

# WORKERS' fight



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*"The emancipation of the working class will only be achieved by the working class itself" (Karl Marx)*

## AGAINST THEIR EXTREMIST LIES AND WAR-MONGERING

Cabinet minister Michael Gove had the job of turning PM Sunak's bizarre statement on the threat to "British values", made just after Rochdale's by-election, into a new "non-statutory definition of extremism". Yes, in the context of the current extreme position of the government on immigration (Rwanda!) and its support for the extreme Zionist right in Israeli politics, the world has truly been turned on its head!

Gove explained that anyone, or any organisation, "intentionally [creating] a permissive environment for others" for the "promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance" will be... denied "government funding and engagement"!

So no, contrary to expectations, this new "non-law-law", isn't the ferocious bulldog it was hyped up to be, aiming to devour dissent and proscribe political groups, but actually a pup! And while the definition includes groups "who wish to undermine, overturn or replace the UK's system of liberal parliamentary democracy and democratic rights" or enable others to do so, they won't be banned... just disallowed from mixing with government ministers! Presumably the undermining of British judicial "values" several times over by Tory prime ministers (Brexit, Prorogation, the Rwanda safety bill...) don't count. When it comes to the government, it's "do as I say, not as I do"...

### Preventing free speech

Gove further explained that this non-law was all about "helping" the public (or his own party?! ) to "choose their friends wisely"! Perhaps he was thinking about former Home Secretary and current colleague, Suella Braverman? Or millionaire Tory donor, Frank Hester, who used violent, racist and misogynist language against veteran black woman MP Diane Abbott? Yes, such "wise" Tory friends..!



That said, one aspect of Gove's "non-law" isn't a "pup". And that's the "strengthening" of the so-called "Prevent" anti-terrorism programme. In fact it's already been extended. Ever since the war on Gaza started and school children reacted against it, identifying with its victims (as they have against every war which governments have started, provoked, or supported) the number referred to "Prevent" has grown exponentially. Indeed, more and more teachers and pupils alike are being branded "potential terrorists" merely because they've raised the issue of Palestine.

### Promoting threats and war

This verbiage over extremism, which literally gaslights the public, is accompanied by an escalation of the government's war-mongering. Here and in the rest of Europe, the population is told that "Russia" (aka Putin), will be coming for the rest of us, if it wins its war against Ukraine... Never mind that Russia's ruling bureaucracy not only has no interest nor means to extend the war anywhere else - and has explicitly said it won't!

Sunak said in his Downing Street speech, "We must face down the extremists who would tear us apart... When they tell their lies, we will tell the truth". Indeed! His "truth" (and that of Macron and Germany's Scholz) is the lie that "the stability of the whole of Europe is under threat from Russia" - and, why not, from China, Iran, North Korea and tiny North Yemen!?

But wasn't it the US and its Nato allies who provoked the Russian invasion of Ukraine, by refusing to discuss its status with the Russian leadership (this goes back 14 years, not just two!)? And now they're gruesomely pushing Zelensky to fight "to the last Ukrainian", rather than sue for peace. What's more, as part of their war preparations, since their "arms economy" helps to counter their ever-looming economic recession, Nato forces have just staged their biggest ever military exercise off the coast of Norway. The working class on its part, needs to "face down" such (lethal) extremism and the poisonous politicians on all sides who promote it. ☐

## International

# FIVE MONTHS OF THE ISRAELI ARMY'S DESTRUCTION OF THE GAZA STRIP - FULLY BACKED BY IMPERIALISM

At the time of writing, it is 160 days since the Israeli government's war on Gaza started. The number of dead and wounded civilians is more than 100,200. No conflict in the world today has "achieved" so many casualties in so short a time. But, according to official Israeli spokespersons, this is just "collateral damage". One wonders just who the Israeli leaders and their western imperialist supporters think they are fooling. The world's population is watching; it sees the images. It can judge for itself.

### **Collective punishment and cultural annihilation**

The Israeli military has among the most sophisticated weapons, surveillance systems, heat-seeking equipment, drones etc., in the world (thanks also to the USA), which would allow it to hunt down the much more poorly-equipped Hamas militias, who are hiding inside deep tunnels. Yes, it could quite plausibly have targeted them without the mass-bombing, shelling and shooting of civilians. And certainly without turning Gaza into a pile of rubble, after destroying homes, hospitals, schools, universities, libraries, archives, churches and mosques, some of them thousands of years old...

So, not only is this the brutal collective punishment of a people, but it is the destruction of their society and their culture. Artists, poets, writers (126 journalists), teachers, professors, doctors... are dead. And it also proves



that Netanyahu and his far-right (quasi-fascist) coalition partners do not give a damn about the 132 hostages who are still being held to date. It's likely that 30 are already dead.

