The Plebs News

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February 2021

ZERO COVID

The campaign to beat the pandemic

Vaccines are part of a zero-Covid strategy, not a substitute for it

- **The NHS vaccination programme is working miracles there is a risk that government spin around the vaccines provides a false sense of security – and the dangers posed by a premature ending of lockdown are real**
- **The Government idea that Coronavirus will remain endemic and be kept at bay by yearly injections should be challenged**
- **New Zealand, Vietnam and China have shown how effective local action can control and eradicate the virus through solidarity**

Trade Unions & Sheffield Trades Council
Support for local communities

A few of us in Burngreave/ Firvale have been working with the Sheffield Community Contact Tracers, (SCCT), a group of community activists, local volunteers, former GPs, and public health doctors. We believe that what we have learned could be a model for a community-based contract tracing system that could achieve zero-covid throughout the UK.
Sheffield Trades Union Council (STUC) has shown strong and active support for SCCT by writing to Greg Fell, Director for Public Health in Sheffield, and having a zoom face to face session with him, by contacting MPs and local councillors stressing the crucial importance of instigating a local tracing system as opposed to using the criminally expensive and ineffective SERCO run national scheme. In the summer, a motion was taken from Unite Community trade union to STUC asking for support for the Burngreave/ Firvale arm of SCCT. We started off with £150 & have since raised a further £1200 from the unions, from individuals & from other community organisations. This has enabled us to buy the weekly fruit & veg to top up food parcels that are going out to families who have been badly affected by the Covid crisis and making them able to self isolate.

Trade unions are the bedrock of collective action for ordinary working people. Unions are the voice of Britain at work and in the community.

Carrie Hedderwick; Sheffield Trade Unionist

Fay Musselwhite lives and writes in Sheffield. Her poetry collection Contraflow was published by Longbarrow Press in 2016. This poem was written while self isolating in the Spring of 2020 and appeared in the Morning Star.

With the closing of public space Longbarrow have published online downloadable content of local poets which is downloadable here.

Boys on Manoeuvres

by Fay Musselwhite

Campaigning in the woods,
little Dom and little Alex
find the River Virus keeps
getting in their way.

Alex fluffs his crown
of strawberry blond candyfloss,
limbers up his tongue
set to charm his path across,
steps a sandal in the brook.

But kneeling on the bank
with his toy theodolite, Dom says
if we're clever we can dam this.

So they gather (at their leisure)
bracken, twigs and gravel,
weave their muddle. When it topples,
bolster it with bluster and playground-savvy,
chuck in plugs of money.

Water shivers.
Dipper calls out for lost chicks.
In a rock's dip lay two stranded fish.

Waging war on Nature seems
a doddle with an instrument
blind to how muscular and subtle
her laws and currency.

Led by gravity, this river
soon trumps their vanity.
Their construct unravelling,
novelty of battle falls away.

A single Simpsonian cloud sidles over the sun.
Mud greys on skin. The urge
of funnel-forced flow surges on.

Alex and Dom survey the terrain:
bankful of trampled flowers, the drift
of collapsing bridge.

Each raises an eyebrow, flares a top lip.
Then they shrug and call it a day.

No backward glance or need to debrief.
Trudge through the trees
hitting saplings with sticks.

And before you know it, they're
home, into dry clothes
and something delicious for tea.

Author

Tom Hunt is Deputy Director of the Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute (SPERI) at the University of Sheffield. He is the co-leader of SPERI's Labour & Decent Work research theme. His research focuses on efforts by unions, workers, states, industry and civil society to improve labour standards.

Unions 21

Unions 21 exists to support unions to increase their influence, impact and effectiveness within the world of work. We will do this by working with unions, supporters and stakeholders to create an open space for research, innovation and activity to assist unions to secure a better life for working people. This paper is part of its work on new economies, new workers.

