

The Plebs News



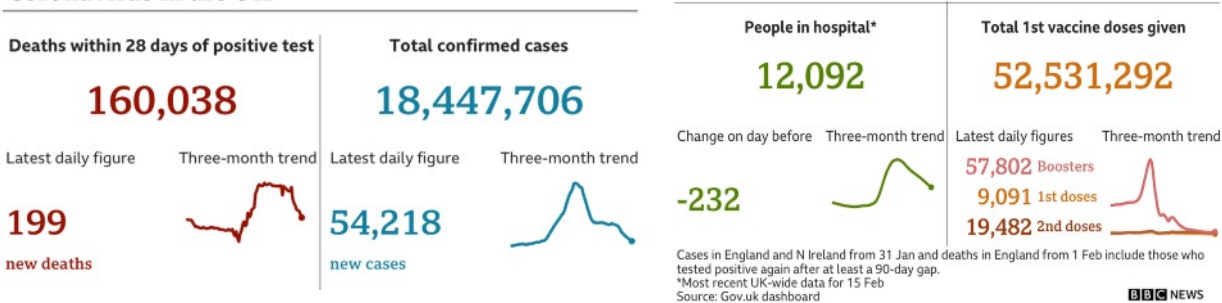
<https://www.facebook.com/SheffieldCentralCLPEducationPage>

daveberrygmb@yahoo.co.uk

February 2022

And the Covid Shambles Continues: Return to School Boosts Omicron Numbers, Partygate Comes to Sheffield and Gray Report "Whitewash", Australia to Open Up

Coronavirus in the UK



COVID-19: One in three English schools has staff absence levels of more than 10%

As expected the mixing over the Xmas period saw a surge in adult cases of Omicron which peaked on 5th January. The return of children to school saw the numbers continue to rise as child infections maintained the rise in numbers. The infections spread to staff members resulting in children have to stay off school both to isolate and also due to lack of staff. Numbers now appear to be falling or plateauing but there is still a fear of a return to rising adult case numbers. Thousands of people also reported as testing positive for the second or third time as a result of re-infection. Although hospital admissions reduced December and January still saw the deaths of almost nine thousand people.

- Covid-19: How many people have been infected more than once?

Kate Josephs: Sheffield council boss on 'paid leave' amid party probe

A council boss who hosted a lockdown party in her old government job is on paid leave from her current role while an investigation takes place. Sheffield chief executive Kate Josephs, who led the government's Covid-19 taskforce, had leaving drinks in the Cabinet Office in December 2020. She went on annual leave last week after admitting and apologising for hosting the gathering.

The situation is not likely to be resolved soon as the Gray Report, led by civil servant Sue Gray, charged with investigating the Downing St parties has had the full report postponed after the matter was referred to the Metropolitan Police. Her interim report has been regarded largely as a "whitewash" and "gutted" of real information.

The campaign to beat the pandemic

ZERO COVID

ZC Conference: Towards a Covid free world

Plenary 1: Two years on: the state we're in
Plenary 2: Towards a Covid free world

Workshops on:
*Big Pharma and vaccine apartheid *Busting the Covid myths
*Challenging the media narrative *Organising for zero Covid

Sunday 27 February 1.30-5pm
Register: <https://bit.ly/zerocovidconf>

Covid: Australia to reopen borders to international travel-

Australia has announced the reopening of its borders to vaccinated tourists and other visa holders for the first time in almost two years. "If you're double vaccinated, we look forward to welcoming you back," Prime Minister Scott Morrison said. Australia has had some of the world's strictest border controls throughout the coronavirus pandemic.

More on economics at a time of gathering clouds

Last month in Plebs News we looked at Quantative Easing with the help of Richard Murphy and his blog. His blog showed us that the budget of a nation is far different to the household budget of popular mythology and that money creation by the central bank can be used to balance the economy over a long period of time. It can also be used to create demand, fluidity and to help create jobs through Government investment. Although nominally independent the Bank has only one shareholder, the UK government, who has used it to lend money to itself to create Quantative Easing to buy back old assets, usually Government debt. The BBC has done us a service by showing two programmes about how QE was created and how the most wealthy ended up with most of it. Well worth watching but be warned it is only the beginning of the story.

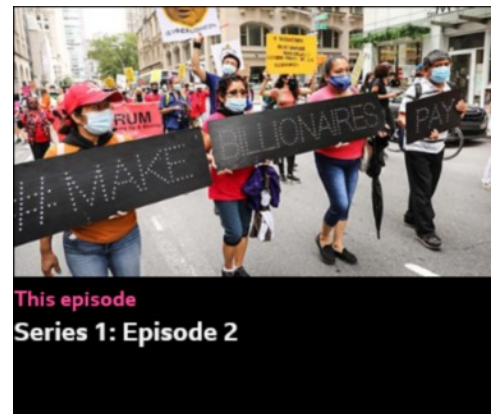


The government and the Bank of England took drastic action to save the UK economy in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. Insiders from the world of finance tell us how decisions made to solve the crisis allowed them to 'make out like bandits.'

From bailing out the banks to pursuing a faster, deeper austerity than any other country, Britain's policymakers shatter the status quo in a desperate bid to save the economy. With first-hand accounts from key players, this two-part series takes us inside the room when the big decisions were made.

In the second episode, the government and the Bank of England are forced to react to the economic shocks brought on by Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic. Insiders from the world of finance tell us how these crises create an opportunity for the rich to vastly increase their fortunes.

Theresa May enters office in the aftermath of Brexit, setting her sights on tax dodgers, bloated executive pay and unethical multinational companies.



In the Wizard of Oz Dorothy's slippers were originally silver. Find out why.