### **Starvation and famine**

Today, the situation has deteriorated to the point where the 1.9m Palestinians now crowded into Rafah (but penned in with the Israeli army on one side and the firmly shut gate into Egypt on the other) are beginning to starve; children have already died of dehydration and malnutrition.

Only now, when it is already too late for so many - and only for the sake of his pre-election domestic vote - has US President Biden asked Netanyahu to "postpone" extending his full ground

invasion into Rafah. Only now too, is food and medical aid from the US and Britain being sent (slowly) by sea. And Rishi Sunak, who also faces an election, but who, unlike Biden never really relied upon the vote of Middle Eastern immigrants (as Biden does, for instance, in Michigan), continues to mimic Biden's awkward and useless utterances.

In fact if there is some real hope in this situation, it is in a mobilised Israeli population demanding that Netanyahu stand down and being prepared to force the issue, as they were before the 7 October Hamas attack. What will count for the future, are the protests (but also strikes by Israel's diverse working class) calling for an immediate end to this war and the freeing of all hostages and all Palestinian prisoners. □

## THE WAR IN UKRAINE: TWO YEARS ON

No end is in sight to the war in Ukraine after two years of fighting. In fact Nato leaders, who see Ukraine as their proxy, are beating the war drum louder. Just last month, France's President Macron even mentioned the possibility of sending in French troops, although he immediately retracted the "offer".

For the moment, more weapons are being sent, including tanks, long-range missiles and F16 fighter jets. French defence companies will now repair and manufacture military equipment locally in Ukraine. Just last month, the EU pledged €50bn, with Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission and a frequent visitor to Kiev, declaring, "We know Ukraine is fighting for us ... so we will provide them with much-needed stability"...

### **Russia's war economy**

Over the past year, Ukraine has not been able to claw back any territory in the East, while Russia has increased the land it occupies by 2% - not much, of course, but this just

emphasises the difficulty of waging this war, and for both sides. In the meantime, Putin has managed to turn the Russian economy into a war economy, while crushing dissent; the population is paying a heavy price for this.

Russia's defense spending will almost double next year, to 6% of GDP - the highest it has been since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It now accounts for a third of all government expenditure and this is paid for mainly by oil export revenues - thanks to the high price of oil. Indeed, western sanctions against Russia have actually backfired...

### **Ukrainian exhaustion**

The Ukrainian population is understandably war-weary. Too many young men have died in a war fought in trenches reminiscent of the primitive conditions of WW1. And while the number of Ukrainian casualties is a "state secret", the US estimated last year that 70,000 Ukrainian soldiers had been killed, with 120,000 injured. Ukrainian President Zelensky claims that 180,000 Russian

soldiers have been killed; but that is not verifiable either. What is certain is that the Ukrainian army is running out of soldiers.

Anyway, the "stalemate" in the war itself (in the words of Commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian armed forces), is likely to continue. Unless, of course, Zelensky can be persuaded to call a halt and negotiate with Putin's government. There is all the more reason to do this, given the uncertainty of future US funding in the context of Trump's coming (likely) election.

In the meantime, EU leaders are trying to raise funds "for Ukraine". In fact they have - for their own political purposes - been claiming that Russia is threatening the rest of Europe... despite Putin having refuted this quite clearly and despite the lack of any obvious motive. In this vein, Macron said that Russia's "defeat" was indispensable to the stability and security of Europe. When in fact his and his fellow EU leaders' (and Sunak's) warmongering and fuelling of proxy wars are the real threat to the people of Europe - and beyond.

## Their society

### • The farmers' protest: politicians and rich farmers negotiate...

Over the past 2 months, there've been militant farmers' protests right across Europe. Their main grievance is the low prices offered for their produce by food industry giants and big grocery retailers. Not to mention cheaper imports as a result of recently-negotiated agricultural trade agreements - in particular with Ukraine. They demand increased subsidies.

However, if smaller farmers are at the forefront of the tractor-convoys, blockades and clashes with police, it's rich farmers who're at the head of the organisations which call the actions. In France, for instance, the leader of the National Federation of Farmers' Unions is the boss of the international agro-industrial group Avril.

In Britain, farmers have been more restrained, but hundreds of tractors have carried out go-slows in Canterbury, Dover and Cardiff. In post-Brexit Britain, the National Farmers Union is also demanding subsidies. The Sustainable Farming Scheme - meant to replace EU grants - requires 10% of the land to

be planted with trees instead of crops. Farmers don't like this idea. At the moment subsidies (still) represent over 90% of their "profits".

