

WORKERS' fight

No 130 - February 2022

price 30p

<http://www.w-fight.org>
contact@w-fight.org

ISSN 2040-400X

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

FOR AN ALL-OUT FIGHT FOR HIGHER WAGES!

No, Britain hasn't got the "fastest growing economy in the G7" - as Johnson and his ministers like to boast. But yes, there certainly is "record" growth happening somewhere: workers are experiencing the highest jump in the cost of living in decades!

Of course it's no surprise that the government pretends that it has done a great job steering the economy through the pandemic, not least because King Boris is about to have his head chopped off...

But the truth is that economic growth is among the slowest of the rich 7 countries. And now workers' incomes are falling fast.

As the Bank of England explained, we're seeing the "weakest growth of real post-tax labour incomes in more than 70 years" - already! And right now, no worker is getting a "real" pay rise. In fact, almost all pay rises have been below the RPI, already 7.5% in December.

Never mind, though! The Bank of England governor tells workers to "exercise restraint" in pay demands, as they'll fuel inflation. It's the old lie used against pay claims, when in fact it's rising prices, the "normal" result of the capitalists' greed for ever-higher profits, which are the real "chicken before the inflation egg"! So no, if workers are to keep the wolf from the door, wage rises are mandatory!

Politicians protecting profiteers

The latest example of greedy profiteering is that of BP and Shell, who just announced their highest profits in 8 years, pandemic or no! Combined, they made £24 billion!

Labour politicians immediately called for a "windfall tax" (just 10%!) on them, a favourite Labour measure, which leaves the whole rotten bunch of extortionists and most of their profits intact.



Naturally, the crooked billionaires from BP and Shell said an emphatic "no" to Labour's proposal. They intend to use their profits for "share buy-backs": Shell will hand back \$8.5bn to shareholders immediately!

But isn't it these companies, precisely, who're at the root of today's energy price hike, which is going to push many working class families over the edge, into poverty?

The government is stepping in - it says - to "help" workers with spiralling bills. Which is a bit of a joke, since it's the government which is aggravating things by imposing the 1.25% National Insurance Contribution increase!

So it's offering a £200 "discount" (against the over £600 rise) on energy bills... from October. But next year it will claw this back! A further £150 will go to some council-tax payers in the lower bands. But even after the government's rebate, the energy price rise will still be 39%!

Yes, our determination can win!

There's only one way for the working class to deal with these spiralling costs. There has to be a concerted,

all-out fight for higher wages, in line with what's needed.

Many workers, especially those among the lowest-paid, are already taking strike action. Like subcontracted NHS cleaners, porters and security workers employed by Serco.

Among other sections, the fight is still to be organised. Workers in the middle of 2 or 3 year deals are seeing their pay fall seriously behind. So there's not one section that doesn't have a direct interest in taking to the offensive.

And the bosses, struggling to fill vacancies, know they should be worried about workers' reactions. As one Financial Times columnist wrote: "...such a multiple whammy will make workers even more determined to recoup their lost real incomes via higher wages". Indeed, it's workers' determination to recoup their losses which the bosses most dread. And that determination is precisely what the working class can and must show, in the weeks to come. ☐

Covid-19 crisis

Health minister Javid and the rest of Johnson's Cabinet have been wanting to lift the few remaining Covid restrictions for months and now they have done it, at least for England. Unfortunately for them, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have a certain autonomy in this regard and are using it to retain mandatory masks and passes in certain instances, although most of their restrictions have also been lifted. So now we are told that the virus can be lived with and that it will become endemic. But these two don't necessarily go together. An endemic disease can be lethal to those who get it. In fact "we" don't want to live with a deadly virus. And who knows yet what SARS-CoV can still manage to come up with in terms of mutations? Just as it has produced a less dangerous variant like Omicron, it could in the future develop one even more lethal than Delta...

Once more, on masks...

Of course, once mask-wearing is "voluntary" (even though Transport for London has formally kept it mandatory on London's Underground) this in effect means that it is no longer regarded as necessary by the majority of passengers.

Indeed, it's no surprise that masks aren't believed to be effective in preventing the spread of Covid, since the government's own scientific and medical officers have continued throughout to express scepticism - *against* the science. But "against science" was always "for" saving government the hassle and expense of giving out free masks, educating the public in wearing them and then ensuring that "exempt" from mask-wearing didn't include just not feeling like it at the expense of others.

Contempt and carelessness

It goes to show just how contemptuous and careless Johnson&Co have been

From pandemic to endemic



when, in the light of continuing high rates of infection, the end of the pandemic is nevertheless declared. And all for the sake of appearing to do it first - of course under pressure of the City and businesses, especially aviation.

It is ironic that in the US, where an almost exact same infection profile exists, 400m FFP2 (higher protection) masks have just been given out free to the population in order to curtail infectiousness. Obviously with Omicron and new even more infectious sub-variants, this makes a lot of sense.

