

WORKERS

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IF YOU WANT PROGRESS, PREPARE FOR STRUGGLE!

Immigration Class, nation

Higher ed Who for?

Public services The decline

Ukraine No escalation!

Energy What Britain needs

NHS Pay imposed

New govt Same problems

plus Historic Notes,

Comedy Unleashed in Manc

News and more

JOURNAL OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY

TAKE CONTROL: BUILD THE NEW BRITAIN

WORKERS



For Britain – assert independence!

THE NEW government rules out rejoining the EU, but acts as if wants to adopt by stealth all those things British workers rejected in 2016 – above all a return to free movement of labour, open borders.

Keir Starmer knows that the working class would not let him openly return Britain to the EU. Previous governments failed to grasp the potential of leaving the EU. Workers did not create the pressure to make that happen – and Labour in opposition did all it could to keep Britain in.

There's nothing to be gained by looking back to re-fight Brexit. What's needed now is to assert the interests of British workers for the future of our country. That will certainly mean resisting policies that take Britain closer to the EU and rejecting the illusion that anything good can come of that approach.

The government says it wants a security pact with the EU, more trade and a deal on migration. Yet the EU is clear there will be no concessions on trade without agreement to free movement of labour.

The EU was ruthless in Brexit negotiations – forcing through a poor deal for Britain. Its influence is much diminished, but is not eliminated. And there's no chance that its attitude will be any different in negotiating a closer relationship. It has already talked about regaining access to our fishing grounds, for example.

The risk is that this government, like its predecessors, will make concessions to appease the EU,

gaining nothing in return. And workers cannot look to the EU for protection against employers, or our own government.

The ruling class attack upon workers' living standards is ever-present – before, during and after Britain's membership of the EU. Capitalism here doesn't need the EU to continue exploiting us.

Boris Johnson's idea of "Global Britain" was a vision of subservience to global capitalist markets rather than the EU alone. Starmer's manifesto claim to "reconnect Britain globally" – leading with "unshakable commitment to NATO" – differs only in emphasis and not substance.

The Labour Party manifesto pledged to seek an "ambitious" new UK-EU security pact, saying that a Labour government would "rebuild relationships with key European allies".

And since NATO and the EU are closely in step, Britain doesn't have to rejoin the EU to get the "fullest involvement in EU defence efforts". This pact would be about strengthening the drive to war.

The EU helped to facilitate all the things capitalism needs to flourish and made it harder to fight them. That's why we must oppose moving closer to the EU – whether openly or by stealth.

We must use the independence we won in 2016 and unite our class in order to become truly independent. Our class needs to work out how to become independent of capitalism, not flirt with the failed EU project.



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Workers

University College Hospital, 2023: nurses fighting for pay.

NHS pay settlement imposed

THE GOVERNMENT has imposed a pay settlement on the majority of NHS workers in England. There is no option to accept or reject. This inevitably raises the stakes for future pay claims.

Workers on NHS Agenda for Change pay scales will get a pay rise of 5.5 per cent, backdated to April. This is in line with the NHS Pay Review Body recommendation.

This settlement leaves significant issues open. Firstly 5.5 per cent is not enough. More importantly, it was imposed, not negotiated.

The role of pay review bodies has come into question during the course of recent NHS pay disputes. Continued denial of the basic right of workers and function of their unions has been ignored, and it won't go away.

This government or any successor will find it hard to swallow a change to pay reviews or their abolition, but the unions may fear to press for that.

Acceptance of the rise despite imposition is to be welcomed. But trumpeting that this settlement is the result of the change of government is likely to lead to disappointment. The need now is to prepare for a renewed pay fight next year.

Asserting that "the NHS is broken" and bringing back eminent ennobled ex-ministers to run or re-run official reviews is no solution. The NHS is not broken, and the 1.5 million people who work in it will ensure its future. ■

BUSES

Strikes at First South West

OVER 300 bus workers employed by First South West in depots across Somerset and Cornwall have taken strike action several times since 23 July to defend their pay and conditions.

Parent company First Group recently declared £204 million profits, and paid £800,000 in bonuses to top managers, but has not offered the workers a decent rise.

First SW has tried to undermine the union by making an offer directly to staff, bypassing the union. It has tried to get RMT members to leave the union, imposed changes in terms and conditions, and attacked the workers in the local media.

RMT general secretary Mick Lynch said, "Our members are furious with company MD Simon Goff for refusing to sit down with our negotiators to hammer out a deal and instead attempting to discredit the union in the media...First South West already have some of the poorest pay rates for bus workers in the region and have added insult to injury with ludicrous comments about their own staff." ■

FACTS MATTER

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

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

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



ON THE WEB

A selection of additional stories at cpbml.org.uk

Amazon recognition – the fight goes on

Amazon workers have narrowly failed in a bid for union recognition. They have vowed to continue their struggle.

Courts undermine oil

The Labour government is using a court decision in June to justify its opposition to oil and gas production, threatening Britain’s energy security and industry.

Rush to huge solar farms

Labour is pushing through the previous government’s energy policy –approving even more large scale solar farms despite opposition and with no debate.

Opera musicians fight cuts in Wales

Faced with cuts that threaten their future and that of their company, musicians in the Welsh National Opera have voted overwhelmingly for potential strike action.

No guarantees on Tata Steel

The new government isn’t guaranteeing the future of Tata Steel in Port Talbot. Unions had hopes of a positive outcome after the election, but still face job losses.

Youth arts cuts in Wales

A vital programme for young artists in Wales faces closure. Musicians and college staff are fighting back

Plus: the e-newsletter

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Workers



3 August: workers march in Grangemouth, Scotland, against the relegation of the Petroineos refinery to an import/export hub.

Grangemouth workers march

ON SATURDAY 3 AUGUST workers marched past the Grangemouth oil and gas refinery, near Falkirk, Scotland. This was a further boost to their campaign to save their jobs at the site.

The refinery owner, Petroineos, has revealed plans to start downgrading to just an import and export facility in 2025. The workforce includes about 500 workers at the refinery, 450 on the North Sea Forties pipeline and over 1,000 in petrochemicals.

Thousands more work in allied supply chains. Unite Scottish Secretary, Derek Thomson, outlined his union’s vision for the refinery’s survival, citing innovative projects such as sustainable aviation fuel production.

Thomson said, “We need to get this right for the workers based at Grangemouth – and the tens of thousands more in the oil and gas sector that will follow. We cannot allow these workers to become the coalminers of our generation. Unite will work tirelessly to ensure this does not happen.”

FOOD

Huge drop in farm income

FARM INCOMES are falling, posing a threat to Britain’s food security. Official figures for England show a 19 per cent drop last year in the total income from farming to £4.5 billion. The fall was driven by decreases in farm gate prices for arable crops and milk.

The income from food production was only £3.4 billion. The remainder was income from diversification such as holiday cottages and subsidies not linked to food production. While that’s essential for most farmers, it means that income for food production for each farmer is shrinking.

The Labour manifesto said little about agriculture, but did acknowledge that “food security is national security”. Yet there are

no actions behind those fine words – certainly nothing in the new government’s proposed legislation will improve food security.

The new farming minister Daniel Zeichner addressed a meeting of MPs, peers and NFU representatives the day after the King’s Speech. He pledged to continue the environmental land management scheme of the previous government.

This scheme pays farmers to fallow their land or to boost wildlife, adding to the encouragements for farmers to move out of food production. Increasingly that means pressure to use farm land for solar farms, which is counted as part of “total income from farming”! Lease periods for solar farms are increasing too – commonly 40 years or more – taking farm land out of food production for decades.

RAIL

Drivers' pay to rise

TRAIN DRIVERS' union Aslef has reached agreement with the incoming Labour government to resolve a pay dispute in most of the passenger train operators. It has involved 18 days of strikes. The train operators concerned are either publicly owned or under tight government control.

The drivers have not had a pay increase since 2019, a period that saw annual inflation peak at 14.2 per cent. RPI inflation in July stood at 3.6 per cent.

The union will put the offer out to a vote by members. If accepted this will increase pay by 5 per cent for 2022-23, 4.75 per cent for 2023-24, and 4.5 per cent for 2024-25.

The previous government refused to give drivers a pay increase unless they

accepted unpalatable changes to terms and conditions. The drivers were solid and persistent in resisting that. The incoming government has removed this condition – the key that has unlocked a deal.

Meanwhile, there are moves to settle the long-running pay dispute involving the other train operators' rail staff, represented by RMT, TSSA and Unite unions.

