

Tory government in extremis - workers' action needed to kick them out!

Corbyn: stand firm for a general election

...and fight for socialist change

"The moderate politics we've had since the end of the English Civil War could be under threat".

This was the panic stricken warning of Tory transport minister Chris Grayling.

Behind this remark lies the recognition of him and others that the increasing inability of capitalist politicians to control events could presage their worst nightmare - the working-class majority stepping onto the scene of history.

After all, the current, unprecedented mess in the Palace of Westminster was triggered by the result of the 2016 referendum.

The root cause of millions of working-class people voting for Brexit was a [revolt against the existing capitalist establishment](#).

Two and a half years, later the Tory government is suspended in mid-air, seemingly unable to find a way to agree a Brexit withdrawal agreement and, in the meantime, unable to function as an effective government.

In this bizarre, Alice in Wonderland world, [Theresa May's Brexit deal has been defeated](#) in the biggest parliamentary revolt in history, with her own backbench MPs voting against her by a margin of three to one. Yet the next day she won a vote of confidence, and then came back to parliament to put a 'Plan B' which was identical to the one that had just been annihilated!

At the time of writing, May still appears to be trying to win over the 'hard Brexiteer' wing of her party and the DUP MPs via attempts - so far in vain - to win reassurances from the EU on the 'Irish backstop'. Clearly this strategy has failed miserably so far, but she hopes against hope that - faced with a choice of accepting a delay in Brexit or voting for her deal - she may still be able to shift them her way.

Her alternative way forward is to move towards a Brexit where Britain would remain permanently in the Customs Union and the Single Market, [with all its neoliberal rules](#). Such a move would be welcomed by the capitalist class, the majority of whom would rather have stayed in the EU. There might well be a majority for such a deal in parliament, but May could only force it through by splitting the Tory party down the middle.

Had Labour still been led by a Blairite, the capitalist class would have by now turned to a Labour government to try and force through a pro-big business version of Brexit. Unfortunately for them, however, Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party makes it an unreliable tool to act in their interests.

Up until now they have favoured keeping this zombie government in power, rather than risk a Labour government that could act in the interests of the working-class majority rather than those of the billionaires. Nonetheless, the utter intractability of the crisis can leave no option but for a general election to be called, either via May 'going to the people' or losing a no-confidence vote.

No-confidence votes

We cannot rely, however, on the government collapsing. The no-confidence in the government motion Corbyn called 16 January was narrowly lost - with Tory MPs openly explaining that they had no confidence in May but couldn't risk their worst nightmare - a Jeremy Corbyn-led government. The pro-remain Liberal Democrats have also suggested they may not automatically support future no-confidence votes.

Regardless of this, Corbyn is right to threaten future no-confidence votes and to keep demanding a general election. But this must not, any longer, be left at the level of parliamentary manoeuvres. It is urgent that Corbyn and the trade unions start to call for a mass campaign to demand a general election.

Such a campaign could very quickly force May from office. Look at how the 'gilets jaunes' (yellow vests) in France [won £7 billion from the Macron government](#) despite the failure of the trade union leaders to call general strike action. Imagine how a movement to force out this incredibly weak May government could become unstoppable.

Inevitably the pro-capitalist, Blairite wing of the Labour Party is attempting, at every stage, to cut across calls for a general election. If May was to make a decisive turn towards a 'Norway-style' Brexit, with Britain remaining in the Single Market, it is probable that a section of them would back her, effectively forming a kind of unofficial 'national government' to prevent a Corbyn-led government.

At this stage, however, many of them are concentrating their fire on demanding a second referendum. Corbyn is under huge pressure to bend in this direction. It would be a serious mistake to do so. We understand why, with parliament deadlocked, sections of the population have started looking to a second referendum as a way forward. In fact, this would be far easier said than done, as parliament would have to agree not only the principle of a referendum but what the question or questions would be.

More importantly, at this stage any vote which included the option to reverse the result of the 2016 referendum would be very divisive, and be seen as trying to reverse a democratic decision, and a betrayal by many of the millions of working-class people who voted for Brexit in a revolt against the establishment.

Socialists are not opposed to referenda in principle, including a second vote on an issue in some circumstances. Ultimately our attitude depends on whether holding one would help to increase the confidence and cohesion of the working-class majority. At this stage, that would clearly not be the case here.

A serious, mass campaign for a general election, however, could unite broad sections of the working class, and enthuse millions who are currently looking on in horror at Westminster, provided it was linked to a clear socialist programme - including, but not only, on Brexit.

In his Wakefield speech on 10 January, Corbyn said: "If you're living in Tottenham you may well have voted to Remain. You've got high bills, rising debts. You're in insecure work. You struggle to make your wages stretch and you may be on Universal Credit, and forced to access food banks. You're up against it.

"If you're living in Mansfield, you are more likely to have voted to Leave. You've got high bills, rising debts. You're in insecure work. You struggle to make your wages stretch and you may be on Universal Credit and forced to access food banks. You're up against it. But you're not against each other. People across the country, whether they voted Leave or Remain know that the system isn't working for them."

He should build on this correct approach of working-class unity by declaring now a radical general election programme including abolishing Universal Credit and introducing decent benefits, reversing cuts to public services, immediately introducing a £10-an-hour minimum wage, as a step towards a real living wage, and a programme of mass council-house building. This should be combined with nationalisation of the major corporations and banks, under democratic workers' control, to take the levers of power out of the hands of the capitalist saboteurs.

A socialist alternative to the EU

This could be linked with a manifesto for a socialist Brexit, which would mean negotiating in the interests of the working class. 'Red lines' would be opposition to all neoliberal, pro-capitalist rules. On this basis Corbyn could make a call for international solidarity with workers across Europe.

A [Corbyn-led government would, of course, need to seek a trade deal with the EU](#), but he would be in a far stronger position than May to achieve this on the basis of having won a clear election victory on bold, socialist policies - which would electrify workers across Europe.

In addition, a Corbyn-led government would be able to use a programme of nationalisation to take the ability to inflict job losses, closures or reductions in pay and conditions, out of the hands of any corporations that move to take that path.

Preparing for a general election also means taking [urgent measures to transform the Labour Party](#) into a party that represents the interests of the working class. The fundamental reason for the crisis of the major political parties in Britain is the crisis of capitalism, which offers the working and middle class a diet of endless low pay, insecure housing and overwork.

For Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour left it is long overdue that attempts to seek unity with the pro-capitalist wing of the Labour Party cease. Urgent preparation for a general election means starting the 'trigger ballot' process now, which allows local Labour parties to select new candidates for a forthcoming general election.

And an emergency labour movement conference should also be called, open to all anti-austerity forces, including the Socialist Party and non-Labour affiliated unions like the RMT, to discuss how to urgently recreate Labour on democratic, socialist lines to prepare for the stormy events to come.

NHS faces drug price hikes

Nationalise big pharma: end this profit-driven NHS crisis

Price controls not enough: we need democratic public ownership

Iain Dalton, Socialist Party national committee

Among all the other Brexit-related headlines, the latest crisis announced has been a projected shortage of generic, out-of-patent medicines.

The NHS was reportedly paying higher prices to suppliers of 80 products in December to shore up its supplies. According to Oxford University researchers, last month the total cost of these generic drugs was £37 million instead of the 'normal' £11.4 million.

But this isn't the first time in recent years there has been a [spike in drug prices](#) coinciding with projected shortages. In November 2017, 91 medicines were on the price concessions list (allowing companies to increase what they charge for them).

In reality, there are a number of factors that can lead to such shortages. These include increasing global demand and issues with the supply of raw materials. But linked with this are problems stemming from the nature of capitalist, profit-driven markets.

To boost profits, many companies cease to manufacture generic products in favour of more expensive and profitable patented brands. What's more, as the Healthcare Distribution Association has suggested, companies can stockpile medicines in a speculative fashion to make money as further shortages develop.

This rigging of the market in the interests of private profit, with scant regard for the healthcare needs of the population, is the dominant feature of the pharmaceutical industry.

According to a recent study, two thirds of patient groups appraising pharmaceuticals for regulatory body NICE receive funding from the very companies they are meant to be judging.

The government's own website to attract Big Pharma investment in the UK boasts an Effective Tax Rate of between 11% and 13%. 30% of all drugs used worldwide were developed in Britain.

