

WORKERS' fight

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

LET'S GET READY TO SQUEEZE THE CAPITALISTS IN 2021!

What's in store for workers in 2021 - and beyond?

Sunak's platitude that *"the economy will get worse before it gets better"*, tells nobody anything. He probably doesn't have a clue himself.

Last year we were told Britain was experiencing the worst depression since the 1930s. Some economists said it was even worse, due to its rapid onset. But, by the end of 2020, financial markets had reached new heights, boosted by the discovery of Covid-19 vaccines, which pundits expected would lead to "a rapid recovery".

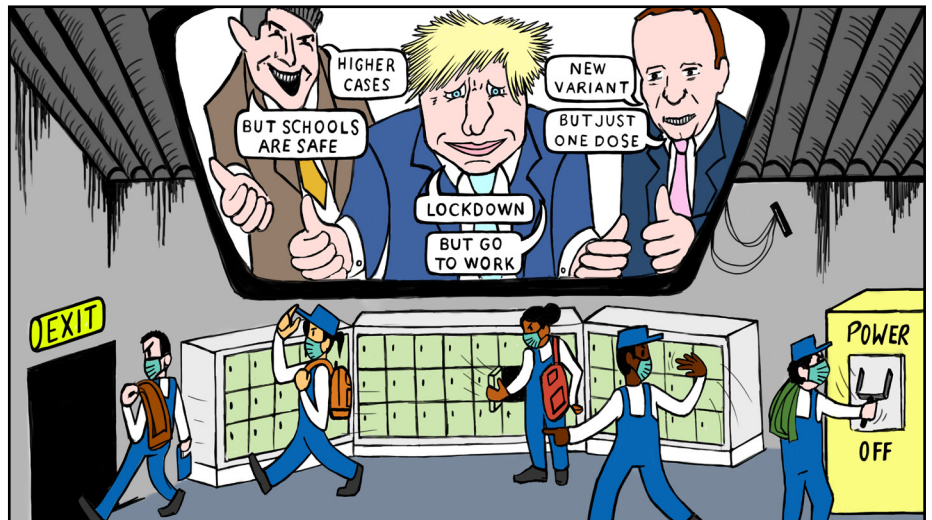
In Britain, that may not be working out so well, thanks to the government's gross mishandling of the 2nd Covid wave. Yes, its impact so far, blamed on a "variant" virus, rather than Johnson's and Sunak's "profits before human life" policies, has been the worst in the world.

But the fact that so many companies have been making a fortune out of the crisis - money which is shared among the capitalists through their economic "common pot", as it were - should be evidence enough, that if workers choose to confront them and fight, they can improve their situation.

"Helping the struggling"?

Predictably, Sunak rushed in with another £4.6 billion *"fresh financial support package for struggling UK companies"* as soon as the new lockdown was announced. But of course, there was no "fresh package for struggling workers".

In fact what did appear, was a "package" which was meant to provide meals for families whose kids would otherwise go hungry while schools were closed. This said it all. Companies like Chartwells, a subsidiary of Compass (CEO a Tory donor) which were given the job of supplying these food hampers, parasitised



even this miserly "benefit"! Wrote one mum on Twitter: *"Public funds were charged £30. I'd have bought this for £5.22. The private company who has the free school meals contract made a good profit here"*.

Workers know the outlook is grim, because more are losing their livelihoods every day. Sunak himself said he expects almost a million more to join the ranks of the unemployed in 2021.

The struggling will help themselves!

But not only are no extra measures being put in place for the jobless, he's already discussing with bosses and backbench MPs how workers' employment rights can be cut. However, due to the Brexit deal's "level playing field", he is not meant to make things worse for workers here, than they are in the EU, as it would be "unfair"... So it remains to be seen how much more damage he can do to the already loophole-ridden quasi-rights which British workers

supposedly "enjoy"...

"Act as if you have the virus", says the government. "Stay at home". But Chancellor Rishi Sunak is against lockdowns. While Johnson postpones them, until delaying any further will lose him even more points on his ever-plummeting popularity poll.

So they refuse to tell manufacturing, construction, transport, security, and of course the booming property companies, to shut up shop as part of lockdown. In fact it is as if this part of the working class, which is also on the frontline now, despite not being "essential", didn't even exist! The Covid cases and the Covid deaths amongst these workers are not being counted. Just like in the war against "terrorism" when they did not do civilian body counts, they are not counting these casualties. No, Sunak and the bosses behind him, are concerned only with counting profits.