The Aslef deal will doubtless encourage other unions to achieve “no-strings” pay increases. All unions have reached deals with numerous other rail employers over the last four years. None kept pace with inflation, but crucially the deals were achieved without insistence on worsening working practices and conditions.

Like its predecessors, Labour is set on making big changes to the rail industry, to working practices, and to conditions of employment.

WHAT'S ON

Coming soon

SEPTEMBER

Sunday 1 September, 10.30am

Burston, near Diss, Norfolk

Burston Strike School Rally

Celebrating the longest-running strike in British history, from 1914 to 1939, after teachers at the village's Church of England school were sacked and schoolchildren went on strike in support. No charge for access. Details available from burstonstrikeschool.wordpress.com

Tuesday 3 September 7pm

Online discussion meeting (via Zoom)

“Net zero and climate change”

The rush to decarbonise should not be an opportunity for capitalist profit and making workers pay through lower living standards and the loss of industry. How should Britain's workers respond to the many complex facets of climate change and net zero? Come and discuss. Email info@cpbml.org.uk for an invitation.

OCTOBER

Wednesday 16 October, 7.30pm

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

In person CPBML Public Meeting

“The growing threat of war: what can workers do?”

Our rulers follow the US's drive to war. But war isn't in the interest of British workers, nor is membership of NATO. How can workers bring this message home to the new government? Come and discuss. All welcome.

NOVEMBER

Tuesday 5 November 7pm

Online discussion meeting (via Zoom)

“Mass immigration – war on the working class”

Capitalism encourages mass immigration as a strategy to keep wages low, deskill jobs and weaken working class unity. How should British workers respond? Come and discuss. Email info@cpbml.org.uk for an invitation.

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



Vuk Vajic/Alamy Stock Photo

BMA rally, Whitehall, June 2024.

Doctors' pay fights go on

SOME GROUPS of doctors have settled pay claims for now. But others are fighting for rises. A massive 98 per cent of GP members of the British Medical Association voted for collective action on the GP contract.

Every government since the NHS was established has paid lip-service to the importance of general practice. But most have tended to neglect primary care, and action is needed.

GPs will decide practice-by-practice on which sanctions to impose and when, choosing from a menu of ten options. These include limiting daily patient contacts to the recommended safe daily maximum of 25 (the current average is 37); withdrawing voluntary services that plug local commissioning gaps; and stopping rationing referrals, investigations and admissions.

Appointments to see a GP are scarce and difficult to obtain. Practices are resorting to the creeping use of medically-unqualified physician associates to cope. Yet trained GPs, ready and willing to work, are unemployed. The Royal College of General Practitioners found that six out of ten GPs looking for work struggled to find a vacancy to apply for.

- The protracted pay campaign by junior hospital doctors that began in March 2023 looks like it's reaching a conclusion, for now at least.

They took five more days of strikes in late June and early July. This showed the doctors' resolve to take their claim as far as they could, no matter what the outcome of the election.

The result was that junior doctors have secured a pay offer of 22.3 per cent over two years. The BMA is balloting with a recommendation to accept; voting closes on 15 September.

What do workers in and outside of higher education think fight for it?

Higher education – who

HIGHER EDUCATION workers are challenging the current marketised funding model. The University and College Union (UCU), the trade union for lecturers, researchers and other key HE staff, is campaigning under the banner Reclaim Higher Education.

The present system of higher education funding embraced by successive governments is not sustainable, everyone knows that (see Box). Despite the evidence, there's been a refusal by government to make a decision about any alternative.

Attempts to address the problem are, if anything, compounding the harm. Their focus is profitability and competition. A system which could meet our needs as a society is reduced to a "loss making activity", in the words of one policy analyst. The sort of higher education that Britain needs is rarely discussed.

The UCU campaign seeks to break the funding impasse. It is essential for workers in the sector and the students they serve. It is also essential for society, because we need higher education for the vital research it carries out, and for educating our young people to serve society's needs.

Job loss

The current funding model has, the union says, "torn up the higher education sector as we know it and has created a system which is bad for students, staff, universities, and taxpayers alike." Dozens of universities across Britain are threatening the loss of thousands of jobs and the closure of entire departments.

Students are graduating with a lifetime of debt. Yet spending on staff is at a record

'Students are graduating with a lifetime of debt. Yet spending on staff is at a record low...'



Craig Brown/Alamy Stock Photo

NUS rally, Edinburgh, 21 February 2024 protesting against cuts to Scotland's higher education

low, workloads and job insecurity are mounting, and financial inequality is growing as institutions are forced to battle for student income. The union calls for a fair funding model and for professional autonomy and respect for staff.

The union is calling for fair and equal pay and an end to exploitative working practices; collaborative approaches to regulation and quality assurance; and meaningful representation for staff on decision-making structures.

Workers have solutions. Specifically, the union wants to see an end to tuition fees in higher education and secure, long-term funding for all subjects and types of higher education institution. It also calls for a fair distribution of students across the sector. Recent polling conducted for UCU

by Savanta shows most people think students should pay less towards the cost of higher education (62 per cent) and employers should pay more (53 per cent).

UCU has long argued that employers should pay more to develop the supply of skilled graduates on which they rely. It proposes a new funding model – a business education tax paid by employers.

The union commissioned a research company, London Economics, to evaluate its ideas. Its report, *Assessing the costs of removing undergraduate tuition fees across the UK*, argues that student fees across Britain could be abolished and replaced by a levy on graduates' employers or an increase in corporation tax. This would replace the £11 billion in fees paid by each cohort of UK-domiciled students

is its purpose in our society? And are they prepared to should it serve?



budget.

with a corresponding increase in public teaching grants funded by the charge on employers.

A parliamentary research report provides further evidence backing the union's demands. The higher education sector adds over £70 billion to the UK economy, the report says. Yet it relies on domestic students paying back debt for up to 40 years with the government still making a loss on the loan.

The problem is that employers have no interest in maintaining higher education, or skills training, while they can get educated, trained workers more cheaply through immigration. Coupled with a reliance on overseas students, the HE sector is not serving Britain's needs.

UCU general secretary Jo Grady said,

The funding crisis in detail

BEFORE THE early 2000s, Britain's universities were almost wholly funded by taxpayers, but the amount halved between 1975 and 2000.

Then a Labour government introduced tuition fees, at first of up to £1,000 a year, shifting costs from the state to graduates, later raising them to £3,000.

The 2010 coalition government hiked fees again – capped at £9,000 a year. The following Conservative government raised the cap in line with inflation and scrapped maintenance grants.

Tuition fees in England can now be as much as £9,250 a year, leading to punitive levels of debt, averaging £44,940 last year.

Unpaid student loan debt is now one

of the main elements of public spending on higher education. The fifth version of the student loan scheme was introduced last year. It has boosted the amount students will pay for their education – by more than 50 per cent on average.

Two-fifths of our universities are about to run budget deficits and a third have financial difficulties, leading to redundancies, closures of departments and courses, and a looming wave of mergers and acquisitions.

Universities have tried to balance the books by recruiting overseas students – 600,000 of them in 2021-22 – who pay up to £38,000 a year in fees. This income stream relies on decisions by foreign governments. ■

“UCU is calling on all political parties to remove the debt burden from young people accessing education and commit to publicly funding universities. The report from London Economics shows there are clear options for a future government to pay for higher education and that it can do so without burdening individual taxpayers.”

It is positive that the union is starting a much-needed debate about the purpose of higher education in Britain today. It is great that UCU general secretary Jo Grady unambiguously states that universities are a “public good”. But the campaign's approach is not ambitious enough.

The UCU's campaign launch document says, “It's time to reclaim higher education for the interests of staff and students.” But wider interests are at stake. Higher education is part of Britain's economy, part of our society. It is not a separate special interest making a claim for privileged treatment.

Skills

Britain needs a greater focus on developing technical skills among the whole population, including apprenticeships. The application of science to industrial development is vital to producing new goods.

But that's not all. Our universities are an

essential part of our cultural life: pitting the arts against the sciences is a divisive approach, seeing the sole purpose of higher education to produce student fodder for capital to exploit.

This capitalist approach to higher education is one aspect of the reactionary offensive against Britain, our industry, our culture, and our people. Workers in the sector should look more widely at the value of higher education and talk to their fellow workers about it.

The UCU campaign document claims, “Our sector has been placed at the centre of a divisive culture war.” In truth, some in our universities have aided the reactionary offensive by trying to crush the free exchange of ideas. That has to be honestly addressed sooner rather than later.