Pharma giants

The UK's pharmaceutical industry is dominated by two giants, GlaxoSmithKline and AstraZeneca. These are the fifth and sixth largest drugs companies globally, both with profits over £2 billion in 2017.

Instead of subsidising their profits with tax breaks and guaranteeing large payments from the NHS, they should be nationalised under democratic workers' control and management.

This would allow production to be directly linked with what is needed in the NHS. It would free up funds that currently go to the vast profits of these companies for increased investment in research - helping to pave the way for fresh advances in the treatment of disease.

Drug production could be democratically planned by workers in the sector, the NHS and patient groups, and with the involvement of wider society.

Such measures, which would need to be taken as part of the socialist transformation of society, could inspire workers around the world who are struggling for decent health care and against the capitalist system.

Such a movement for socialist change would demand the multinational [big pharma companies like Pfizer](#), Novartis, Merck, Sanofi and others are brought into public ownership - paving the way for a fully integrated, publicly owned and democratically run health service. In this way research data would no longer be hidden for commercial confidentiality, but instead shared.

In this way we could begin to tackle global health problems in a coordinated fashion - to the benefit of all.

Duke's car crash: one law for them and another for us

Caroline Vincent, Leicester East Socialist Party

Just in case there was any doubt that it's one law for them and another for us, Prince Philip cleared that up as he ploughed his tank-like Land Rover 4x4 into the path of a lowly Kia. He blamed his careless driving on being dazzled by the sun.

"I'm such a fool," he remarked to witnesses. Indeed! But while it's unlikely one of us commoners would be allowed back on the road at the age of 97 after such foolish recklessness, the Duke of Edinburgh needn't worry about the consequences.

Presented with a brand new £68,000 Freelander, the royal freeloader was back behind the wheel just two days later. This time without his seat belt! The other driver's car is still in the shop.

The non-royals involved in the accident included a nine-month-old baby, and two women who needed hospital treatment for their injuries.

No one involved was seriously hurt, not that the establishment press thought this was of any interest. Their initial coverage merely reported that Prince Philip had walked away unscathed - thank goodness!

Police

The driver of the Kia has allegedly come under intense pressure from the police to keep quiet and not make a fuss. The duke has certainly been quiet, not offering so much as an apology.

The car's passenger, who suffered a broken wrist, said "I love the royals, but I've been ignored and rejected." Sadly for her, the love is not reciprocated.

An 'apology' eventually materialised when a voicemail was left by one of the royal servants.

The whole fiasco reveals the monarchy's contempt and disregard for the working and middle classes. We've endured a decade of austerity while they've merrily drained the public purse to maintain their lavish lifestyles.

And as well as being a danger on the roads, [they're a danger to the workers' movement](#). The reserve powers they formally hold allow the government to circumvent democracy in an 'emergency' to defend capitalist rule.

The monarchy must be abolished. There's no place for such a feudal relic on the road to socialism!

Peasant v pheasants

Another driver near the queen's Sandringham Estate now alleges a royal gamekeeper called him a "peasant" and beat him with a stick after he complained that a pheasant shoot was blocking the road. We are not amused.

What we saw

Workers at the Historic Royal Palaces are [striking against attempts to downgrade their pensions](#). Members of civil service union PCS and general union GMB walked out in December and again this month. Even the ex-military Beefeaters - keepers of the crown jewels - have had enough!

Racist jobs discrimination same for 50 years - unions must fight for jobs for all

Ketheswaran Sritharan, East London Socialist Party

Black and Asian workers in Britain have to send almost twice as many job applications before we get a positive response. It's clear the anti-discrimination laws are not enough - we need union action for jobs for all.

We have to send 80% more CVs and covering letters, according to Oxford University research. And a comparison of studies finds this hasn't changed since 1969!

Every black and Asian worker here knows personally how many job applications we've sent and how few call-backs we got - eyes be rolling! This is true for most workers right now - but doubly bad for us. I asked a friend who is also of South Asian descent about the problem.

"It is startling to think that I was not the only person who employers seem to hate as my full name contains around 23 letters.

"It meant that I had to use an alias containing only four letters of the alphabet on my applications - and hey presto, the wheels of call-back did actually start to move.

"This was a piece of golden advice given to me by a friend. Use an alias, secure an interview and then at the interview use every skill and grit you possess to secure yourself the job that you applied for. But before you do that, make sure you let them know your full name."

This was the case for him 17 years ago. Fast forward 17 years and there have been no signs of progress.

So what on earth is that legislation on 'race relations' doing other than sitting in the law books?

Unions

What we need is strong trade unions leading a fight for jobs. Massive public investment in well-paid jobs for all on trade union conditions, regardless of ethnicity, name length and so on, would start to overcome this problem for all workers.

And trade unions should have democratic oversight of the hiring process, to help ensure bosses provide fair and equal job opportunities for all rather than conscious or unconscious racist practices. In fact, why leave the super-rich bosses in charge at all?

Public ownership under democratic workers' control and management would be the strongest foundation for combating workplace racism - the true power must shift to the real grafters, the working class! Then workers of all races could start to create a democratic, socialist plan to provide for all.

Wales is Europe's prisoner capital: capitalist cutters' crimes to blame

Alex Wedlake, Cardiff West Socialist Party

England and Wales has the highest number of prisoners relative to population in western Europe - an accolade held for over two decades - with 148 prisoners per 100,000 in 2016.

Now, a new report using devolved data has found that Wales itself tops the leaderboard, with 154 prisoners per 100,000 compared to 141 in England.

Capitalist politicians in England and Wales see overcrowded prisons as a cash cow for privatisers and a threat to frighten the population. A socialist justice system would have rehabilitation and protection, not profit, as its goal.

The head researcher at the Wales Governance Centre rightly says the data should be considered in light of Wales being one of the poorest parts of Britain. No doubt figures will be similar for deindustrialised regions of England.

Poverty drives people to desperate acts. Only ending austerity, and mass investment in decent jobs for all, can start to overcome that.

Yet despite a lower crime rate, judges hand down custodial sentences in Wales at a much greater rate.

This shows the institutional bias of the capitalist courts against workers and the poor. Socialists call for the election of judges from the working class, not their appointment from among wealthy lawyers by unaccountable ruling-class figures.

And prison populations have long been at dangerous levels. All prisons in South Wales are now operating above their 'certified normal accommodation' - HM Prison Swansea is worst at 143%!

Assaults

This causes huge problems for both staff and prisoners. Assaults on staff in prisons in Wales reached their highest levels in 2017, with more than one assault per day.

This rate is five times higher than in 2010. In England this number tripled during the same period.

Furthermore, prisoner-on-prisoner assaults in Wales increased by a staggering 156%, and 86% in England.

It is no coincidence that culling 7,000 prison officers in 2010 has had a direct impact on safety in prisons.

Cases of prisoner self-harm in Wales are increasing at a similar but still higher rate to England, where they are also increasing.

The Welsh prison population grew by 23% from 2010 to 2017 - and recorded self-harm incidents increased by 358%. Young offender institution HMP Parc topped the list at 91 incidents per 100 prisoners.

There are no women's prisons in Wales. But because of this, women prisoners fall foul of further injustices. The average distance from home for women in prison across England and Wales is 64 miles - higher than for men.

But for Welsh women this figure is 101 miles! How are families to visit? Women prisoners across England and Wales are twice as likely to suffer from anxiety and depression or die by suicide. As a start, we need more staff to support these vulnerable women.

It is no surprise that [thousands of prison officers walked out across England and Wales](#) in November, led by prison and secure hospital union POA. Their action was over health and safety concerns - for members and inmates alike.

Them & Us

Davos special!

Yes, it's that time of year again! The annual World Economic Forum will see the planet's billionaire bosses and political lackeys gather to hobnob at the Swiss ski resort that sounds like a Doctor Who villain. So what's the state of play in 2019?

