The Plebs News

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2022- Unions take the fight to the Government over cost of living crisis

2023- Time to defend our unions from Government attacks

Pickets around Yorkshire from ambulance workers, posties, railway workers, nurses and Shelter. All have seen public support.

The cost of living crisis sparked by the doubling of energy prices, rising rent and mortgage payments and ever deteriorating working conditions has seen workers fighting back with industrial disputes across both the public and private sectors. It is estimated that over a million workers took some form of industrial action during the last month of 2022, many for the first time. Many unions have been able to negotiate with private sector employers and the Office for National Statistics has private sector pay increasing by 6.9% for the three months ending in October. This has still not been enough for many to keep up with inflation that is totally unrelated to wages, See Richard Murphy blog, but at least discussions are taking place.

However the employer for many workers is the Government and rather than negotiate with trade unions the new Sunak government has responded by threatening trade unions and workers taking industrial action. After a period of pay freezes and below inflation pay impositions many workers were hoping for better times from pay review bodies. But it was not to be. Rather than recognise that pay review bodies were provided with inflation forecasts of 3-4% by their own predictions and reopening discussions the Government are proposing legislation restricting strike action and threatening financial penalties on trade unions. The UK already has some of the most draconian laws on trade unions and industrial action and the new proposals will take the law back to the position of the late 19^{th} and early 20^{th} century.

Any discussions that Government are prepared to have seem to be on the basis of saying "No" often enough will improve things. **This from a Government that has taken the limit off bankers bonus' and saw the average CEO earn more in the first 5 days of 2023 than the average worker will in the whole of the year.**

Strikes affecting our area

RMT (Rail and Maritime Transport Union): 2 x 48 hour strikes this week

Tuesday 3rd January and Wednesday 4th January 48-hour strike

Friday 6th January and Saturday 7th January 48-hour strike

Please show your support by attending the picket line on Cross Turner Street

Wednesday 11th January Unison & GMB Ambulance Strike (Pickets @ Longley, Middlewood, Batemoor & Workshops)

Saturday 14th January STUC Solidarity Stall- Collection Buckets, Top of the Moor H&M and Debenhams

Wednesday 18th January Lunchtime Solidarity with Healthworkers, Rebuild the NHS:o/s Hallamshire Hosp, Glossop Rd

23 December 2022 RMT Press Office:

Government ministers have abdicated their responsibility to sort out strikes by blocking rail employers from making a deal with RMT. Since meeting the minister last week there have been no further scheduled negotiations to try to prevent upcoming strikes on Network Rail. The union has done deals in every part of the railway network where the Department for Transport is not involved. Both pay offers from Network Rail and the train operating companies are well below what has been agreed in Scotland, Wales and where metro mayors have control of the rail franchise. The rejected offer on Network Rail was also conditional on ripping up working conditions for railway workers, including unsafe practices for the travelling public such as a 50% cut in scheduled maintenance tasks and an unacceptable hike in unsocial hours. On the train operators, RMT members would have been forced to accept a paltry pay sum, Driver Only Operations (DOO) across the whole network, and the closure of all ticket offices creating an inaccessible and less safe railway. RMT general secretary Mick Lynch said: "The union remains available for talks to resolve this dispute. But until the government gives the rail industry a mandate to come to a negotiated settlement on job security, pay and condition of work, our industrial campaign will continue into the new year, if necessary."

Pay deals secured by the RMT:

- **Eurostar International: 8% pay rise**
- **Eurostar - Mitie security: 10% pay rise for all staff and 29% for the lowest paid.**
- **Scotrail: 7-9% backdated to April this year**
- **Transport for Wales: Between 6.6% and 9.5% pay rise**
- **Merseyrail: 7% pay rise**
- **MTR Crossrail: 8.2% (2021-2022)**
- **Docklands Light Railway: 9.25%**
- **London Underground: 8.4% (2021)**

ASLEF (Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen)

24-hour strike on Thursday 5th January

Please show your support by attending the picket line on Cross Turner Street

Mick Whelan, general secretary, commented:

“We regret that passengers will be inconvenienced for another day. We don’t want to be taking this action. Withdrawing our labour is always a last resort for a trade union. We have come to the table, as we always will, in good faith but while the industry continues to make no offer – due to the dodgy deal they signed with the DfT – we have no choice but to take strike action again. They want drivers to take real terms pay cut. With inflation now well into double figures, train drivers who kept Britain moving through the pandemic are now being expected to work just as hard this year as last year but for less. Most of these drivers have not had an increase in salary since 2019. We want the companies – which are making huge profits – to make a proper pay offer so that our members can keep up with the cost of living.”

UNISON and GMB Ambulance workers

Wednesday 11 January

Ambulance workers represented by Unison and GMB set to strike in England and Wales. We await details of how this affects South Yorkshire but expect picket lines at Batemoor, Longley and Middlewood

Other disputes

PCS civil servants are taking targeted strike action in various departments in protest at a paltry 2% pay offer. Disputes include DVSA centres in various parts of the country and the National Highways

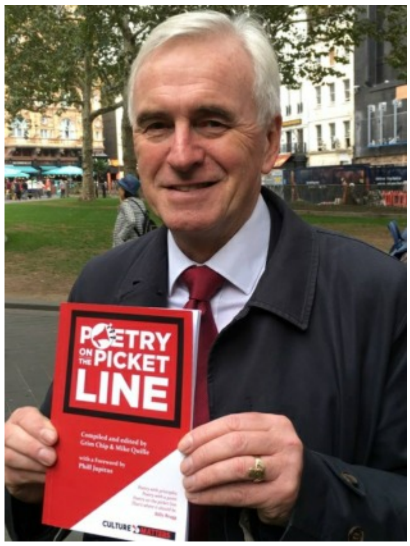
Next RCN strike is 18th and 19th January

No new CWU Royal Mail strikes have been announced for 2023

POETRY ON THE PICKET LINE SOLIDARITY BUNDLE

from Joe Solo

Special two-book bundle donated to #LockdownSolidarity by Poetry On The Picket Line stalwart Chip Hamer. Two awesome books of awesome poetry fresh from raising striking worker's spirits and direct to your doormat for £12 including postage.



It’s workers who create wealth – not billionaires

Our economy operates in the interests of those who own and manage the wealth which workers create. The current strike wave is seeking to redress the balance, says JON TRICKETT MP

WORKERS’ pay has become a political issue once more. And the Tories and echo chambers in the media — both tabloid and should-know-better — are reverting to type.

They cannot see a strike, no matter how well-justified, without dipping their pens in vitriol and, in the case of Conservative ministers, seeking to rewrite the rule-book to help keep workers poor.

There is a story being told by the government that inflation is being stoked by pay rises led by unreasonable trade unions.

But if you listen carefully, you will see that this story is being contested by those who really understand how the system works.

The Financial Times quotes economists saying that “squeezing public-sector workers’ pay is a political choice not a necessity” — much like the austerity we have endured for the last decade.

Former Bank of England official Tony Yates told the FT the government’s real objection to public-sector pay increases is an “ideological one, in particular the argument of the Tory Party who don’t think a (bigger state) is consistent with conservatism.”

The truth is that wages are increasing much more slowly than prices — 6 per cent compared to almost 11 per cent. Big price rises are the cause and wage claims are the effect of the present crisis.

But for the left there is a much bigger picture to what is happening in our country. And indeed across all advanced capitalist economies.

We start by rejecting the idea that it is somehow the billionaires who are the “wealth-creators” upon whom we all depend.

The truth is the reverse. Working people create the world’s wealth when they apply their intellectual and manual skills in the processes of production. No-one else.

Think what would happen if the billionaires — or even TV commentators — stopped working before Christmas. Would the country be any poorer or the economy come to a halt? In fact, nobody would notice.

Yet the government prefers to cut the pay of public service workers — and then wonders why there are staff shortages in so many vital sectors.

Our economy operates in the interests of those who own and manage the wealth which workers create.

What happens when prices rise faster than workers’ pay? The answer is simple — profits rise, shareholder value increases and executives get paid more while workers suffer a pay cut.