The campaign document calls for “fairness” – in pay, in funding and so on. But that's a disarming approach. Experience should teach us that the obstacle to all progress, including fairness, is capitalism.

A radical change is necessary: workers need to face up to that and to call for it. The debate about the system of funding is much needed, but that debate can and should be extended to include the purpose of higher education. ■

Public services are in a sorry state, and the new government
Our focus must be on what change is needed in our public

Why are public services



Workers

Bucking the trend: Shoe Lane Library in the City of London is to be upgraded, with a number of new facilities.

IN THE 1970s, public services were run by public bodies of one sort or another: local councils controlled many, central government others, and some were run by corporate bodies such as the National Coal Board. This was the start of my working life, and I want to draw illustrations from

sectors I have worked in over the years, public libraries in local government and the National Health Service.

First some history. We can trace what we now consider public services back to the nineteenth century. The working class fought, not only for pay and conditions in

the workplace, but for services to improve their lives in the developing towns and

• This article is based on a CPBML public meeting held in Conway Hall, London, on 10 July.

ent has other priorities, like devolution and backing wars.
c services – and how we can make it come about...

getting worse?

cities. This was a time of widespread trade union activity, new organisations for trades and skills joining battle with the employer.

These measures were given voice in parliamentary legislation, the Factory Acts of the 1830s, 1840s and that of 1850, and later the Elementary Education Act of 1870. But that should not make us believe that they were the gift of parliament to grateful supplicants – rather the laws followed popular struggle for improvements. This struggle continued in the period after the Second World War, when many public services were broadened and deepened.

Libraries

When I started as a library assistant in a North London public library, the borough I worked for had a network of branches. Even the smallest library had as a minimum a professionally qualified branch librarian and deputy, as well as library assistants. Larger branches had more staff and specialist services: music libraries, reference libraries, with appropriately qualified and experienced staff.

Then there was a mobile library service to parts of the borough not served by buildings, a housebound service, and a schools' library service offering collections and advice to schools without their own professional librarian.

The borough could call on cooperative arrangements with other libraries to get material that we didn't hold, with the British Library as backup. Part of a subject specialisation scheme, each borough undertook to acquire stock in a particular range of subjects, sharing the universe of knowledge among the member libraries for the benefit of readers. A similar system organised specialisation for London's music libraries.

I have painted a picture of a golden age. So where did it all go wrong? Round after round of cuts started with the Healy-IMF cuts of 1976-77. Over the decades opening hours were reduced, branches closed, staff posts lost. Schools' library services could not survive the local management of schools. Cuts in book funds ended subject specialisation in interlending networks.

More recently councils, whether

Labour or Conservative, have replaced qualified and trained staff with volunteers. Some even open libraries with self-service machines instead of staff. No unaccompanied children allowed here! As other services fail, the purpose of libraries is diluted as they take on other functions, or are sold off for redevelopment.

Over 800 public libraries have been closed since 2010. By 2019 there were 28 million fewer books in stock than in 2005. Now there is a context of local government insolvency. A survey of council finance officers earlier this year found that 51 per cent of them thought they were likely to declare their council insolvent.

The potential for public libraries, and libraries of all kinds – scientific, technical, academic, medical – is immense. An example: libraries now lend e-books. Their great advantage as a medium is that they are capable of multiple simultaneous uses. Or would be, except for the restrictive practices of publishers and sellers of eBooks to public libraries.

We could do a great deal about this. The principle of legal deposit requires any British publisher to provide a free copy to the British Library and up to five other libraries, if they request a copy. This principle could be extended to require publishers to make eBooks available throughout the public library network.

The use and abuse of volunteers to de-skill the profession and downgrade services could be stopped, and library education expanded once more, to provide the staff needed for a reinvigorated public library service.

The NHS

Hospitals continue to be crippled by debt repayments: in 2021 NHS trusts were spending nearly half a billion pounds on interest charges alone on private finance initiative contracts. Banned since 2018 after the collapse of Carillion, these PFI deals, which were usually struck for 25 to 30 year terms, are starting to come to an end. There are around 700 PFI contracts with a capital value of £57 billion and charges of around £160 billion still to be paid for use and maintenance.

In January the external cladding on

‘So where did it all go wrong? Round after round of cuts started with the Healey-IMF cuts of 1976-77...’

Darent Valley Hospital in Dartford – the country's first private finance initiative hospital – was found not to comply with fire safety standards when it was built nearly a quarter of a century ago and will need to be removed.

A parasitic dispute resolution industry has grown up around the end of PFI agreements. One of the advantages claimed for PFI was that maintenance would be carried out by the contractors. But when Whittington Hospital in North London tried to get their contractors to carry out remediation work after a fire, the contractors filed for bankruptcy and Lloyds Banking Group, the biggest investor in the PFI scheme, sued the hospital for £56 million.

Nevertheless, after the election of the new government, the chief executive of NHS Providers, the membership organisation for NHS trusts, Julian Hartley, in the name of “thinking outside the box” was quoted as saying that the new government should relax Treasury rules that limit NHS trusts from entering into such deals.

Over the years capitalism has been quite content for some industries and utilities to be in the public sector. Failing industries still required can be bailed out, and finance capital gets rich on workers' money (taxes) used to service debt. Even some of the banks were nationalised in the 2007-2008 banking crisis.

We do not advocate nationalisation as an end in itself. Nationalisation is not the

Continued on page 10



Continued from page 9

same as socialism, as proletarian dictatorship, although that belief still lingers.

Those who argue for nationalisation as a panacea probably do not remember nationalised industries as they really were – trade unions had to fight every bit as hard as against a private employer. If renationalisation, say of rail, were to end some of the inanities and anarchy of the current system, that it is to be welcomed, but it will not of itself help us.

Privatisation was resisted, rightly, both by the trade unions organising in those services, and by the users of those services. They predicted, and were correct, that to privatise, outsource, or market test services would result in an attack on pay, on conditions of service, on workplace safety and on the quality of services. It did not make services any more efficient. If

‘It is time to assert again our professionalism, to challenge those we work with who are prepared to acquiesce in decline...’

How public libraries were won

Britain’s public library service is usually dated from the 1850 Public Libraries Act, attributed to the reformer William Ewart. As with so much in public services, the parliamentary act was the culmination of local struggles, and efforts by members of the library profession.

One of them was Edward Edwards, a former bricklayer who worked at what was then the British Museum library, and a Chartist sympathiser who was to become the first librarian of the Manchester Free Library.

The act allowed local councils with a population over 10,000, if two-thirds of the rate payers voted in favour in a referendum, to fund public libraries from the rates, but by no more than a halfpenny in the pound. Even this was controversial: opponents argued that libraries would become working-class lecture halls which would give rise to what they called an unhealthy agitation.

A number of councils took this up and in 1888 county councils were also included. The halfpenny rate, later a penny rate restriction, was lifted. Public libraries became important centres for adult education, information through reference libraries and, though it was controversial, reading for recreation.

The profession of librarianship developed too, with the foundation of a professional body in 1877, the Library Association (now the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals).

In 1942 Lionel McCoolvin, the chief librarian of Westminster, produced a report commissioned by the Library Association into the public library system, and how it might be rebuilt after the war, described as the Beveridge report for libraries. Though many of its recommendations were not immediately accepted it was hugely influential on the subsequent developments. ■

anything, it introduced unnecessary complexities, extra layers of management.

Trade unions

As for trade unions in the public services, the trend of merger has led to Britain’s largest trade union being a public service union, Unison. But the number of public sector workers in trade unions has fallen for three years, and now less than half of public sector workers are members. So we need to pay attention to basic questions of recruitment and organisation, and refocus our trade unions on their purpose.

With a dwindling membership, it is too easy for unions to be taken over by those with axes to grind: the decolonisers; the enthusiasts for the latest technological fad; the aspirant censors; the diversity and equality obsessives. All the more important that members speak out and say, “these are our organisations, we will make them tackle the fundamental questions of the future of our profession”.

