

Labour Internationalist

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

Issue No.16, March 2021

Price: £1

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.

**The workers should not
pay for the failures of
the government and the
capitalist system**

**We need united and
co-ordinated action by
all of the unions facing
the same attacks by the
same class enemy**

**No to "fire and rehire"!
No cuts, wherever they
come from!**

EDITORIAL

We know that today the working class is frustrated and angry, and that workers across the country are fighting back, resisting the head-on attacks on their job status, wages and working conditions. We also know that today there is growing discontent and pressure building up in the trade unions and inside the Labour Party regarding the lack of political opposition to those attacks.

In this situation, Chancellor Rishi Sunak delivered a budget speech in Parliament on 3 March which confirmed that the Tories are once again attacking working people, the NHS, care homes, and people on benefits. In his statement, he did not set out any plans for the NHS, but the “Red Book” containing the detailed figures for the statement showed that NHS England’s budget will fall from £148 billion in 2020-21 to £139 billion in 2021-22, a 6 per cent cut for a period when the NHS will need to deal with a big backlog of surgery and other treatments, and increased mental illness. Sunak ignored the social care system and set out only a temporary extension (to September) of the £20 per week boost in Universal Credit, potentially plunging 500,000 people into poverty next winter.

As well as attacking the nurses and other NHS workers on pay and funding, the budget puts a further squeeze on local council funding to the point of forcing cuts, and puts low-income tenants at risk of eviction by freezing the Local Housing Allowance (LHA). Despite some emergency Covid-related funding from central government, councils are facing huge financial gaps caused by massive drops in income – especially business rates – accompanied by big Covid-related expenditure. Manchester city council is facing cuts in the next financial year of £41 million; in Bolton, the figure is £35 million. The London borough of Newham is set to implement “cuts and savings” of £43 million by April 2023, £30 million of it this year. Leeds council is facing cuts of £87 million, the single biggest amount to be taken out of its spending since the start of the Tories’ austerity policy. Millions of council tax payers in hundreds of council areas are now facing increases of up to 5 percent in their annual bills from April, with those on low and middle incomes hit hardest by a sixth year of increases in England above the rate of inflation.

The Starmer leadership’s response to all of this is to “play the game” on nurses’ pay and to threaten with suspension any Labour councillor who dares to refuse to implement the Tory cuts, all the while saying we shouldn’t get worked up, because “the next general election is years away”.

In terms of benefits for the capitalists, time will tell whether corporation tax will indeed be raised from

19 percent to 25 percent by 2023, but in the meantime, big businesses such as Amazon have been handed an untargeted £25 billion “super-deduction” tax break. Sunak also announced the creation of eight freeports with low-tax zones, telling the House of Commons it was a policy the UK could only pursue now it was outside the European Union. In fact, there are around 80 freeports within the EU, which have been linked with money laundering, corruption, tax evasion and organised crime.

However, the budget also served as a reminder that there is a growing crisis among the bourgeoisie over the economic situation following Brexit.

The Tory government’s false promises and a lack of practical management regarding road haulage, fishing and the north of Ireland, to mention just three examples, is resulting in increasing public expressions of frustration and anger by representatives of whole industries and economic sectors, echoed by Tory MPs.

Amidst all of this, the Starmer leadership not only remains silent, but instructs Labour MPs to “not mention Brexit”. In December 2020, Starmer publicly justified his support for the “final” version of Johnson’s Brexit deal by saying he would hold the government to account “forensically” on the detail. It only took a few weeks to break that commitment – the silence of Starmer and his cabal has been deafening.

The right wing of the Conservative Party may criticise the 3 March budget for not going far enough in its attacks against the working class – which is one expression of the government’s awareness of the resistance to it. But it already contained both direct and indirect measures in the direction of making the working class pay for the crisis, heralding further attacks in future budgets.

What we need is a government that will implement the measures required by the working class: a ban on lay-offs and job-cuts (including “fire and rehire”), providing the necessary funding to local councils to maintain and expand local services, investing properly in other public services including renationalising the railways, reversing the privatisation of the NHS, and investing massively in social housing, to name just a few.

Only a workers’ government acting solely in the interests of the needs of the workers, the youth and the wider population – a government that breaks with the capitalists and its institutions – can nationalise the big means of production, direct public funds towards social needs, and deliver where we need to be.

But the fightback by workers on specific demands is already happening, and must be expanded in a way that will force this government to retreat. “Fire and rehire” has been successfully resisted through strike action in some high-profile cases, but the bosses’ offensive continues nationwide, with the government’s full support. The various unions representing municipal council workers have won individual local battles, but in the coming months they will face massive cuts due to be made across the board by hundreds of councils throughout the

country, all of them the result of the government’s funding decisions, and all of them hitting the local communities in the same way.

A big problem so far has been the isolation of each of these struggles.

What we need is action on a united and co-ordinated basis by all of the unions facing the same attacks by the same class enemy. A proposal by one of our readers (see page 8) points the way.

29 March

The new Police Bill: a further move towards an authoritarian state

The timing of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill 2021 is anything but coincidental. As the 3 March budget set out the first elements of the Tories’ new austerity programme, intended to make the workers and youth pay for the economic impact of Covid-19 and Brexit as part of the wider crisis of capitalism, the new Bill is designed to provide the means to systematically repress public protest and dissent.

The Coronavirus Act 2020 already provides the legal framework for the police to break up public protests, as we have seen so graphically with the vigil for Sarah Everard in Clapham (London) and the three Bristol protests against the new Bill. But – thanks to the Labour Party’s voting with the government on 25 March – the powers granted to the police under the Coronavirus Act will extend only until September, hence the Tories’ need for new legislation.