Before Quantative Easing Government currency had to be backed by something solid and valuable, usually gold or silver. But what happens when production outruns the supply of gold or vice versa. Central bankers have looked for answers to this throughout history until the system collapsed in the 1970's. Listen to Melvyn Bragg and his guests track the history of the gold standard



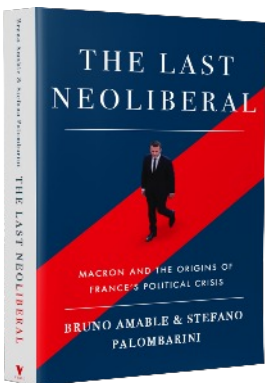
In Our Time: The Gold Standard

Melvyn Bragg and guests discuss the system that flourished from 1870 when gold became dominant and more widely available, following gold rushes in California and Australia. Banknotes could be exchanged for gold at central banks, the coins in circulation could be gold (as with the sovereign in the image above, initially worth £1), gold could be freely imported and exported, and many national currencies around the world were tied to gold and so to each other. The idea began in Britain, where sterling was seen as good as gold, and when other countries rushed to the Gold Standard the confidence in their currencies grew, and world trade took off and, for a century, gold was seen as a vital component of the world economy, supporting stability and confidence. The system came with constraints on government ability to respond to economic crises, though, and has been blamed for deepening and prolonging the Great Depression of the 1930s.

French Elections 2022

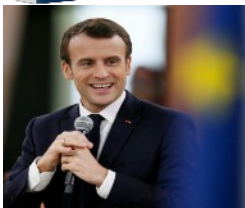
Earlier in the year Plebs News featured some articles on the potential results of the French elections. Like many countries the politics of left/right have blurred into a kaleidoscope of parties and personalities vying for success. The existing President was originally a Minister of Economy in the Parti Socialiste government before forming his own party En Marche to win the presidency at the last election. His vision of European integration has seen him follow the EU agenda of liberalisation, privatisation and austerity termed as “new realism”. This has lost him support from the traditional left vote and resulted in the Front National, the old fascist party, as his main challenger. With no united left challenger many traditional left voters now simply abstain from voting. Who knows what will happen?

A recent translation of a 2019 French text is worth a read to gain some history of not only French politics but trends that are occurring all around world politics.



Why centrist politics in France is bound to fail

This book analyses the French political crisis, which has entered its most acute phase in more than thirty years with the break-up of traditional left and right social blocs. Governing parties have distanced themselves from the working classes, leaving behind on the one hand craftsmen, shop owners and small entrepreneurs disappointed by the timidity of the reforms of the neoliberal right and, on the other hand, workers and employees hostile to the neoliberal and pro-European integration orientation of the Socialist Party. The presidency of François Hollande was less an anomaly than the definitive failure of attempts to reconcile the social base of the left with the so-called modernisation of the French model. The project, based on the pursuit of neoliberal reforms, did not die with Hollande's failure; it was taken up and radicalised by his successor, Emmanuel Macron. This project needs a social base, the bourgeois bloc, designed to overcome the right-left divide by a new alliance between the middle and upper classes. But this, as we have seen recently on the streets of Paris and elsewhere, is a precarious process.



The road to neoliberal autocracy

Bruno Amable, author of forthcoming *The Last Neoliberal*, explores how the ‘visionary’ speeches of the current French leaders to reveal an authoritarian turn.

A common practice of French leaders is to present themselves to world public opinion as visionaries ready to face the greatest planetary challenges, even when their political practice is in total contradiction with their declarations. Emmanuel Macron gave an example of this in an interview with the magazine *Le Grand Continent*. Here, he presents his doctrine for tackling climate change, and issues such as biodiversity, inequality and digital transformation.

He claims he is working for a ‘Paris consensus’ to replace the famous Washington consensus, which he describes as follows: ‘Reduction of the state share, privatisations, structural reforms, opening up of economies through trade, financialisation of our economies, with a rather monolithic logic based on the constitution of profit’. But perhaps we read this wrong, as it is exactly the programme he has been applying since he came to power: privatisation of Française des Jeux (the national lottery company) and Aéroport de Paris, an end to the special status of railway workers, loosening the regulations protecting employment, reduction of employer social contributions, pension reform and a ‘supply’ policy based on the vision of the economy of an investment banker.

It doesn't get any better when he goes into detail. What about climate change? It's an ‘externality’ that has to be ‘put back into the market’. The Paris consensus would do this ‘through, for example, the carbon price, which is not understandable under the Washington consensus, because it implies that something other than

profit must be included'. This convoluted formulation is simply the standard way in economics to deal with an externality, by 'internalising' it in the price. It is a classically neoliberal perspective: public intervention to make the market work better. And what about inequalities? 'We don't respond to them through taxation, we respond by constructing life chances differently,' says the man who reduced taxation on capital. In short, it's always the same neo-liberal inspiration.

What is the political use of this kind of exercise? If Macron thinks it's going to improve his image internationally, that's a failure. The foreign press is full of articles about the authoritarian drift of the regime. A recent editorial in the Swiss daily *Le Temps* wondered whether this drift could weaken Macron's social base by alienating the more moderate part of it. This concern is not absent from Macron's interview and he indicates how he intends to respond to it.

He sees 'the sociological basis of our regimes' as lying in 'progress for the middle classes'. If these middle classes no longer see any elements of progress for themselves... a doubt is cast on democracy.' They then say to themselves: 'Since we are no longer making progress, then to restore progress we either have to reduce democracy and accept some form of authority, or we have to partially close borders, because things no longer work as they are.' Emmanuel Macron claims to be fighting against this disastrous evolution, but is that so sure? Doesn't he rather reveal the guiding principle of his political strategy?

The authoritarian and brutal turn of the regime is only the continuation of a trend that was already very strong under the previous presidency. The police treatment of social movements began at the latest with the brutal repression of demonstrations against the labour law. This did not prevent the 'moderates', the educated middle classes, the bourgeois bloc, from voting en masse for the man who was the main inspirer of this law.

Recently, the Economics Minister rejected a tax increase because the French would allegedly be against it. But they are particularly against pension reform, which the same minister sees as the central element of the government's structural policy. The radical programme to transform the French socio-economic model, which involves the dismantling and privatisation of the social protection system, is not supported by a social majority. Implementation of this programme will inevitably be accompanied by tensions that the government can only cope with by infringing civil liberties. If the 'moderates' reject these attacks on democracy, which remains to be proven (see their indifference to the violence suffered by the *Gilets Jaunes*), they must oppose the structural economic policy choices of which these are only the consequence.