Executive summary

- The pandemic has changed how unions operate. Unions have adopted new ways for workers to act and speak together, and new forms and methods of campaigning, communications, recruitment, negotiating, lobbying, training and representation, both on and offline, have been developed. Whilst there have been big changes, unions' central purpose to defend their members' interests and improve work has not changed. Unions have found new ways to do this and have protected lives and livelihoods.

- Unions have secured wins for members such as the introduction of the furlough scheme and greater provision of PPE, influenced the national debate about conditions of key workers and put the spotlight on low-paid, unsafe and under-valued work that many millions of workers face daily.

- Whilst the pandemic has brought new challenges, overall unions have a reinvigorated sense of purpose. Staff teams have come together, member engagement has increased and deepened, activism has increased, and there are encouraging signs membership will have increased during 2020.

- The report focuses on changes to member engagement; recruitment and retention; advocacy and influencing; training members and supporting reps; representation of members, and union democracy and governance. It also looks at how unions adapted to remote working.

- Each chapter ends by highlighting key findings and new challenges and questions for unions to consider as they plan for 2021 and beyond.

- Unions need to reflect on the changes they made during 2020 and assess what has worked and why, and to reflect on how COVID-19 is changing work and what changes unions may need to make as a result.

Sheffield Needs a Pay Rise, Sheffield Trades Council, CV19Council of Action #HeartUnion #TUC Bob Jeffery

It's TUC Hearts Union week - time to celebrate the fantastic work of our TU Health and Safety Stewards tirelessly working to make workplaces COVID safe. If you're not already a member, JOIN A UNION!

The Marmot Report 2010 and the New Pandemic Report Ten Years On

In 2010 the Government commissioned a report to examine and report on and the results of health inequalities in the UK. The report was hard hitting and called for more preventative social policies rather than waiting for acute health interventions. Marmot has just published a review of his report in light of the pandemic and it is equally hard hitting showing that age, disabilty and socio-economic factors have provided the bulk of the deaths and economic hardship during the pandemic.

Professor Sir Michael Marmot is Director of the UCL Institute of Health Equity, which works to reduce health inequities through action on the social determinants of health. You can also find Michael's blog posts at www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/michael-marmot

Summary and recommendations of the report.

- People living in the poorest neighbourhoods in England will on average die seven years earlier than people living in the richest neighbourhoods
- People living in poorer areas not only die sooner, but spend more of their lives with disability - an average total difference of 17 years
- The Review highlights the social gradient of health inequalities - put simply, the lower one's social and economic status, the poorer one's health is likely to be
- Health inequalities arise from a complex interaction of many factors - housing, income, education, social isolation, disability - all of which are strongly affected by one's economic and social status

- Health inequalities are largely preventable. Not only is there a strong social justice case for addressing health inequalities, there is also a pressing economic case. It is estimated that the annual cost of health inequalities is between £36 billion to £40 billion through lost taxes, welfare payments and costs to the NHS
- Action on health inequalities requires action across all the social determinants of health, including education, occupation, income, home and community

Build Back Fairer: The COVID-19 Marmot Review

“We have lost a decade. And it shows” was the simple summary of Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On, published in February 2020 (1) (2). Improvements in health, as assessed by ill-health and life expectancy, had slowed markedly over the decade from 2010. Health inequalities were growing. And, of extreme concern, life expectancy for women and men living in the most deprived areas outside London had dropped. In a rich society such as the UK we are used to health improving steadily. When the rate of health improvement in the UK lags behind all other rich countries except Iceland and the USA, and life expectancy for some groups begins to deteriorate... simply, it should not be happening.

And on the Pandemic Since then, with the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has changed dramatically. But in England the changes have been entirely consistent with its existing state when the pandemic hit in February. We set out at the beginning of this report the proposition that England’s comparatively poor management of the pandemic was of a piece with England’s health improvement falling behind that of other rich countries in the decade since 2010. We offered four likely reasons why: the quality of governance and political culture which did not give priority to the conditions for good health; continuing increases in inequalities in economic and social conditions, including a rise in poverty among families with children; a policy of austerity and consequent cuts to funding of public services; and a poor state of the nation’s health that would increase the lethality of COVID-19.