The brutal answer to the question of

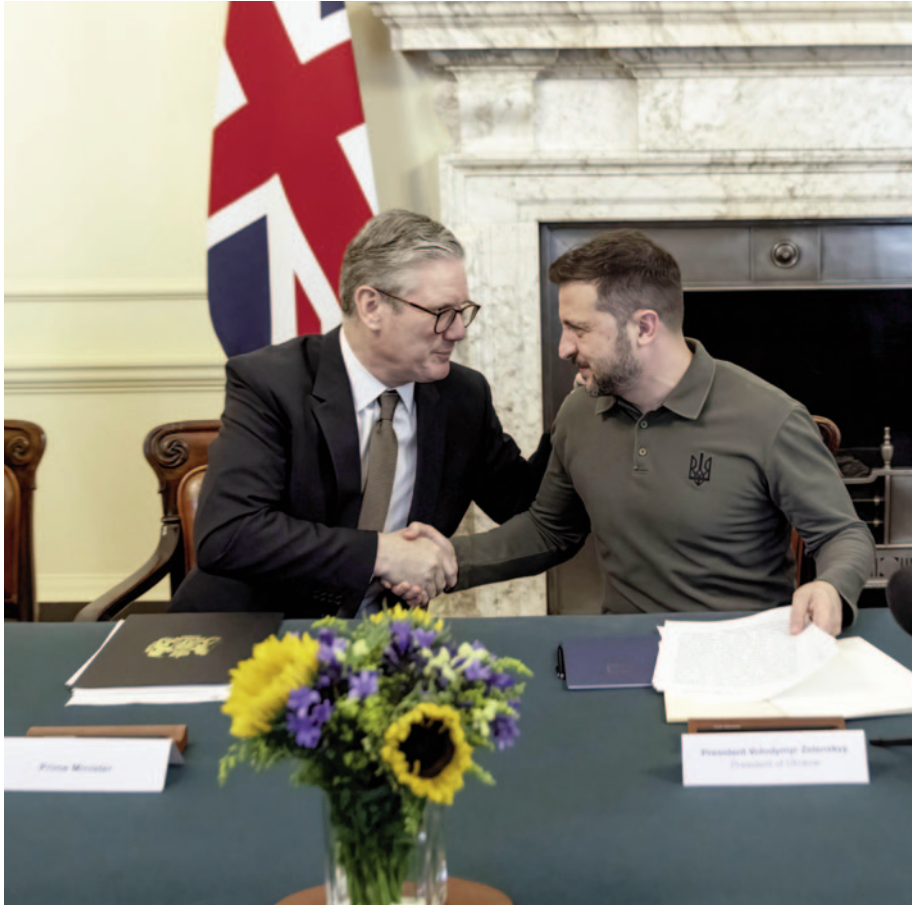
why are our public services getting worse, is that we allow it. It is time to assert again our professionalism, to challenge those we work with who are prepared to acquiesce in decline. We take pride in doing our work to the highest possible standard and there’s no room for those who won’t accept that.

If the working class does nothing, not only will nothing get better, things will get much worse. People organising around certain issues can be part of the answer: on water for example, surfers’ and swimmers’ groups have exposed the shocking state of our rivers, lakes and seas.

There clearly is money, if we choose not to divert it to make war abroad, if we renounce the debts entered into in our name: last year 10 per cent of total government revenue went on debt interest; this year more than £110 billion. The problem is not money: the working class make wealth, not the parasites, speculators and oligarchs. We should take control of how it is used for and by the people. ■

The war between Ukraine and Russia has escalated with little sign of resolution...

No to escalation!



PA Images/Alamy Stock Photo

Ukraine president Volodymyr Zelensky with Keir Starmer in Downing Street, 19 July. Starmer promised backing “today and always”.

The advance by Ukraine into the Kursk region of Russia marks a new step in the fighting, ongoing since the Russian invasion in February 2022.

Successive British governments have backed Ukraine unreservedly and feted its president, Volodymyr Zelensky. They have also encouraged Ukraine to hold out against a peace deal and continue fighting.

Above all else they have opened the door to Ukraine joining NATO – a course specifically endorsed by the incoming Labour government. The threat of NATO expansion and the aim of the Ukrainian government to join the military alliance have been sources of conflict with Russia for over a decade.

The new prime minister Keir Starmer quickly committed Britain to continue military assistance “for as long as it takes” – in

addition to the aid already provided – a total of £12.7 billion, including £3 billion planned for this year.

Britain has trained Ukrainian armed forces and supplied weapons. This has now escalated with Ukraine’s use of Challenger 2 tanks – “gifted” by Britain – in their attack into Russia. Agreement was given for the use of weapons supplied by Britain inside Russia in June, but this is the first time they have actually been deployed.

The government and the defence ministry say that there is no change in policy and that Ukraine has “a clear right” to use those weapons in self-defence, including action inside Russia. That completely overlooks the inexorable shift in British involvement, becoming more entangled in the conflict at every step.

Further entanglement is threatened by

Zelensky’s expressed desire for Ukraine to use Britain’s Storm Shadow long range missile. In late July Starmer appeared to accede to this demand, but the defence ministry quickly announced that nothing had changed. But why supply them at all and ramp up production if they are not to be used at some point?

NATO – with the US and Britain in the lead – has seen invasion as an opportunity to intensify its opposition to Russia. And the EU seeks to use the war to further its failing mission of centralisation and control.

NATO describes Ukraine’s action as self-defence by “an independent, peaceful and democratic country” against an unprovoked attack. This completely ignores the US interference in the region during the time between the break-up of the Soviet Union and the current Ukraine government coming to power. That was far from peaceful and democratic.

Conscription

And Ukraine with a conscription crisis is hardly independent when its war aims depend on bringing NATO countries directly into the conflict. Its counter attack in Kursk isn’t an attempt to invade the whole of Russia. Nor will it drive Russian troops out of Ukraine’s territory – Russia is making gains in the Donetsk region.

But there isn’t any sign that the offensive is designed to bring Russia into peace talks.

Zelensky sent his foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba to China on 24 July, the first visit to China by any senior Ukrainian figure since the war started. This followed the summit held in June in Switzerland at Zelensky’s behest excluding Russia – which China declined to attend. The visit appeared to be merely an attempt to persuade China to attend the next summit while continuing to exclude Russia.

Starmer and his ministers forget about financial black holes when it comes to war-mongering. British workers could help by forcing the government to use the resources allocated to war at home instead, where they are badly needed – in education, social care and the NHS for starters. That would also be a great contribution to peace. ■

A snapshot of the condition of our country shows the scale of the crisis. We must return Britain to progress...

If you want progress, pro



Steel workers marching for their industry, Cheltenham, January 2024.

BRITAIN HAS seen decades of economic stagnation and decline. Investment in production, the basis for true wealth creation, has dwindled. The country's starved infrastructure is in a terrible state. There is neither a strategy nor a fiscal plan to correct

'Nothing changes with the election of a new government...'

the neglect.

Successive governments have failed to address the problems. Nothing changes with the election of a new government.

The deindustrialisation of Britain continues, along with fostering the economic impoverishment of working people. Mass immigration, sucking in cheap labour, expands dramatically, ignoring widespread disquiet. Yet alongside that is an obstinate refusal to upskill and invest in the workers of Britain instead.

The problem is that power over our society is in the hands of finance capital and the corporate monopolies. They aren't interested in satisfying the needs of the working class, the great majority of citi-

zens, because they have only a self-interested desire to keep coining grand profits for themselves.

In the service of the ruling class are the government and parliament. These are supine to the ruling oligarchies and do not govern in the interests of the working class. Effective democracy for workers does not exist within the system.

No choice

There is little difference between the mainstream political parties on questions of the economy. All prop up capitalism, so there is no choice for progress within the flawed electoral process and Westminster parliamentary set-up.

le of the problem facing us and also suggests a path to

Prepare for struggle!

There was little enthusiasm for the conventional parties in the election. There is no confidence that the established politicians or parties will tackle the problems and transform the country.

The result was due to the unpopularity of the Conservative government rather than a popular surge of hope for the capacity of Labour.

Our class never gets any closer towards exercising power over events or resolving fundamental problems. The systemic tendency towards absolute decline and the inadequacies of the prevailing political structures hem everyone in.

Where will change come from if not from the existing system and the political parties in Westminster?

The working class is the only agent for change, the only force with the potential strength capable of overturning the ruinous stranglehold of monopoly finance capital over our society.

A working class creates power when it comes together and acts collectively, which is why we say: "Prepare for struggle!"

Things have become bad not only because the ruling class holds sway but also because there has been insufficient working class struggle.

Yet workers cannot afford to believe and act as if they are powerless when there is plenty of evidence to the contrary. The working class must move beyond cynicism and have confidence in itself.

The recent resurgence in working class struggle is welcome. Yet past upturns in working class activity have dissipated, allowing the rule of capital to re-assert itself.