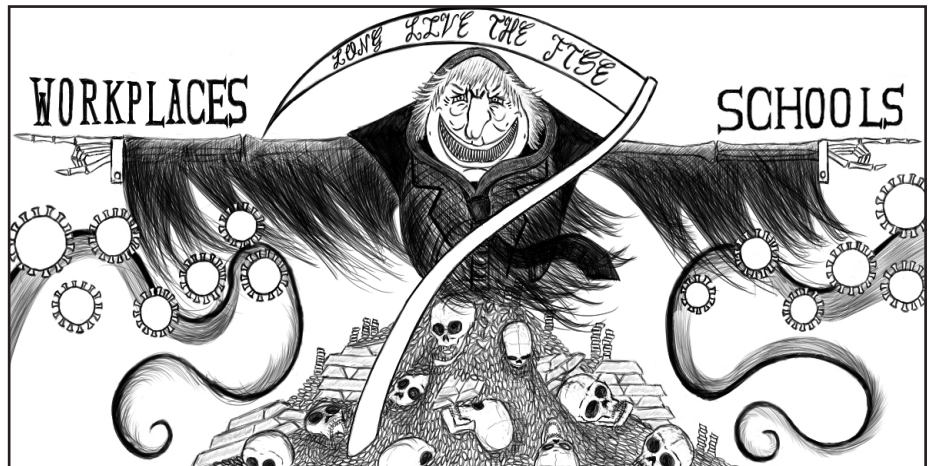
And this is why they have to be grabbed hold of and squeezed, because it's the working class, who made these profits with their sweat and blood, who need to reclaim them, now, more than ever. □

Covid-19 crisis

At the time of writing, the new variant Covid is out of control. And the peak of this second (3rd?) infection wave is still to come. Already the deaths - the highest toll in Europe - are 82,624, as of 11 January. In the past week there have been 1,000 deaths a day. In some parts of London 1 in 20 has the virus. We are back to the dark days of WW2: 2020 saw the highest excess deaths in a single year (90,000) since 1940.

But while Chief Medical Officer, the sombre Professor Whitty, is given the job of transmitting the "stay at home" message, the good news about Britain's "world-beating" vaccine delivery plan, is brightly promoted by Health Minister Hancock, who tells us how Britain is better and faster than all other countries in the world.

This is a travesty. What's more, it's obvious why the situation is so very bad. Of course, it's true, and

The new variant is winning

studies bear it out: the new variant "Kent" virus is 50%-70% more transmissible. But it's also clear that the catastrophic increase in cases, hospital admissions and deaths is due to the political choices of the government - whose impact on the

transmissibility of the virus, can be found in no study! Johnson calls the fight against the variant "a race against time". But his criminal policy to help the bosses make "profits first" means we must lose even more lives, let alone lose this lethal race. □

• Profits first and Covid first

Less than 24 hours before Johnson announced the 3rd lockdown on 4 January, primary schools were still meant to open. They day before, he said "schools are safe" and still repeats this! But staff pre-empted him, stayed home and taught online.

In fact SAGE advisors already warned by 22 December that 3% of 12-16 year-olds were testing positive, and so were 2% of 2-11 year-olds, double the rate of 25-34 year-olds. But the politicians cried hypocritical tears over the "poor" working class children who'd miss out on

their "education" if schools shut, to cover their policy of keeping parents at work.

They'd done nothing about lack of access to laptops or the internet - already an issue last March! By lockdown's start, on 4 January, 1.8 million children still had no computer or tablet, indispensable for education, lockdown or not, and 900,000 had no internet connection at home, relying entirely on mobile data. So much for "education first"!

Today schools remain open for "key" and non-"key" workers' kids... Millions of non-essential workers in factories (car

workers!) and construction sites are still labouring away, not to mention transport workers, security and shopworkers. Last April London bus drivers died of Covid. Today TFL workers are dying again. So are postal workers. Low-paid workers, refused sick pay or support are obliged to work. And while Sunak lavishes billions on businesses ostensibly affected by lockdown, Marcus Rashford had again to take it on himself to expose the miserly "free school meals parcels" given to families to last them 10 days, with a miserable £5 worth of food in them!

• Vaccine availability: a cloud on the horizon

The Johnsonian boasts keep coming. Britain was "first" in its roll-out of the Pfizer vaccine on 1 December and the AstraZeneca vaccine on 4 January. And now the Moderna vaccine has been approved, even if it won't be available until the spring.

But Johnson's promise of 13.2 million people vaccinated by mid February will only guarantee them a first dose. The limited supply of vaccines, of which there's a severe global shortage, will be stretched further (contrary to Pfizer's advice!) by postponing the 2nd dose to 12 weeks later instead of giving it at 3 weeks. Never mind that it's still uncertain whether this will offer the needed protection or prevent transmission!

While there is a nationalised health service in this country, there's no nationalised vaccine production. Manufacture, needlessly complicated, today involves multiple sites and is almost exclusively "for profit". To get reasonable quantities of the AstraZeneca vaccine, for instance, several contractors are

needed to produce it: Halix in the Netherlands, Cobra Biologics in Staffordshire and Oxford Biomedica. Once made, the doses have to be transported to other companies (in Britain or Germany) to be added to vials and then transported back.