Please click here to view a Youtube video of the 'Build Back Fairer: The COVID-19 Marmot Review'

This Post Brexit article by two Central CLP members appeared in redpepper.org.uk

How business benefits from Brexit

The UK has finally left the EU. Out of the single market and the customs union, the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) reached on the 23rd December 2020 now forms the basis of the new UK-EU relationship. For many, we have reached the culmination of lengthy process through which the Tory party has turned against the interests of 'British business'.

This line of argument dictates that the Tory party has been taken over by a reactionary clique of fantasists, nostalgic for the (bygone 'glory') of the British Empire and detached from the needs of contemporary British and international capital. Yet, such an analysis misreads the current situation. There are, in fact, a number of ways in which this deal benefits business.

The contradictory interests of capital

It is important to note how the impact of the Brexit deal will vary for different aspects of capital. To take a general example, productive capital operating within Britain, both British and foreign owned, is now in a very different situation to, for instance, international capital invested through the City of London.

First and foremost – and most contradictory – is the issue of trade. Around 45 per cent of UK exports and imports are with the EU. Trade in goods has been free of tariff and non-tariff barriers on condition that each product meets minimum quality specifications, common labour market and ecological regulations are enforced, and state aid to industry is not 'anti-competitive'. For manufacturing production within Britain, this framework is essential. Supply chains that have evolved over decades of alignment cannot easily be unpicked or redirected. While the TCA avoids tariffs (for the time being), many manufacturing sub-sectors were reliant on EU-wide collaborations in high-tech research and production and will be negatively impacted by regulatory dis-alignment.

But this imperative for production is not necessarily one for capital. Since 2016, many manufacturing transnationals have looked to offset the impact of Brexit by moving production or new investment from Britain to existing or new sites in the EU. This has been particularly prominent in the vehicles industry. Ineos, for example, is to build its new Land Rover clone in France. Many British-owned manufacturing corporations have located all their factories outside the EU, and are therefore indifferent to the Customs Union. For example, since 2002 Dyson has produced its white goods in Malaysia. These internationalisations of production have muted some of the opposition of manufacturing capital to a hard Brexit.

Elsewhere, many sectors of the economy have long maintained a strong interest in escaping EU regulations. To take one example, Jim Ratcliffe, owner of Ineos, whose major operations are in oil, gas and fracking, is an ardent Brexiteer who denounces EU 'bureaucracy' and 'interference in business'. Ineos closed its Middlesbrough manufacturing plant in 2019 due to the 'excessive cost' of meeting EU rules on air and water pollution. A similar school of thought can be seen in many arenas of locally supplied service capital (i.e. retail, hospitality and leisure).

Since the referendum the Conservative Party has therefore had contradictory pressures on it. With some manufacturers and farming on the one hand (looking to maintain close proximity to the EU) and locally-supplied service capital on the other (looking to exit the EU's regulatory orbit). May and Johnson tried to square this circle by demanding tariff-free access to the EU without adherence to the 'level playing field' conditions. But the EU proved to be intransigent. By autumn 2020, while much manufacturing capacity in Britain had closed or been relocated to the EU, the remainder faced having to trade with the EU on WTO terms, which would result in short- or medium-term loss of three-quarters of a million jobs. Johnson was forced to put the immediate interests of manufacturing over the long term interests of locally-supplied service, building and oil capital.

Accordingly, the agreement on trade concluded on 23 December was a near complete capitulation by Johnson. Providing no role for the European Court of Justice, the agreement has been hailed as a victory for British sovereignty. However, in order to maintain trade in goods without tariffs or quotas, Britain will continue to have equal minimum standards with the EU in labour market and ecological regulation and on state aid to industry. Britain will remain within some of the high tech industrial collaborations of the EU and the Horizon research programme. In this field, the Brexiteers have achieved no increase in 'sovereignty'.

