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THE MIDDLE EAST

United States
proxies, rivals
& danger of war

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defences for global push

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Is the world a safer place with Biden in the White House rather than Trump?

Biden's policies

In *Biden shores up domestic defences for global push*, Steve Howell considers Biden's political appointments and domestic policies as the backdrop to the United States strategy to maintain its world dominance. These policies are being forged by veteran Washington insiders - key figures who were also prominent in the Obama era. Domestically policies are aimed at stabilising the US economy post-pandemic and preventing social dislocation and potential further unrest. This involves a big stimulus package which will give cash to individuals, support small businesses and invest hugely in infrastructure projects also aimed at providing jobs. Whilst the plans include provisions for a \$15 minimum wage and unionisation, these are unlikely to pass into law due to the Republicans ability to filibuster in the Senate. Likewise proposed reform of policing in the wake of the killing of George Floyd will meet the same obstacle. It was concerning that Vice President Harris failed to challenge the Republicans when they were able to throw out the \$15 minimum wage.

The left, Howell argues, will need to work hard to prevent backsliding by Biden and to put working class interests at the heart of policy. The US is increasingly diverse and uniting that working class is a major task too.

Though Biden's rhetoric is different from Trump's, he has appointed foreign policy hawks like Anthony Blinken, a veteran warmonger, to his cabinet and will continue with the policies of Obama and Trump aimed at confronting the rise of China and Russia on the world stage. To be able to focus on that more effectively, however, the US is seeking to get out of major military commitments in

the Middle East, which have proved a quagmire and instead to use proxies as a more effective way of achieving its ends.

The Middle East

This is a theme expanded upon by Simon Korner in *The Middle East: United States proxies, rivals and danger of war*. Historically the region has been the centre of conflict between different imperial powers and remains so today with its strategic and economic importance in terms of trade routes and oil. For over thirty years the US has been embroiled in "endless wars" there and Korner examines how the US will attempt to use proxies in the area so that it can withdraw much of its military presence to concentrate on its new priorities. The situation, however, is highly complex with other resurgent regional and world powers asserting themselves in a shifting pattern of alliances. Russia, Turkey, Israel, the Gulf States and Iran are major players and China has an interest too. The US has not gone away, nor the former colonialists - Britain and France. The Soviet Union once supported secular Arab governments, but with its defeat and the regime change wars of the US, Islamic fundamentalist regimes and armed groups have also become an important element in this volatile mix.

War continues throughout the region, but there is also serious danger of direct conflict between the big powers - perhaps a prelude to a third world war.

Whilst Korner untangles the web of shifting imperial alliances and interests, some things are clear. The peoples of the Middle East are continuing to suffer and there is a real threat of major conflict between big powers, whether by accident or design. There is, therefore, a duty on the movement in the west to mobilise unconditionally against war wherever it is instigated and what-

ever the supposed justification. Also to support the Palestinians in their fight against Israeli oppression.

Working class struggles

In *The Socialist Correspondent* we seek to examine the challenges and struggles of the working class against new variants of the virus that is capitalism in the 21st century. In the last issue we examined Deliveroo and the gig economy and in this one we look at Amazon and the British Gas engineer's dispute.

In *Workers take on the mighty Amazon*, John Moore reports on the oppressive conditions endured by Amazon workers and the struggles which are now taking place to improve these and to gain union recognition across the globe. These are hard fought battles as the company uses any dirty tricks: lying to staff, spying on union organisers and sacking activists, to fight their own workers. Pat Turnbull reports on the British Gas dispute where, despite making big profits and gas engineers putting themselves on the line in the pandemic, Centrica which owns British Gas, has sought to use fire and rehire tactics to force them to accept worse conditions of employment. She outlines the dispute in *British Gas engineers strike against background of problems in the industry*.

These are both ruthless employers whose objective is to screw as much profit out of workers as possible and who will use any tactics to do so. But then capitalism and greed, as Boris Johnson is proud to say, go together. However, they are not the success he likes to pretend. In fact markets have failed abysmally to deal with the coronavirus pandemic as Frieda Park points out in *Vaccines - Capitalism, greed and rivalries*. In fact it is the public sector and state intervention that has had the greatest success in combatting the virus. Capitalist greed benefits no one but the capitalists.

THE MIDDLE EAST

United States proxies, rivals & danger of war

by Simon Korner

A brief history

Much of the Middle East was for centuries part of the Ottoman Empire, which, by the end of the 19th century, had shrunk dramatically as European powers and rising nationalist movements within Ottoman territory had reduced its power. World War 1 finished off the ‘sick man’, and the victors France and Britain divided the spoils. European imperialism was far more powerful, and more systematically violent, than Ottoman rule. Churchill’s attitude is typical of western imperialism: “I am strongly in favour of using poison gas against uncivilised tribes,” he said, referring to the Kurds and Iraqis the British were bombing into submission in the 1920s to secure oil for British warships.

The Suez debacle in 1956 marked the end of British domination in the Middle East and its replacement by American imperialism. But the post-war period also saw the rise of nationalist secular movements in the region, supported by the USSR, which had been strengthened militarily – and morally – by its victory over Nazism, and was by 1949 nuclear-armed. Egypt took control of the Suez Canal in 1956; Iraq became a republic in 1958; Syria stabilised in 1963; the Palestinians formed a united leadership; Yemen, decolonised after 1967, set up a socialist republic in South Yemen that lasted till 1990 when the Soviet Union was defeated. The Cold War, in other words, underpinned the anti-colonialist and anti-Zionist wave in the Middle East.

This meant that imperialism’s gendarme, that “little loyal Jewish Ulster” in the Middle East, as the first British military governor of Palestine described the future state of Israel, had to work hard. After the Nakba in 1948, which ethnically cleansed the Palestinian population, Israel waged a succession of expansionist wars and attacks on its neighbours – an incessant campaign of terror that has intensified over 70 years. While Soviet power couldn’t prevent Israeli expansion or the pro-imperialist Camp David agreement between Israel and Egypt in 1980, or the mutually ruinous Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88, it did aid economic and military development in many Arab countries – notably Egypt and Libya – and it created conditions in which secular Arab nationalism could become hegemonic.

The importance of Soviet power became eminently clear after its removal. In 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait, sparking the first Gulf War and the start of the US’s ‘endless wars’. Since then, we’ve seen the radical weakening of relatively strong Arab communist parties, and the decline of pan-Arab solidarity and links to national liberation struggles globally. Also, after the failure of the Arab Spring, there has been the consolidation of political Islam as the prevailing ruling-class ideology. We’ve seen Libya destroyed, Iraq balkanised, Yemen invaded by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, with direction from Britain, the US and Israel. We’ve seen a decade-long regime change war in Syria that has killed half a million people, Lebanon locked into sectarian fragmentation and growing poverty; a violent coup in Egypt; and ongoing imperialist assas-

inations and sabotage against Iran and its theocratic regime. And Israeli apartheid rule has been consolidated. On the edge of the Middle East, in Nagorno Karabakh, the continuing reverberations of the removal of Soviet socialist co-operation saw competing bourgeois nationalisms boil over into war last year.

Russia emerges – US fails in Syria

It wasn’t until 2008, and Putin’s short war against Georgia, that the newly capitalist Russia began to reassert itself on the world stage. Russia’s intervention in Syria underlined its challenge to American unipolar dominance. Russia’s decision to support the Syrian government led directly to the failure of US strategy in Syria. It was Russian airpower that turned the tide of the war, which, in turn, marked a decisive shift in the balance of power in the Middle East. Russia has now become a key regional player and stabilising force, challenging American power, both militarily and diplomatically. The journalist Sharmine Narwani believes that this change, along with China’s greater regional involvement, represents the greatest transformation in the Middle East since Sykes-Picot – the secret drawing of colonial borders by France and Britain in 1916 (4 May, 2019, *International Movement for a Just World*). She says: “The battle for global hegemony really began to unfold over Syria... when the Russians, Iranians and Chinese decided to draw a line and put up a fight. The world changed after that.”

The US war aims were to bring down Assad, so that the western-backed energy pipeline from Qatar



PHOTO BY AREJENIS NUNEZ

US forces in Syria

through Syria, and then on to Germany, would eclipse Russian energy exports to Germany. It was Syria's refusal to host this pipeline that sowed the seeds of war. In addition, the US wanted to push Russia out of its naval bases on the Mediterranean, weaken Iran by breaking its alliance with Syria, and block Hezbollah's overland supply route from Iran, through Iraq and Syria and onto Lebanon. If Assad had fallen, and it was touch and go, pro-western jihadi forces – Al Qaeda under other names – supported by Israel and the Gulf states, would probably have taken over Syria. Broadly, the US plan failed.

Of course, imperialism is continuing its war through other means. The US controls the east and north-east of Syria, a large triangle of territory stretching a thousand miles along the Turkish border and down the Iraqi border. This area, effectively a US protectorate, is where 60% of Syria's wheat and 95% of its oil comes from. It is controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces, mainly

Kurdish, and a relatively small contingent of US troops that acts as a "tripwire" according to Peter Ford, ex-UK ambassador to Syria – so that if the Syrian army advances, it will incur massive US airstrikes. The US stranglehold over Syria's energy and food supplies, coupled with sanctions, means that the Syrian population is suffering terribly. 12 million Syrian people are in danger of going hungry.

Meanwhile, Turkey controls a chunk of Syrian territory in the north, both directly and indirectly through its jihadi militias. ISIS still enjoys ideological support, and the US military base at Al Tanf, on the eastern border of Syria with Iraq, is providing a safe space for ISIS to regroup. There is also the terrible problem of 10 million refugees and how to facilitate their return. Overall, the US and Turkish presence is preventing Syrian re-integration and normalisation.

Yet despite these major obstacles, Syria is trying to rebuild. Peace talks

involving the different Syrian sides were launched in 2017 at Astana in Kazakhstan, led by Russia, Iran and Turkey. The talks are an important marker in themselves, being the first time regional powers had co-operated in the post-Cold War era. Constitutional talks on Syria's future are underway. If the warring sides fail to reach agreement, as is likely given their sharp differences, Assad will contest the presidential elections, due later this year, under the current Syrian constitution. His government, which has provided healthcare, education and food subsidies throughout the war, means that Assad would probably win, enabling him to enact the democratic reforms he began in 2011.

A fragile peace is returning to Syria, at least in the 70% the government controls. Aleppo is being reconstructed, important motorways are back in government hands. It is a peace underwritten by Russia, which needs a stable government and economic revival in Syria for reasons of its own. First, because chaos in

Syria would provoke social unrest that would allow the West back in to stir up protests into war – just as it did ten years ago. Second, Russia also wants a stable Syria in order to secure its military bases on the Mediterranean. Third, Russia wants to demonstrate its superior ability to guarantee peace, against so many western failures: Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. The round-table talks in Astana that Russia has convened have completely eclipsed the Geneva peace process which the West initiated, and signal the fact that Russia is effectively at the head of Syrian peace-making diplomacy.

Iran's growing connections

Iran's increased connectedness depends on several factors. First, it is bolstered by an alliance of regional forces from Iraq to Yemen. This alliance consists of Hezbollah, one of the best armed non-state actors in the world, its troops battle-hardened in Syria where they played an important role in ground-fighting. Hezbollah still commands popular support in Lebanon, based on its consistent resistance to Israel and its provi-

gency when ISIS threatened to take Baghdad. These militias are coming increasingly under Iraqi government control, but some continue regular attacks on American bases and convoys. In Syria, Iran has bases and close ties with local militias (*Atlantic Council*, 5 Nov, 2020). These forces have opened up a land bridge from Iran, through Iraq and Syria, all the way to the Mediterranean, and have kept supplies flowing to Hezbollah in Lebanon – though the American bombing in February was designed to disrupt this trade route.

All in all, combined with the Syrian national army, this regional alliance represents “a group of ideologically aligned, militarily interdependent, political-military actors committed to one another's mutual defense,” according to Brian Katz, writing in the liberal American journal, *The Atlantic* (19 Oct, 2019). This is a formidable, geographically diffuse, enemy for Israel and US to take on.

Another significant external relationship for Iran is with Russia. This relationship, strengthened, during the Syrian war, has given Iran a major influence over the future of

major Iranian energy buyer in future. Russia and Iran also differ over Israel – Iran fears that Russia's avowed position as an ‘honest broker’ in the region makes it too accommodating to Israeli attacks on Syria. These differences, while not antagonistic, do expose the limits of Russian-sponsored stability. Russia is not strong enough to set the region onto a peaceful path for the long term.

A third element in Iran's increased connectedness is its economic relationship with China. The two countries recently signed a 25-year economic deal worth \$400 billion, under which Iran supplies China with energy in exchange for major Chinese infrastructure investments, 5G roll-out, and intelligence sharing. There are also military links. In 2019, the two countries conducted a major naval exercise in the Gulf, together with Russia.

