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the Socialist

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4-10 May 2023

formerly **Militant**

While royals and rich parade and party...

WE WON'T ACCEPT BEING MADE POORER

JOHN WILLIAMS
CARDIFF EAST SOCIALIST PARTY

750,000 people visited a food bank for the first time last year, an increase of 37%, according to the Trussell Trust, a UK food bank charity. It gave out nearly three million food parcels in 2022-23 and there's no signs of this slowing down.

However, according to Bank of England economist Huw Pill, we need to "accept" being poorer...

Obviously he's fine with food bank usage going up, because many people can't afford the basics as it is. This cost-of-living crisis is hitting the poorest hardest.

Millions - paramedics, carers, shop workers, pensioners, parents - are being plunged into poverty. But the millionaires and billionaires are doing just fine. They aren't being told to get used to being poorer. The opposite in fact!

It's estimated that the total cost the 'taxpayer' will have to pay for the King's coronation is more than

£250 million. But what about services like 'meals on wheels' for the elderly and vulnerable, which has been scrapped in various places of the UK, or money for underfunded schools, or a real pay rise for health workers?

Less than a third of 16 to 24-year-olds support the monarchy now, and it's clear to see why. All the institutions of the capitalist establishment are losing credibility. The rotten profit system keeps making life worse.

Over the May Day weekend,

teachers, nurses and civil servants took strike action, showing that we shouldn't just accept getting poorer. Instead taking on the bosses and the governments of the UK, that want to make working-class people pay for their crisis. To hell with their mantra of 'making difficult decisions', and that includes Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer.

We shouldn't accept being poorer, because we know there's enough wealth and money in society. The problem is - who owns and controls it? Why can a select few, like the

royal family, get the best healthcare while the rest of us face hours-long queues for A&E?

To put the control in the hands of working people, we need to fight for democratic nationalisation and for socialism. We need further coordinated strikes, and to channel energy into building a new mass workers' party with a socialist programme that would fully fund the NHS, build council homes, provide inflation-busting wages and jobs for all, and end the rule of the monarchs and bosses (see page 3).

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HOW CAN WE WIN A FOUR-DAY WEEK? >>> p8

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"The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."
Karl Marx

Starmer to ditch Labour's free education pledge

A week after removing the whip from key Jeremy Corbyn ally, Diane Abbott MP, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer has taken the axe to Corbyn's headline policies too.

On Corbyn's 2019 manifesto pledge to abolish tuition fees, Starmer said on BBC Radio 4's Today programme: "We are likely to move on from that commitment".

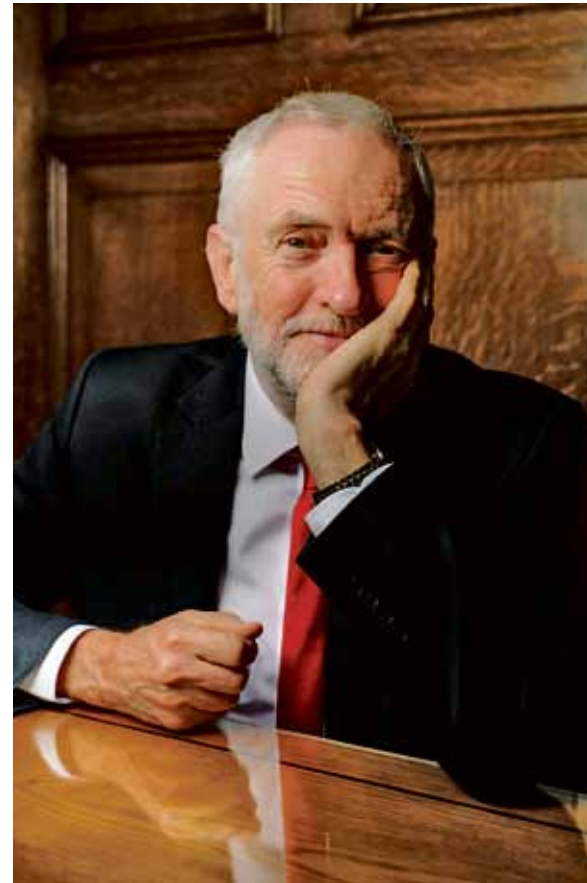
"When we have come up with what is the fairest option, then we will announce that." What would be fairer than giving young people today what Starmer and a whole raft of other MPs had - free university education with maintenance grants?

Nationalisation

What about Corbyn's pledges to nationalise energy, water and mail? Starmer's reason for jettisoning these policies too: "There is a huge outlay of money to nationalise some of these companies". Not true.

Why should the muck-spreading, profiteering, water company bosses get any compensation? So too the energy bosses, like those of BP that made £4 billion profits in the first quarter of the year. Nationalising these companies under democratic working-class control, with compensation only on the basis of need, could be free.

Starmer is proclaiming from the rooftops, addressing the capitalist class: 'Labour would govern in your interests'. That's why the Socialist Party calls for a trade union-backed



workers' list of candidates at the next general election, fighting in the interests of workers not the bosses - as a step towards establishing a new mass workers' party. This should include

Jeremy Corbyn standing in Islington North, outside of Labour if he has to. The Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) stand in the local elections on 4 May was part of that

same fight - with striking workers, students and those kicked out of Labour among the candidates - putting up a fighting socialist alternative to austerity.

New Tory ID laws deny two million right to vote

ADAM HARMSWORTH
COVENTRY SOCIALIST PARTY

The Tories' new requirement for photo ID to vote is a clear attempt to suppress democracy.

The Tories know there is barely any actual electoral fraud in the UK. But now, two million people were unable to vote in the 4 May local elections, because they don't have valid ID.

Only 85,000 people applied for free 'voter authority certificates', before the deadline this year. After disenfranchising two million people, the Tories made no serious effort to ensure people would be able to vote.

Local election turnouts are already horrendously low, especially in working-class areas. For example, at last year's local elections, Hull's Marfleet ward had just 13.45% of voters actually take part.

But local authorities control a huge portion of public funding, and are responsible for major public services, like social care, education, and transport. Both Tory and Labour councils have got away with passing on austerity from the Tories in Westminster, butchering these essential services.

The Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) stood over 250

candidates in this election to oppose them. The new photo ID laws particularly affect those who have the most to gain from using their vote to oppose cuts.