Capital gains

This does not mean, however, that Brexit has yielded nothing for the Tory Right or for capital.

Brexit has enabled a major gain for capital in corporate taxation. Britain has such low rates of taxation of corporations that it has been dubbed a tax haven, and there is zero corporate taxation in its archipelago of overseas dependencies. Since the 'financial' crash of 2007-8 and the subsequent crisis of the Euro, Germany and France have led a push for unified taxation policy throughout the EU. Excepting the Eurozone, types and rates of taxation are presently a matter for national governments only, yet there is a strong trajectory towards common tax policies.

The EU's clamp down on tax havens is already underway, and this affects Britain directly with its numerous tax haven dependencies – the Cayman Islands was added to its tax haven 'blacklist' in February 2020. Minimum common taxation of e-businesses, particularly the US-based big four, is being discussed, and has already been introduced in France. For British capital, a key aim of Brexit has therefore been to head off any increase in corporate taxation. This basic and simple aim is shared by all capital operating in, from and through Britain. This aim of capital has been completely absent in most commentary on Brexit.

The neglect of this issue is connected to the invisibility of another major beneficiary of Brexit, the large number of British-headquartered ('British-owned') corporations whose production is entirely outside Britain and the EU. This includes manufacturers like Dyson; large property, building and civil engineering corporations operating abroad, especially in the Middle East; mining, oil and gas; and tropical agricultural producers such as Tate and Lyle. Collectively these corporations constitute a large proportion of British-headquartered capital, reflecting Britain's imperial history. They have no interest in Britain's trade relationship with the EU, but they have a strong interest in Britain's low rate of corporate taxation.

The second major gain for capital is in the regulation of finance and business services, though again, not without contradictions. According to reports, the EU has been looking to reduce trading in derivatives and other high-risk assets in order to prevent another financial crash. One means to do this, though not the only one, is the imposition of a financial transactions (Tobin) tax. The EU also wishes to clamp down on the inward flow of kleptocrat, corrupt oligarch and mafia capital (the latter alone making up perhaps 15 per cent of world capital). The City of London is the global centre for both derivatives trading and money laundering, and accordingly has strong reasons to support Brexit.

Faced with uncertainty about the outcome of Brexit, many large City-based institutions decided not to rely on the outcome of parliamentary debates or any post-Brexit trade deal. Starting in 2018, they began to establish operational hubs in cities such as Dublin, Luxembourg, Paris, Frankfurt and Amsterdam (paralleling the relocation of manufacturing into the EU). In 2018 alone, it is estimated that over 250 City businesses created new, or upgraded existing, offices in EU27 countries in order to continue operating freely in the EU after Brexit. The City now has its cake and is eating it: trading as before with EU clients, and continuing with high-risk trading and money laundering in London.

There have been, then, two important fields in which Brexit has advantages for capital: evasion of increased corporate taxation; and continuing freedom for high-risk finance and criminal money capital. These affect distinct but overlapping sectors of capital. Note that the first of these does not specifically concern financial capital, and we disagree with the common view – 'Brexit aims to create Singapore on Thames' – that it is only finance, or only hedge funds, which benefit from Brexit.

What now for the left?

It is remarkable how little has been said by the left about the interests of capital in Brexit. Before and after the referendum, Corbyn rightly highlighted the wish of sections of capital to deregulate the labour market and the environment. But Labour said nothing about capital's wish to avoid increase in corporation taxation, nor the wish of finance and business services to avoid EU regulation. These are the elephants in the Brexit sitting-room.

Now that we have capital's relation to Brexit clearly in our sights, what are the implications for the campaigning priorities of left? First we need a serious increase in taxation of capital, as in Labour's 2019 manifesto, and closure of Britain's offshore tax havens. Outside the scope of EU intervention, we'll need large scale, long term campaigns by the left and labour movement. Such campaigns must also aim to constrain trading in risky financial assets, and to restrict the servicing of kleptocrats, oligarchs and mafias by the City of London.