Of course, China has its own agenda. It's making long-term trade deals with the Gulf states. It also has links with Israel – building the port in Ashdod, and developing Haifa's existing facilities as part of its Belt and Road Initiative. But overall, China's growing economic presence in the region acts as a hindrance to American designs, as does the construction of its only overseas base in Djibouti, across the narrow Red Sea straits from Yemen. As *Forbes* online business journal (17 July, 2020) put it: China is gaining “massive influence in this geopolitically critical region.” China's importance in challenging the US unipolar order in the Middle East is only going to grow, and for Iran, the strategic 25-year deal with China “represents a major blow” to the US, according to the *New York Times* (11 July, 2020).

So far, we've looked mainly at the challenges to the US unipolar order. But the question arises: could these challenges, and in particular the American response to them, make war a greater danger than before?

sion of welfare. Another alliance partner, the Houthis in Yemen, have succeeded in fighting the Saudi-led occupation to a standstill, and have used drones and low-tech missiles to attack Saudi refineries and airports. They are now poised for a major, possibly final, battle to take the oil-rich Yemeni province of Marib. In other words, they're winning the war – which explains why the US is finally calling time on its support for the Saudi occupation and pursuing a ceasefire. In Iraq, Iran has allies in the Popular Mobilisation Units (or the Hash'd al Shaabi), the 40 or so self-defence militias of 180,000 fighters, formed during the 2014 emer-

Syria and the peace process. And military links with Russia show the US that Iran is not alone. Iran and Russia conducted joint military exercises in the Gulf earlier this year, the second in a series.

At the same time, the Iran-Russia relationship is not friction-free. Russia wants to fund Syria's reconstruction with money from the Gulf states. But Iran is suspicious of these states' interference in Syria – seeing they were actively supporting regime change in Syria until recently, and oppose Iran. Instead Iran wants Chinese involvement, and also looks to Europe, which it hopes will become a



Israeli Defence Force near the border with Gaza

Dangers of war

US military spending massively outweighs all the other global powers combined, making up 38% of global expenditure on arms. In 2019, its military spending was \$732 billion – China was next at \$261 billion, and Russia at \$65 billion. Saudi Arabia, which spends \$60 billion on arms a year, is slightly above France, Germany, Britain, Japan and South Korea, in that order. American military pre-eminence is not just for show. The US physical presence in the Middle East is ongoing. Its recent bombing of Iraqi militia forces fighting ISIS sent a clear message that Biden’s foreign policy is as murderous as that of his predecessors. NATO troop numbers in Iraq are also being raised. Though Trump said he wanted to draw down troops in Syria, the US remains illegally entrenched in the north-east of Syria, using the mainly Kurdish Syrian Defence Force as its ground troops to guard and steal Syria’s oil. The US has bases across the Middle East in almost every country. That’s 60,000 troops in total in the region, plus 10,000 more on the Afghan-Iran border, as well as a big naval presence in the Gulf.

Nevertheless, given the broad, slow process of American decline, and given its recent failures in Middle Eastern wars and their aftermath, the US will find it difficult to “enter another war like the Iraq war, when it deployed 185,000 soldiers, spent at least US \$1.2 trillion and had thousands of casualties,” as Iran campaigner Jane Green pointed out in the *Morning Star* (3 Feb, 2021). According to George Friedman of the establishment American website *Stratfor* (3 March, 2015), the US “has come to the conclusion that wars of occupation are beyond American capacity”. It therefore needs to change tack.

Israel

To this end, Israel, already highly ambitious, has been massively rewarded by the US, the better to serve American interests. First, Trump tore up the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, the JCPOA, in line with Israeli wishes. While Biden is talking about re-engaging with the deal, his hawkish Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, along with the Israel lobby, make that outcome uncertain. The US is unlikely to lift sanctions, which

could force Iran to refuse a deal. Second, Trump handed Israel Jerusalem as its capital and cancelled the \$65 million a year US contribution to the UN Relief Agency supporting Palestinian refugees. He also cheered on the West Bank Jewish settlements, which Pompeo declared were “not inconsistent with international law” (*Times of Israel*, 19 Nov, 2019). Biden is unlikely to roll back on any of this. Third, Israeli power has been increased by the Abraham Accords – the normalisation of its ties with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in the Gulf, as well as Sudan and Morocco – and soon with other Arab states. Though these deals basically articulate already existing realities, the open disdain that allying with Israel shows for the Palestinian struggle by these Gulf states represents a new low.

The fourth reward for Israel, and perhaps the most important, is that Israel has been brought under the strategic military umbrella of Centcom, the US’s Middle East command. This means that Israel will be able to base its aircraft openly in any US airbase in the Middle East, for example, in the UAE, much nearer to Iran

than Israel. It will be able to lead the Gulf states' powerful but less technologically advanced forces, in exchange for sharing its expertise in population suppression with the Gulf monarchies. As Jonathan Cook puts it (*Middle Eastern Eye*, 2 Feb, 2021): "Israeli officers will soon move out of the shadows and publicly train and advise the UAE and Saudi armies as part of their joint roles in Centcom."

Israeli ties with the UAE are already strong. Through the UAE and the UAE's proxy force in Yemen, the Southern Transitional Council, Israel has gained a foothold on the strategically important Yemeni island of Socotra off Aden. This means that Israel and the UAE could soon develop potential control over vital shipping lanes leading south from Suez, whose economic importance was underlined in March this year when the Canal was blocked by a huge container ship. Economically, trade will boom between Israel and the UAE – hitherto blocked.

As a result of the Abraham Accords, the UAE, for its part, will gain access to 50 US stealth fighters, which it needs to extend its military power. The UAE has already shown its own expansionist ambitions. It was a key player in the 2013 Egyptian coup against the Muslim Brotherhood leader, Mohamed Morsi, has been very active on one side in the Libya war and it tried, along with the Saudis, to blockade Qatar economically and topple its monarchy for being too close to Iran. New high-tech weapons will only make the UAE more aggressive.

Iran rightly sees both the Centcom move, and the Abraham Accords, as a direct threat.

Israel is also working on Qatar. Now that the economic blockade by the Saudis and UAE has failed, Israel, which backed the blockade, sees closer ties with Qatar as a good way forward. It has offered to lift its arms veto on US sales of stealth bombers to Qatar – a veto

the Americans gave Israel in 2008 so as to guarantee its permanent military superiority in the Middle East, known as 'Qualitative Military Edge'. Israel's friendly moves towards Qatar explain Pompeo's parting shot before he left office, which was to patch up the Saudi-Qatari quarrel. The way is now open for a really powerful war alliance against Iran.

To sum up, as the US scales back direct military control in the Middle East, it is outsourcing its work of domination, drawing together a group of well-armed proxy powers, led by its most efficient gendarme, Israel. The aim is to neutralise and, if necessary, destroy Iranian power, and thus indirectly weaken China, which depends on Iranian energy. Israel is able to exploit the uneven development and rivalry between the ambitious Gulf states to put itself at their head, as their technological leader, and their conduit to US and Israeli arms.

Israel's increased power makes regional war more likely overall, because of its nuclear-armed status, with at least 200 nuclear weapons, and its implacable opposition to Iran ever getting nuclear arms. As the American journal *The National Interest* (26 Oct, 2019) put it: "If a hostile power (let's say Iran, for the sake of discussion) appeared to be on the verge of making nuclear devices with the systems needed to deliver them, Israel might well consider a preventive [their word] nuclear attack. In the case of Iran, we can imagine scenarios in which Israeli planners would no longer deem a conventional attack sufficiently lethal to destroy or delay the Iranian program." The US promotion of Israel makes it increasingly reliant on it, and thus less and less able to control it, with the risk that Israel could trigger a devastating war, now it's been put in the driving seat. Having said that, Turkey may prove a more dangerous regional power still.

Turkey's ambitions

The Syria war has been instrumental in rendering Turkey a highly unreliable NATO ally for the US, as it plays off West against East, in a Janus-like position. Originally part of the western forces to bring down Assad, Turkey changed its position when it realised Assad was not going to fall, and it came to terms with Syria, Russia and Iran. It has also been provoking its fellow NATO power Greece over energy fields in the eastern Mediterranean – drilling for energy within Greek and Cypriot coastal waters – and has clashed with another NATO ally France over shipping arms to the side France is against in the Libya conflict.

Turkey has also never fallen out with Russia irrevocably, in spite of various close calls – such as the shooting down of a Russian jet during the Syria war. It is keeping its S-400 anti-missile systems Russia has supplied it with, despite US sanctions for doing so. All this suggests that Turkey might be moving towards a permanent alliance with Russia. But such an alliance is unlikely for several reasons. First, Turkey's position in Afrin in northern Syria – where it's opening post offices, clinics, colleges, and using the Turkish lira as it does in Northern Cyprus – is an aggressive act of occupation against Syria and, by extension, Russia. In addition, there is its continued support for Al Qaeda in Idlib, which it is using as a weapon to be unleashed whenever necessary. And although Turkish and Russian troops jointly patrol various borderlands and highways in northern Syria, it is an extremely tense relationship – especially as Syrian planes have begun bombing oil transports smuggling stolen oil into Turkey. Second, Turkey is host to a major NATO base at Incirlik, something it is unlikely to give up because Turkey's NATO membership gives it further leverage against Russia.

More broadly, as a major regional power, Turkey has long-term ambitions to regain its former Otto-

man possessions in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere. It has only reluctantly, and temporarily, accepted Assad's survival. Its friendship with Qatar, where it has a base and a shared Muslim Brotherhood ideology, shows it has ambitions as far away as the Persian Gulf, as well as in Yemen where it plans to send Islamist mercenaries to fight the Houthis. And its incursions into northern Iraq to kill PKK fighters underline its lack of respect for international borders. Turkey also has nuclear ambitions, with Pakistan as its likely supplier.

Turkey risked war with Russia by supporting Azerbaijan's war against Armenia. It supplied Azerbaijan with sophisticated drones that enabled its victory. Russia was hard-put to broker a fragile peace deal, a deal that now gives Turkey a direct transport route to the Turkic-speaking countries east of the Caspian Sea, on which it is setting its long-term sights: Turkmenistan, for example, and other former republics of the USSR. Turkey will at some point challenge Russia for hegemony over these central Asian countries. So, all in all, a definitive move by Turkey towards Russia and away from the West is unlikely.

And though Biden is continuing to shut Turkey out of participation in producing F-35 bombers, and is making critical comments about Turkey, a *New York Times* article suggests a more accommodating line could emerge: "Turkish forces are all that stand between five million vulnerable citizens and potential slaughter at the hands of President Bashar al-Assad's forces and his Russian allies" (17 Feb, 2021). Americans are being prepared to forgive Turkey for its unruly behaviour, so long as it remains within the US sphere of influence. Biden's only other option to bring Turkey to heel would be to impose more sanctions, or try another coup. But the last coup attempt against Erdogan failed badly.

Overall, Turkey's ambiguous foreign policy has served it well, and there is little reason for it to change now.

Britain and France

Into this combustible mix, we also have the old European powers and their competing ambitions. British hawks like Tobias Ellwood, chair of the Defence Select Committee, and Tom Tugendhat, chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, are calling for Britain to take a far more active role in the Middle East. Britain has aided and abetted the Saudi war in Yemen, and has close ties with the Gulf monarchies: through arms, football, the funding of British universities and our royal family, which has met Gulf monarchs over 200 times in the past decade. Britain is mired in dirty tricks in Syria and Lebanon, and has been instrumental in anti-Assad propaganda – it's no coincidence that the pro-terrorist White Helmets leader Le Mesurier was British. Over half of *Al Jazeera*'s reporters in Syria were trained by a UK-US government programme. Britain has also embedded itself in Lebanon's security services and the army, and has created 'civil society' groups to push for regime change. Britain has cornered the market in ideological warfare.

Meanwhile, France also wants to regain its old colonial influence. Macron, in a visit to Lebanon just after the Beirut explosion, said: "France will never let Lebanon go. The heart of the French people still beats to the pulse of Beirut." He also said that France would resist Turkey's intervention in the war in Libya where they back different sides and would prevent Turkey drilling for energy in Greek coastal waters, which threatens the interests of French oil company Total. France's military bases in the UAE and Djibouti (next door to China's and America's) allow it to project French power into the Gulf. Given all this, and Macron's recent major weapons deal with Egypt, the current balance of forces in the Middle East is ripe for future conflict.

In conclusion, Russia's military and diplomatic influence, coupled with Chinese economic influence, could potentially lead to a more stable Middle East. China has continued to buy Iranian oil in the teeth of US sanctions, and is now investing in Iraq's broken infrastructure in exchange for guarantees of energy supplies in future, forging ahead with plans for peaceful economic development. On the other hand, any trade-led stability under Chinese and Russian tutelage will face sabotage from the US, which will try to use its military superiority to gain what it can no longer win economically. That means that the new dispensation, the new multipolarity, could end up intensifying the danger of war, rather than guaranteeing peace. While Russia and China support the UN Charter and international norms, the US will continue to break international law and fill any gap in terms of boots on the ground with its alliance of increasingly assertive regional powers. In encouraging these players, led by Israel, it is storing up ingredients for future war, not only against Iran, but one that could drag in the global powers too. Which begs the question: was Syria the ground on which the opening battles of World War 3 have already been fought?

What can we do here? First, re-emphasise support for the Palestinian struggle, both within Labour and beyond, exposing apartheid Israel and its key place in the imperialist order. Second, support campaigns against British arms deals to Israel and the Gulf states. Third, challenge wars of intervention, existing and new, and challenge the new Cold War narrative against Russia and China.