Our right to strike and protest

This is the latest in a series of anti-democratic moves by the Tory government. The right to strike and protest has already been curtailed in recent years, and are threatened with even more draconian laws.

The Tories are entirely unable to resolve the cost-of-living crisis, among other major issues facing workers today. So they are resorting to trying to

suppress our ability to fight back, as they stumble from one crisis to the next. But it won't stop mass opposition to their policies.

A government genuinely acting in the interests of democracy, would try to actually increase the number of people voting, and taking part in democratic discussion. The new voter ID requirement should be ended. Everyone should automatically have a right to vote from age 16. We should also have a shorter working week, combined with inflation-proof pay rises, to ensure workers actually have the time to get involved in democracy.

Tories and Labour fail to invest in public transport

PIRIYASHA
BIRMINGHAM CENTRAL SOCIALIST PARTY

A report by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) states that there needs to be a radical increase in public spending on transport to tackle climate change. The TUC reports that greater investment in transport would boost the economy by £52 billion, and create 140,000 new transport jobs.

Public transport workers - such as rail staff and bus drivers - have also joined the strike wave, fighting for better pay, funding, and living conditions.

The Socialist Party has always campaigned for the expansion of public transport. However, the Tory government does not prioritise this investment.

Unaffordable and inaccessible

For anyone trying to get around the outskirts of a city, they must first travel into the city centre, and then back out again. Bus and train routes need to be extended, particularly in rural areas. And public transport needs to be truly affordable and accessible.

Labour councils have a lot of

power. They could bring services back in-house, and extend free bus travel to young people, as a step toward universal free services.

Annual 'climate change conferences' get the world's capitalist leaders, and their fossil fuel lobbyists, together to discuss the climate emergency. However, no significant action is ever taken to tackle climate change by these capitalist politicians.

The constant burning of fossil fuels, increasing carbon dioxide emissions, is not sustainable. The capitalist system that the Tories and

Keir Starmer's Labour uphold, prioritises profit, while destroying the environment.

We need a fully funded and integrated public transport system, owned and controlled by the working class, to provide easily accessible services for everyone and help halt climate change.

Tories and Labour won't do that. We need a party that will. That's why the Socialist Party fights to help build a new mass workers' party, and stood as part of the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) in the local elections on 4 May.

Pomp and ceremony - food banks and strikes

End the rule of the monarchs and bosses - fight for socialism



WHAT WE THINK

“Lose trust in democracy and democracy dies. Lose trust in capitalism and it fails too.”

This was the warning given by the Tory leader of the House of Commons, Penny Mordaunt, at the launch of the Edelman Trust Barometer 2023 in March.

Surveys on trust abound but they all conclude that confidence in the institutions of modern-day capitalist society - political parties, governments, press, police, judiciary - is being eroded, and especially among young people. The World Values Survey found that confidence in the government among Millennials in Britain has halved since 2005. This is the background to the Coronation.



Their system is not democratic - unelected head of state and House of Lords, billionaire-owned press, and anti-union legislation, and ownership of the means of production by the tiny capitalist elite

For the poorest, Mordaunt said, "the whole system can seem rigged against them". That's because it is. Nurses, for example, face a Tory government, led by a multimillionaire heir, attacking their democratic right to strike. The pay 'rise' being imposed on them amounts to around half the amount that removing student bursaries has taken from their salaries. In fact, the NHS pay offer equates to about a sixth of the inflation on a cheese sandwich.

Meanwhile, the big businesses who own the means of producing that sandwich - including energy, water and supermarkets - rake in profit. The Financial Times recently noted that across western economies profit "margins reached record highs" during 2022, and "remain historically high". Research released in March by the trade union Unite showed that, for the 350 largest companies listed on the London Stock Exchange, "Profit margins for the first half of 2022 were 89% higher than in the same period in 2019."



Royal Mail workers marched through central London to Buckingham Palace in December during their strike. ISAI MARJUKA

of capitalism that the resulting fall in trust in the system poses a threat to the continuation of capitalism, based on maximising private profits through exploitation of the majority by a small minority. The fear is that the Edelman findings, that "61% want a new type of political party", while "73% want new thinking, ideas and approaches", will find expression in a struggle to build a new workers' party with a socialist programme to end the capitalist order and the poverty, war and oppression inherent to it.

The monarchy has historically played a role in blurring the edges of class inequality. By engendering a sense of 'nationhood' or 'national unity', the monarch, and royal events, have attempted to draw working-class people into feeling part of the system, obfuscating how rigged it is and the need to organise for socialist transformation.

70 years ago

However, the crisis of capitalism and the attempts to make the working class pay for it undermines this.

At the time of the Queen's Coronation 70 years ago, there was some material basis for believing that the system offered a decent future. The NHS had been established - and was not yet being destroyed by privatisation and funding cuts as is the case today. Under pressure of the organised working class and the potential threat to the capitalists' right to rule, the Tory government in 1953 completed 245,160 new council homes. Under Tony Blair's pro-capitalist New Labour, 130 council homes were built in 2004

and numbers remain low. House prices have increased dramatically too: if the price of a supermarket chicken had increased at the same rate since the late 1960s, it would today cost more than £50. What basis is there for working-class people, especially the youth, to have confidence in this system?

The publicly paid-for £250 million Coronation is revealing that under Charles the monarchy's ability to continue playing that role is increasingly limited. Since 2013, the number of young people who support its continuation has halved to 32%. The recent research into its obscene wealth published by The Guardian newspaper and the focus on the royal family's connections to the slave trade adds to this mood. Slavery played a central role in creating the basis for British capitalism and involved virtually every institution of modern British capitalism that existed during the years of the transatlantic slave trade, including the royal family.

This situation poses a problem for the capitalist class for a number of reasons. Their system is not democratic, including the maintenance of an unelected head of state and House of Lords; billionaire-owned press, and anti-trade union legislation; and, fundamentally, is based on ownership of the means of production by the tiny capitalist elite. But their preference is for this to be obscured, and for a consensus which upholds them in power with minimal opposition. The alternative which is forced on them by class struggle, relying on increased repression, can more clearly reveal the real character of capitalism, 'red in tooth and claw' and can accelerate the understanding of the need to replace the rigged capitalist system.