However, the "No Farmers, No Food" campaign visible in their protests, involves UKIP, Reform and GB News figures who emphasise "British food", and its "strategic self-sufficiency"...

against "Mr. Putin"! Yes, nationalism and patriotism all-in-one, but a pre-election challenge to Sunak. So no wonder he turned up to the National Farmers' Union Conference in Birmingham in February - the first time a PM has attended since 2008 - to announce a £427m "grant scheme", as he seeks the vote of rural constituencies!



### • New immigration rules: scapegoating migrant workers

On 28 February, 3 more migrants drowned in the Channel. Then, on 3 March, a 7 year-old girl drowned. The small wooden boat she was in with 16 others, capsized. These are only a few cases among many that don't get reported.

And while on both sides of the Channel, British and French governments blame "people smugglers" for these deaths, they continue to implement their vicious anti-migrant measures. This is all the more hypocritical when successive British governments have effectively closed off all safe and legal routes to

asylum-seekers and literally thrown them into the arms of "people smugglers"!

And now the Home Office's new "five-point plan", aimed at "slashing migration levels and curbing abuse of the immigration system" will become law in March/April. It will forbid foreign social carers from bringing their dependents with them. Skilled workers aren't spared either, since in order to be sponsored by an employer, their minimum salary will have to be £38,700, as opposed to the current £26,200 threshold. For now, this minimum salary won't apply to workers in

sectors that experience labour shortages (but the low pay in these sectors is precisely what causes such a shortage!). The government is also cutting the number of threshold exemptions overall.

Even British workers, who might want to bring a partner or spouse from abroad, will have to earn a minimum income, which is being raised by stages over the next 2 years from £18,600 to £38,700. As always, it is the poorest workers, whether at home or abroad, who are penalised.

### • Bankrupt councils - austerity comes home to roost

Since 2021, six English councils have issued "Section 114 notices", effectively declaring bankruptcy and freezing all spending except on statutory obligations. The largest are Birmingham and Nottingham, but the others are all around London: Croydon, Thurrock, Slough and Woking.

In Birmingham's case, the liabilities from a successful equal pay claim by thousands of women employed by the

council and a costly botched new IT system, were blamed. Between them, these are expected to cost the council up to £800m. Both Thurrock and Woking made dubious investments which have left them with enormous debts; Woking's is expected to reach £2.4bn in 2026!

The underlying reason for these bankruptcies is the 40% real-terms cut in grant funding to local government between

2009-10 and 2019-20. Only social care spending has increased, and that is a function of social dereliction. Education spending bore the brunt of the cuts, falling by over £400 per individual over the period. Despite a call for an urgent £4bn by the Commons housing and communities committee, Hunt barely mentioned local government finance in his Spring Budget.

### • Households subsidising energy companies' profits

In April, the energy price is being reduced by 12%. This means that an "average" household will be paying £1,690/year for gas and electricity. While this is a drop in cost, it leaves average prices still 50% higher than the same time three years ago.

It's not going to help families who are still choosing between heating and eating. Government stats show 13% of households - 3.17m - are living in "fuel poverty". And this is an underestimate,

because households are discounted if they live in an "energy efficient" home, regardless of income. "Fuel poverty" means having an income below the "poverty line" after housing and energy costs are deducted: for a couple with 2 kids, this is £367/week or £150/week for a single person.

However, Ofgem, the government energy regulator which sets the price cap, will allow energy suppliers to charge every customer an extra £28/year (on top

of the price cap!!) from April, to "make sure suppliers have sufficient funds". It's claimed that £3.1bn is owed by people in arrears and so apparently suppliers are strapped for cash!

Are they indeed!! British Gas profits for 2023 were £751m, ten times higher than the £72m they made in 2022. Another big supplier, EDF, tripled its profits in Britain to £3.3 billion. Yup, it's hardly struggling to make ends meet, unlike millions of energy bill payers.

## Their society

### • Who's the extremist?

The day after populist former Labour and "Respect" MP, George Galloway was elected in the Rochdale by-election Sunak made a speech on the steps of 10 Downing Street to denounce "extremism". He called Galloway's election "*beyond alarming*". True, Galloway said his victory was "*for Gaza*" and he undoubtedly gained the so-called "Muslim vote", having campaigned on this basis.

But Galloway's election was not an earth-shaking result. He received 12,335 votes, that is 40% of the votes cast, on a less than 40% turnout. So just 16% of the electorate voted for him. If this shows anything, it is just how unpopular all major parties are. The Tories and Labour (who were on the ballot, even though they disowned their candidate before the election) got just 6,000 votes between

them. Second place behind Galloway went to an independent local candidate who stood on the basis of local issues like getting a hospital built.