This is so obviously inefficient, that a new larger facility, the Manufacturing Innovation Centre (VMIC) is planned, due to open in 2021 (assuming construction goes as planned), but even then it's not a public body, even if it's going to be "non-profit" and is government-backed...

• LFTs: a not-so-useful test

Lateral flow tests (LFTs), which the government bought billions of, are being promoted as useful for identifying asymptomatic carriers of Covid, who can then isolate and prevent silent viral spread... These are the tests used for Liverpool's "Operation Moonshot", which Johnson hailed as such a great success - but which anyone who knows anything, calls a failure.

Again, the scientific evidence exposes government lies. LFTs aren't accurate: the

British Medical journal writes: "in symptomless people it misses the SARS-CoV-2 virus... in the Liverpool pilot study, 60% of infected symptomless people went undetected, including 33% of those with high viral loads who are at highest risk of infecting others. Among students in Birmingham, only 3% of those who would have tested positive on PCR were detected. The government continues to claim that the test detects 77%, a figure from an unrealistic study using laboratory scientists and experienced nurses running tests on symptomatic people. At a recent select committee hearing, the Secretary of State for Health appeared uninformed about the reduced accuracy in real life settings of the Innova tests in Public Health England studies and has denied that the Liverpool study showed the test performed "poorly."

That says it all. But who and what is "Innova"? An upstart "medical equipment supplier" which has already pocketed £700m of the £1bn the government has forked out on LFTs... Maybe the answer to this question will throw some light on why the LFT deceit continues...

Stretched beyond its limits

By 12 January, the number of Covid-19 patients in hospitals - 35,075 - had already surpassed the peak of the first wave by over 61%. A quarter of these are under 55 years. A leaked NHS briefing said that London's hospitals were less than two weeks from being overwhelmed by Covid even under the "best" case scenario.

Patients had been left waiting more than 24 hours in A&E, with ambulances queuing for up to 9 hours before being able to offload their patients. Beds in many intensive care units are already full with one nurse to at least 3 patients, instead of one to one. Nurses are already working 12-hour shifts without breaks, and are being asked to work additional overtime. In order to re-open the London Nightingale hospital (given its bed capacity is urgently needed) the military will again need to be drafted in. But that will still only allow 60 of its beds to be used for now (1.5% of its 4,000 bed capacity)!

Never enough hands...

Of course, NHS workers are exhausted. But the dire shortage of staff is not new, nor is it entirely due to the pandemic. Over 22,000 staff have left the NHS since the Brexit referendum, including nearly 9,000 nurses! Already in December 2019, there were an estimated 106,000 vacancies across the NHS in England alone, including 44,000 vacancies in nursing. At the



time, an estimated 57.2 million unpaid hours were being worked, thanks to the goodwill of these overstretched staff. It is hard to imagine how staff are coping now, in the face of this unprecedented Covid surge.

So it is not surprising that according to the Royal College of Nursing, 36% of nurses are considering leaving the profession in the next year, citing low pay and the appalling working conditions during the pandemic.

... but ever more work

In September last year, hundreds of frontline NHS staff, many of whom worked throughout the pandemic, marched through central London and in other locations around the country to demand better wages. Their banners read: "stop clapping, start paying", "priceless yet penniless"

and "640 healthcare workers dead, blood on their hands". This was just after nurses had been excluded from the pay increase announced for 900,000 public sector workers. Today, the same staff are wondering why despite the fact that nobody is clapping any more, they've received not a penny more in pay. And why every time Health Secretary Hancock is asked about the overworked staff, he cheerfully changes the subject to the "good news" about Britain being first to roll out not one, but two, Covid vaccines!

But that is not good news for NHS workers, stretched beyond their limits, who are now meant to implement a vaccination programme, on top of everything else. If indeed there's enough vaccine available in the first place... □

• Capitalism is the biggest threat to workers' health

Michael Marmot's report on health inequalities and Covid, published in December, "reveals" what was obvious. England has one of the highest mortality rates from Covid-19 and one of the greatest number of excess deaths in world, not just due to the government's failure to control the virus, but because of the previous decade of worsening health, particularly for the poorest sections of the population.

Deaths from Covid-19 in England are twice as high in the most deprived areas

compared with the least. Life expectancy in England actually fell between 2010 and 2020 for a large section of the population. This is the worst record among all rich countries apart from Iceland and the USA.

The report also exposed more fully what had been seen since the beginning of the pandemic: "key" workers and those in so-called "elementary" jobs, suffer the highest rates of death in this pandemic - four times as high as for those in "professional occupations".

Among "BAME" people, even accounting for occupational and deprivation factors, all ethnic groups have higher death rates than white people, exposing the structural racism at the heart of the system - which was obvious to anyone who looked.

Marmot's recommendation is to "build back fairer" after this pandemic, but there can be no rebuilding of this long-ago decayed capitalist system, which has left so many people exposed to this virus - the whole thing can only be dumped.