Their power

For the capitalist class, there is more to this conundrum. The monarchy holds reserve powers, including to dissolve governments, call elections and even declare martial law. The Queen's powers were used in November 1975 in Australia, when the governor-general, the Queen's representative, removed the elected Labor prime minister Gough Whitlam. Whitlam had been pushed by pressure from the working class and social movements to carry out substantial reforms, including free higher education.

It is for these reasons that the Socialist Party says the monarchy should be abolished. Because of the role the monarchy can play for them, the capitalist class will fight to maintain it. Building a mass workers' movement armed with a socialist programme that can replace failed capitalism, with all its repressive and coercive state institutions and inequality, is needed. Socialism, based on a democratic planned economy, can meet the needs of the millions not the millionaires, and the environment.

After the May Day weekend strikes Organise further mass coordinated strike action



Despite the efforts of the Tory government and bosses to end the strikes with poor pay offers, threats and court action, once again workers have demonstrated that the strike wave for a real pay rise is well and truly still on.

2023 May Day – International Workers’ Day – was marked with four days of strikes and workers’ demonstrations. Teachers in the National Education Union (NEU) in England took two days of strike action on 27 April and 2 May. Civil servants in the PCS took their third day of national strike action on 28 April. Nurses in the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) struck from 8pm Sunday to midnight Monday 1 May. A Northern Ireland-wide strike of education and the civil service took place on 26 April.

Unite strikes also took place in the NHS on 1 and 2 May, including Yorkshire, South Central, South East Coast and West Midlands ambulances, and a number of hospital trusts including East Lancashire, Sandwell and West Birmingham, and Guy’s and St Thomas’s in London.

Demonstrations and rallies took place in many towns and cities. PCS members protested at Downing Street and up to 10,000 NEU members marched through Westminster.

Throughout the strike wave it has been the members that have pushed forward, delivering overwhelming votes in the ballots required by Tory anti-union legislation, and in many of the votes on pay offers.

The RCN leadership tried to get members to accept the latest government offer – so hard that they called the police on members who were campaigning for reject! But the members pushed back. That pressure has meant that Pat Cullen, RCN general secretary, has felt compelled to protest at the Tories’ disgraceful court action that blocked the planned strike for Tuesday 2 May.

Lead
Where a lead has been given, members have responded: in the NEU’s consultation on the government offer, in which the National Executive recommended rejection, 98% voted to reject! NHS workers in Unite have joined RCN members in voting to reject, as have radiographers. In Unison and the GMB, where the leadership campaigned strenuously for acceptance, members have voted to accept – although in Unison 40,000 members still voted to reject, and in the GMB 44% voted to reject!

A meeting of the NHS Staff Council, made up of representatives of NHS unions and employers took place on Tuesday 2 May to decide whether the NHS pay offer would be accepted. But that body has no power to make a binding decision. Members of unions that have voted to reject can bank that inadequate 5% pay rise and still fight on for more.

PCS, RCN and NEU are all rebalancing to maintain their strike mandates. In each of these unions, there now needs to be a serious plan for escalating strike action to win. Wherever possible that should be coordinated: many nurses and junior doctors argue to strike together, as could four teaching unions (NEU, NASUWT, NAHT and ACSL) in the autumn.

Other workers are also potentially joining the action, including Unison members in local government and schools, which, if they vote to strike in the upcoming ballot, could bring hundreds of thousands more workers into the field.

As reported in last week’s Socialist, postal workers in the Communication Workers Union (CWU) will be consulted on the proposed deal negotiated by the union’s leadership with Royal Mail senior management, in a vote that runs from 17 May – 7 June. The deal only offers a 10% pay rise over three years, and over 400 reps and members remain victimised and sacked. Consequently, Socialist Party members are campaigning for a reject vote, alongside other activists in the union in CWU Forward (see meeting advert).

The Tories’ latest anti-union measures, the Minimum Services bill,

could become law within weeks. But this is a divided government acting out of desperation against workers, and can be defeated. But that requires a serious response. The unions must meet urgently to prepare for mass coordinated action, up to and including a 24-hour general strike. The TUC should organise a national demonstration to launch such a campaign.

The organised working class in action has the power still to bring down this Tory government sooner rather than later, with the likelihood of a Starmer-led Labour government coming to power. Action now will help build the pressure on that government, which, as Starmer further underlines every day, has no intention of granting inflation-proof pay rises or fully funding public services such as the NHS and schools, never mind renationalising Royal Mail.

NSSN conference

The annual conference of the National Shop Stewards Network, on 24 June in London, therefore takes place at a vital time. The fight for inflation-proof pay rises, against imminent further anti-union legislation, and in preparation for a potential Starmer government, are all crucial and urgent issues for strikers, union reps, members and activists to debate.

Those same forces that have propelled the strike wave forward all through, have the opportunity to come together at the NSSN conference to thrash out a fighting strategy. If you’ve been on the picket line, this conference is the next place you need to be!

www.shopstewards.net

nationalshop stewardsnetwork

If you've been on a picket line, this is where you need to be next!

2023 National Shop Stewards Network Conference
Saturday 24 June
Conway Hall,
London WC1R 4RL
11am-4.30pm

FIGHT THE TORY COST-OF-LIVING SQUEEZE AND THEIR ANTI-UNION LAWS!

MEGA-STRIKE

Hundreds of thousands walked out in May Day weekend ‘mega-strikes’. Socialist Party members went along to picket lines, strike demos and May Day rallies in support.

TEACHERS

Elaine Brunskill reports that the numbers on NEU picket lines in Gateshead are growing.

Some of the strikers at Oakfield School on 27 April were from Kells Lane School, who then organised their own picket line on 2 May. At Glynwood Primary School, teachers had friends and relatives in the PCS

and RCN. Everybody knows somebody who is out on strike!

Strikers made the point that, alongside the deal on offer not being enough, there is no extra funding for it. Any extra money given to them comes out of existing budgets, meaning cuts to support staff.

Children were shouting out “toot, toot!” as they walked by – a generation of young people learning a valuable lesson about workers’ solidarity!



CWU FORWARD

Zoom meeting to help organise the REJECT vote

8pm Friday 5th May
Meeting ID: 82957017380
Passcode: 506427

VOTE NO!

