

Labour Internationalist

Monthly publication of the British supporters of the Organising Committee
for the Reconstitution of the Fourth International (OCRFI)

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Who we are, What we stand for

We believe that the working class needs to rely on its own efforts, both at home and around the world, to defend its interests against a capitalist system that is determined to extract maximum profit regardless of the human and environmental cost.

We believe that the capitalist system, based on private ownership of the means of production, cannot be reformed and has to be abolished by means of a proletarian revolution that will introduce socialism.

We stand on the founding programme of the Fourth International, the *Transitional Programme*, which says in particular: "It is necessary to help the masses, in the process of their daily struggles, to find the bridge between their current demands and the programme of the socialist revolution. This bridge should include a system of transitional demands which stem from today's conditions and from today's consciousness of wide layers of the working class, and invariably lead to the same conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat."

The working class's struggle against the capitalist system – on its own account as well as on behalf of all of the oppressed – needs to be united and based on class independence from capital and its national and international institutions.

This means defending the organisations which the workers have built, and helping the workers themselves to build new forms of organisation to carry out their struggle in ways which they decide on freely and which they control.

Often, this also means opposing those in the labour movement who ignore the mandate of their membership and co-operate with capitalism's plans, at the workplace, institutional or State level.

Labour Internationalist aims to be part of the fight against that process of integrating the working-class organisations into capitalism's plans.

Labour Internationalist therefore focuses on helping to advance the struggle by the working class in its own interests – locally, nationally and internationally.

Consistent with this view, *Labour Internationalist* defines itself as a forum of class struggle that is open to all individuals, groups and currents in the labour movement that are committed to political independence of the working class and to internationalism.

**Protect
working people,
not the banks and
big business!**

**The working class
must defend its
own interests,
now and after
the health crisis,
and on
an independent
basis!**

Every day, the list of Covid-19 victims gets longer, even after the government has massaged the figures downwards. On 27 April, the official figure was 21,092 people, which excludes people who have died at home or in care homes. But, as the *Financial Times* has reported (see “Snapshots of the crisis” in this issue), the real figure is probably over 40,000. Among the victims are NHS staff, social care workers, bus drivers and other frontline workers working without sufficient PPE. Those most at risk are low-paid workers (especially women) and the poorest sections of the population.

Hundreds of thousands of people are being forced to work without protection from the virus, and millions more are about to be encouraged to risk their lives by going back to work, because as far as the government and those who support it are concerned, the main issue is to save the economy, in other words to protect profits. The death-toll is growing in the name of a capitalist system that has been destroying the NHS for ten years and more. At the same time, millions of people are being laid off.

The government was quick to allocate hundreds of billions to the banks and continues to bail out big companies, while leaving millions of working people in financial limbo. The working class is fighting back (see “News from the picket line” in this issue).

The top leadership of the Labour Party and the TUC are refusing to listen to appeals from the working class and instead are supporting the government in the name of “national unity”. Meanwhile, thousands of small businesses will probably go bust under the weight of debts resulting from the crisis, and unemployment will grow daily. The Resolution Foundation estimates that up to 11.7 million people will be out of work in the period April-June, either “furloughed” under the government’s scheme (8.3 million) or simply sacked (3.4 million). This is the logic of the capitalist economy.

For us, it is not the capitalist system and its economy driven by the banks and financial markets that needs to be saved, it is working people who must be saved.

Working people are starting to say “never again”. Never again “austerity”, which drives people into poverty and leaves them helpless in an emergency. Never again the undermining and deliberate destruction of the NHS and the welfare system. But who will make “never again” happen, if not the working class itself?

This is why we unreservedly endorse the appeal by 15 labour movement activists with various political views, launched earlier this month (see page 3). We completely agree with its content and conclusions, and will do everything we can to promote its aims. The starting-point has to be a rallying of forces in the labour movement by those who agree with the appeal’s emergency measures to protect working

people, not the banks and big business.

It would be easy to focus on the government’s dishonesty and mismanagement of the crisis, of which there are far too many examples. But ultimately, the current disaster is not only the result of bad management or bad choices. Just as there are no “good” cuts and “bad” cuts when government funding of council budgets is reduced, the current situation is the inevitable and merciless result of the capitalist system and the institutions that serve it.

Things will not “get back to normal” after the health crisis – there will be no return to the pre-crisis economic environment. There will be a savage onslaught on the jobs, living standards and rights of the working class, an attempt to reduce wages, which will lower the purchasing power of those who will still have jobs. The government will seek to compensate big business for a reduction in demand, and will want to put the burden of its extra borrowing onto the workers’ backs. No doubt, the government will put forward a new “we’re all in this together” campaign of savage austerity at the expense of social services and the poor, and to do so they will need to ensure support from the Labour Party and the TUC leaderships. This is the meaning of Johnson’s statement on 27 April, when he said his government will push for “consensus across industry” and the involvement of the opposition parties in getting people back to work in the next phase of its crisis (mis)management.

The most basic needs of the working class and the will of trade union members and of the mass of the Labour Party members run contrary to those plans.

What is needed is a government that will genuinely serve the interests of the working class, and therefore will break with defending the failed capitalist system. A government that would immediately direct the necessary funds to the NHS, refocus production on what is needed to combat the pandemic, and ensure the safety of all those who work. A government that would ban lay-offs and reorganise production in line with the needs of the vast majority.

For us supporters of the OCRFI, that is the meaning of our unconditional support for the appeal which we publish in this issue. We call on all those who share this view to join us.

The fight against the bankrupt system of capitalist exploitation is international. On 1 May, the international day of struggle of the working class, an online international rally organised by the IWC (International Workers Committee, which was formed as the conclusion of the World Conference Against War and Exploitation held in Mumbai in December 2016) will include video contributions from 42 countries, proving in practice that “*The Internationale unites the human race*”.

27 April 2020

APPEAL

**The government was quick to give £350 billion to the banks and businesses,
but has left millions of working people wondering how they will survive**

Requisition all the resources needed to protect the population!

Let's come together to push for the basic emergency measures that democracy requires.

We reject "*One rule for the rich, another for the rest*"!

Protect working people, not the banks and big business!

The working class must defend its own interests, and on an independent basis!