Not everyone can be vaccinated

Javid and Johnson claim that vaccination (plus boosters) are the only necessary protection, going into the future, from Covid. Sure, vaccines prevent death and severe illness so far, and reduce transmission. But they cannot be the whole answer, as infection still occurs in the vaccinated, so other measures alongside vaccines remain just as necessary.

What's more, as the now withdrawn

mandate on vaccination for NHS staff has shown, even if the percentage of the population who do not want the vaccine, or cannot have it, is small, it is highly significant. Not only because most of those dying or at least very ill from the albeit less virulent Omicron were and are mainly unvaccinated, but also because of the critical number of unvaccinated NHS staff.

Reverse privatisation!

In the end we were told that this involved 77,000 NHS workers, maybe 5%. And that if they were removed from their jobs - as was previously threatened - by 1 April, the NHS, with its 6m waiting list, would collapse even further. Javid thus U-turned. But the crisis in the NHS is set to get worse. The latest attempt to recentralise resources so that Trusts can share wards and beds among each other only exposes the whole strategy of successive governments since bit-by-bit privatisation began in the 1980s. It's in need of urgent reversal. □

Leaving them out puts the whole world at risk

Only 9% of the African population have been fully vaccinated so far, compared to 71% in the countries of the European Union. In Nigeria, the most populated country of Africa, the vaccination rate stands at 2.6% - and rates are even lower in countries like Cameroon. In Asia, a poor country like Papua New Guinea, (yes, part of the "Common"wealth!), has a vaccination rate of 2.5% compared to 79% in Japan. And the US claims a 64% vaccination rate against 0.69% in Haiti!

Well aware of "global inequalities" and their likely impact on the pandemic, the World Health Organisation launched the COVAX programme back in April 2020, to support vaccine development and vaccine distribution to poor countries. Distribution of vaccines began in February 2021. Since then, only 200m of the 600m doses initially

promised have been provided - far short the WHO pledge. And the lack of infrastructure, equipment and health staff in poor countries means that many of the donated doses could not even be used. So for instance, Nigeria had to destroy 1m doses of expired AstraZeneca vaccines in December, while Senegal had to destroy 400,000.

It's obvious that a "pandemic" - which, by definition, is a worldwide epidemic - cannot be controlled unless there is a co-ordinated international strategy, mutually agreed and implemented equally by all countries and with costs and knowledge shared fully. Including the formula of a vaccine! But how is that to be, in this capitalist, imperialist world, where competition, profit and national borders stand in the way? As a result, the pandemic continues into its 3rd year, without an end in sight. And new variants, which mutate most easily in the unvaccinated population, continue to constitute a threat.

Class Struggle n°114

Winter 2021

- Britain - Johnson's party pooped, but not over...
- South Africa - After the municipal elections: has the ruling ANC finally lost it?
- Afghanistan - The West leaves the population to pay the price
- India - A balance sheet of "the farmers' movement"

price: £1.50

Get your copies from the Workers' Fight activists you know or send us your order by mail.

Grenfell: the politicians' bonfire primed it

The last stage of the Grenfell Tower inquiry has started, focusing on the role of the state in the disaster. And this is huge. In the 1980s, Thatcher's government had already drastically reduced building regulations (materially speaking, this cut 306 pages of legislation to just 24!). In 1985, local authority building control was subjected to compulsory competitive tendering, i.e., put into private, profit-motivated

• And who pays now?

Nearly five years after the Grenfell fire, the question as to who will pay, to make safe thousands of blocks of flats with similar cladding to Grenfell Tower, remains unresolved.

Initially leaseholders were meant to share the costs of removal and replacement of cladding through

• From fire risk to freezing cold

Residents whose blocks of flats have had cladding removed may now be safer from fires spreading quickly around the outside of the building. But many blocks have had their cladding removed and not replaced! For instance nine blocks in Salford have been in this situation for 18 months and the contractors say replacement could take until 2024 to

hands. Then in 1996-7, Major's Tory government privatised the Building Research Establishment, which tests building materials for safety, allowing companies to test their own materials!

Over the next 13 years, successive Labour governments reversed none of this. Cameron, the next Tory prime minister, boasted of "killing off the health and safety culture for good" and true to the then coalition government's "bonfire

government-backed loans. But Housing Secretary (among other things!), Michael Gove, announced that the government was backing down on this, and would be "coming after" the developers to pay up instead. He also relented on the government's previous refusal to include the lower floors of clad buildings, below

complete! Some blocks are sheathed in plastic, keeping sunlight out. Due to lack of any insulation, temperatures inside the flats go down to freezing and the residents cannot afford their soaring heating bills.

The responsible developers blame "regulation failures" for the delays. But the government's refusal to prioritise

Their society

of regulations" in 2014, his housing minister Brandon Lewis refused to make sprinkler systems mandatory in new blocks.