The giant accountancy firm PwC recently noted that "the average total pay of CEOs has returned to pre-Covid levels," increasing from £3.2 million in 2020/21 to £3.9m in 2021/22, primarily driven by an increase in annual bonuses.

And restrictions on City bonuses, introduced after the bankers' crash of 2008 are being scrapped by Rishi Sunak and Jeremy Hunt at the same time as they seek to cut pay for nurses and postal workers.

Privately owned corporations are now so large that few governments can contest their demands. The power of such companies to impose price rises without challenge arises from their quasi-monopolistic domination of the marketplace.

The overall effect is clear to see for those who have eyes to look. The collective wealth of the richest 250 people in our country has risen from £565.7 billion to £658.1bn — meaning that during the pandemic the richest got richer by increasing their wealth by 16.3 per cent or £106.7bn.

This translates to £420m each, and over £1m a day — which would take a lifetime for the average worker on £30,000 a year to earn.

It is also interesting to track what happened to corporate wealth as the country entered into the Covid period.

In a single six-month period between October 2020 and April 2021 the total value of the London Stock Exchange increased by £607bn.

As of early 2021, the total market value of all companies trading on the London Stock Exchange stood at £3.67 trillion. Pandemics are good for profit, it seems.

The central argument of the left is that there is a latent — often out of sight — struggle between the interests of the wealthy and of those who work for a living.

It is relatively easy to see who has been winning. Present estimates suggest that in the coming period, wages in real terms are due to decline by 7 per cent while prices will climb by 9 per cent.

Ever since the bankers' crash the wealth of the few has been sky-rocketing while wages and salaries have been squeezed and are now falling.

The situation facing working people has been described as a "cost-of living-crisis." Those who are taking action to protect their incomes and their communities have been labelled as greedy reckless trade unionists.

The reality is that we have a crisis brought on by greed and the source of the problem is the big corporations and the mega-rich who are driven to increase their share of the wealth produced at the expense of everyone else, come rain or shine.

This is the left's case. It is irrefutable; and if we make it with sufficient confidence, we can win the battle for the hearts and minds of the British people.

Whatever be the outcome of this debate, it is our task to show solidarity with all those struggling for a better country, with wealth being placed at the disposal of the community rather than staying in the hands of the few who appropriate the fruits of our common labour.

Jon Trickett is the Labour MP for Hemsworth.

Jeremy Corbyn: ‘Strike Action Wins Victories For Us All’

By Jeremy Corbyn

The Equal Pay Act, the 8-hour day, the two-day weekend, parental leave, holiday pay – organised labour is behind many of the rights we have today. We must mobilise in our thousands to fight the government's latest effort to crush it.

Striking female machinists from the Ford plant in Dagenham attend a women's conference on equal rights in industry at Friends House, Euston, 28 June 1968. (Bob Aylott / Keystone / Getty Images)

‘Thank you very much for fighting for us. We are very proud.’

Gwen Davis recalls the feeling of solidarity when she and 186 other women went on strike on 7 June 1968. They were working as sewing machinists in Dagenham, in of the most profitable car-production plants in Britain, employed to make covers for car seats. Following Ford’s decision to re-classify its wage structure, women learnt that they would now be categorised as ‘unskilled’ and subsequently receive lower pay than the men working in the same plant. Collectively, they decided to take industrial action in protest of such egregious pay inequality, which inspired other female workers at a plant in Halewood, Merseyside to down their tools too.

Ford’s production line came to a halt. In taking strike action, the women showcased something that could be said of workers everywhere: without their brain and muscle, not a single wheel can turn. As Gwen Davis recalls, they faced hostility, but they also mobilised a wide-ranging coalition that supported their demands. Many women in particular would come up to them on the picket line and thank them for standing up for principles of gender equality, fairness, and dignity in the workplace.

Their bravery did not just change the lives of female workers in Dagenham. It changed the lives of female workers across the country. The year after the strike, the National Joint Action Campaign Committee for Women’s Equal Rights was born. The year after that, the government passed the 1970 Equal Pay Act which, for the first time in Britain, legislated to equalise the pay and employment conditions of men and women.

Alongside the Equal Pay Act, we can also thank strike action for a shorter working day. Protesting against long hours, sometimes reaching 16 hours a day, gas workers and dockers went on strike throughout the 1880s to secure something that would soon become the norm: the eight-hour working day. From the Equal Pay Act to the shorter working day, higher public sector wages to the two-day weekend, and parental leave to holiday pay, organised labour has secured victories for us all.

The gains workers have made, and the triumphs they are yet to win, are under threat. New government legislation intends to override a worker’s right to withdraw their labour, forcing them to work against their will. This includes a requirement for certain industries (including the health service, rail, education, fire, and border security) to provide ‘minimum service levels’; bosses will be allowed to sue unions and sack employees if these minimum levels are not met. In doing so, the government is in danger of contravening a fundamental democratic right, a right that is enshrined in the International Labour Organisation, dating back to 1919.

We already have some of the toughest anti-union legislation in the world. To pretend that the current economic crisis can be fixed by toughening them further is absurd and insulting to the millions of workers struggling to get by. The government has done its best to turn railway workers and postal workers into public enemies. Next, healthcare workers and teachers, campaigning to defend their jobs and defend our public services. In accelerating its fight with unions, the government is forcing workers to pay the price for a crisis caused by decades of austerity, economic mismanagement, and corporate greed.

It is a strategy of scapegoating that runs through the government's entire agenda. The government's latest attack on workers is part of a much broader assault on human rights; Suella Braverman is intent on withdrawing from the European Convention on Human Rights and reneging on the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. It is no coincidence that the government is targeting ordinary workers and refugees at the same time. They are all being blamed for a crisis that the Tories created. Their hope is that the scapegoats turn on each other.

Repealing anti-strike laws is not just imperative. It's the bare minimum. We do not need to restore, defend, or protect workers' rights. We need to build, expand, and amplify them. That's why I will be standing up in Parliament, speaking out in the strongest terms against this legislation and campaigning to encourage my colleagues from all parties to do the same.

As well as repealing anti-trade-union legislation (both historic and modern), we need to re-emphasise the message that underpinned the women's strike in Dagenham: those who keep this country going will not be taken for granted any longer. That means redistributing wealth from those who enjoy wealth to those who create it. If we're prepared to clap for workers on our doorstep, we should be prepared to support them on the picket line and back their demands for an inflation-busting pay rise, funded by taxes on wealth, corporate profits, and the highest earners.

This distributional politics must underpin any programme of devolution. After all, local governments and communities require the financial capacity to tackle the crises they will be tasked with solving. The only way that workers and communities can truly 'take back control' is by transferring wealth and ownership from top to bottom. Indeed, being honest about our nation's finances is not the same as pretending we have no money to spend. Instead, being honest about our nation's finances means having the courage to tell the public where that money really is: in the pockets of CEOs, shareholders, and the 1%.

The Tories' latest attack on workers is only the beginning. My hope is that the government has overplayed its hand; we must mobilise in our thousands to fight back. That means launching a new wave of union recruitment, which brings together otherwise disconnected workers: young people, those in the gig economy, and those who perform unpaid and unrecognised labour at home. The recent action by Amazon and Starbucks workers gives us much-needed hope that we can succeed.

We're starting the year at a time of immense and intense stress for many workers, particularly in healthcare and education. It is essential that we ensure the collective solidarity that we showed in 2022 not only carries into 2023, but grows in size and stature.

The strikes up and down this country are not just about pay. They are about poverty, hunger, stress, insecurity, inequality, and injustice within our society. Today's turbulent terrain and societal fractures cannot be resolved or healed without a politics of hope. A politics that stands up for those who run our public services, teach our children, keep our communities connected, look after us when we are sick, and care for the most vulnerable. As women in Dagenham taught us in 1968, when you stand by striking workers, you stand up for a better world.

Ten Times Workers Won in 2022

By Taj Ali /Francesca Newton - Tribune

As 2022 draws to a close, Tribune looks back at ten landmark trade union victories – showing how organised workers are fighting back against greed and exploitation.