**Requisition the £350 billion given to the banks and businesses and apply it to
these emergency measures to directly protect the population:**

- All personal protection equipment (PPE) of the necessary standard to be sourced immediately, including by requisition, and delivered immediately where needed by NHS staff and care-home staff;
- Requisition big companies to serve in the production of ventilators, masks, testing kits, healthcare beds and everything that is lacking today in the NHS;
- Free diagnostic testing for all, free antibody testing for all. All private testing and processing facilities, as well as all other private healthcare resources, to be immediately requisitioned and incorporated into the NHS.
- Free distribution of masks to the whole population;
- Ban "temporary" lay-offs and job-cuts;
- Ban bogus self-employment;
- Full pay immediately, not in May or June, for all self-isolated workers, whatever their work status;
- Paid time off to care for children when there is no other option available;
- All employers without exception to be legally bound by the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, and the Employment Rights Act 1996, which together give employees the right to leave their place of work if they feel they are in "serious and imminent" danger;
- Financial security for all: scrap Universal Credit;
- Moratorium on all debt and the payment of rent and rental charges (utilities, etc.);
- All social benefits and support allowances to be paid immediately, not in May or June;
- Staple foods and basic goods to be distributed for free to people in difficulty;
- Requisition vacant/available premises to provide accommodation to the homeless and poorly-housed;
- Scrap all Private Finance Initiative (PFI) contracts, which have been a tool for commercialising education and privatising the NHS;
- Repeal the Coronavirus Act 2020, replace it with properly scrutinised measures that do not restrict civil liberties.

**We, workers (full-time and part-time, on secure and insecure contracts),
homemakers, pensioners, students and youth, say:**

These are immediate measures that are needed to avoid medical and economic carnage.

**They cannot wait. We will not accept more of the same –
what is happening now cannot be allowed to happen again.**

5 April 2020

On behalf of the organisation

Ian Hodson, National President, **Bakers', Food & Allied Workers Union**

Stefan Cholewka, Secretary, **Greater Manchester Association of Trades Union Councils**

Matt Webb, General Secretary, **Brighton, Hove and District Trades Union Council**

Margaret K. Taylor, Labour Party member, Treasurer, **Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Trades Council**

In a personal capacity:

Anwar Alsaïd, trade unionist; **Aaron Bastani**, trade unionist; **Leo Bell**, trade unionist; **Paul Bradshaw**, trade unionist; **Janine Sally Brady**, retired Unite member, Mablethorpe and Coastal Labour Party; **Marian Brain**, Midland No.1 Branch CWU, Birmingham Ladywood CLP; **Alex Braithwaite**, trade unionist; **Richard Britten**, trade unionist; **Justina Brook**, care worker, Islington UNISON shop steward, London; **Graham Brown**, trade unionist; **Jeff Bull**, trade unionist, Matlock; **Pat Burns**, trade unionist; **Mike Calvert**, Deputy Branch Secretary, Islington UNISON, London; **Charles Charalambous**, ex-President, Torbay and South Devon TUC, Editor of *Labour Internationalist*; **Dena Cohen**, trade unionist; **Lindsay Cole**, trade unionist; **Sheila Coleman**, Unite Community, Liverpool; **Alex Dale**, trade unionist; **John Davenport**, trade unionist; **Michael Dean**, trade unionist; **Briony Densham**, Islington UNISON Schools Convenor, London; **Jane Doolan**, UNISON NEC member, Branch Secretary, Islington UNISON, London; **Peter Durrant**, Unite West Norfolk branch; **Christine Ellis**, trade unionist; **Etta's Botanica**, trade unionist; **Naomi K Fearon**, trade unionist; **Paul Filby**, Labour Party member, Liverpool; **Rajmil Fischman**, UCU Committee member, Keele University; **Barry Fox**, trade unionist; **Ruth Fox**, trade unionist; **Liz Foley**, trade unionist; **Sarah Franklin**, trade unionist; **Sylvia Freeman**, trade unionist; **Chris Gallagher**, trade unionist; **James Gamble**, trade unionist; **Jane Gebbie**, Branch Secretary, Neath Port Talbot UNISON; Bridgend County Borough Council member (Labour); **Mick Gilgunn**, Chair, Islington Trades Union Council, London; **Jackie Gilmore**, trade unionist; **Stephen Hall**, President, Greater Manchester Association of Trades Union Councils; **Mark Hollinrake**, PCS shop steward and branch organiser, Rochdale Green Party; **Bill Hutt**, trade unionist; **Diana James**, Assistant Branch Secretary, Islington UNISON, London; **Paul Kelly**, Vice President, Greater Manchester Association of Trades Union Councils; **Yasmin Khan**, trade unionist; **Brian Lawton**, UNISON NCC member, Wanstead and Leytonstone CLP; **Peter Lewis**, trade unionist; **Joan Long**, trade unionist; **Prof. Michael Loughlin**, University of West London; **Kurt McDavis**, trade unionist; **Doreen McNally**, Unite Community, Liverpool; **Johanna Mackenzie**, trade unionist; **Patrick Maloney**, trade unionist; **Kelly Martin**, trade unionist; **Fiona Monkman**, Branch Chair, Islington UNISON, London; **Henry Mott**, Branch Secretary, Southwark Unite, London; **Bill Murphy**, Chair, Unite Branch 567, Liverpool; **Craig Murray**, trade unionist; **Pauline Murray**, trade unionist; **Victoria Nelson**, trade unionist; **Dave Nichols**, trade unionist; **Theresa Norton**, trade unionist; **Caroline Obe**, trade unionist; **David Osborne**, trade unionist; **Dave Power**, trade unionist; **Nat Queen**, University and College Union member; **Tony Rimmer**, Vice-Chair, Unite 567 Branch; Chair, Bootle CLP; Liverpool47 surcharged Labour councillor; **Cleo Simmons**, trade unionist; **Miroslav Spasov**, Professor, Keele University, UCU Member, Reading; **Gary Stevens**, trade unionist; **Mark Still**, RMT Waterloo, London; **John Sweeney**, Labour Party member, Leave activist, London; **Louise Vincent**, trade unionist; **John Wallace**, trade unionist; **Claire Watson**, trade unionist; **Steve Watson**, trade unionist

I endorse these demands

In a personal capacity / On behalf of my organisation

Name:
Trade union / CLP / other:
Position/title:
Email:

Defending the interests of working people against the capitalists' interests depends on an accurate picture of what is happening around the country. We therefore invite all signatories of these measures to relate what they and their families are going through, their concerns regarding their health, wellbeing and future employment.

