

WORKERS' fight

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

BREAKING THE PAY FREEZE!

We're all in it together says Johnson? Like hell we are! Just after Sunak gave that extra Covid "shielding" to the bosses in his budget, the Department of Health recommended that hospital workers should get a pay cut! Yes, in the middle of the pandemic! Of course, they called it a 1% pay "rise", but when inflation is 1.4% - or even 0.9%, by their chosen index - that's a lie!

So now the Royal College of Nursing and health union Unison, have let it be known that they're building up strike funds.

The obvious points have been made. That 1% is an "insult" to those same "heroes" who this hypocritical government keeps heaping with praise.

In fact this is the real problem. Because despite all the coverage of NHS staff fighting to keep patients with Covid alive, including Johnson himself, the government still thinks it can get away with cutting their pay.

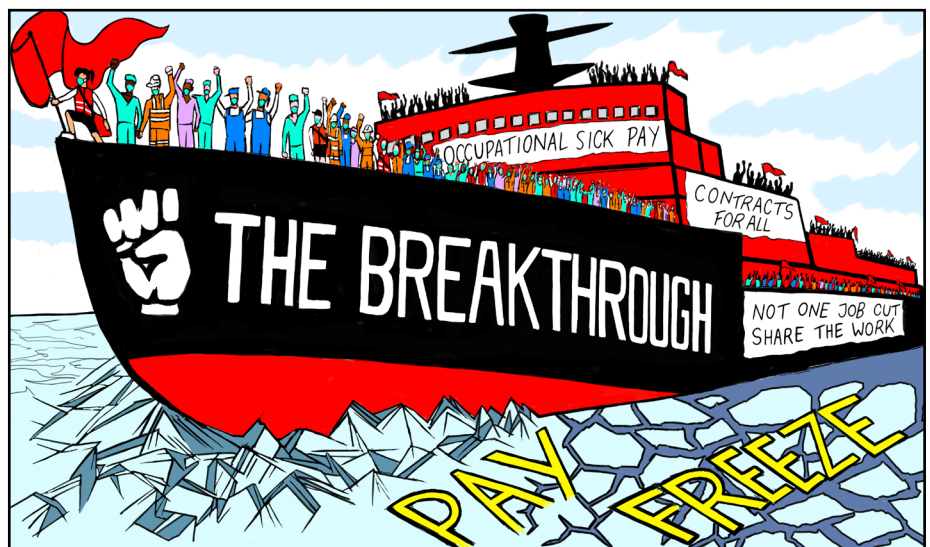
The same goes for the pay freeze for the rest of the public sector. The whole of the civil service, council workers, firefighters and even police are to get a pay cut over the coming year!

And in January the Department for Transport recommended that 62,000 railway workers should have their pay frozen for two years!

Making workers pay for the crisis

So yes, you couldn't find a more literal example of a government telling the working class that it is going to pay for the crisis.

Sunak says that this "cost" is now as much as £407bn. And it includes the price of serial government incompetence. For instance, the £37bn given to Deloitte, the accountancy giant. And by the way, even with this largesse



it is unable to establish an effective "test and trace" system!

Instead of handing out yet more to the capitalists, Sunak could certainly have taken money away from them, to fund all necessary expenditure: the collective wealth of Britain's billionaires even grew during lockdown, by £25bn, to £147bn. And then there are all the online businesses and supermarkets who've made record profits.

Smash the ice!

So the money's definitely there for pay rises. However, the working class is going to have to fight for it. It's not going to be offered on plate.

And while the government knows it hasn't a leg to stand on, it is also aware of the danger of placing hundreds of thousands of workers in exactly the same boat, all at the same time, by either freezing, cutting or refusing to increase their pay.

So Tory peer, "Lord" Bethell, has popped up to try to play workers off against each other and divide the

ranks... He explained that "There are lots of people who have had an extremely tough time and who face a period of unemployment... (..) Nurses are well paid for the job, they have a secure job and they have other benefits"!

Exhausted staff who are still fighting the pandemic in every ICU were no doubt pleased to hear such "expert opinion" from this millionaire hereditary peer!

Through this pandemic, every worker has had to face the fact that this divisive capitalist system which rests on exploitation, competition, nationalism and its twin, racism, and which has proven incapable of using its collective resources for the benefit of all, is absurd and outdated and deserves to be thrown out.

But united, the force of all of us together is strong enough to break through the ice of any kind of pay freeze and to win a decent livelihood for every member of the working class! Not to mention going much further and fighting to get rid of capitalism altogether. ☐

Covid-19 crisis

Johnson says his "roadmap" out of lockdown is "irreversible". It started with re-opening schools to 7m children on 8 March, against warnings that only the virus would benefit from such a "big bang". After phased re-opening of shops, pubs and cafes by 12 April at the earliest, and most other indoor entertainment by 17 May, the vaccine is supposed to make everyone safe and free of restrictions on mixing or distancing, by 21 June.