Second, the Brexit agreement prevents a medium-term collapse of manufacturing and bonfire of labour and eco regulations. But the government will attempt to weaken these regulations while avoiding EU sanctions. With the ink scarcely dry on the treaty, Johnson is proposing to allow gene editing of animal and plant DNA, and has already authorised the use of nicotinoid pesticides, both of which are banned by the EU. Though labour conditions and environmental protection are already abysmal, as is investment in manufacturing, caring work, public services and green infrastructure, the labour movement will have to expose and oppose every case of such backsliding. It is clear therefore, that while Brexit might in a formal sense be 'done' our struggle against the latest manoeuvres and political pressures of capital must intensify.

Jamie Gough is a retired lecturer in political economy from Sheffield University and John Kirby is a retired Senior Lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University.

City of London at night. Credit: Colin

Culture and Literature

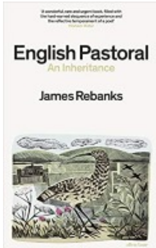
Disabled Britain

For more than a century, one group of people in Britain has been shut out of society, denied basic human rights and treated with fear and prejudice.

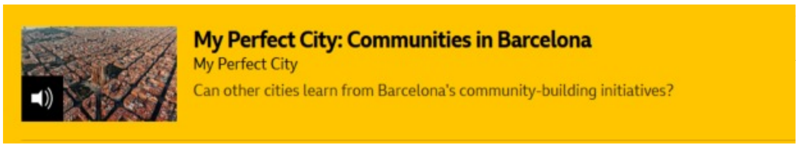
Now, in this shocking, moving film, writer, actor and presenter Cerrie Burnell is going to uncover the hidden story of how disabled people fought back – and won their freedom.

Book of the Week- English Pastoral: James Rebank

As a boy, James Rebanks's grandfather taught him to work the land the old way. Their family farm in the Lake District hills was part of an ancient agricultural landscape: a patchwork of crops and meadows, of pastures grazed with livestock, and hedgerows teeming with wildlife. And yet, by the time James inherited the farm, it was barely recognisable. The men and women had vanished from the fields; the old stone barns had crumbled; the skies had emptied of birds and their wind-blown song. One man's story of farming and how the intensification of production from pastoral to industrial places pressure on the land and people.



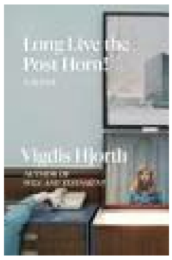
Climate Change on the World Service: Podcasts



What Barcelona and five other cities are doing to improve the lives of citizens and fight climate change. 6 episodes

Four episodes on how climate change is affecting Artic communities.

Great Lives - In 1960s California, Mexican-American Civil Rights Leader, Cesar Chavez led the United Farmworkers union in a series of strikes, boycotts and semi-religious processions, which inspired farmworkers, students and celebrities to join him in what he called 'La Causa' The Cause' was his struggle to force the landowners and growers - and the system in which they operated - to recognise farmworkers as human beings who deserved dignity, respect and basic rights.



Long Live the Post Horn! - by Vigdis Hjorth Ellinor, a thirty-five-year-old media consultant, has not been feeling herself; she's not been feeling much at all lately. Far beyond jaded, she picks through an old diary and fails to recognise the woman in its pages, seemingly as far away from the world around her as she's ever been. But when her coworker vanishes overnight, an unusual new task is dropped on her desk. A compelling novel that sees Ellinor recapture her humanity and help Norwegian postal workers in their fight against the dreaded EU Postal Directive.

Sheffield woman's swim challenge in aid of couriers' trade union dispute Hannah Thompson undertook a cold swim every day during January to raise strike funds for the IWGB fast couriers dispute. Hannah said: "Couriers have been refused access to toilets by giant fast food chains (despite health and safety law), have faced racist and contemptuous bullying by restaurants, and even verbal and physical abuse from customers once they get deliveries to the door."If workers complain or try to organise, Uber and Deliveroo dismiss them without warning or due process."