Them

- The world's 26 richest billionaires own as much as the poorest half of humanity, says Oxfam. The [earlier figure of eight billionaires](#) was revised up last year, following new data from Credit Suisse. But the preposterous concentration of wealth is still ever greater - in 2017 it was 43 billionaires; in 2016, 61. And you could now fit them all in a stretch hummer
- Wall Street has posted over \$100 billion in profits for the first time. The US's six biggest banks netted \$111 billion in 2018, says Bloomberg - even before reporting their fourth-quarter results
- But the chief execs are worried! 30% expect slower economic growth this year, six times more than in 2018, says a PwC survey
- And house prices in the wealthiest areas have fallen by up to 25% in the last 12 months, caused by ([the working-class revolt which was](#)) the Leave vote, says Your Move. It couldn't happen to nicer people

Us

- Meanwhile, the planet's 3.8 billion poorest actually suffered an 11% wealth reduction last year - compared to the billionaires' 12% increase, or \$2.5 billion a day, says Oxfam
- 175,000 retail workers in Britain could lose their jobs this year [if unions don't combat the closure](#) of 23,000 shops predicted by Altus Group
- Surprise, surprise. Two-fifths of ex-council homes bought under Thatcher's flagship housing policy, 'right to buy', are no longer the dwellings of owner-occupiers. They are cash-cow rentals for private landlords, according to FoI data
- The Spice Girls' gender justice t-shirts are produced in a Bangladesh factory where abused and harassed women workers earn just 35p an hour. Tory-turned-Blairite Ginger Spice has a net worth of \$40 million, says Time. Union organising and socialist change, not super-rich celebs, are the path to women's liberation

Cuban revolution at 60: defend the gains and fight for workers' democracy

Scott Jones, Tower Hamlets Socialist Party

Sixty years ago in January 1959, the Cuban capital Havana erupted in celebration. Crowds greeted the victory march from Santa Clara of revolutionaries led by Che Guevara and the brothers Fidel and Raúl Castro.

The Battle of Santa Clara and the march to Havana marked the end of heroic years of struggle by the '26th of July Movement', with the support of Cuban workers and peasants, against US-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista. His government had ruled the country with an iron fist - facilitating exploitation by US capitalism and smashing opposition and workers' movements.

The Cuban revolution is one of the great, historic hammer blows to capitalism. It ushered in widespread nationalisation of private industry, property and land, as well as huge advances in the day-to-day lives of the Cuban people - gains which largely last to this very day.

These social gains include free healthcare and education. In both fields the achievements are impressive. A literacy campaign was undertaken, raising the national literacy rate from 60% in 1959 to 96% in 1961. Life expectancy is now almost two decades longer than in 1959 and infant mortality is lower than the United States.

There are now fifteen times more doctors since the revolution, with the best doctor to patient ratio in the world. Tens of thousands of Cuban doctors and nurses have also worked overseas in over 40 countries.

In an admirable display of internationalism, Cuba sent thousands of troops to Angola and Namibia to fight a South African apartheid army and free the countries from its rule.

Cuba rightly has the support and sympathy of workers and young people around the world. These gains and actions, and the many more that have been achieved, give an idea of what is possible by breaking with capitalism. They hint at what could be achieved under a socialist planned economy under democratic workers' control.

The working class

Four decades prior to the Cuban revolution [the greatest event in human history to date took place in Russia](#) as the workers, under the leadership of the Bolshevik party, took power. The revolution in Cuba took a different route.

The leader of the revolution and future leader of Cuba, Fidel Castro, while exiled in Mexico following the defeat of an earlier uprising on 26 July 1953, gathered a small force of 82 men who landed in Cuba aboard a boat called Granma in 1956.

The group gradually built up their forces and waged a guerrilla war against the government with the support of peasants and workers, successfully defeating Batista and forcing him to flee the country in 1959.

Unlike Russia in 1917, the working class did not play a central role in the revolution, forming democratic bodies like soviets. The central role of the working class in a revolution is vital. Also, unlike Russia, there was an absence of a revolutionary party like the Bolsheviks.

In Cuba, the Communist Party was formed after the revolution and the Cuban workers and peasants had no direct say in the programme and policy of the new Cuban state.

Through a combination of the pressure of the Cuban masses and hostility from US imperialism, terrified as it was of 'socialism on its doorstep', the new Cuban government nationalised most of the economy. This

included all the major industries and much of the private property owned by US capitalists and, in some cases, organised crime. The hostility went as far as supporting armed intervention in 1961, in the Bay of Pigs invasion, as well as subsequent terrorist attacks carried out by the CIA and right-wing Cuban exiles.

It was through this process that Cuba established a planned economy which made all the economic and social gains possible.

But the opposition of the United States and its ruthless economic embargo (still in place today and estimated to have cost Cuba \$1 trillion) led Cuba towards the other world power of the time - the Soviet Union in Russia which had, under Stalin and his successors, deteriorated into a bureaucratic regime. Its influence, combined with the absence of genuine workers' democracy, meant the planned economy developed into a top-down bureaucratic model similar to the deformed workers' states in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union itself.

The programme of the Socialist Party and the Committee for a Workers' International is one of nationally, regionally and locally - at every level - elected representatives being accountable and subject to instant recall. We call for these elected representatives to receive only the average wage of the workers.

Leon Trotsky, one of the leaders of the Russian Revolution and whose writings much of our programme is based on, explained that a "nationalised planned economy needs democracy as the human body needs oxygen".

In Cuba, Che Guevara, always principled and self-sacrificing, refused to take a wage at all. Most other officials took average wages and refused any perks. And Cuba hasn't ever taken on the same horrific character of Stalin's Russia.

In fact, on one occasion Che described the regime in Russia as "horse shit"! But without the key workplace and political democracy outlined, there developed a top-down society where, despite regular referendums being held, everything starts and ends with the government. It is this which has held Cuba back from making even more gains for workers. Particularly since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990, this has left it open to attack and exploitation again by capitalism.

'The sun goes out'

Fidel Castro described the collapse of the Soviet Union in early 90s as the "sun going out" and it forced Cuba into what became known as the 'special period', which in reality meant austerity measures, as the vast resources and funds channelled to Cuba from Russia dried up.

It is testament to the support for Cuba's revolutionary gains, and the determination to keep them, that Cuba's planned economy survived this period.

As we have written in the Socialist previously, Cuba defied the laws of political gravity, despite the tidal wave of free-market capitalism which dominated the world economy. The regime was also able to sustain itself through links with Hugo Chavez and his left government in Venezuela, which provided Cuba with cheap oil.

In fact the revolutionary movements that swept Latin America throughout 2000s - like in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador - offered Cuba an opportunity to break out of its isolation and to also build a socialist federation in the region, which genuine workers' democracies would have done. But these movements and governments didn't break with capitalism or go as far as the Cuban revolution. They failed to learn any of its lessons.

The [fate of these governments](#) also shows that the lessons of the Russian revolution - the participation of the working class, the need for workers' democracy and the role of a revolutionary party - are as vital as ever.

Despite all the colossal outside influences which have buffeted Cuba, change in the country itself has been slow. Fidel Castro, effectively Cuban leader since 1959, stepped down in 2008 ([passing away in 2016](#)), to be succeeded by his brother Raúl who himself stepped down in 2018.

In the economy, the regime has introduced incremental steps towards capitalist restoration, opening up certain sectors to private ownership - especially small and medium-sized businesses. 500,000 licenses have been issued to 'cuentapropistas'.

Tourism has continued to grow for years and other foreign investment has taken place, such as plans to open one of the largest docks in Latin America in the west of Cuba - all funded and owned by Chinese capital for the purpose of profit.

Another \$3 billion a year has come into the island from abroad, sent to relatives by Cuban émigrés.

And cracks are showing in some of the state-owned sectors, particularly transport, which has been hit hard by the collapse of the Venezuelan economy and the turning off of the oil taps.

New Cuban president Miguel Díaz-Canel has replaced Cuba's transport and finance ministers and its national airline suffered a deadly crash as 112 were killed at Havana's José Martí International Airport on a plane operated on behalf of Cubana de Aviación on 18 May 2018.

While the US embargo remains in place there were [historic moves made by the Obama presidency to reopen diplomatic and travel links](#) with Cuba in 2014, representing a seismic shift in US policy, however some of these moves have been scaled back under Donald Trump who has returned to hostile rhetoric of the past. Recent US policy towards Cuba reflects how the transition to capitalism in Cuba will not be a straightforward, uninterrupted process.

Support for the gains of revolution in Cuba remains high and the dismal failure of capitalism in Latin America, the US and the Caribbean itself - particularly the horrendous example of US-controlled Puerto Rico - will have an effect.