Yes, Grenfell was a disaster primed by government ministers, ensuring lethal profiteering by their business friends for more than 30 years. The lives of 74 men, women and children, burnt to death in the fire, are on their hands. ☐

18 metres, in the scheme.

Nevertheless, many leaseholders still face enormous (up to six-figure!) bills for fire safety improvements other than cladding. And as some have pointed out, many private flat developments were built by now-disbanded companies, so who is Gove going to "go after"?

the re-cladding programme, by *up-front* funding and of course, their "reluctance" to pursue the profiteers who supplied or bought dangerous cladding materials, exposes their contempt for the mostly working-class inhabitants who are left exposed to these freezing, dark and dank conditions.

Remember Bloody Sunday!

It's 50 years since British paratroopers opened fire on a civil rights march in Derry, Northern Ireland, killing 13 people. Most of them were still in their teens, fleeing from the gunshots, shot in the back. The march they were attending, on Sunday 31 January 1972, was against internment - indefinite imprisonment without trial.

It had been brought in by the British government the year before, in reaction to growing sympathy for the anti-British Provisional Irish Republican Army among the population in the Catholic ghettos. PIRA claimed to be fighting for a united Ireland, against British-unionist-led rule, which was weighted against Catholics. Internment was a "suss" law before its time, incarcerating hundreds of men and women in the concentration camp of Long Kesh and in Armagh jail - and even on a ship in Belfast Harbour.

On the Bloody Sunday Anniversary this year, thousands attended Derry's commemorative march. They were addressed by Bernadette (Devlin) McAliskey, who, 50 years previously, had been forced off the platform at Free Derry Corner by the para's bullets.

At the time, she was the youngest "British" MP and the day after the killings, she was in the Commons. When refused the chance to challenge Tory Home Secretary Reginald Maudling's 3-minute statement "which contained not a single substantiated fact nor word of regret" for

the 13 people shot dead in Derry the day before, she got up and slapped him in the face. She was ejected from the chamber. In the interview which followed, she told a hostile press that not only had she been refused the chance to speak, despite having witnessed the massacre, but that Maudling had shown his "tacit approval" for what the paras had done.

That "approval" continued throughout the course of the next 30 years. Not one army officer, nor government minister has ever been held accountable for these murders, nor indeed the many executions of civilians by soldiers, police or loyalists in cahoots with them. The Widgery Report, just a few months after the

Bloody Sunday killings, was a whitewash. But even the Saville enquiry, set up in 1998, and only "finished" in 2010, which exonerated the demonstrators and caused then PM Cameron to make an official apology, apportioned no blame. The truth of the matter is that "shooting to kill" was a policy sanctioned at the top of the government.

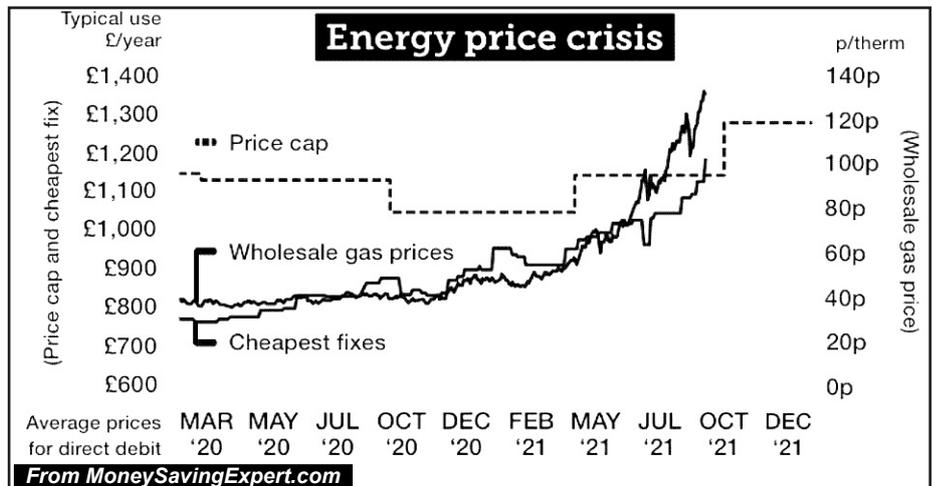
Today, despite the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which ended 30 years of "Troubles", the contestation by unionists over Brexit and the border between the 6 and 26 counties, shows that Northern Ireland's conflict has never been fully resolved. This will only happen when all borders are wiped out.



The heat is on... and we can't afford it!

The energy price cap is set to rise by a massive 54% in April. This cap, which is decided by the government regulator, Ofgem, was meant to prevent consumers from being ripped off. But with wholesale oil and gas prices being hiked up by greedy producers, Ofgem decided that after all, we could be ripped off! So now the suppliers (a growing monopoly, because even with this helping hand many went out of business) are able to make us all pay more. And it is an extortionate amount. For typical gas and electricity use, it's set to increase from £1,277/year to £1,971/year - adding a massive £693/year to the average household bill!

