

The Plebs News



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daveberrygmb@yahoo.co.uk

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And the Covid Shambles Continues:

Why are some towns in the North struggling to shake off Covid-19?

For weeks now, Covid-19 infection rates have been falling across the UK. But there are some towns that have bucked the trend, with infections remaining stubbornly high. This is particularly true of towns where the local economy relies on manufacturing, construction or food processing jobs - the kind of work that simply can't be done from home.

That becomes obvious on the shop floor of Owen Springs in Rotherham, where the sparks are flying. For nearly 40 years this South Yorkshire firm has manufactured springs for cars, vans and trains. "This is old fashioned Sheffield metal bashing. We heat treat it and get it into shape, we can't do it separately, we do it as a team" said Nick Naylor, Managing Director.

"It isn't something you can sit at home and do," he says.

"So we have staggered breaks and working times, we have people who have buddied up in twos who always work together".

One way to break what health experts call the "chain of transmission" of the virus is to make sure people can isolate properly if they get a positive test, or live with someone who has.

Some people have faced a choice between putting food on the table and isolating. These hotspots show the need for the Government to extend sick pay protection to all workers.

The Briefing Room: Covid-19 and the World

No crisis has had the global reach and impact of Covid-19. There have been more than 120 million recorded cases of the coronavirus and 2.7 million people have died. Lockdowns, with their draconian curbs on people's freedoms have become a familiar part of daily life in many parts of the world. Just over a year since the world started to get to grips with the first global pandemic in more than a century, what can we say about how different countries have dealt it? Where and why has the vaccine roll out been most successful? And what could be the lasting legacy of the pandemic?



Failures of State: The Inside Story of Britain's Battle with Coronavirus

Failures of State: The Inside Story of Britain's Battle with Coronavirus recounts the extraordinary political decisions taken at the heart of Boris Johnson's government during the global pandemic. In the eye of the storm was Boris Johnson, a Prime Minister who idolised Winston Churchill and had the chance to become a hero of his own making as the crisis engulfed the nation. Instead he was fixated on Brexit, his own political destiny and a myriad of personal issues, all while presiding over the UK government's botched response to the global coronavirus pandemic. His inaction resulted in the deaths of many thousands of British people and his own hospitalisation at the hands of the pandemic, yet further reckless decisions allowed a deadly second wave to sweep across the country in the autumn months with the economy on the brink of collapse.



David Graeber: After the Pandemic, We Can't Go Back to Sleep

By David Graeber



In an essay penned shortly before his death for *Jacobin* magazine, David Graeber argued that post-pandemic, we can't slip back into a reality where the way our society is organized — to serve every whim of a small handful of rich people while debasing and degrading the vast majority of us — is seen as sensible or reasonable

David Graeber speaks at Maagdenhuis Amsterdam in March 2015. (Guido van Nispen / Wikimedia Commons)

At some point in the next few months, the crisis will be declared over, and we will be able to return to our “nonessential” jobs. For many, this will be like waking from a dream.

The media and political classes will definitely encourage us to think of it this way. This is what happened after the 2008 financial crash. There was a brief moment of questioning. (What is “finance,” anyway? Isn't it just other people's debts? What is money? Is it just debt, too? What's debt? Isn't it just a promise? If money and debt are just a collection of promises we make to each other, then couldn't we just as easily make different ones?) The window was almost instantly shut by those insisting we shut up, stop thinking, and get back to work, or at least start looking for it.

Last time, most of us fell for it. This time, it is critical that we do not. Because, in reality, the crisis we just experienced was waking from a dream, a confrontation with the actual reality of human life, which is that we are a collection of fragile beings taking care of one another, and that those who do the lion's share of this care work that keeps us alive are overtaxed, underpaid, and daily humiliated, and that a very large proportion of the population don't do anything at all but spin fantasies, extract rents, and generally get in the way of those who are making, fixing, moving, and transporting things, or tending to the needs of other living beings. It is imperative that we not slip back into a reality where all this makes some sort of inexplicable sense, the way senseless things so often do in dreams.