But it's also true many younger Cubans are desperate to have the right to travel, as well as access to the internet and other goods. But while it might give Cubans access to cheaper consumer goods on the one hand, capitalist restoration will take away the gains of the revolution on the other.

For socialists and working-class people a restoration of capitalism would be a backwards step. It would be a disaster for the living standards of the Cuban masses. And it would be used internationally by the capitalist system and its defenders to discredit the Cuban revolution and socialism in general.

Crossroads

[Cuba is a country at a crossroads](#). Both the pride in the remarkable revolutionary past and the problems and threats of the present can be seen when visiting the country.

The need to oppose and build an alternative to the increasing threat of capitalist restoration, and to fight for genuine workers' democracy and a socialist planned economy in Cuba, is more urgent than ever.

This movement, defending the gains and winning new ones, fighting alongside the working class and youth who are increasingly moving into action in Latin America and internationally, could build a real socialist alternative to capitalism. And this movement, taking inspiration from the Cuban revolution, while learning its lessons, can win.

Birmingham: hostile Labour council attacks striking workers

Councillor resigns from cabinet

Birmingham Socialist Party

Birmingham city Labour councillor Majid Mahmood recently announced that he will be stepping down from his cabinet role for Clean Streets, Waste and Recycling. He credits this decision to his frustration over the [Labour council's hostile approach to both the bin workers and home care workers](#).

The council made public its plan to pursue legal action against Unite and Unison unions for the recent industrial action taken by their council worker members - another example in a long list showing how far the council will go to attack its own employees as well as find new ways to waste public money.

They spent over £6 million on agency staff to try and break the bin workers' strike last year and another £12 million on consultants to 'streamline' (ie cut) adult and social care, which the home care service is part of.

Union reps report bin workers' anger and frustration, not just at these right-wing Labour councillors carrying out the Tories' dirty work, but also the unelected financial officers of the council who appear to be pulling the real strings behind the scenes of who has power here in Birmingham.

Birmingham [home care workers have been taking strike action against the Labour council](#) for over a year, amounting to 50+ days' full strike action. In December, the leadership of Unison (the union leading the strike) finally gave in to the rank-and-file membership and started building political pressure on the Labour council cabinet members. It was these councillors who agreed to the drastic cutting of the jobs in this service, reducing them to just part-time positions and resulting in poverty pay for the staff.

The home carers have been leafleting the individual wards of the cabinet members, including Majid Mahmood, questioning their 'Labour values' while they attack their own workforce.

At the same time in December, Unite bin workers overwhelmingly voted in favour of strike action against the council after only just [concluding their last dispute a year ago](#). Additionally, Unison bin members voted for joint industrial action.

The workers across both unions are currently following a 'work to rule' which has already had an impact with missed bin collections.

Sweetheart deal

This new dispute is over 'bribe' money which was paid to GMB union members who did not take strike action last year. An alleged secret 'sweetheart' deal was made between GMB leadership and the Labour council which saw GMB members receive a lump sum of money directly into their payslip - essentially blacklisting Unite and Unison members. The details on this deal have still not been made public.

It is good to see a Labour councillor finally break away from these attacks and stand on the side of the workers, but it shouldn't just stop there. The labour movement needs genuine fighting councillors to push back against Tory austerity and the Blairites who carry out their cuts.

It's worth noting the actions of opportunists on the other end of the spectrum, like Labour councillor Lisa Trickett, the former cabinet member in charge of the bin service.

Opportunists

Recently she came outside the Council House (town hall) supposedly offering support and solidarity to the striking home care workers despite last year being the person in charge of attacking the bin workers.

Trickett and other opportunist Labour councillors can't pick and choose when and which workers and communities they want to support when convenient for them and their publicity!

The unions should continue to put political pressure on Labour, not just in Birmingham, but also nationally. Any Labour councillor who supports the strikers needs to stand on the side of all council workers and oppose all cuts to public services.

Councillors who truly want to stand up to Tory austerity should work with the unions to demand councils set 'anti-cuts budgets' while using reserves and borrowing powers to ensure not a single cut is made.

During this time all Labour councils and trade unions can coordinate to mobilise workers and the public to stand up against the incredibly weak and fractured Tory-led government. This would be the most effective

way of bringing down 'wobbly' Theresa May and triggering an early general election.

Labour councillors in Birmingham and across the country should be accountable to the labour movement. But if they continue to carry out the Tories' dirty work, then their union sponsors should withdraw financial and political support.

Moreover, the unions should demand that Jeremy Corbyn and the national executive withdraw the Labour whip from councillors carrying out cuts.

These cuts not only damage the lives of ordinary people but also undermine the anti-austerity platform Corbyn stands on and which has received massive support.

Labour councillors who have spoken out against the actions of the council should be applauded but they need to put those words into action!

Trade unionists and Labour members opposed to the council's attacks need to ramp up the pressure on the council in support of the bin and care workers.

Unite and Unison should build a mass campaign towards further coordinated action across the council workforce in support of the home care and bin workers and against the attacks taking place across every inch of the council.

Mass meetings should be called in every department to discuss and build support.

If the council's legal challenge is successful, Unite and Unison should call a joint national demonstration and rally in defence of the action taken by council workers.

Mass strike wins historic step towards victory in Glasgow equal pay battle

Matt Dobson, Socialist Party Scotland

In a historic announcement, trade unions and lawyers representing 13,000 Glasgow council workers have reached an "agreement in principle" to end the equal pay injustice suffered by low-paid women workers for over a decade.

The Scottish National Party (SNP) administration in Glasgow has also confirmed an agreement has been reached. The deal is thought to be valued at around £500 million.

This is a larger sum than the council was discussing a year ago. The decisive catalyst for this breakthrough is the colossal impact of the [8,000-strong 48-hour strike, in reality a working-class uprising](#), by the workers and their trade unions on 23-24 October 2018, which shook the city.

The administration was fully aware that unless it moved it faced the prospect of more strikes, escalating further the political impact and the inevitable backlash against the SNP. The mood and confidence of the strikers to fight on has only increased since October.

Striker Isobel O'Brien told Socialist Party Scotland: "It's been very emotional. We all deserve every penny we get having fought for so long. Thanks to your party for your support. Come to the City Chambers on 24 January at 12.15pm to celebrate and show them we can still mobilise."

Denise Philips, Unison home care convenor, who spoke at the Socialist Party's Socialism 2018 rally, told the BBC: "They have been playing about and robbing us for years. They need to pay up now, hopefully it comes to fruition".

This is a historic turning point in [the fight for equal pay](#). But the process isn't over. The 'deal' still needs to be agreed by the council.

The claimants - the heroic low-paid workers who have inspired trade unionists internationally - will also be the best judges of whether this proposed settlement meets the cost of what they are owed and rectifies injustice. Throughout this dispute, mass meetings have made every critical decision and this will continue.

Once the settlement for more than a decade of injustice is finalised, the question then becomes how an equality-proofed pay and job evaluation scheme for the council can be agreed.

The trade unions, which have grown through the dispute, with a new layer of activists and shop stewards energised, are in a strong position to combat any reticence from council officers and the SNP.

It should also be noted that, after claiming the use of financial powers such as borrowing to set a no-cuts budget was irresponsible, the council has taken the option of securing a commercial loan to finance the settlement.

However, the repayment rates on this will be significant, running into tens of millions annually. The trade unions and working-class communities will need to prepare to fight the attempts of the SNP-led council to carry out cuts to pay for the deal.

At every stage the trade unions, and Socialist Party Scotland, have called for the cost of the equal pay settlement to be met by the Scottish and Westminster governments. These bodies could have taken the funds from the wealthy and big business rather than the wider working class.

Socialist Party Scotland and our members who play a leading role in Glasgow City Unison will continue to give support and solidarity to the workers in the next stage of their struggle.

- [See full article at socialistpartyscotland.org.uk](http://socialistpartyscotland.org.uk)
-

John Lewis workers count the cost of the retail crisis

A John Lewis worker

As a John Lewis retail worker I was gutted to hear that for the first time in 66 years the John Lewis leadership might suspend the annual staff bonus.

What is even worse is that they admitted they could afford to pay a modest bonus but may choose not to due to "unusual economic circumstances". Brexit and the crisis on the high street were both blamed.