To share information, experiences and views, contact: emergency.action@aol.com

SNAPSHOTS OF THE CRISIS

1 April: Almost 1 million apply for universal credit in two weeks

In the first two weeks of the lockdown, 950,000 people applied for the main Income Support benefit, compared to the norm of around

100,000 applicants in any given two-week period. The surge reflects falls in income as well as unemployment as firms go bust or lay off staff because they cannot afford to wait for the government's job support

schemes to start making payments. But applicants for universal credit still have to wait five weeks before receiving any cash.

8 April: Heathrow workers threatened with sack if they reject “voluntary” pay cuts

Non-union workers at Heathrow airport are told they could be sacked if they do not accept a 15% reduction in pay, otherwise “dismissal and reinstatement might be the final step”. Unite members employed by the London airport, including security guards and firefighters, already accepted a 10% reduction of their pay for nine months.

11 April: Hunger crisis as 1.5 million people go whole day without food

Independent think-tank the Food Foundation says that three weeks into the lockdown, 1.5 million people reported not eating for a whole day because they had no money or access to food. Some 3 million people in total were in households where someone had been forced to skip some meals. More than 1 million people reported losing all their income because of the pandemic, with over a third of them believing they would not be entitled to any government help. Local authorities confirm the Food Foundation’s findings.

12 April: Nurses lacking PPE should refuse to treat Covid-19 patients “as a last resort”

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) issues guidance that nurses should refuse to treat Covid-19 patients “as a last resort” if they are not given adequate PPE. The RCN said it would provide legal assistance to those making what it acknowledged was an “enormously difficult decision”.

13 April: People are dying, but profits must still be made

Sunak announces that the government’s emergency response fund, set up in the March budget, has been increased from £5 billion to £14.5 billion, of which £6.6 billion is support to health services, which among other things would be specifically targeted towards delivering “urgent priorities including acquiring ventilators, diagnostic tests and protective equipment for NHS staff”. So, the £1.6 billion increase on the March figure is to be used to buy material for the NHS in the market rather than requisition it. As far as this

government is concerned, people are dying, but profits must still be made.

13 April: Housing inequality grows due to the health crisis

New research shows that a fifth of private renters had to choose between paying for food and bills and paying their landlords this month. The government has introduced a temporary ban on evictions but a quarter of those surveyed have already lost their home. Unable to pay the rent, they had to voluntarily move in with friends or parents.

18 April: Health unions condemn PPE shortages but stop short of calling collective action

New guidance from Public Health England (PHE) instructs healthcare workers to reuse disposable PPE, and recommends that medics wear aprons if they are unable to access full-length gowns.

UNISON’s Head of Health Sara Gorton says: *“If gowns run out, staff in high-risk areas may well decide that it’s no longer safe for them to work. No part of the NHS should use this move as an excuse to ration supplies of gowns when they still have stocks. That would cause a damaging breakdown of trust at a time when staff are working under intense pressure.”*

Unite Assistant General Secretary Gail Cartmail says the union has advised healthcare staff to refuse to work if they felt they were not being protected from the virus. She said: *“Unite has already advised its 100,000 members that reluctantly NHS and social care staff could legitimately and lawfully decline to put themselves in further danger and risk of injury at work. The continued lack of PPE is a national scandal and the government’s litany of broken promises over the last month is shameful. We are not just talking about NHS staff in hospitals, but those working in the community, such as health visitors and community nurses, and those employed in social care settings, such as care homes”.*

The GMB refuses to be drawn on whether its members would walk out if they felt unprotected, but the national secretary, Rehana Azam, says it was *“advising all members to contact us if they feel as though their health and safety is being put at risk*

due to lack of PPE”. The union said it had written to the government *“stating in the strongest possible terms”* the need to protect frontline workers.

20 and 23 April: Mass unemployment already rising

A report by the Resolution Foundation on the impact of the government’s Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (JRS) estimates that non-working could increase by up to 11.7 million in April-June 2020, comprising 8.3 million employees “furloughed” under the JRS and 3.4 million unemployed. Most of those affected are in low-paying service sectors, especially retail and hospitality.

According to research by the Office for National Statistics, 8 in 10 workers in the UK accommodation and food services sector (hotels, restaurants and pubs) have been “furloughed” or temporarily laid off, the largest proportion of workers after the start of the lockdown.

The all-industry average for “furloughed” staff is 26.7%.

21 April: Government misses out on 16 million face masks for NHS in four weeks

Several British suppliers of UK-standard face masks voice their frustration over the government’s failure to respond in a timely way – or even at all – to supply offers, resulting in 16 million face masks being sold instead to other countries over the past four weeks.

22 April: Government’s lies about testing in care homes are exposed

A leaked email from Public Health England (PHE) shows that the government is failing to test sick care home residents for Covid-19, 10 days after Hancock promised that anyone in residential care would be checked if symptomatic. With a worsening crisis in care homes for the elderly, where thousands have died, Hancock pledged on 14 April that all residents would be able to get a test, not just an initial five people in an outbreak at each home. He claimed again on 23 April that *“anybody in a care home who has symptoms now gets tested”.* However, the leaked email from PHE to a care provider said that *“the*

processes to undertake this have still not been established”.

22 April: The Financial Times says the government is reporting less than half of the Covid-19 death-toll

The *Financial Times* reports that according to its own analysis of the latest data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the true number of Covid-19 deaths in the UK is over 41,000, more than double the official figure of 17,337 issued by the government on 21 April. Unlike the government’s figure, which is limited to deaths in hospital that have been official registered (which can involve many days delay), the FT’s estimate includes deaths at home and in care homes, extrapolated on the basis of the “all cause excess mortality” figure (i.e. deaths from all causes above the seasonal average across the UK), which most accurately reflects the current mortality trends.

23 April: Seven weeks after the first Covid-19 death in the UK, the government offers tests to all essential workers

The government announces that free Covid-19 tests “will be offered” to essential workers and their families in England...a full 48 days after the first UK death from the virus. The government estimates that there are 10 million key workers in the UK, and according to its own figures, 14,629 people were tested on 22 April. Health and social care workers, bus drivers, teachers, food production workers, workers in the oil, gas, electricity and water sectors and others are entitled to ask: given the government’s mismanagement and

lies so far, can we count on being tested without having to wait for several days or being required to drive miles to a test site?