2022 has been a difficult year. It's been a year of spiralling costs and growing fear, particularly as the heatwave of summer descended into the winter and warm banks have appeared across the country. It's been a year of three prime ministers, in which the government has proved the only thing that can keep it united is a shared commitment to immiserating the many. But with the highest number of working days lost to strike action in a decade, it's also been a year when the labour movement awoke from a too-long slumber and, with the public overwhelmingly behind it, began, once again, to fight back.

Across the economy, workers have been out on picket lines fighting back against the cost of living crisis class war and demanding their worth. Many of these struggles—including those being fought by rail workers, posties, nurses, paramedics, university staff, and more—are long-standing disputes with fundamental questions about our public services and in whose interest they're run at their core. Many of these are set to continue into 2023, with their outcome remaining to be seen. It's in the interests of us all that they win, and as always, Tribune will be behind them.

But other disputes have been resolved this year, with workers winning industrial fights from the hospitals of London to the hotels of Loch Lomond. As we see out the closing hours of a year likely to go down in history, here are ten of the multitude of victories workers won in 2022.

1. Bus Drivers Win Higher Pay Across the Country

In January, Tracey Scholes, one of Greater Manchester's first ever female drivers, who had worked at the same depot for 34 years, faced the sack for not being tall enough to operate Go North West's new buses. Her fellow bus drivers and her union, Unite, would mount a campaign to defend her, and she went on to win her appeal against the dismissal.

This was just one of a number of victories for bus workers this year. In the summer, Arriva bus drivers and members of Unite in Merseyside went on strike for 29 days over a real-terms pay cut, which would end in August after they won an 11.1% pay rise. Solidarity from the people of Merseyside was crucial, with many donating money, food and drink during the four weeks of strike action.

Later, in September, Arriva bus drivers in Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, and Buckinghamshire found themselves engaged in a similar dispute. Tribune joined them on the picket line in Luton. Here too, solidarity from members of the public was incredible: located on a busy stretch of a main road, honks in solidarity from motorists passing the depot were frequent, picket-line pakoras were provided by a local food van, and Reggae music played from a speaker, followed by some Punjabi music, reflecting the diversity of the workers taking strike action. Buoyed by the victory of bus drivers in Merseyside, they remained united in their determination to demand better and would go on to secure pay rises between 10.4-11.4%.

More were to follow. In recent months Arriva drivers have won a 14% pay rise in Kent, and 11% in North London; Stagecoach drivers have won a 13% pay rise in Warwickshire and 10% in East London; Metroline drivers in London have secured an 11% pay rise. With bus drivers some of the worst affected by the pandemic, their successful fight for their worth is a victory for every worker.

2. Outsourced Workers in the North West Win Parity

In Covid's wake, the injustice of outsourcing and the impact of unequal contracts on healthcare workers has been a growing source of concern. This was the case for hospital domestics at Lancashire and South Cumbria Trust, who, employed by outsourcing firm OCS, began back in May 2021 to call for parity in pay and benefits with their directly employed colleagues.

In June 2022 OCS offered workers the same hourly pay, but still wouldn't pay the same rates for nights, weekends, or bank holidays, or backdate the correct rate of pay. Directly employed staff also still had a higher annual leave entitlement, and full pay while sick. Doing the same work, OCS workers knew they deserved the same.

So in June, they began a series of walkouts, coming to a total of 26 days of strike action by November. They were backed by fellow Unison members in other sectors and workers from a range of trade unions, who attended a march and rally in support. Their final win—an inflation-busting 14% pay rise, an extra week of annual leave, and the same sick pay as their in-housed colleagues—was a victory against the two-tier workforce.

Union membership also grew by more than 50% during the dispute, and Unison members made strides in building worker power within their organisation. There are now two official union reps, who have signed up since the dispute ended. 'It took a long time,' Caroline*, an OCS employee, told Tribune, 'But, finally, we got what we wanted.'

3. Firefighters Win Compensation on Discriminatory Pensions

Back in 2015, the government introduced new pension rules requiring firefighters to work to the age of 60 or take a reduced pension. Older members were allowed to remain in the older, better scheme, while younger members were required to transfer to the new scheme. According to the union, if firefighters chose to retire at the earlier pensionable age of 55, their pension would be reduced by more than 20%.

The change was subject to a legal case by the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), alongside strike action, on the basis that it amounted to unlawful discrimination on the basis of age. In December 2018, the Court of Appeal ruled in the FBU's favour. This year, in October, the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) announced it had won compensation for nearly 9,000 members affected by the change with stress and anxiety related to the financial uncertainty are set to receive a payout of at least £3,750. FBU General Secretary Matt Wrack pointed out that there is still further to go in the fight to put the situation right in a 'mess of the government's own making', but that this was a 'significant step'.

This win came amid a difficult year for firefighters, which, with its heatwave and resultant record wildfires, proved just how vital their work is to keeping us safe. Despite that, they have been offered yet another real-terms pay cut. FBU members have rejected the offer and are now being balloted on industrial action, in the hopes of shoring up not only their own living standards but also the future of an underfunded and neglected service.

4. Liverpool and Felixstowe Workers Stop the Docks

For many, it was during the pandemic that it became clear just how vital the shipping industry is to keeping the world running. So in September this year, faced with a real-terms pay cut despite the vital work they do, more than 500 dock workers in Liverpool went on strike. Their union, Unite, pointed out that their employer, the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company, had made £30 million in profit in 2021.

The strike prompted displays of international solidarity, with dockers receiving support from longshoremen from America, who donated $15,000 to the strike fund, as well as from dockers from the likes of Spain and Denmark, who sent delegations to the picket line in solidarity. The workers celebrated a major victory in November, after securing a pay deal worth between 14.3% and 18.5%.

The tail end of the Liverpool dockers' first set of strikes also coincided with those at Felixstowe port, which one worker told Tribune would 'paralyse' around 60 percent of the UK's containerised products going in and out of the country for at least a week. During Felixstowe's first wave of strike action in August, which involved over 1,900 workers, Liverpool workers refused to work on any vessels diverted from Felixstowe and sent a delegation down to the picket line to show support. In December, Felixstowe port workers would also celebrate a major victory, winning 15.5%.

5. 4,800 Open University Workers Are Decasualised

As well as the falling pay and growing workload that have prompted this year's national university strikes, one of the major problems facing workers in the higher education sector in recent years has been casualisation and precarity. Research from the UCU shows that in 2019-20, a massive 68% of research-only academic staff were on fixed-term contracts, along with 44% of teaching-only staff. 46% of universities use zero-hours contracts to deliver teaching. The precarity rife in the sector means workers constantly facing insecurity of every kind.

So it was no mean feat when at the start of August, following negotiations with university management, the University and College Union (UCU) hailed a massive win as 4,800 workers at the Open University were taken off fixed term contracts and moved onto permanent ones—a change that the union said constituted the biggest decasualisation in the history of UK higher education. As well as improved job security, staff benefited from a pay uplift of between 10-15% and additional annual leave. The effort now continues to stamp out casualisation across the sector.

6. BT Workers Beat the Rigged Economy

This summer saw 40,000 BT and Openreach employees and members of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) out in the first national telecoms strike since 1987. The strike was a response to the imposition of a pay rise of just £1,500, while energy bills and food costs continued to spiral far above that figure. For BT's workers alone, the problem was clearly so bad that the company had to set up a food bank in the workplace—or in their words, a 'community pantry'—to feed its own staff, earning CEO Philip Jansen the nickname 'Foodbank Phil'.

As CWU General Secretary Dave Ward told Tribune from the picket line outside BT Tower in July, the company had made £1.3 billion in profit in 2021, while announcing a price hike for customers of 13% from Spring 2023, epitomising the mutual interest in fair pay and fair prices between workers and customers. The workers taking part in the action were engineers and call centre workers, including 999 call handlers, one of whom wrote for Tribune about the prevalence of food bank use and Universal Credit claims among her colleagues to make up for what she called BT's 'low pay culture'.