But many of the low-paid staff at John Lewis (and Waitrose which is also part of the partnership) cannot afford not to receive a bonus! Especially since the bonus last year was cut for the fifth year in a row and was only 5% of a worker's annual salary.

This is not very much when you consider that non-management workers start on salaries that are well below the £10 an hour that both the Socialist Party and the shop workers' union Usdaw demand should be the absolute minimum for all workers.

John Lewis's 'employee-owned' partnership model means the company is viewed by some as a fantastic place to work.

However, this is at odds with how many staff feel. Morale is low and we are expected to offer the same high level of service with less and less staff.

Although management likes to emphasise that we are all 'co-owners', employee concerns are usually downplayed or ignored. There is no union recognition which makes it harder to organise with colleagues to fight for improvements.

The company has its own 'democracy structures', which many workers do engage with to try and get their voice heard.

However, many quickly get disillusioned with them as, without the right to strike or collective bargaining that trade unions bring, it means that, in reality, these structures don't have any teeth.

In many ways, working at John Lewis feels like working for any other retailer. Premium pay for Sundays and bank holidays are things of the past. They were scrapped for all new workers several years ago.

It's a very uncertain time for retail workers right now and it feels like almost every week another high street retailer is in trouble. The most recent is M&S, which has announced a further 17 store closures, putting 1,045 jobs at risk.

The Socialist Party argues that these [failing retailers should not be allowed to sack workers and should instead be brought into public ownership](#).

Trade unions need to reach out to retail workers in unorganised workplaces who would be receptive to campaigns such as Usdaw's 'Time for Better Pay' which not only demands a £10-an-hour minimum wage but also an end to zero-hour contracts, which many retail workers are currently on. This campaign must be backed up with a willingness to organise serious action.

All I want is to be able to do my job effectively, with the right resources, and be paid fairly for it.

Unison union higher education conference: a missed opportunity to develop a fighting strategy

Unison higher education activists

Delegates from universities across the country met in Nottingham on 10 January for public service union Unison's annual conference of the higher education service group.

As is usually the case, the standing orders committee was busy preventing branches from discussing motions and amendments and, in some cases, preventing delegates (or anyone) from even reading what activists wanted to discuss. This is all supposedly on the advice of the legal officer.

Of the four amendments and three emergency motions submitted by branches, only one was allowed onto the agenda. This amendment on pay dispute tactics from Brighton did at least manage to provoke a debate.

The main controversy was the pay campaign for 2019. The campaign in the autumn of 2018 ended with a strong vote (62%) in favour of strike action. But the turnout was below the anti-trade union law threshold of 50%.

The amendment to the pay motion sought to commit the service group executive to running a future strike ballot on the basis of a series of 'disaggregate' ballots, in effect creating separate disputes at each university.

This tactic is a measured response to the problem of low turnout (31% last year) which would at least provide some options. Not least of these could be the opportunity for the most organised branches to take action over pay as the others catch up.

Campaigning for a disaggregate ballot, as opposed to repeating the same mistake again, is the agreed policy of Unison Action broad left activists. Left activists agreed that this would be proposed on the basis of fighting

for every branch to get a 50% turnout and a positive strike vote.

Many delegates supported the Brighton amendment, carefully explaining to conference that this tactic is the best way of allowing higher education workers to take action in 2019, [linking up with University and College Union members](#) and students in a united and dynamic campaign to achieve better pay and working conditions, and a fully funded education system.

Opposition came from the leadership, who couldn't explain how we could realistically double the turnout in the ballot by doing precisely the same thing again.

Despite some excellent contributions, the amendment was voted down. Either way, the result does not rule out that tactic, but it does mean that conference leaves the decision-making to the service group executive.

Across many universities, support workers and academics are bracing themselves for more attacks on jobs and pension schemes as institutions fight among themselves for a reducing number of students.

For workers and students, defending higher education as a public service, and the jobs and education that go with it, will be on the agenda. No amount of bureaucratic manoeuvring by some trade union leaders will prevent workers from struggling.

What's necessary is a fighting and democratic leadership to develop a clear strategy for that battle.

Bristol Deliveroo workers walk out

Domenico Hill, Bristol South Socialist Party

Bristol Deliveroo workers took strike action on the evening of Friday 18 January.

About 150 gathered in the city centre with their bikes and mopeds and began the strike by switching off their apps.

I spoke to one of them who told me he had worked for Deliveroo for three years and that Deliveroo currently pays £4 a drop, and only about 10p extra a mile.

As Deliveroo has expanded the area it covers, the distances have increased but the basic pay hasn't, so their pay has effectively been cut.

Staff are also angry that the time spent waiting outside restaurants isn't paid, even though they are expected to get there early to receive food while it's still hot, increasing the time further.

Deliveroo also frequently changes the rate per distance, but doesn't inform the drivers. They want more transparency from the company.

Their main demands are for £5 a drop, paid waiting times of £10 an hour, and £1 extra per mile. The strikers gave out leaflets in English on one side and Portuguese on the other, and a Brazilian driver spoke to the rally.

Labour's Marvin Rees, Bristol's mayor, also spoke in support of the strikers. He said he would contact Deliveroo to urge them to become a 'living wage employer', like the council. He forgot to mention the [thousands made redundant by his administration](#).

Deliveroo workers are planning further strikes to push for their demands.

PCS union: re-elect Chris Baugh for assistant general secretary

The voting meetings are starting in civil service union PCS's broad left, Left Unity, for the re-run contest for the assistant general secretary (AGS) nomination. Socialist Party member Chris Baugh has been AGS since 2004. He won over 48% of the Left Unity nomination votes in an extremely close-run election held at the end of 2018 that saw a record turnout of Left Unity members.

The unfortunate withdrawal of Janice Godrich, due to ill health, [has meant that the election is being re-run](#).

Chris has secured at least eleven nominations, a majority, and up from eight last time. The Chris4AGS campaign is seeking nominations for Chris and also for Tahir Latif to fill a national executive committee vacancy on the Left Unity slate.

There will now be voting meetings in each Left Unity geographical group. For those who can't attend their meeting, they can vote by post. All votes have to be in by 5pm on Friday 25 January.

- chrisbaughpcs.wordpress.com

Enfield North CLP backs no-cuts budget - now councillors must act

Socialist Party reporters

Enfield North Constituency Labour Party (CLP) has demanded that Labour-led Enfield council pass a no-cuts budget. A resolution passed at the party's January all members meeting calls for a [legal budget drawing on reserves and a "grassroots" local campaign to get the money for vital services](#) from the government.

One councillor pledged not to vote for further cuts at the same meeting.

The Socialist Party, which has long campaigned for a mass, no-cuts strategy to resist Tory austerity, welcomes this positive development and looks forward to working with all willing Labour Party members, councillors and trade unions to fight to implement this.

Enfield Labour council plans to implement £18 million of cuts on top of the £178 million cut since 2010. As the resolution warns, imposing Tory cuts will "risk bringing the party into disrepute" and damage Labour's electoral prospects.

According to the End Child Poverty coalition, 39% of children in the borough were living in poverty last year. It has the highest eviction rate in London, yet the council prosecuted no dodgy landlords at all in 2015, 2016 or 2017 - reflecting the impact of cuts. There can be no doubting the acute social needs in this outer London borough.

The local Labour party will be calling on the two other Enfield CLPs for support and it aims to mobilise trade unions and community groups in opposition to the cuts.

It also calls for a national campaign; other Labour parties and trade unions should contact Enfield North to express solidarity for the stand.

Unions with members in local authorities, such as Unite, Unison and GMB, have conference policy in line with Enfield North's stand. Now is the time to turn good resolutions into a mass campaign.

We need May Day greetings!

Strengthen ties between the Socialist and workers

Gain valuable income for the working-class press

James Ivens, May Day greetings campaign organiser

The capitalist establishment is writhing in a trap of its own making: the world economic and political crisis. But still workers and young people suffer its attacks - austerity, low pay, high rents, and more. We believe only working-class action can finish off capitalism - and inaugurate the socialist alternative.

This is why the Socialist newspaper collects greetings for May Day - [International Workers' Day](#). To measure the standing of our analysis and fighting programme in workplaces, unions and campaigns. And by fighting for donations to the working-class press, to advance that standing.

Supporters of the Socialist should use our sign-up sheet: speak with colleagues about contributing to a workplace greeting. It's essential to visit the workers whose strikes we have supported to collect for a greeting as well.