BIDEN SHORES UP DOMESTIC DEFENCES FOR GLOBAL PUSH

by Steve Howell

Donald Trump was fond of calling his Democrat opponent ‘sleepy Joe’ but the first three months of Joe Biden’s presidency have been anything but lethargic.

Since his inauguration in January in a Washington patrolled by 20,000 troops and looking like a war zone, president Biden has set about re-engineering US strategy domestically and internationally with astonishing speed and zeal. For the US establishment, a revamp was undoubtedly much needed. Globally, the USA’s pre-eminence is under threat from China’s relentless economic growth, the drain on its resources from the ‘forever wars’, the European Union’s increasing propensity to act unilaterally and the growing climate change crisis. Domestically, Biden faces a batch of potentially destabilising issues, including the world’s third worst COVID-19 death rate, an upsurge in white supremacist activity and deepening economic inequality, accelerated by Trump’s regressive tax cuts.

The energy with which the White House has begun to tackle these challenges is not, of course, the doing of its elderly occupant. Biden is merely the front man for a ready-made team drawn from the Washington political elite, most of whom have served in previous Democrat administrations. Foremost among them are secretary of state Anthony Blinken, who was Hillary Clinton’s deputy under Obama, and Treasury secretary Janet Yellen, who chaired president Clinton’s Council of Economic Advisers and was appointed by Barack Obama as chair of the



Joe Biden, Presidential motorcade 2021

Federal Reserve. Biden’s selection of a cabinet packed with veteran centrists appeared to confirm fears on the left that he meant what he said when he promised rich donors early in his presidential campaign that ‘nothing will fundamentally change’. But, confronted by so many problems, centrists have realised that some things have to change – after all, an elite that is unable to sustain hegemony internally is in no position to defend it internationally.

Response to domestic threats

Concern in Washington circles about the threats facing capitalism is reflected in a warning from the International Monetary Fund in April that the exacerbation of inequalities by Covid-19 may lead to “polarization, erosion of trust in government or social unrest” and “pose risks to macroeconomic stability and the functioning of society.” [1] Those concerns have shaped much of Biden’s early agenda and rheto-

ric. He frequently says “Wall Street didn’t build America” and that he will deliver “shots in arms, money in pockets”. And the money has indeed come thick and fast: under the £1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan, 127 million people had by the end of March been sent cheques – typically \$1,400 per person - and billions had been allocated to prevent home repossessions, evictions, small business failures and public sector job cuts. [2] That was followed by the announcement of a longer term \$3 trillion American Jobs Plan that will renew the country’s electricity grid and water system, pay for new buses and rolling stock, modernise 20,000 miles of highways, invest in schools and hospitals, retrofit two million homes to make them energy efficient and connect everyone to high-speed broadband. [3] The sums are eye-watering but progressive members of Congress such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez are arguing for a much more ambitious \$10 trillion, ten-year plan, saying: “We need to understand we are in

a devastating economic moment, millions of people are without jobs, we have a truly crippled healthcare system and a planetary crisis on our hands, and we are the wealthiest country in the history of the world.” [4]

However, one point on which there is no disagreement between the left and the White House is on the need for jobs to be unionised. Biden surprised and alarmed big business by including in his jobs plan a commitment to “ensuring workers have a free and fair choice to organize, join a union, and bargain collectively with their employers” and that “American taxpayers’ dollars benefit working families and their communities, and not multinational corporations or foreign governments.” [5] Union-backed legislation to protect the right to organise was adopted by 225 to 206 in the House of Representatives in March, but it is unlikely to get through the Senate, where the Democrats rely on the casting vote of vice-president Kamala Harris and Republicans are certain to use the filibuster [6], which requires a 60:40 vote to over-turn.

By making the right to organise integral to his jobs plan, Biden could get around that problem because budgetary measures go through what’s known as a reconciliation process that has a 20-hour limit to the filibuster. A similar move to include a \$15 minimum wage in the rescue plan fell foul of a legal ruling that it wasn’t strictly a budgetary matter, and therefore would be subject to the filibuster, but the left argue that Harris could have challenged that and will no doubt push hard next time for union rights not to be dropped.

Biden’s other high-profile piece of legislation, the George Floyd Justice and Policing Act, was passed by 220 to 212 in the House but is not in a spending plan and is likely to run into a brick wall in the Senate. As it stands, it would ban the use of chokeholds, remove “qualified immunity” for law enforcement officials,

scrap ‘no-knock’ warrants, mandate data collection on police encounters, prohibit racial and religious profiling and redirect funding to community-based policing programs.

This piece of domestic legislation, above all the others, highlights a virtually intractable problem facing those in US ruling circles who want to stabilise the country socially and politically: they are up against resistance from a large portion of their own class who can block change not only in the Senate but also through their dominance of the judiciary and much of the coercive structure of the state. The US locks up far more people per capita than any other country in the world. The 2.3 million held in more than 7,000 prisons and detention facilities equate to 698 per 100,000 of the population, well ahead of other comparable countries such as Russia (413), Brazil (325) and England/Wales (141). [7] Of those incarcerated in the US, 40% are African Americans – three times more than their proportion of the population.

Against this background, it’s not surprising that high-profile incidents like the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis last year have become symbols of systemic racism and a catalyst for the Black Lives Matter movement. But in many US police forces far right attitudes are deeply rooted. The Fraternal Order of Police, with 355,000 members, endorsed Trump. Their statement on the storming of the Capitol in January described it as “heart-breaking” but didn’t condemn it outright. Their Chicago president, John Cantanzara, said the protestors were only “voicing frustration” and that he would remain convinced “for the rest of his life” that “something shitty happened in this election”. [8]

The problem with the police is compounded by a judiciary that successive Republican presidents have stacked with conservatives. This means that district courts often act to thwart progressive measures - as

has happened recently with moratoriums on evictions and deportations - and to uphold racist voter suppression measures enacted by state legislatures. Biden has a popular mandate for change and those around him appear to understand that a society so poisoned by racism is ultimately doomed, never mind credible as a ‘beacon of democracy’.

Trump’s defeat

A demographic transformation has made the United States a much less cohesive society than it was at the end of the second world war when the country became the brash successor to Britain as the dominant capitalist power globally. Not only has the population more than doubled from 140 million to 330 million, it has also changed radically in its ethnic composition. In 1945, 90 per cent of Americans were white, the rights of non-whites were negligible and desegregation of housing was explicitly considered ‘Un-American’. Today, more than thirty per cent of the much larger population is non-white – nearly 100 million people who, after successive waves of struggle, are not prepared to accept second best. Biden owes his election to the way they turned out in huge numbers for him. He won 15 million more votes than Hillary Clinton to beat Trump clearly by 81 to 74 million in the popular vote. Like Clinton, but on a higher turn-out, he had the support of nine out of ten black voters and two of every three Latinos.

The main difference between 2016 and 2020, apart from the record numbers voting, was the big lead Biden had over Trump among voters on lower incomes. If you convert the *New York Times* exit poll into votes, more than 64 million of Biden’s 81 million votes came from households with a combined income below \$100,000 – that was nearly 17 million more than Trump, compared to a roughly even split in 2016. Among people from households with an income of more than \$100,000, whereas in 2016 the votes

broke fairly evenly between Clinton and Trump, the 2020 election saw Trump beat Biden by 54% to 43% (or by around five million votes) in that category. In other words, wealthier voters swung to Trump, no doubt pleased with their tax cuts, while Biden secured a staggering increase in support – something like 20 million more votes than Clinton – from less well-off voters. And this must have included a large increase in working class white voters because overall he won 41% of the white vote, compared to Clinton’s 37%.

Further evidence of the Democrats regaining working class support – white and black – can be found in the states Biden won back from Trump. Of the five he flipped, three – Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Michigan – were in the de-industrialised ‘rust belt’ where Trump had promised but failed to deliver jobs. In Pennsylvania, for example, the two counties that Biden took from Trump were Northampton, once the home of the giant Bethlehem steelworks, and Erie, another former centre of the steel industry where Trump made three campaign stops, including for one of his final big rallies.

Challenges for the left

The defeat of Trump has opened a new phase in US politics in which the progressive left has opportunities to advance, capitalising on Biden’s need to keep them onside. Whether it can do so depends on how well it can rise to three major challenges.

Firstly, the left will need to continue to build mass pressure for their policy agenda to overcome resistance from the Republicans and backsliding from the centrists around Biden. In January, Sanders warned that the Democrats will lose control of Congress in the midterms next year if they don’t follow what he calls an “aggressive working-class agenda”. Recalling what happened after the victories of Bill Clinton in 1992 and Barack Obama in 2008, he said: “In 1994, Democrats in power

lost big because they were not bold. In 2010, it happened again. If we do not take aggressive action now to protect working families, it will happen in 2022.”

The Rescue Plan was the kind of thing he had in mind, but the failure of Biden and Harris to make a real fight for a \$15 minimum was warning signal. Former Obama chief of staff and Chicago mayor, Rahm Emmanuel, is among those touting the idea of a compromise with employer lobby groups that would allow states to opt-out of a \$15 federal minimum to a floor of \$12. [9] Predictably, centrists claim that policies corporate interests oppose are an electoral liability. After the November elections, they tried to blame a handful of Democrat Congressional losses on the left, but Sanders was quick to point out that all 112 co-sponsors of Medicare For All and 97 of 98 co-sponsors of the Green New Deal won their elections. “These are not just good policies, they’re also good politics,” he said.

Secondly, uniting the US working class in all its diversity across a huge continent is a herculean task. The Sanders campaigns of 2016 and 2020, despite not ultimately being successful, lifted the left to a level arguably never seen in the US before. Tens of thousands of people are now active in organisations such as Our Revolution, Justice Democrats and Democratic Socialists of America. The DSA alone now boasts 85,000 members, four members of Congress and 155 elected officials in 32 states. However, when you look closely at the 13 state legislatures on which its members sit, almost all of them are in the north and north east of the US and not in the West, South West and South East where the working class has been growing fastest. [10]

In 1949, my father, Brandon Howell, conducted a demographic study for the state of Nevada in which he projected that the state would see its population grow from 173,800 to

208,800 by 1970. He was way out. By 1970, nearly half a million people lived in the state. Today, Nevada has a population of more than three million, mainly centred on Las Vegas. While states such as Pennsylvania, Michigan and New York have seen their populations plateau, there has been phenomenal growth over the last fifty years not only in Nevada but also in states such as Arizona (from 1.7m in 1970 to 7.3m in 2020), Texas (11.2m to 29.4m), Georgia (4.6m to 10.6m) and Florida (6.8m to 21.5m). These so-called sunbelt states have become big political battlegrounds, but they are not places where socialist ideas and working class organisation have strong roots.

Foreign policy hawks

Finally, while there is currently a large overlap between Biden and the left on the domestic front, the same cannot be said of foreign policy. When Blinken was appointed secretary of state, Lord Finkelstein described him in the Times as someone “who continued to support liberal interventionism even when, after the Iraq war, such a position was unpopular among Democrats”. [11] Blinken has recently changed his tune, saying in March that the US will not “promote democracy through costly military interventions or by attempting to overthrow authoritarian regimes by force” because “however well intentioned” those tactics “haven’t worked.” [12] This apparent U turn is borne largely of necessity: the ‘forever wars’ have cost \$6.4 trillion [13] and thousands of US lives and are deeply unpopular. But Blinken also knows that regime change – or regime weakening - can often be achieved through a combination of sanctions, special forces, proxies and drone strikes backed by the occasional bombing raid.

That strategy frees US resources to focus on its main goal of isolating China and Russia and strengthening its grip on maritime global trade. The US can’t do much about the improv-



PHOTO BY TONY WEBSTER

Black Lives Matter protesters Minneapolis demand Justice for Jamar Clark 2015

ing transport infrastructure integrating China with central Asia and Russia, but it is looking to encircle that land mass with its vastly superior naval and nuclear might to ensure it calls the shots on sea routes. Blinken is therefore busy whipping NATO countries into line and trying to build up the 'Quad' alliance with Japan, India and Australia.

The EU, and especially Germany, is reluctant to be the US's junior partner in this new Cold War. The EU Commission has agreed a major investment deal with China. The US is opposed to it and it has run into opposition in the European Parliament, but one in every two Volkswagens is sold in China and Merkel's ministers have made clear that business comes first – a stance that reflects a wider weariness in Europe of its interests being subservient to those of the US, reflected in the new Brussels buzz phrase 'open strategic autonomy'. As Portugal's former Europe minister put it recently: "Our ability to chart our own economic policy and choices does not have a ceiling". [14]

Human rights hypocrisy

But the left and the peace movement – in the US and worldwide – can't afford to rely on dissension

among the major Western powers to prevent a worsening of the new cold war to the point where it tips dangerously into a real one. This is no idle scaremongering. The head of the US Strategic Command, Admiral Charles Richard, said in an article published in a military journal in January that "there is a real possibility that a regional crisis with Russia or China could escalate quickly to a conflict involving nuclear weapons" and that the US "must shift its principal assumption from 'nuclear employment is not possible' to 'nuclear employment is a very real possibility' and act to meet and deter that reality". [15]

Faced with such a stark danger, the left cannot afford to let US hypocrisy on 'human rights' go unchallenged. Some in the West – notably including the Murdoch-owned media – are lobbying for a boycott of the Winter Olympics in China next February. Blinken's spokesperson cryptically encouraged speculation in April by tweeting that "we don't have any announcement regarding the Beijing Olympics...but we will continue to consult closely with allies and partners to define our common concerns". [16] US 'concern' about the human rights of Muslims in China is a bit rich, to say the least, given how since 2010 it has mounted 14,040

confirmed drone strikes in Pakistan, Somalia, Afghanistan and Yemen, killing 8,858-16,901 people of which 910-2,200 were civilians and 283-454 were children. [17] Biden and Blinken were among the architects of this extra-judicial slaughter. They need to be held to account.