Eight days of strike action were taken altogether by BT and Openreach workers, with the company finally coming back to the table with a new offer of £3,000 from April 2022, representing between 6% and 16% depending on pay grade, which workers voted to accept in December. As Dave Ward put it, the improved pay deal would have been impossible without the determination of the workers shown on the picket line, which 'caught the sympathy of the country, and shocked the company out of its complacency.'

7. The RMT Shows Up the Government

The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) has been at the forefront of this year's newfound trade union strength, and on the frontline of media and establishment attacks. Its dispute with Network Rail and train operating companies in England rolling on into 2023 as the government continues to block new offers, considering the ongoing disruption caused by strikes and the ongoing destruction of our rail network a worthwhile price to pay to defeat the workers.

But RMT members have also won a number of separate victories this year, too. Eurostar security staff, on outsourced contracts with Mitie, cancelled strike action in December following an improved offer of 10%, with 29% secured for the lowest paid workers. Deals were also secured with devolved administrations, including an improved pay offer of 7-9% with Scotrail, and 6.6-9.5% with Transport for Wales.

In other words, the RMT have settled disputes where the Department for Transport are not involved. At present, deals between rail operators and the government allows the Tories to direct how disputes are handled, and rail operators are not free to agree terms and conditions with their employees without the involvement of the Transport Secretary—and if a rail operator fails to agree a mandate with the Transport Secretary, it can face financial penalties.

It's clear that the government is attempting to block a deal and the RMT are under no illusions about the battles they face in the year to come. For now, though, it is a credit to RMT members and their resilience that improved pay has been achieved elsewhere—and a sign that the government shouldn't expect workers to back down any time soon.

8. Croydon Hospital Workers Win a Whopping 24%

As with the OCS win we covered above, the damage done by the inferior contracts offered by outsourcing giants, which drive poor conditions and low pay, has been a major focus for the labour movement in recent years. Rarely are these giants bigger than G4S—but that's who cleaners and porters at Croydon University hospital, unionised with the GMB, decided they were ready to take on in spring of this year, as the cost of living crisis began to really bite. Workers voted for strike action for improved pay, and in March, they announced a huge pay win of 24%, along with an occupational sick pay scheme worth eight sick days.

But for the workers, that wasn't the end. This month has seen GMB members at Croydon hospital once again marching in protest, this time demanding the end goal of insourcing on NHS contracts. As regional organiser Helen O'Connor pointed out, the struggle to get private companies like G4S out of the NHS and proper treatment for NHS workers is a struggle for the existence of the NHS itself: 'The NHS is being destroyed by cuts and privatisation and we need to oppose both inside and outside hospitals.' Along with the fights of ambulance workers, nurses, junior doctors, and more, their struggle will continue into 2023, and we all need to stand alongside them.

9. Jacob's Workers Stop Bosses Taking the Biscuit

In September 2021, workers at the Jacob's factory in Liverpool's Aintree were in uproar over management's attempt to impose new requirements for unpaid training. By June 2022, bosses had made an offer of just 4.5% to workers, a pay rise contingent on accepting these unpaid training requirements. With the cost of living crisis spiralling and hot strike summer kicking off, the workers and their union GMB knew that just wouldn't do.

By November, when Tribune reported on the strike, 750 workers were all out, not returning to the workplace until a deal was decided. Workers told Tribune he knew of employees there dependent on food banks, others who walked for more than an hour to work because they couldn't afford transport, others who were having to seek debt advice.

It took 11 weeks of strike action, but an improved pay offer was finally won, with 6.5% backdated to the first of January and a £500 payment along with an additional 3% uplift for 2023 and £250. The factory workers who spoke to Tribune about the dispute cited 'unbelievable' support from members of the public, including those bringing food for the picket line and wood for the fire, acts of simple solidarity that allowed workers to stay strong. Their resilience is a source of inspiration for others engaged in long disputes in their respective industries—and proves that collective action pays dividends.

10. BEIS Workers Win Big

As 100,000 civil servants and PCS members gear up for strike action in 2023, back in November, their fellow trade unionists are closing out the year showing what can be achieved when workers stick together. Caterers and hospitality workers employed by services company Aramark at the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy grew tired of waiting for a promised improved pay offer earlier in the year, as talks stalled, and voted for five days of strike action in November and December—a 100% positive vote on a 75% turnout.

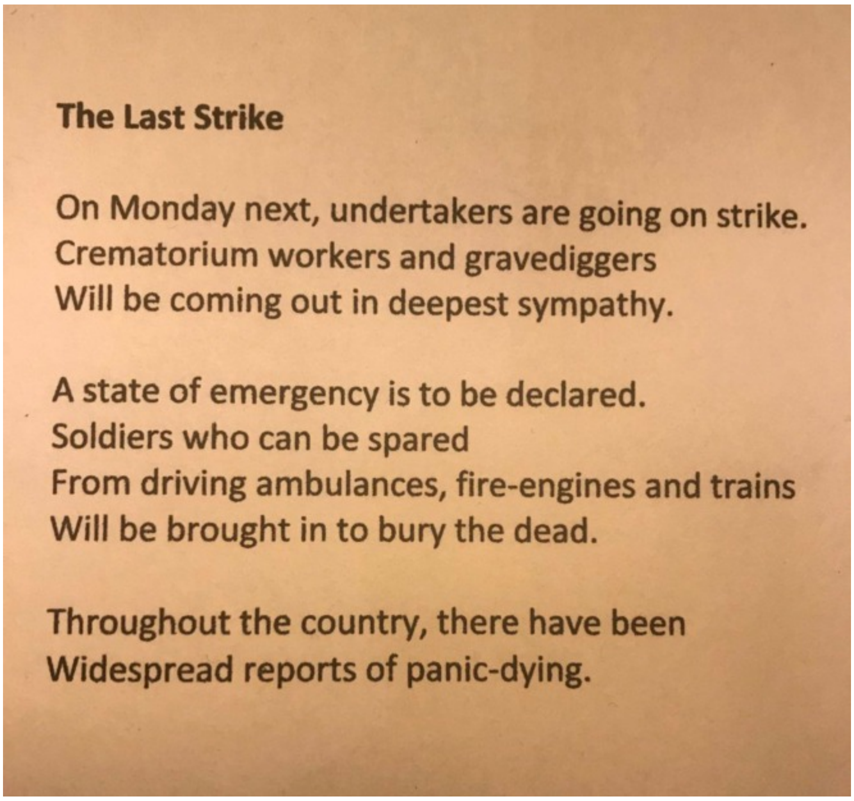
These workers run the canteen at BEIS and provide food for trade delegations. A survey by PCS conducted in the summer found that a third of members were skipping meals because they couldn't afford to buy food—so 'it would be no surprise if these hard-working caterers would struggle to afford the food they serve to others,' PCS General Secretary Mark Serwotka said.

The threat of this strike action brought Aramark back to the negotiating table, and strike action was called off following a pay rise offer of 12%. This pay rise is a major victory for those workers struggling to make ends meet this winter—and a reminder, as we enter a new year, of the power of trade union action.

The Year Ahead

The biggest strike wave in three decades shows no signs of abating anytime soon. Teachers and firefighters are currently being balloted on strike action, soon to be joined by junior doctors, while railway workers and nurses are taking further strike action in the new year. In an ideal world, those who keep this country going shouldn't have to withdraw their labour for better pay and conditions, but as long as the capitalist status quo continues, workers will have no choice but to fight the cost-of-living crisis through the pay packet.

This year's victories serve as a reminder that when those in power fail us, we can use our strength in numbers to demand better. We are under no illusions about the scale of the challenge workers face in 2023, but if this year has taught us anything, it's that power concedes nothing without demand. As we enter 2023, let's redouble our commitment to demanding respect and dignity for those who form the very backbone of our society.



The Last Strike

On Monday next, undertakers are going on strike.
Crematorium workers and gravediggers
Will be coming out in deepest sympathy.

A state of emergency is to be declared.
Soldiers who can be spared
From driving ambulances, fire-engines and trains
Will be brought in to bury the dead.

Throughout the country, there have been
Widespread reports of panic-dying.