But this is not all. Over the past year, prices on all essential goods have gone up. The cost of the cheapest bag of pasta in a supermarket has jumped 141%. Whereas the cheapest rice used to cost 45p for a kilogram bag, it's now £1 for a bag half the size - a 344% price increase. Transport prices are also expected to rise again with rail fares set



to increase by 3.8% in March.

According to the Institute of Fiscal studies, already in October 2021, the poorest households were spending more than 73% of their income on essential household goods and services like rent,

food or energy. And many families had to use credit to manage till the next wage comes in. With the cost of living rising and living standards falling, the only answer is a concerted general fight back for higher wages! ☐

• University staff are striking!

After new attacks against pensions, pay and working conditions, the university staff union, UCU, has announced a 10-day strike across 68 Universities and colleges in Britain. This involves 50,000 staff.

In December, staff in 58 universities went on strike for 3 days over proposed cuts to their pensions. In fact there have been ongoing strikes and protests of university staff since the last big mobilisation in 2018.

Indeed, while Universities cash in billions each year (£41.9bn in 2019/2020) and enrolment has even increased by 9% this academic year, despite Covid, the salaries and working conditions of its staff have been going in the opposite direction. Lecturers' pensions have been cut by 20% over the past 12 years; insecure fixed-term contracts have become widespread. Radical cuts in staffing levels have pushed the workload onto the remaining staff who

are overstretched and underpaid.

Strikes are meant to begin on the 14th of February. However they are not co-ordinated and are meant to "roll" across the different institutions on different dates, with all of them being hit by the action on just 2 consecutive days. That is a sure way to divide forces and is ultimately ineffective - a lesson UCU leaders should have learnt last time round.

• Even private school teachers are fighting!

An unprecedented strike is being planned by 2,950 private (independent, "public") school teachers! Yes, teachers working for a network of 23 independent girls' schools in England have overwhelmingly (95% out of an 85% turnout!) voted for a strike over attacks on their pensions. This is the first time that the Trust has faced a winning ballot, after the almost 150 years since its foundation.

For good reason: The Trust said it was withdrawing from the Teachers' Pension Scheme which provides a pension linked to final salary and is proposing instead, a "flexible" pension plan which would cut pensions by an average of 20%!

One in ten private schools in England have already left the scheme, after the government stopped funding the rise in employers' contributions. It would

increase their level of contributions to the scheme by 43% which they regard as too large a chunk to spare out of their profits... Never mind that they'd have not a penny in profit without their teachers...

Hopefully the fight (if it happens) of teachers from this network of private schools, the largest in England, will help to narrow the gap between those working in public and private education.

"Missing out" on education: Covid or cuts?

Just after the government formally lifted the requirement to wear masks in schools in England (on the 27th January) many schools had to reintroduce them. Thanks to the highly infectious Omicron variant, absences from school in England jumped by 100,000 in the space of just 2 weeks and by 20 January 415,000 pupils were absent nationally, which is 5% of the total. In some schools 15% of teachers were also absent.

Without any other measures to stop

Covid spreading, teachers were told to "ventilate classrooms" by opening windows (and getting the kids to wear their coats indoors!). The government's contribution has been to supply 300,000 CO2 monitors, meant to tell teachers whether the air quality in the classroom is OK or not. But as soon as they're turned on they register CO2 levels which are off the scale! So nobody bothers with them. In fact even with windows open, the CO2 level is too high. And the other contribution - air purifiers to filter out virus particles - were given to just 7,000 out of 32,000 schools and

colleges.

Of course, the government's schools' Covid policy has been rubbish from day one. The main aim was always to get parents back to work and never mind if teachers or pupils got sick or spread the virus back into the community. Now we are told schools must stay open at all costs because of the "tragedy" of pupils "missing out on education". The systematically "missed education" caused by successive cuts - 10% cut out of the education budget since 2009 - is, of course "no problem"!

Brexit biting them back

On 31 January, Johnson announced a "Brexit Freedoms" bill, "to mark the two-year anniversary of Getting Brexit Done". Not that it's "done", of course. The Northern Ireland protocol is still being negotiated two years later. Johnson claims his bill will cut out £1bn of "red tape" for businesses: chiefly, in fact, what remains of workers' employment protections under EU law.

Of course, as fast as he can "cut" red tape, Brexit produces it! Full customs checks came into force in January. Immediately, huge queues of lorries formed at Dover, while all the extra paperwork was processed. There are more "safety and security" checks to come in July. Everyone is paying the price: Brexit is estimated to have added 2.9% to prices since 2016.