24 April: Government promise on tests fails within hours

Within three hours of being launched, the government’s website for online applications by 10 million key workers for a drive-through test or a home-testing kit was closed. The 15,000 available drive-through appointments ran out after 2.5 hours, and it took just two minutes for the 5,000 available home-testing kits to run out. The same scenario was repeated the next day. The Department for Health and Social Care blamed “significant demand” for the problems.

27 April: Defend the workers’ particular interests! No to “national unity” attempts to protect profits!

In his first public speech for weeks, Boris Johnson makes it clear that in order to get people back to work, the government “*will be reaching out to build the biggest possible consensus across business, across industry, across all parts of our United Kingdom, across party lines, bringing in opposition parties as far as we possibly can*”.

28 April: Labour is quick to respond positively to Johnson’s invitation to co-operate

Writing in *The Guardian*, Shadow Chancellor Anneliese Dodds, says: “*I will continue to call on the Chancellor to work together, with me, with trade unions, with businesses and with local*

authorities across the country, to develop a plan to protect jobs and get our economy moving again.”

A timeline of the government’s failure on testing, in its own words

11 March: “A big expansion of testing”, but no specific timetable;

12 March: Tests to be restricted to people already in hospital;

16 March: WHO says “test, test, test”. Just 3,826 people have been tested for coronavirus in the UK;

18 March: “Test 25,000 a day” – but no timetable;

19 March: “Antibody tests coming soon” – but no timetable;

24 March: “UK has 3.5 million antibody tests” – but no timetable;

25 March: “UK aiming for 250,000 tests a day” – but no timetable;

25 March: “Antibody tests within days” – then denied;

27 March: “Dramatic increase planned” – but no timetable;

31 March: “Testing hampered by chemical shortage” – denied by the Chemical Industries Association;

1 April: Ministers admit only 2,000 NHS staff (0.4%) have been tested;

2 April: Government sets new target of 100,000 tests a day by the end of April – and admits 3.5 million antibody tests don’t work.

29 April: Government concedes it is “probable that we won’t” reach the target of 100,000 tests. As of 9am, 33,455 people had been tested, involving 52,429 tests.



Keir Starmer's election as Labour Party leader

By John Sweeney

Starmer's first statement shows that the right is still running the Labour Party by pulling the appropriate strings. A rich human rights lawyer from London who's been knighted. Sounds about right for those whom Labour want to represent nowadays. If ever there was a man in the right place, at the right time, it's Sir Kier Starmer. We may get a bit of rhetoric from Sir Keir, but essentially (like all centre-right figures) he will serve the establishment while lacking the moral conviction to rock the boat on important points of principle.

Let's compare Labour's performance in the last two elections. In 2017, when Labour said it would respect the result of the referendum and work towards a socialist Brexit, it did far better than expected. In 2019, it said it would hold another referendum and campaign to remain, and suffered its worst defeat since the 1930's – and Keir Starmer was the chief architect of this disastrous about-turn.

And a leader who will preside over the death of a socialism within the Labour Party, as disillusioned members leave in droves. Labour hasn't elected a leader; it has elected an undertaker and his new cabinet will supply the gravediggers to bury it.

As it ever was. Expect more tin-eared responses from celebrities worrying about their profile in these unprecedented times. All the praise for NHS staff and other key workers will be yesterday's news, and we'll be back to NHS privatisation by stealth and the size of Kim Kardashian's cleavage.

Recently, some people have floated the idea of forming a National Unity Government in response to the ongoing Covid-19 epidemic. This has made me think of the last non-wartime National Unity Government in Britain, headed by Ramsay MacDonald during the Great Depression.

Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald responded to his 1929 election victory with the words: *"Did Labour people ever live in such an inspiring moment as this?"* Tony Blair

echoed the same theme 70 years later: "It is wonderful, is it not?" Fine sentiments, but in reality, both were traitors and hand-puppets of the establishment who betrayed the working class and the labour movement.

Labour's first Prime Minister became a pariah who was ostracised and reviled during his life time. To this day, he is considered the archetypal class traitor. Tony Blair has suffered a cataclysmic slump in his reputation (not that it had to fall very far to reach rock bottom), both in and out of office. At a time when many in the trade union movement complained that the gradualism and caution of the parliamentary party (most of whom – then as now – were not socialists) had little to offer the workers in their class struggle with the forces of capitalism. The result of the Labour leadership contest can only be greeted with a sense of foreboding.

With the election of Starmer, we may well see a similar pattern emerging to that of both Ramsay MacDonald and Tony Blair. He has already committed himself to working hand-in-hand with Boris Johnson for "the benefit of the nation". His politics are the embodiment of opportunism. He denounces capitalism only to embrace it. His conduct so far is the natural expression of the man: a "sheep in sheep's clothing" who is masquerading as a socialist. A man who will do nothing other than appeal to the ruling class to be more gentle. He has already filled his shadow cabinet with Blairite apostles and has dismissed all those who lean even slightly to the left.

The legacy of both Blair and MacDonald is the near eradication of the working-class elements within its ranks and the party's surrender to capital. Until the Parliamentary Labour Party is forced to once again defend the interests of the working class (and under the leadership of Starmer that will simply not happen), they can never again play the role of a proletarian party holding aloft the banner of socialism, as they did in the early days of the Labour Party.

The EU exposed for what it is

By John Sweeney

Cuba (despite the cruel and unjustifiable trade embargo ongoing since 1960) has given more help to Italy than the EU. What this crisis has proven is that you don't need to be in a political union for nations to co-operate with each other. The EU has now been exposed for what it is, an irrelevant and unnecessary very expensive self-serving club. This crisis will reveal its flaws for all to see. Why is this a surprise to anyone? The EU has been in the process of self-destruction for some time. It is now well on the way towards total disintegration and collapse.

Whenever there is a crisis, the EU folds like a pack of cards. If it is a family of nations which it claims to be, then

they are irresponsible parents not to be trusted. It has exhibited the most disastrous type of European leadership since Caligula.