Deportations in the time of Covid

Since June, Home Secretary Priti Patel has been deporting convicted criminals after their release from prison. Nearly half are sent to Jamaica and several have died violently there. That would not bother Patel, who argued for the death penalty on BBC Question Time in 2011, though she claimed later never to have advocated

it as an MP. So she persists with the deportations even now, despite the risk of spreading new-strain Covid. All the men deported on a recent charter flight were tested on arrival in Jamaica, but the Home Office would not confirm whether they tested negative before leaving.

Where originally she decided to deport "foreign" offenders who had served at least a year in prison, now she tries to

deport petty offenders who have served six months. So for example, 22-year-old Osime Brown, who has diagnosed autism and a learning age of seven, faces deportation to Jamaica. He has lived in England since he was four, has no family in Jamaica, and still denies the robbery of a friend's mobile phone for which he was jailed in 2018. This is the Windrush scandal mark 2!

Their Brexit

For most of November and December the trade talks with the EU seemed to be heading for "No Deal". All Johnson's signalling and posturing pointed in this direction, until he started having direct discussions with the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen. After more missed deadlines the government finally agreed a deal, with just a week to spare!

Since Johnson had refused to extend the transition period beyond 1 January, the deal required a special session of Parliament on 30 December to approve it. With a Tory majority of 80, the result of the Commons vote was never in doubt: only 2 of Johnson's most xenophobic former cabinet ministers abstained. "Debate" on the deal - a 1,234-page document - was squeezed into a few hours, with no time for amendments, so that it could pass through both Houses and be duly endorsed.

There was no opposition either from Labour. Leader Keir Starmer had already committed Labour MPs to vote for it within 2 hours of its release, despite calling it "a thin deal". He argued that opposing it would imply that Labour supported "no deal"... Thirty-six Labour MPs abstained and three resigned from shadow positions to do so, refusing to vote on the grounds

Last-minute Brexit



that the rushed process was undemocratic.

De facto, this meant that Labour also agreed to end free movement across the border and agreed the end of equal workers' rights and the right of settlement. This is now enforced from 1 January. In fact, when asked about this, Starmer told the Andrew Marr show on the 10 January that he is no longer in favour of this freedom; his only interest is to win votes - and in particular the Labour "leave" votes which switched to the Tories in the last

election.

In other areas transitional arrangements will continue to guarantee supply chains for production. So, for instance, some of the paperwork requirements for exports are suspended until 2022. As to the sore subject of fishing rights, in fact "foreign" boats now have the right to fish in "British" waters until 2026, subject to annual reviews thereafter. Which did not prevent the announcement of a Naval patrol to "police" Britain's "sovereign waters"! □

• The shape of things to come

A bitter "taster" of Brexit was provided for workers on the 20th of December, when France closed its border to all traffic from Britain, ostensibly because of the new British Covid strain. As a result, up to nearly 5,000 lorry drivers ended up being stuck in Kent waiting to cross the English Channel without food, or any other provisions - no toilets, no showers nor even the possibility of refuelling and with the only help coming from a Sikh charity which handed out bowls of curry!

It took the government almost 48 hours to decide to direct some of the stranded drivers to an old disused airport at Manston. The blockage was officially ended 3 days later when France agreed to reopen the border, but now it insisted that drivers provide proof of a negative Covid test! This created further delays for the drivers as it was obviously impossible to get any tests where they were. Eventually, the British army was

brought in to do the testing and the long queues started to clear on Boxing day - almost a week after the border closure!

The bosses and their politicians, Labour included, have shown time and again that they could not care less for the lives and livelihoods of the workers. And there is more to come as Brexit kicks in.

• Freeports "à la Johnson"

Whenever Johnson is confronted by his interviewers with the reality of job losses due to Brexit he comes up with his "flagship government program" for Freeports. The government is now seeking bids for the first 7 of them, claiming this will "create jobs and boost the economy"...

In fact a bid is already being made to establish a "Thames Freeport" in Thurrock, encompassing the Port of Tilbury, Thames Gateway, and Ford's engine plant at Dagenham, by the companies "DP World", an Emirati

multinational logistics company based in Dubai and "Forth Ports" based in Edinburgh, owned by a Canadian pension investment fund which took over the privatised public ports authority. These companies claim this will be "a magnet for new investment and skills development... creating 20,000 jobs".

Of course, tax free zones like this aren't exactly new. And contrary to the Brexiteers' claims, they weren't prevented from operating under EU rules. These "ports" will allow companies to export goods without paying tariffs or duties, nor the usual taxes either... What is more, the regulation-free environment inside these special economic zones will help bosses escape employment regulations - such as they are. And rather than "creating new skilled jobs" they will be able to transfer part of their workforces directly into Freeports, driving working conditions down in the process, creating "Singapore upon Thames".