As it stands, the new Police Bill is worded so vaguely as to allow the police to arrest someone for being noisy or disruptive in public – the very definition of public protest. It creates the offence of causing “*serious annoyance*” and “*serious inconvenience*”.

A judicial review in November 2020 (in a case brought by Unite to uphold the right to picket by strikers at the Optare bus manufacturing company) resulted in the government backing down and instructing all police forces that socially-distanced official pickets can go ahead.

But unofficial pickets (i.e., not approved by the union apparatuses) are not covered by this ruling, nor are other forms of protest: students protesting against their financial exploitation by universities, women protesting against the violence and harassment to which they are subjected on a daily basis, people protesting against the closure of their local amenities, and so on. All of these expressions of resistance and dissent could be declared illegal under the new Bill.

When the new Bill was published, the Starmer leadership said that Labour would abstain in the vote rather than oppose it, and then changed its position days later, after the media reported a negative public response to the events in Clapham and the Bill itself. Just the latest example of a so-called Leader of the Opposition who will face whichever way the wind blows, as determined by opinion polls and focus groups. The only quote by Marx likely to pass Starmer’s lips is the one by Groucho Marx: “*Those are my principles, and if you don’t like them...well, I have others.*”

The media response to the Bristol protests, where the police instigated and carried out much of the violence, was wholly predictable in its condemnation of the predominantly young protestors, with Bristol’s Labour mayor calling them “*politically illiterate*”.

This last comment bears further scrutiny. Dismissing protesting youth for their perceived inexperience or supposedly narrow focus only serves to endorse this government’s increasingly authoritarian tendencies. It also reinforces the false notion that there are “special interest issues” that can be compartmentalised and therefore ignored by the organised labour movement.

Yes, the capitalist system does attack particular components of society in different ways at different times. But the common thread to all of these attacks is preserving the system of exploitation for profit and repressing any resistance to it. This is why collective action is needed to resist the latest Police Bill, based on an awareness of the common interest of organised workers with all those who are socially and/or economically deprived in various ways.

Lenin famously described one of the “*major symptoms*” of a revolutionary situation as including the element that “*the upper classes should be unable to rule in the old way*”. The new Police Bill is proof that the capitalists and their government are already preparing for the coming social explosion.

The labour movement must respond accordingly.

29 March

SNAPSHOTS OF THE CRISIS

2 March: Working mothers experience more discrimination

In an interview with *The Guardian*, Joeli Brearley, CEO and founder of campaign group Pregnant Then Screwed points out that in a normal year, the organisation's legal advice line receives about 3,000 calls from women experiencing pregnancy and maternity discrimination at work, but "since the start of the pandemic, we've given 32,000 women free legal advice in some form". She believes that companies are taking advantage of the pandemic to remove pregnant working women and mothers. A survey of nearly 20,000 mothers and pregnant women published in July 2020 by Pregnant Then Screwed found that 15 per cent of them had been made redundant, or expected to be – and of these, 57 per cent were pregnant black women. Brearley says: "This is a generational rollback. Fifteen per cent of mothers leaving the workforce is enormous. It took us 20 years to increase maternal employment by just 9 per cent."

4 March: Union anger at "pitiful" pay offer to NHS workers

It emerges that in its evidence to the NHS Pay Review Body, the government is recommending a 1 percent pay rise for 2021-22, which would be the latest in a series of cuts in real terms: nurses' pay would be £2,500 less than in 2010 when adjusted for inflation. UNISON Head of Health Sara Gorton says: "A 1 percent pay rise is the worst kind of insult the government could give health workers who've given their absolute everything over the past year." Unite Assistant General Secretary Gail Cartmail says that Johnson "has delivered an enormous slap in the face to health workers." Royal College of Nursing (RCN) Chief Executive and General Secretary Dame Donna Kinnair says: "This is pitiful and bitterly disappointing. (...) Nursing staff would feel they are being punished and made to pay for the cost of the pandemic. It is a political decision to underfund and undervalue nursing staff." On 5 March, the RCN's Governing Council holds an emergency meeting and votes to set up a £35 million fund to support workers facing loss of earnings due to strike action.

10 March: HoC committee exposes colossal waste of public money on "test, track and trace" programme

The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee publishes a report which concludes that there is "no clear evidence" of the overall effectiveness of the government's £22 billion "test, track and trace" programme to combat Covid-19 in England. The Chancellor's latest Budget included an additional £15 billion for the programme, taking the total bill to more than £37 billion over two years. Former Treasury Permanent Secretary Nick Macpherson describes it as "the most wasteful and inept public spending programme of all time". Despite insultingly being named "NHS Test and Trace" by the government, the scheme is a tangled web of programmes mainly outsourced to private sector companies, including the participation of management consultants each billing the taxpayer up to £6,600 a day. By contrast, the successful vaccination programme, which is organised and operated mainly by fully-trained and dedicated NHS staff, costs just one-third of the government's failed £37-billion scheme.

16 March: Uber pays the price for bogus self-employment

Following the UK Supreme Court's dismissal of Uber's appeal against a 2016 landmark employment tribunal ruling that its drivers should be classed as workers, the company announces that its 70,000 UK drivers would get at least the legal minimum wage, after expenses and holiday time at 12.07 percent of earnings, paid out on a fortnightly basis. They will also be automatically enrolled in a company pension plan with contributions from Uber alongside their own. Drivers will continue to have access to free insurance in case of sickness or injury as well as parental payments, which have been in place for all drivers since 2018.