One would imagine they would now learn the wide gulf between their agenda and the real groundswell of European opinion, now that they have been uncovered and are staring like a rabbit into a car's headlights, the headlights being the people of Europe who have had enough of bureaucrats posing as saviours. People will not forget how they were treated by the elite millionaires of the EU, and nor should they. The EU doesn't need any help from the coronavirus to destroy itself. Its days are

numbered and the clock is ticking. Its Commission is a self-appointed, a virus that needs to be eradicated along with Covid-19. The EU is about power, it is about defending capitalism and world markets, it is not about helping people. It has ostracised and marginalised anyone on the left taking issue with its dogma.

The comic opera that is the EU, with its choir singing “support the union at all costs and forget about the

working class”, is about to end and the voices of the masses are preparing to sing a new tune.

For the avoidance of doubt, my condolences and solidarity are with my brothers and sisters across Europe who are facing the brunt of the Covid-19 virus, and not with the tyrannical nature of world capitalism which seeks to enslave us all.

Stefan Cholewka's notes of the month

Starmer's Pyrrhic victory: the architect of the “block Brexit” strategy led directly to the 2019 general election disaster and Labour's collapse in the northern heartlands

In his victory speech, Starmer stated that Labour and the government held a “shared purpose”, adding: “*Under my leadership, we will engage constructively with the government, not opposition for opposition's sake, but with the courage to support where that's the right thing to do.*”

The UK's ruling class is in crisis. Its airports are closed. Its great airlines are going bust. The auto industry has ceased to exist, and the Tory government has just ended 10 years of austerity imposed after the 2008 crash by announcing that it is to borrow trillions of pounds from the banks to prevent the complete collapse of British capitalism.

At such a time of crisis, the UK's ruling class turns towards the Labour Party. It is now considering inviting the winner of the Labour leadership election – plus a few others – into the cabinet to help run the campaign to save British capitalism. They want the PLP to justify the reactionary policies of the Johnson government.

This is why the call has gone up to form a national government, and in particular for the new leader of the Labour Party to be welcomed into a “war cabinet”. The battle-cry is for Labour to “put aside its class differences” and form a government of national unity with the Tories. The last thing that is needed in the UK is a national government to add to this catastrophe.

During his election campaign, Starmer was very keen to deflect any blame from himself for the historic Labour defeat in the 2019 general election, claiming that Jeremy Corbyn came up on the doorstep more than Brexit. However, the reality is that Labour lost its MPs in 60 constituencies, many long-perceived as safe red seats, and 52 of them were Labour seats that voted “Leave” in 2016. Whatever spins and lies Starmer told during the

campaign, the fact remains that it was Labour's vote-losing Brexit policy, and specifically the second referendum aspect, that saw those 52 seats not voting Labour.

Starmer declared that the 2019 result was down to the unpopularity of one person – Jeremy Corbyn – and that Labour's left-wing policies meant that the party was unelectable. By repeating this lie, he consciously undermines the left-wing agenda of the Labour Party.

During the leadership contest, Jeremy Corbyn called on Starmer to reveal who was funding his leadership campaign. While this was a legitimate demand to make, the emphasis surely should have been on the fact that Labour's policies were overwhelmingly popular: significant majorities of voters supported funding the NHS, raising the minimum wage, building council homes and other such social democratic policies.

It was pointed out on social media that when Starmer was Director of Public Prosecutions, he refused to prosecute the police killers of Jean Charles de Menezes and Ian Tomlinson, in addition to his support for bringing in draconian new guidelines for the punishment of “benefit cheats” at the height of Iain Duncan Smith's war on Britain's most vulnerable in 2013.

Within Corbyn's shadow cabinet, Starmer resigned during the “chicken coup” of 2016, joining other Blairite MPs who were seeking to remove the leader.

Later, Starmer repeatedly called for Labour to become an unequivocally “Remain” party, and as Shadow Brexit Secretary he was the key architect of the “block Brexit” strategy that did more to ensure Labour's defeat than any other.

The current Covid-19 crisis has galvanised a myriad of forms of local working-class solidarity, community and trade union organisation

The junior doctors' strike in 2016 demonstrated exactly what the Tory government fears. When the BMA acted as a real trade union, organising the resistance, hundreds of junior doctors were willing to join it.

Faced with the government's refusal to negotiate, the BMA took strike action and organised a large campaign in which the junior doctors received the support of the majority of the working class – the trade unions,

including many Labour party branches and CLPs and socialist organisations – alongside the majority of the country.

This struggle raised the issue of a united struggle involving the whole trade union movement to defend the NHS. The PCS and the FBU made the proposal to organise a national demonstration in solidarity with the junior doctors, but this was refused by the TUC, on the grounds

that it would be seen by the government as a solidarity strike that has been illegal since Thatcher. However, a government that is divided and rejected would not have the political strength to oppose a resolute and united trade union front.

The government fears the action of the workers organised in their trade unions, and knows that they are able to prevent the implementation of the austerity measures called for by finance capital and its institutions, the IMF, the World Bank and the European

Union. This fear is not only fuelled by the growing mobilisation of the workers, but also by the profound crisis of the European Union and of all the national governments.

The history of the working class and the upsurge of members in the Labour Party show that the working class is able and willing take back control over its traditional organisations, party and trade unions, to organise its class struggle against the capitalist class and its government.

NEWS FROM THE PICKET LINE

NHS workers

With drugs being rationed by the Department of Health and Social Care, a growing death-toll, the lack of PPE and more deaths of health workers each day, anger is rising among NHS staff.

The Royal College of Nursing has told nurses they do not have to care for Covid-19 patients if they do not have the right PPE.

Chaand Nagpaul, Chair of the British Medical Association said (12 April) that *“as well as PPE, we are running low in vital intensive care drugs and are having to try to find substitutes, ultimately impacting patients’ recovery. This needs to be addressed urgently.”*

In Manchester, health worker Karen Reissmann said: *“On Thursday 16 April, we are protesting about the lack of PPE that still exists in some hospitals, community and social care services... As we see our colleagues die, we have lost confidence in the government. We call on Matt Hancock, the minister responsible, to resign.”*

At Homerton hospital, in east London, workers demanded that management change the guidance on PPE, and they won.

The British Medical Association said in a press release (26 April) that its frustration is growing over the government’s failure to guarantee that the families of healthcare workers who lose their lives during the fight

against Covid-19 will be financially supported in these tragic circumstances.