Anon 1979

We must force their hand with a workers' bill of rights

The government is openly committed to meeting the social and financial crisis with attacks on working people rather than reform. That is why we must now launch our own programme, write KEITH EWING and LORD JOHN HENDY KC

RISING food, energy and housing costs and the falling value of wages mean that workers' living standards are under attack. So are their legal rights. The government refuses to introduce an Employment Bill, promised in 2019, and is currently on course to remove a large body of workers' rights derived from EU law, including the right to paid holidays.

The government is also attacking trade union rights, with further restrictions designed to undermine the ability of workers to fight back. Yet British workers are already among the least protected in the developed world, and British employers are among the most powerful.

British workplaces have been plagued for years by zero-hours or work-on-demand contracts, flexible contractual terms giving wide-ranging powers to managers to dictate when, where and how work is to be done, fire-and-rehire allowing employers to reduce pay and working conditions, and, at P&O Ferries, the emergence of fire-and-replace as a corporate tactic.

In the meantime, collective bargaining coverage has plummeted, with collective agreements reaching fewer than one in four workers, lower than at any time in the last 100 years.

The right to strike is constrained by unparalleled restrictions, though workers are heroically voting in their millions to overcome them. No surprise then that workers' share of the nation's wealth continues to decline as poverty and inequality continue to increase, threatening the very basis of our threadbare democratic institutions.

It is time for change.

As lawyers, we are offended also that these developments are in breach of a wide range of international legal obligations by which this country is bound — but which successive governments have ignored.

These include the International Labour Organisation's Declaration of Philadelphia, and its Fundamental Conventions, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the European Social Charter (all treaties ratified by Britain). They also include the EU-Britain Trade and Co-operation Agreement, and the Brexit deal of 2020.

In that agreement, the Tory government gave a legally binding undertaking to the EU to protect labour standards and to comply with the international obligations mentioned above.

Yet here we are about to remove a host of core EU-derived employment rights and introduce even more restrictions on the right to strike.

The Transport Strikes (Minimum Service Level) Bill will include a duty on unions to take steps to ensure that members and others do not disrupt services, requiring the unions actively to work against members' interests.

In terms of trade union and employment rights, there is a mountain to climb if the rule of law is to be restored to the workplace, if workers are to have a meaningful voice in setting terms and conditions of employment, and if unilateral decision making is to be stopped and employers held to account.

Remarkably, we find ourselves in the 21st century fighting 19th-century battles, despite the wealth, progress and sophistication enjoyed by the few at the expense of the many.

We need a new text to articulate demands which will set us in a new progressive direction. This is why the Institute of Employment Rights has created a new Workers' Bill of Rights for an Age of Crisis. Rather than reheat the timeless provisions of existing international legal obligations, which were written in more optimistic periods of our history, we borrow from and adapt them to the contemporary crisis in Britain, to take into account the catastrophe faced by British workers.

We have tried to set out principles rather than detail. No doubt there are omissions that readers will wish to see included. It is not exhaustive; there will be gaps that need to be filled. But there will be no solution until we make collective bargaining a priority and succeed in restoring collective agreements to post-war levels of coverage.

The P&O Ferries' dispute should be a lesson to us all on the fundamental importance of sector-wide collective agreements, imposing legally binding minimum obligations on all employers in the sector, regardless of who is responsible for paying the wages.

There would thus be no incentive for an employer to sack an existing workforce and replace it with a cheaper alternative supplied by an overseas agency. By the same token, P&O Ferries is a lesson to us all in the crucial importance of restoring the right to take solidarity action.

In that dispute, the prohibition on that right prevented the union from calling on fellow trade unionists to take action against the employer. It thereby denied them any lawful effective means of protecting the dismissed seafarers.

Unaccountable power is unacceptable when exercised by the state. It is no more acceptable when exercised by employers.

Workers' Bill of Rights for an Age of Crisis

I -Every worker (however classified and except for the genuinely self-employed in business on their own account) shall be entitled to all employment rights from day one of their engagement. Labour law shall be universal in its application.

II- Every worker shall have the right to full transparency about the terms and conditions of employment, which shall clearly define the worker's obligations in relation to when, where and what work is to be done.

Every worker shall be entitled to a just wage having regard to (i) the social value of the work undertaken, (ii) the principle of equal pay for work of equal value, and (iii) the principle of fair differentials where work is of different value.

Every worker shall be entitled to the regulation of working time which guarantees (i) a sufficient number of working hours to earn a just wage, (ii) a maximum number of working hours weekly or monthly; and (iii) reasonable paid rest breaks, meal breaks, breaks between shifts, weekly breaks, and holidays.

Every worker shall be entitled to a safe and healthy working environment, free from harassment, protective of and accommodating their particular needs and vulnerabilities, upholding their dignity, and governed by rules in the making of which workers' representatives participate, and which are effectively enforced by a tripartite, fully committed, properly funded and staffed inspection and enforcement agency with full powers.

III- Every worker shall have the right to join an independent trade union — whether national or international — for the protection and promotion of their economic, social and political interests.

Every worker shall have the right to be represented by an independent trade union on all matters arising at work, at every level including that of their workplace, their employer, their trade, and their industry.

Every worker shall have the right to be protected by collective bargaining, and to this end it shall be the responsibility of the state to take steps to ensure that collective bargaining machinery operates at enterprise and sectoral level.

Every worker shall have the right to participate in trade union activities and not to be penalised for doing so, and every union shall have the right to reasonable access to its members and prospective members at the premises of the employer.

Every worker shall have the right to participate in industrial action for the protection and promotion of their economic, social and political interests and not to be penalised for doing so, and every union shall have the right to organise and support industrial action, subject only to the rules of the trade union in question.

IV- Every worker shall have the right to equality of opportunity and freedom from discrimination, and shall have the right to insist on barriers to employment being removed, including access to free or affordable high-quality childcare.

Every worker shall have the right — either directly or indirectly through their trade union — to be informed and consulted about changes to contractual or working practices and to agree before any such changes are implemented.

Every worker shall have the right to job security, and the right not to be dismissed for (i) refusing to agree to a change in the terms and conditions of their employment, or (ii) before dismissal or other procedures are fully complied with. Any such dismissal shall be void.

Every worker shall have the right to (i) social security benefits in unemployment, ill-health, or incapacity and to (ii) pension in retirement, which will guarantee a just income and a decent standard of living, without the need for charitable supplements.

V- Every worker shall have the right to insist that EU employment rights in force at the time of Brexit shall continue to apply in the United Kingdom, until such time as legislation makes provision for higher levels of protection.

Every worker shall have the right to effective labour standards. To this end, it is the responsibility of the state to ensure that rights at work are enforced in practice by a tripartite, fully committed, properly funded and staffed labour inspection and enforcement agency with full powers.

Every worker shall have the right of access to justice in tripartite independent, impartial and speedy labour courts with effective and uncapped remedies to restrain employers from, and to compensate workers for, unlawful acts by employers, and to which trade unions may, on the instruction of a relevant member(s), be parties.

Every worker shall have the right to representation in government. To this end, a Ministry of Labour shall be established to ensure that trade union freedom, collective bargaining structures, workers' rights, and enforcement mechanisms are fully and effectively created and maintained.

VI- Every business selling goods or services in the United Kingdom and its territorial waters shall ensure that the workers in its supply chains are, in practice, accorded equivalent rights to those in this bill of rights.

Statistics

By JIM WATERS.

I'm tired of listening to sun-shine talk,

This pie-in-the-sky stuff,

This travesty on patient toil;

Let the Jesus-screamers,

The open-shop artists,

And their ilk. . .

Hook their fat necks over a flying emery wheel

For. . . . eight. . . . long. . . . hours;

And to the beat and whir of machinery,

Chant this:

"I work to get money to buy food to get strong,

So I can work to get money to buy food and get

strong.". . .

Then, maybe, they will understand

Why the church pews are empty,

And men die for unionism.

Brexit isn't to blame for our current problems; it is still an opportunity

Larry Elliott- The Guardian

The UK economy is clearly struggling. Growth has stalled, interest rates are going up and the Treasury is softening up the public for a new dose of austerity measures.