A year on, the gilets jaunes have lost 24 eyes and five hands – and made a deep mark on French society

The Repression of France's Yellow Vests Has Left Hundreds in Jail — And Crushed Freedom of Protest

Draghi's Government Marks the Paradoxical Return of the Bourgeois Bloc

Stefano Palombarini, co-author of *The Last Neoliberal*, marks the return of the technocratic Italian Prime Minister and warns that this is only the morbid symptoms of a politics without future

Having been plucked from outside the political arena, Mario Draghi was recently appointed to head Italy's new government. His administration is based on a very broad majority ranging from the far-right Lega to the Democrats and even part of *Liberi e Uguali* (LeU), an assemblage of small movements representing what remains of the parliamentary Left. Those who've followed recent Italian political history will know this is not a wholly novel situation: indeed, there were three such precedents over the last thirty years. Carlo Azeglio Ciampi was the first technocrat to lead a "national unity" government (in 1993-4), and he was followed by Lamberto Dini's administration (1995-6) and more recently the one headed by Mario Monti (2011-13).

In each of these past instances, rather motley coalitions took form mid-way through a parliament, in reaction to some major political crisis. Three of the four technocrats who were called on to "save" Italy — in each case presented as being on the brink of collapse — were former central bankers; the only one who hadn't filled such a job, Monti, was himself very closely linked to the world of banking. A further recurrent trait is the European dimension of the political crises that give rise to these super partes governments. Ciampi was called in after the lira had crashed out of the European Monetary System in autumn 1992. Monti replaced Berlusconi, who had in October 2011 openly seen his legitimacy cut from underneath him by a Merkel-Sarkozy press conference, which sparked a dramatic rise in the interest rates on Italian debt. Draghi has now come in with the central mission of negotiating the Recovery Fund money that the European Union has offered in reaction to the pandemic-era collapse in economic activity.

Technocrats are nothing new in Italian politics

This government's profile would suggest that the use these European funds is the decisive factor driving this political development. In Draghi's bid to orchestrate a balance among the parties supporting his government, he has handed them several important ministries: foreign affairs, defence, healthcare, etc. Out of 23 ministries, 15 directly represent political forces, while only 8 are non-party technocrats. But the three ministries that will have a say on the conditions under which the European funds are obtained and used are figures close to the prime minister himself: Vittorio Colao will have the brief for technological innovation and the digital transition, Roberto Cingolani the green transition, and Daniele Franco — who pursued the bulk of his career at the Bank of Italy — the economy and finance ministry. These three ministries do not have to answer to any political force. The new economics minister is especially worth a little focus, as this will allow us to draw the connections between the new government and Mario Monti's administration.

The crisis that led to Berlusconi's resignation in 2011 was famously triggered by a letter from the European Central Bank (ECB), signed by Jean-Claude Trichet and... Mario Draghi. In this letter, the ECB governor Trichet and his anointed successor Draghi insisted that their buyback of Italian public bonds would be conditional on fiscal tightening and a series of structural reforms (the "liberalisation" of public services, a shift from sectoral collective bargaining to company-level agreements, changes to rules on layoffs, a reform to the pension system, etc.) This was nothing short of an agenda for government, and Berlusconi was ultimately considered too unreliable to make it happen; hence Monti took his place and made the ECB letter his roadmap.

Less well-known, in this story, is the episode related in a 2014 book by Forza Italia's Renato Brunetta [1] — a minister of Berlusconi's at the time and today a minister under Draghi. Three months before Berlusconi resigned, and having already been informed of the imminent publication of the letter, he phoned Draghi, telling him that he had got the message (he also decided to put up a few taxes in the meantime) and asked if he could see the letter before it was circulated publicly. Draghi told him that the Bank of Italy's Daniele Franco was working on the letter, and that the following day Franco would himself provide prime minister Berlusconi with a first version.

Monti's so-called "technical" government, created in order to apply the policies "advised" by the ECB letter, brought into being a sort of "bourgeois bloc" in Italy,[2] based on the connection between its European commitments and neoliberal reforms — then continued up till 2018 by the Letta, Renzi and Gentiloni governments. To fully grasp the paradoxical character of today's situation, it is worth remembering that this experience resulted in electoral disaster for its leading figures, and triumph for those who opposed it. The party Monti founded, Scelta Civica, ceased to exist in 2018 after getting less than 1 percent of the vote in that year's general election. After he lost control of the Democratic Party, Renzi split away to form Italia Viva, credited with around 3 percent in polls. Letta quit politics altogether, while Gentiloni also left the Italian political arena behind as he was nominated a European Commissioner[3] Opposed to the Monti government were the Lega and, yet more important, the Five Star Movement (M5s), which entered parliament in 2013 and five years later became the biggest single party. These two parties, which had frontally opposed the bourgeois bloc, became central players in the Italian political scene: in 2018, they together drew over 50 percent of the vote.

Yet, ten years after the emergence of a bourgeois bloc to which Draghi and Franco actively contributed, and three years after this same bourgeois bloc met with electoral collapse, Italy finds itself with a government headed by Draghi — with Franco holding the economic brief. And they can count on a near-unanimous parliamentary majority, even though there has been no election overturning the 2018 result!

A Keynesian narrative serving neoliberal reforms

But — most Italian media and political figures object — it would be mistaken to imagine that the period which is now beginning, with Draghi distributing Recovery Fund money, has anything to do with the austerity imposed by Monti. Such an objection calls for two different kinds of response.

Firstly, we should see the money dedicated to Italy in relative terms. If the €209 billion is seen as manna from heaven, this amounts to €127 billion in loans and €82 billion in grants spread out over six years. The loans will obviously be taken out at highly favourable interest rates, unlike what Italy would have to pay if it borrowed in its own name. According to the calculations set out by Emiliano Brancaccio and Riccardo Realfonzo in the Financial Times,[4] Italy will thus save as much as €24 billion in total over the next six years (as compared to pessimistic forecasts for the trend Italian interest rates follow).