Of course, what is actually "alarming" for Sunak and his party, is the scale of the wipe-out they are facing at the next election. And Sunak himself is quite willing to pander to extremists on his right, in the hope that he can win back a few votes.

### • Rochdale - the poorest of the poor!

Rochdale came to everyone's attention because of the by-election at the end of February. But nobody cared to talk about the problems of Rochdale's population - most of whom abstained in this election anyway. In fact Central Rochdale has been named the most deprived place in Greater Manchester, based on the "Index of Multiple Deprivation" which takes into account wages, employment, education, health and housing standards.

It was in Rochdale that 2-year old Awaab Ishak died due to exposure to damp and mould in a "Rochdale Boroughwide Housing" (RBH) flat. The town no longer has an Accident and Emergency department or maternity unit; for the past 10 years expectant mothers have had to go to Oldham to have their babies. Boarded up shops are everywhere. Almost a third of the population is either unemployed or

economically inactive... many have a disability or chronic health problem.

The election candidates all made promises to fix everything. Galloway promised to move there and "*make Rochdale great again*". Not that anyone can remember when it was "great", if it ever was. But as part of the Tories' levelling up, a multi-million pound plan is in place to transform the area: another one, like HS2, due soon to bite the dust.

### • Living standards down, Victorian diseases back

In the last year, 84 NHS trusts and health boards reported 13,000 cases of malnutrition, 15,000 cases of rickets (due to vitamin D deficiency) and 150 cases of scurvy (due to lack of vitamin C - found in fresh fruit and vegetables). Of these, almost half were in the north of England.

In addition, there were 2,000 scabies cases in England last year. Birmingham had the highest incidence of tuberculosis.

Sexually transmitted diseases, such as syphilis and gonorrhoea have increased. Little wonder that experts speak of a return to the "Victorian past".

Of course dietary deficiency and disease are linked to poverty and deprivation. If families have just £35/week to spend, what fresh food can they afford? And GPs are completely absent in the poorest regions. Health visitors no

longer visit all 1-5 year olds; their number has been cut by 40% since 2015. So who will ensure that young children get the free supplements they need, in particular Vitamin D if they live "up north", or have darker skins which are less penetrable to the sun's radiation?

Yes, welcome to the "Great" British return to pre-NHS poverty and Victorian ill-health.

### • The worsening housing crisis

The housing crisis in Britain is just getting worse and worse. Rents keep rising: the average monthly wage across Britain in December 2023 was about £2,900 before

tax, while the average rent was £1,280/month. This was up by 22% compared to November 2022 - and up by 56% since October 2019. Almost 1 in 4 private

renters spend 40% of their earnings in rent. In London's Hackney, rent eats up 44% of earnings.

As a consequence, homelessness reached record levels last summer. According to charity Shelter, by December 2023 at least 309,000 people in England alone were relying on temporary accommodation - or at worst, rough sleeping. This a 14% increase on last year, and it doesn't include those who "sofa surf", at friends, family or others. London has the highest rate of homelessness and Newham is the worst hit borough, with 1 in 20 people homeless.

This dire situation is also due to a 63% cut in 2020 in funding for affordable housing: in 2022-2023, only 9,561 social homes were delivered in England compared with 40,000 a decade earlier.



### • Evicted? No fault of Michael Gove!

Another big factor in rising homelessness is evictions. In September 2023, 25,180 households were affected by no-fault evictions - where landlords can kick tenants out of their properties if they want to increase the rent, for instance. In their 2019 election manifesto, the Tories promised to ban no-fault evictions. Their Renters Reform Bill was first read in

Parliament only last May, and since then it has been delayed by Tory MPs who are trying to water it down. This is no surprise, since out of 47 MPs proposing amendments to it, nearly half are landlords themselves.

The government also says that before passing this Bill, the judicial system has to be "reformed" - in fact, to make

it easier for landlords to use! But never mind; trying to appeal to younger voters - who are struggling the most with rents - Michael Gove, who is Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities' is still promising that no-fault evictions will be banned before the elections. Believe it, or not!

## Miners' strike

# 40 YEARS SINCE THE "GREAT MINERS' STRIKE": DEFEAT WASN'T INEVITABLE!

The 6 March was the "official" anniversary of the start of the 1984-1985, miners' strike.

Forty years ago, as part of its ongoing pit-closure plan, the National Coal Board announced that Cortonwood Colliery in South Yorkshire would close prematurely - and on that day a mass meeting of miners voted to walk out on strike.

In fact a national overtime ban had already been in place for 4 months. Mines were already on strike in South Yorkshire over the Coal Board's plans. The day after the Cortonwood walkout, the NCB announced 20 more pit closures within the year, including 3 within 5 weeks, with the loss of 20,000 jobs. This was undoubtedly a provocation to draw the miners out on strike in the worst possible conditions, and thus defeat them. At the time there were large coal reserves in place, so the power stations and steel furnaces could easily withstand a strike of several months.