Underpaying the minimum wage

HMRC has finally caught up with a few companies which aren't paying the minimum wage. Its blacklist was compiled from "probes" between 2016 and 2018. The culprits aren't little cowboys, either, but the big boys! Tesco, busy raking it in these days thanks to online deliveries during the pandemic, paid 140,000

workers less than the national minimum wage in 2017, claiming it was a "payroll system error". An excuse very many workers will be all too familiar with! Again in 2018, wages of 78,199 workers "fell short" (as if this happens by magic) by £5.1million!

Pizza Hut underpaid 11,000 workers by £845,936, by deducting the cost of their uniforms from wages. Home Grown Hotels,

part-owned by billionaire Brexiteer and tax-exile Jim Ratcliffe, had to pay back £13,790 to just 25 workers... also for uniform deductions! The other 138 companies' underpayments affected about 17,000 workers in total. This is likely to be the tip of the iceberg. And given the overstretched HMRC intends to cut another 2,000 jobs this year, it's likely the rest of that iceberg will remain underwater.

Brexit, the bosses and Covid

Iain Duncan-Smith, Tory Brexiteer par excellence is happy: Brexit is finally "done"; the famous British "buccaneering spirit" is free again... Britain can once again dominate the world, just like in the old days... 300 years ago.. or so he hopes!

Brexit negotiator, "Lord" Frost, said Britain had become a "fully independent country again". Deputy chair of the European Research Group said "We can now say clearly Britain is a sovereign state."

Of course this is a joke. If Britain hadn't been "independent" and "sovereign" all along, why would it have such self-important members of a British parliament passing its own laws to screw workers? And why indeed, would there be a "sovereign" opening said parliament? Obviously, being rational isn't their strong point.

It's worth recalling their heroine Thatcher's take on the EU to remind them what they've lost: "A single market without barriers, visible or invisible, giving you direct and unhindered access to the purchasing power of over 300 million of the



world's wealthiest and most prosperous people. Bigger than Japan. Bigger than the United States. On your doorstep. And with the Channel Tunnel to give you direct access to it."

Of course, when it comes to Johnson, truth and reality are always far away: in his New Year message, he pronounced

Brexit as an "amazing moment", adding that the combination of the Brexit deal and roll-out of the Oxford vaccine meant "we are creating the potential trampoline for the national bounceback". Unfortunately Sunak and the Bank of England have contradicted him. The bounce back, if it even happens, is going to be delayed. □

• Burning their fingers, not red tape

Johnson's "jumbo Canada-style" deal, is "jumbo" only in the jumbo new barriers to trade. For a start, there'll be an estimated 215 million extra customs declarations a year, costing at least £15 billion pounds, according to the government's tax and customs department, HMRC (who also need 50,000 new customs agents).

Other new barriers to trade include regulations on animal products, extra safety certificates and rules of origin, to name a few. Manufacturing lobby group, Make UK, showed a sharp fall in the proportion of companies expecting to export in the first three months of 2021.

The border in the Irish sea

At a time of year when the volume of goods crossing the English Channel is usually low, things have already got snarled up, especially

on the way to Northern Ireland, at the new border in the Irish sea. Most commercial goods now need a customs declaration. And there are new border control posts where all food products which require health certificates, can be inspected - although this process is going to be eased in over 3 months... In fact there's a 3-month "grace period" for parcels too, before



they have to have their customs declarations in place.

Deprived of British sandwiches

CEO of Morrisons supermarket said, "I think any delay on the back of paperwork and process post-December 31 is yet to be felt or yet to be visible". Except that the consequences of Brexit are already plain to see! Marks and Spencer couldn't send sandwiches to its shops in France, and many small businesses in the EU have stopped sending goods to customers in Britain. Major mail and freight companies such as TNT/FedEX, UPS and DHL have increased their prices by around £4.50 on standard parcels crossing the EU-British border. Yes, the pile of paper - real and virtual - is growing every day. In fact there is less red tape now for New Zealand farmers, than for British farmers, to send their lamb to the EU!

• Opportunity for more profits

Back in December, £33bn was wiped off the index of the 100 leading companies in Britain, as a result of fears over Brexit and Covid. The airline industry was hit the hardest. The owner of British Airways, International Consolidated Airlines Group, saw a 16% drop in their share price. Tour operators were also hit hard, with TUI recording £1.8 billion losses. But not all companies have seen their share prices drop.

In fact, tech and e-commerce companies have seen them rising continuously the past 9 months. The total value of all Amazon's shares rose by £294.61 billion. Microsoft was not far behind with £160 billion. Overall, the 25 most profitable global corporations in the S&P Global 100 Index are expected

to pay shareholders over £278.04 billion in 2020 - equivalent to 124% of their profits! And even for those companies classified as "losers" their shareholders have taken millions in dividends over the years. Not to mention the latest government rescue packages, amounting to £4.6 billion, are aimed at rescuing those shareholders!

