrete manifestation of taking responsibility should be "no, no and no". No – because it is unethical to poach other nations' staff, even more so during a global pandemic. No – because international recruitment has not solved the problem in the past; indeed it made things worse and we are living with the consequences. And no – because the answer lies close to home.

There is a global shortage of six million nurses, predicted by the World Health Organization (WHO) to rise to nine million by the end of the decade. Governments of wealthy countries have routinely recruited nurses from overseas to fill the gaps.

The International Council of Nurses (ICN) represents 130 nursing associations from around the world. Writing in *Nursing Standard*, journal of the Royal College of Nursing, ICN chief executive Howard Catton called for ethical recruitment. He said, "One answer to the nursing shortages around the world is for each country to retain the nurses it has by showing how much they are valued: pay is fundamental". One answer? Surely it is the answer.

The NHS leadership still harks back to past practices. A new NHS pan-London consortium for international recruitment was launched recently. And Prerena Issar, NHS Chief People Officer, said at the NHS Providers conference on 8 October, "International nurses are starting to return to UK...with 6,500 'waiting to start'".

As Issar's background is in working for the United Nations and international firms like Unilever, you might understand the lack of focus on Britain's needs. But even the WHO knows that a domestic focus is the right course. Its Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel says the goal for all countries should be to have a sustainable national nursing workforce that focuses on a stable core of domestically educated nurses.

The ICN's recent report *Covid-19 and the International Supply of Nurses* made the point that long-term reliance on inward international inflow of nurses is "the antithesis of self-sufficiency". Such reliance is a likely marker of a country that is not investing sufficient funding and effort in training adequate numbers of nurses to meet its own demands.

Part of the reason Britain scores so poorly on the self-sufficiency indicator is the reliance in recent decades on EU free movement of people. That contributed to the reduction in the number of UK students from 2010. Yet clearly there are officials in NHS England who are content to make the same mistake, with an emphasis this time on non-EU staff.

The ethical dilemma created by our dependence on EU staff is still evident. For example Spain's General Nursing Council reports a shortage of 125,000 nurses. Yet in January this year more than 5,500 Spanish nationals were working for the NHS, many of them as registered nurses. The Spanish nursing council and the Spanish unions are pleased that Brexit means more Spanish nurses returning.

One reason that Spanish nurses came to Britain was for longer-term contracts that weren't available in Spain. Over two-thirds of Spanish nurses are on temporary contracts – not much evidence of wonderful EU employment rights there. Rights in the workplace are protected by workers fighting for them – whether in Britain, Spain or anywhere else. And that is the key to retention of nursing staff worldwide. ■

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