### *Mrs Thatcher's revenge*

The then prime minister Margaret Thatcher had already defeated the steelworkers. She saw herself as the bosses' chief of staff. Her battle against the miners - the strongest workers' battalion - was, for her, a battle against the whole of the working class, and one which she intended to win. Her party had never forgiven the miners for unseating Heath's government in 1974.

Within 3 weeks of the Cortonwood walk-out, 145,000 miners were on strike, vote or no vote, thanks to miners spreading the action themselves, visiting pits around the country and convincing their fellow-workers to join them. It must be said, a far preferable and militant method to get everybody out!

Miners from Yorkshire, Scotland and Kent mobilised their famous "flying pickets". And while most union lodges in South Wales at first didn't vote to strike (not for lack of militancy, but out of mistrust for the union leadership) they all joined the walkout after the minority of strikers convinced them that this time, there would be a real fight.

### *Scargill's narrow perspective*

A militant force this size was capable of generalising the strike into a political struggle against the Thatcher government's anti-working class offensive. However this was not what the NUM leadership under Arthur Scargill had in mind. His narrow perspective was confined to "saving British coal" - hence the slogan "coal not dole". Strikers were organised to halt coal production; to "save their jobs", rather than demanding "jobs elsewhere, or full pay - not dole"!

As to spreading the strike to the



coking and power plants, the steel industry or ports, in fact Scargill confined himself to rhetorical appeals to his fellow union leaders at TUC conference. Nevertheless, several Aslef train drivers struck on their own initiative and refused to transport coal - as did port workers in Wales, Kent and Essex. But this was not the start of a conscious "general" strike, as would have been needed.

Then there was the problem of the Nottinghamshire miners... After the NCB deliberately let it be known that their pits were not earmarked for closure, they voted 3 to 1 against striking. However 8,000 voted to strike - which is why the mass-picketing against working miners in these pits was a mistake - and caused bitter and unnecessary division in the ranks (at the end of the strike some Notts miners launched their own union). In fact despite not striking, Notts miners observed the overtime ban to the end.

### *Armed bodies of men*

Huge police operations to escort working miners into work and prevent pickets from picketing were organised. Police road blocks prevented hundreds of flying pickets from getting to their destinations - although inventive subterfuge often got around this. At Orgreave coking plant near Sheffield in May-June, 5,000 pickets were mobilised to stop trucks carrying coke destined for a power plant. But the government brought in 6,000 cops equipped with riot gear and supported by police dogs and 42 mounted police. They weighed in and beat up the pickets; many miners were badly injured, 95 were charged with riot. But as their barrister, Michael Mansfield said: "They wanted to teach the miners a lesson - a big lesson, such that they wouldn't come out in force again".

One of the features of this long and

difficult strike was the solidarity from other workers and the rallying of the miners' "wives" who not only organised collective kitchens in the mining villages, but toured the country giving speeches about their struggle.

By the 9th month of the strike however, some miners were losing heart and beginning to go back to work. That said, when the strike was called off by the union on 3 March 1985, 83% of miners in Yorkshire and 93% in Kent were still on strike and miners in Kent stayed out for another week.

### *A lesson to be learned*

In the end, the strongest battalion of the working class had taken on the full might of Thatcher's "armed bodies of men", fighting heroically for over 13 months, but had lost.

This wasn't just a defeat for the miners. It was a defeat for the whole of the working class and a watershed; demoralised workers concluded that "if the miners could not win, the rest of us have no chance".

This was precisely Thatcher's intention. She was laying the ground for the future across-the-board privatisation of all the (then) state-owned utilities - telecoms, gas, electricity, water, etc., and did not want any opposition from the vast public sector workforce.

Thatcher carried out her plans successfully. But this success was never inevitable. Had the miners seen their battle in the same way she saw hers - a class war - needing the full mobilisation all of their class brothers and sisters, there is a good chance Thatcher and the bosses could have been beaten. Of course there's no point in crying over spilt milk. But every reason not to keep repeating the same mistake. □

## King's Cross railway station (London)

## Hitachi workers win

In January and February, Hitachi fitters, shunters and cleaners went on strike over pay. This involved depots in Craightenny in Scotland, Doncaster, Bounds Green and West London.

At first bosses offered a ridiculous 3% "rise". After we went on strike, the offer was revised: a 6% increase for 2023/2024; 5.2% for 2024/2025, and RPI% for 2025/2026, plus lump sums and annual leave days across these 3 years. The vote was 75% to accept.