As for the grants, it is worth remembering that, unless there is a (highly unlikely) Europe-wide tax to finance the Fund, it will rely on contributions from member states, according to their GDP. Thus, the Italian contribution will be of the order of €40 billion, reducing the net grant to Italy to €42 billion. So, even in the hypothetical situation most favourable to Italy, it will receive a total €66 billion in European aid over six years — €11 billion a year, compared to a €160 billion fall in GDP in 2020 alone. This is, therefore, very far from a large Keynesian-type stimulus.

The second response is more general in character and concerns the role of austerity in the bourgeois bloc's strategy. The need to keep a lid on the deficit, the risk of debt spiralling out of control, the burden that it will impose on future generations... these talking points usually play an important role in the discourse of decision-makers attached to the bourgeois bloc. Yet austerity is not, and has never been, their fundamental goal — rather, austerity is used instrumentally as a constraint that helps push through structural reforms. We could say the same thing of the "European idea": in these decision-makers' strategy, it has never been anything more than an instrument for easing Italian capitalism's transition toward the neoliberal model.

Drawing a parallel between the Monti and Draghi governments is thus entirely appropriate: if the former presented reforms as indispensable to stop debt exploding, the latter will say that they are necessary in order to secure European help. These structural reforms, which have reduced social protection, enfeebled public services and precaritised employment relations (for instance, Renzi's Jobs Act, which did not bring any fiscal savings), are what prompted Italian society's backlash against the bourgeois bloc governments. And this is also what produced the complete turnaround in the electoral balance of forces, with the rising strength of the Lega and the M5S's breakthrough.

Parties bereft of strategy

So, we should ask for what strange reason the parties that grew by opposing the bourgeois bloc administrations (M5S, Lega) and the parties that shed masses of voters because of their support for these same governments (the Democrats and Berlusconi's Forza Italia) have now all joined in supporting Draghi's government, with various degrees of enthusiasm. This, particularly when we consider that Draghi's strategy is again to form a bourgeois bloc — a project now rising from the ashes.

True — for the moment, we only know the broad outlines of the new government's programme. But it is no surprise that in his first public speech as prime minister, addressing the Senate on 17 February, Draghi emphasised the need for speedy reforms to strengthen competition, simplify the tax system, reduce compulsory deductions, make the public administration more efficient, and encourage the growth of hubs of excellence in the public research system. Again, the general framework is based on structural policies to facilitate innovation, growth and — as the European Recovery Fund demands — the green transition.

In this sense, support for businesses thrown into difficulties by the economic recession is to be selective, and the fight against rising unemployment will again entirely rely on "active policies" to boost employment. In the Senate, Draghi did not devote a single word to employment contracts, collective bargaining (which now mostly takes place at the company level), the minimum wage (which Italy still lacks), or salary levels, though he did forcefully emphasise his government's commitment to the EU, which will involve further transfers of sovereignty at the fiscal level. Even the rhetoric calling on Italians not to sacrifice the young generations' future to the selfishness of the elderly, stands in perfect continuity with the era of the bourgeois-bloc governments.

So, what explains the near-unanimous parliamentary support for the new government? The answer partly owes to the dynamics within each party; here I will stick to a brief analysis of the three main forces, i.e. the M5S, the Democrats and the Lega. But another important part of the answer lies in the bourgeois bloc's effect in restructuring political cleavages themselves, leaving deep marks on the ordering of the political and social conflict in Italy. I'll return to this point later on.

The Lega's spectacular turn — long campaigning for euro exit, up till the 2018 election campaign, but now supporting a government led by Draghi (who told the Senate that the euro is irreversible) — is surprising only for those unaware of the preponderant weight, within this party, of its traditional component, essentially linked to SMEs in Veneto, Lombardy and Piedmont, i.e. the richest and most industrialised part of Italy. For a long time Salvini's project was to transform his formation — till 2017 still called the Northern League for Padanian Independence — into a nationalist party with a strong territorial presence across the whole of Italy. This would allow it also to address the popular classes in central and southern Italy, heavily sacrificed on the altar of structural reforms and austerity.

Yet northern and especially north-east Italian industry, whose production and trade are very heavily integrated with the German economy, is unable to tolerate any prospect of a break with the EU, and especially any unilateral move. Just after the 2018 election and the Lega's rise to government in alliance with the M5S, Salvini quickly announced that he had 'changed his mind' on the euro.^[5] A year later came the end of Giuseppe Conte's first government, as a result of the M5S's refusal to grant major fiscal autonomy to the regions — something which the Lega (under pressure from northern regional presidents) considered a priority. The nationwide, nationalist party that Salvini wanted to build thus had two souls: but each time a choice had to be made, the old Lega, representing the industrialised north, dictated the party line, without broaching even the least compromise with the expectations of the new electorate, instead rooted in the popular classes of central and southern Italy.

A choice also had to be made when the Lega decided whether to oppose Draghi or join his majority; and again, it was the expectations of classes linked to the world of SMEs that proved decisive. These latter have no desire for a clash with the European institutions, which they can perfectly well accept. But what they do demand is a major liberalisation of employment relations, and they also hope to enjoy some of the Recovery Fund resources. So, it would have made no sense to remain in opposition. Salvini declared that all he had asked of the new government was to cut income taxes, avoid the introduction of an inheritance tax, and not to increase property taxes.^[6]

We can see well enough what social interests such aims correspond to — and also understand that this marks the end of the Lega's national project, as it folds back on its traditional bases. It is also worth emphasising that this does not necessarily imply any weakening of the wider right-wing coalition; Fratelli d'Italia, a neofascist party allied to the Lega in all elections, and which now stands alone in opposition, is directly targeting the electorate which the Lega is today abandoning. Salvini's strategy is thus easy enough to read: he is giving up on the popular support he so rapidly picked up in central-southern Italy, but through his support for Draghi he seeks to strengthen the Lega's role as representative of northern industry.

Matters are more complicated for the Democrats and the M5S, who in autumn 2019 ended up governing together, almost by accident. As I noted earlier, it was Salvini who put an end to Conte's first government, under pressure from northern regional presidents; the Democrats and M5S decided to form a new government (again under Conte) in autumn 2019 mainly to avoid early elections which the Right was sure to win. The new alliance's main characteristic, at least at first, was that parties caught in strategic crises came to play the leading roles in Italian political life.