To avoid repeating that cycle, working class initiative must be maintained and extended. That means staying in charge of matters in workplaces and sectors, not letting our guard drop – and above all not allowing active involvement to lapse when disputes reach temporary settlements.

Instead, struggle must spread further, into more spheres and other sectors of society. Workers strengthen their influence when they govern events and issues by action. That's the way to increase working class power, that's the way to rebuild the

labour movement, that's the way to fashion a powerful network based on a reinvigorated class consciousness.

Most of these recent pay struggles have been well conducted, and many have been successful. Many workers have been involved, avoiding unfeasible all-out strikes and instead adopting a more guerrilla approach: ever wanting to avoid setback, ever eager to strengthen their influence, ever keen to control events.

Once a trade union culture is reborn, then spin-offs flow – not least in the form of willingness to be involved in future struggle. And that can have wider influence.

Workplace trade union organisation has responded to the need for struggle over pay. But once settlements are reached, that organisation can't be left to die back. Momentum gained on pay can translate into ongoing, permanent pressure on the whole range of issues that bother workers, beyond pay: conditions of work, health and safety, pensions, training a younger skilled force, the quality of work, and so on.

Our party has promoted the idea of "taking control". The first crucial element is to assert a collective response to the problems that workers face. That then needs to evolve into an incipient amalgam of political power, operating persistently and independently of the system.

Conscious

But "taking control" isn't a mechanistic formula, workers becoming a new managerial power. Rather it means workers acting collectively and consciously to force the employer or government into accepting specific demands that are vital to our way of life.

"Taking control" means building working class networks and advancing our independent thinking so that a working class becomes increasingly separated from the capitalist order, acting as a new type of thinking, class conscious movement.

As these "taking control" attitudes grow and spread, workers will develop and hold on to power over decisions. Eventually, the class will have to debate over whether there is any option other than seeking total power for the great majority. Revolution!

By that stage workers will have the

'All the struggles and battles ahead will provide the conditions needed to change the outlook of our class...'

experience to decide whether parliamentary systems with universal suffrage do what working people need – and if the answer is negative, to invent new ways and structures of governance.

"Taking control" is a protracted strategy – to shift the balance of power between the working class and the ruling class in workers' favour. This won't happen overnight: but as the working class becomes more and more independent, in thought and action, it will develop a confident mindset, operating in political terrain that suits it best.

All the struggles and battles ahead will provide the conditions needed to change the outlook of our class. As it grows in political stature it will constitute itself as the nation in a practical sense. A nation to be successful has to have an impelling force. As Marx and Engels set out in the opening chapter of *The Communist Manifesto*, that will either refashion society in a revolutionary way, or the contending classes may ruin each other.

We need a manifesto for workers, not just for elections, not as promises to be reneged on, but a declaration of intent containing objectives for us to achieve and impose in the future.

A contest is underway for the heart of Britain! A contest between two opposing forces. A ruling class overseeing stagnation and decline. And a working class, challenging, ready to take responsibility for our country and seeking to mould a society which actively meets our needs.

There is a long way to go, but the contest has begun. ■

The headlong rush into what are still unreliable and inadequate security that the country requires to maintain and develop

The energy that Britain n



Workers

ENERGY IS the capacity to do work. Civilisation is only possible because humans have learned how to change energy from one form to another.

The application of energy underpins every single aspect of our lives. It is needed at work to drive machinery, power computers, melt steel, enable communication, move commodities from place to place, and in the manufacture of machinery, appliances and gadgets – the list is endless.

We need energy at home to provide heat, enable us to cook, to travel and to enjoy leisure time. Without energy, our world would be in darkness at night.

In the modern world, the age of electricity, energy must be readily available, reliable and affordable. As the industrial revolution began in Britain, steam engines heated by coal led the way, with oil and gas later on – all increasingly used to generate electricity.

Coal

Mining coal by hand was notoriously hazardous, with the constant risk of death by disease, explosion or mine collapse. But society, and miners themselves, did not ask for coal to be outlawed. Instead the process was mechanised.

Cutting machines of ever greater sophistication replaced the pick and shovel. Gas detection supplanted the Davy lamp and the canary. Better ventilation improved the working environment at the coal face, along with more advanced medical facilities.

Then when the unionised miners, in the 1970s, became too successful for the employers at defending their industry, a new agenda emerged characterising coal itself as the enemy. This found an echo with the environmental crusaders at the time, and the war against fossil fuels – and mining in general – began in earnest.

Funding

Today, scientists who don't toe the official net zero emissions line find it hard to secure funding for research, or to get their work published.

The prevailing dogma is that renewable energy will meet our need for available, reliable and affordable energy. Although

adequate 'green' technologies is putting at risk the energy of modern life...

needs

renewable energy has come a long way, it cannot be described as readily available and reliable.

Wind and sun are intermittent. Any energy they generate that cannot be used at once is wasted unless it can be stored for use later – and that's the problem. Pumped storage is proven, but isn't scalable to the degree required. Giant battery arrays are not proven technology, even at the present small scale. Both come with downsides and limitations.

Affordability

And what of affordability? Earlier this year, Keir Starmer promised the launch of a publicly funded body, Great British Energy, claiming it would provide lower bills and energy security. The reality may turn out to be otherwise.

Break down the promises of Great British Energy and you find that there is little new and nothing to suggest that Labour have discovered an answer to cheaper, renewable energy. Instead there's a great deal of magical thinking and over-reliance on one optimistic consultancy report.

And the plans, such as they are, rely almost wholly on private sector investment to supply funding. It's just a variation on the present market-driven subsidy model. And given Labour's history, it could end up like the private finance initiative, transferring public money to the private sector in bucketloads.

Pipe dream

Since it is most unlikely that renewable energy will come on stream in the volume required within the timelines required by government policies, the promise of energy security is another pipe dream. In fact the present government has endorsed its predecessor's policy of building more under-sea connectors to import electricity and further increase our energy dependence.

The carrot of new green jobs to replace those sacrificed on the net zero altar is proving to be nothing more than a stick to accelerate the decline of jobs in essential industries like steel. This approach, increasing Britain's dependency on others while calling it "security", is not confined to industry.

Our agriculture, a byword for quality, is also threatened. Giant onshore wind and solar farms are on their way, along with the expansion of housing and industry in green belt land.

To do all this, planning controls will be dropped, with Angela Rayner continuing the policy of her predecessor, Michael Gove. Local opposition will not be tolerated – ironic when you consider the policy of even greater devolution.

But this approach isn't working. Unconvinced by the dogma local campaigns are springing up against windfarms and green belt development, for example led by the Calderdale Windfarm Action Group, and the residents in Ansty, Warwickshire.

Opposition in Europe

Europe-wide the decision to set 2050 in law as the date to achieve net zero is facing mounting popular opposition and a growing recognition of its practical impossibility. In all likelihood the government of the day will be compelled to face reality and shift the date.

This of itself will not halt the job losses that have accompanied this headlong rush to ever greater dependency. If we desire to be truly independent, in energy as in other essentials, we will have to work out how to do it for ourselves.

'The carrot of new green jobs to replace those sacrificed on the net zero altar is proving to be nothing more than a stick to accelerate the decline of jobs in essential industries like steel...'

A change of government changes nothing. We need to reposition our local fights into a collective, nationwide response to attacks on our country and our way of life. But we must also start to discuss what we do want for our country and our future. ■

Meet the Party

The Communist Party of Britain Marxist-Leninist's series of Zoom discussion meetings continues on Tuesday 3 September on net zero and climate change. How should Britain's workers respond to the many complex facets of this issue? All meeting details are published on What's On, page 5, in our eNewsletter, and at cpbml.org.uk/events.

M As well as our Zoom discussion meetings, we hold regular in-person public meetings, with one in London on 16 October on the growing threat of war (details on page 5), and informal meetings with interested workers and study sessions for those who want to take the discussion further.

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

**We look at some of the proposals from the Labour government
ca...**

New government – same



Workers

Hill farming, North Yorkshire. The new government plans to let developers loose on the countryside.

THE OUTCOME of July's general election was a foregone conclusion with a rout of the Conservative Party across the country. Equally inevitable was that the Labour Party would carry on where its predecessor left off.

But although we have a change of face in government, the so-called Labour landslide is not quite the ringing endorsement some of their supporters claim. True, they won 211 more seats than in the 2019 election, but with half a million fewer votes. Indeed their 33.8 per cent share of votes cast appears modest at best. Factor in a turnout of only 60 per cent, and Labour's "landslide" turns out to be 20 per cent of eligible voters.