How about this: Why don't we stop treating it as entirely normal that the more obviously one's work benefits others, the less one is likely to be paid for it; or insisting that financial markets are the best way to direct long-term investment even as they are propelling us to destroy most life on Earth?

Why not instead, once the current emergency is declared over, actually remember what we've learned: that if “the economy” means anything, it is the way we provide each other with what we need to be alive (in every sense of the term), that what we call “the market” is largely just a way of tabulating the aggregate desires of rich people, most of whom are at least slightly pathological, and the most powerful of whom were already completing the designs for the bunkers they plan to escape to if we continue to be foolish enough to believe their minions' lectures that we were all, collectively, too lacking in basic common sense to do anything about oncoming catastrophes.

This time around, can we please just ignore them?

Most of the work we're currently doing is dream-work. It exists only for its own sake, or to make rich people feel good about themselves, or to make poor people feel bad about themselves. And if we simply stopped, it might be possible to make ourselves a much more reasonable set of promises: for instance, to create an “economy” that lets us actually take care of the people who are taking care of us.

The Tory approach is to prioritise profit, while workers shoulder the burden of the crisis – Labour must inspire with a vision of full employment.

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“We are living through history; this is the greatest economic crisis in more than a century. We should set our aspirations to meet it.”

By Nadia Jama, Labour NEC



Taking into account the measures announced in the last budget, the Office for Budgetary Responsibility – which has a reputation for sunny predictions – suggests that by the end of the year, 6.5% of workers could be unemployed. That’s about 2.2 million people. The OECD puts the figure at around 7%. While the Tories boast about spending vast amounts of money on temporary support measures for businesses, in the February budget they announced only a meagre £8bn in new infrastructure and green investment, and a cut of £4bn on day-to-day spending (that’s things like public services and social security) on top of last year’s 5.6% cut.

Combined with furloughed wages – sometimes to below minimum wage levels – and the downward pressure on wages from rising unemployment, it’s clear that the government plans on a weak recovery funded by the increased exploitation of workers. The plan is Austerity 2.0.

But none of that is inevitable. Part of the reason the unemployment rate won’t be even higher is because of the pressure on the government to extend the furlough scheme. As we come out of the public health crisis, we need to continue to pile on that pressure – arguing for a plan to invest in our economy and create jobs.

Labour must take a lead in shaping that debate. We can’t be satisfied with throwing 2.2 million people out of work. One job lost is one job too many.

We should be ambitious. Our plan to create 400,000 new jobs with £30bn of green infrastructure investment is a step in the right direction, but we need to be much bolder. The policy is a retreat from our 2019 pledge to spend twice that on green retrofit – and many will wonder about the remaining 1.76 million jobs needed to tackle the unemployment crisis.

This isn’t a time for half measures; Labour needs a plan for full employment – creating jobs by investing in a Green New Deal, including housing and home retrofit, public transport, renewable energy, digital infrastructure and everything we need to bring our economy into the 21st century.

And that should mean a fundamental change in our conditions at work, too. We need to reverse the casualisation of our economy which has seen an explosion in zero-hours contracts, and an end to dodgy hire and rehire tactics.

The public health crisis has also shone a light on the under-resourcing of health and safety enforcement. We need to reverse cuts to the Health and Safety Executive and ensure that all workplaces are safe.

But it’s not enough just to address the problems we’ve seen exacerbated by the public health crisis. We need to reimagine work-life balance. Lockdown has forced us to work more flexibly – a four day week is a more realistic prospect than it’s ever been before.

We also need to bring an end to in-work poverty and stagnating wages. That means increasing the Government’s fake living wage to a real living wage, ending the year-on-year pay freezes for public sector workers, and making up for a lost decade of pay cuts by backing the 15% increase for NHS workers. If you’re ill, you shouldn’t be forced to live on less than £100 per week – we need sick pay which is at least as much as the real living wage.

At the heart of negotiating better pay and conditions, are strong trade unions. Anti-trade union laws in the UK are some of the harshest in the world. Not only do we need a repeal of anti-trade union legislation, but we need to reintroduce sectoral bargaining and find new ways of empowering workers in sectors that trade unionists have historically found difficult to access – the same sectors that have often been hit hardest by the pandemic.