The vexed unionists

Meanwhile, the issue of the border with the EU in Northern Ireland remains unresolved - the so-called NI Protocol. On 31 January, the Democratic Unionist Stormont Executive's co-leader Paul Givan resigned over the issue, collapsing the Northern Ireland government. The DUP's leader Geoffrey Donaldson is

Labour's race to nowhere

Opinion polls have gone into overdrive to try to rate Keir Starmer's popularity. And finally (after gaffe and super-gaffe from Johnson), he's beginning to come out on top.

To quote Ipsos "33% of Britons think a Labour government led by Keir Starmer would do a better job at running the country than Boris Johnson's Conservatives (+7 points from last June), 28% say it would do worse (- 8 points). 27% say it would make no difference..." Needless to say, we're with the 27%!

Significantly, none of this has anything to do with policy - of course not. There was not an inch of difference between Starmer's shadow cabinet and Johnson's real one on Brexit nor Covid, the two big issues of the day on which Johnson has visibly cocked up: one of the highest Covid death tolls in the 1st and 2nd waves; and a 4%, directly Brexit-related, shrinkage in GDP. Starmer's view is that there's "no case for rejoining" the EU, "we're out, we stay out" and Brexit must



demanding that Article 16 be invoked, which would unilaterally get rid of all customs checks between Britain and NI, breaking Johnson's deal with the EU.

Trussed-up, or down?

New Foreign Secretary Liz Truss has now been asked to sort this out. However all she has done is inflame the situation even further by being seen (she really hasn't a clue!) to meet Orange Order leaders on Belfast's loyalist Shankill Road... This

Their politics

is either plain ignorance or an ill-judged attempt to placate Loyalist anger against Johnson over his Brexit border-in-the-Irish-sea betrayal. Never mind that their temper tantrums are a storm in a teacup. Because in reality, this "border" hasn't damaged NI businesses, as they claim; businesses have more to lose from a hard border with the Irish Republic. But "reality" has never been an issue for the DUP. □

be "made to work from the outside".

As for what Labour offers in the light of sky-high BP and Shell profits, while workers are having to choose whether to "eat or heat", all it suggests is a "windfall tax" of 10% of the oil giants' profits plus a cut in VAT on fuel bills, providing a 5% reduction, when they're going up by 54%!

Obviously, the policies that would answer workers' needs won't be coming from the Labour party; the working class will have to impose them.

Corbyn ban: too left for the right

As Labour's Starmer is defended by all and sundry against Johnson's "unjust" political jibes, spare a thought for Jeremy Corbyn. The former Labour leader not only suffered even worse smears from Johnson and May before him, but was condemned by his own side in a concerted campaign to label him ultra-left and, even more mendaciously, "anti-Semitic".

At the end of October 2020, Corbyn was suspended from the Labour party.

He was reinstated a few weeks later, but his status as a Labour MP has been blocked by Starmer and the National Executive Committee ever since, effectively denying his readmission to the Parliamentary Labour Party.

It was Corbyn's criticism of the state of Israel for its criminal policies against the Palestinians, which a section of the Labour Party allied with the British establishment couldn't stomach. Nor could they stomach the fact that he stood with the Irish people against the British military occupation of Northern Ireland between 1969 and 2007.

Of course, Corbyn is not an anti-Semite. Neither was his "socialism" even close to verging on the "communism" that the clown-mouthed Johnson accused him of. In truth there is no reason why he should not be accepted back into bosom of Labour. But given former public prosecutor, Keir Starmer's overstated loyalty to the British capitalist class and all of its institutions, Corbyn is likely to remain out in the cold for the foreseeable future!

Covid loans: fraudulent from beginning to end

Since the beginning of the Covid pandemic Chancellor Rishi Sunak has been boasting about the "unprecedented" rescue plans the government put in place to save businesses. First came the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme (CBILS) which offered loans up to £5 million. Only to be followed by the bounce

back loan scheme (BBLS) which was designed to give money to companies in as little as 24 hours! In fact, BBLS ended up being the biggest scheme, distributing £47bn to 1.6 million companies, who were able to borrow up to £50,000 each.

The government was keen to splash out money to the bosses and the bosses so eager to receive it, that no thorough checks were put in place. And of course, the banks didn't mind either, as the

money they were lending was backed by the government i.e., the taxpayers!

As a result, BBLS-related fraud losses were already estimated at £4.9bn by the end of March 2020! That's over a third of the amount (£12bn) the government says it has to take out of workers' pay this April through the 1.25% rise in NIC contributions, supposedly to rescue the NHS! Perhaps a new definition of "fraud" is needed?

Ford Dagenham Engine Plant

We need to throw a spanner in Ford's works!

Last year, Ford bosses said they were "transforming its industrial operations" in Europe, to "become a leading manufacturer of EVs". And then the company asked management of the 5,000-strong Saarlouis plant in Germany and the 6,000-strong Valencia plant in Spain both to submit "efficiency" proposals, threatening to close the plant that didn't achieve enough cuts.