Unsurprisingly, the government does what is necessary to protect the wealthy, but does hardly anything to protect the workers who produce the wealth.

• More job cuts for us to fight!

The number of people claiming benefits more than doubled between March and May last year, to 2.7m, and remains at this level. But bosses made another 370,000 workers

redundant between August and October, 177,000 of them from retail. Hospitality UK, representing hotels, restaurants and pubs, reported that 660,000 jobs had already been cut in its sector - before the second lockdown in November. So if official unemployment shows only a 400,000 rise for 2020, that's certainly not the full picture!

It's not all down to Covid. Retail has been in crisis due to online competition, for years. In 2019, 143,000 jobs went. When the latest furlough ends (if it does) in April 2021, 1,300 employers have said they plan to cut yet more jobs. Sunak himself forecast another 900,000 unemployed by mid-2021.

Each new phase of this pandemic exposes further the inability of this capitalist system to provide for society's needs. It has got to go!

Ford Dagenham Engine Plant

Ford helps spread the virus

On 7 January, Ford sent us a letter telling us that, despite the lockdown, "operations will essentially continue in line with the arrangements already in place". On top of this, since over 100 workers are on sick leave at the moment (how many with Covid-19?), we're sent to fill the gaps on overtime. In fact they even laid on overtime during the Xmas/New Year shutdown, when the number of Covid cases were rocketing in East London and Essex!

Yes, even though the situation is far worse than it was in April, when they put us all on furlough and closed the plant, management

claims that today, its "Covid-secure" measures are protection enough. So we had that "safety stand-down" about Covid at the beginning of December and then they sent us a 5-page letter during shutdown, to boast about their record - adding that if we don't comply with the rules, we'll face discipline. In other words, we are to blame if we catch the virus. It's even worse for the subcontracted Lineside Logistics workers and Hamton cleaners, because if they get sick they only get the statutory £95.85/week to live on. Whereas when furloughed



last year, they at least got 80% of their wages!

Ford's bloody-minded insistence on producing these non-essential diesel engines is not only a threat to our lives and long-term health, but the health of our families and neighbours. The plant should be shut down! And this time we want 100% furlough pay for everyone, Lineside and Hamton included. □

• The core problem

It's not surprising that this virus is spreading everywhere. Lineside management pushes sick workmates to stay at work on the grounds that "we" are short of hands...! If we go off sick, they threaten us with disciplines on return! Is it any wonder that mates come to work when ill and take paracetamol to get through the day (and through the temperature check at the gate!)? Ford/Lineside are putting the whole workforce at risk! [Workers' fight bulletin Ford Dagenham 6/1/21]

• Saving electricity trumps our health!

How come Tiger stopped work at 4.30 (5?) pm and restarted at 7pm these past 2 days? They even turned the lights off to save electricity (and switched off the air con?!). A parts shortage due to Brexit? Whatever the reason, why didn't they send us home instead of keeping us hanging around inside the plant for hours - increasing our risk of catching something! [Workers' fight bulletin Ford Dagenham 6/1/21]

• What next?

We see that car sales suffered their biggest drop since WW2... The Financial Times says "Far more battery factories are needed to 'sustain' auto plants during the shift to electric vehicles... Diesel sales last year fell to a fifth of the market, their lowest share of car sales since the turn of the millennium". We'd like to know what Ford plans to do about Dagenham Engine plant once diesels are banned... What's this about a Freeport here, incorporating Tilbury docks? Is that why managers are seeing the government this week?? [Workers' fight bulletin Ford Dagenham 6/1/21]

King's Cross railway station (London)

• Head in the sand

Talk about a broken record! No matter what the Covid crisis throws at LNER (or at everyone else!) - Tier 3, Tier 4, highly contagious mutant virus - they have the same answer: "everything is safe here, we've assessed the risk". So having catering services running while Covid cases are 50,000 plus a day is OK for them? The virus can travel at high speed on their services and it does not bother them? No, it is left to us, the workers, to assess the risks... and act on them!

• Low numbers...

We were surprised and puzzled that there were suddenly 2 catering workers rather than 4, working on all trains. Did an outbreak mean that there were no staff available? Or was it that, by some miracle, LNER thought it was safer to put fewer workers on trains? In fact they have now cynically explained that it's because they have low passenger numbers. So why not stop the catering service altogether?

• Exposed at the gates

Despite Covid cases going up and despite the new lockdown, neither LNER

nor GN has said anything about reducing the number of us working on the gate line. Never mind that we're coming into contact with a lot of passengers every day, especially during rush hour. Last lockdown, shifts were reduced and a rota was organised which cut to minimum our exposure to this virus! Why not now?

• Tests should be provided

We can hardly believe this! Atalian bosses haven't changed a thing as regards the work environment despite yet another workmate getting Covid, meaning some of us having to isolate this last month. We're still cramped into too-small spaces, and our shifts still overlap so if the virus is present we'll catch it, but we won't know before we've passed it on! We should really not be working at all - since trains should have been halted - but since we are, we need regular Covid tests.