17 March: Scottish government renationalises railways

The Scottish government announces that the ScotRail franchise run by Abellio will be taken over by the

state's operator of last resort when its contract expires in March 2022. Scotland's Transport Secretary Michael Matheson says: "The current franchising system is no longer fit for purpose." The move comes soon after the Welsh government completed the renationalisation of the railway network in Wales in February, when it ended the Keolis-Amey franchise. TSSA General Secretary Manuel Cortes says: "The Covid-19 pandemic made it abundantly clear that our railways are a public service, not a piggy bank for fat cat shareholders. The rest of the country must now follow Welsh Labour's lead and end the Tories' Frankenstein privatisation failure." Two major franchises in England – LNER and Northern – are already run by the government through its operator of last resort, and the Office for National Statistics (ONS) said in 2020 that rail services had in effect been nationalised due to the level of Treasury support.

23 March: Shrewsbury 24 exonerated

A Court of Appeal overturns the criminal convictions of 14 trade unionists after a campaign lasting more than four decades. Three judges decided that the convictions, which related to a strike by building workers in 1972, were unsafe due to police malpractice. A total of 24 trade unionists who had picketed during the strike were charged with unlawful assembly, conspiracy to intimidate, and affray. After three trials in 1973 and 1974, two trade unionists were acquitted but 22 were convicted. They were given sentences ranging from three years' jail time to four months' imprisonment suspended for two years. Campaigners argued for decades that they had been persecuted by the building industry bosses, with the collusion of the Conservative government and the secret state, to deter workers from taking action to improve their pay and working conditions.

23 March: Youth hit hardest by unemployment

Figures released by the ONS show that young people aged 16-24 not in employment, education or training (Neets) account for nearly two-

thirds of job losses since the start of the pandemic. The figures show the sharpest quarterly rise in Neets for almost a decade, resulting in 437,000 fewer young people in paid employment, a 10 percent fall in 12 months. Overall, more than half of under-25s have been furloughed or lost their jobs. The figures also highlight widespread regional variations: unemployment among 16- to 24-year-olds is just under 10 percent in the south-east, but is more than 19 percent in London, 18 percent in the West Midlands and nearly 17 percent in the north-east.

23 March: Johnson ignores public investment, smacks his lips over private profit

One year after the first Covid-19 lockdown, Johnson celebrates the successful NHS-run vaccination programme – which is based on massive public investment in vaccine research – by telling the Conservative Party’s 1922 Committee: *“The reason we have the vaccine success is because of capitalism, because of greed, my friends.”*

25 March: Manchester buses to be brought back under public control

Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham announces that the city’s bus services will be brought under public control, with one integrated

service to replace the dozens of private operations in a *“broken market”*, in what would be the first reversal of the deregulation of the bus industry by the Thatcher government in the 1980s. Burnham says that the first routes are planned in 2023 for Wigan and Bolton, and all routes will be under the city’s control by 2025. He adds that plans would follow to bring local rail services into an integrated Greater Manchester transport system by the end of the decade.

26 March: Supreme Court upholds Asda workers' equal pay case

The Supreme Court backs a 2016 employment tribunal decision that retail staff at the Asda supermarket chain, who are mostly women, can compare their work to those in the company’s distribution centres. More than 44,000 shop workers say they should be paid the same as the predominantly male staff who work in the chain’s depots, and who receive between £1.50 and £3.00 per hour more in pay than the shop workers.

This latest key stage in the working women’s fight for equal pay could lead to a £500 million compensation claim, and has clear implications for around 8,000 workers at other supermarket chains – including Tesco, Sainsbury’s, Co-op and Morrisons – who are also engaged in

equal pay disputes with their employers.

26 March: Striking British Gas workers threatened with lockout

GMB members at British Gas begin strike days 39 to 42 as engineers face mass sackings on 1 April. After a 9-month battle against “fire and rehire”, the 7,500 service engineers have been told they must sign acceptance of a 15 percent pay cut and other detrimental changes to terms and conditions by 12 noon on 25 March, or face being fired one week later. GMB’s Central Executive Council agrees to declare an official national lockout dispute between British Gas and GMB from 1 April unless the company pulls back from the brink.

30 March: ONS confirms that UK Covid deaths have passed 150,000

New figures as of 19 March released by the ONS show that 150,116 people have died from Covid-19 in the UK. This total figure is based on mentions of Covid-19 on death certificates, and is higher than the government’s official death-toll of 126,615 as of 29 March, which only counts deaths within 28 days of a positive test for Covid-19.

NEWS FROM THE PICKET LINE

Unite announces strike action at Heathrow Airport

Unite has announced a series of one-day strikes at Heathrow Airport during April following the decision by Heathrow Airport Limited (HAL) to “fire and rehire” its entire 4,000 workforce, slashing their pay and reducing their conditions. The new schedule of strike action follows intermittent strikes by HAL workers since December.

Targeted strike action – involving engineering, airside operations, landside operations, fire service, campus security and central terminal operations – will begin on 2 April. There will be 41 strikes over a 23-day period, with the final strike scheduled for 25 April.

Each sector will be taking seven days of strike action. During the strike period at least one of the sectors will be on strike on most days.

PCS members vote to strike at Heathrow Airport

Around 450 PCS members working in passport control at Heathrow Airport have voted overwhelmingly to start strike action on 1 April, in response to the imposition of new rosters which are considered to be unworkable.

The rosters have resulted in travellers waiting in queues of more than seven hours to have their passports checked. The Home Office has claimed it imposed rosters in response to Covid-19 safety measures, but many staff have reported they feel less safe compared to the previous roster.

In the strike ballot in January, 96.4 percent voted in favour of strike action on a 68 percent turnout.