Steve Howell is author of *Game Changer*, the story of Labour's 2017 election campaign, and two novels, the latest of which, *Collateral Damage*, was published in April and can be ordered via www.steve-howell.com

[1] 'IMF calls for tax hikes on wealthy to reduce income gap', Guardian, 1.4.21.

[2] 'FACT SHEET: The American Rescue Plan Will Deliver Immediate Economic Relief to Families', US Treasury, 18.3.21.

[3] 'FACT SHEET: The American Jobs Plan', The White House, 31.3.21.

[4] AOC interview with Rachel Maddow, MSNBC, 1.4.21.

[5] 'FACT SHEET: The American Jobs Plan', The White House, 31.3.21.

[6] Filibuster is the tactic of Senators speaking at length until time has run out for debate on a piece of legislation. For more, see: 'What is the U.S. Senate filibuster and why is everyone talking about it?' Reuters, 17.3.21.

[7] Source: Prison Policy Initiative. Some states - such as Oklahoma (1,079), Louisiana (1,052), Mississippi (1,039) and Georgia (970) – have staggeringly high levels of incarceration.

[8] Interview with Chip Mitchell, WBEZ Radio, Chicago, 7.1.21.

[9] David Sirota, 'Rahm Emanuel Headlines Event For Group Fighting \$15 Minimum Wage', Daily Poster, 2.4.21.

[10] According to the DSA website, the 13 state legislatures on which its members serve are: Massachusetts, Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, New York, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Maryland, Minnesota, Hawaii, Montana, and Michigan.

[11] Daniel Finkelstein, 'What makes Biden's right hand man tick?' The Times, 2.12.21.

[12] As reported in the Financial Times, 4.3.21.

[13] 'America has spent \$6.4 trillion on wars in the Middle East and Asia since 2001, a new study says', CNBC, 20.11.19.

[14] Quoted by Dominic Lawson, 'Germany, not Brexit Britain, will vex Biden', Sunday Times, 24.1.21.

[15] As reported in The Times, 4.1.21.

[16] Ned price @StateDeptSpox, 6.4.21.

[17] The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, figures to 10.4.21.

NHS vaccination success

NHS
COVID-19
Vaccination Centre

VACCINES CAPITALISM, GREED & RIVALRY

PHOTO BY WHISPYHISTORY

will benefit reaping the rewards of public procurement and state investment.

One of the key reasons that Britain's vaccine programme is working is the organisation of our National Health Service and the dedication of its staff and volunteers delivering the programme. A sense of social solidarity has brought people together to get the job in huge numbers as they seek to protect themselves, their families and communities. The opposite of capitalism and greed. Where capitalism and greed have been at the forefront of policy, failure has ensued. Countries which have deployed state planning and intervention, like China and New Zealand, have had the greatest success in combating the virus. It is helpful, however, that Johnson linked capitalism with greed as that is what capitalism is about – competing to gain profit, resources and advantage over those weaker than yourself. All capitalist companies, countries and alliances behave this way even if they are not usually crass enough to say so.

Vaccine war

The failure of capitalism has also been evident in the botched EU vaccine procurement and rollout effort. This alliance of capitalist states is in competition with other capitalist countries for supplies of vaccines, but had failed to order them early on unlike Britain and the United States, two of its competitors. For example, the UK and the US ordered supplies of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, based on early results, back in July 2020. Whereas the EU did not order it until 11th November. The EU also invested less in vaccine development than the US. Even when supplies became available some countries, like France, were slow to roll it out. The US and Britain then had first call on supplies and were relatively well prepared to start programmes as soon as vaccines were delivered. This has disadvantaged EU countries, but is hardly out-

by Frieda Park

Prime Minister Boris Johnson claimed that it was capitalism and greed that made Britain's vaccine programme a success which was rather extraordinary since it was capitalism and greed that lay behind its total failure in managing the pandemic over the previous months. It bunged huge amounts of public money to cronies in consultancies and companies who failed to provide PPE. The favouring of friends and David Cameron's lobbying on behalf of Greensill might all have been technically within the rules, but was corrupt, nevertheless. It took a dogmatic approach to keeping the economy open only fuelling further surges in infection. There was a contempt for public services and their workers, worshiping the incompetent and self-serving private sector.

It was a public institution, Oxford University, which co-developed the main vaccine being used in Britain in partnership with Astra Zeneca, a private company. Pharmaceutical companies have received huge amounts of public funding to develop vaccines. Their success, therefore, has not been due to enterprising, greedy capitalists but state investment. Currently the Oxford/Astra Zeneca vaccine is being sold at cost price, unlike most others, including Pfizer and Moderna. However, the company has reserved the right to change that when it deems the pandemic is over. Then, no doubt, it will reap huge future benefits from the public funding it received and market share it has acquired as the low-cost option. It could be said that this is almost a loss-leader to obtain competitive advantage in the future Covid vaccine market. Capitalism

geous skulduggery, only modest and pretty standard capitalist competitive practice. The pro-EU establishment in Britain widely condemned the decision not to join the EU vaccine procurement programme. It was “unforgivable” according to The Guardian of 10th July 2020 which claimed that the procurement process would target supplies to the EU citizens who needed it most.

The bloc’s response to this has shed a light on how it habitually operates, throwing its weight around and threatening unilateral action to bully others into line. This aspect of the EU has been obscured in Britain by the polarised passions of the Brexit debate. The people of Greece and other EU countries who suffered under its austerity measures and refugees camped in terrible conditions and drowning in the Mediterranean are only too well aware of the dark side of its operations. To try to catch up with its competitors the EU stopped some exports, threatened an outright export ban and legal action. Even when this strategy failed and was doing huge reputational damage it persisted as it tried to shift blame for its own failure to Britain and Astra Zeneca – convenient targets post-Brexit. It escalated matters over concerns about the safety and efficacy of the Oxford/Astra Zeneca vaccine, some justified and some not. Use of the vaccine was widely limited or suspended by EU countries for periods of time. Bizarrely the EU was demanding a bigger share of the very vaccine which it was undermining. Despite talk about collaboration to increase supplies, the EU is not backing down and has agreed in principle that it could halt the export of vaccines from its territory.

Capitalism isn’t fair and doesn’t deliver resources based on need. Even if the EU does have a legitimate gripe that its vulnerable citizens are being left behind in the vaccine war, it is only arguing for redistribution from some rich economies - the US and Britain - to other rich economies

in Europe. What about the really disadvantaged and vulnerable in the developing world? Without addressing that glaring need the EU’s claim to be arguing on the side of fairness rings hollow. While in Britain, the US, and more slowly in the EU, populations are being jabbed, few in the developing world have been vaccinated and have little prospect of this in the near future. Oxfam calculated that rich countries, with 14% of the world’s population had pre-ordered 53% of promising vaccines. The rich world simply by its economic power is ensuring it gets access to vaccines over the rest of the world. The COVAX programme which aims to distribute supplies to the developing world is struggling as it is underfunded and rich countries continue to buy up and hoard supplies. This has been combined with India, the

Countries which have deployed state planning and intervention, like China and New Zealand, have had the greatest success in combating the virus.

world’s third largest producer of vaccines, imposing an export ban. It is now estimated that COVAX will struggle to deliver enough doses for developing countries to vaccinate even their health care workers, never mind the rest of their populations. Maybe only 10% of people in these countries will be vaccinated this year. (*The Economist* 3/4/21)

Setbacks for EU

If the EU has ramped up tensions with other countries then the tensions within it have also emerged in the pandemic. Rather than cooperating, member states are now at each other’s throats and that of the Commission. The tendency in the EU over years has been to centralise power, taking it away from member states and the pandemic was seen to be a good opportunity to advance

this agenda. The centralised purchase of vaccines was a first in the EU taking on an aspect of procurement and delivery across the whole bloc. Its failure and the fallout from this do not bode well for future EU integration. There was further evidence of the dysfunctionality of the EU when, according to the *Financial Times*, the bloc’s leaders spent most of the evening of its summit designed to tackle the vaccine crisis arguing about how to divide up just 10 million doses of the Pfizer jab. It is not just Hungary that is now looking to source Russian vaccines outwith the EU procurement process, and people nipping across borders into Serbia to get jabbed. Having been a prime mover in the plan to source vaccines centrally, it is reported that German states and Germany itself are looking to get

the Sputnik V Russian vaccine. It is difficult to see how this will go down well with member states subject to the EU’s failed procurement system.

The EU struggled with other aspects of its drive to political union in the pandemic as national borders were reinstated, curtailing free movement of labour, to control the spread of the virus. The EU’s Covid Recovery and Resilience Facility is another step towards centralisation born in the pandemic, funded for the first time by issuing pan-European bonds. The cash being made available is a mix of loans and grants, contingent on neo-liberal reforms to domestic economies and ear-marked for other priorities defined by the EU, such as projects aimed at tackling climate change. Structural reforms, attacking pension rights for example, are going to be unpopular and EU objec-

tives may not fit well with individual countries urgent needs coming out of the pandemic. This will cause further tensions.

Sadly the one thing which has worked relatively in the move to centralise the EU has not been to the benefit the people of the EU nor those beyond its borders. This has been the establishment of its first militarised force in the shape of Frontex – the European Border and Coast Guard Agency. Although initially established in 2004 it has now received significant funding and has been given new powers to try to stem migration to the EU by refugees. From £100m in 2017 its budget last year was £400m with it set to increase in the future. Frontex forces are not only deployed within the EU, but further afield in, for example, Albania and Montenegro, with civilian staff being deployed in Niger, Turkey, Senegal and Serbia. Even Frontex is not without its problems, however. It

has faced legal action and criticism for illegal deportations of refugees and there are tensions between it and local border forces and governments.

Cooperation and sharing

Competition and greed mean that capitalism creates rivalries. It can never achieve a world of cooperation through markets, unequal alliances or trade agreements. Capitalist globalisation, amazing though its supply chains are, has its limitations and is fraught with inequality and injustice. The pandemic and the vaccine wars, amongst other things, have called into question the neo-liberal model of globalisation and countries, especially the United States, are seeking to repatriate production. This will not only guard against future supply problems of critical commodities, but will also be used as a post-pandemic stimulus mechanism to develop production at home. Individual countries' desire for domination leads to con-



PHOTO BY WIKI RUHAN

Vaccination booth in Birmapur, Bangladesh – when will developing countries get vaccines?

flict and war. A truly collaborative world will be realised only through policies founded on mutual respect, sharing resources and peaceful development, where regions are able to develop their peoples and resources. And if we are to tackle climate change then trade must be more sustainable and not about unnecessarily transporting goods across the globe on massive container ships or planes.

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PHOTO BY FIBONACCI BLUE

Workers take on the mighty AMAZON

Amazon workers, mostly of East African descent, protest outside their workplace in Minnesota

by John Moore

Amazon delivery drivers and warehouse workers are routinely reduced to urinating into bottles and defecating into bags so as not to have to take a toilet break. It's the only way they can stick to Amazon's punishing work schedules, which are constantly speeding up. 74% of Amazon workers avoid using the toilet for fear of missing their targets, according to a survey by online campaigning platform *Organise*: "I do not drink water because I do not have time to go to the toilet," said one respondent to the survey. Amazon warehouse workers in the US get minimum daily breaks – two 15 minute paid breaks and one 30 minute unpaid break, per 10 hour day. Even these are eroded by the long distances workers have to walk to the rest area.

Intensifying exploitation

Workers are forced to keep up to speed by Time-Off-Task electronic tracking system that measures their pace to the second. The number of items to be processed has risen from 100 an hour to 300 to 400 items an hour since the introduction of robots that roam the aisles and bring items to the workstations. The frantic speed means workers frequently sustain injuries. If that happens, they are often sacked without compensation. There is constant surveillance in the workplace. Sunglasses and hoodies are forbidden in case they disguise the worker's face, and mobile phones are also prohibited lest they record what's going on. Security is tight; workers are searched on entry and exit, according to journalist James Bloodworth who worked undercover

for Amazon to research a book *Hired: Six Months Undercover in Low-Wage Britain*. Now 75,000 delivery drivers in the US are being forced to sign a consent form to allow their biometric data to be used to monitor their work – or be sacked if they refuse. No wonder 55% of workers report having suffered depression since working for Amazon.