To justify this, ministers and their embedded scientific advisors had to ignore, or lie about, local spikes in infection rates. Peterborough and nearby Corby both had rising rates and so did Tamworth and neighbouring North Warwickshire. It was left to a Warwickshire community safety manager to point out that North Warwickshire has a concentration of big distribution centres, where hundreds of non-essential workers are concentrated

Roadmap to... more infections?



daily, because "they cannot work from home".

Of course, as long as unvaccinated workers are in contact with each other at work and in public transport there will be contagion: the definition of "essential" occupations has been stretched beyond credibility, all in the name of profit-flows. A large North Warwickshire factory at

Hams Hall, owned by BMW, has expected its 1,000 workers to come in and make engines for minis and 4X4s since after the first lockdown ended in May. This is the definition of "non-essential" work! But infection rates will also climb when school students begin circulating in the community. And no vaccine is yet available for under 18s... □

• Return to school... and education?

Most schools in England phased their return on 8 March. Not to avoid a possible "big bang of Covid", 1-2 weeks down the line, but because they'd been instructed that high school pupils need to have Covid tests first - and twice a week thereafter.

This isn't a bad idea, even if these tests are 30-minute "lateral flow" tests which give positive results only when there's a high viral count. There's also lower accuracy if self-testing. But in small rooms with 30 pupils, viruses will always

spread, especially infectious variants. And mask-wearing isn't mandatory, just "advised".

That's why it would've made sense to vaccinate staff. The data showing teachers aren't more likely to get sick or die, was collected before the new mutants came along. So all that's sure is that cases will rise. Chief Medical Officer Whitty admits as much.

As for the general outcry over the "lost education" of "deprived working class children". Besides the fact that

their system of "education" is little more than learning to pass exams, this is gross hypocrisy. Pre-pandemic, 2,000 students were being excluded from school, a further 40 permanently, every single day! And these exclusions were in the poorest schools. The government's education policy remains what it always was: a function of the needs of the bosses. Schools are meant to teach kids obedience and if they don't learn it, they're out the door.

• Hancock's contract lies

At least 850 healthcare workers are thought to have died from exposure to Covid-19. Many of these lives could have been saved if full PPE had been available. Instead, ICU staff were forced to ration supplies or even make improvised gowns from binbags.

At the same time, the government handed out £15bn in contracts for this life-saving equipment. The law requires MPs to publish all contracts within 30 days. This is meant to allow scrutiny of whether taxpayers' money is being given to MPs' friends, neighbours or a former local pub landlord (as happened with a multimillion-pound contract for testing vials). But Health Secretary Hancock failed to publish 94% of contracts within this timeframe. And the high court has confirmed that this failure was illegal. Some contracts remained unpublished months later - despite Hancock and Johnson's claims to the contrary.

Hancock tried to excuse himself with the outright lie that there was never a national shortage of PPE. Doctors' groups described this as "disgustingly disrespectful" to those who died. Yet Hancock said, of his illegal

behaviour: "I would do exactly the same thing again"! Not surprising, when these lies and failures make his friends so much richer!

• Feeding private scavengers!

Since the start of the pandemic, KPMG, the management and accountancy services provider and one of the 'Big Four' giants (£3bn annual profits), has accumulated an unprecedented amount of NHS contracts.

This includes management of NHS digital platforms and cybersecurity, audits and advisory services, the management of test and trace ("Moonshot program"), flu and Covid vaccination programs and hospital facilities (like the Nightingale hospitals) - to a total value estimated at £621m!

Tamzen Isacson, CEO of the Management Consultancy Association, which is the lobby defending the interests of the bosses in this sector, justified these de facto handouts from the government as due to "Government departments facing an unprecedented volume of workload during the pandemic"! In other words they were only doing their bit to help out in an emergency! She added, "It has

been our industry's priority to strengthen the response and processes of clients and provide value for money". Apparently this was said with a straight face.

Meanwhile KPMG's 2020 annual review shows their 582 British "partners" (top managers and shareholders), collected in the midst of the pandemic, a bounty worth £332m, the highest individual payment being worth £1.7m! And nothing can be found to pay NHS staff?

• Test and waste

Not to be forgotten is one of the biggest Covid-contract winners, Deloitte - another accountancy giant which is getting £37 billion for establishing Test and Trace. Only it hasn't established it. And the fact that it occasionally traces the odd person successfully is no proof of T&T's efficiency.

The point isn't that it's not working, but that another way of doing this job (for instance reviving and expanding the contact tracing that used to be part of the NHS, e.g., for HIV), would definitely have been better. Instead of leaving it to Jockey-Club amateurs who haven't a clue about testing, but do know about bestowing large sums of money on their "class"-mates!

Vaccines: back to the law of the jungle

The way the government is dealing with the Covid-19 vaccine supply problem - which it anticipated by grabbing as much as possible of the world's share before the others - is to spread the vaccine rollout further, by giving one dose to as many people as possible.