Manchester bus drivers in all-out strike against “fire and rehire”

More than 400 Manchester bus drivers employed by Go North West who are members of Unite have been on all-out indefinite strike against “fire and rehire” since February 28. The new contracts would result in a £2,500 pay cut per worker and slashed conditions, including sick pay.

The bus workers, who are based in Cheetham Hill, have held mass pickets of the depot. They have received many expressions of support, including from the Greater Manchester Association of Trades Union Councils (GMATUC).



Go North West Unite Branch Secretary Pat Gleave said: *“We have contacted colleagues and they have contacted us from all over the country, and we are still getting plenty of support from the NHS trade unions. So, it is not just transport. They are all writing us letters of support and they all realise that if “fire and rehire” gets in, it will be everywhere. For example, we have had a lot of support from branches of Argos, where they are also facing “fire and rehire”. We have also had people backing us from the Disabled Federation, members of the public who will also be hit, because what the bus companies are doing is not following the Disability Association rules on wheelchairs. This is an all-out strike until we get it sorted.”*

However, a major problem is the fact that parent company Go Ahead – the largest private bus operator in the UK – has subcontracted its routes to a number of smaller operators in a major strike-breaking operation, but there has been no call from Unite to drivers across Manchester to defeat these plans.

More strike action against “fire and rehire”

Around 200 Unite members at aerospace parts producer SPS Technologies in Leicester came out on four 24-hour strikes (on 12, 19, 22 and 26 March) and operated an overtime ban against “fire and rehire” proposals that would result in reductions to overtime pay, sick pay, paid breaks and shift premiums amounting to annual wage losses of up to £3,000. The workers will take all-out strike action from 29 March through to June.

More than 20 Unite members at lettings agent software provider Goodlord in London decided to escalate their industrial action (which began on 22 February) to an indefinite strike. The workers – who are employed in Goodlord’s London-based

referencing department, which provides tenant checks for estate agents – are striking against “fire and rehire” plans that would see their pay slashed from £24,000 to £18,000, well below the Living Wage Foundation’s benchmark of £21,157. Referencing staff are the only workers employed by the company to have been singled out for “fire and rehire” attacks.

Around 300 Unite members at coffee company Douwe Egberts in Banbury are balloting for strike action over the company’s imposition of vastly inferior pay and employment conditions.

London bus strikes to protect pay and conditions are fragmented and isolated

Following three 24-hour strikes in late February, around 2,000 bus drivers employed by French-owned transport company RATP through its three London subsidiaries (London United, Quality Line and London Sovereign) renewed their strike action against RATP’s attempt to cut pay both directly and indirectly. In a press release on 1 March, Unite said: *“In a divide and rule approach, RATP is attempting to treat workers in each subsidiary differently and play one set of workers off against another.”*

London Sovereign drivers were offered a pay increase of just 0.75 percent, well below what other London bus operators have offered drivers. Quality Line drivers, who are among the lowest paid in London and earn £2.50 per hour less than drivers at the other RATP subsidiaries, were offered a pay increase of just 0.5 percent. At the same time, drivers at London United – the largest of RATP’s London operations – face pay cuts of £2,500 per year (down to 2015 rates), with workers expected to work far longer for the lower pay rates.

A series of dates were set for 24-hour strike action during March. However, each garage of each subsidiary company balloted for strike action separately, not every garage operated by each employer voted to take strike action, and there was very little overlap in the dates set for the action that was voted for. Also, with the union negotiating on different offers made by the three subsidiaries, many of the separate strike actions were called off in order to ballot on individual “improved” offers made by the employer. Meanwhile, rival operator Metroline ran additional bus services to undermine the strike, and there was no call for Metroline drivers to show solidarity.

As of the end of the month, the dispute involving all three subsidiaries has not been resolved, and more strike action is being planned for April – but this will again be staggered across the three subsidiaries, with the same degree of fragmentation between the various garages.

The London bus drivers know about RATP’s “divide and rule” tactics, but they are entitled to ask: what is the leadership of their union doing to counter this?

As the Tories' attacks continue, Labour's leadership refuses to lead the fightback

By John Sweeney

The latest budget failed to address Sunak's personal culpability for the additional damage caused by his failure to support everyone who has had to isolate, and for delaying September's lock-down – both of which have caused the subsequent lock-down to be longer and deeper than otherwise necessary.

Clapping key workers generates a lot of noise, but precious little in terms of a meaningful reward. All the praise was empty, the sycophancy merely that. This government has made no meaningful commitment to the NHS or social care at all. There is plenty of money for cronies. The "magic money tree" is abundant with billions for them and the likes of Serco.

If the NHS workers do decide to take industrial action, the trade unions must call for a general strike and stand alongside them.

Sunak's budget has simply confirmed what we already knew: empty promises and using the NHS vaccination success to bolster their reputations. The people of this country are victims of both physical and mental abuse – we are expected to be grateful that the government are no longer beating us (or not be so open about it), yet since Osborne's austerity cuts have not been reversed, we know the beatings will go on.

To reuse that famous quote by Bevan: "*lower than vermin*".

Labour needed to attack the Tories' appalling Covid response, the tens of thousands of unnecessary deaths, and the economic catastrophe it has caused. Instead, Starmer fantasised about being in a national government and stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the very people who have prolonged and accelerated the devastating effects of the Covid epidemic. The idea that Labour is flagging in the polls because it has been

a hard time for opposition simply won't wash. An opposition that can't do more with the above needs to take a long hard look at itself.

"*Until the time is right*". That could become Labour's new slogan. I can understand the appeal of sitting under the tree waiting for the apple to fall in your lap, but has the Labour Party thought perhaps it might give the tree a little shake, otherwise the fruit may rot on the branch. The Labour Party is far too passive. Successful political movements don't bide their time and appear when the time is right. They make the weather, lead opinion and seize the moment.