FIGHT FOR THE RIGHT DEAL

NHS

Across Leeds, nurses and ambulance workers both took part in strike action on 1 May. As the RCN picket line supervisor at St James’s Hospital kept saying, “Every time I look, there’s more of us!”

Nurses said they rejected the 5% pay offer not only for how low it was in relation to inflation, or restoring the decade of lost pay, but also as it reflected a total failure to address safe staffing and nurse retention.

There was enthusiasm about striking alongside ambulance workers, and for coordinating future action with junior doctors. At the ambulance picket line in Bramley, we were told that Unite was struggling to process all the new members signing up to join.

At Torbay Hospital, RCN members told Ryan Aldred: “I joined the RCN because it had a no-strike policy, but it’s now that bad that here I am on a picket line.” “I don’t work overtime and I can’t afford holidays.” Another added: “You even have to pay to come to work because of the car parking fees.”

Corinthia Ward reports from Good Hope Hospital, in Sutton Coldfield: “Nurses were being offered £50 an hour to come in today, with one shift effectively being worth a week’s normal wages.” At Birmingham Children’s Hospital a picket sarcastically said: “It’s a funny coincidence that after 13 years of the Tories we’re being paid less, bursaries have been scrapped and we’re more understaffed than ever. But that’s not saying it would have been any better under Labour!”

A striker told Joe Foster at



Ickburgh School, Hackney, East London (top left)
Oakfield Primary School, Gateshead (left)
Cardiff May Day demo (above)
Birmingham Children’s Hospital (above right)
PCS protest at Downing Street (below)
RCN protest at the Royal Courts of Justice (right)



MEGA-STRIKE

Heartlands Hospital in Birmingham: “We have doctors coming from other areas to work here, and we tell them that we can’t carry out basic procedures, due to not having the equipment or the staff.”

CIVIL SERVICE

Hundreds of PCS members descended on Downing Street in London on 28 April. Helen Pattison reports that the picket lines were big, loud and angry, with lots of new and younger members of the union. Strikers said there were lots of reasons why they had joined the union recently: the action on pay, and also working conditions. These new, young reps were keen to discuss a strategy to escalate the action.

Labour must refuse to implement new anti- strike law

The latest round of action by teachers, nurses and civil servants in the ongoing battle against the cost-of-living crisis could potentially be the last set of strikes to be held before the government’s new anti-union Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill comes into law.

The Tories were defeated in the House of Lords at the end of April but are set to push ahead when the Bill returns to the Commons for the last time.

The new law will allow Secretaries of State in six sectors – health services, education, transport, fire and rescue, nuclear safety, and border staff – to make ‘minimum service regulations’ empowering employers to issue a ‘Work Notice’ to a trade union specifying which individuals they require to continue to work during a strike.

If a union “fails to take reasonable steps” to ensure that its members identified in a Work Notice follow an instruction to work, it will lose its protection from liability and subsequent claims for damages. An individual worker continuing to take part in a strike contrary to a Work Notice instruction will lose their current automatic protection from unfair dismissal.

This is a draconian attack on workers’ rights which must be resisted at every level – including by Labour-controlled public employers in local government, education, transport and fire and rescue authorities, and the Welsh government.

While Starmer’s Labour has voted against the Minimum Service Level law in parliament, it is clear, however, that it will take more than just polite lobbying to compel their local representatives on public authorities to support non-compliance and refuse to implement the Act.

That must include standing trade union candidates in elections against any councillor who collaborates with anti-union laws.

Labour First Minister of Wales, the London Mayor Sadiq Khan, or the Labour ‘Metro-Mayors’ of Liverpool, Manchester, North Tyneside, South Yorkshire, the West of England and West Yorkshire? Or Labour council candidates standing in the 4 May local elections?

Build the pressure for non-compliance

The key to making the new anti-union law inoperable is action organised across the trade union movement. This must include preparations for a one-day general strike if the legislation is used to levy punitive damages against an individual union exercising its democratic right to take strike action.

But, as the Fire Brigades Union general secretary Matt Wrack said in response to Humza Yousaf’s pledge at the Scottish TUC, pressurising public sector employers to refuse to apply work notices – and to end contracts with any outside employer who does so – is another weapon that must be used.

That applies to local councils as well – especially the 120 or so Labour-controlled councils across Britain with rights and powers in education, transport, fire and rescue services, and health.

While Starmer’s Labour has voted against the Minimum Service Level law in parliament, it is clear, however, that it will take more than just polite lobbying to compel their local representatives on public authorities to support non-compliance and refuse to implement the Act.

That must include standing trade union candidates in elections against any councillor who collaborates with anti-union laws.

Tories take NHS ‘heroes’ to court An RCN member’s response

MICHELLE JARRETT-RUECROFT
NURSE PRACTITIONER AND RCN STEWARD

Since the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) vote to strike was announced on 2 November 2022, the Tories have used every delaying tactic they can muster to try to stop us striking – including entering into negotiations to only offer a paltry sum.

After RCN members went against the advice of the unions’ leadership and rejected the Tories’ insulting offer, the union gave the mandatory 14-day notice period to commence a 48-hour walkout from 8pm on 30 April.

The Tories claimed that to strike on 2 May would be unlawful, calling on the ‘anti-’ Trade Union Act 2016 that limits workers’ strike mandate to a period of six months. The explanatory notes, which are available on the government website,

include a discretionary provision to extend this period to nine months, if agreed by the union and employer. The judge ruled in favour of the Tories and deemed the last hours of the strike, on 2 May, illegal. The strike was forced to end at 23:59 on 1 May.

The RCN will now ballot its members for a new strike mandate. The government’s bully-boy tactics will instil a further sense of anger among nurses. It is up to us, fighting trade unionists in the workplace, to make sure the Tories’ tactics don’t succeed, to give nurses confidence that we do not have to accept a significantly below-inflation pay deal.

This bullying Tory government would like to impose even stricter anti-trade union laws – we must stop them! The Tories must not be allowed to bully us – who they declared “heroes”. And they must not be allowed to further decimate our NHS!