Such messages and money have the highest political worth. But trade unionists should also send a motion for May Day greetings to their respective union committees. Do it now so it gets on the agenda.

Young people are crucial to organise too. Groups of students in school, college and university should hit the streets to campaign for funds to send a greeting.

And while the workplace is the key base of power against the bosses, the battle is not confined to it. On housing, healthcare, women's services - even trees and footbridges - our paper and members have fought.

Help us by asking the community campaigns for greetings. Even our minimum price can be negotiable if needed.

But most important of all - we want you to start now. Select an organiser in your region, trade union group or Socialist Party branch. List the groups you want to ask for greetings. And schedule the time to campaign for the funds.

[Last year was another record-breaker](#), with 112 greetings and over £7,500 pledged. Let's smash our targets again in 2019. Let's get those greetings in!

- Send your greeting, and for prices and payments: socialistparty.org.uk/mayday
- Resources and enquiries: chrisnewby@socialistparty.org.uk or jamesivens@socialistparty.org.uk

Leeds: don't let the far right divide us

Leeds Socialist Party

About 100 right-wing 'yellow vest' protesters gathered in Leeds city centre, outside the BBC Yorkshire offices, on 19 January. Clad in high-vis jackets, waving England flags and shouting "Leave means leave" (but also with a flag from the fascist British Movement and one person doing a Nazi salute), the group came to stand off against the [counter-demo that Leeds Socialist Party had been involved in organising](#).

Groups, including Leeds Socialist Party, left Labour members and the Anti-Fascist Network, came together to oppose the divisive message of the far-right protest, which sought to pit migrants and refugees against the rest

of the population.

This face-off stopped passers-by and disrupted traffic, with many stopping to question what the opposing sides each stood for.

Many onlookers generally supported aspects of [the genuine 'gilets jaunes' \(yellow vests\) movement in France](#) and shared our anger at the impact of austerity on working-class people. Our leaflets were positively received and were handed out by other groups on the demo to passers-by.

We highlighted how some of those attracted to the far-right demo are as angry as ourselves about cuts to education, health services and public services. But, rather than blaming migrant workers and refugees for the decimation of services, we pointed towards the crisis-ridden capitalist profit-system. A system where the super-rich have inflated their wealth at the expense of working-class living standards.

Most of the counter-protest, including Socialist Party members, had earlier that morning joined the RMT transport union picket lines on Northern Rail - whose members are fighting to retain safety-critical guards on trains.

It is militant action like this which points the way forward to fighting cuts and austerity.

Moreover, as we've seen in Manchester recently, [it has been far-right groups who have attacked the RMT guards' picket line](#), thereby playing into the hands of the bosses.

There is an urgent need to take up the pressing social and economic issues by organising a united struggle of the working class through the trade unions, and offering a real socialist alternative to capitalism. This is necessary to cut across attempts by far-right groups to divide working-class communities.

Europe: school students strike against climate change

Belgium

Michael Bouchez, CWI Belgium

This generation thinks the neoliberal approach - putting the responsibility with consumers - has failed.

The second 'school strike for the climate' on 17 January assembled 14,000 students in Brussels, after 2,000 demonstrated the week before.

The idea spread like wildfire when two students called for 'Thursday strikes' on social media. Students in Walloon students have walked out too.

A big sense of urgency is part of the mood. They say, "what good is school, if there is no future".

One student said: "Our only means to put pressure [on the government] is to not go to classes, in the same way workers decide to go on strike".

There are almost no slogans calling for individual efforts to reduce our carbon footprint.

They know something has to be done to the big polluters. Just 300 Belgian companies emit 40% of greenhouse gases.

One of our slogans, "international resistance, against the pollution of capital", was shouted throughout the whole demonstration.

Étudiants de Gauche Actifs - Actief Linkse Studenten (Active Left Students) calls for school student committees and open assemblies to organise the movement.

There will be a big march on 27 January and an international school strike on 15 March.

Trade unions have walked out of wage negotiations and called a general strike for 13 February.

We put forward concrete demands so the movement is armed against vague government promises. The demand for free, more frequent and better public transport has a huge resonance.

We call for the nationalisation of the energy sector with democratic control and ownership of science and technology to massively invest in green energy and create green jobs.

Neoliberal politicians will likely find these demands 'unrealistic'. This is because they defend the multinationals and shareholders' interests, for whom our future on this planet is subordinate to their profits.

That is why we explain [the need for a socialist economy based on the needs of the many and protecting the planet, not on profit](#).

Germany

Max Klinkner, Sozialistische Alternative (CWI Germany - SAV)

School student strikes have spread. Students ask: why should we learn for a future that is being destroyed?

In Germany, school student strikes took place in over 50 cities on 18 January. In Mainz, (a city of 215,000 inhabitants) SAV and Left Youth helped to organise a protest of 1,600 people.

SAV and Left Youth took part in the discussions in advance of the walkouts and proposed demands. It was agreed that ecological and economic questions must be linked, coal industry workers must not be forgotten, and there must be free retraining programmes and guaranteed continued employment, without wage cuts, for those workers. Companies that have made big profits destroying the environment should pay for that.

Ecological reconstruction requires free local public transport, a major expansion of rail lines and an increase in the frequency of services for a start.

SAV and Left Youth member Caspar spoke on behalf of Mainz student representatives. We're protesting "not because, as some of us have already been accused, we are yuppie-ecos who like to shop in expensive organic shops and insult everyone as climate sinners who do not feed on soybeans, but because our lives are being sold for profits!"

Left Youth had a strong presence with flags and leaflets at the demonstration. The SAV leaflet demanded the nationalisation of RWE electric company.

It's important the pressure continues to be built. Only through mass protests and strikes, which do not neglect the economic questions but demand public ownership of the major monopolies, will ecological upheaval be possible.

- Max is the Rhineland-Palatinate state spokesperson for Linksjugend Solid (Left Youth)
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Poland: thousands mourn death of murdered mayor

Alternatywa Socjalistyczna, CWI Poland

Poland has been rocked by the murder of Gdansk's mayor, Pawel Adamowicz. He was stabbed on 13 January during the finale of a nationwide charity event for hospitals. Adamowicz had taken a liberal position towards immigration and LGBT+ rights.

His attacker, a convicted bank robber who had just been released from prison, claimed he'd been wrongly jailed and tortured by the mayor's former party, Civic Platform (PO).

Widely seen as a political murder, Adamowicz's death has provoked widespread anger against the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party and its right-wing populist leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, blamed for inciting hate and aggression.

Thousands took part in silent marches all over the country, not only to mourn, but to protest against hate speech and intolerance.

The PiS leadership officially condemned the murder. But some PiS politicians attacked Adamowicz and the opposition even after his death.

Poland's state TV, firmly controlled by PiS, blamed Adamowicz's death on hate speech spread by opposition politicians and the charity event organisers.

The charity, Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity, is particularly hated by PiS and Catholic Church leaders, who believe the Church should have a monopoly on charity and influence on the health service.

No action was taken against the far-right All-Polish Youth, who issued "political death certificates" for eleven mayors in 2017, including Adamowicz.

This murder highlights a dangerous trend in many eastern European countries. The semi-colonial capitalism introduced after the fall of Stalinism has led to the growth of right-wing populism.

PiS came to power in 2015 exploiting genuine anger against the neoliberal policies of the PO government. PO faced huge workers' opposition while in power.

Scapegoating

However, PiS has channelled this anger along nationalist lines - scapegoating refugees, immigrants, and LGBT+ people.

The government has become increasingly authoritarian, undermining the 'independence' of the courts and turning state media into a party propaganda machine.

Until now PiS has enjoyed the support of many workers for lowering the retirement age and introducing a new child benefit.

But economic slowdown looms, anger over public sector pay is growing and teachers are preparing to strike.

Neither the liberals nor right-wing populism of PiS can solve the problems of society. The working class needs to unite around a fight against cuts in the health service and education, against attacks on working conditions and the labour code, and for a public sector wage rise.

But above all, it needs its own party with a socialist programme, which will cut across nationalist hate and violence.

International round-up

USA: teachers strike

30,000 Los Angeles teachers are striking over a catalogue of issues arising from privatisation and underfunding.