Amazon executive Dave Clark said on *Amazon News*, the official company news account: "You don't really believe the peeing in bottles thing do you? If that were true, nobody would work for us." Since Clark's denial, evidence has forced the company to admit that workers do indeed have to use bottles and bags. A leaked internal memo published by *The Intercept* website showed that the company knew all along, with many communications

about it: “This is the third occasion in the last 2 months when bags have been returned to station with poop inside... DA’s [driver associates] cannot, MUST NOT, return bags to station with poop inside.” Amazon has since had to apologise for its earlier denial and promised to improve working conditions, claiming that it provides an “inclusive” environment. Yet such inclusivity doesn’t extend to union members. None of Amazon’s 950,000 US employees is unionised, and the company has fiercely resisted all attempts at unionisation.

Fight to unionise

Since Chris Smalls began campaigning against Amazon’s lax Covid safety and was sacked for leading a walk-out in New York last year, 6,000 workers in Bessemer, Alabama have been trying to form a union. But their efforts have been met by aggressive anti-union campaigning. Regular management-run meetings pushed the company lies, telling workers, for example, that unionisation would mean a compulsory fee of \$500 a year for all employees, in or out of the union. The company also texted and emailed workers several times a day with messages such as: “The union can’t promise you anything”; “Don’t let outsiders divide our winning team!” Amazon even got local traffic lights timing changed to prevent pro-union workers from approaching others in their cars. Management also threatened to close down the warehouse.

Meanwhile, job adverts for “intelligence analysts”, spying on union organisers, have appeared. One advert read: “Analysts must be capable of engaging and informing...stakeholders on sensitive topics that are highly confidential, including labour organising threats against the company.” It was looking for applicants with previous experience in the intelligence community, military or police. The ads were quickly removed after

None of Amazon’s 950,000 US employees is unionised, and the company has fiercely resisted all attempts at unionisation.

negative publicity. Yet anti-union espionage continues, including snooping on workers’ closed Facebook groups, in particular those of drivers “planning for any strike or protest against Amazon.” Company reports include the full names and posts of drivers across the US.

Despite such intimidation, union organisation has been growing. The Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) union, active in the Alabama unionisation drive, has recruited 2,000 members at Bessemer. It also forced a ballot on union recognition there. In early April, despite a very well-supported campaign by the union, Amazon’s bullying and intimidation won out. It challenged over 500 votes which it claimed were ineligible and lied to workers about the deadline for the ballot so they would vote early, before union organizers had time to reach them. Professor Rebecca Givan of Rutgers University explained: “Employers have a huge advantage in these situations. They have almost unlimited money and almost unlimited access to the workers to bombard them with messages of anxiety and uncertainty and we see the result of that here.” But it’s not the end of the story. The RWDSU is challenging the result, accusing Amazon of illegal interference. “They lied to game the system,” said RWDSU president Stuart Appelbaum, who also pointed to biased labour laws that inevitably worked in Amazon’s favour. He said: “If Amazon considers this a victory, they may want to reconsider because at best it is a pyrrhic victory.”

Since the result came through, Amazon workers in Chicago have

gone on strike against being forced onto ‘megacycle’ nightshifts of 11 hours. The RWDSU has also received over a thousand inquiries from Amazon workers across the US, and has held rallies in Alabama. The widespread media coverage has raised the profile of the unionisation campaign across the US and internationally. While the 80% black workforce at Bessemer may not have won a breakthrough this time round, their pro-union campaign nevertheless marks an advance, both in terms of worker organisation and the civil rights struggle – making the connection between the two visible. As one pro-union worker, Emmit Ashford, said: “Things will not stay the same after this point. It’s not over. It’s only a matter of time before things change.”

Lessons from struggle

A ‘yes’ vote would have bucked a long downward trend in US private-sector union membership since the 1960s. The ‘no’ result shows there are lessons to be learned. According to veteran union organisers Rand Wilson and Peter Olney (*Portside*, 10/4/21), unions need to combine forces to challenge an adversary as powerful as Amazon, which means logistics unions and transport unions such as the Teamsters working together. Closer co-operation is also needed between unions and the informal networks of Amazon worker committees like Amazonians United, and with groups such as the Southern Workers Assembly, founded a decade ago by union and Black Workers for Justice organisers. Thirdly, campaigning against anti-worker laws is vital, including

challenging the 'right-to-work' laws which are particularly prevalent across the South. Finally, Amazon's global reach means unions need to work more closely across countries to defeat the company's international whack-a-mole strategy – in evidence last year when French workers went on strike and Amazon temporarily shut down all its French warehouses, re-routing orders through Italy (*Politico*, 19/10/20).

There are signs that Amazon workers in Europe have begun to move. Apart from French workers' action last year, which led to partial unionisation, and a small pay rise, in March this year, Italian Amazon workers went on strike for better conditions – their first action ever against the company. This was followed a week later by German workers who stopped work for four days over Easter. The German Verdi trade union is calling for a 4.5% pay rise. Workers in Spain and Poland have also taken action. In India, strikes by delivery workers are planned in the cities of Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Pune and Delhi.

In the UK, where Amazon employs 40,000 people, Unite has launched a whistle-blowing hotline for workers, beginning in Bolton and Exeter, as part of its 'Action on Amazon' campaign for a 'new deal', including the right to unionise. Unite's Sharon Graham said: "Amazon attacks all attempts by workers to gain a collective voice of their own... It is prime time Amazon gave workers the right to be in a union and to do so without interference, bullying and intimidation." The GMB is also campaigning for unionisation – at Amazon's Rugeley facility near Birmingham, and at the Amazon warehouse in Coventry.

Covid has accelerated all the processes of modern capitalism, concentrating power and wealth in the biggest companies, particularly the tech and e-commerce giants. Amazon boss Jeff Bezos's wealth has risen by \$70 billion during the pandemic and now stands at \$184 billion – making him the world's richest man, according to Bloomberg's Billionaire's Index. Bernie Sanders, who supported the Alabama campaign, called Bezos the emblem of "unfettered capitalism". Against such

power, advance will not be easy or straightforward. Nevertheless, as Marcus Courtney, an organiser who attempted an earlier unionisation drive at Amazon's Seattle call centre in 2000, put it: "The conversation has really been cracked open this time. Amazon has been trying to find a way to snuff this out. It's trying to say to other warehouses, look at what happened to the workers here, this would also happen to you. But I think it will be very hard to stop it now." (*Daily Telegraph*, 11/4/21).

"RWDSU's effort at Bessemer was unexpected," said Wilson and Olney, pointing to the fact that even its parent union the United Food and Commercial Workers was unaware of the unionisation drive until late last year. As *Business Insider* noted: "The US labor movement is gaining more steam than it has in decades" (10/4/21). Financial analyst Tom Forte expressed the fear this has induced: "There is a real risk that Amazon exits the pandemic unionized." (*Forbes*, 1/4/21).

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BRITISH GAS ENGINEERS STRIKE against background of problems in the industry

by Pat Turnbull

Throughout the pandemic, gas engineers have continued to risk their health and even their lives, and those of their families, entering people's homes to carry out repairs and services. Yet instead of getting the appreciation they deserve, workers in the gas industry find themselves in the forefront of the struggle against attacks by British Gas on wages and working conditions using the 'fire and rehire' tactic. Around 7,000 British Gas employees who are members of the GMB union have stood firm in a long series of strikes. The campaign started in July 2020 when British Gas announced that employees in the field staff bargaining group who refused to accept 15% cuts in pay rates and other changes would be sacked. On April 14, the engineers took their 43rd day of strike action which was the date set by British Gas for sackings with pay in lieu of notice if they did not sign the new contracts. True to their word British Gas went ahead with mass sackings on that date. A national lockout dispute between British Gas and GMB then became effective with action continuing. *(British Gas engineers to strike on April 14 - new date they face mass sackings | GMB)*

British Gas van



PHOTO BY KROOK74

GMB members voted by an overwhelming 89% 'yes' vote for strike action. Centrica's claims of poverty ring false. Centrica PLC recorded a group wide operating profit of £901 million in 2019, and an adjusted operating profit of £229 million for the six months to 30 June 2020 – up 27% on the same period in the previous year. *(GMB announce new British Gas strike dates | GMB)* The union says that four members of the Centrica board have between them earned £37 million from their jobs outside Centrica since 2015. *(British Gas board millionaire's club must rein in CEO over fire and rehire | GMB)* On 12/3/21 the GMB reported that 270,000 households were in the backlog for repairs and there were 400,000 homes where planned annual service visits had been axed.

Gas industry

British Gas Services Ltd and British Gas New Heating Ltd, subsidiaries of Centrica, serve 12 million homes in the UK and are the biggest energy supplier in the country. The Gas Act 1948 passed by the Attlee government nationalised the UK gas industry, previously made up of 1,062 privately owned and municipal gas companies. The Gas Act 1986, however, privatised the company and on 8 December 1986 it floated on the London stock market

as British Gas plc. Shares were sold at 135p with the company valued at £9 billion. In February 1997 British Gas plc demerged from the company and became the separate British Gas Group. The gas sales, gas trading, services, retail businesses and the gas production business of the North and South Morecambe gas fields, were transferred to Centrica, which continues to own and operate the British Gas retail brand. British Gas is one of around 60 energy suppliers that provide gas and electricity to homes across the UK.

Energy UK (trade association for the industry) gave a run-down in 2019 of where the UK gets its gas. Production in the North Sea and Irish Sea typically provides around 40 per cent of gas supplies, but is in decline. The rest is supplied by four pipelines from continental Europe and Norway and LNG (Liquified Natural Gas) which is shipped in from around the world. Britain has three LNG import facilities capable of meeting nearly 50 per cent of annual demand.

The National Careers Service web site suggests that a gas installation/gas maintenance engineer earns an average salary of £12,000 - £38,000 and can expect to work 41 to 43 hours a week, including evenings, weekends and bank holidays. It lists a variety of ways to qualify, including college courses, apprenticeships, and assessment of experience by a professional body. As an example, Logic 4 training, advertising its services online, says it will cost £5750 plus VAT to train with them to become a gas engineer from scratch. By law all gas businesses must be on the Gas Safe Register, which replaced CORGI (Council for Registered Gas Installers). More than 120,000 gas engineers are certified on the Gas Safe Register.

The Gas Safe Register's last Decade Review, published November 2017, provides some insights into the industry and the views of those who work in it. As well as organising a wide range of focus groups and interviews with different 'stakeholders', the report's compilers sent their engineer survey to 71,870 Gas Safe Register contacts. They got 2,814 responses, 96 per cent of them from engineers. The UK has 21.5 million gas powered homes. The median age for engineers is 55, with the average age being around 46. While there are large employers like British Gas, most gas engineers are self-employed sole traders. A fee has to be paid to Gas Safe Register for or by each engineer. Engineers and others who responded to the register's request for comments suggested a need for more control of training and competence, or restricting the right to sell gas appliances to registered engineers, but these areas are outside the control of both the Gas Safe Register and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). The report says: 'Gas Safe Register and HSE would need more resources or wider powers of investigation to enable them to deal with the root of some safety issues' and mentions 'public-spending austerity' adding '... restricting trade sales is not something that Gas Safe Register or HSE could enforce within their remits'.

Given the majority of engineers are self-employed, it is not surprising that the burden of keeping up with new technology figures prominently in comments - 70% of participants mentioned it. An example is combustion testing, which was mandated by boiler manufacturers in 2014 when commissioning condensing boilers. This was generally regarded as useful but it required 'an expensive piece of kit' to perform the analysis. 60% mentioned increased legislation. One engineer commented that there might be "five pages of new regulations" in each issue of Gas Safe Register's magazine. The number of boiler manufacturers is another problem.

Engineers were concerned at the low number of inspections that Gas Safe Register carries out, as its focus is on high-risk engineers. The report says: 'the availability of inspectors and the Register's risk-based inspection process, which means fewer engineers are inspected than before, is the chief criticism of Gas Safe's registration model'. The review says: 'Businesses of all sizes express some frustration that they are subsidising less competent and even illegal installers because registration fees help to fund Gas Safe Register's investigations and inspections.' Engineers were also concerned at people using short cuts to join the trade. The Nationally Accredited Certification Scheme (ACS) for Gas Fitting Operatives requires experienced gas engineers to gain a certificate of competence every five years to maintain registration with Gas Safe Register. This is a problem in itself, as it costs approximately £749 and takes between 8 and 40 hours, stopping the engineer during this period from being available for work. (Options Skills web site) But it is also in recent years being used as a pathway into the industry, mainly because it is unclear what defines 'experience' to access ACS.

Gas engineers feel pressure to do work more cheaply, a pressure increased by illegal gas fitters who are forcing prices down. But on the other hand, the reluctance of younger people to undertake long courses or apprenticeships is also understandable; they want to start earning as quickly as possible. As the report says: 'less scrupulous, less thorough training companies [are] providing faster, cheaper qualifications'. A frustrated gas engineer gives an example of the problem: "I come across it every day; these six-week wonders are guessing how to install gas appliances. I challenged one recently...and he shouted back at me: 'Don't have a go at me, I was stacking bananas at Asda six weeks ago.'" The importance of apprenticeships was mentioned repeatedly, but funding is lacking. The government portrays gas as a declining industry.