• Arguing for the bosses?

We read on the RMT website that their priority is to "punch Britain back into economic recovery when the lockdown lifts". Really? Shouldn't their priority be to help us punch the bosses into ensuring our jobs, pay and conditions "recover"? They are already squeezing us, citing Covid, the



lockdown and whatever else and jobs are already threatened at the Hitachi depots. But apparently RMT leaders have forgotten who they are and which side they're (meant to be) on.

• "World-beating" train fares

Never let it be said that this government ever did the right thing by rail workers or passengers! Last month, the DfT announced their annual fare rise, which is bad enough, given the combined effects of Covid, Brexit and the crisis! Based on last July's RPI it'd normally be 1.6%, but to recoup their £10bn "losses" spent running the trains this last year (handout to TOCs!) they've added another 1% above inflation! So it will be 2.6%, but "softened" by a delay to March, thus maintaining their record of charging the highest fares in the world...

Mount Pleasant mail centre (London)
It's a fight against Covid and bosses!

The union's Health and Safety rep has been regularly texting us to tell us how many of us have Covid. And this number had been going up steadily. In the 1st week of 2021, 27 Mount Pleasant workmates had the virus and another 55 were self-isolating! And no wonder: we've been expected to "work as usual" during the Xmas rush - and given the extra hands and the extra load, it's impossible to keep 1 metre apart let alone 2!

Pathway downhill...

While the Covid outbreak has been unfolding inside, Royal Mail and Communication Workers' Union officials have been busy negotiating away our employment conditions outside... A so-called "Pathway to Change" agreement has been signed behind our backs, reaffirming RM's attacks and adding a few more. So for instance, "Managing

the Surplus Framework" will remain in place, voluntary redundancies will continue and so will job cuts. The roll-out of scan in/out and other technologies will allow RM bosses to follow our every move even more closely, while yet another measure to "improve efficiency/productivity" has been agreed.

As for our pay, the 2.7% increase backdated to April 2020 and the 1% for April 2021 will leave us with a net pay cut (RPI's forecast to be 2.6% in 2021!). The only good news is the 1 hour off the working week (without loss of pay)... but only in October 2021. In the meantime, the union has actually agreed for RM to introduce (initially voluntary) Sunday deliveries! Unbelievable.

...so we'll vote no!

Of course, RM has been making the most of the pandemic, thanks to



the demand for parcels and juicy government contracts for Covid test processing. And they've kept us working through the Covid surges, with no regard for our health. So yes, we'll be voting against this agreement when the ballot comes, later in January. But we'll need to put forward our own demands: no job cuts - in fact a lot more workers to be offered jobs, with the reopening of closed sites to allow adequate distancing - a shorter working week immediately, weekends free, and a decent pay rise! For now, however, we need the complete shutting down of Mount Pleasant until the outbreak is under control! ☐

BMW Mini centre (Cowley, Oxford)
We've got a lot to sort out...

On Tuesday 1st December, 70 of us working for Rudolph & Hellmann (R&H) logistics downed tools for 45 minutes at the beginning of our 12-hour night shift to protest against management's attempt to cut our pay. They had given us a letter announcing our wages would go down to £11.08/hour from £11.15/hour - and they wanted everyone to sign up to this!

The stoppage was in the "Integrated Logistics Center", i.e. the main warehouse, so the whole plant was brought to a halt, since it's us who supply parts to the assembly lines. When we stopped, many others followed, and we decided to gather in the canteen to discuss what to

do next. Because no way is this over!

More than one reason to fight!

But the stoppage wasn't only about the hourly pay rate. R&H keeps messing around with the shift pattern, like cancelling the Friday night shift which results in the loss of 12 hour's pay. Last summer in fact, many workers left in disgust when this far-too-long 12-hour shift was introduced in the first place. And on top of it, the night premium is not paid in full. In fact the list of grievances is endless!!

Making winter hot!

Straight away, R&H showed how much we'd hurt them: with Uwe Winter himself, R&H CEO, admitting



that "a big proportion" of us stopped working, thus "damaging" R&H's profits! He reminded us that what we did could be a "sackable offence". But he knew better than to push it, in case it triggered an even bigger reaction. And indeed, that "bigger reaction" will have to be on the cards, unless R&H pays us the wages they owe us and restores our full shift premiums. ☐

• The plant must stay shut

Are we seriously returning to work the week when this deadly "new variant wave" is going to be at its peak??! To assemble "essential" branded MINIs?? We had no temperature checks, nor deep cleanings, nor even distancing! Let alone Covid tests 3 times a week!

Before the shutdown the managers were trying to get some of us to pay for our sick leave with WTA - i.e., working over-exposure time...! How many of us have occupational sick

pay in this plant? How many of us are even entitled to SSP for that matter?! It's pretty clear we're better off on furlough since we can't even quarantine. But BMW won't concede - unless tools stay down.