At Saarlouis, shift changes have already resulted in wage reductions. While in Valencia, the workforce has been presented with a 10% cut in wages, a one-week cut in holidays and a 30-minute extension of shifts! These are similar cuts to those imposed on

workers in India, before Ford decided to close its two factories there!

At the same time, here at Dagenham an unofficial-looking plan entitled "Dagenham Engine Plant Volume Update 17 January 2022" has been circulated on WhatsApp announcing 537 job cuts by 2026 - which corresponds to half of the factory's permanent workforce. It also says that Tiger engine production will end by 2025 and that workers on the Panther engine assembly line will start a 144 shift pattern (12-hour shifts) in April, cutting an entire shift and saving on their wages!

In the meantime, Ford's CEO Jim Farley has announced a 10-year investment plan of



£15bn to "accelerate" Ford's EV "transition" - part of which would go into highly-speculative and ludicrous high-tech startups. Yes, Ford has lots of money to invest in what big shareholders consider a quick way to make a buck! And it certainly has the means to maintain all jobs and working conditions across Europe - and the world!

- **They can't organise it**

The shortage of hands goes on. The bosses still can't count; they got rid of temps and failed to recruit ever since. Sickness due to Covid and long-term absence make shortages worse. So on Tiger machining, cut to 1 shift and a mini on Monday, they're still moving us from pillar to post. Same on Panther, Tiger Assy, etc... What a piss-up. [Workers' Fight bulletin Ford Dagenham 02/02/22]

- **The fat lady hasn't sung yet...**

With this 7.00am-3.30pm shift in DDC - Tiger mates must get in just as early as before, to be in on time. It makes the 1st break at

9am far too late... and the 8 hour working day stretch far too long... Ford's excuse for the change - to suit maintenance, which is on 3-shift continuous anyway - is implausible. And since it was imposed on Tiger Assy as a "fait accompli", we STILL want a PROPER full meeting about this with EVERYONE concerned, including LLL and maintenance. This ain't over... [Workers' Fight bulletin Ford Dagenham 02/02/22]

- **We're in the same boat**

When scanner-guns were introduced by LLL in DDC - to pick and deliver every part - no extra time was added to the work cycle. Then 2 routes supplying parts were cut, overloading

drivers and putting even more pressure on the pickers... And now we've lost pay due to single shift, and our breaks are cut! Well, we think that Ford and LLL mates can fight all of this - if we try, together! [Workers' Fight bulletin Ford Dagenham 02/02/22]

- **Short long service award**

How nice! LLL "rewards" long service with the equivalent of £10 per year "served" - yes, those mates with 15 years under the belt, were given a Westfield voucher to spend for £150..! So, no chance LLL will damage its reputation for generosity... [Workers' Fight bulletin Ford Dagenham 02/02/22]

Mount Pleasant mail centre (London)

Cuts in the face of a critical shortage of hands!

Royal Mail announced in January it would be cutting 700 managers, amounting to 10% of all middle management jobs. This is meant to save £40m a year and comes on top of the 2,000 management positions which were cut last year.

It's true that there have always been a lot of managers breathing down our necks, so we wouldn't be sad to see them go. But you have to wonder what the RM board can be thinking, if in fact it thinks at all! Today, there's a dire shortage of *working*

hands across the board in sorting and delivery offices! This is causing the worst ever - unprecedented - "historical" delays in the postal service! So much so, that regulator Ofcom is threatening to impose fines and Royal Mail's share price has taken a severe hit! But instead of announcing that it is to hire workers to remedy the problem, the Board announces job cuts! This caused the share-price to rebound by 5%: yes, exposing the stupid blindness of



this system!

The managers' union Unite, has threatened to strike against the job cuts. We on the shop floor would be happy to join such a strike - but with our own demands, of course!

- **How's this possible?**

So according to management there isn't enough work to even think about giving part-timers the *real* full-time jobs many of us want, let alone recruit brand new workers. And yet they dare to offer overtime to clear the workload! Yes, some of our workmates on Lates are doing overtime into the Night shift, from 5pm to 6.30am! That's a 13.5hrs shift, isn't it? [Workers' fight bulletin Mount Pleasant Mail Centre, 09/02/22]

- **Sleep deprivation...**

This is outrageous in itself. But it's also against the working time regulations

- which haven't yet been burnt in a bonfire of the regulations - although this is what Johnson has promised... And how do these mates get the 11 consecutive hours of rest for any 24-hour period (which is actually not even good enough) that they're legally entitled to?! [Workers' fight bulletin Mount Pleasant Mail Centre, 09/02/22]

- **We don't want to wait**

So those of us who'd like to leave HMP sooner rather than later, have heard the number of Early Voluntary Redundancies on offer are decreasing rapidly... There was talk of 48 EVRs before Xmas, then managers revised the number to 40 and now we hear there's going to be only 30.