In their attempt to appear as "world beating", they're gambling on the outcome. Luck might be on their side concerning the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine, since there is some scientific data to show that it still offers some protection 12 weeks after the first dose. But that's not the case for the

Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, which shows protection tends to fall after 3-6 weeks.

Of course, this stretching of the "dose gap" wasn't done to *"protect as many vulnerable people as possible"*, as "Vaccine Minister" Zahawi claims, but due to a lack of enough vaccine doses. Not least because vaccines are made through a process which involves growing living cells, production of batches can take at up to 5 weeks and cannot easily be hurried up.

That said, if all the resources in the hands of pharmaceutical companies were put together, not for profit-seeking purposes, but to really fight against the

Covid-19 crisis

virus, then the "production time problem" and the "shortage problem" could be solved! However, after scientists, technicians and lab workers collectively achieved the feat of producing effective vaccines in less than 10 months, profit-hungry speculators have wasted no time in sabotaging their efforts!

So, we're back to the capitalist law of the jungle and never mind "saving lives". First comes anti-Chinese and nationalist posturing, and then come embargoes, "free market" competition and prices boosted by ensuring shortage of supply! What an indictment of this degenerate system. □

• Big pharmaceuticals bonanza on vaccine scarcity!

Despite the endless flow of public money handed to big pharmaceuticals (amounting globally to £71.6bn!), the world faces a vaccine shortage. Currently, 51% of the doses go to rich countries with just 14% of the world population...

In fact, on 3 March, another handout of public money (£192m!) was given by the US government to pharmaceutical giant, Merck, to "help" it expand its production capacity for making vaccines, in this case, the Johnson&Johnson one.. As if this giant couldn't fund this expansion itself!

According to UNICEF, only 43% of the world's vaccine manufacturing facilities are being used. No wonder, when production aims

at maximising profit via a system of monopoly through drug patents!

When "potential competitor", Danish company Bavarian Nordic offered facilities for making 240m vaccine doses, to one of the pharmaceuticals holding vaccine patents, its proposal wasn't even considered!

And even when a temporary license for manufacturing is provided, like AstraZeneca's licence to India's Serum Institute, it includes conditions which drive the price of the vaccine up: in India it's £10 compared to £6 for the same vaccine made in Britain!

The "shortage" created by capitalism's operation in the middle of the pandemic, to boost prices and add to the fortunes of pharmaceuticals with state complicity, is a conscious consequence of this iniquitous profit system. And it kills.

• "No jab, no job"..?

In mid January, Pimlico Plumbers announced that all its new starters would have to be vaccinated against Covid. Other organisations like Care UK and Barchester Healthcare have since adopted this "no jab no job" condition for new recruits. As Justice Secretary Robert Buckland explained, *"it is unlikely bosses could make existing employees have vaccines under their current contracts"*. The government says this would amount to discrimination - and it would know all about that: ask Priti Patel!

It's precisely lack of trust in a government led by a known liar, with overtly racist institutions like Patel's Home Office, which has mishandled the pandemic from day one, that fuels vaccine hesitancy.

So despite relatively high vaccine uptake among the general population, by late February, only 52% of care workers in London had agreed to vaccination, posing an obvious problem. In fact hospital-acquired infections were as much as 15-25% of the total cases during the peak of the pandemic in January. And 20,000 elderly died in care homes.

Of course all health and social care workers (in fact all key workers) should be vaccinated. If they can't be convinced this is crucial - and if they then can't be given a job where they aren't in contact with others - then they'll have to be given leave on full pay until the pandemic is over.



NHS white paper: sharks will be fed

On 11 February, while the NHS was in the middle of the worst crisis in its history, crippled by decades of cuts, the government published a surprise "NHS white paper". Nobody would argue the NHS doesn't need fundamental revamping. Apart from hospital staff and equipment shortages, the most glaring problem exposed by this pandemic was the dire state of social care, cut from the NHS and mostly in private, underfunded, "for profit" hands.

To justify himself, Health Secretary Hancock claimed his NHS reforms would reverse some of the changes introduced

by the Health and Social Care Act of 2012 - which many saw as the last nail in the coffin of the NHS, opening it to full privatisation.

So what would change? Well, first, the Health secretary would be reinstated as boss-in-chief of the NHS. He/she would have final say as to which private company got contracts. Yes, a kind of retrospective permission for what Hancock just did (illegitimately) with contracts for mobile apps, PPE, tests, Nightingale Hospitals, etc., during the pandemic!

As for social care being re-integrated into the NHS, a possibility discussed over the past months, not a chance! Hancock's proposals would "strengthen" links between the NHS and local authorities

through already partly-implemented "Statutory Integrated Care Systems (ICS)". These decide which private providers get contracts, as with the takeover by US corporate health provider Centene, of GP practices in Hackney Wick, which campaigners are currently fighting. Under the government's planned "Health Systems Support Framework" this would be the norm.

So does the white paper put into question the parasitism of private providers feeding off the NHS? Not at all! It will make this easier and less transparent. And, of course, require the final "blessing" of the Health Secretary himself: so that chums won't be forgotten!