From 2011 to 2018, the Democrats had been the main pillar of the bourgeois bloc. After backing Monti, the party chose the next three prime ministers for governments corresponding to this same social bloc (Letta, Renzi, Gentiloni). But the electoral effects were unmistakable; in 2008 the Democrats had lost the general election with 33 percent support, but then fell to 25 percent in 2013 and 18 percent in 2018. After this searing defeat, Renzi's line — almost a caricature of the bourgeois bloc — was pushed into the minority, and he ended up quitting the Democrats and founding his own Italia Viva party.

Yet — and in this lies the whole problem — there has never been any real clash or sharp debate within the Democratic Party, such as might set different political lines against one another. Renzi brought about his own downfall, so to speak, and then left behind a formation lacking a political compass. Awareness of the social costs and inequality produced by "necessary reforms" is widespread in the party — but the only glue keeping the Democrats together is their strong and unconditional support for the European project. This glue is obviously an obstacle to a real critical analysis of the bourgeois-bloc period, though this is the necessary precondition for the development of any alternative political project.

The situation for the M5S is even more confused (if that were even possible). For its course seems more determined by the vagaries of the particular conjuncture, rather than any real political orientation on its part. Long opposed to the "caste" of parties — and determinedly rejecting any alliances — following its 2018 election triumph the M5s first offered the Democrats a pact, but then, after Renzi's refusal, it formed a coalition with the Lega; when Salvini decided to put an end to the alliance, the M5s turned back to the Democrats; and after Renzi pulled Italia Viva's support for the second Conte government (thus bringing its end) the M5s today finds itself allied to both the Lega and the Democrats, within Draghi's new majority.

Yet even this tortuous path is organised around a few broad guidelines. Its high vote (33 percent) in 2018 owed to its frontal opposition to the bourgeois bloc, structured around the defence of public goods, denouncing the privileges of the very wealthiest, and also its attention to green issues — an opposition accompanied with a deliberate ambiguity on essential questions like fiscal policy, the single currency and relations with the European Union. This vagueness, including highly erratic positions on immigration, allowed the M5S to rally voters from both Right and Left, hit by the bourgeois bloc's actions in government.

The conflictual tenor of the M5S's relations with the Lega during the first Conte government, and then its more cooperative relationship with the Democrats during the second, gradually led the M5s to position itself more or less clearly in favour of progressive taxation, against increasingly precarious employment relations, and also in favour of a bid to change the European treaties through negotiation, i.e. without any major rupture. M5s thus lost its share of voters coming over from the Right, and polls today credit it with around half the votes it took in 2018.

Conte's second government was thus based on the alliance between two formations — the Democrats, and Five Star — in strategic crisis but which, among internal conflicts and hesitation — were in some sense heading in the same direction. Indeed, Renzi's decision to withdraw his parliamentary backing for Conte, and to spark the crisis that led to the formation of the Draghi government, aimed to block the (still hypothetical) prospect of a new centre-left forming around the Democrats and M5S. Such an alliance would,

doubtless, have been conditioned by a Europeanism in need of more critical scrutiny. But it could also have been attentive to social inequalities and the problems of precarity and poverty, especially in southern and central Italy.

The hegemony of the bourgeois bloc survives its social decline

The turbulence within the main protagonists of Italian politics, and the paradoxical emergence of yet another government following a bourgeois bloc strategy, can each be connected to a unitary framework. The bourgeois bloc is not simply a social alliance that brings together the middle and upper classes, from both Left and Right, around a neoliberal reform of capitalism that draws its legitimacy from the European integration process. It is also an ideological project, which entails a complete restructuring of political cleavages. The electoral disasters faced by both the Renzi-era Democrats and Berlusconi's Forza Italia — the parties which carried this project — have not erased the effects that this experience has had on the structuring of social and political conflict.

The Left/Right cleavage has, over the last ten years, been weakened in favour of others, which set Europe against nation, elites against people, cosmopolitans against identitarians, and globalists against sovereigntists. The bourgeois bloc brings together an alliance around one pole in these divides: an alliance which has seen its social reach gradually shrink, to the point of being completely minoritarian, but which remains coherent in both its goals and its support for the neoliberal-Europeanist strategy that undergirds its existence. The other pole of these same cleavages rallies a majoritarian but completely eclectic swathe of the population. Its heterogeneous character has, as we have seen, decisively undermined Salvini's project for a national Lega, and it is also the source of the strategic hesitations of the M5S and its decline since its 2018 victory. Similarly, the Democrats' unconditional support for the EU project — leading it to dismiss any real criticism of the EU as "populist" — corresponds to this party's positioning within cleavages driven by the bourgeois bloc, preventing it from really changing its political line.

The dominant media outlets denounce the whole political class as unable to propose any solid programme for government — hence why they see Draghi as the only man up to the task of breaking Italy out of its crisis. There is an element of truth to this, though only in part. For in reality the problem owes not to political figures' own personal qualities, but to the fact that the hegemony of the bourgeois bloc has survived its social decline.

Its hegemony has the direct effect of marginalising from the political battlefield such essential questions as the future of social protection, public services and employment relations, and forces the bourgeois bloc's opponents to define themselves on the basis of the cleavages which it has itself imposed. In this structuring of political conflict, as shaped by the bourgeois bloc, there is only space for one coherent political strategy — its own. That is why, faced with the imperative of handling a crisis unprecedented since the end of the war, a broad political majority has rallied around a project which has a minoritarian base in Italian society.

This does not mean that Draghi's policies will not have social consequences of the same order as the governments of the 2011-18 period did: they very probably will do. Then, the classes sacrificed by the bourgeois bloc's reforms sought an electoral means of expressing their discontent and their suffering. But what are they to do now? Will they again have an opportunity to make themselves heard democratically, and the persistence to make the possibility real? Nothing could be less clear. While reverting to the same quotes from a complex author like Gramsci risks caricaturing his thought, his conclusion seems the best way of summing up the current Italian crisis: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."