In total, we had 10 days of strike – including several in a row in January. But all along, RMT full-time officials made all the decisions regarding the strike and of course negotiated on our behalf over our heads. They cancelled 3 days of action in late December and another 6 in February without asking us first and automatically put Hitachi's offers to a vote via electronic referendums, also without as much as a "by your leave".

Next time we will have to make sure that it



is the strikers, not the full time, non-striking, union officials who make the decisions. □

## • No to the TOCs' "reforms"

We cannot agree to the latest proposal from the LNER bosses which includes all the changes we already said we were opposed to last year! Like multitasking, annual leave allowances cut, 2-tiers employment, etc...

True, the LNER company council and RMT executive have so far said no to any deal. But leader Mick Lynch sent out a

letter which said "*the union will of course now continue these talks ... with the aim of receiving a fair and genuine set of proposals and an accompanying 2023 pay offer which meets the aspirations of you and your colleagues*".

What is there to negotiate, we wonder? However, what apparently ties the hands of the union officials is the fact

that they agreed last year to a "no strike clause" – in place till end of April when the process is meant to be concluded. Whether it's legally binding or not, the bosses (organised together in their so-called Rail Delivery Group), have threatened in advance that there will be compulsory redundancies if we strike. Perhaps we should try calling their bluff?

## • Tricky calculus

As part of this "consultation", we hear that LNER managers are trying to change how our annual leave is calculated. Guards have 34 annual leave days and catering crew 20 days plus 3 block weeks. LNER is proposing instead, to count our annual leave in hours and they are offering a total leave allocation of 238 hours. For sure, their aim is to cut our allocation. For instance, are they going to make us take "leave hours" for hospital appointments? And what other theft of our

time-off might they have up their sleeves? [Workers' Platform bulletin Kings' X 06/03/24]

## • Wrong excuse

On the staff train app, Arrakis, LNER was still claiming that delays and cancellations over the weekend were "*due to Hitachi strikes*". Were they not aware that the strikes were cancelled and the latest offer accepted last week? Or were they just looking for excuses to justify the regular delays due to staff shortages? [Workers' Platform bulletin Kings' X 06/03/24]

## • Azuma faults continue...

The faults we experience at the food bar/kitchen of Azuma trains remain seriously problematic. Ovens don't heat up properly and microwaves don't work. And why? In fact the number of Hitachi fitters who take care of fixing equipment on board was cut drastically last year, after older workers left and were not replaced. Sometimes there are only half the number there should be. And half the workforce obviously means only half the work done... [Workers' Platform bulletin Kings' X 06/03/24]

## Mount Pleasant mail centre (London)

## Royal Mail Panorama: doesn't say what we all know

A recent Panorama TV documentary entitled "Royal Mail: Where's My Post?" tried in 30 minutes to examine why letters are delayed or not delivered at all – a phenomenon which has become all too common in the last year or so. The BBC reporter posted 51 first class letters to see what happened and only 21 arrived the next day (which is meant to be guaranteed). She then put tracking devices in some of the letters to see exactly what happened to them. In some cases, the letters spent up to 20 days

sitting in the Delivery Office!

Jenny Hall, Royal Mail's Director of Corporate Affairs was asked what was going on. She really had no clue. Interviewed in a new "Superhub" (Royal Mail's "Amazonised" automated parcel-sorting factory) she denied that parcels were a priority. Which of course they are. But nothing was said about the real cause behind the failure of letter delivery: that there are nowhere near enough workers left to do the work – not in the sorting offices nor in the delivery offices – after



round after round of job cuts.

The BBC also interviewed the CWU general secretary Dave Ward. He said the problem was that new staff keep leaving because of the new contract's "terms and conditions" – which he "negotiated" with the bosses himself and recommended workers vote to accept it! □

## • (Not-really) welcome to our ranks?

Imagine this: there they were, both the line manager and shift manager on Processing Nights, improvising a sorting frame in a little corner of the shop floor and trying to sort just like us... A sorry sight, indeed! Yes, now they are forced to react – no matter

how uselessly – given the amount of work which piles up, thanks to all the workmates who they let go without replacing them... [Workers' Fight bulletin Mount Pleasant 06/03/24]

## • We refuse to pay for this

CWU leader, Martin Walsh, informed us that internal mail flights are being cut by RM, including those going to Stansted.

Apparently RM bosses claim that it is more "*environmentally friendly*" to move mail by road(!?) or train, but we know it's only because it's cheaper for them! So what about the *unfriendly* effect on us of later starts in Distribution and the knock-on effect on Delivery and Processing start times? [Workers' Fight bulletin Mount Pleasant 06/03/24]

**Ford Dagenham estate (Essex)****A strike would have to be in our hands!**

Out of 2,443 workers entitled to vote in the strike ballot (including temps!), 831 voted for strike action on a turnout of 62.14%. That's a good 54%. In fact, super-profitable Ford (net income of £3.4bn on revenues of £137.6bn last year!) is, for the first time in decades, offering a below-inflation 2.5% pay "rise" (plus a miserable 2.5% non-consolidated "bonus") which amounts to a real pay cut.