It's clear that the Government's plan is to continue with the austerity logic of the last decade – prioritising profit, while workers shoulder the burden of the crisis. Labour needs an alternative strategy – one which mends the damage not only of the last twelve months, but the last twelve years by investing in full employment and setting out an inspiring vision of work in the 21st century.

We are living through history; this is the greatest economic crisis in more than a century. We should set our aspirations to meet it.

The 'Coronavirus Slayer' – Lessons to learn from Kerala

Full Article

Indian farmers and agricultural workers have crossed the hundred-day mark of their protest against the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. They will not withdraw until the government repeals laws that deliver the advantages of agriculture to large corporate houses. This, the farmers and agricultural workers say, is an existential struggle. Surrender is equivalent to death: even before these laws were passed, more than 315,000 Indian farmers had committed suicide since 1995 because of the debt burden placed on them.

In Kerala (population 35 million), the Left Democratic Front has been in the government for the past five years, during which it has confronted a number of serious crises: the aftereffects of Cyclone Ockhi in 2017, the Nipah virus outbreak of 2018, the floods of 2018 and 2019, and then the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, Kerala's health minister, K.K. Shailaja, has earned the nickname the 'Coronavirus Slayer' because of the state's rapid and comprehensive approach to breaking the chain of infection. All polls indicate that the Left will return to the government, breaking an anti-incumbency trend in the state since 1980.

The present government has been very remarkable in meeting the crises, ensuring that there is no social breakdown, ensuring that nobody in Kerala would go hungry, and [that] everybody will get treatment during COVID times and so on. But we did something more remarkable.

What the government did was to build the state's infrastructure and begin to pivot to another economic foundation. The amount needed to upgrade the infrastructure is staggering, about Rs. 60,000 crores (or \$11 billion). How does a Left government raise the funds to finance this kind of infrastructural development? Kerala, as a state within India, cannot borrow beyond a certain limit, so the Left government set up instruments such as the Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Board (KIIFB). Through the Board, the government was able to spend Rs. 10,000 crores (US\$1.85 billion) and 'has produced a remarkable change in the infrastructure'. After the hop (redistribution) and infrastructural development (step), comes the jump:

The jump is the programme that we have placed before the people. Now that infrastructure is there, [such as] transmission lines, assured electricity, industrial parks for investors to come and invest, we will have K-FON [Kerala-Fibre Optic Network], a super-highway of internet owned by the state, which is available to any service provider. [It ensures] equal treatment to everybody; nobody will have an [undue] advantage. And we are going to provide internet to everybody. It is the right of every individual. All the poor are going to get broadband connectivity for free.



“Yes, it is possible to build something different. That’s the idea of Kerala.”





Free Speech: An elephant trap for the left

A demoralised and insular left is in danger of handing the issue of free speech over to the dishonest right – and no good can come of it for socialists, warns KEVIN OVENDEN

ON THE one hand, threatening to cut funding from English heritage bodies that do not promulgate the official fiction that the British empire was an unalloyed force for good.

On the other, arrogating to the state fresh powers to enforce free speech on university campuses that are apparently in the totalitarian grip of left-wing lecturers and their anti-colonial studies.

The flat contradictions in the Tory government's attempts to divert attention from its failures into a US-style "culture war" are more than simple hypocrisy.

They point to a deep strategic dilemma that ought to make defeating this Tory aim of consolidating their voter base relatively straightforward. It ought to. But it also sets an elephant trap that the left is in danger of jumping into headfirst unless we get our response right. And unless we acknowledge that there is an elephant in the room.

A piece in the Jewish Chronicle by the government's anti-semitism "tsar" Lord Mann this week illustrated the Tories' contradictions.

Timed a day before Education Secretary Gavin Williamson's announcement on freedom of speech in universities, Mann was at pains to say he was in favour of that principle.