With the number of self-employed in the industry - 'one man and a van' - it is unrealistic to expect them to train up apprentices; 'all they're doing is training a competitor'. The report also says: 'a recurrent theme was wanting Gas Safe Register to put more emphasis on support and help, rather than policing the workforce.'

The future

If plans to deal with climate change are carried through, the gas industry will not have a long-term future, adding further pressure to those who work as engineers. In the UK, installations of new gas boilers, unless they are hydrogen-ready, will be phased out by the mid-2030s as part of the government's 'decisive shift' away from fossil fuel. Instead a low-carbon heating system, or an appliance that can be converted to use clean fuel, will need to be installed. Heat pumps or hydrogen-ready boilers are possible candidates. Gas and oil boilers currently make up more than 90% of the UK's heating stock. New homes built from 2025 are also supposed to be zero-carbon ready. (Which? New gas boiler installations banned by mid-2030s, 16/12/20) Replacing all these gas heating systems is a huge task. How committed is the government to providing the necessary funding, or will it be billed to the private customer, or the tenant in the form of rent rises? An article from 2018, Kick-Starting the Decarbonisation of Heat, on the Energy UK web site, says: 'Clean Growth Strategy allocated a low amount of resource to the decarbonisation of heat (£227m in confirmed funding compared to the £3.5bn allocated to transport) showing an apparent lack of commitment to solving the issue.'

A planned and well-financed approach could see gas engineers retrained to install and maintain the new types of heating, but the question is, will that happen, or will yet another group of highly trained and skilled workers find themselves out of a job?

FAILING SNP still election winners...

by Scott McDonald

At the time of writing the opinion polls are predicting that the Scottish National Party (SNP) is poised to win an overall majority, or failing that, there will be a majority of pro-independence MSPs in the Scottish Parliament after the election on 6 May 2021. The same opinion polls are reporting that the position on Scottish independence is 50:50 for and against. If the SNP falls short of an overall majority it is predicted that, with the addition of pro-independence parties winning some list seats, there will be a majority for independence in the Parliament. This would replicate the current situation in which a minority SNP administration is supported by the Scottish Greens. [1]

This outcome is being predicted despite the SNP Scottish Government's failings, admitted mistakes, incompetence and catastrophes over health, education, industrial and economic matters; a variety of scandals involving SNP MPs and MSPs; and the deep divisions within the party which have finally emerged into public view.

Health crisis

One third of the 10,000 Covid deaths in Scotland have been in care homes. Jeanne Freeman, SNP government Health Secretary, has confirmed that the Scottish Government failed to stop the spread of the Covid 19 virus infection into care homes and failed to understand the social care sector as a whole. She told the BBC: "We didn't take the right precautions to make sure that older people leaving hospital going into care homes were as

safe as they could be and that was a mistake." [2]

There was a crisis in the Health Service prior to the pandemic, which has now been exacerbated. Waiting list targets have not been met for years and the backlog has grown hugely since the onset of Covid 19.

The Queen Elizabeth University Hospital (QEUH) in Glasgow has been beset with problems since it opened in 2015 at a cost of £842 million. It is the largest campus of its kind in Europe with some 1300 beds, treating about 750,000 patients every year from as far away as the isle of Skye. In 2018 a panel fell from the



Queen Elizabeth University Hospital and the Royal Hospital for Children

10th floor shattering near the front entrance. The following year it was announced that cladding similar to that used on Grenfell Tower would be replaced at a cost to the taxpayer of £6 million. In January 2019 it emerged that two patients had died

after contracting a fungal infection linked to pigeon droppings. Later that same year it came to light that two children had died in 2017 in a ward affected by water contamination. One of the children, 10 year-old Milly Main, was recovering from leukaemia but her Hickman Line, a catheter used to administer drugs, became infected. Milly went into toxic shock and died days later.

A report was leaked by whistle-blowers in 2019 to Anas Sarwar, now Scottish Labour Leader, which showed that days after the hospital opened in 2015 warnings were given about the risk of water contamination. The report ranked infection control measures as "high risk" in several areas. Despite the warnings, the hospital stayed open. It was put into "special measures" in November 2019 following issues of infection prevention, management and control after a series of deaths at the hospital.

In Edinburgh a new hospital for children is long delayed and in dispute between the builders and the Scottish Government. In recent years NHS Tayside has been in "special measures" and currently NHS Lothian as well as NHS Greater Glasgow are also in "special measures".

Education goes backwards

In terms of education the attainment gap under the SNP's fourteen years in government has widened and the national examination body, the Scottish Qualifications Authority, is not fit for purpose. SNP First Minister Nicola Sturgeon following the previous election asked that she be judged at this election on her performance on education. So far



Nicola Sturgeon talks with Erasmus students, but fails on education

PHOTO BY JIM MCDUGALL

during this election campaign she has not mentioned that. Of course, the pandemic has made a bad situation worse. In response the SNP are promising that every child will be given a laptop. For the 50% of children living below the poverty line in Sturgeon's own constituency (Glasgow Southside) that will not make them less hungry; and if you are hungry, you are much less able to learn with or without a laptop.

Ferry fiasco

One of the many economic failures is that of the Ferguson shipyard, which had gone into administration in 2014, and was bought by billionaire Jim McColl, claiming that he was "begged" to buy the yard. McColl was one of the most prominent business figures to support Scottish independence ahead of the 2014 referendum, and he enjoyed a close relationship with the Scottish Government sitting on its council of

economic advisers. McColl's shipyard won the contract from CalMac, owned by the Scottish Government, to build two new ferries for the Island of Arran and the Hebrides at a cost of £100 million. The contract was running well over time and budget and led to a serious dispute between McColl and the Scottish Government. McColl's put Ferguson Marine into administration and the Scottish Government took ownership of the company in 2019 and in the process wrote off about £50 million of previous loans. So, the Scottish Government became both the contractor and client. Now three years late and £100 million over budget the ferries are still unfinished. It is a sorry tale of mismanagement, incompetence and cronies falling out.

Scandals

Derek McKay was Cabinet Secretary for Finance in the Scottish Govern-

ment until he resigned in May 2020 when it was revealed that he had pestered a 16-year-old boy in private on Instagram and Facebook over a six-month period bombarding him with messages. His behaviour was described as predatory and unacceptable grooming. McKay remained as an independent MSP until April 2021 when Parliament dissolved. He continued to collect his salary and expenses totalling some £100,000 although he did not attend Parliament during that time. The bookies had him as favourite to replace Nicola Sturgeon as SNP Scottish Government First Minister until his ignominious departure.

Natalie McGarry, the former SNP MP for Glasgow East, goes on trial in May 2021 having been charged with embezzlement of more than £25,000 from Women for Independence.

Patrick Grady MP stood down as Chief Whip of the SNP at Westminster

ster in March 2021. This followed a formal complaint after reports of sexual harassment that he groped two male staffers at the SNP Christmas party in London in 2016. The SNP sat on the complaints until they went formal years later.

Joanna Cherry MP was sacked from her role as SNP Justice spokesperson in February 2021. She had signed the Women's Pledge which opposes the reform of the Gender Recognition Act. Cherry had come under sustained attack from the transgender lobby in the SNP. Her removal from the SNP front bench according to an SNP spokesperson was "because of unacceptable behaviour which did not meet the standards of front bench spokespersons - not because of the views she holds". At a meeting of the SNP Westminster group Joanna Cherry MP compared her unfavourable treatment with that of Grady by the SNP hierarchy. The transgender lobby in the SNP wields considerable influence with the leadership. According to reports the debate around the issue has created a toxic atmosphere in the SNP.

Sturgeon – Salmond feud

Complaints were raised with the Scottish Government by women alleging that Alex Salmond had sexually harassed them when he was First Minister. Alex Salmond took the Scottish Government to judicial review over its handling of the matter. It emerged that the civil servant appointed as investigating officer had substantial prior contact with the complainants. The judge in the case branded the probe into Salmond "unlawful, unfair and tainted by apparent bias". Salmond was awarded more than £500,000 in costs. The Scottish Crown Office brought 13 criminal charges of sexual harassment and attempted rape involving nine women against Salmond. He admitted inappropriate behaviour but denied that it was criminal. Salmond was brought to trial but the jury acquitted him on all charges.

Salmond was brought to trial but the jury acquitted him on all charges.

Following the judicial review and trial the Scottish Parliament established a Parliamentary Committee on the "Scottish Government Handling of Harassment Complaints". The Committee comprised 9 MSPs: 4 SNP, 2 Tory, 1 Labour, 1 Liberal Democrat and a Scottish Green, who during the proceedings left the Greens and became an Independent. [3] Many scathing comments were made about the calibre and contributions of the SNP members on the Committee. They had been specially selected by the SNP's Whips' office and reflected the poor quality of the SNP's MSPs. Any bright SNP MSP must hold a government post!

The Committee, in trying to get to the bottom of what happened, asked for papers which the Scottish Government refused to submit for legal reasons, ostensibly to protect the names of the complainants. Parliament voted twice to have the papers handed over. It was only when the Deputy First Minister, John Swinney, was threatened with a vote of no-confidence that some of the papers, heavily redacted, were handed over at the very, very last minute. Some of these papers contained advice the Scottish Government had received from external counsel during the judicial review process. From these papers it is clear that the Scottish Government ignored the legal advice to abandon the costly court case against Salmond over flaws in the government's complaints process.

The Parliament and the Committee had been advised that it would

be illegal to publish some papers. The Lord Advocate, James Wolffe QC, "told the parliamentary inquiry that he had nothing to do with legal advice given to MSPs as to what could and could not be published. The fact that the advice came from his own office was, apparently, nothing to do with him. One wonders where the Crown Office buck actually stops – or indeed if there is a buck at all." [4] The Committee in its report referred to "the challenges it faced in obtaining information from the Scottish Government... These difficulties cannot be overstated as they have seriously inhibited our ability to fully scrutinise the work of the Scottish Government which is at the heart of our remit." [5] The Committee in its report noted that it had been misled by the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, on some matters. [6] The Committee concluded that "fundamental errors were made which called the procedure into question. These errors were compounded by the way in which the judicial review was dealt with by the Scottish Government. This resulted in over £500,000 of public money being spent on defending a judicial review that ultimately had to be conceded." [7]

In a separate inquiry, Northern Irish Judge, James Hamilton QC, an adviser to the Scottish Government, found that Sturgeon had not broken the ministerial code but may have misled Parliament. However, he expressed his frustration at the heavy redaction of his report: "I am deeply frustrated that applicable court orders will have the effect of preventing the full publication of a report which fulfils my remit and which I believe it would be in the public interest to publish." He said in a note on the publication, "...I have reluctantly accepted that a redacted report should be published in order to bring this process to a close..." 22 March 2021.

Failing SNP to win election

Despite the many failings, mistakes, catastrophes and scandals the SNP

are likely to be re-elected as the government in the election on 6 May. How can this be you may ask?

There has been an anti-Tory majority in Scotland for some forty years. There is a deep anti-Tory feeling in Scotland although it should be noted that there is still a substantial Tory base, which has never gone away. Under Thatcher in the 1980s the Tories went on a relentless attack against the working-class across the whole of Britain. The defeat of the miner's strike in 1984-85 was a watershed moment and unleashed a period of unremitting attack on the gains made by the working-class over previous generations.

Labour won the election of 1997 under the leadership of Tony Blair on a wave of anti-Tory feeling. Blair and his government left in place most of the Tories' legislation and introduced devolution believing that it would blunt support for independence. When Blair and the right-wing Labour government took Britain to war in Iraq many Labour supporters were further alienated. With the crash of 2007-8 and the defeat of Labour in the election of 2010 the Tories took office and Cameron/Osborne began a period of austerity. With the trade union movement severely weakened and the Labour Party badly discredited by its time in government the SNP made gains in Scotland.

David Cameron, when UK Tory Prime Minister, allowed the SNP to set the referendum question giving them the advantage of the positive answer, 'YES', which is always worth a few percentage points. Despite being defeated in the referendum, the head of steam built up by the SNP did not disappear. Much of Labour's support in Scotland had defected to the SNP before Jeremy Corbyn became leader of the Labour Party. There was no Corbyn bounce in Scotland. The Tories under the leadership of Boris Johnson have been a gift to the SNP, which presents itself as a 'progressive social democratic party', and

has always had the aim of destroying Labour and replacing it.

The 2016 referendum on the EU with Scotland voting 68% to 32% to remain in the EU consolidated the SNP's position. Many people are under the illusion that the EU is a progressive internationalist organisation and saw those leading the campaign to exit the EU as racist 'Little Englanders'. Labour was being further squeezed between the SNP and the Tories. Starmer's right-wing leadership of the Labour Party has further undermined Labour in Scotland.

The SNP point to Westminster as being to blame for everything and that only with independence will the Scottish people have control of their own affairs and be able to move forward. They have promised another independence referendum in the first half of the next Scottish Parliament. There are divisions within the independence camp over this timetable with Alex Salmond's newly formed Alba party arguing that there is not enough urgency on the issue. Salmond and the Alba party are gaming the Scottish parliament electoral system by telling people to vote SNP in the constituency vote and Alba in the list vote. By doing so they argue that this will produce a 'super-majority' of independence supporting MSPs at the expense of 'unionists'. If this tactic works it may be at the expense of the Labour Party.