Their society

The context of the March budget, as Chancellor Rishi Sunak reminded parliament, is the worst economic recession in 300 years (even if nobody knows what happened in 1720...) and the highest government debt since WW2.

His proposals were welcomed by the bosses. Their Covid handouts, like furlough, are extended to September and there are generous new grants to

"struggling" businesses.

The main talking point, that is, the increase in corporation tax from 19% to 25%, but only in 2023, can always be reversed in a year or two's time. So there was nothing for the bosses to worry about. They got a writing-off of this tax anyway, if they do a bit of investment, and other taxes like VAT were cut, while the freezing of income tax thresholds,

won't change much for the rich anyway. This is how the bosses' Financial Times mouthpiece pedantically summed it up: *"The Augustinian 'make me chaste, but not yet' approach of spending now but taxing later starts to re-establish the Conservative party commitment to sound public finances"*. Hmm... so Thatcher is back? But didn't she tax corporations at 52%? ☐

• Strike for decent sick-pay!

An arguably non-essential store that's been open during lockdown is the Wilko chain. All through the whole pandemic, since March, Wilko bosses have been trying to drive down their labour costs by attacking workers' conditions. Their latest move is to impose a new sickness and absence policy, which cuts entitlement to occupational sick pay

to just one occasion - in fact, 1 day of sickness - in any 12-month period.

The GMB union is balloting for strike action this time, having negotiated behind-closed-doors bargains with Wilko bosses, up to now. The result of the vote will be out after 15 March.

It's incredible that bosses should think they can carry out this kind of

attack right now. Or maybe they think that this is the best time to try? But with so many workers (2m) not even eligible for sick statutory sick pay (they earn too little to qualify), plus the pressures of the pandemic, a concerted fightback over this issue - not just at Wilko, but across the board, is overdue.

• Toothless TUC announces campaign

At the end of February, the Trade Union Congress announced a campaign over sick pay. They ask the government, very politely, to: *"abolish the earnings threshold (you have to earn a minimum of £120/w) for statutory sick pay, extend coverage to almost two million workers and for all absences; remove the waiting period for sick pay; increase sick pay to £330 a week, the equivalent of a week's pay at the real living wage; and provide additional funds to ensure employers can afford to pay sick pay."*

Sounds good, but this toothless body has no plan for anything more than words... Yet collective action (not leaving it to isolated sections like Wilko!) is needed more than ever, to ensure the working class isn't only able to defend itself in the here and now, but to remain well and healthy enough to fight future battles!

• Uber's workers are... workers

Uber has argued for years that everyone who drives for the company is "self-employed". Its drivers were therefore not entitled to basic rights, including the minimum wage, paid holidays and workplace pensions. The same goes for most of the 3.6m insecure and zero-hours workers in Britain's "gig economy".

So now the UK supreme court has finally confirmed a 2016 employment tribunal ruling that Uber drivers should be considered "workers". This means that Uber will have to pay compensation to the drivers who brought the case to court. It will also have to revise its current contracts, which the supreme court described as a "sham."

But this decision won't force all gig employers to give their workers proper contracts. There are currently around 1,000 similar cases in the courts. Only if workers win these cases will the law actually force bosses to give workers their legal rights. Unless, of course, there is a fight on the ground which beats these bosses in the meantime - the preferred option!



• If you can't pay your rent, "buy"!

Evictions are happening again. The extension of the "Covid" ban (until 31 March), was watered down. Now tenants can only accrue 6 months rent arrears due to Covid before the landlord can kick them out. So forget about Robert Jenrick's promise that *"no renter who has lost income due to coronavirus will be forced out of their home"*.

Unions campaigning on this issue say that as many as 840,000 private tenants are behind on their rent. In fact a third of private renters were already in poverty before the pandemic. And given that 19% of the population lives in rented flats or houses, this means a lot of people are in imminent threat of homelessness.

In the run-up to his budget, Sunak boasted that there'd be a "new incentive" to help young people onto that legendary "housing ladder"... so that "generation rent" could become "generation buy". The deposit required will be reduced and the government would stand guarantor to mortgages obtained from the banks under new terms. Yes, a "generation buy" is meant to emerge from underneath a mountain of arrears and other debts! But at least the banks haven't been forgotten...

Lethal omission, dangerous delays

The Grenfell Tower inquiry heard that the cladding used on the tower had already failed a fire test in 2004. Executives of Arconic, which manufactured this cladding, admitted they had failed to give these results to the relevant authorities.

The cladding burnt so fast that the test had to be stopped after 14 minutes!

Nearly four years on, the removal of similar cladding on 460 buildings at the highest risk of fire is still not progressing. The residents-owners of flats face bills of up to £100,000 for the cost of the work and are still having to mount their own round-the-clock fire prevention.

Housing minister Robert Jenrick has only just announced £3.5m funding for those affected. However leaseholders are still required to pay up to £50/month towards the cost. And what if one of these buildings catches fire in the meantime? The delay is criminal. And in this, the government is complicit.