60,000 people came to their first strike-day rally on 14 January.

- [Read the Socialist Alternative \(CWI USA\) proposal for action at socialistalternative.org](https://socialistalternative.org)

Nigeria: socialist arrested and released

Democratic Socialist Movement (CWI Nigeria) member Abiodun Bamigboye (Abbey Trotsky) was arrested by state forces on 21 January.

International pressure and protests, organised by the CWI, forced his release. Abbey is a Socialist Party of Nigeria candidate.

He was arrested for helping to organise a casual workers' strike in 2018 and because he is challenging the capitalist elite in elections.

- [Stay updated at socialistnigeria.org](https://socialistnigeria.org)

Russia: repression of anti-fascists

Four anti-fascist protesters, including Socialisticheskaya Alternativa (CWI Russia) member Igor Yashin, were arrested on a march on 19 January.

We feared they could be held for up to 15 days. But swift action in Russia and internationally has secured their release.

- [Read the events at socialistworld.net](https://socialistworld.net)

France: gilets jaunes

'Gilets jaunes' (yellow vests) still enjoy public backing in France, 55% according to the polls.

Official government figures say the protests doubled in size on 12 January.

The tenth weekend of action, 19 January, was the biggest yet in Toulouse, with 10,000 people protesting.

- [Go to socialistworld.net for an important article on how the movement can be sustained](https://socialistworld.net)

Tunisia: public sector general strike

750,000 Tunisian public sector workers struck against pay freezes and IMF-imposed austerity on 17 January.

The Tayaar al'Amal al Qaa'dii (CWI Tunisia) leaflet said, "The neo-liberal policies adopted by successive governments are contrary to the Tunisian revolution, and reflect the sole interests of a minority that monopolises the nation's wealth and deepens the class divide."

- [Read the full leaflet and check out pictures at socialistworld.net](https://socialistworld.net)

Zimbabwe: general strike

150% fuel price hikes - making Zimbabwean fuel the most expensive in the world - provoked a three-day general strike starting 14 January.

A litre of fuel costs more than the daily earnings of almost the entire population.

- [Read about the horrific state repression and our programme for how the struggle can win at socialistworld.net](#)

Spanish state: Massive opposition to right-wing bloc

Izquierda Revolucionaria (CWI in the Spanish state) and their socialist feminist campaign Libres y Combativas (LyC) participated in huge protests across the Spanish state on 15 January, against the bloc of right-wing parties following 2018's Andalusian elections.

LyC is now building for a feminist general strike on International Women's Day.

- [Check out 'Libres y Combativas' on Facebook to stay in touch](#)
-

Theatre: Rouse, Ye Women!

Interview: breaking the chains of oppression

In 1910, women chainmakers in Cradley Heath, West Midlands went on strike. These heroic forerunners of today's gig economy workers forced the bosses to raise their pay.

Cast and creatives from [socialist theatre company Townsend Productions](#) spoke to the Socialist about their new dramatisation of the dispute, 'Rouse, Ye Women!'

So what happened?

Neil Gore (writer and actor): A strike, that started at the end of August 1910. It lasted ten weeks. The strike was the culmination of many years of efforts by 'anti-sweating' organisations to institute the principle of a minimum wage in low-paid, 'sweated' work.

The principle was enshrined in law by the Trade Board Act of 1909, setting minimum rates of pay in some of the worst-affected trades.

But the first minimum rate agreed was in the home manufacture of small chain by women in the Black Country in 1910, due to the strike.

Sweated labour mostly affected women working at home. They were unorganised. They were working over 50 hours a week - especially the chain industry - and they were earning between two shillings and five shillings a week [roughly £10 to £30 today]!

Obviously the more they worked the more they got paid, because it was piecework. But it was very, very hard to earn as much as that.

The odds were against them. The middlemen - usually men - were called "foggers" in the Black Country. They would fine the women if chains were substandard.

They used that, and many other tricks, to get out of paying the full wage. So it was very difficult to earn anything above five shillings - that was considered a 'good' wage.

Social reformists discovered this. One of these was Mary Macarthur, a middle-class woman who discovered trade unionism a bit by accident - but when she got involved, she became one of Britain's most determined, successful and inspiring union leaders.

What was Macarthur's role?

Bryony Purdue (Mary Macarthur): Mary was a Glaswegian woman who had worked in her father's shop - he was a draper, her dad.

She noticed that the working conditions of lots of women who worked in shops were not up to scratch.

Once she'd gone to a speech by [shop workers' union leader] John Turner. She was only 21, and went as a journalist. It inspired her. She really found herself converted to the cause.

The shop workers' union was the first thing she was involved in. And then her passion snowballed. She became the general secretary of the Women's Trade Union League in 1903, and then from 1906 helped form the National Federation of Women Workers, and was their president.

She set up her own magazine, called the Woman Worker. Then she could make it clear in print that the situation wasn't fair, and the word could travel more widely. It was a pretty amazing campaign.

What were the strikers' conditions?

Rowan Godel (Bird): I'm playing a character called Bird. She's a chainmaker. She's called Bird because all the women in Cradley Heath used it as a term of endearment; it's a kind of 'everywoman' name.

These women would work in horrendous conditions. Long, long hours. I know the story of one woman who'd had a baby, and went back to work ten minutes later - and the baby was in the forge, with sparks flying around.

So Mary Macarthur noticed these dreadful working conditions and pay. She helped these women to form a union.

Most of them worked in single shops in the back of a home, so they were very easy for the bosses and the foggers to manipulate. They weren't working together in factories like the men were.

Why weren't the women in the factories?

Neil: The women were making small chain, agricultural chain, small-link stuff. I don't think it brought a lot of profit, so the big chainmaking companies which made chains for things like the Titanic, ships and things like that, for them it was small beer.

So they contracted it out to these middlemen, who were at liberty to do what they liked.

So you've got the big factories with the men working there, unionised workers earning pretty well. And the women's wages were seen as 'pin money' - in addition, usually, to the husband's wage.

But it was the same skilled work. And some of the women that were single, they relied on this wage completely.

The children had to be in the forge as well, because they had to look after the children at the same time.

The women had all their homely duties to do as well as this work. It was a full-on thing for them - but they got very little money for it.

A lot of this will sound familiar to workers today.

Neil: Well, yeah. If you look at zero-hour contracts, the gig economy. Sitting at home waiting for the phone to ring to get any sort of work or income.

Dependent on a sub-contractor, a modern-day fogger, to offer work or deliver tools and materials. If none comes, there's no work, no pay. The clock is being turned back to those times.

People are not able to earn enough. It's not a living wage anymore. And that's exactly the situation these women found themselves in.

Bryony: Babies were brought up in the forge, and children were helping their mothers in the forges. You had children who were picking up - there's a quote in this production - kids in Cradley Heath who were picking up iron instead of flowers. Made to work, not play. There was never any play for women, or children.

Louise Townsend (director): The women and the childcare thing, it still happens now. Women are still working. There is no provision for women and childcare while they're working.

You get provision, but then you end up with no money at the end of it. I'm trying to bring that out, because we're still in the same position.

I'm self-employed because I can't afford the childcare that I need. And that goes for a lot of women.

So we work round - a lot of women work from home so we can continue to work - it's exactly the same. No government has changed it.

What can audiences expect from the staging?

Neil: There's always plenty of drama and music in our productions, but this time it's song-heavy. Songs are the main part of this. A sort of folk ballad opera.

John Kirkpatrick (composer and musical director): So we've found two or three songs from the time, that we know were sung as part of this campaign, sung on the march and so on.

The phrase "rouse, ye women" is one of the main songs that we feature in the play, to the tune of Men of Harlech, a well-known march. They wrote their own words to go with the campaign on the march.

Then for the songs I've written - I'm a 'folky', broadly speaking in the traditional folk music style. So in the idiom of music and speech that would have been current at the time.

In glorious unaccompanied harmony; up to three voices sometimes. And we've got guitar, banjo, accordion, oboe - quite a range of sounds and combinations of voices. An aural feast!

Neil: And some new anthems as well, for people to join in and share. Lots of good choruses to sing along to.

Rouse, Ye Women!

- Touring nationally to over 50 venues from February through April. [Visit townsendproductions.org.uk](http://townsendproductions.org.uk) for dates and bookings.