He argued that the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of anti-semitism, which conflates that form of racism with fundamental criticism of the state of Israel and which he supports, did not mean restricting "academic freedom of speech or research."

That he had to claim that is an indication that it is indeed being used in that way, something Tory ministers and others have pressed for.

When an academic committee at University College London rejected the IHRA definition and insisted upon something precise instead, they were impugned as not caring about anti-Jewish racism.

Mann went so far as to oppose an attempt to ban celebrated film-maker Ken Loach from an event at St Peter's College Oxford on the grounds of his views on Israel-Palestine.

The event went ahead, but the college later apologised for the "hurt" some Jewish students said they felt at Loach speaking.

That ought to be a warning to the left that grounds of hurt or offence are not ones upon which we can approach this issue. Apart from anything else, our opponents can easily use them and do.

Yet too often that is indeed what happens. It provides an easy entry for this Tory ruse to claim the mantle of democratic debate, and it leads to us, not them facing the charge of hypocrisy.

So, while a broad spectrum of left opinion opposed efforts to no-platform Loach, far fewer have spoken out over another Oxford case: Professor Selina Todd.

Todd is a socialist-feminist from a working-class background and is a professor of modern history.

Not your usual Oxford academic. Unusual too is that she has had to rely on the university providing security so she can deliver lectures.

Her “crime” was to take a view on women’s sex-based rights, trans rights, and where they converge, diverge and may conflict that a large number of left-wing activists object to.

Further, they say that her research itself, which is around the social history of women and the working class, is “harmful.”

You only have to read Todd’s latest book, *Snakes and Ladders* on the social mobility myth, to see that the only “harm” caused is to the ideology of successive governments that a bit of meritocratic tinkering is all that is needed to overcome Britain’s entrenched class system.

A left that can defend socialist film-maker Ken Loach’s right to speak but not socialist public intellectual Selina Todd’s will resolve the contradictions on the right for them and take the badge of hypocrisy as our own.

At the very least it invites the charge that the socialist left applies different standards over Palestine-Israel than to other areas of conflicted rights claims. Talk about an own goal.

Worse than silence are some arguments so preposterous that I cannot imagine those making them believe what they are saying.

First, this just isn’t happening. Second, and with no regard to logic, the fact that Todd and some courageous others such as PhD student Raquel Rosario Sanchez are able to speak about it is evidence that no-one is being bullied or silenced.

How many on the left who rallied to Loach’s defence would accept the argument that it is impossible for him to complain of no-platforming because he has made dozens of films and won an Oscar?

Incoherent positions bring bad and inconsistent arguments. The University and College Union this week responded to Williamson by denying that there is an issue around campus free speech.

At the same time it cited its own research showing how the spread of short-term contracts and precarious conditions does restrict academics’ capacity to speak freely. So which is it?

The good second point is not helped when some academics dismiss the sacking of Maya Forstater from a major NGO.

She asserted her belief in the reality of biological sex and its political implications in a society suffused with women’s oppression.

But, they say, she wasn’t sacked. She just didn’t have her contract renewed.

There is a deeper problem behind these ludicrous “six impossible things before breakfast” responses.

Free, democratic speech has been a cause of the left since the English Revolution.

A demoralised and insular left is in danger of handing the entire issue over to the dishonest right and to liberals who spout an abstract principle but cannot make it a social reality.

Karl Marx’s thunderous defence of free speech and publishing in the early 1840s is reasonably known. It is all too often put down to an early liberal, democratic phase or to conditions of direct state censorship that are not such an issue now.

But the socialist movement at its best neither abandoned a policy championing democratic speech nor did it fall in behind the notion of a “marketplace of ideas.”

That was the phrase used in the US Supreme Court drawing on the thinking of British liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill.

Marketplace is apt. Just as the capitalist free market is meant to optimise economic wellbeing so the free exchange of ideas will produce the best thinking. We know that does not work in the economy.

Nor is it true of a marketplace of ideas that is every bit as hypothetical as a market in goods supposedly free from great concentrations of power, such as the British imperial navy as it enforced an empire of unfreedom.