For some, the explanation for these horrors is simple: Britain is paying the price for its decision to leave the European Union. Forget the impact of the most severe pandemic in a century. Forget what Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine has done to energy prices. Brexit is the "gorilla in the room".

Really? Or is this a classic case of confirmation bias, where someone starts with a preconceived view and then finds evidence to back up their argument? As in: I always said Brexit would be a disaster; the economy is in a bad way; Brexit is to blame and here's the proof.

There is no dispute that the UK has some serious economic problems – including a chronic trade deficit and a poor record for investment – but they predate the Brexit vote in 2016. Britain has not run a surplus on trade in goods since the early 1980s, and wages adjusted for inflation have barely grown since the global financial crisis of the late 2000s. Had the economy been firing on all cylinders in 2016, it seems unlikely more than 17 million people would have voted to leave the EU.

Britain is not the only country facing labour shortages. The German government said earlier this year it was cutting red tape to make it easier to recruit workers from Turkey, and its big industrial sector trade union, IG Metall, has put in a claim for an 8% increase. France reported 300,000 unfilled vacancies in its hospitality, with a similar picture in Spain. According to the Office for National Statistics, at the time of the 2016 referendum there were 2,335,000 people born in other EU countries employed in the UK. At the latest count, this total stood at 2,389,000. The number is down slightly on the peak of 2,508,000 in early 2020 but there has been no mass exodus of EU workers.

Nor is the UK alone in facing cost of living pressures. The annual inflation rate for the 19-nation eurozone currently stands at 10.7%, higher than the UK's 10.1%. US inflation peaked at just over 9% in the summer.

The European Central Bank is pushing up interest rates because it is worried that tight labour markets will lead to a wage-price spiral; so is the Federal Reserve in the US. The upward pressures on inflation are caused by the pandemic, the supply-chain bottlenecks that followed the pandemic, and by the failure of central banks to act quickly enough when problems first started to emerge. The whole of Europe is facing recession this winter, with Germany in particular paying a heavy price for its dependence on Russian gas.

All sorts of dire predictions were made for the UK economy at the time of the Brexit vote: house prices would tumble, unemployment would rise by 500,000 and the economy would sink into an immediate recession. None of it happened. The economy has trundled on.

Mark Carney, the former governor of the Bank of England, takes a dimmer view. He has argued that Britain's economy was 90% the size of Germany's before Brexit but only 70% the size of it today.

Prof Jonathan Portes, an economist at King's College London who is no fan of Brexit, has described this comparison as "nonsense" because it involves measuring the value of economies at prevailing exchange rates. This is not the normal method economists use to assess the relative performance of countries, because comparisons are heavily influenced by movements in currencies. The pound, for example, is almost 10% higher than it was during a recent trough against the US dollar, but that doesn't mean the UK economy has grown by almost 10% relative to the American economy in the past month.

A recent paper by Briefings for Britain, a Brexit-supporting body, offers a different perspective to Carney's. It notes that the UK's cumulative growth has been slightly higher than Germany's since 2016; that trade with the EU – notwithstanding the extra red tape burdens facing small businesses – has recovered, and that Britain continues to attract more foreign direct investment than any other European country.

Of course, it might be argued that the UK would have had still more investment and even higher exports had a different decision been made on 23 June 2016. Over the years, the argument from the anti-Brexit camp has changed. Where once it was “Brexit will crash the economy” it now is “the economy would be performing better were it not for Brexit”.

The Briefings for Brexit paper (a comprehensive piece of work, worth reading whichever side of the argument you are on) says these counterfactual analyses are flawed. It concludes: “A careful reading of the evidence shows that while there is little evidence yet that Brexit is doing much to help the UK economy, neither is there evidence of much harm.”

That rings true. There has been no Armageddon. The economy is adapting, even if that process has been made more difficult by the pandemic, the war, and Liz Truss’ brief period as prime minister. If the effects of Brexit have tended to be exaggerated, then the impact of the pandemic and the lockdowns that accompanied it have tended to be downplayed, perhaps because the most fervent anti-Brexiters also wanted longer and more stringent lockdowns.

After six years, the argument for Brexit remains what it always was: an opportunity to look at an under-performing economy in a new light and to do things differently. Whether that opportunity will be seized or squandered remains to be seen, but there is no gorilla in the room, just a mouse with a loud squeak.

More articles

Austerity policies have made European citizens €3000 a year worse-off

European governments are spending €1000 less on public and social ser[illegible] person than they would have done if austerity had not been implemented

A return to austerity in Europe: feasible or fictional?

Inflationary pressure, rising levels of public debt and the fading post-pandemic recovery may suggest the premature adoption of policies for fiscal consolidation. However, the international economic outlook and the geopolitical situation created by the war in Ukraine rule out a return to the model of growth that emerged from the financial crisis in 2008-10

Brussels proposes new EU fiscal rules to turn the page on austerity

The European Union appears ready to ditch austerity as it takes the first formal steps to reform the long-standing fiscal rules that rein in excessive government spending.

The legally-binding rules, which date back to the Maastricht Treaty in the early 1990s, compel EU states to keep their public deficit below 3% and their debt-to-GDP ratio below 60%, thresholds that many currently exceed by a significant margin.

The rules have remained suspended since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020.

The revolution will be published

By Lucy Brownson - Sheffield Tribune

The Sheffield Bookshop, 93 The Wicker, c.1972. Image courtesy of Picture Sheffield and Sheffield Libraries and Archives.

From Chapel Walk, if you go up Church Street and down St James Row, you come to the deceptively-named Paradise Square (perhaps counting only as such for those looking for parking). At one end of the square a cobbled path takes you to a hulking block of student accommodation. But this is only 105 Queen Street's most recent incarnation. From around 1938, it was the site of the Workers' Bookshop — which did pretty much what it said on the tin, acting as a vital hub for workers to swap information and organise. It also acted as the former headquarters of the Sheffield Communist Party.

While this might sound like the sort of fact you could successfully deploy in a local pub quiz, it isn't some colourful anomaly. Examine Sheffield's political history and you'll find a persistent pattern. Head to an independent bookshop in this city or else read about one in the history books and as often as not, you'll often find a connection with working-class activism.

Communism's core demands — namely economic equality and workers' liberation — had seeded amongst Sheffield's working classes long before the Communist Party of Great Britain, or CPGB, was established in August 1922. One hundred years earlier, an alliance of six cutlery workers' unions founded the Sheffield Mechanical Trades Association, the city's first trades union council (indeed, one of the first of its kind in the UK). Chartism, widely regarded as the world's first mass movement for workers' labour rights, also found fertile ground here in the mid nineteenth century. In 1837 the Chartists founded the Sheffield Working Men's Association, a mass campaign for workers' rights and political suffrage. The Sheffield Trades and Labour Council was founded in 1858 to give local workers a voice and a political foothold, predating the Trades Union Council by a full decade. Because heavy industry has historically been so concentrated in Sheffield, those who wanted better working conditions have always found strength in numbers; as such, workers' uprisings have happened here with a frequency that's unmatched elsewhere.

Given this storied past, the CPGB thrived here in the twentieth century — despite attempts at state repression. Throughout the '20s and '30s, the local papers are peppered with reports of people being arrested and charged with sedition for publicly speaking or demonstrating against church and state — in one memorable incident from 1921, a local coppersmith was sentenced to three months' hard labour for declaring that World War 1 had been 'invented by capitalists for the purpose of hounding down the working classes.'

As distributors of anti-capitalist literature, Communist Party booksellers were easy targets for such charges — which is perhaps why the Sheffield Workers' Bookshop relocated four times in the 1940s, eventually settling into premises at 20 Matilda Street around 1948. With this move came a new (less provocative?) name, The Sheffield Bookshop, and a new custodian, Charlie Eason, both of whom would stick around for many years.

Born in Oxford, Charlie moved to Sheffield in the 1930s and began managing The Sheffield Bookshop when he returned from his military service during WWII. On the face of it, Charlie didn't have a great deal in common with the men of industry who were prominent in the local CP — he was a vicar's son from a comfortably well-off family, and one can't help but wonder what his family made of his career choice.