• When's our vaccination?

If we're planning to go on furlough we don't want to take any risk upon return! There is more than enough space in the plant to set up a vaccination centre - 2nd dose included. Up to BMW and Johnson

to hurry up and sort that out.

• No evictions!

Why should any of us have to struggle to pay the rent... or even face eviction? But with many of us left without any income, or in the case of agency workers, without any promise of work, homelessness is a real threat. This is what happened last year. And now the eviction ban is expiring again. We've not put together all these damn MINIs to end up without a roof!

USA

We reproduce an abridged version of the workplace bulletin editorial of the Spark Trotskyist group in the USA. It was written after Trump supporters rampaged through the US "parliament" in Washington DC.

We've all seen the pictures: gangs of white supremacists leading the way into the Capitol Building, Confederate and Trump flags flying, racist slogans held aloft: Proud Boys, American Nazis, QAnon, Michigan Militia... and among them, off-duty cops.

The Capitol police seemed to melt away when the gangs reached the doors.

It was clear something would happen in Washington DC on January 6. Trump had called his supporters to overturn the election. Social media posts spoke of "action".

It wasn't just words. In December, just as Electoral College electors met to cast their votes, extreme-right thugs paraded through DC. In May, militia gangs invaded Michigan legislature. In the summer, Proud Boys rammed truck caravans through Portland Oregon, long guns poking out of windows. Gangs attacked Black Lives Matter demonstrators in Louisville and Kenosha. People were killed.

Anyone listening to Trump, or these groups' social media posts, would have prepared for an attack. DC and federal police authorities did not.

DC cops know how to control crowds. They act with military precision, even against ordinary demonstrations like

White supremacy raises its barbarous head

over climate change, let alone the police murder of George Floyd.

Not this time. They gave white hoodlums a pass.

What happened on January 6 reflects the ever-present official racism of US society. But it was also a signpost, pointing to future dangers.

Whatever Trump does when he leaves the White House, these forces that were part of his support aren't going away. Their invasion of the Capitol could only have made them more bold.

These gangs, who want a "white, Christian nation", target black people, immigrants, Jews, Muslims. They work to get rid of unions and rail against communism. Today, they may still be marginal. But tomorrow they can

become a real force.

This is a potential danger, pointed right at the heart of the working class. Their radicalism can pull a number of white workers, whose lives are deteriorating, to line up behind them.

Against a danger like this, we can't count on the cops or government. Didn't January 6 show that? As for the Democrats, they only mouth platitudes. Biden said "This isn't what America is". But, this IS what capitalist America is - and has long been.

Those who would oppose these racist bands must rely on the capacities of the working class, to fight to improve their situation and attract to its side all those fed up with society today, to start the work of building a new one. □

India

The Modi government is facing a fightback. The national capital Delhi is surrounded by thousands of farmers from Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat, led by a range of organisations and among them, peasant unions affiliated to the Communist parties. They are continuing their already 4-month-long protest against three laws the government intends to enact, which threaten to ruin them and drive up food prices for the population.

Despite rain and near freezing temperatures, the protests keep growing larger. Recently 1,200 farmers from Maharashtra arrived. Another thousand from Kerala are on their way. The makeshift camps they've set up are transforming into mini-cities with health facilities, soup kitchens and libraries. The protestors sense they're in this

First the farmers... now the workers?

for the long haul. And in the face of slander from government, ministers and right-wing media, they've set up their own newspaper, the "Trolley Times" - a reference to the roughly 90,000 tractor-trailers they've parked on Delhi's borders!

Demonstrations of support by peasant unions, trade unions and democratic rights organisations have been taking place elsewhere, too: in Bihar, Tamil Nadu and Madhya Pradesh. The government, which so many considered to be all-powerful, has not been able to use the army, the police, or even its right-wing RSS thugs against the protest, due to decisive support from the population.

While so far not taking an active part in the protests, workers from the surrounding industrial belt bring food and supplies. And some sections are making

their own stand. In Delhi, 5000 nurses at the prestigious AIIMS (All India Institute of Medical Sciences) hospital went on strike against the hiring of nurses on downgraded contracts. Car workers at the 6,000-strong Toyota Kirloskar plant near Bengaluru continue a strike against line speed-up and the dismissal of workers. At the Wistron plant nearby, which assembles Apple i-phones, workers smashed managers' offices and cars in anger at the lengthening of shifts to 12hrs, and the cutting of the wages by half.

We can hope that these are signs of a generalised working class fightback which could bring farmers and workers together against Modi's reactionary policies. □

In addition to this paper, we publish bulletins in several large workplaces in the South East, a journal, "Class Struggle" and a series of pamphlets on topical issues. If you wish to know more, contact Workers' Fight by e-mail, at contact@w-fight.org, or by postal mail at:

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