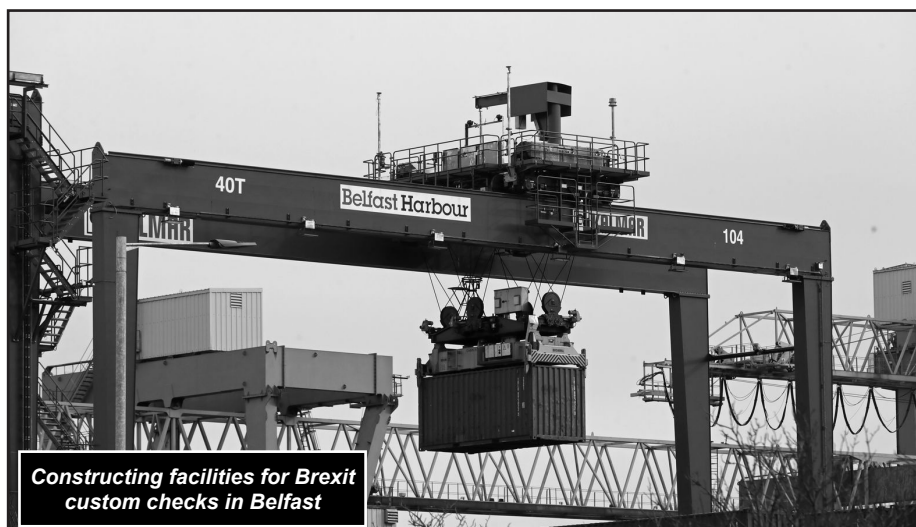
Brexit's Irish "Troubles"

Their Society

The "teething problems" which have beset Northern Irish cross-border traffic and trade with "mainland Britain" post Brexit, are all going to be resolved quickly and amiably, said Johnson at his Monday 8 March Covid press conference. Soon there will be harmony: after all, "we have free trade with Europe". So one can only wonder why the now "Lord" Frost who negotiated the "fantastic deal" intervened the day before to accuse the EU of 'ill will'?

Of course, it was Johnson who baked this problem into his oven-ready Brexit deal in the first place, much to the dismay of his Ulster Unionist fan club. Because his solution to the "Irish problem" was to leave the six counties in the EU custom union. Meaning checks must be done on a variety of produce both ways, which few were prepared for and which caused huge hold-ups, whilst truckloads of food rotting portside.

The "working solution" is to ignore the border. So Johnson has suspended the Northern Ireland



protocol unilaterally and extended the grace period for implementation of the checks. Think back 2 months when the EU, just for a few hours, invoked Article 16 of the protocol which would have placed the border between the 6 and 36 counties! The EU is not going to be allowed to live this down. In fact this

move, over the highly charged vaccine row with AstraZeneca after it reneged on its contract with the EU, was "legal" within protocol terms, even if ill-judged. But ignoring the custom checks into Northern Ireland (and for how long?) isn't. The EU is now taking Britain to court. Brexit is not nearly "done". □

• Sunak to the rescue of the City

In January, Amsterdam overtook London as Europe's largest centre for trading stocks and shares. City banks were left with only about half of their normal trading business after all... but this was still worth about £8bn!

Of course, City bosses will try to find ways to make up for their losses... and if at all possible increase their profits! And ex-City golden boy, now Chancellor, Rishi Sunak is there to help them.

He commissioned a report last year by Tory Lord Hill, published on the same day as the Budget, on how London could "better compete" with US and European rivals. His recommendations, unsurprisingly, mostly involve loosening a range of regulatory rules. One example is that of SPACs, or Special Purpose Acquisition Companies. These are a type of shell company, usually set up by hedge funds (those self-appointed "masters of the universe"!) to raise money from investors on the stock market, with the purpose of merging with an existing company. After which the hedge funds exit, having made a packet.

Sunak even boasted about the City becoming a SPAC haven in his budget day speech. It's already a tax haven, so perhaps an expanding SPAC market will help it make up for what it lost to Amsterdam and Frankfurt. Or it might just help inflate the speculative bubble to the point where it bursts.

• £20 too much

Sunak's budget has extended the 12-month £20/week "uplift" to Universal Credit which had been given as a result of the Covid crisis last April - but only until September. So in October, when the uplift is stopped, claimants will suddenly lose £80 a month.

In fact it was out of character for Johnson's government to make this concession in the first place. The new UC system, introduced in 2013 by the Tories, was intended to cut the welfare budget. And last year, due to the mass job-cutting by the bosses, the number of claimants jumped from 3m in March 2020 to almost double this number by November, adding even more demand on this budget.

It might be argued that Johnson conceded the £20 payment under pressure of back benchers, given that the "new unemployed" comprised many from the middle class Tory constituency. They now had to go through the "humiliation" of claiming benefits, and relying on ~£402/month and even resorting to foodbanks when their money ran out!