Nevertheless we have a new government, no matter how many voted for them. In July, before the election, we said in this journal, "...Workers have nothing to gain from a change of party in government." And Labour have confirmed the accuracy of that statement from day one in office.

No change

The King's Speech on 17 July – the laws the new government wants to pass – confirmed that, on the major issues that confront us today – war, energy, security, industry, immigration – there will be no change from the fundamentals of Conservative policy. It will be business as usual.

Significantly, Keir Starmer's first international trip once in office was to attend the NATO 75th anniversary summit. He called on all members to increase defence spending, and announced a strategic defence review which would enable Britain to increase spending up to 2.5 per cent of GDP. Of course he was unable to confirm where the extra tens of billions would come from.

He further emphasised his unshakeable commitment to Ukraine, for which read commitment to war in Ukraine. In seeking to appear strong and statesmanlike, Starmer has reinforced the stance taken by his Conservative predecessors, favouring intervention and confrontation in

ment. There's little to benefit workers, and a great deal to

e old problems

foreign affairs rather than negotiation and resolution.

Labour trumpeted its pledge to put an end to zero hours contracts during the election campaign, as it did on guaranteed sick pay and protection from unfair dismissal from day one of employment. These are spelt out in the Employment Rights Bill.

Unions have broadly welcomed these employment law commitments including the removal of powers on minimum service levels during strikes in some sectors and the abolition of strike ballot thresholds.

Action

But none of this is Labour Party largesse, as it would claim. The gains are the result of determined workers' action, which will continue to be necessary in defence of those rights. The Conservative law on minimum levels was not once used by an employer during recent strikes.

And although removal of the balloting thresholds is welcome, organised workers had made that law ineffective. And as the pledge was to remove unnecessary restrictions on unions, that means necessary restrictions (in the government's view) will remain in force. They must go too.

One of the 40 policies announced is the proposed Great British Energy Bill, by means of which £8.3 billion is to be invested in renewable energy projects, designed to decarbonise the electricity supply by 2030.

It is claimed that the private sector will pour money into such projects, though many in the industry say the target is unachievable, that the technology required is expensive, and not yet viable on a commercial scale.

Manufacturers, including car builders, are increasingly distancing themselves from what they now see as the great risk of putting all their eggs in the green technology basket.

Ed Miliband, the new energy secretary, continues to insist that renewable energy is cheap – conveniently forgetting the huge subsidies which conceal the real cost.

The National Wealth Fund Bill is another device for channelling taxpayers' money into decarbonising industry. It is proposed to invest £7.3 billion in "green"

steel and carbon capture and storage – fine sounding and theoretically plausible, but as yet unproven and commercially unviable. Bold claims are made that for every £1 the government invests, private enterprise will invest £3. If this is the new economics, it looks ominously like the old.

The Planning and Infrastructure Bill promises to address a lack of affordable housing. And while that would be welcome, it's not the whole story. The risk is that further swathes of farmland and natural habitat will be prey to rapacious developers.

Worryingly, the bill paves the way for a huge increase in onshore wind and solar farms. These offer little by way of reliable energy, but further reduce the amount of good agricultural land, guaranteeing increased food imports too.

Like the Conservatives, Labour sees planning laws as an obstacle to building houses as well as windfarms. So it wants to simplify and speed up the planning process and to invoke compulsory purchase powers where necessary. Green belt land is under threat of being redesignated "grey belt" and by implication of low value.

Profit

Obstructive regulation is not the problem for workers. Rather it is that property developers make more profit from expensive housing, and landowners hold on to land to obtain the best price.

Nor are developers interested in developing brownfield sites in our decaying towns and cities, or bringing back into habitable condition the increasing number of empty properties – there's not enough profit in that.

Targets for new house building or the proportion of "affordable" homes make good headlines, but that's about all – not least because of the lack of skilled workers in the construction industry.

The Skills England Bill proposes to set up a body to work with employers and unions to develop a picture of future skills needs. Having a picture is one thing, having the determination and planning to do something about it is quite another.

And why just England? Because Labour's commitment is to the continued fragmentation of Britain, not national plan-

'Labour's agenda largely amounts to a rehash of pre-existing Conservative proposals...'

ning – through the English Devolution Bill and a promised new Council of the Nations and Regions.

The Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill claims to address the fears many workers have that unchecked immigration is used by employers in many industries to drive down wages, and is enforcing changes to the character of many parts of the country. Again, the bill is long on talk but short on plans of action.

The woeful Rwanda scheme is to be scrapped and £75 million diverted to a tough sounding Border Security Command. Whether the £75 million actually exists is moot, but there's no evidence that the proposal to process asylum claims abroad will be any less fraught with problems than its predecessor.

Meanwhile, the refusal to disengage from the European Convention on Human Rights ensures that the armies of lawyers who obstruct steps to deport people with no right to be here will continue to fill their pockets. And the bill does little to stem the flow of legal immigration.

The King's Speech shows, if there was any doubt, that Labour's agenda largely amounts to a rehash of pre-existing Conservative proposals and giving a little to trade unions that they had already won anyway.

The country is crying out for a change from the old policies, which haven't produced any improvement in people's lives. The Labour Party in government won't help – it is an obstacle to progress, hell bent on proving that it can be a better servant of capital than its predecessor. ■

Comedy Unleashed – a home for those who leave self-censoring Workers interviews the Manchester residents who worked

Bringing Comedy Unleashed



Stuart Mitchell, Inc. Monocle

Comedian Andrew Doyle performing at Comedy Unleashed's Backyard Comedy Club, Bethnal Green.

COMEDY UNLEASHED first came to Manchester in June of this year and quickly sold out. The city can now expect to enjoy regular Comedy Unleashed nights out.

This happened through the hard work and determination of a small group of local residents.

Comedy Unleashed was started in 2017 by Andrew Doyle and Andy Shaw, both stand-up comedians and writers. Their purpose was to counter the growing trend where comedians are either being cancelled and losing income or were self-censoring to stay in work, with a negative impact on the art.

Fast forward to November 2023 when

Andy Shaw was a speaker at the Battle of Ideas Festival in Buxton. Four Manchester residents – Cath, Lee, Danny and Steve – independently approached him and asked for Comedy Unleashed to come to Manchester.

Encouraged

Andy explained the huge amount of work involved in launching such an event – and that he had a day job! But he kept their details, put them in touch with one another after the festival and encouraged them to look for a city centre venue to host a one-off gig. A year later Izzy, another Manchester resident, approached Comedy

Unleashed with the same request and Andy put her in touch with the others.

Workers met with the group plus their newest member, Garcia, in August to find out more about what they had done.

Workers: Why did you want Comedy Unleashed to come to Manchester?

Steve: I'd watched clips from their gigs on-line and enjoyed their brand of free-thinking comedy. For me, too many comedians have become boring and tame. I appreciate that not everyone thinks so, but I do.

Lee: I go to the Manchester comedy clubs too. I have seen some good acts, but they are in the minority. Four or five years

...ship at the door – has finally made it to Manchester.
... to make it happen...

...shed to Manchester

ago I started watching Comedy Unleashed videos online, and couldn't believe how good it was. What a relief from those on the television telling jokes about the Tories and Trump. It was as if I had found a cool new band no one had ever heard of.

Danny: I'm impressed with the ethos – Comedy Unleashed will put on comedians that have been cancelled so that the audience gets to decide what's funny. If something's funny – it's funny. If someone is just nasty, people won't be amused.

Izzy: Lots of previously "anti-establishment" comedians are now part of the establishment. They all make similar jokes and it's become boring.

Workers: How did you manage to get Comedy Unleashed to Manchester?

Cath: It was hard work. We approached so many venues that I put together a spreadsheet so that we could keep track of outright refusals, ones we were still chasing and those that we'd given up on. In total, we looked at over 30 venues. Straight off, some weren't suitable for an audience of over 150. We engaged with 17, which included having an initial conversation, maybe getting a quote, a further reccy but for various reasons none of them materialised.

Lee: I even approached the old Bernard Manning club. It was a possibility but isn't in the city centre.

Steve: Izzy found the club called Impossible and got a positive response – and then had to go on holiday! But we got

there. It's a brilliant venue. The atmosphere is great.

Workers: Did you expect it to take 18 months to get the first gig off the ground?