Dr Vishal Sharma, BMA pensions committee chair, said: *“Another week has passed, more healthcare workers have lost their lives and yet the government continues to drag its heels. This is particularly galling for the many doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers who continue to put themselves at risk to protect and care for patients against this deadly virus, with the knowledge that their families will be provided no financial support if the worst should happen. This really is a shambolic, unacceptable and frankly shameful situation.”*

Miners

NUM General Secretary Chris Kitchen has stated: *“We have had information from Scotland that ex-miners were being contacted by the NHS and asked if they got it, would they not want to be resuscitated, and asked if they were happy to sign a “Do Not Resuscitate” form.”*

Postal workers

Royal Mail’s top management have tried to carry on with “business as usual” during the coronavirus outbreak

After Southwark (London) and Bridgewater (Somerset) last month, this month postal workers at several Royal Mail sites have taken unofficial action over their safety concerns, including Chatham, Southampton, Stoke-on-Trent, Warrington, Didcot, Edinburgh, Alloa and Fife.

At the huge Edinburgh City depot, postal workers staged a walk-out about the cleanliness of their delivery rooms and offices.

Earlier, 80 workers in Alloa (Clackmannanshire) and 15 in Lochgelly (Fife) carried out unofficial actions.

Workers in the East Oxford delivery offices took action over health and safety. In Didcot, Oxfordshire, workers



left the workplace after a colleague was found to have had the virus.

In Swansea, Parcelforce workers left their depot demanding improved health and safety measures. The local CWU said Royal Mail has failed to provide basic safety items such as masks, gloves and hand sanitisers for workers.

Warrington (Cheshire) Royal Mail workers also walked out after a colleague contracted the virus.

Members of the CWU union at the Royal Mail delivery office in Bury St Edmunds (Suffolk) walked out on 17 April as they were being made to work too close together.

Bin-workers

Enough is enough. Workers will not continue to have their own health and that of their families placed at needless risk

Bin-workers on the Wirral on Merseyside stopped work over coronavirus health and safety.

Workers for the outsourcer Biffa refused to work over bosses' "failure to take the workforce's concerns seriously". Bosses were asking three workers to be in a lorry cab despite social distancing. Steven Gerrard, a Unite regional officer, said, "For over a fortnight Unite has been trying to ensure that Biffa introduced measures to protect our members. They have failed to do so."

Building workers

At the Tricoya site in Hull, steel construction workers employed by Engie Fabricom are building a wood chip acetylation plant. The 100-strong workforce decided to withdraw their labour until they received assurances from the company that their idea to stagger tea-breaks and start and finishing times would be implemented. This would halve both cabin and changing-room

occupancy. This was agreed, and the workforce went back onsite.

Teachers

Teaching unions have warned the government against fully re-opening schools until staff safety is scientifically guaranteed. The warning by GMB, UNISON and Unite comes as a NEU petition gathered more than 83,000 signatures within three days of its launch (on 14 April). Dr Mary Bousted, NEU Joint General Secretary, said:

"As yet there is no clarity as to how social distancing would or even could be implemented in schools, particularly for younger age groups. Even though the majority of children are considered low risk, their teachers and families are not.

The fear is that asymptomatic children will put adult staff in danger, so it is essential that we see a programme of testing, PPE and contact tracing throughout the education sector before schools are fully re-opened."

A joint statement by statement by UNISON, Unite and GMB (17 April) said that "re-opening schools should only happen once there is clear published scientific evidence that can command the confidence of the schools' workforce that it is safe to do so."

Public-sector pensions

The POA, FBU, PCS and GMB are seeking a judicial review over the government's withholding of improved pension benefits arising from the Pensions Cost Cap from thousands of POA members and hundreds of thousands of public service workers.

POA National Chairman Mark Fairhurst stated: "We are fed up with the government's platitudes about how grateful they are to public sector workers during National Emergencies, but then continue to deny us what is rightfully ours in relation to excessive pension contribution. They need to stop looting from our pension pots and repay what they owe to our members."



INTERNATIONAL

The capitalist system is exposing its failure and its bankruptcy

On 17 April, in one day, 1,891 Americans infected by Covid-19 died. The total death-toll due to the pandemic rose above 30,000. A disproportionate number of victims came from the Afro-American community. That same day, President Donald Trump gave strong support to protestors against quarantine measures in Virginia and Michigan. “Liberate Virginia!” shouted Trump, it is time to re-open America. At the same time, he threatened China, saying that it would face the consequences for hiding information about the origins of Covid-19. This was not just rhetoric: huge military exercises were taking place near the Philippines, and the Pentagon was asking for US\$20 billion more to face China.

On 20 April, more than 40,000 American citizens were dead. Trump reassessed the need to get the economy running again and targeted migrants, saying that he would act to prevent any more immigration to the United States.

There is far more to those statements and tweets than the specific characteristics of Trump’s style. Rather, they point to something that is essential for all governments of the capitalist class. Profit comes first, so exploitation must proceed, whatever the cost in human lives.

The capitalist system worldwide is clearly exposing its failure and its bankruptcy, and this is being demonstrated in a concentrated way in the United States, precisely because it is the strongest and most advanced imperialist power in the world. It can easily spread war and destruction all over the planet, but its whole health system is a disaster and it cannot provide its own citizens with the most basic means of protection.

That bankruptcy also exposes the failure of all the policies based on the idea of an accommodation between the interests of the tiny minority of exploiters with the huge majority of the working population. More than ever, the working class needs its own organisations, its own policy to defend its interests by fighting the murderous system of capitalist exploitation.

When it was being formed at the beginning of the Second World War, the Fourth International, founded by Leon Trotsky, held an Emergency Conference. That Conference issued a Manifesto, which said:

“Contrary to the official fables designed to drug the people, the cause of war as of all social evils, unemployment, the high cost of living, fascism, colonial oppression, is the private ownership of the means of production, together with the bourgeois state which rests on this foundation.”

More than ever, in order to satisfy the most immediate demands of working people, to save lives and jobs, to uphold democracy, the aim must be the destruction of that evil system.



AZANIA/SOUTH AFRICA

Statement by the Editorial Collective of *Black Republic*,
published by the Azanian section of the Fourth International

Address the entire socio-economic and political system, not just the current pandemic

By Ashraf Jooma

The exponential increase in the number of COVID-19 infections in South Africa from 85 to 116 overnight has raised questions regarding the timeliness of the response and the programme of the government in dealing with the pandemic, as well as those of capital (big business) and the labour movement.

The pandemic will most certainly affect the work environment: administration, finances, sales and operations of production and distribution.