IAIN DALTON
SOCIALIST PARTY NATIONAL COMMITTEE

Increasingly feeling the need to put items back as you're going round the supermarket doing your weekly shop? Worrying about how much it'll come to when you reach the checkouts?

You're not alone, and stats back it up. According to the Office for National Statistics, annual price inflation for food and non-alcoholic beverages reached 19.2% in March, the fastest annual rate since 1977.

The justification for the government's measly 5% pay offer to NHS workers, and even less for school and local authority staff, is that inflation is supposed to be coming down. But the cost of food continues to accelerate upwards.

44% of people in Britain are cutting back on food spending, and 14% are skipping meals, according to the Trades Union Congress. Food bank use is rising. Globally, 828 million are affected by hunger, and 2.3 billion are moderately or severely food insecure.

Meanwhile, the world's 20 biggest food companies delivered \$53.5 billion to shareholders in the last two financial years, according to research by Greenpeace. As a Greenpeace spokesperson puts it: "What we are witnessing is an enormous transfer of wealth to a few rich families that basically own the global food system, at a time when the majority of the world population is struggling to make ends meet."

Ukraine war

Food supply has been hit significantly by the war in Ukraine, in addition to the impacts of Covid-19 pandemic supply disruptions – both themselves symptoms of increased tensions in a capitalist world in crisis.

28% of the world's fertilisers made from nitrogen and phosphate came from Russia and Ukraine before the conflict erupted. Limits on Russian exports of gas have curtailed fertiliser production in Europe too. Tonnes of Russian-made fertiliser are stuck in warehouses elsewhere in the world, unable to be exported due to sanctions.

Farmers who were paying £281 per tonne of fertiliser in April 2021 were paying £785 per tonne in April 2022 – a 180% increase. Prices have remained at a high level since.

Like in other industry, record-high wholesale energy prices (in part another byproduct of the Ukraine conflict) have driven up production costs.

It has a direct impact on farmers themselves, particularly on those growing crops in greenhouses that require heating. A spokesperson for the National Farmers' Union (NFU) said: "At the moment we've got a lot of glasshouses that would be growing the tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, aubergines that are sitting there empty because they simply couldn't take the risk to plant them with the crops, not thinking they'd get the returns from the marketplace."

A recent survey by Farmers Weekly showed a third of respondents had reduced their output in the past 12 months due to increased costs.

The increased cost of natural gas has other knock-on effects too. Production of carbonated drinks and brewing has been hit by the closure of the CF Fertilisers plant in Billingham, Teesside – the last UK ammonia plant, where carbon dioxide is produced as a byproduct.

In 2019, Russia and Ukraine exported more than a quarter of the world's wheat. In 2022, the year of the invasion, grain production in Ukraine had dropped by 40%. Three fifths of the world's sunflower oil is produced in Russia and Ukraine but production of these dropped 25%. Prices of these staples are soaring. So too their substitutes such as olive oil, which has increased by 18%, despite production of it increasing by 11%.

All this disruption is a reflection of the new unstable era of global capitalist crisis with heightened geo-political tensions. The impact on ordinary people, directly and indirectly, is so much small change for the major capitalist powers trying to extend their influence.

If the impact of wars and pandemic wasn't enough, add to that the increased rate of extreme weather events as a result of climate change.

In the UK, last summer's heatwave led to reduced yields of a whole series of crops, from apples to peas, potatoes to salads. A Mediterranean cold snap, particularly affecting Spain and Morocco, was an additional factor in the shortages of salads and tomatoes in British supermarkets at the beginning of this year.

But it's not just extreme temperatures affecting crops. Last year's floods in Pakistan destroyed \$1.3 billion of rice, sugarcane and cotton in the Sindh province alone, plus a further \$374 million of tomatoes, onions and chilies, according to research from the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development.

Food and climate change

The food industry itself accounts for 26% of global greenhouse gas emissions, the majority from animal products.

All this highlights the need to rapidly transition to net zero carbon emissions, and to plan and develop environmentally friendly energy and food production methods. But capitalism's profit drive, where individual capitalists compete to maximize profits, means firms are reluctant to invest at the scale and pace needed to drastically reduce emissions.

Capitalist states, representing the dominant interests of their own capitalist classes, compete too – incapable of the international collaboration, investment and planning necessary to tackle climate change.

Disruptions to food supply plays a part in driving up prices. But capitalists are taking advantage of opportunities to boost profits by inflating prices further still. This was alluded to by Bank of England governor Andrew Bailey, in a recent interview with the Today programme on BBC Radio 4.

Having last year told workers to show "restraint" in their demands for pay to keep up with the cost of living, after a year of workers' strikes, he addressed "price setters" (capitalists) instead.

FOOD PRICE CRISIS

WHAT IS THE SOCIALIST SOLUTION?



PHOTO: MTAYLOR848/CC

The recently published "Unite Investigates: Profiteering Across the Economy – it's systemic" lays bare the soaring profits made by many of the big companies in the food sector, where market share is dominated by just a handful of companies.

For example, the global grain trade is dominated by four big companies (Archer-Daniels Midland, Bunge, Cargill and Louis Dreyfus), which account for 90% of the market, and whose profits soared by a whopping 255% from 2019 to 2021.

Three companies, Tesco, Asda and Sainsbury's have a majority of UK supermarket trade, 56% – together they increased their profits by 97%

between 2019 and 2021.

Food manufacturers have also made huge profits. Eight out of the top ten manufacturers in the UK that Unite could find data for reported a £22.8 billion profit for 2021, a 21% increase on 2019.

Between the food manufacturers and the supermarkets there have also been battles over the share of these profits – with the most high profile being the disappearance of Heinz products from Tesco shelves in summer 2022.

Food prices internationally are being hit by profiteering, climate change and increased global tensions. British capitalism faces additional

disruptions and instability from the Tories' ongoing disorderly process of leaving the EU bosses' club.

30% of UK food is imported from the EU. Tory Brexit has led to additional costs for transnational shipments of agricultural goods and food, such as customs duties.

The implementation of the new post-Brexit inspection regime has been delayed four times so far, and the industry body, the Cold Chain Federation, has suggested its implementation will deter EU firms exporting to the UK.

British capitalism has long relied on food imports. It has been a strategy of the capitalist class dating back to

the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846.