Over the past fourteen years as the government in Scotland the SNP has steadily centralised power across many institutions in Scottish society. At the same time the leadership of the SNP has held a vice-like grip on the party and the wider independence support base, notably exercised through Nicola Sturgeon as Party Leader and First Minister and her husband, Peter Murrell, as Chief Executive of the SNP. The mainstream media has generally been supine towards the SNP and the Scottish Government but recently a pro-independence columnist, Kevin McKenna, in *The Herald*, wrote:

"Scotland is in the grip of a single party run by an all-powerful - and very affluent husband-and-wife team who have made themselves virtually untouchable. This couple have constructed a fearsome apparatus in which the police, the judiciary and the entire civil service now dance to their tune." [8]

If the SNP form the next Scottish government they will move for another independence referendum, which Prime Minister Johnson may refuse. This will feed into the SNP grievance narrative but it will also lead to further divisions in the independence camp as to how to tactically proceed. In addition, many issues will come to the fore including what currency to use, the prospect of a hard border with England, Scotland's large debt and the difficulties of re-joining the EU. The SNP winning this election will be far from the end of the story.

[1] The additional member system is the system used for elections to the Scottish Parliament. It is a form of mixed electoral system which combines traditional single member first past the post constituencies with regions elected by a proportional list system. There are a total of 129 MSPs: 73 constituency MSPs and 56 list MSPs.

[2] BBC podcast, *Political Thinking with Nick Robinson*, reported in *The Herald*, 9 April 2021.

[3] Andy Wightman MSP resigned from the Scottish Green Party in December 2020 alleging that the party was intolerant to discussion of potential clashes between transgender and women's rights. He continued as an independent MSP until Parliament dissolved in April 2021.

[4] Magnus Linklater, *The Times*, 10 April 2021.

[5] Report of the Scottish Parliamentary Committee on the Scottish Government Handling of Complaints, 23 March 2021, para 31.

[6] Ibid: for example para 718: "The Committee finds it hard to believe that the First Minister had no knowledge of any concerns about inappropriate behaviour on the part of Mr Salmond prior to November 2017. If she did have such knowledge, then she should have acted upon it. If she did have such knowledge, then she has misled the Committee." and para 720: "Her written evidence is therefore an inaccurate account of what happened, and she has misled the Committee on this matter. This is a potential breach of the Ministerial Code under the terms of section 1.3 (c)"

[7] Ibid: para 727.

[8] Kevin McKenna, *The Herald*, 5 April 2021

PROGRESSIVE FEDERALISM CAN IT WORK?

by Paul Sutton

On 21 December last year, in a speech prefiguring the Labour Party campaign for the Scottish parliamentary elections in May 2021, Keir Starmer announced: “Labour will launch a UK-wide Constitutional Commission to consider how power, wealth and opportunity can be devolved to the most local level. This won’t be an exercise in shifting power from one parliament to another – of moving a few jobs out of London, or to devolve and forget. This will be the boldest project Labour has embarked on for a generation....It will consider all parts of the United Kingdom. And it will focus on delivering real - and lasting - political and economic devolution across our towns, our communities and to people across the country”. The Commission will be advised by Gordon Brown. His position was made clear in an article in *The Observer* (18/10/2020) when he wrote that as soon as the coronavirus pandemic was over: “the UK needs to be rethought and rebooted - starting with a convention engaging all nations and regions and built out of local citizens’ assemblies to discuss how, through joint working and the sharing of power, we manage practical challenges like disease control, social care, regeneration and employment”.

The strategy set out by Labour is to extend and deepen the existing devolution settlements for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

These already give substantial powers to their respective governments even if, as in the case of Scotland, they have not been fully deployed, especially by the Scottish nationalist government which prefers instead to blame Westminster for its many problems. It also indirectly addresses the situation in England by proposing greater devolution to the English regions, though this is a complex problem on which there is no consensus nor much attempt so far to promote awareness or discussion of the issue. This strategy of further devolution is cautious and incremental, promising only limited change. As such, it has drawn criticism from some on the left of the Labour Party and by socialists who want something more fundamental. In recent years this has been variously advanced under the designation of ‘progressive federalism’.

Progressive federalism

The idea of progressive federalism was first developed by the Red Paper Collective in the opening skirmishes of the Scottish referendum on independence. Its members were drawn from the trade unions, politics and academia and they were opposed to both the Scottish National Party’s vision of independence and to those who were by and large content with the status quo. They initially set out their views in *Scottish Left Review*, November/December 2012. These argued that for socialists independence was meaningless unless

it could “challenge the power of capitalism and bring markets under democratic control”. Independence by itself could not guarantee this and so, contrary to socialists in the Radical Independence Campaign, who argued that an independent Scotland was a first step to a socialist Scotland, the Red Paper Collective proposed staying within the United Kingdom but fundamentally changing the way it was governed.

Subsequent to this they have developed their views in several publications exploring the policies that would need to be adopted by a radical Scottish Parliament to bring fundamental socialist change. The most recent was released in January this year (*Scotland United 1971-2021*) and set out their arguments for a third option on the ballot paper on any future referendum on Scotland’s future. This would propose giving more powers to the Scottish Parliament through a programme of constitutional change throughout the UK that would also deliver increased powers to Wales, Northern Ireland and the regions of England. It would, in effect, constitute a ‘third way’ opening the route to radical constitutional reform. The form that would take is set out in a lengthy report released this January entitled *Remaking the British State: For the Many, Not the Few* commissioned by Jeremy Corbyn in 2018 as Leader of the Labour party and completed in February 2020.



Debating Chamber of the Scottish Parliament

PHOTO BY COLIN

The Report, authored by Sean Patrick Griffin, a constitutional lawyer, covers a lot of ground. It discusses some essential elements of the British Constitution; examines in detail the experience of the Scottish Parliament, especially in recent years; touches upon ‘the English question’; examines federalism, including progressive federalism; and sets out at length key elements of a new constitution, including detailed proposals for a Senate of the Nations and Regions

The main arguments for, and features of, progressive federalism are briefly set out in Chapter 7. It argues that fundamental change is needed now and that this requires a shift from “the doctrine of the Sovereignty of Parliament” to “a new constitutional model, where sovereignty rests with all of the peoples of the UK as embodied in their various institutions across the country” (p. 138). This requires that a new written constitution be enacted and provisions entrenched within it. Among these should be a constitutional commitment to socialism:

“through the public ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange for the UK’s assets and key industries including the NHS; utilities including water, natural gas and electricity generation and supply; natural resources including oil and gas; essential transport structure including the railways; the National Investment Bank as the UK’s state investment bank and the Bank of England as the central bank; and the state education system” (p. 165). Additionally, workers should be given full protection of economic and social rights by the constitution along with the protection of “alternative models of economic ownership to rebalance the economy towards democratic principles rather than private profit” (p. 169).

The constitution should also promote greater democracy and better governance through the principles of ‘progressive federalism’ which recognise that the UK is “a multi-national state made up of four distinctive but unified nations” and that this would

involve splitting sovereignty and “sharing it across the whole of the UK, diffusing power downwards to the nations, regions and local communities of the UK” (p. 145). This means promoting subsidiarity i.e. devolving decision-making downwards to “the lowest possible level of government closest to the people whom the decisions affect most directly” (p.145). Other key principles are promoting ‘solidarity’ between nations and regions through redistributing power and wealth throughout the UK, ensuring it is done in such a manner that it “fosters and reflects the economic and social solidarity between working class people across the UK who, although living in different parts of the country share the same class interests” (p.146); and ensuring ‘parity of esteem, tolerance and respect’ between the different national identities, ethnicities, cultures and institutions of the UK, including between the continuing central government Westminster and the various devolved administrations at national and regional level.

The report presumes a largely consensual process even though what is being proposed is momentous and so would be contested every inch of the way, not least by the ruling class who would appear to have everything to lose in such a process.

Is it Feasible?

These wide-ranging proposals would, if enacted, amount to the greatest constitutional changes that England and Wales have seen since the English Civil war in the seventeenth century and Scotland since the Union in 1707. It is therefore appropriate to ask how and whether they could come about.

Regrettably the Report has almost nothing to say on this matter. Its final chapter entitled 'The Process of Constitutional Transformation' is less than three pages long. It simply notes it "will be very difficult to achieve" (p. 213). This is an understatement. Earlier in the Report it notes that winning a parliamentary majority in the House of Commons to take control of the commanding heights of the British state and economy fails "to appreciate the in-built reactionary and conservative bias of the sclerotic British state itself" and that the "capture of the British State by the British establishment and the interests of capital has been total" (p. 143). It also quotes Ralph Miliband to the effect that the Labour party is not a socialist party, even if it has always contained socialists within its ranks. It is instead "a political party committed to parliamentary democracy" (p. 143). In other words, would the Labour Party itself commit to a radical strategy when faced with substantial opposition to it in Parliament and out? It notes, for example that it would take more than "the avowedly socialist leadership" of Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell to achieve any socialist transformation.

Instead it concludes with the rather weak proposal that the Labour Party should develop its own clear vision on the constitution and promote a comprehensive and inclusive UK-wide constitutional convention, followed by the drafting of a constitution, which would then be put to a UK-wide referendum for approval. It presumes a largely consensual process even though what is being

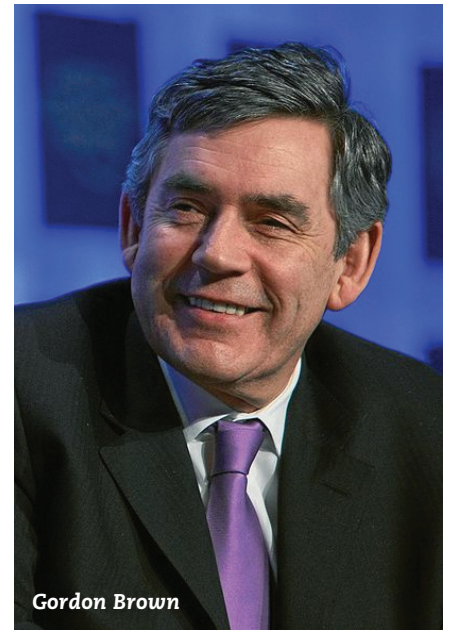


PHOTO BY REMY STEINEGGER

proposed is momentous and so would be contested every inch of the way, not least by the ruling class who would appear to have everything to lose in such a process. That is why, in comparison to all other political parties throughout the UK, the Tories are least interested in real constitutional change. What have they to gain?

In spite of this, many in the Labour Party think they are onto a winner. Progressive federalism continues to gather support. The latest recruits are leading members of the Welsh Labour Party. In another paper released in January: *We, the People: the case for Radical Federalism* they claim: "Radical constitutional reform is no longer an option, it is an unavoidable necessity". They repeat many of the ideas in the Report and affirm the need for debate throughout the UK, deploring the fact that "the only choice which seems to be on offer to the voters of Scotland and Wales is a strictly binary choice between an ill-defined 'independence' or the status quo. Further, no choice of any sort is being made available to voters in the cities and regions of England, ignoring the importance of constitutional reform in that country to us all, and the historic links

and common interests we share across the nations of the UK” (p.5). This quotation draws attention to a major weakness of their arguments and those of the Report and, before them, the Red Paper Collective: what to do about England.

In the Report the discussion of England is brief (there is none on Wales, though Northern Ireland is examined). It concludes that dividing England into regions would not work and suggests as an alternative a “combined authorities model based on the current combined authorities in England” (p.100), of which there are now ten. The Combined Regional Authorities (CRAs) would be represented in the Senate of Nations and Regions. The Report also does not recommend a separate Parliament for England, but rather that the current arrangement of ‘English votes for English laws’ in the UK Parliament continues, albeit with greater local powers and in a reformed context. None of this is convincing. The Report notes that while CRAs “may be suitable for metropolitan and urban areas in England... outside the major conurbations, for example in the shires, there may have to be different models available” (p.102). It does not specify these and even allows for the possibility that “local authorities that have decided not to combine into a CRA would essentially be excluded both from the local regional autonomy that the CRA offers and from the election of Senators to the Senate of the Nations and Regions” (p. 103). That is, they would be doubly disadvantaged, without local power and without a vote.

Less it be forgot, the heart of Tory voting power is the English shires and anything which compromises this will not in any way reach the agenda, let alone be considered. Equally, it should not be forgotten that some 85% of the UK population live in England compared to just 8% in Scotland and 4% in Wales. Unless English interests are put at

the centre of any new constitutional debate any notion of federalism in the UK will fail, let alone progressive federalism.

A New Third Way?

Ultimately the idea of progressive federalism is driven by the prospect of Scottish independence and growing in the wings, Welsh independence. It offers a third way which keeps the UK together and at the same time opens the road to socialism. The latter, as with all roads to socialism, is paved with difficulties and in its progressive/radical federalism vision is a road too far for the current Labour leadership under Keir Starmer. His view of a third way is very different and addresses only the issue of the union in the UK. It focuses only on further devolution, not radical constitutional change. It is likely to proceed by reform within the system, rather than reform of the system. The model here is the one set out in the Fabian pamphlet *Progressive federalism: a different way of looking at the UK* (August 2019), authored by Professor Jim Gallagher, formerly the most senior civil servant in the Cabinet Office directing the process of devolution under New Labour. This new third way prioritises social justice through entrenching constitutional provisions and guaranteeing allocation of resources to fund it from across the UK. It would, for example, guarantee free education and health services so that if there was a right-wing government in the UK, a left-wing government in Scotland or Wales would still be able to maintain its social welfare programmes. This is equivalent in his words to “an ‘each way bet’ for progressive causes”.