The pandemic will most certainly have a devastating effect on the working class and its communities, who have been bearing the brunt of all the austerity measures as far back as the early 1990s, when Mandela asked the nation to tighten its belt to ensure better days, while wilfully initiating and implementing Economic Structural Adjustment Programs (ESAPs), which were embedded in all of the ANC government-led programmes — from the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP), to Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), and now the National Development Plan (NDP).

Privatisation in 1992 under the guise of “mixed economy and the creation of wealth and jobs” was given full impetus when Mandela, following a visit to Germany in May 1996, declared that “Privatisation is the fundamental policy of the ANC and is going to be implemented.” (1)

This policy has led to the majority Black population being without housing, water, sanitation and nutrition (2). These are essential to the fundamental well-being of individuals, to combating all kinds of diseases. Yet the majority live in overcrowded shacks, and therefore cannot self-isolate! They live without clean running water, and cannot regularly wash their hands. They do not have proper daily nutrition, and therefore are vulnerable to opportunistic infections!

This policy of privatisation has resulted in the creation of one of the most unequal societies in the world. All the talk and hearings about addressing corruption (which is endemic to the system of private accumulation), without concomitant action of expropriating those responsible, would be fruitless. The wealth needs to be returned to the people in order to address the disparities in society

and to give the government the capacity to address national emergencies and disasters. With every crisis come opportunities. Capital knows this very well, and will capitalise on it as its always done. The state needs to protect its citizens from the challenges of supply and demand and inflated prices, by being the only producer and supplier of medical protection equipment such as masks, gloves, protective suits and sanitisers.

The state should commandeer all medical equipment-manufacturing facilities, private laboratories and hospitals/clinics, to ensure access to those who cannot afford access. This will test the will for a National Health Insurance (NHI). The South African health system has been facing a systemic crisis as a result of years of underfunding due to neoliberal austerity, for more than a quarter of a century. Expropriation in the public interest — on a temporary basis — is consistent with the South African constitution.

Only radical changes in the health system, that of socialising medical and healthcare, will ensure that we confront this pandemic, and in the process alter the system to benefit its entire people going forward.

The working class should use this opportunity to ensure that society moves away from individual selfish private accumulation and socialises/nationalises all resources, to refocus on humanism and not profit and greed.

In a society based on gross inequality and polarisation, the effect of any epidemic or pandemic will affect the working class (who are just one paycheck away from poverty!) and its communities more adversely than those of privilege. Yes, the virus does not discriminate, but its impact on the working class and its poor communities will be a disaster, due to the socio-economic conditions created by capitalism.

We have seen evidence of this, not only in emerging viruses, such as HIV, Ebola and H1N12, but also in simple common colds and flus, and in the carcinogens that are in and spread by the foods we consume, which have been treated with pesticides and other harmful chemicals, allegedly linked to controversial companies like Monsanto.

The state (with capital and labour) needs to come up with a comprehensive package of interventions to mitigate the expected impact of COVID-19 on the economy, especially on the working class and its communities. This should be funded by the state and international capital institutions like the IMF and World Bank as donations and not loans.

We demand that:

1. All wages need to be paid in full to all workers unable to work for whatever reason relating to the pandemic. Arrangements must be made to enable workers to work from home.
2. All rents, bond and loan repayments be suspended indefinitely.
3. All workers, permanent and temporary/contract, must be covered by sick pay.
4. Compel all employers to disinfect their premises and provide masks, gloves and sanitisers to workers.
5. Compel public transport authorities to disinfect all facilities and provide preventative equipment and measures. Most workers use public transport and are at high risk.
6. Immediately suspend all issues relating to energy and water – stop all suspensions/disconnections and re-instate access by suspending all charges for water, and address the crisis in water-scarce areas.
7. Provide an income grant to all unemployed people.
8. Set up safe childcare facilities.

9. Provide adequate facilities near informal settlements for those who are self-isolating.

10. Organise distribution of healthy meals and supplements for all those on low incomes and the unemployed, the elderly and children.

11. Introduce free testing for all.

12. Organise/establish voluntary youth (on a stipend) and medical brigades to organise and assist amongst the most vulnerable: the Black working class and its communities.

13. All national and international debt to be suspended and/or cancelled especially for impoverished nations, and for donor funds to be made available by the international financial institutions (the IMF and World Bank), and multinational/transnational corporations to assist in combating this pandemic and rebuilding their infrastructure and economies. Don't pay the debt!

We need to organise for radical social change!

RECONSTRUCT FOR A SOCIALIST SOCIETY

18 March 2020

(1) *Financial Mail*, 31 May 1996.

(2) With schools and creches being closed, large numbers of children will not receive the minimum nutrition that they received at some of these schools.

MEXICO

Organisation of Workers and Peoples (OPT)

Report on the COVID-19 work stoppages in the maquiladoras along the US-Mexico border (Mexicali and Tijuana, 14 April 2020)

Since April 6, there have been work stoppages in Mexicali, in other municipalities in the state of Baja California, and in many other cities along the northern border with the United States. The work stoppages – with the participation of thousands of workers – began after the federal government issued a decree on 30 March regarding the “health emergency due to *force majeure*” that suspended all non-essential productive activities. The federal decree, which runs from 30 March to 30 April, requires that employers pay full wages to all workers in non-essential industries that have

shut down during this period.

However, the decree has not been heeded by all employers in the country, with the *maquiladora* industry being the most reluctant to stop production (1). This caused panic in workplaces where workers had tested positive for COVID-19. This triggered a series of work stoppages in several companies such as Honeywell Aerospace, Gulfstream Aerospace, and Skyworks, just to mention some of the most important ones.

During this period of strikes and protests, workers reported multiple acts of intimidation by human

resources personnel or top management. The workers denounced threats of mass layoffs, the withholding of wages, fraudulent agreements requiring them to sign “voluntary temporary” layoffs, unpaid “leaves of absence”, advanced holidays, etc. It was incredible how, in the midst of this worldwide emergency caused by the pandemic, these companies were determined to make the workers continue to work in unsafe conditions, while in their own countries of origin many had closed their plants.

The government, acting through the Secretariat of Labour and Social Welfare (STPS), was forced to go out and shut down non-essential companies during the health emergency. This was the direct result of the pressure generated by the outbreak of work stoppages that began in Mexicali and later spread to Tecate, Tijuana, and Ensenada.