[1] R. Brunetta : Berlusconi deve cadere. Cronaca di un complotto, Editore Il Giornale, 2014

[2] B. Amable, E. Guillaud, S. Palombarini: L'Économie politique du néolibéralisme. Le cas de la France et de l'Italie, Editions Rue d'Ulm, Paris, 2012

[3] S. Palombarini: 'L'Italie est malade du néolibéralisme (mais elle ne le sait pas)', Mediapart personal blog, 9 April 2020

[4] E. Brancaccio, R. Realfozo: 'Draghi's plan needs less Keynes, more Schumpeter', Financial Times, 12 February, 2021

[5] 'Italy has done a lot, maybe too much', interview with Salvini in the Washington Post, 19 July, 2018.

[6] Salvini speaking to "1/2 ora in più" RAI 3, 14 February, 2021.

Labour on the streets and campaigning



Abdullah Okud , Labour candidate for Walkley, spoke at the nationalities and borders bill protest on Saturday on behalf of Sheff BLM. This bill will effectively strip people of their British citizenship without warning, affecting millions of black, Asian, and minorities citizens disproportionately.

The ability of repressive forces to strip a person of their British citizenship without notice is highly concerning. Without a doubt, the Windrush scandal has taught us that when you have a tiered citizenship system, you are not only perceived as less than, but you can also be treated shamefully like such during times of political crisis.

ACORN Sheffield members out in the freezing cold today getting signatures on our landlord licensing petition - 130 signatures in less than 2 hours!

We spoke to people living in homes with no running water, with no heating in this weather - and one man whose house is so mouldy his baby daughter can't come to stay.

That's why we need citywide landlord licensing across Sheffield. Sign here: acorntheunion.org.uk/slumlordfreesheffield



THE.ORGANISE.NETWORK
Carers Allowance isn't a wage: let unpaid carers keep all of their UC payment.

To Thérèse Coffey, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and Chloe Smith, Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work

As unpaid carers we each save the government thousands of pounds a year by not getting carers to come in to help with our loved ones. We get paid £67 a week in Carers Allowance. To claim this you need to be caring for someone at least 35 hours a week, so it works out at well under £2 an hour. When you get your Universal Credit statement coming Carers Allowance is classed as a wage and taken off our Universal Credits. It's like the government are giving it to you in one hand and take it straight out of the other hand. It is not

Sign the petition

Please help S2 Foodbank

Urgent Help Required

Due to unprecedented demand from the start of this Year our Food Stocks Are virtually depleted!!! So we are in urgent need of :-

Tinned Beans, Peas, Carrots, Potatoes, Meat (Chilli, Stewing Steak etc), Fruit. Tinned Pasta, Soup, Fish, Rice Pudding, Jam, Marmalade, Chocolate Spread. Nappies, Baby Wipes, Toilet Rolls.

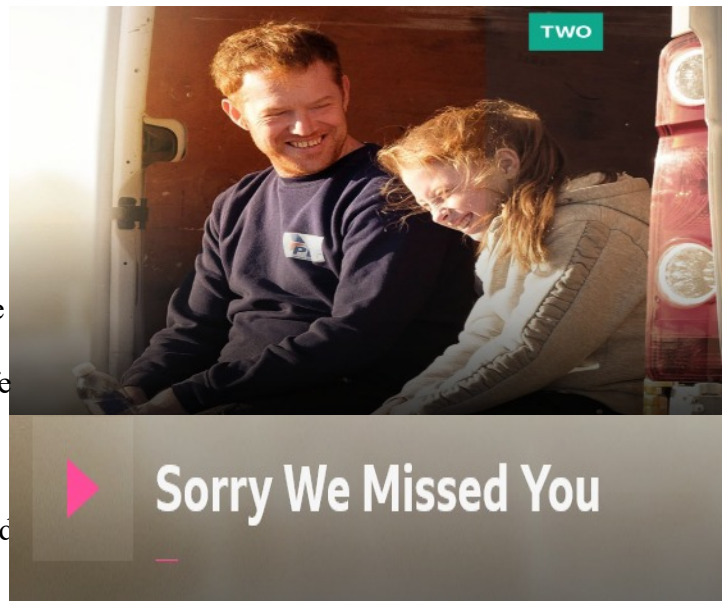
The truth about the gig economy: Can Labour Ignore It ?

Labour party members will be aware of the IWGB dispute currently underway in Sheffield and across the country protesting the cut in pay to food couriers. The drivers are notionally self employed, contracted to Stuart Delivery, but in fact the work comprises in mainly collecting and delivering food from multi national fast food chains. The drivers are facing a 25% cut in the rates paid for their deliveries at a time when all their costs are rising. The work is typical of the new generation of jobs whether employed directly or fraudulently through this sort of outsourced arms length arrangement. Alongside the couriers delivering food we also see parcels arriving at our door through the same sort of arrangement and under the same sort of pressure on their physical and mental well being but also the financial pressure of rising costs and diminishing reward.

Sorry We Missed You- BBC 2 iPlayer

BBC 2 recently showed the film by Ken Loach and the fictional story of a young man with a family joining the gig economy and its effects.

Ricky Turner takes a job as a delivery driver on a zero-hours contract, thinking it's a step towards independence and stability for his family. Instead, he finds the unforgiving working conditions and demanding schedule exact a heavy toll. With his wife Abbie needing to be at her job as a home carer and their graffiti artist son Seb's habit of playing truant, Ricky and Abbie find they always need to be in two places at once and give everything they can to try and help their family.



I also recently attended a meeting and met a young woman who had worked for Hermes at their warehouse in Leeds. The work was long hours, poorly paid, aggressive management with wrist bands dictating the pace of work and dismissals for time taken off for illness or family commitments. Many of the workers were migrants sleeping on the streets with no housing or stable lifestyle. The young woman eventually ended up in hospital with pneumonia over the Christmas. I wondered if her experience was out of the ordinary and visited the website of the agency supplying workers to Hermes. Of just over 1000 reviews of working for Hermes 463 considered it 1 star out of 5 and 800 at 3 stars or below. Some of the comments

Honestly the worst place I've ever worked. Management - not a clue what they are on about, basically if your face doesn't fit they just get rid I worked here (unfortunately) throughout the pandemic and it's was honestly the worst time of my life!