Steve: Finding the venue was the first step. The next was to make sure they'd stick with us if they came under pressure from people opposed to what they are trying to do. Two venues pulled out at last year's Edinburgh Fringe for example, so we told Impossible that the line-up for the gig was Andrew Doyle, Graham Linehan, Leo Kearse and Andrew Lawrence – four artists seen as the most contentious – just to check that they wouldn't back out.

Cath: A minimum of about 150 tickets needs to be sold just to break even, so it was crucial that we pulled out all the stops to publicise the event. It was such a relief that it sold out. The July event was also a success. There's a break in August and then monthly events planned from September.

Steve: Comedy Unleashed book the acts for each gig but we share out the work on the ground – the comedians' transport, hotels and pay, of course. I tackle much of that. I'm learning to deal with artist types that (to me) are extraordinarily disorganised! That's been a real learning curve for me. There's also the job of being on the door and taking tickets. The venue has its own security, so we don't need to worry about that.

Izzy: We also deal with the sound and lighting. I asked Garcia to join us as she

'The purpose was to counter the growing trend where comedians are either being cancelled or losing income...'

knows her way around the tech.

Garcia: That has been a steep learning curve too. At one point we had to borrow an iPhone from an audience member, but we are doing it and it's fun.

Workers: Comedy Unleashed has been established in London for several years now, but there are also monthly events in Leeds. Were they set up by a similar group?

Lee: No, the Leeds venue approached Comedy Unleashed so that didn't need the initial legwork. We've shown that it's possible to get a Comedy Unleashed club going in any city. It's up to others now to take up the baton if they want Comedy Unleashed in their city or town.

Comedy Unleashed is in Manchester on 5 September, Leeds on 6 September and London on 10 September. ■

CPBML public meeting

Wednesday 16 October London, 7.30pm

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

"The growing threat of war: what can workers do?"

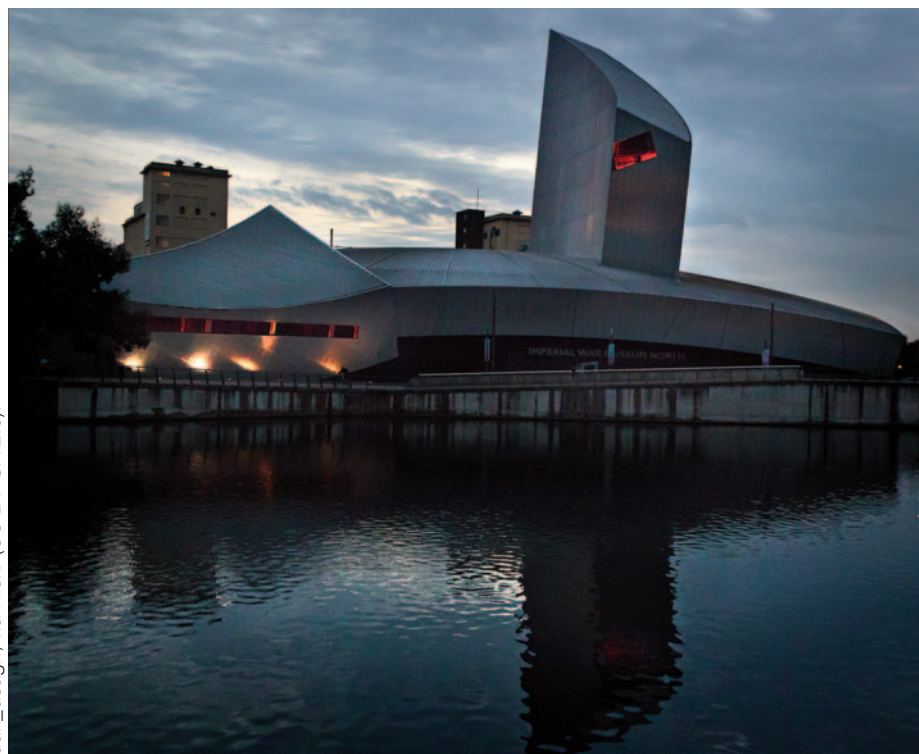
Our rulers in turn follow and encourage the US's drive to war. But war isn't in the interest of British workers, nor is membership of NATO. How can workers bring this message home to the new government? All welcome. Free Entry. For details, see www.cpbml.org.uk/events



Workers

An exhibition at the Imperial War Museum North, in Manchester thought-provoking oral recollections from across the political divide.

Living with the Troubles



dun_deagh, via Flickr (CC BY-SA 2.0).

Imperial War Museum North.

AN EXHIBITION at the Imperial War Museum North in Manchester explores how many incidents of the Troubles in northern Ireland, 1969 to 1998, remain highly contested. Called “Living with the Troubles”, it shows that many people who lived through them have very different perspectives on what happened.

The exhibition graphically illustrates the damage wrought and lives destroyed when a working class allows itself to be divided on sectarian lines, when we lose sight of ourselves as a class and of what unites us.

The focus is on four themes with relevant images, video, objects and – most importantly – contributions from people who lived through them. The museum has gathered oral recollections from people across the political divide – and those that tried to straddle the divide. Visitors can listen to or read the oral contributions and should find them thought provoking.

The first of the four themes is titled “The night of the 27-28 June 1970”. The agreed facts are that violence erupted on that night at the junction of the republican Short

Strand district and loyalist Newtownards Road and three people died, two Protestants and one Catholic.

Visitors to the exhibition can listen to two men who were children on that night and caught up on the edges of the violence. They lived a short distance apart yet their memories of what happened, with the loss of those three lives, are very different.

One, at the age of 16, saw men with guns (neighbours that he knew) go down the street to defend the local Catholic church and his community from attack by rioters. The other man was 15 at the time and is adamant that there was no gun battle, no guns from the Protestant side, but that gunmen shot and killed two peaceful Protestant marchers and one Catholic.

Contradictory

An explanation board from the exhibition’s curator team states that this event and the contradictory recollections of it epitomise the divisions of the near 30 years of conflict in northern Ireland, but that encouraging people to express their different versions of

events allows peace to endure.

“The Descent into Violence” covers the rise of paramilitary groups – the split of the Irish Republican Army into the Official IRA and the Provisional IRA, and the emergence of the Red Hand Commando, the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Ulster Defence Army. It has contributions from ex-members of those groups, from the British Army, the police and fire services, and from civilians. Civilians made up more than half of all those killed during the conflict.

Two particularly pertinent contributions come from Liam McAnoy an ex-Official IRA member and Beano Niblock an ex-Red Hand Commando member.

Discrimination

Liam McAnoy: “But the reality was that discrimination wasn’t solely against Catholics ... in actual fact working class Protestants were discriminated against because it worked on the basis of nepotism: in other words if your father worked in those industries you were more likely to get a job. So quite a lot of working class Protestants who had no relationship to engineering, to the shipyards were also discriminated against.”

Beano Niblock: “It was only when I went into prison...these guys although they are born on the other side of the road, although they’re from a different religion, there’s where the commonality is you know? Because we’re working class and if you look at the statistics the vast majority of people who went through the prison system would have been working class; the vast majority of people who were killed in the Troubles were working class; and it’s not a coincidence you know? So there has to be that connection between the communities here, although I didn’t see that growing up, probably because I was tutored not to see it.”

“Hell in a Wee Place” does an excellent job of contrasting life in northern Ireland during the Troubles with the rest of the UK. Photographs show that the towns and cities of northern Ireland had the same shops and road signs, but someone going to work might find a soldier in their garden, British army checkpoints on one road and a paramilitary checkpoint on another.

Shopping in the city centre meant

ster, gathers
al divide...

S

‘A graphic illustration of the damage wrought and lives destroyed when a working class allows itself to be divided along sectarian lines...’

going through a turnstile, being frisked and a bag search. Bombs and shootings were commonplace and public information posters warned children not to pick up items in the street. The oral contributors talk about how all this was “their normal”.

The final theme, “Today and the Future” is weaker, perhaps not surprisingly as it speculates on what might develop. But there are still interesting contributions.

For example, Jim Gibney, who spoke about the night of 27-28 June when he was 16, is now a Sinn Fein member. He says, “Armed struggle is not some sort of immutable principle...it’s not employed when it’s not required...in the absence of armed struggle the political momentum you generate around a party like Sinn Fein... working with others, the SDLP, the Irish Government, the US...that you create a momentum where peace has taken root and on the back of that change is possible.”