Labour has become the party of means, and not ends – the party of pragmatism and slow change. Starmer and his pod of handpicked stooges and Blairite apologists stand for nothing that will radically alter the endemic inequality in this country. They are concerned with what is, not what could be. Labour's entire strategy is to commit to nothing and hope to profit from the twin disasters of recession and Covid. They are cynical and spineless. They have neither the guts, nor the guile to touch any policy that gives off even slightest odour of a leftist alternative. All they offer is a futile, outdated replay of Blairism.

Starmer proclaims difficult times ahead? Those hard time will not affect the rich and powerful, nor the businesses which have quite literately made a killing out of the pandemic. As always, the brunt of any economic downturn will be on the backs of the working class. The only thing the Labour right are concerned about is setting fire to the Labour Party itself. Rather than deliver a socialist Labour government, they prefer to toxify the party beyond all salvation. Essentially, Starmer's sycophancy towards the Tories has gifted them an extra five years in office.

The Recall Conference initiative has failed. What next?

By PK, Labour Party and Unite member, London

As many predicted, the initiative to call an Emergency Recall Conference of the Labour Party (LP) on the slogan of "Reclaim Democracy" stalled very quickly. The motions on the Recall Conference that had been tabled for the LP's National Executive Committee meeting on 11 March were rejected without a debate or vote by a majority who continue to oversee the suspension of individual members and whole CLPs and the summary dismissal

of democratically selected candidates for the local elections on 6 May.

Less than a week before the NEC meeting (6 March), the campaign for a Recall Conference held a national online rally. Most of the featured speakers did little more than describe a situation we are all already familiar with, and then repeated the position of "pass the motion for a Recall Conference in your unions and

CLPs”. But they didn’t offer a perspective that included the real possibility of a Recall Conference not taking place. This position was most notably put by Rob Sewell, the national co-ordinator of Labour4Clause4 and editor of *Socialist Appeal*, who acknowledged in passing that the call for a Recall Conference might be blocked, but said that in any case the task is to “*fight against the counter-revolution*” and “*transform the Labour Party*”. Leaving aside the question of “what revolution is being countered?”, we can reasonably ask: How? Rob Sewell didn’t say.

A different take on the situation was given by Howard Beckett, Assistant General Secretary of Unite and a member of the LP NEC. After describing the situation as “*an existential crisis for the LP*”, he listed a series of questions being asked by trade unionists and those on the left around the country, including: “*Would we trust the leadership of Labour to deliver an agenda that was one that spoke for trade union members?*” After stating that “*the right wing of our party has no answers*” to the needs of working people, he then said notably that “*it will be the trade unions that will say ‘we will not pay for this crisis’*”. But once again, this position poses more questions than it answers; for example: what have the national trade union leaderships been doing to

organise the fightback, and what political perspective do the unions offer going forward, especially regarding the LP?

So, the basic weakness of the whole Recall Conference initiative was that it focused on “*restoring party democracy and achieving genuine unity*” via a model resolution that didn’t make any mention of the major economic and social issues that are affecting working-class people – in other words, ignoring the very foundation of “*genuine unity*”.

If the fight to “restore party democracy” is to mean anything to the mass of Labour supporters, it will need to be relevant to their real needs: no lay-offs or job-cuts using Covid-19 as a pretext, including a ban on “fire and rehire”; no cuts in local government, whatever they are wherever they come from; and so on.

If a LP Recall Conference were to take place and I was able to speak, I would use my time to propose a specific campaign that encapsulates this whole argument in very concrete and immediate terms: the fight against local government cuts.

If model resolutions are needed, I would propose the following:

No cuts, whatever they are and wherever they come from

This branch notes that:

1. Central government grants to local government were cut by 38 per cent in real terms between 2009-10 and 2018-19, even as demand for key services increased;
2. As a result, local public services have been cut and private-sector providers have been called in to plug gaps in housing, social care, transport, planning, and cultural and leisure services;
3. Cuts to funding from central government have led to a 17 per cent reduction in council spending on local public services since 2009-10;
4. The COVID-19 crisis is having immediate effects on councils’ budgets as a result of increases in spending on local services and reductions in revenue. Based on councils’ forecasts of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on their non-tax income and spending in 2020-21, there is an estimated £2 billion gap between the funding provided by central government and the spending pressures anticipated by councils, and this gap is very likely to widen;
5. At the same time, the Government has been quick to channel tens of billions of pounds to private sector companies in the form of inflated supply and service contracts that were awarded without a tendering process and often failed to deliver to a proper standard;

This branch therefore resolves:

6. That working people and local communities should not and will not be made to pay for the health and economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than allocating tens of billions of pounds in public funds to private sector companies, the Government must allocate the funding required by local councils to provide the full range of local services needed by working people and local communities;
7. To oppose all local government cuts, whatever they are and wherever they come from;
8. To link up with other trade unions, organisations, associations and campaigns, at both the local and regional levels, in a united campaign to oppose all cuts to all public services.

Sources:

Point 1: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/local-government-funding-england>

Point 3: Tom Harris, Louis Hodge and David Phillips, “English local government funding: trends and challenges in 2019 and beyond”, Institute for Fiscal Studies (November 2019), available at <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14563>

Point 4: Kate Ogden, David Phillips and Jean-Christophe Spiliotis, “COVID-19 and English council funding: what is the medium-term outlook?”, Institute for Fiscal Studies (September 2020), available at <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/15041>

Compass Labour: Promoting cross-party collaboration for a centrist government

By Stefan Cholewka, GMATUC Secretary (personal capacity)

Two weeks after the Labour Party's NEC flatly refused to even allow a debate on motions for an Emergency Recall Conference, we witnessed a major intervention by Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey, who took LP leader Keir Starmer to task in an interview with Times Radio.