Quite simply the worst company I have had the misfortune to encounter in a thirty year career. Terribly pressurised environment, compounded by a management team that wouldn't be out of place in toy story. Dont do it as they say! You have been warned.

not treated very well. the money paid was rubbish. you only got paid per parcel. after working 7 hours a day 7 days a week for a month I could earnt about £300 after taking my car payments off. Ridiculous

there wass no job security there which wasnt nice going into work day in day out not knowing if you had a job that day .it was mentally draining when people shoutred at you



Striking delivery drivers staged a second blockade of a high-profile fast food outlet in Sheffield as they ramp up the pressure over pay. Couriers began striking on December 6 after Stuart Delivery cut the minimum delivery pay by 24 per cent, from £4.50 to £3.40.

We remember John L Halstead (1936-2021)



John was a member of Nether Edge Branch

John Halstead, who has died aged 85, was among the earliest members of the Society for the Study of Labour History, and over a period of six decades occupied nearly every post within the Society, contributing his time and expertise unstintingly to serve as editor, chair, secretary and latterly vice-president.

Born in Huddersfield, and educated at Highburton Church of England elementary school and Penistone Grammar School, John wrote local news stories for the West Yorkshire Advertiser while still at school. He joined the civil service, working in government for a decade, during which time he also graduated from the London School of Economics with a degree in economics and politics. He subsequently joined the University of Sheffield extramural department, where he taught courses to industrial workers. He retired in 1996.

John wrote early and often for the Society's publications. His first named appearance in the pages of the SSLH Bulletin was as a reviewer of John Vincent's Pollbooks: How Victorians Voted in 1968. It would be the first of many. Indeed, he continued to edit the SSLH website's Notes & Queries section until earlier this year.

His main research interests, however, were in the nineteenth-century radical history of the Huddersfield area, and he was a founder and active member for many years of the Huddersfield Local History Society. John wrote widely on adult education and historical topics. Publications included The Voice of the West Riding: Promoters and Supporters of a Provincial Unstamped Newspaper, 1833-34, and The Local Tradition of Working-Class and Self-Help Education for a volume marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the opening of Northern College. To mark our golden jubilee in 2010, he also wrote about the history of the Society for the Study of Labour History – much of which he had experienced at first hand.



Norma Waterson, who has passed away aged 82, was an immense musical talent and tireless advocate of the traditional folk music that represented the joys, hopes and struggles of the working class – the class from which she proudly came.

Our oral history', Norma Waterson once said, 'is what made us march. It's what made us sing, it's what made us happy, and it does deserve as much respect and dignity as any of those history books high on a shelf.' *Tribune article*

E. P. Thompson, author of 'The Making of the English Working Class,' was born on this day in 1924. His work reclaimed history for the masses – and displayed a resilient hope in their capacity to remake the world.

It is difficult to contemplate at such a distance the left-wing giants who strode the stage in the middle of the twentieth century. Fascism had been defeated for a long moment, the colonial world was exploding in revolt, and in a related vein, history was being rewritten, re-evaluated at large, beyond the saga of kings and armies.