So they're finally realising that they might be pushing their luck by cutting too many jobs? That doesn't change the fact that many of us want to leave and we should be able to do so if we need to. [Workers' fight bulletin Mount Pleasant Mail Centre, 09/02/22]

- **Not born yesterday**

And of course, we know that those leaving on EVR (apparently by July) won't be replaced... This is part of management's "efficiencies" and they're currently using the Parcel Sorting Machine as an excuse for these job cuts. Do they really think any of us fall for this? [Workers' fight bulletin Mount Pleasant Mail Centre, 09/02/22]

BMW Mini centre (Cowley, Oxford)**Straight to a strike ballot!**

Unite members at BMW's lineside logistics contractor Rudolph & Hellmann were surprised to get phone calls from the union at the end of January, canvassing their willingness to take industrial action over their pay rise. It sounded as if officials were looking for ways to try to sell an offer they already knew would be far below the £12.50/hr which the union had demanded.

Then on 2 February, R&H workers got a new Unite leaflet. It said officials had rejected R&H's proposed rise of 2.5%, (five points below RPI), which would have increased pay to £10.98/hr on days and £11.99 on nights. It announced a

consultative ballot on strike action to start from 7 February, and included a union membership application form on the back. In fact the union has been telling workers that if we don't want to be "scabs", we must join the union!

What's even more incredible is that Unite officials have just been negotiating a pay rise for the core BMW workforce and are recommending acceptance of an offer of 5.5% this year and a rise equal to RPI inflation in years 2 and 3. With RPI in December already at 7.5%, that's a cut in real wages. One can only wonder where these union officials'



heads might be? That said, with such lousy pay deals on the table, the whole workforce (whatever the uniform!) has common cause and a common need to fight for a wage increase to beat inflation and the huge cost of living rises we all face! ☐

• Electrifying future... at a cost

Only 860,000 cars were built in Britain last year, the lowest level since 1956 and about a third fewer than pre-Covid. The closure of Honda at Swindon as well as the shortages of parts, especially semiconductors contributed to this fall. However now Stellantis, the newly-merged owner of Vauxhall, Nissan and BMW-Mini are all saying they see a

shining future in their switch to exclusive electric vehicle manufacture. The BMW Mini Oxford already produced 37,000 EVs in 2021.

BMW also announced a "Mini Recharged" project, offering to convert "classic" original Minis built between 1959 and the 1980s to electric traction. Does this mean BMW Oxford will be

offering to retrofit battery-powered engines to the minis made at Oxford over the past 21 years? The company hasn't yet announced what it will charge to "recharge", though one trade publication estimates it will cost around £25,000 - £1,000 more than it'd cost to buy a new electric mini...

King's Cross railway station (London)**All out together!**

Churchill cleaners on Thameslink, Southern, Great Northern, Southeastern, High Speed 1 and Eurostar trains are all being balloted for strike over pay. Many are struggling on the minimum wage of £8.91/hr, while those who caught Covid or had to self-isolate lost their full wages (and still do!). The fight is for a decent rise, occupational sick pay and travel facilities.

However, we have to wonder why RMT officials choose to use the fake language of the government/bosses by referring to Churchill cleaning workmates as "Covid heroes"? Obviously they might use it to

expose the bosses' hypocrisy. Many low-paid public service workers have done this, displaying placards reading "Covid 'heroes', but treated as zeroes"... But it seems union officials hope to use "hero status" to help their argument for a pay rise. As if it needed such "help"! What's more, these are the bosses, who, across the board, sent mates to work at the height of the pandemic, without proper protection, and on poverty pay!

No, what's needed to fight this coming cost-of-living crisis is the combined and fighting force of all workers across the



whole railway. Including all the cleaners from the myriad of different little companies. We could actually beat the freeze and de facto wage cuts, if we all fight together - for once!! ☐

• Strike at last!

At last! Churchill cleaners are striking on the 23rd of February! There'll also be a rally outside Parliament. Let's use this chance to gather "all together": with Atalian and Interserve cleaners - as well as all other railway workers! - to prepare our collective fight for better pay. And it won't be for just one day! [Workers' Platform King's X 09/02/22]

• Workers all in it together

As far as we're concerned, all of us, across all companies, are affected by the spiralling cost of food, petrol and energy. And we don't see our wages going up, accordingly! So thawing our frozen wages has to be on everyone's agenda. We have the potential

strength to stop the whole network. We just need to start using it. [Workers' Platform King's X 09/02/22]

• They announced a national ballot!