McCluskey lamented that under Starmer, voters "don't understand" what Labour stands for anymore, and that the Labour leader needs to "shake off the siren voices of New Labour" if the party is to stand a chance of defeating the Tories. He said: "There is a real fear at the moment that he is attempting to marginalise the left. Now we seem to be travelling in a direction that is turning the Labour Party into a party of the establishment. That will not get you into No 10."

McCluskey's comments are feeding into widespread apathy and frustration among the mass of Labour voters and supporters.

Except at moments of unequivocal national betrayal or when they have directly experienced the selling out of a struggle in which they themselves have been engaged, few Labour supporters are yet able to crystallise their feelings into a comprehensive criticism of their new leader's policies and actions. But there is no doubt that the rank and file have viewed with increasing disquiet Starmer's failure to take the offensive against the Tories and the employers.

When Starmer appears on television he speaks not to LP members and traditional voters who helped create the party to serve them in struggle, and who so urgently need leadership, but to the middle class.

Grassroots Labour activists feel that the party has lost its sense of purpose and direction and has jettisoned traditional working-class policies in an attempt to avoid alienating "moderate" opinion and give an agreeable impression to hesitant middle-class voters. This is confirmed by the fact that since becoming Labour leader, Starmer has conducted a witch-hunt against his predecessor Jeremy Corbyn and mounted a campaign to purge the party of Corbyn supporters.

Three years ago, under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, Labour very nearly won an election, and probably would have won if the PLP hadn't sabotaged their own campaign by starving marginal seats of funds and resources. However, the centrist cabal who currently lead the LP have finally registered the utter shambles they have created by their own actions. But instead of rising to the challenge and trying to fix the damage they have done, they have opted to transform the LP into a version of ChangeUK, something they call Compass Labour.

As LabourList explains: "*Compass Labour is effectively a Labour centrist plan to form a coalition with other centrist political parties (LibDems, Greens, SNP), as they are now*

convinced that this is the only way they can defeat the Conservatives in a general election. Compass Labour have even produced a report on Labour's electoral chances, ironically titled "If we divide, they conquer" and concluded that "Labour will struggle to win alone", and that an alliance is the only way to install a Labour-led government. What they're really saying is that centrist Labour has no hope of winning unless they form alliance with other centrists, and that's the only option they are prepared to consider because they refuse to concede control to the democratic socialist left."



Incidentally, the LibDems and Greens have simultaneously just launched their own Compass groups. It is also blatantly clear that this is far more than just cross-party collaboration, as they are proposing to "develop shared policy ideas and campaign together". In fact, according to LabourList, they are planning to "hold informal discussion meetings, run fringe events, publish articles and campaign on issues relevant to a progressive alliance".

Surprisingly, Compass Labour appear to be in favour of a form of proportional representation as a replacement for the first-past-the-post system, while at the same time being entirely comfortable with politically disenfranchising the majority of the Labour Party's own membership. It seems, therefore, that they are in favour of any system that allows them to gain and retain political control, while at the same time ensuring that the Left never will.

It doesn't take an internal politically-motivated Labour Party report to convince the majority of LP members that Labour has been made almost politically irrelevant by an unscrupulous right-wing political cabal from within the party. People who have spent the last five years smearing the party leadership under Jeremy Corbyn (and the membership), and who have colluded to sabotage two Labour election campaigns.

The fact that they did this tells us that these centrists are well aware that the LP could actually win elections if the party reflected genuine working-class interests, and it also tells us just how determined they are to keep the Left out of power. The Compass Labour report simply reveals the real reasons why they want to form a new centrist alliance: to install a centrist government and to ensure the Left will never be allowed to win control of the LP again.

The operation against the left in Liverpool is nothing new

From our Liverpool Correspondent

The “coup” in Liverpool by the Labour Party’s right wing over the mayoral candidate selection is nothing new.

The cabal running the LP’s North West region have been active for a few years now, making up rules and breaking them whenever they choose.

An overview of it all is that the State wants to ensure that the LP never becomes a mass party of the left. And they are succeeding, as many thousands of LP members have resigned.

The “left” is actually very small. Most of the members who describe themselves as “left” are predominantly middle-class people who campaign on middle-class issues, if Liverpool can be taken as a benchmark.

Except Wavertree that is, where we’re campaigning and leafleting outside of the LP.

I don’t see how it’s possible or practicable to turn the LP into an organisation prepared and capable of defending the poorest in society, or combating capitalism generally.

Sadly, many left-wingers are embroiled in single issues like Israel/Zionism, gender politics, etc., as these issues are popular amongst the chattering classes.

Most working people care more about not being able to provide for their children.

Subscribe to ***Labour Internationalist***: £10 for 1 year (12 issues)

Email labour.internationalist2019@gmail.com for details

INTERNATIONAL

AMAZON WORKERS TAKE ACTION IN THE UNITED STATES, ITALY AND GERMANY

UNITED STATES

**Solidarity with Bessemer Amazon workers!
A major campaign to organise labour in the South!**

By Southern Workers Assembly

Workers at an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama, are waging a historic struggle to win the first union at an Amazon facility in the US. The Southern Workers Assembly (SWA), an Organize the South Network formed in 2012, stands in solidarity with this important worker’s struggle. National solidarity with organising in the South needs to be a permanent part of labour’s Southern strategy.