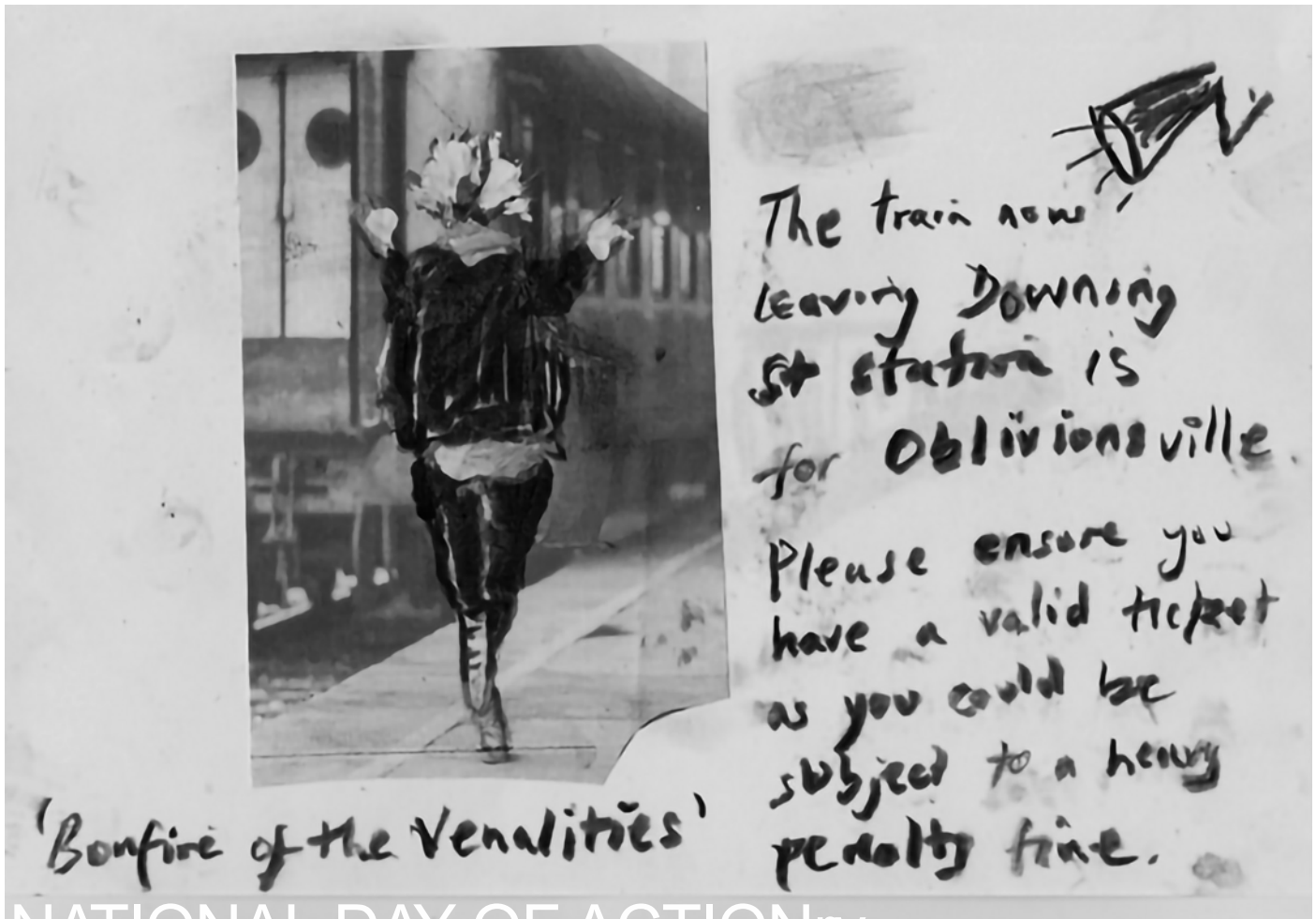


Edward Thompson, setting the example for the re-examining of the history of labour anywhere in the world, further proved himself as a leader of the global peace movement. That he was also a great scholar of the two Williams, Blake and Morris, could almost be forgotten in a larger truth: Edward Thompson, word and deed, was the Great English Romantic and therefore the Great Anti-Thatcher as well.

KEYWORKERS UNITED

Norwich No 12 February 2022 Norwich

BORIS JOHNSON: LIAR-BILITY



NHS National Day of Action February 26th 2022

'This will be the hardest winter ever in health and social care. We must act to safeguard services for patients and service users, boost staff morale and tackle the mental health crisis among health and care staff. Emergency funds must be secured now to avert disaster. We must repair crumbling hospitals; restore NHS beds, recruit, retain, train and properly pay health and care staff; rebuild underfunded public health and GP services struggling to respond effectively to Covid; publicly fund a service for care and independent living support; and much more. The Health and Care Bill does none of these things. We need new legislation to secure a fully public NHS and end privatisation'. (by SOS Keep our NHS Public and Health Campaigns Together)

SALTLEY GATES, BIRMINGHAM 1972-2022

THIS DAY of action could be the start of a serious fightback against the Tory government. In the wake of covid, the Tories are seeking a 'bonfire of protections' in order to claw back cash from the working class. Thousands of redundancies are already happening, privatisation accelerates, corruption is rife, net zero targets are under attack, huge energy price increases hitting the poorest hardest whilst the cost of living rockets. And 'partygate' leaves Johnson heading for Oblivionsville. But this must be the time for the kind of movement in 2022 that ensured victory for the miners in Birmingham in 1972, paving the way for the defeat of the Tory government.

Book Review.

MAKE BOSSSES PAY WHY WE NEED UNIONS

RACHEL HENDERSON (UCU)

THIS BOOK is part of the Outspoken series by Pluto, which seeks to provide answers by “platforming underrepresented voices, intervening in important political issues; revealing powerful histories and giving voice to our experiences”

Eve Livingston is a journalist, and that comparative rarity, a young trade unionist. This is a useful contribution, written in an easy style which makes it more accessible than some more academic books. I got energised from reading it, and would recommend it as a quick read particularly for those unfamiliar with trade unions.

The author identifies how the relatively strong unions in the UK were brought down by Thatcher’s anti-union legislation, followed by the New Labour years and most recently the 2016 TU Act which introduced the 50% threshold requirement for strike ballots. She recognises that this has left unions disempowered. And points out that the individualism encouraged by Thatcherism makes workers more likely to look for what the unions do for them, rather than what they can do for the unions.

In a chapter bluntly called “HR are not your friends” she writes how in many workplaces “Everywhere we look, bosses create the illusion of giving voice and power to their workers, while opposing the unions which would give them actual power, on their own terms”

But as she points out, unions themselves need to change to better reflect the workforce. The rise of IWGB, and United Voices of the World, who have championed migrant, casualised workforces have perhaps given the older unions a new perspective. She writes about the case for a liberatory unionism where issues of gender, race and disability are the focus, rather than a side interest.

And although the unions’ education role has been undermined by the removal of the Learning Fund, she still sees a place for political education. Particularly at a time when many don’t even know what a trade union is. Ways to reach people are of course via the online workplace of whatsapp, facebook etc, and she also sees inspiration in community action groups such as Acorn, who organise tenants groups, and are mobilising people where they live since the workplace is often - particularly post Covid - so fragmented.

Finally she sees the power of unions in their collectivism and social support which is rarely found elsewhere these days: “In a world where capitalism thrives on our atomisation, competition and self-doubt, forming caring and supportive friendships is defiance, and believing in ourselves is radical and powerful”.

<https://www.plutobooks.com/9780745341620/make-bosses-pay/>



Protest at the Royal Courts of Justice in London on 1st February

2022 in support of the judicial review into US company Centene’s takeover of Britain’s biggest GP practise operators.

WHEN THE WILD WIND BLOWS

Attila the shelf stacker

FOR TWO winters we worked with barely any heating. Some of us think this contributed to the early death of one of our colleagues. He was an ill man who could not afford early retirement and he worked on till’s. He’d wrap himself in many layers of clothing including a battery powered heated jacket, scarf and woolly hat. Management would put him on the till nearest the doors. The doors rarely closed properly as the company wouldn’t pay for the automatic close function to be repaired let alone the heating system, and those doors faced north. He’d cough and splutter, walked with the aid of a stick, but he was so knowledgeable and keen to give advice. One of the few to receive a redundancy payoff after furlough, he died within two months of leaving.

The Kickstart boys are great. Of course the company took them on as free labour to replace all the older staff they cruelly got rid of at the end of furlough. Kickstart should involve a training element but this eluded management here. They were being used as skivvies. Regular workers said to them to mention this to their scheme mentor and it seems to have worked. Nevertheless managers do take advantage of them, saying things like “we don’t want you here if you’re not at your peak” and being disdainful or disparaging.

I’m sure you may wonder, if you are a regular reader of this column, why the workers here don’t join a Trade Union, get organised and fight back. Well there’s many reasons. Most work is part time, everybody wants more hours and those hours are dished out on a grace and favour basis. Loyalty and long service is exploited. Retail jobs are under the cosh. There is no tradition of a Trade Union. Whoever complains about anything, even in the most respectful way, gets bullied, harassed and disciplined out. Camels can be stubborn, but there’s always that last straw.