Two of the main non-essential companies that were closed down by the STPS were Gulfstream, where there had been strikes since 10 April, and Skyworks, which after almost a week of strikes and protests was shut down on 13 April.

However, one of the corporations that has not heeded the federal decree is Honeywell Aerospace. It witnessed work stoppages from 6 April onwards, then retaliated by laying off more than 100 workers

without pay and firing four of them outright. To date, the company continues to operate normally.

During the 14 April Day of Work Stoppages, more wildcat strikes and walk-outs took place after the leadership of the Baja California section of the Nueva Central de Trabajadores (New Workers Federation) issued a call for work stoppages along the entire northern border to demand the total suspension of all the non-essential companies. (2)

On 14 April, the STPS was not able to answer all the phone-calls by workers reporting their walk-outs and demanding federal protection for their actions. Throughout the day, the workers raised their main demands: Respect for the federal decree of 30 March regarding the health emergency due to *force majeure*, full payment of wages, and no reprisals against workers who, in addition to calling on the companies to abide by the federal decree, demanded respect for their human right to health and a dignified life.

(1) Editor’s note: A *maquiladora* is a factory in Mexico run by a foreign company, superexploiting the workers and exporting its products to that company’s country of origin.

(2) Translator’s note: Reports from Ciudad Juarez and Matamoros are forthcoming.

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE

From France

The French CBI wants people back to work as soon as possible to save their economy

[Excerpted from the editorial published in Issue no. 236 of *La Tribune des Travailleurs* (Workers Tribune), the weekly newspaper of the Democratic Independent Workers Party (POID)]

Macron says people must go back to work on 11 May at all costs. Are there scientific reasons for this decision, a dramatic decline of the pandemic? No. Many scientists and clinicians are warning against the possible consequences of lifting the lockdown in these conditions, which could result in a “second wave” and thousands more victims. It is the capitalist class and its representative, the MEDEF [employers’ organisation], that are demanding a return to work on 11 May: as far as they are concerned, it is time to “get back to business”.

This attempt to impose the imperative of exploitation in opposition to health considerations is causing great concern among wage-earners: there are more and more demands, protests and position statements.

From Germany

Andreas Gangl is a member of the Ver.di trade union and a member of the Bad Hersfeld Amazon Strike Committee. He relayed the appeal “Protect working people, not the banks and big business!” to German comrades, and in return he sent us the following letter in support. He also asks our readers to pass on his letter to his Amazon colleagues in Britain wherever possible.

Dear Comrades,

You wrote: “The government was quick to give £350 billion to the banks and businesses, but has left millions of working people wondering how they will survive. Requisition all the resources needed to

protect the population! Let's come together to push for the basic emergency measures that democracy requires. We reject 'One rule for the rich, another for the rest'! Protect working people, not the banks and big business! The working class must defend its own interests, and on an independent basis!"

As German workers, and in particular as workers employed by Amazon, we fully support your demands. We do so because we have the same problems in Germany. I will briefly demonstrate this, using the example of Amazon.

The state and consequences of digitisation in the work world, and the speeding up of digitisation following the coronavirus, as applied to Amazon:

1. How is digitisation being carried out?

At Amazon, all operations have been digitised. At the same time, these have been broken down and allocated widely, to the point where specialised jobs are disappearing as the level of assignments is falling, which is leading to lower wages. In addition, each work phase is personalised and can be monitored.

Moreover, Amazon aims to use new measures to monitor employees (surveillance cameras). What is more, Amazon is organised in such a way that all sites function in a network as a single site. In this way, orders can be allocated globally as required. On top of this, Amazon mistrusts its employees and is of the belief that they must be monitored, otherwise they don't work.

2. What is the impact of the coronavirus?

Amazon is not organising protection against the pandemic in a decentralised way in relation to local needs, instead it is following one and the same approach globally.

To the extent that co-management rights are quite simply being denied in the name of the coronavirus. Closed-circuit cameras are being reprogrammed to turn them into a tool for monitoring employees. Work areas and social activity areas have quite simply been changed and are being used to gather information.

3. How will digitisation be pursued?

Amazon aims to take responsibility for all stages of the value chain. They are already able to produce articles, transport them, sell them, dispatch them and even deliver them to the customer. Also, they are making memory space available for data and are creating software for the production processes. The next phase is for robots to take on warehouse activities and replace the employees. Similarly, the company is looking at digitising the lower management stage.

In the US, employees are managed by computer. Artificial intelligence (AI) monitors the employee, sends him/her feedback, and lay-offs are already printed out automatically. The AI is already capable of warning the employee that he/she is about to make a mistake.

4. What demands should we put forward?

- Depersonalised work processes; it is enough for each employee to only record the daily overall performance, not how he/she has achieved it;
- No surveillance cameras;
- No digitised management;
- It is the human operator that sets the pace, not the machine;
- Decentralisation of decision-making power, respect for co-management rights;
- Show confidence in the employee, not a negative attitude from the start;
- Ultimately, given Amazon's size, it will be necessary to break up the corporation and split it up into smaller companies;
- Find a tax methodology to ensure that Amazon assumes its social obligations;
- Due to the introduction of robots, thought needs to be given to the social system, in view of the fact that many jobs are sure to disappear. This is in addition to the fact that jobs are going to be cut in other sectors (for example, the auto industry);
- Response measure: e.g. reduction of working time while retaining full pay.

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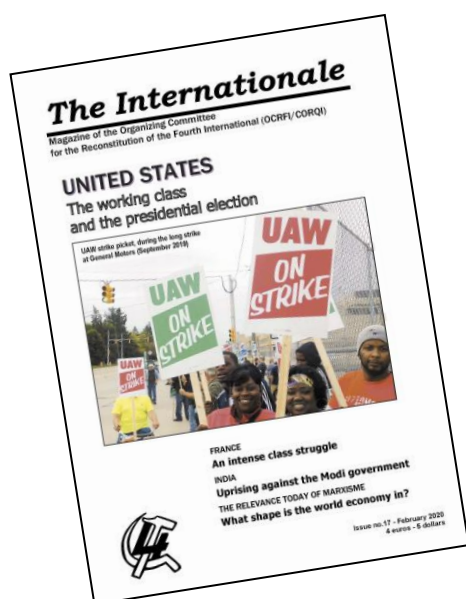
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