Such a strategy builds on the approach to constitutional reform by New Labour which was to proceed through separate initiatives rather than any grand plan. It was modest and of course will be well known to Gordon Brown. The Third Way is thus reborn, now with a con-

stitutional rather than an economic focus. The question is whether it is anywhere near radical enough to confront the nationalist challenges facing the UK. After all, it was another New Labour luminary, George Robertson, then Shadow Secretary of State for Scotland, who declared ‘Devolution will kill nationalism stone dead’. Instead devolution nourished it. Is the Labour Party under Starmer about to do the same again?

From The Socialist Correspondent 10 years ago

“...Africa has to ensure that the negative tendencies which have resulted in the external interventions in Libya and Côte d’Ivoire do not become entrenched as a permissible manner of responding to Africa’s challenges. [...] The conflict in Libya threatens to dismember the country, obliging its population to engage in a deadly fratricidal strife which will make national unity and reconciliation immensely difficult. Inevitably the conflict in Libya will contribute to conflict and instability in neighbouring countries both in north Africa and the Sahel”

Issue 12 Summer 2011

The Order of the day: Defend the independence of Africa – appeal to the Chair of the African Union Commission by former African leaders, including Nelson Mandela, Ahmed Ben Bella and Kenneth Kaunda

REWILDING

Challenges for agribusiness & questions for socialists

by Peter Latham

“The new conception of nature was complete in its main features: all rigidity was dissolved, all fixity dissipated, all particularity that had been regarded as eternal became transient, the whole of nature shown as moving in eternal flux and cycles.” Friedrich Engels makes this assertion when writing in 1875 on the emerging understanding of nature in natural science in his Introduction to *The Dialectics of Nature* (Progress Publishers, 1977).

The conflict between capital and labour has sharpened in recent years. The ruling class is riven with disagreements, and not just about the European Union. Some financial experts think capitalism could be amended from its neoliberal version. Labour’s 2017 manifesto might have crystallised thinking among those in the ruling class who see the urgency of tackling climate change. Bringing the idea of a Green New Deal into common acceptance is a great achievement. However, the debate is still unresolved.

On the one hand, Mark Carney, the former Governor of the Bank of England, has complained that financial value has taken precedence over human value. Oscar Wilde had a point, he said (slightly misquoting him) about “knowing the price of everything but the value of nothing”. [1] Dr Carney observed that, early in the Covid crisis, most states gave human life more value than economic well-being, although he assumed a conflict between the two. Carney wants to tackle the environmental emergency by broadening “the market’s conception of value” to include “inclusive growth and environmental sustainability.” Fine, but



PHOTO BY TOMLINE43

more attention to the labour theory of value would help. On the other hand, the Chancellor Rishi Sunak produced a Budget in March that continued austerity as usual, with public sector pay cuts and a questionable approach to the so-called levelling up of the North. [2]

Farming crisis

We have a troubling background to the demise of nature, but with new positive features of some importance. A definite critique is emerging from farmers at the sharp end of the environmental crisis. Subject to Government policy on farm payments, and reliant on supplies from corporations promoting destructive farming practices which are detrimental to the land and to farmers, they compete in the market to sell their produce. Intensification has been the method, with ever more use of fertilisers, herbicides and insecticides to grow food, increasingly to standards set by the big retailers. Habitat loss and soil degradation have been the consequence. James Rebanks gives a

shocking account of the doings of agribusiness, bankrupting some of his neighbours’ farms. [3]

Concerns about poisoning the land are not new. In the 1960’s the Scottish scientist Kenneth Mellanby pioneered research into the effects of pesticides on the environment, advocating the use of predators to eat the pests as a means of biological control. [4] The science of ecology emerged soon afterwards. Since then things have got steadily worse. Wildlife is disappearing, with only another 100 harvests left in our soil, according to *Farmers’ Weekly*. However, the crisis is producing its own opposite.

Isabella Tree describes the collapse of farming on the Knepp estate in Sussex, and its conversion back to nature. [5] Her husband, Charles Burrell, inherited the estate from his grandparents in 1987. It goes back centuries, with a medieval castle in parkland designed by Humphrey Repton. The farm was already losing money, so Charles played the game by intensifying

production. He amalgamated dairies, improved infrastructure and diversified into ice cream, yogurt and sheep's milk. The losses continued. They were going bankrupt, and had to rethink. Three dairy herds were dispersed and twelve men lost their jobs. In the year 2000 they auctioned all the farm equipment. The chapter describing the sale, "At Odds with Everything", reads like a Shakespearean tragedy. The trouble was the heavy clay soil, really only marginal land. Commercial inputs failed to make up for it.

Revival

Charles and Isabella had expert advice from British and Dutch sources. They left the land to itself, sowing wildflower seed mixtures native to their soil, which were surprisingly hard to come by. With no industrial farming, they were soon wandering knee-deep through flowery meadows in a riot of colour, with the thrumming of insects in their ears. They learnt to put nature in the driving seat. The insects attracted more birds. Voles arrived in the rabbit burrows, which in turn attracted foxes. The woods needed grazing animals, left wild not farmed. They chose fallow deer, English longhorn cattle, Exmoor ponies and Tamworth pigs, and later red deer. They reverted to wood pasture, a land use from the distant past where grazing animals disturb the ground, browse the trees, and make use of natural glades that evolve as the woods respond to grazing, manuring and trampling.

Over the years long lost species have returned: turtle doves, nesting ravens, painted lady butterflies, breeding skylarks and five other bird species, 13 of the UK's 17 bat species, and 60 invertebrates of conservation importance. They found 34 nightingale territories, from none in 2002, 19 species of earthworm, and the UK's largest breeding population of purple emperor butterflies.

Other work included restoration of natural watercourses. In time they were able to sell meat from the animals and open accommodation for visitors, bringing in an income. With no high input farming costs, they survived. Nature recovered remarkably quickly once the exploitation of the land stopped. Another lesson was the natural variation of flora and fauna from year to year, depending on conditions.

Yet their farming neighbours had a visceral objection to their doings, despite the implications for the profitability of their own farms. They felt abandoned. Why was Knepp not playing the game? However, their doubts mellowed in later years. Isabella takes a dialectical approach to all the factors at work in charting a way forward. She is keenly aware of where the obstructions lie, and how sympathetic allies may be marshalled to good effect. The emergence of Knepp as an authority on the subject of wilding has benefited not only the estate, but the world at large.

Other questions remain. How are we to feed ourselves if wilding is to be widely adopted, as seems necessary? Will the good farming land produce enough? With or without high inputs? If many people turn vegetarian, will there be enough demand for the meat from wild animals in the wood pasture? Will farmworkers be better paid?

Profiting naturally

There is a rapidly growing literature that questions current farming practices. "I have had a gutsful of chemical farming," writes John Lewis-Stempel, "Really, I just want the birds back". [6] He rented a conventional arable field for a year, a few miles from his Herefordshire farm, and sowed it with a wildflower-rich crop of wheat, in the spring old style, not the autumn. He describes the field's wildlife

throughout the year, revelling in nature's recovery. After harvest, a friend helped him load the sheaves of wheat. He needed three trailers, not two as his friend thought. Output was greater than expected. John used the wheat from his field as food for his cattle, sheep, pigs and chickens. The field gave him roughly a ton of grain per acre after threshing. "I could have improved the tonnage per acre by a more sensible drilling policy, and with better 'weed' control without too much detriment to my wildlife policy," he writes. "The real benefit for conservation has been the wildflowers at the edge of the ploughland, and the grain and seeds left behind from the harvest for gleaning by birds and animals." It is a myth, he says, that conventional farming is more productive than organic farming.

He quotes a study by Chinese scientists in which modern rice-growing using a single hi-tech variety was tested against a much older technique, planting several kinds in one field. Farmers reverting to the old method reported an increase in yield and a decrease of 94% in rice blast, a fungal disease. The farmers planting a mixture of strains were able to stop using poisons altogether while producing 18% more rice. This was one of the biggest agricultural experiments ever conducted.

James Rebanks has a family farm in Cumbria, and writes beautifully about his efforts to bring back wildlife, with a clear anti-corporate stance. [7] In one project he re-wiggled a straightened stream to provide pools, shallows and wetland, to complement the tree planting. His farm is becoming a new compromise between food production and nature. Traditionally, his farming neighbours only co-operated for certain things. Mostly they kept their own counsel. Now they are working together to find ways to farm with nature. Hedges are being laid, drystone walls rebuilt, stone

barns and houses restored. River corridors are fenced off, ponds dug, and blanket peatbog on the common land restored. "I believe in this landscape and its people," he says, "I am sick of 1980's economics bullshit." Overall, it is not true that nature must be destroyed for farmers to make a profit.

The RSPB runs a demonstration project at Hope Farm in Cambridgeshire, where for 20 years now wildlife-friendly farming has replaced conventional farming, with strong positive results. [8] The farm makes a profit, as well as reducing inputs and benefitting the wildlife. It is not organic, but mainstream. They want to appeal to the average farmer. The soil is heavy clay. Techniques include more crop rotation and spring sowing, direct drilling, overwintering stubble, post-harvest cover crops, more food and shelter for birds and soil quality, reducing the cultivated area slightly by providing wildflower field margins, and scientific research into the habitat needs of farmland bird species. Successes include 213% increase in butterflies to 2017, breeding birds up 226% from 2000, and winter birds index up by 1,739%. Future work includes a 10-year field trial over 70 acres to analyse the soil's microbial diversity, organic carbon, crop yield and vegetation structure. The farm's work has been well received, with study visits from many interested parties.

Rewilding and political challenges

Rewilding has been going on for many years now, providing some answers to the questions raised. The charity Rewilding Britain brings together landowners, farmers, land managers, community groups and local authorities. They recently studied 23 projects covering 75,000 acres of land being rewilded. Most of the land was poorly productive or non-agricultural. They found a 47% increase in full-time equivalent jobs and a ninefold increase in volunteer-

ing opportunities. (9) All the sites studied produced an income from food production, livestock and other enterprises, showing that marginal land is able to produce food. This result debunks some early myths that rewilding means abandoning land or ceasing food production. The sites still support grazing animals, though livestock are 54% lower than before, solely due to fewer sheep. Cattle, pigs and ponies all increased slightly, closely replicating the natural grazing impacts of former native species. Some species were introduced, mainly beaver, white stork and water vole.

Rewilding presents a political challenge. It will be easier for the labour movement to take a legitimate interest than for the ruling class to resolve their ambivalent attitude to it, which arises from vested interests in agribusiness. Small and medium sized farms are threatened by capital intensive agriculture. Food production and the state of nature are of great interest to socialist opinion. The biggest, most damaging farms should be publicly owned, to restore good economics. More state support is needed, with restrictions on agribusiness and prairie farming, improved pay and conditions for farm workers, and adjustments to trade in agricultural produce. If a firm course could be steered, these matters would play on divisions in the ruling class to our advantage. The benefits of flexible thinking are enormous. Confidence returns as expertise grows. Public support is growing quickly.

[1] *Reith Lectures* 2020, www.bbc.co.uk

[2] *The Guardian* 3/3/21

[3] *English Pastoral*, James Rebanks, Chapter on "Progress", Allen Lane (2020)

[4] www.scottish-places.info.

[5] *Wilding*, Isabella Tree, Picador (2018).

[6] *The Running Hare* by John Lewis-Stempel, Penguin (2016)

[7] Rebanks *ibid*

[8] www.rspb.org.uk

[9] www.rewildingbritain.org.uk and *Yorkshire Post* 12/3/21

IN MEMORIAM

Greg Kaser (1955 – 2021)

Comrade Greg Kaser was a contributor to *The Socialist Correspondent* over many years writing on a wide range of topics, including climate change, British and European politics, economics and defence. He spoke on the Green New Deal at our last conference in 2019 when we were still able to physically meet together. There he outlined the failure of neo-liberalism and market-based approaches to tackling climate change and the challenges which will need to be confronted to achieve a just transition to a net zero carbon emitting economy. He emphasised the importance of economic planning to achieve the goals of the Green New Deal.

He had a keen interest in developments in the former Soviet Union and the negative effects of the restoration of capitalism on the people and the economy.

Greg was a renowned energy economist working in the field of nuclear power. His unassuming manner belied his depth of reading, knowledge and expertise in so many areas.

A committed socialist, Greg was involved in campaigning over the years for a range of causes. He worked for a time for the Coalfield Communities Campaign, trying to bring life back into ex-mining communities devastated by the closure of the pits after the defeat by Thatcher of the miners in 1985. Latterly he was active in the Labour Party.

Greg died of Covid in January this year. His comradeship and contribution to *The Socialist Correspondent* will be greatly missed.