We have lost a great socialist in Alice Mahon

The former MP for Halifax was a credit to working-class politics and a committed fighter for peace.

I shall miss her terribly, writes JEREMY CORBYN MP

TERRIBLE news came on Christmas Day that Alice Mahon had sadly passed away.

As the MP for Halifax, Mahon was utterly brilliant, determined, dogged and totally unfazed by the pomp and grandeur of Parliament.

Elected to Parliament in 1987, she was incredibly active on behalf of her constituents and proudly saw herself as a working-class MP.

She had previously worked in the NHS for 10 years as a nursing auxiliary, studied at Bradford University and later taught trade union studies at Bradford College. She had also served as a Labour councillor in Calderdale.

In Parliament she immediately joined the Socialist Campaign Group and was a frequent figure in all campaigns, fighting for workers' rights on the picket line, anti-racism on the streets and international solidarity around the world.

Mahon opposed the Gulf war in 1991 and later the later Balkans war, bravely visiting Belgrade while it was under Nato bombardment.

In 2001, we travelled together to East Timor to observe the referendum on its future and the end of the brutal war of independence, which cost thousands of lives.

Along with Ann Clwyd MP, we observed all the polling stations we visited very closely. Mahon was fearless even when we saw the effects of military attacks on some of the polling stations first hand.

In 2002, she drafted the first parliamentary motion against British military involvement in Iraq. A supporter of Stop the War, she later told the Labour Party conference: "We were lied to about WMD, and there is no delicate way of putting it."

She was a great friend to all those who were facing poverty and marginalisation. As a member of the NUPE (later Unison) group in Parliament, she strongly opposed privatisation in the form of PFI schemes and foundation hospitals, which she saw as vehicles for undermining the NHS.

Sadly, Mahon stepped down from Parliament in 2005, became increasingly frustrated with the direction of New Labour, and resigned from the party in 2009.

She came back to Labour when I was elected leader in 2015, and despite suffering macular degeneration and loss of much of her sight, she was a committed and vocal supporter of the anti-austerity socialist agenda we were putting forward.

I have this happy memory of her in the 2017 election campaign at a huge election rally in Hebden Bridge, on the front row beaming with hope and happiness.

Mahon was a great socialist, never a crowd-pleaser or career politician, with an acerbic but human wit, and never afraid to take her case into hostile territory. When she was somehow elected to the Nato parliamentary assembly, she spoke for peace, detente and nuclear disarmament.

Everyone who met Mahon learned much from her about life, principles and determination. I found her a brilliant and loyal friend, on the good days and the bad.

Mike Grindley 1937-2023: humble hero of the GCHQ union ban

Hugh Lanning

VINDICATED: Mike Grindley (centre) holds up his famous bag before making a symbolic return to the GCHQ site with other sacked colleagues, July 1997

He faced the eye of the storm of Thatcherism, then became the thorn in its side — living to see victory and the reinstatement of unions at GCHQ a decade later, he was a symbol of principled struggle,. writes Hugh Lanning

MANY seek prominence, others have it thrust upon them. Mike Grindley, who died aged 85 in hospital on New Year's Day following a stroke, was definitely one of the latter.

Humble and kind, Grindley had been beavering away as a Chinese linguist in the still very secret GCHQ since 1961 when, in January 1984, a rampant Margaret Thatcher sought to ban trade unions, saying it was "a conflict of loyalties" to be a member of a trade union and work for GCHQ.

On January 25 1984 all staff were given an ultimatum of leaving the union or facing the sack. The public and political response to the announcement was massive, with the TUC calling a day of action and even the EETPU, the right-wing led electricians union, threatening to go on strike if there were sackings.

Despite the unions giving commitments to protect national security and a High Court ruling in the unions' favour, Thatcher was not for turning and the ban was implemented on March 1 — with the House of Lords overturning the High Court decision on grounds of "national security."

In the ensuing campaign, Grindley became chair of GCHQ trade unions, representing union members from a small office in Cheltenham. Following its election victory in 1987, the Tory government were confident enough to proceed with its long-threatened sackings of the remaining trade unionists. These began on November 14 1988 and in the end, Grindley was sacked along with 13 other trade unionists.

For Grindley, it was a moral issue. At a rally in London's Central Hall held in protest against the sackings, Grindley let loose his feelings: "We resent utterly and completely the accusations that the trade unions we are proud to belong to are any threat to national security … The traitors come from the old-boy network or elsewhere. No government has the right to say to its employees that your democratic rights have been removed."

Over the next decade, Grindley became the symbol of the campaign, speaking at trade union conferences, Tolpuddle and the annual January rallies in Cheltenham. He became famous — not least for the ever-faithful GCHQ trade unions carrier bag he had with him on all occasions and, to cheers, held up when he finished speaking.

Not only did he promote the GCHQ cause, but he also took solidarity to other workers in dispute — to Wapping, Silent Night, P&O and many others. Proud of his Irish heritage, he established and kept strong links with many Irish trade unions.

The GCHQ dispute is still highly relevant today. It was clear the Tory government was intent on banning unions not only in GCHQ but in other areas of government and limiting rights to strike in essential services. The response and the difficulty in implementing the ban in GCHQ effectively blocked the avalanche of union attacks envisaged by the Tories.

This was done through the enduring commitment of the sacked workers supported by the Civil Service unions and the collective and united response of the wider trade union movement here and abroad.

Wherever Thatcher went across the international stage she was hounded about GCHQ and her hypocrisy in criticising other governments over human rights. The campaign is a valuable lesson and example for trade unionists today facing similar threats in the wake of the growing number of industrial disputes.

His proudest moment came in August 1997 when Robin Cook honoured an oft-repeated Labour Party pledge to restore trade unions in GCHQ. Marching, fist clenched with his GCHQ trade union plastic bag in hand — he led the sacked unionists back through the gates into GCHQ.

This success came about in no small part due to Grindley's willingness to make a life-changing commitment to campaigning for what he believed in — the right to belong to a union.

Grindley remained the custodian of the campaign and was planning how the 40th anniversary of the ban should be marked in 2024 — keen that an important trade union victory should be properly remembered. He is survived by the three children of the marriage to his beloved Isabel — Helen, Tim and Neil — and his sister Biff.

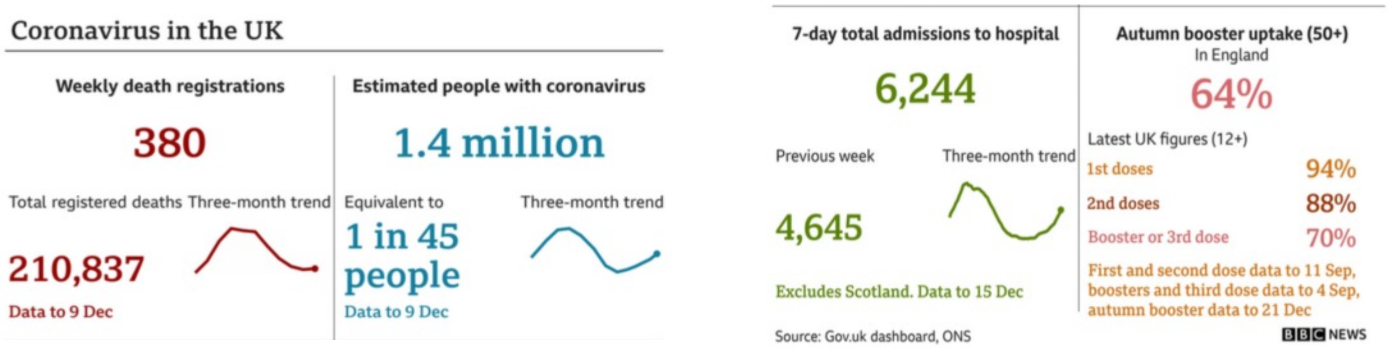
As I Grow Old I Will March Not Shuffle

As I grow old
I will not shuffle to the beat
of self-interest
and make that slow retreat
to the right.
I will be a septuagenarian insurrectionist
marching with the kids. I shall sing
'La Marseillaise', whilst brandishing
homemade placards that proclaim
'DOWN WITH THIS SORT OF THING'.
I will be an octogenarian obstructionist,
and build unscalable barricades
from bottles of flat lemonade,
tartan blankets and chicken wire.
I will hurl prejudice upon the brazier's fire.
I will be a nonagenarian nonconformist,
armed with a ballpoint pen
and a hand that shakes with rage not age
at politicians' latest crimes,
in strongly-worded letters to The Times.