Since joining the European Economic Community in 1972, British capitalism increasingly relied on food imports. In the 1980s Britain's food self-sufficiency was nearly 80%; this has since dropped to around 50%.

By using cheaper labour elsewhere in the world, capitalists hold down wages and realise more profits.

Farming

The agriculture and food production industry in Britain is dependent on low-paid migrant labour. EU residents who had previously been employed without restriction have, since 2018, needed to apply for a seasonal work

visa, reducing numbers. Pandemic travel restrictions exacerbated this further.

With big farm owners unable to easily recruit the same levels of low-paid labour, as much as 30% of crops have gone unharvested in recent years.

The EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), a cornerstone of EU membership, contributed as much as 55% of UK farmers' income in 2014, although 80% of funding went to just 20% of farms. According to the National Audit Office, around 42% of the 85,000 farmers receiving CAP subsidies in 2017 would have made a loss without them, and a further 16% made a loss despite receiving them!

Now out of the EU, the government has promised to maintain farming funding for the course of this parliament and move to a new framework through a seven-year 'Agricultural Transition' to focus more on "public money for public good", rather than on food production explicitly.

For many farmers, non-farming activities are becoming increasingly important to keep afloat – 47% of farmers let out buildings for non-agricultural use, while 22% have solar panels on their land. For 19% of farmers, relying on such diversified business has become their majority source of income.

According to consulting firm Anderson, the number of farmers is expected to fall from 54,000 in 2020 to 42,300 in 2030. It is the nature of the concentration of capital that squeezes smaller, less profitable firms out of the economy, regardless of the consequences for food supply. Whatever gives the big capitalist investors the biggest returns.

There are a whole number of books and other publications that will point to the many problems with food systems around the globe, and even more so in the UK. What does Greenpeace say needs to be done to stop the "enormous transfer of wealth to a few rich families", for example?

Often such critics offer very limited solutions beyond begging big multinationals to act more responsibly in relation to people, the environment or both, or calling upon capitalist governments to legislate and force them to do so.

Very few raise the potential for working-class collective action to challenge these big businesses and governments through industrial action, or with the establishment of working-class democratic control in the industry – such as elected committees of workers' representatives to monitor, check and organise price controls, for example.

Unite the Union's document on profiteering correctly identifies how industrial action can force employers to give up a portion of their profits to higher wages. This has been demonstrated by numerous victories of Unite members during general secretary Sharon Graham's time in office.

However, the report doesn't raise the issue of who fundamentally owns and controls these companies.

If profiteering across food and other industries is systemic, then it requires a systemic alternative.

As it is, the food industry, and the economy at large, is driven by capitalism's need to produce ever-increasing profits for those at the top – the capitalists who own the factories, the big farms, the banks and so on.

If these major levers of the economy were brought into public ownership, production and distribution of food could instead be organised to meet the needs of all. By drawing up a socialist plan, based on what different parts of the food industry can produce and what is being sold, investment into those areas can be planned – democratically decided by elected representatives of workers in the industry and the wider working class.

The food and drink industry is dominated by a small number of monopolies in production, distribution and retail, but it also contains many small businesses – small shops, restaurants, small farms, and so on. The policies of the giant food companies can have a huge effect on the economic viability of smaller producers and outlets. At present it is these smaller companies which are under threat of collapse. The National Federation of Fish Friers reported last year that between 20 to 40 fish and chip shops were closing every week across Britain.

Socialism

Socialists don't aim to 'nationalise every fish and chip shop', but we do raise the need to nationalise the big companies that dominate the sector. This would include many of those pointed to in Unite's report – the grain traders, supermarkets, food processors. The dominance of these companies means that such measures would have a decisive impact.

Taking land into public ownership, for example the estimated 18% owned by corporations and 30% by aristocrats and gentry, would mean its use could be democratically decided upon – to be leased to small farmers, or for use by publicly owned farms, for example.

A nationalised banking system, under working-class control and management, could extend cheap credit to finance aspects of the food industry when necessary.

There are other ways smaller producers could be supported, including direct subsidies in key strategic sectors, or by providing purchase price guarantees to farmers to encourage certain crops to be grown. Where supply was short for any reason, decisions about how to prioritise the distribution of goods could be democratically decided, as could plans to step up production in different ways.

Socialist planning would mean these decisions would not be subject to the whims of a handful of capitalists, but democratically discussed and decided upon by elected representatives of workers. Such methods of organising society, to put the needs of people and our environment first, could lay the basis to ensure that the abundance of food that is currently squandered by capitalism could be produced affordably, sustainably and with good quality. It would allow humanity to put an end to the horrors of hunger that have given rise to food banks here in Britain, and the horrors of famine in some parts of the world.

How can we win a four-day week?

OISIN DUNCAN
NORTH WEST SOCIALIST PARTY

The effects of austerity have forced many workers into dealing with bigger workloads for real-terms pay cuts. Teachers in secondary schools are working 54 hours a week on average, and in the NHS, junior doctors and nurses are asked to pick up the slack as sub-safe staffing levels pile more work on the remaining workforce.

No wonder these workers have been on strike. Imagine working essentially an extra day every week, only to be told by your employer that your pay will not rise with the highest rate of inflation in decades.

Public sector workers' mental and physical health is being sacrificed as they are expected to make up for thousands of vacancies. The huge impact of these workers' strike action is a very real demonstration of the value of the work they do.

Workers in Britain worked an average of 42 hours a week in 2018, two hours more than the European average, according to figures from the Trades Union Congress (TUC). Meanwhile millions live with the insecurity of low- or zero-hour contracts. A quarter of the UK workforce currently works part-time.

For many workers such as teachers, overtime is unpaid. For others, it is contractual or so-called voluntary. Many workers will have started a job and immediately been presented with a piece of paper to sign, opting out of the working time directive's 48-hour weekly limit. Those on insecure limited-hours contracts face the constant threat of hours being cut.

A 32-hour working week without

loss of pay, and with flexibility on our terms not the bosses, has the potential to transform workers' lives. Particularly those struggling to fulfil caring roles on top of full-time work, such as parents. A full-time nursery place for a child under two costs on average £14,836 a year.

Already many parents are forced to work shorter hours with less pay, or leave work altogether unable to afford childcare. In many cases navigating a delicate balance of childcare availability and cost, the cost of commuting, and eligibility for help with benefits.