That said, this extra £20 was also an admission that UC levels are far too low to live on. By removing it, Sunak is merely anticipating the rise in unemployment (predicted to be at least 500,000) when he terminates the furlough scheme and bosses, who no longer get his handout, sack their workers. It's a reversion to "normal" Tory policy - austerity and welfare cuts.

Bosses get away with murder

Again, it's the bosses own paper, the Financial Times, which has been throwing up its hands over the unfairness of the system! In an article entitled "Covid rule-breakers face jail but careless employers go free", it contrasts the 10 year jail sentence threatened for breaking Covid travel restrictions, with bosses' total impunity even when their refusal to observe Covid rules leads to harm and death.

It points out that out of 179,873 Covid-related inspections at workplaces the Health and Safety Executive only issued 218 "enforcement" notices!

In other words, only 0.12% of the bosses who broke Covid rules have been told to do something about it. And to give a measure of how many workers might have caught Covid or died as a result of going to work, the HSE says it's received 27,446 occupational disease notifications of Covid and 318 death notifications since April 2020.

Of course the HSE can't do much inspecting of workplaces nor "enforcement", thanks to drastic funding cuts - but neither can local authorities, whose health and safety inspectors were cut by 50%.

So nobody should be too surprised that staff at the Driver and Licensing Authority office in Swansea have had to ballot this month for strike action over Covid safety: there have been "more than 500 Covid-19 cases there since September"!

Ford Dagenham Engine Plant

e-Ford: what about Dagenham and Halewood?

On 18 February Ford announced that its entire passenger vehicle line would be "all-electric" by 2030. President of Ford Europe, Stuart Rowley, said: "Relying on incumbent internal combustion engine technology for profits has now become high-risk". He went on to acknowledge that people would now be buying electric cars rather than petrol and diesel ones... As usual, Ford lags behind other car makers and now wants to catch up - to ensure it gets its share of the

market!

Rowley also said that "the changes are a seismic challenge, but one the company could meet". The news of a £1bn investment in Cologne in their Ford Fiesta site, has already been released. But concerning Halewood and Dagenham plants, even if Ford implies they might be involved in the production of some components, there has been no hint as to their future. Only rumours about Ford showing interest in the government's new "freeports"... In



fact, for the time being, all we've seen - apart from a bunch of electric transits dating from 2009 and some mysterious e-scooters... is job cuts! Yes, while at the same time production of diesel engines is being pushed - as if it were going out of fashion! ☐

• How to slow the line

Yeah, Fords isn't just pushing production, but pushing us all over the place. And when it's the oldest workers being shuffled around the factory and being put on the heaviest jobs, no wonder there are so many off on long term sick! Well, never mind: us oldies will just take our time, and when we can't lift it, we'll wait for help to arrive... for as long as it takes... [Workers' Fight bulletin Ford Dagenham 3/13/21]

• Getrag gets out

After that "going electric by 2030", announcement, followed by silence over D'ham's future, Ford is now taking full charge of Halewood transmission from Getrag. Doesn't change much for us. Halewood mates always kept their Ford identities and were part of collective bargaining. Anyway for them, like for us here, the question mark re the future remains. Electric cars don't need the transmissions they make. [Workers' Fight bulletin Ford Dagenham 3/13/21]

• Proper goodbyes

We said goodbye and good luck to some of the Tiger mates who left the plant last week after a lifetime of work in here. And we had a chance to clap and shake hands (sanitised straight after, of course...).

But lots of the 50 total who've been granted VR/EVR were not even in the plant, to leave it! Because many are off sick - and some with Covid. [Workers' Fight bulletin Ford Dagenham 3/13/21]

King's Cross railway station (London)

East Coast "improvements"?

An upgrade to the East Coast line has been long overdue. The tracks and signals hadn't been fit for purpose for decades already. But it was only when the new Hitachi high-speed trains came into use, that Network Rail was forced to start serious renewal work.

They boast about the huge engineering "feat". And rightly so: it most recently involved pushing a huge concrete curved box weighing 11,000 tonnes underneath the mainline, while still allowing trains to carry on running above... Apparently a world "first"!

The works are meant to last until

June. New platforms, the re-opening of an old gas tunnel, more upgrading of signalling, overhead works, etc., have meant major disruptions on top of the changes necessitated by the pandemic. And it's the workforce which is bearing the brunt.

On-board LNER crews out of King's Cross have had our shifts changed at least 6 times since last March! GN station workers have been moved from one station to another without notice. Atalian train cleaners have been made to travel up the line during some King's Cross closures, in some cases with up



to 4 hours added to our shifts.

Of course, we're all in favour of infrastructure improvements, making train journeys safer - but it's high time we saw improvements in our pay and conditions! ☐

• STRIKE!

The Atalian strike days were announced by the RMT executive for the 8th and 12th of March. We're ready! We were already "ready", weeks ago! But we now hear that "they" may move these days to August, due to the upcoming engineering works?