I will be a centenarian centurion
and allow injustice no admittance.
I will stage longstanding sit-ins.
My mobility scooter and I
will move for no-one.

And when I die
I will be the scattered ashes
that attach themselves to the lashes
and blind the eyes
of racists and fascists.

The Covid Shambles Continues.



An autumn Covid booster vaccination programme in England has reached almost two thirds of those aged 50 and over (64%), with 14.9 million people jabbed.

What is known about new Covid variant XBB.1.5?

A new Covid sub-variant is causing some concern in the US, where it is spreading rapidly.

Some cases have also been recorded in the UK, so what do you need to know about XBB.1.5? Prof Wendy Barclay from Imperial College London said XBB.1.5 has a mutation known as F486P, which restores this ability to bind to cells while continuing to evade immunity. That makes it spread more easily. She said these evolutionary changes were like "stepping stones", as the virus evolves to find new ways of bypassing the body's defence mechanisms.

The Wellcome Sanger Institute in Cambridge is sequencing at least 5,000 Covid samples a week, as part of continuing efforts to track variants.

Over 40% of Covid cases in the United States are thought to be caused by XBB.1.5, making it the dominant strain. At the beginning of December, it accounted for only 4% of cases, so it has quickly overtaken other versions of Omicron.

Covid hospital admissions have been rising in recent weeks across the US, and the government has restarted its free testing programme. The UK had five Omicron waves in 2022, and further spikes in cases seem inevitable.Figures for the week to Saturday 17 December from Wellcome Sanger suggested that one in 25 Covid cases in the UK were XBB.1.5.

Zero-Covid and the China protests: look at the bigger picture

ESTABLISHMENT media have seized on protests over Covid lockdowns to rehearse their favourite anti-China narratives.

Ever since the world's first Covid outbreak in Wuhan, the virus has been used as a stick to beat China.

Donald Trump cynically portrayed the pandemic as a Chinese weapon — "the worst attack we've ever had on our country ... worse than Pearl Harbour."

Trump's ravings were seldom taken seriously even by US allies. But the resurrection of the "lab leak" conspiracy theory by the Joe Biden administration made it respectable, and the judgement of a World Health Organisation scientific team, that the virus likely evolved in bats and was "extremely unlikely" to have originated in a laboratory, was howled down.

As one British member of the team complained, “it’s disappointing to spend time with journalists explaining key findings ... to see our colleagues selectively misquoted to fit a narrative that was prescribed before the work began.”

Since Western governments have moved on from Covid, the focus has shifted from trying to blame China for the virus to attacking its zero-Covid policy.

Clearly resumed lockdowns are causing genuine anger in some places. The Chinese government has recognised the problems caused by a “one size fits all” approach: reminding authorities in Henan’s capital Zhengzhou for example of the exceptions that need to be made to stay-home orders and rebuking police in Anhui for over-strict enforcement of quarantine.

But Western reportage is misleading. Top billing on the BBC implies protests on a far larger scale than is actually the case: just as in 2019 when riots in Hong Kong received blanket coverage while far more serious police violence against the Yellow Vests in France was downplayed, any sign of dissatisfaction in China is exaggerated for political reasons.

China watchers have noted the role of mistranslation in attributing broader political aims to the protests: that “jiefeng” (lift the lockdown) has been rendered “jiefang” (liberate), or that calls to loosen Covid restrictions in Xinjiang have been portrayed as calls to “free Xinjiang” to reinforce Western claims of Chinese oppression in the region.

We should also look at the bigger picture. China has effectively contained Covid-19, suppressing outbreaks through rapid localised lockdowns. The result is a death rate of 10.38 per million.

The British rate is 2,668.64 per million — British citizens have been 257 times more likely to die from Covid than Chinese. The fact that this disparity is treated as irrelevant by most commentators says something unpleasant about how little our society values the lives of vulnerable and elderly people.

The limited economic impact of China’s short, targeted lockdowns is obscured by Western crowing about a slowing in China’s GDP growth rate, which seems bizarre given it still comfortably outpaces all Western economies.

Coverage rarely mentions the fact that slower growth is a deliberate part of China’s economic planning, reflecting Xi Jinping’s shift of emphasis from growth at any cost to development that limits inequality and protects the environment.

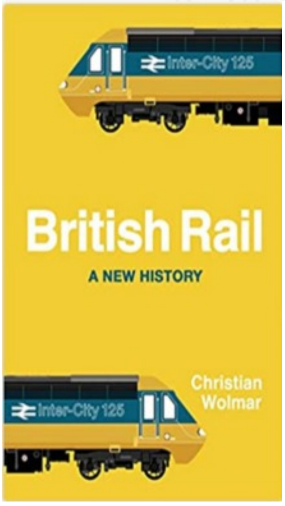
Those who dismiss these stated goals as propaganda ignore palpable evidence that they are serious: only a government prepared to sacrifice economic output for long-term sustainability would have enacted a policy such as the 10-year ban on fishing in the Yangtze river imposed last year to allow wildlife to recover, a measure that saw the authorities allocate billions to creating new employment for the 231,000 people who relied on fishing China’s biggest river for their livelihoods.

To an excitable Western commentariat loyally plugging the new cold war line set in Washington, Beijing’s zero-Covid policy is evidence of its paranoid authoritarianism.

The government has repeatedly adapted its approach, and recent protests may prompt further revision. But the fact remains that by comparison with Britain or any other Western country, China’s strategy has saved millions of lives. We should be wary of mocking it or presenting our governments’ record as somehow superior.

Media and Reading

With the global Covid crisis not yet over and the NHS under threat health will remain a top political topic. Listen to the Health Foundation's 30 minute podcast of 2022 to understand the problems to come in 2023.



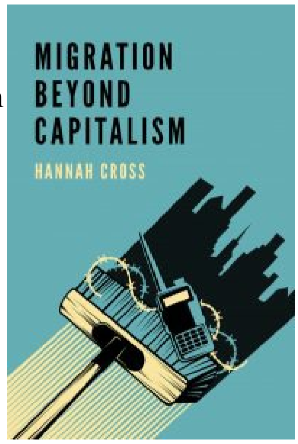
British Rail: A New History- Christian Wolmar

I may not \agree with his view on industrial relations on the rail way a new history well worth a read for those that are students of politics, economic, management and history. From its creation after the Second World War, through its fifty-year lifetime, British Rail was an innovative powerhouse that transformed our transport system. Uniting disparate lines into a highly competent organisation - heralding 'The Age of the Train' - and, for a time, providing one of the fastest regular rail services in the world.

Born into post-war austerity, traumatised, impoverished and exploited by a hostile press, the state-owned railway was dismissed as a dinosaur unable to evolve, and swept away by a government hellbent on selling it off.

Perhaps the most curious fact is that both Labour and Conservative governments adopted a policy of cuts in order to take the railways into profitability. But it wasnt until 1971 that BR commissioned a global economic comparative study that showed that no railway system in the world made a profit and BR compared favourably with its international competittors.

Migration Beyond Capitalism- Hannah Cross



Hannah Cross' Migration Beyond Capitalism rescues an undoubtedly critical question for the twentieth-first century: the consequences of neoliberal politics over the displacement of the working class throughout the world and, more specifically, the movement from the Global South towards the North.

Having previously analysed what she calls 'unfree labour mobility' related to the migration of West Africans towards Europe, Cross widens her theoretical approach to the issue of migration in neo- and post neoliberal societies by considering it 'on the basis of a world-historical understanding of capitalism'

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