So what has happened to the RMT and TSSA leaderships' promise to coordinate national industrial action? They said it months ago, as soon as the pay freeze was announced. Then we heard nothing. We'd like to know what these union officials are waiting for..? Because we certainly can't wait! [Workers' Platform King's X 09/02/22]

• They don't learn

We are not surprised to see that the government maybe facing legal action

after considering to extend Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR) franchise for another 6 years... It seems the Department for Transport (DfT) "forgot" how the SouthEastern franchise bosses - SE franchise also belongs to Govia - didn't report £25 million of taxpayer's money..? So now they are happy to give them a bit more..? [Workers' Platform King's X 09/02/22]

• What the heck?

We got this email from RMT stating that HQ building had to close for "staff safety". But what exactly is going on? And how this will impact on our day to day needs including the general strike ballot, which they're meant to organise..? [Workers' Platform King's X 09/02/22]

Ukraine

For weeks now, western politicians, led by the US, have been claiming that Putin intends to invade Ukraine. They've sent troops and arms under the auspices of NATO, to shore up defences in countries on its borders and they threaten heavier sanctions against Russia. British Foreign Secretary, Liz Truss "revealed intelligence" (!) that Putin was plotting to install a puppet leader in Kyiv. She promised support for "our Baltic allies across the Black Sea", revealing a worrying ignorance of geography.

Western sabre-rattling obviously serves domestic purposes: US president Biden can assert himself as world "strongman"; Johnson needs every possible diversion he can find in the light of calls for his resignation and France's Macron, facing a presidential election, can flaunt his "exclusive" meeting with Putin!

However for European countries, the ties to the Russian economy are significant. Not least because around 35% of the EU's natural gas comes from Russia. Disruption could lead to further hikes in already surging energy prices. Competitors in the gas supply game - including the US - have a sharp eye on new pipelines from Russia, like Nordstream2, which also potentially threaten Ukraine's royalties from the older pipeline passing under its territory...

In reality, Putin's troop deployment is a transparent bargaining chip over the long-standing threat he perceives

Letter from India

On 24 January, in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, thousands of unemployed youth demonstrated at railway stations, blocked tracks, set fire to trains and clashed with police, burning effigies of Prime Minister Modi. They were protesting over irregularities and delays in examinations for railway jobs. There



Imperialist sabre-rattling



Ukraine's anti-tank weapons donated by the US

from NATO - and Ukraine's aspiration to become a member. In fact NATO - the military alliance formed by the US to isolate the Soviet Union during the Cold War - continues to be used for American regional expansionism. The US and its western allies have been trying to surround Russia with military bases ever since the Soviet collapse, 3 decades ago. They took advantage of the weakening of Russia in the 1990s to bring into NATO the three Baltic countries and former Eastern European members of the Warsaw Pact - and to gain a foothold in Central Asia by opening military bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

The current warmongering and US policy of regional expansionism has

already had real consequences for Ukraine's population. Even the pro-NATO president of Ukraine asked the West to wind down its current hysteria! Those living in the border region already face rockets and shelling by rival militias. The separatist-held and Russian-speaking region of Donbas has borne the brunt of Ukrainian economic sanctions. Today the once-thriving mining economy has totally collapsed. Last, but not least, economic devastation has fed into simmering tensions between pro-western and pro-Russian camps among Ukraine's population, which can be explosive - as the events of 2014 have shown. Such is the reality of the "peace" that the US and Britain pretend to defend. □

The unemployed take to the streets

had been 12 million applicants for just 35,000 jobs! In fact these youths had spent years preparing for railway entrance exams and when the results were finally released, 3 years late, there were blatant irregularities - like the same names appearing multiple times. They tried to make their complaints heard through formal channels and when this failed to have any effect, their anger exploded onto the streets.

The police responded with their usual violence, using tear gas and water cannon and laying into protestors with sticks and batons. The Railway Ministry threatened to ban them from railway jobs for life. But this didn't stop the protests, which continued for four days. Eventually after a committee was set up to investigate the whole application and examination process, a degree of calm was restored.

However this is likely to be a temporary respite. Half of India's 1.3bn population is under 25 and only a third have regular jobs. Millions stay at home

or live in rented rooms with 3-4 others, preparing for exams which might allow them to enter the few permanent jobs on offer. They attend (and pay for) private, often extortionate "coaching centres". What made matters worse in this case, is the fact that 200,000 railway posts are vacant. The railway board is not only not filling them, but thanks to Modi's privatisation policy, jobs are being cut (8,011 posts on the Northern Railway alone, disappeared since 2017).

Aspiring railway workers have common cause with other sections of the unemployed applying for public sector jobs, who've also held protests in recent years, but also with all workers in these sectors threatened with privatisation and degradation of working conditions. Their demonstrations have been called India's "first large-scale unemployment riots". However, the potential exists for today's riots to be transformed into an effective working class mobilisation and this is cause for optimism. □

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:

BM Workers' Fight - LONDON WC1N 3XX.