A number of studies have been conducted in various countries looking at the possible effects of implementing a shorter working week without loss of pay. A recent pilot in the UK coordinated by Autonomy, in which workers remained on full pay with a "meaningful reduction in work time", found that staff reported feeling happier and closer to their loved ones.

Of the 61 companies that participated, together employing around 2,900 workers, 56 are continuing and 18 plan to make the change permanent. The largest firm surveyed had around 1,000 staff but they were an outlier, two-thirds of the firms in the study employed fewer than 25 people. In Britain, the vast majority of workers are employed by companies with more than 100 employees.

The study's authors appear to attempt to make the case to employers that it is in their interests to adopt a four-day week. Bluntly, it's not. And the capitalists know it.

Their profits are maximised by extracting as much labour time as possible from the worker, while giving up

as little of the value they produce in wages.

Just as workers are needing to struggle for pay rises, as they are in the strike wave, a struggle needs to be waged for reduced working hours too.

If the capitalists had their way, workers would work for longer, for less pay. In fact, this is the trend in the teaching profession and others.

Under capitalism, individual bosses strive to increase their own profits, but also compete with each other for a share of the market. Any capitalist convinced by the report's arguments about "improvements in hiring, absenteeism and resignations", that made the change to a four-day working week without loss of pay, would find itself at a competitive disadvantage.

This does not mean a shorter working week without loss of pay is impossible, just that it is in the interests of the workers, and against the interests of the bosses. As Friedrich Engels explained in his pamphlet 'Socialism: Utopian and Scientific', the class struggle can be boiled down to the struggle over the working day.

In the 19th Century Engels analysed the concrete struggles of trade unionists in industrialising countries for paid overtime, an eight-hour day and weekends. And it is the need for workers' struggle against the bosses that is missing from the Autonomy report.

The demand for pay to keep up with inflation has dominated the ongoing strike wave. But key aspects of many of the disputes have involved the struggle over the working day. In the Royal Mail dispute, bosses intended to impose annualised hours, with postal workers working longer hours at busier times of the year,

and later start and 'last letter' times. Weekend working arrangements have been a feature of the RMT union's dispute on the railways.

A motion at the PCS union Annual Delegates Meeting takes up the issue, and the TUC adopted the demand for a four-day week in 2018.

Teachers in the National Education Union (NEU) are currently striking over pay and funding. Socialist Party members in NEU, including those on its executive, continue to campaign for national action for a 'national contract', taking up the issues of workload and working hours. Under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership in 2019, then shadow chancellor John McDonnell, speaking at the Labour conference, committed the party to "reduce the average working week to 32 hours within a decade".

There is no front-bench opposition MP now calling for anything along those lines. The trade union struggle for a shorter working week would be strengthened by a workers' party prepared to fight in the interests of the working class against the capitalists.

The capitalist bosses won't be persuaded by 'rational' arguments to forgo their short-term profits and concede a 32-hour working week without loss of pay. Most will complain such measures are unaffordable, to which socialists say 'open the books and prove it!' Nationalised, democratically controlled by the working class, the big firms can be run on the basis of a 32-hour working week without loss of pay and with future pay linked to inflation, not to maximise profits for shareholders.

History has shown that under the pressure of workers' struggle, industrial and political, the capitalists can be forced into making concessions. But to make substantial, lasting improvements to workers' lives - inflation-proof pay rises, a 32-hour week without loss of pay, access to free high-quality childcare, and more - means a struggle for socialist change.



Capitalist bosses won't be persuaded by 'rational' arguments to forgo their short-term profits and concede a 32-hour working week without loss of pay. But under the pressure of workers' struggle, they can be forced into making concessions

Unite election results: Gains for supporters of Sharon Graham

Now build a fighting lead industrially and politically

KEVIN PARSLOW
BRANCH SECRETARY UNITE LE1228
(PERSONAL CAPACITY)

The results of Unite the Union's Executive Council (EC) elections appear to have given a slim majority to supporters of general secretary Sharon Graham's industrial programme. This includes Socialist Party member Suzanne Muna, formerly an EC member from London and Eastern, who has been elected from her new region, South West.

This is a defeat for the formerly dominant United Left organisation in Unite, which had a majority on the union's leading body since its formation over a decade ago. It stood under the moniker 'Members First' in this election, and has increasingly become the mouthpiece of the conservative elements of the full-time officialdom of the union, wanting to undo the gains that have been made since Sharon's election as general secretary in 2021.

The election saw turnouts in most divisions of between just 5-7%. This is poor, but reflects the situation across the trade union movement where turnouts for union leadership elections do not usually catch the interest of members. Nevertheless, the hundreds of disputes members have voted for and pursued since Sharon Graham became general secretary,

and the hundreds of millions of pounds won in settlements, show that when a lead is given, workers will respond.

The task of the new executive will be to build on this mood to increase participation in the union to take it further along its current path.

But the new executive cannot confine itself to maintaining the current industrial strategy. Inevitably, the union will have to draw political conclusions from the strikes.

The lack of support, even opposition, from Labour leader Keir Starmer and the majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party for workers' struggles, including those of Unite, should not be ignored. This is a clear statement of intent from a party which is likely to be in government during the period of this Executive Council. Unite must be prepared to challenge what will be an anti-working class, pro-capitalist government, whose potential leaders are already schmoozing big business leaders on the 'prawn cocktail' circuit.

Early tests of this will come at the rules and policy conferences of Unite in July. There are rules amendments tabled which propose that Unite backs only those election candidates who support its policies; others call for outright disaffiliation from Labour. Meanwhile, an amendment has gone into the policy conference

agenda calling for a referendum of Unite members on the link with Labour. Socialists on the executive will push for the strongest political lead from Unite, and for the EC to back the amendments.

Ahead of the conference, Unite is also balloting its members on whether to continue its political fund, in which Socialist Party members will call for a yes vote to continue the fund. It is noticeable that in the material, Labour affiliation is barely mentioned as a reason for keeping the fund!

Other Socialist Party members who stood as candidates, and others who also stood on a socialist platform, did well in the elections with fighting campaigns and good votes. This time round, not all secured enough votes to be elected, but their campaigning laid the groundwork for future election victories.