Black workers make up more than 70 percent of the approximately 6,000 Amazon warehouse workers in Bessemer. This campaign offers the opportunity of forging rank-and-file worker unity against the systemic racism that is part of the history of Black oppression in the South and that has been used to divide workers and their communities.

In November 2020, eight months after officially opening the Bessemer Amazon warehouse in March, the workers led by the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Workers Union (RWDSU), petitioned the labour board to hold a union vote. This was a shock not only to Amazon, but for corporate America, which has historically viewed the South as a kind of domestic colony with systemic racism, weak labour and environmental laws, voter suppression, and a divided working-class. This is why major US and international companies have relocated industries to the South.



These workers have launched a history-changing organising campaign against one of the biggest and most powerful transnational corporations in the world, and against its super rich union-busting owner, Jeff Bezos. These workers are standing up to the racist and anti-labour laws that suppress worker rights across the South, where union density is low, and a region with the largest concentration of anti-labour right-to-work laws weakening and denying workers collective bargaining rights.

Highly-paid union-busters and some governmental officials have united to lie and try and intimidate Bessemer Amazon workers to defeat the union vote. This should point out to Bessemer workers and workers across Alabama that this campaign has the potential of making economic, political, and social changes favourable for the working class. This organised power is needed in the struggle for worker protections against the COVID-19 pandemic and for a system of Medicare for All.

Local unions, worker organisations, and labour activists need to form Worker Assemblies that help to build rank-and-file organising and solidarity infrastructures for a social movement to organise labour in the South. The SWA Workers Schools can provide training in building these infrastructures.

Onwards to a union victory in Bessemer, and to Organise the South!

ITALY

Thousands of Amazon workers and delivery drivers participated in the first-ever nationwide strike in Italy on 22 March.

According to the national union federations, approximately 75 percent of employees struck. Amazon reported a much lower strike rate of between 10-20 percent. The company reportedly employs more than 9,500 workers directly across the country, and an estimated 15,000 via a network of “third-party subcontractors” who are not directly employed by Amazon but are subject to the diktat of its onerous quota algorithms.

The company has significantly expanded its Italian operations over the past five years, including building six new “fulfilment centres” since 2017.

Three national unions – Filt Cgil, Fit Cisl and Uiltrasporti – announced the strike two weeks previously, claiming that Amazon had refused to continue negotiations with them on a national contract covering delivery drivers.

Striking workers who spoke to the media described conditions of brutal exploitation. One worker told daily newspaper *La Repubblica* that he wears an ankle brace because of the long journeys of more than 20 kilometres he has to walk each shift. He said: “*The system is driven by an algorithm, which demands results. Whoever is in charge does not care how those numbers are obtained. The power is in the hands of these managers, 25- to 30-year-olds who have just*

graduated, who sometimes decide to use it even in an uncompromising and dangerous way.”

However, the unions’ central demand is that Amazon agrees to negotiate with them on the terms of a national agreement and establish “*stable trade union relations*” with them.

The Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL) released a statement by Confederal Secretary Tania Scacchetti on 22 March, declaring that “*The workers of the Amazon supply chain have decided to protest to claim a normal system of trade union relations.*” She added: “*In a company with that type of turnover, it is correct to build a system of relationships that recognises workers with a performance bonus and contractual conditions. That is, stable trade union relations.*”

A fundamental question is whether it is possible for the workers to obtain better wages, working hours and conditions through “stable trade union relations” with the employers and government, when today this usually means pressure on the unions to subordinate the workers’ interests to the capitalist state framework.



GERMANY

Verdi calls four-day strike at Amazon sites over pay ahead of Easter

The trade union Verdi called for workers at six Amazon sites in Germany to go on strike for four days from the evening of 28 March, in the latest attempt to try to force the corporation to recognise collective bargaining agreements.

Verdi said the strikes at Amazon’s sites in Rheinberg, Werne, Koblenz, Leipzig and at two locations in Bad Hersfeld signalled an “*unofficial start*” to wage talks for the retail and mail order industry, which are due to begin in the next few weeks.

Verdi representative Orhan Akman said “*Amazon is making a mint in the coronavirus crisis. For this reason alone, wage evasion must be stopped there.*”

Verdi is demanding a pay increase of 4.5 per cent for workers in the retail and mail order industry.

Amazon has faced a long-running battle with unions in Germany over better pay and conditions for logistics workers, who have frequently staged strikes since 2013.

Germany is Amazon’s biggest market after the United States.



International campaign to free Mumia Abu-Jamal gathers support

On 6 March, the International Workers Committee Against War and Exploitation, For a Workers International (IWC) launched its own appeal as part of the international campaign to free Mumia Abu-Jamal. The IWC appeal, which was issued in English, Spanish and French, has now received endorsements from activists of labour and democratic rights organisations around the world.

URGENT APPEAL

*Mumia's Covid-19 infection has been confirmed
by prison doctors after initial denial*

**Free Mumia immediately!
Free all political prisoners!**

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

We need your urgent support.

Mumia Abu-Jamal must be hospitalised. He has tested positive for Covid-19 and is being warehoused in a completely inadequate prison infirmary. Given his age (67), his liver disease, and his blood-pressure challenges, Mumia's life is seriously in danger. His condition is even more alarming, as he has been diagnosed recently as suffering from congestive heart failure. He needs to be released from prison and sent to a hospital for proper medical attention.

But that is not all. Mumia needs to be released from prison altogether, based on his documented innocence and his medical condition, which in itself should be sufficient to warrant his release.

There is growing clamour at home and abroad demanding Mumia's release. On 27 February, activists at an emergency action at Philadelphia District Attorney Larry Krasner's office called for Mumia's immediate release and treatment at an appropriate hospital. On 3 March, Mumia was able to speak by phone to his supporters as they rallied once again outside Krasner's office. Mumia expressed his gratitude for the worldwide support for him and for all other elders with life-threatening conditions who remain in prison.