That's a decision for us to make - not to be made above our heads. Because the sooner we have this fight against these Covid-negligent, underpaying and over-bearing bosses, the better. [Workers' Platform bulletin King's Cross 24/1/21]

• Free and safe

As always(!) the hand held terminals used by catering workers on the Azumas are slow to log on and the WiFi connection is dodgy. So, let's forget card payments for food and drinks - and since we don't take cash for Covid reasons - just give everything for free. In that way, we can also stay safely distant from the passengers... [Workers' Platform bulletin King's Cross 24/1/21]

• Bills are 100%

All of us Grand Central workers were told that we'd be called back to work at the end of February. But now we've been told we have

another month on furlough. That means another month on just 80% of our low wages (and even lower for contract cleaners). No, we can't hold out on that! Why is this boastful "best operator-awarded" company not paying 100%? [Workers' Platform bulletin King's Cross 24/1/21]

• We want to know

Why has Edinburgh's RG depot been closed for almost a week? Rumour has it that there have been cases of Covid there. So we expect that the place is being thoroughly deep cleaned and disinfected? And if everything is being done the correct way, why not tell us? [Workers' Platform bulletin King's Cross 24/1/21]

Mount Pleasant mail centre (London)**Royal Mail's bonanza: return to "sender"**

Royal Mail proudly announced that in the 3rd quarter of the financial year, 497m parcels were processed - an historic record! Yes, the busiest quarter in 500 years! Of course, it was obvious that parcel volumes would soar during lockdown due to online shopping. And shares have soared accordingly: +38% between October and December. RM is set to make £500m profits this year, 54% more than 2019!

To help handle the parcels' overload, RM has said it will "retain around 10,000 of the 33,000 flexible

workers from the Christmas peak". But surprise, surprise, the big profits are not going to be used to take them on permanently and on decent wages! No, agency workers have been "retained"... on their precarious, casual contracts paid barely above the minimum wage.

It is not just the parcels surge which means more hands are needed, though. The number of absences in our ranks is unprecedented, due to soaring Covid cases and self-isolation, which at one point meant North London Delivery Centre was



missing a third of its workers.

The latest financial results show that RM's big shareholders and its bosses have been making a killing out of the pandemic, from our sweat, blood and tears. It has cost some of us our lives. They will have to pay for that! ☐

• 500m parcels in 3 months

We don't need management to tell us that parcel volumes have gone through the roof... we've seen it first hand. And we also know that every single delivery company has made a killing out of the pandemic! Yes, RM's taken a big share of the cake - the pandemic has delivered them revenue on a platter... A hefty 20% increase to £9.3bn! [Workers' Fight bulletin Mount Pleasant MC/DO 24/02/21]

• Where's the caviar?

And of course, shares have gone up, big

shareholders are opening the champagne and on our side? They've chucked us a few pennies - 1% in our pay-packets... Just about enough to crack open a bottle of Coca-Cola. [Workers' Fight bulletin Mount Pleasant MC/DO 24/02/21]

• Anti-social offer

We're not impressed with management's "offer" to increase part-time hours to 35/week with nine-and-a-half hour night shifts (never acceptable!) plus Saturday afternoons, during Arsenal matches... And their plan wouldn't even guarantee us 3 days off in a row! So most of us are saying,

very politely of course, "No thank you". [Workers' Fight bulletin Mount Pleasant MC/DO 24/02/21]

• Hours and wages all can live on

And will managers ask casuals to do these extra hours if we don't? Well, we've got a big problem with that! Of course, we need more mates in here, we can't stress that enough, but on proper contracts. So, on this issue we'd like to know what the current "Union position" is? Employing casuals outside of Xmas used to be against the rules. [Workers' Fight bulletin Mount Pleasant MC/DO 24/02/21]

BMW Mini centre (Cowley, Oxford)**More permanent contracts needed, not redundancies!**

On February 16, BMW announced it'd offer voluntary redundancies and early retirement to permanent workers, citing "continuing volatility in our markets".

But the proposed "settlements", even for the longest serving workers, are barely equivalent to one year's full wage! Hardly an incentive to leave! So maybe they're banking on us being utterly fed up with working here?

There's a lot to be fed up with, especially the "Working Time

Account" system, which they've been using to make us pay back all the Covid-related lay-off time. If we run out of credit it can mean lay-offs without any pay at all!

Anyway, it seems very likely that BMW just wants to replace yet more permanent workers with temps. They've already cut the number of temporary workers who they make up to permanent, and never mind that many of our mates have been "temping" for up to 7 years or more! It's ludicrous!