Non-fiction: The Murder of Rosa Luxemburg "reveals the brutal lengths capitalists will go to protect their system"

Iain Dalton, Leeds Socialist Party

On 15 January 1919, two key leaders of the German working class and the German Communist Party were murdered by soldiers.

The [cold-blooded killings of Karl Leibknecht and Rosa Luxemburg](#) represented an attempt to behead the German revolution.

Klaus Gietinger's newly translated book (originally published in German in the 1990s) attempts to unpick the conspiracy of army and naval officers and the government responsible for both deaths, but particularly that of Rosa Luxemburg, whose real killer was never brought to justice.

Gietinger's method is somewhat like peeling back the various layers of an onion, prying into each stage of the cover-up, from early attempts to evade justice through a rigged military court, to a prison escape by one of the people convicted (not of murder, but of 'lesser' crimes such as 'disposing of a corpse').

As well as legal action aimed to prevent the screening of a TV film about the events that came very close to the truth.

What is revealed is the very serious threat to their attempt to stabilise German capitalism that senior figures believed that Luxemburg and Liebknecht posed.

When they got their hands on them, they were not going to pass up an opportunity to dispose with them.

Naturally, those senior figures found subordinates to do the dirty work, but also went to great lengths to protect them.

As one would suspect, these figures were generally held in high regard by Hitler's Nazi regime, but also by the representatives of the post-war West German state as well - indicting those proponents of 'liberal' capitalism too.

Gietinger's research documents the various threads between the conspirators well, particularly through interviews and correspondence of one of the main conspirators, Captain Waldemar Pabst, who directly ordered the murders.

But he also details how capitalist figures helped finance such repression. What's more, he explains how the key leaders of the German Social Democratic Party government at the time were complicit in the murders and the cover-ups afterwards, particularly Gustav Noske, who appointed himself the 'bloodhound' of the counter-revolution.

He helped establish the reactionary Freikorps militias. Many of those involved went on to be involved in the Nazi party.

This isn't the book to read if you want to know more about the ideas of Luxemburg and Liebknecht, but it does reveal the sheer brutal lengths that the capitalists and their 'armed bodies of men' will go to protect their system.

The Socialist inbox

Letters to the Socialist's editors.

Do you have something to say?

Send your news, views and criticism in not more than 150 words to editors@socialistparty.org.uk, or if you're not online, to Socialist Postbox, PO Box 24697, London E11 1YD.

We reserve the right to shorten and edit letters. Don't forget to give your name, address and phone number. Confidentiality will be respected if requested.

Views of letter writers do not necessarily match those of the Socialist Party.

Disability benefits nightmare

The security that the benefits system gives disabled people is being increasingly knocked, particularly by the government reviews of ESA (Employment and Support Allowance) and PIP (personal independence Payments).

The private company Maximus, working within the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), must be deafened by the sound of 'kerching' as they get paid for every piece of work done.

One of our disability campaigners related how he had a PIP form forwarded to him a year in advance so that the DWP could have time to get the paperwork done. One whole year required to process the paperwork!

Two other members told us how they were sent ESA forms, which are 28 pages of A4 paper, a very daunting and worrying prospect.

One had a face-to-face interview lasting two hours, which had been delayed for 20 minutes as the interviewer had to read the notes.

The member telephoned the DWP for a verdict soon after his interview as he was worried about his money.

He was told he would receive the same amount of money but would be subject to a review in one year's time, meaning being harassed and worried again.

This is someone whose condition will not change and yes, the beneficiary will be Maximus as they complete another piece of work.

One member has completed a 48-page form asking him to disclose all his financial arrangements, under the suggestion that he could possibly be paid an increase in benefit! This is a means test by any other name, and if any extra payment is forthcoming, it will have been earned by the time and effort needed, and anxiety produced, in completing the form.

2019 needs to be the 'year of complaints'! MPs, particularly Tory ones, claim that a subject cannot be an issue unless formal complaints have been received.

We must all complain to our MPs and the DWP to make sure the issues affecting our lives are on the agenda.

On the back of the recent legal victory by single mothers on Universal Credit, we want to take the home office to court!

Disability Campaigners

Disappearing hospitals

I read the interesting article '[NHS funding crisis: Tory 'super-plan' is a super-con!](#)' which points out the terrible pressures the health service is under.

A huge problem with the NHS is a lack of hospitals. The Thatcher government closed over 150 hospitals throughout the country.

My town used to have two busy general hospitals. The valleys to the east and west of my valley also had their own general hospital.

Three of these hospitals have gone. One of the hospitals, which was being renovated at the time it closed, stood empty for ten years before being pulled down.

Our one remaining hospital can no longer cope. Waiting times at the A&E can be 12 hours and more.

JA, Glamorgan, South Wales

My area no longer has a hospital. It closed in the early 1990s and houses now stand on the site. We need to travel to Newport for treatment. For me this means taking three buses.

People are waiting a year and more for knee ops and our NHS is now sending people to private hospitals and paying for it out of NHS funds. Aneurin Bevan must be spinning in his grave!

Ann D, Gwent, South Wales

Audio version of this document

[To hear an audio version of this document click here.](#)

What the Socialist Party stands for

The Socialist Party fights for socialism – a democratic society run for the needs of all and not the profits of a few. We also oppose every cut, fighting in our day-to-day campaigning for every possible improvement for working class people.

The organised working class has the potential power to stop the cuts and transform society.

As capitalism dominates the globe, the struggle for genuine socialism must be international.

The Socialist Party is part of the Committee for a Workers' International (CWI), a socialist international that organises in over 40 countries.

Our demands include:

Public services

- No to ALL cuts in jobs, public services and benefits. Defend our pensions.
- No to privatisation and the Private Finance Initiative (PFI). Renationalise all privatised utilities and services, with compensation paid only on the basis of proven need.
- Fully fund all services and run them under accountable, democratic committees that include representatives of service workers and users.
- Free, publicly run, good quality education, available to all at any age. Abolish university tuition fees now and introduce a living grant. No to academies and 'free schools'!
- A socialist NHS to provide for everyone's health needs - free at the point of use and under democratic control. Kick out private contractors!
- Keep council housing publicly owned. For a massive building programme of publicly owned housing, on an environmentally sustainable basis, to provide good quality homes with low rents.

Work and income

- Trade union struggle to increase the minimum wage to £10 an hour without exemptions as an immediate step towards a real living wage. For an annual increase in the minimum wage linked to average earnings.
- All workers, including part-timers, temps, casual and migrant workers to have trade union rates of pay, employment protection, and sickness and holiday rights from day one of employment.
- An immediate 50% increase in the state retirement pension, as a step towards a living pension.
- Reject 'workfare'. For the right to decent benefits, education, training, or a job, without compulsion.
- Scrap the anti-trade union laws! For fighting trade unions, democratically controlled by their members. Full-time union officials to be regularly elected and receive no more than a worker's wage. Support the

National Shop Stewards Network.

- A maximum 35-hour week with no loss of pay.

Environment

- Major research and investment into replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy and into ending the problems of early obsolescence and unrecycled waste.
- Public ownership of the energy generating industries. No to nuclear power. No to Trident.
- A democratically planned, low-fare, publicly-owned transport system, as part of an overall plan against environmental pollution.

Rights

- Oppose discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, disability, sexuality, age, and all other forms of prejudice.
- Repeal all laws that trample over civil liberties. For the right to protest! End police harassment.
- Defend abortion rights. For a woman's right to choose when and whether to have children.
- For the right to asylum. No to racist immigration laws.
- For the right to vote at 16.

Mass workers' party

- For a mass workers' party drawing together workers, young people and activists from workplace, community, environmental, anti-racist and anti-cuts campaigns, to provide a fighting, political alternative to the pro-big business parties.
- Fight for Labour to be transformed into such a party: deselect the Blairites!

Socialism and internationalism

- No to imperialist wars and occupations.
- Tax the super-rich! For a socialist government to take into public ownership the top 150 companies and the banking system that dominate the British economy, and run them under democratic working-class control and management. Compensation to be paid only on the basis of proven need.
- A democratic socialist plan of production based on the interests of the overwhelming majority of people, and in a way that safeguards the environment.
- No to the bosses' neoliberal European Union and single market. For a socialist Europe and a socialist world!

Audio version of this document

[To hear an audio version of this document click here.](#)