Generations of socialists have pointed to the structural inequalities and to the concentrations of state and corporate power that limit not only who gets to speak, but who gets heard.

This daily paper is excluded from all the television reviews that purport to cover what the British press is saying.

Ownership, control, democratisation of the instruments of speech and combating the exclusion of the marginalised are all realities socialists highlight.

But that does not mean abandoning the principle of vigorous democratic debate just because liberal capitalism has never lived up to it, principally due to its defence of capitalist property relations that are based upon the domination of the mass of humanity.

Losing sight of this has become the problem. We have vicious capitalist institutions that are able to pay lip-service to some of the gains in social attitudes resulting from upsurges decades ago while turning them into managerial strategies and cover for continued methods of domination.

Amazon has a big “diversity and inclusion” budget. Its website proclaimed “Black Lives Matter.” It is busy trying to crush a unionisation drive in Alabama, for a century a crucible for forging multiracial working-class organisation and battling the reality of racism.

University staff across Britain have human resources departments with all sorts of diversity champions awards from outfits like Stonewall that are sending out redundancy notices by email and closing entire departments.

The Tory distraction on all this cannot be dealt with unless the left deals with an uncomfortable problem. Too many on the left hear “free speech” and associate it with gifters on the right or even lampoon it as “freeze peach.”

Confusion may have come from failure to understand how stopping actual fascists from violently organising — no platform — arose from a militant defence of democratic debate, including with those who held sometimes reactionary ideas that fascism sought to turn into something worse.

I think more has come from a defeatism in which despite a significant minority looking to the left we don’t really have confidence that we can win our ideas among the mass of people.

That is disastrous. Not just pragmatically, but on principle. The mass of people will democratically advance the socialist cause or it will not advance at all.

Not an imagined “marketplace,” not corporate “diversity management” but a real fight to enhance democratic debate and participation upon which the labour movement depends.

That would knock the Tory government into a cocked hat. But it does require a change of direction and not pretending that there is no problem. People aren’t stupid — thankfully.

This article first appeared in the Morning Star

Labour on the Streets and on Zoom



Overview

National Day of Action for UN Anti Racism-Day - organised by Stand Up To Racism and the TUC

On 20 March 2021, UN Anti-Racism Day, events took place in cities, communities and online events around the world.

Sheffield Town Hall 3 April 2021

Sheffield PSC protesting 'apartheid health' towards Palestinians in the limited provision of anti-COVID19 vaccinations*; and ethnic cleansing in the Naqab (called the Negev by Israel)**.

*See Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP) and the Mondoweiss report of 2 April.

** Stop the JNF Campaign for the recorded webinar with Khalil Alamour from his Bedouin village, Al-Sira.



Sheffield Marches Against the Police Bill



Thousands attend Kill the Bill protest in Sheffield

More than a thousand protesters gathered in Sheffield city centre in a second 'Kill the Bill' march

The gathering at Devonshire Green was one of many taking place around the country, against what is seen as a Government crackdown on the right to protest.

It opposed the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, which will give police more powers to restrict and criminalise protests.

The demonstration at 1pm was peaceful and people made every effort to observe social distancing rules as speakers gave several perspectives on why they objected to the Bill.

Register: zerocovid.uk/zc-international 24 April 1pm-5.00pm BST

Zero Covid: an international movement

Fighting to eliminate the virus around the globe. An online meeting to exchange experiences and ideas with activists from different countries on how to push for Zero Covid, and for health solidarity across borders.

• Christian Zeller, Zero Covid Germany	• Nick Dearden, Global Justice Now
• Prof. Aoife McLysaght, ISAG/We Can Be Zero, Ireland	• Health activists from Brazil and South Africa
• Keep Our NHS Public (invited)	

ZERO COVID

On 24 April we're holding an online meeting to exchange experiences and ideas with activists from different countries on how to push for Zero Covid, and for health solidarity across borders.

Speakers include Prof. Aoife McLysaght, ISAG/We can be Zero (Ireland), Nick Dearden, Global Justice Now, Christian Zeller, Zero Covid Germany and health activists from Brazil and South Africa.