So we say this to BMW: you can shove this EVR offer unless every permanent worker who leaves is replaced with another permanent worker, from the ranks of the long-serving "temps". And even if this condition is met, that VR offer will have to be upped considerably! ☐

• The second wave goes on

We're still hearing of many Covid cases all over the plant - some mates are in hospital, and we know of mates off sick in most areas. But BMW still doesn't tell us anything. A whole maintenance crew in Paint Shop who share an office tested positive, but management say no one is contracting the virus "at work"! [Workers' Fight bulletin, BMW Oxford Mini, 21/02/21]

• The bare minimum

When is the regular workplace testing being set up here? This is something that was obviously needed right from the start of the pandemic. But it's only going to be the Lateral Flow Test, which is much less reliable than PCR. Either way, we need social distancing measures here... which we still don't have! [Workers' Fight bulletin, BMW Oxford Mini, 21/02/21]

• Breaking basic safety rules

It's madness that mates are getting calls from managers telling them to come back to work before they get their Covid test results.

They even think they can threaten us with disciplinaries if we don't! They get scared at the slightest mention of "HSE", however. [Workers' Fight bulletin, BMW Oxford Mini, 02/03/21]

Myanmar

For over a month, demonstrations and strikes have been taking place against Myanmar's military junta. On 1 February, its coup d'état returned Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD) to prison. It claimed the election, won by the NLD, was "fraudulent". Since then, arrests and raids have been systematic, with thousands more detained and NLD officials killed in custody.

In major cities, including Yangon, Daiwei, Patheingyi, hundreds of thousands of protestors, stand determined in the face of tear gas, water-cannon and live rounds. Young people have been shot in the head; 54 (but probably far more) protesters have been killed since demonstrations began.

Workers are at the forefront of the movement. Garment and medical workers in the Yangon, the largest city, were the first to come out, followed by railway workers, teachers and workers in military-controlled industries like the Myanmar Oil and Gas enterprise. There have been police defections. Some have joined the protestors. Others fled to the neighbouring Indian state of Mizoram, as they do not wish to follow the Junta's orders.

Western governments, including the British, have been making noises condemning the coup. But above all, western capitalists, the oil groups BP, Total and Chevron, Toyota and more

Strikers and protestors defy the military



than 400 Japanese companies, want to maintain their lucrative investments in Burmese gas and raw materials, the market of 54 million consumers and their contracts negotiated with the military. The protestors should expect no support from their governments.

In fact, it was British colonial policies that set the scene for military rule to prevail, which it did for decades (1962-2011). During the colonial period, Burma's ethnic minorities were used in the Indian Army. During WW2, the British armed ethnic Karens to fight against Burma's communists and nationalists. So much so, that independence of Burma, in 1948, was overshadowed by a civil war between

several rival ethnic groups, with their own armed wings. It was to suppress 20 or so ethnic insurgencies, that the army first took control in 1962. Ever since, the junta has retained a powerful presence in the country, operating as a state within the state.

Myanmar's peoples have a long history of fighting against the military. Through the 1988 and 2007 uprisings, protestors managed to push back the military to some extent. But of course, it was always a matter of when and not if, that the junta would bid for sole control over the country's resources. Only a real revolution, led by the working classes, can get rid of the dictatorship and the hated junta, once and for all. □

Israel-Palestine

Israel's vaccination program is upheld as exemplary. By 4 March, half of the country's 9.3m population had received a shot. Including the 50,000 ultra-orthodox, far-right, Jewish "settlers" who live on stolen Palestinian land on the West Bank - and who made a point of disrupting lockdowns. But more than 5.2m Palestinians who live just a few kilometres away, were denied the vaccine. And so far 2,157 have died of Covid: they "are not Israel's concern". Prime Minister Netanyahu's right-wing Likud government, which relies on the votes of reactionary ultra-religious settlers, cites the 1994 Oslo Peace Accords. These state that the Palestinians will be responsible for their own health. As if successive Israeli regimes ever observed these accords!

In fact the Israeli-encircled Palestinian territories have only been able to procure

Lethal vaccine apartheid

enough vaccine for 17,000 inoculations, through their own efforts and the Covax World Health Organisation scheme. Israel contributed just 5,000 doses, designated for medical personnel. Given that Palestinian medics work in Israel's hospitals, contributing to its "world-class" health system, this was pure self-interest.

The historical denial of political and human rights to Palestinians, resulting in a de facto apartheid system, has extended itself to the denial of vaccination against a highly contagious virus which cannot discriminate between Israelis and Palestinians! Never mind though. Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails have been denied vaccination; thousands of migrant workers who do most of Israel's menial work remain unvaccinated and Israeli border officials blocked delivery of 2,000 doses of the Russian Sputnik

V vaccine bound for Gaza, where Israel confines over 2m Palestinians.

And now Netanyahu is sending Israel's "surplus" vaccines (he "over-ordered", like Boris Johnson) to Honduras, Czech Republic and Guatemala! This, in gratitude for their backing of his illegitimate claim on Palestinian east Jerusalem, where he wants other embassies to follow Trump's US example and relocate themselves.

Netanyahu, a proven fraudster who repeatedly escaped prison by the skin of his teeth, is standing for re-election on the 23 March. It is the 4th election in 2 years: his government has consistently failed to gain a stable majority. So, just like Johnson, after completely mishandling Israel's Covid crisis, he's banking on a successful vaccination campaign to save his political neck. □

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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