We urge you to contact Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf, Secretary of Pennsylvania Prisons John Wetzel, and Philadelphia DA Larry Krasner with these three demands:

- **Transfer Mumia to a hospital for proper medical care!**
- **Free Mumia immediately!**
- **Free all elders, vulnerable inmates, and political prisoners!**

Contact information:

PA Governor Tom Wolf: 717-787-2500, Brunelle.michael@gmail.com; PA DOC Secretary John Wetzel: 717-728-2573, jowetzel@state.pa.us; PA DA Larry Krasner: 267-456-1000, justice@phila.gov.

First endorsers in the UK:

Ian Hodson, National President, Bakers', Food & Allied Workers Union; **Steve Hedley**, Assistant General Secretary, RMT (personal capacity); **Jane Doolan**, UNISON NEC member; **James Parker**, Secretary, Berkshire Association of Trades Councils and Secretary of Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Unite Community Branch; **Stefan Cholewka**, Secretary, Rochdale TUC; **Kevin O'Brien**, UNISON member, Secretary of Merton and Sutton TUC; **Mike Arnott**, Secretary, Dundee TUC; **Cllr Mouna Hamitouche MBE**, Labour Councillor for Barnsbury Ward, Mayor of Islington (London) 2010-11; **Mike Calvert**, Deputy Branch Secretary, Islington UNISON; **Tariq Ali**, writer; **David Halpin**, retired orthopaedic and trauma surgeon, MBBS and FRCS; **Charles Charalambous**, Editor, *Labour Internationalist*; **Nat Queen**, University and College Union, University of Birmingham (pers. cap.); **Ray Barkley**, Secretary, Slough Unite; **Nick Phillips**, Unite member; **Henry Mott**, Unite member; **Michael Loughlin**, academic; **Mona Baker**, Shanghai International Studies University, University of Oslo, Manchester University; **David Ball**, Professor Emeritus, Smith College Northampton; **John Sweeney**, Workers Against the EU (pers. cap.); **Julia Ayache**, PhD student, University of Nottingham; **Doreen McNally**, Liverpool Unite Community (pers. cap.)

FRANCE

The relevance today of the Paris Commune

By Daniel Gluckstein

Editorial published in Issue no.280 (10 March 2021) of *La Tribune des Travailleurs* [Workers' Tribune], the weekly newspaper of the French POID

18 March 2021 will mark the 150th anniversary of the proclamation Paris Commune, the first workers' government in history.

As far as the (reactionary) historian Pierre Nora is concerned, there is no need to commemorate the Paris Commune insofar as "*revolutionary inspiration has long been absent from the memory of workers' achievements*".

So the Paris Commune is supposedly not relevant today, when during the 72 days of its short existence, among other things it requisitioned factories that had been abandoned by their bosses, banned night-work for categories of work that did not fundamentally require it, requisitioned vacant accommodation for workers' families who had lost theirs, cancelled rental arrears, limited the working day to eight hours, introduced secular public education, guaranteed equal rights under law, and set a ceiling for allowances paid to elected representatives at the level of a worker's wage?

For her part, Ms Hidalgo, the ("socialist") mayor of Paris, is arranging the setting-up of "*50 life-size silhouettes of Communards*" and putting up plaques in their honour. But what about the Commune's relevance today? On 9 March, hundreds of workers employed by Paris city council protested outside her window together with their trade unions, having mobilised against her project to extend working time by eight hours per year, applying decisions taken by Macron. "*Not one minute more!*", the workers chanted.

Where does the Paris Commune feature in the reduction in working time or in its extension?

As we know, Ms Hidalgo has presidential ambitions. She respects the institutions of the Fifth Republic which

concentrate power in the hands of the President, because the office-holder must in all circumstances act as the capitalist class's clerk. Sarkozy a while ago, Hollande after him, Macron today... Hidalgo soon?

Will anyone dare to remind Ms Hidalgo what the Paris Commune was in terms of its social and democratic content?

The Hungarian worker Leo Frankel, who was elected a Commune Delegate, said: "*We are here to carry out social reforms (...). The only mandate I need to accept here is to defend the working class.*" And on 22 March 1871, the poster convening the election to Paris municipal council declared: "*The members of the municipal assembly will be continuously held accountable, monitored and discussed by public opinion. They are subject to recall, accountable and held responsible.*"

The Democratic Independent Workers Party (POID) supports mandated democracy. By marching on 20 March to the Wall of the Communards [in Père Lachaise cemetery], where the last of the Communards fell, we will affirm the relevance today of the Paris Commune. In other words, the relevance today of a workers' government which, in the near future, will requisition the factories and ban lay-offs and job-cuts, and will confiscate the hundreds of billions of euros handed out to the capitalists by Macron (and the unanimous National Assembly) in order to fund the emergency measures for defending the working class and the youth.

This is not about history; it is about the struggle of the working class today for democracy and winning back its rights. Let us meet up on 20 March.

* * * * *

Issue No.21 (February 2021) of *The Internationale* is out!

The review of the Organising Committee for the Reconstitution of the Fourth International (OCRFI) is published in Arabic, English, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish

Notes on the world situation following the US presidential election

We salute the uprising by the farmers and rural workers of India!

The world crisis, US-China relations and the struggle of the Chinese proletariat

Correspondence of *The Internationale*

Revisiting the importance of working in the trade unions

History: A political chronology of the Paris Commune (1871)

To subscribe (six issues for £30), please contact labour.internationalist2019@gmail.com