The exhibition closes on 29 September but some of the photographs and videos used, and other material about the Troubles, will continue to be available online at www.iwm.org.uk. ■

• The CPBML opposed the sending of troops to northern Ireland from the outset in 1969. We remain committed to respect for the Irish people’s right to national independence and self-determination. Read our 1974 pamphlet, *Ireland One Nation*, online.

WORKERS

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No one is employed to write, edit and design it. It is the product of the labour, thought and commitment of Party comrades and friends who see the need to produce an independent, working-class, communist magazine in and for Britain in the 21st century.

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

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Campaigns and direct action by workers in the 19th century Flats on the edge of east London as an open space for the

1871: the fight for Wanstead

INSTEAD OF being enclosed by landowners for massive housing developments, Wanstead Flats, a large flat grassland area of 344 acres which marked Epping Forest's southern boundary, was saved by the people for the people.

Success here also stopped the whole of Epping Forest to the north suffering a similar fate. This impressive struggle involved a popular protest by thousands of ordinary Londoners.

The nearby residential population of Forest Gate played a key role in the struggle. Up to the 1870s Forest Gate was still a small west Essex village, on the edge of Wanstead Flats. Epping Forest, once part of a great stretch of woodland across the county, was reduced by this time to 6,000 acres located between Epping in the north and Forest Gate in the south.

Even this shrunken area of forest was under threat. The 19 Lords of the Manor, the forest landowners, began to see money could be made from enclosing and developing these vast open spaces on London's doorstep. By the early 1870s, suburban development was spreading outwards, driven by the railway, which reached Forest Gate in 1846.

As houses covered more and more of London's neighbouring countryside, voices of alarm were raised. Antonio Brady, a leading campaigner to save Epping Forest, called on "citizens of the East End, to protest against the encroachments on the forest, and to do battle with those who had filched from the people rights they had inherited from their ancestors."

Such calls found a ready response

'This impressive struggle involved a popular protest by thousands of ordinary Londoners...'

among east Londoners, who on summer weekends and holidays came by train, "holiday van" or on foot, to enjoy the green space of the Forest. Wanstead Flats was a favourite destination.

The government was called on to legislate to stop the enclosure of London's open spaces, and Epping Forest was the focus of attention. But Gladstone's Liberal administration dragged its feet, to the frustration and anger of Londoners.

Matters came to a head in the summer of 1871, when Lord Cowley, the absentee landowner of Wanstead manor, instructed his agents to fence off Wanstead Flats, in preparation for clearance and house-building. Outrage erupted.

Mixed blessing

London's unprecedented growth was a mixed blessing for Londoners. Although the new suburbs of outer London provided affordable housing for many workers, not just for more affluent residents, the expansion was also swallowing the green spaces which Londoners had for centuries enjoyed.

From the 1850s, the once-remote Epping Forest was under threat. Protest meetings were held not just locally but also in Hackney, Shoreditch, Stratford and elsewhere. A mass demonstration on Wanstead Flats was called for 8 July 1871.

A crowd estimated at 30,000 headed for the Flats. The more nervous organisers, fearful of the increasingly vocal calls for destruction of the fences, adjourned the demonstration to the grounds of nearby West Ham Hall.

But the demonstrators were having none of it. As soon as the first speaker began, there was a storm of hissing, and shouts of "to the Flats". The whole demonstration shifted there.

The open-air meeting agreed to petition the Queen over the forest enclosures. Then the official leaders left, as did the large police detachment sent to guard the fences. Everything it seemed had passed off peacefully. But later that evening the mood changed.

A large section of the crowd began to demolish fences. The police, hastily recalled from Ilford, arrived to find much



Workers

150 years on: Wanstead Flats, 2021 – a section of the

fencing reduced to matchwood. The police charged the crowd and arrested a Whitechapel cabinetmaker named Henry Rennie. A pitched battle then took place, as the crowd tried unsuccessfully to rescue him. He was later prosecuted, but only fined 5 shillings (25p), which was paid for him by one of the Forest Gate organisers.

National news

The demonstration attracted nationwide news coverage, much highly critical of the government. A few days later Prime Minister William Gladstone came to view the Flats. His administration then rushed through the first of a series of acts on Epping Forest, prohibiting further enclosures while a commission investigated.

But the campaign was just getting going. A pressure group, called the Forest Fund, was established in Forest Gate.

In 1872 the Forest Fund organised a second demonstration on Wanstead Flats, to coincide with another parliamentary debate on the future of Epping Forest.

By this time the City of London Corporation had entered the fray, using

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the annual walk celebrating the Epping Forest Act.

their rights as Epping Forest commoners to bring legal action against the Lords of the Manor in the forest to stop enclosures. The City was seizing an opportunity to win popular support among Londoners, who increasingly saw it as outdated, undemocratic and unaccountable.

Its championing of forest preservation did win the City Corporation much popular support, though many suspected its motives. The Corporation's legal action, and parliamentary action by radical London MPs, led to the Epping Forest Act passed on 8 August 1878.

The first legal declaration in Britain of the right of the people to use an open space for leisure and enjoyment had implications not just for Epping Forest, but for other threatened spaces across Britain.

The defeat of the enclosures on Wanstead Flats was a watershed moment, still relevant today. Direct action and popular protests had prevented landowners enclosing land and excluding the public. The marvellous space of Wanstead Flats has been enjoyed for a further 150 years. ■

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Immigration, class and nation

‘What workers say to each other about immigration has long been misrepresented and ignored by politicians and the media – and by too many in the trade union movement...’

THE MASSIVE increase in immigration – both legal and illegal – has formed a constant background to events in Britain for over two decades. This is no accident. The Blair Labour government and all its successors failed to deal with illegal immigration, and above all encouraged the far greater amount of legal immigration.

To create a better future, British workers have to deal with this situation. No one else can: only our class is capable of being a united force for progress. That means taking control to make it politically impossible for governments and employers to continue as they have.

What workers say to each other about immigration has long been misrepresented and ignored by politicians and the media – and by too many in the trade union movement.

Uncontrolled immigration aids finance capital and weakens the workers of Britain. There is an increasing understanding about the nature of this artificial growth in the British working population through the mass import of labour. Immigration is a state-sponsored and ideological attack on British wages and living standards with nothing progressive about it.

Workers have also come to recognise that inflation is a class weapon used to reduce workers’ living standards. The fight for wages and conditions over the past couple of years has returned trade unions to their core purpose.

Parliament and government, promoters of immigration and inflation, merely represent capitalism, personified by a group of economic adventurers and financiers. Overwhelmed by their own contradictions, they are desperate and dangerous.

Finance capitalists see workers as pawns to make profits and increase the dominance of capital, and nation states as an obstacle to their global activity. Yet they can’t do without workers, and nations are proving resilient.

To head off effective opposition to open borders, the ruling class lies, smears and distorts – with the added effect of dividing the working class here. The tales they spin are depressingly familiar.

“Britain can’t cope”; that’s why we need to be in the EU or tied to the US. “British workers

are lazy” – stupid and racist too; that’s why the economy does not grow. “Migrants create more than they cost”; all those arrived by boat or hidden in lorries are victims in need of our protection.

And the denigration of workers and nation goes deeper than that. We are told that “we” must be ashamed and apologise endlessly for everything – nothing created or won in Britain, by British people, is worthwhile or valuable. Divisions and individualism are celebrated; unity, cohesion and collective action are denigrated.

In sum, the capitalist class hopes to do away with what makes a working class. It is what capitalists have always sought, ever since our ancestors left the fields for factories.

But the nature of work is collective. Sooner or later, workers combine and cooperate whatever the employers try to do. That’s their contradiction. Ours is that we repeat the cycle, letting the opposing class off the hook again and again.

Unless there is open debate and discussion within our class about these twin attacks of migration and inflation and how to respond, we will be disarmed again. There is no future in remaining as supplicants to any capitalist government – no matter which face it currently bears – still less to the EU or US, bastions of international finance capital.

It may be an uphill task at first to reverse the attack, but the need is pressing. We can start by facing up to the underlying cause of our problems – it’s capitalism and not the people who come here legally or illegally. They are workers too – and we are not their oppressors.

Controlling immigration into Britain is not denying the human rights of those who want to come here to work. It is asserting the right of British workers to oppose the attacks on their work and their nation by finance capitalists and their governments who use immigrants to their own ends.

And we also need to deal with the confusion in the ranks of workers. Explicitly, our existence as workers unites us. Differences in history, region, culture and experience are secondary – do not let them become weapons to divide and defeat us. ■

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