This will be a crucial term for Unite's EC, which will determine whether the union stays at the forefront of struggle in the labour movement, both on the industrial and the political fronts. However, this task will be more achievable if a new open and democratic broad left is built in Unite. The EC election shows the potential for this. Such a left can be built on the foundations of the election campaign, and should be launched at the upcoming Unite policy and rules conference.



Socialist Party member Suzanne Muna who has been re-elected to the Unite executive. PHOTO: BRISTOL SOCIALIST PARTY

Usdaw: Strike wave leaves its mark on conference

IAIN DALTON
USDAM ADM DELEGATE

Shop workers' union Usdaw's 2023 Annual Delegate Meeting (ADM) took place against a backdrop of waves of industrial action, as workers in many trade unions take action over the impact of the cost-of-living crisis.

It was clear at the ADM that workers in a number of warehouse, manufacturing and road haulage workplaces had rejected initial pitiful pay offers. While battles over pay haven't led to strike action yet, many had won much more substantial offers as a result of pushing for increased pay.

The picture has been more mixed in the retail and wholesale sector, which makes up the majority of Usdaw's membership.

In Tesco, the latest union agreement now makes provision for no contracts less than 16 hours, unless specifically requested by the worker. The company has felt compelled to pay three pay rises in twelve months due to the rising cost of living.

Nonetheless, with eye-watering mega-profits of £2.49 billion, the wages of its workers remain obscenely low, and there is no doubt that with a serious fight, Tesco bosses could be forced to pay more. Despite conference voting repeatedly in recent years to restore the right of members to vote on pay negotiations in Tesco, this has still not been fought for by Usdaw's leadership.

At the bottom end of the spectrum is Morrisons, whose pitiful 2% pay offer was rejected by the membership, only to be imposed by ACAS through binding arbitration. A motion was passed aimed at eliminating the clause



PHOTO: USDAM ACTIVIST

in the Usdaw's agreement with Morrisons which mandates binding arbitration where pay offers are rejected.

This and a number of other motions around workers' rights and the cost of living were supported by the pro-social partnership leadership of Usdaw, reflecting the pressure on them of the new industrial situation.

In contrast to some of the unions that have taken national action in the last months - such as the National Education Union, which has gained 50,000 new members and hundreds of new reps - Usdaw's membership has fallen by around 80,000 in recent years, coupled with a decline in the base of shop stewards.

Partly due to the turnover of conference

delegates, there seemed to be record numbers of first-time delegates speaking at the rostrum.

While this meant some inexperience, with some propositions without movers or withdrawn, it is clear that from this new layer a new combative generation can develop, which can help to transform Usdaw into the fighting union its members need.

As the conference went on, we found that sales of the Socialist increased, as well as people wanting to join the Broad Left - the grouping in the union which aims to bring together all those who want to campaign for a fighting, democratic union, in which Socialist Party members play a key role.

Support for Corbyn's reinstatement lost, despite support for nationalising industries

One of the more debated motions at the conference, moved by a first-time speaker, was for the Labour whip to be restored to Jeremy Corbyn. Not a single speaker opposed this. One reported they had resigned from Labour as a result of the bar on Corbyn, while another young first-time speaker said: "I wouldn't know what a trade union was without him". The decision of the two Usdaw unselected officials who sit on Labour's National Executive Committee to vote to block Corbyn from standing at the next general election came in for criticism.

The vote on the motion was narrowly lost however, following general secretary Paddy Lillis' response to the discussion, suggesting that if Corbyn had "taken responsibility" for the EHR report into anti-semitism within Labour, he would have had the whip restored. In truth, the right-wing majority of Usdaw's leadership opposed Corbyn and his anti-austerity manifesto from the start, and supported Owen Smith in opposition to Corbyn in the right-wing coup attempt in 2016.

Conference passed motions calling for renationalising the water industry and Royal Mail, pledges Keir Starmer had made to win the Labour leadership in succession to Corbyn, but has since dropped. Conference also passed a motion in support of proportional representation, but Starmer has rejected this as well.

It is clear that the struggle for a fighting, democratic leadership of Usdaw needs to include fighting for a genuine, independent political voice for union members. As was raised in the debate, if Corbyn stood he could win, and be a voice for those policies.



Workload is another key part of the strike wave and a number of unions are fighting for a shorter working week, with some adopting policies demanding a four-day week. PHOTOS: PAUL MATTSOON

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NHS

UNDERFUNDED UNDERSTAFFED

BACK THE STRIKES

KATIE SIMPSON
NORTHAMPTON SOCIALIST PARTY

A children's ward at Kettering General Hospital has been found to be inadequate, the lowest rating that inspectors can give. A slew of 50 official complaints came in from parents, after cases of fatalities and serious injuries in the Northamptonshire hospital.

As a mum of a young child in the

area, it's worrying to know a place that a child should be safest is failing so many families. Equally, as someone who's worked in health-care for over a decade, the outcome of the report is unfortunately unsurprising.

Inspectors found whistleblowers being penalised. This is a growing issue in NHS trusts, and a consequence of a top-down method of management.

13 years of Tory austerity has seen

catastrophic underfunding and lack of investment in our NHS. It is clear that the Tories are quite happy to drive the NHS into the ground to justify further privatisation.

Tories and Labour

On the other side, Labour has said it will refuse exhausted NHS staff an inflation-proof pay rise, and called for more privatisation. And when asked about doctors walking out, Labour shadow health secretary,

Wes Streeting, said: "I don't support the strike". We need a new party for us.

Privatisation of hospital cleaning shows the dangers. The inspection of the hospital ward found it was so unclean there was dust on infants' cots.

Another outcome of the report highlighted that lack of staffing was a serious concern, including a vacancy for a lead nurse that hadn't been filled for several months. This

is the reality of what is happening in the NHS.

This is why thousands of nurses and doctors are taking further strike action - to fight back against the ongoing risk that understaffing and underfunding is having on the most vulnerable patients: our kids.

A democratically owned and run NHS, with full funding and well-trained, properly paid staff, is the only solution to prevent these tragedies happening on a national scale.

WHAT WE STAND FOR: THE SOCIALIST PARTY'S MAIN DEMANDS >>> see column on p10



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