Our problem is that the union full-timers are looking for a compromise. We know from past experience that they

regard our strike vote as a bargaining chip in their negotiations with the bosses. This was again confirmed when, the day after our strike vote, both union leaders and management were back into talks, behind closed doors in Daventry.

We also know from past experience (although that was way back, in 1988!) that the only effective way to get what we need is to strike - and properly - all out for as long as it takes. And that we also need to contact our brothers and sisters in the other plants and if possible meet with them: 925 of our workmates



didn't vote and 686 voted against the strike! So establishing contacts on the ground, among ourselves, across plants (and sections) is badly needed - and that's a necessity whether we strike or not! ☐

**• Mass meetings needed!**

We need a mass meeting. If TOPS organises one, we should all go there! This is no time for stupid rivalry between plants and departments! But we also need to meet workmates from the other plants (remember the joint protests outside Ford HQ "Moscow Place"?!! So, coaches to Daventry? [Workers' Fight bulletin Ford Dagenham 13/03/24]

**• Absolutely no way!**

How dare Ford decide suddenly to get rid of the last remaining "Ford" security/fire service workers? There was an agreement "allowing" Ford to subcontract security, on condition these

mates could stay until they retired/left of their own accord. Ford not only wants to break this agreement, but has told these workers that if they aren't ready to go, they'll be sent to engine assembly... [Workers' Fight bulletin Ford Dagenham 13/03/24]

**• Security from fire**

G4S has been doing the security work ever since, but they weren't ever responsible for fire protection. So what now? Will they be trained as firefighters? What happens in the meantime? Fire safety is fundamental. But the bosses here don't seem to think so. [Workers' Fight bulletin Ford Dagenham 13/03/24]

**• Impossible to work here!**

Another really serious H&S issue has arisen again in Lion Machining: the oil mist is so thick it's like a fog - and even denser in the Heads area where the ceiling is lower... After the washes, the spray used to clean the machines suspends all the nasty stuff in the air. And we're meant to breathe it in?

**• Can't trust Ford**

For now, Autotech has been getting "bent" Transit chassis cabs to "unbend" and re-weld. With the history of rust and dodgy metal frames, among so many other defects affecting Ford vehicles, those dealerships called "Trust Ford" definitely need renaming...

**BMW Mini centre (Cowley, Oxford)****Their lay-off patchwork is full of holes!**

On 4 March the plant began 5 months of working early shifts only. Although BMW needs the downtime to retool the plant for new models, it has elaborate systems of flexible working and casualisation in place to avoid paying the price.

Permanent and agency production workers are expected to take a combination of annual leave and "flexi-leave", paid for by working overtime in advance and afterwards, to get their full pay. Since last autumn, the overtime has been mainly on Fridays, which were removed from the normal working week,

or in half-hour additions on the ends of shifts.

Lineside supplier Rudolph & Hellmann's workforce is also split into "permanent" and "agency" and its permanent workers have BMW-style "working time accounts" for banking or borrowing hours. But smaller limits make it certain most will run out of "credit".

Some workers have resorted to taking an unpaid "sabbatical" for the 5 months, so they could take other jobs. Many of R&H's agency workers are already laid off even while R&H hires new ones! And



G&P workers, who do quality monitoring, are on half pay.

Yes, to build the cars of the future, BMW relies on the exploitation and wage starvation belonging 200 years in the past. ☐

**• Why the rush?**

We were surprised that we were already asked to produce 200 per shift of the new model last week! But this was impossible to cope with this many cars, without incorporating many mistakes... and so these cars were speedily sent straight to the rework area... [Workers' Fight bulletin BMW Mini Oxford 12/03/24]

**• The masked avengers?**

So many cars were sent to rework in fact, that BMW had to call a "shadow" shift on nights in order to discreetly fix all the problems created during the day... [Workers' Fight bulletin BMW Mini Oxford 12/03/24]

**• BMW shuts... BMW pays!**

Many of us in R&H had put our names

down on a list, the week before the shutdown, signing up to do some work, during the factory closure.

But of course, despite following the whole procedure and even being allocated days of work, most of us were just told at the last minute we weren't needed, and to stay home! [Workers' Fight bulletin BMW Mini Oxford 12/03/24]

## Letter from India

### THE FARMERS TAKE ON MODI ONCE AGAIN

As elections scheduled for April-May approach, Modi's BJP is confident, claiming that its electoral coalition (the National Democratic Alliance), will get more than 400 of the 543 seats in Parliament. But things may not go as the BJP has planned.

In February, thousands of farmers set out from the northern state of Punjab toward Delhi. They're protesting against the government's failure to provide a legal guarantee that the state will buy crops from farmers at a Minimum Support Price, as promised two years ago. That promise was the achievement of the farmers' movement of 2020-2022, when tens of thousands from the states of Punjab, Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh set up a protest camp on the outskirts of Delhi, eventually forcing Modi to repeal three proposed laws which would have allowed large agribusiness firms deeper penetration into India's agricultural market.

However, there are important differences between the current movement and the one in 2020-2022. A part of the leadership of the previous movement, the Samyukt Kisan Morcha (United Farmers' Movement), has been bought out by the BJP government and has decided, for the time being, to stay away from the current protests. Instead, today's movement is led by a splinter from the SKM called the SKM (Non-Political) and a forum of over 200 farmers' unions called the Kisan Mazdoor Morcha (Farmers' and Workers' Movement). It is also broader than the



previous movement, inclusive of the rural poor, with demands for minimum wages for agricultural labour and 200 days of guaranteed work for the rural unemployed at a daily wage of 700 rupees (£6.65). This gives it a potentially larger social base.

The government is clearly worried. This February, police erected concrete barricades, barbed wire and parked anti-riot vehicles at the Punjab-Haryana border to stop the farmers reaching Delhi. When the farmers used their tractors to move the barricades, the police used rubber bullets, water cannon and dropped tear gas bombs from drones. 200 farmers were injured and Shubhakaran Singh, a 22yr-old farmer, was shot in the neck and died. His funeral

saw huge union mobilisation.

The farmers are undeterred. On 10 March, they occupied railway lines in Punjab. The old SKM, eager not to lose its following, held a Kisan Mazdoor Mahapanchayat (Farmers and Workers' Meeting) on 14 March in Delhi. Even the SKM's pro-BJP leaders have been forced to bring their tractors onto the roads leading to Delhi from Western Uttar Pradesh in symbolic protest, threatening to march on Delhi if need be.

So while the current movement is smaller than the movement of 2020-2022 for the time being, it threatens to spark off a larger movement, and may well threaten the BJP's position in the upcoming election. □

## DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO: LOOTED BY IMPERIALISM AND LOCAL WARLORDS

Prior to the national elections in the DRC last December, and maybe even because of them, the wars being waged by rival warlords in the eastern Great Lakes region began to escalate. At the same time the unpopular United Nations special "peacekeepers" which had been assisting the Congolese military against the armed gangs in the East, were pulled out. What's at stake is control over the region's rich metal and rare earth minerals. And one of the most notorious militias involved is known as M23, led by Tutsi extremists and directly linked to Rwanda's President Paul Kagame.

The eastern Congo region has been in a state of almost constant inter-gang warfare for 25 years. The human devastation is appalling: 6 million dead, countless horrific

injuries, hundreds of thousands of women and girls raped. Today, over 7 million people are "displaced", living in poverty and in constant danger of starvation... yes, in this potentially rich country! Prior to their departure, now re-elected DRC President, Felix Tshisekedi, accused UN troops of "total failure". He also likened Rwanda's Kagame to Adolf Hitler...

In fact, unambiguously backed by Kagame, the vicious M23 militia now controls major towns in North Kivu, as well as vital roads leading to the capital, Goma. (Kivu is particularly rich in gold, diamonds, wolframite, cassiterite - and coltan, used in electronic devices like smartphones and laptops.)

But never mind, Sunak has no problem

with Kagame's Rwandan regime, nor the M23 either, having made a deal to deport to Rwanda, small boat (and other) refugees whose asylum claims have been refused: his law proclaims this is "safe"! And never mind either, that while presiding over M23's atrocities, Kagame carries out his own, sending assassins to get rid of political rivals.

Of course, it wouldn't be the first time that a British government has turned a blind eye to, or even encouraged, conflicts in Africa. After all, the looting of East Congo directly benefits British (and other) multinationals, which take the lion's share of the profits from the trade in these "blood" minerals, without the slightest qualms over their origin.

In addition to this monthly paper, we publish fortnightly bulletins in several large workplaces in the South East, a quarterly journal, "Class Struggle" and the "Internationalist Communist Forums" - a series of pamphlets on topical issues.

If you wish to find out more about our ideas, activities and publications, contact the Workers' Fight activist who sold you this issue of our paper, or write to us either by e-mail, at [contact@w-fight.org](mailto:contact@w-fight.org), or by postal mail at:

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