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UNITED STATES RAMPS UP GLOBAL TENSIONS



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Afghanistan
– the fallout**

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allies and
threatens China**

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The United States' world role under Biden has been different from Donald Trump only in that has been more effective in asserting US dominance, and bullying other countries. However, it is also causing consternation among US allies which are increasingly unhappy about its actions.

Afghanistan and AUKUS

The withdrawal from Afghanistan was a shock. Previously Trump and Obama had talked about "ending the forever wars" and "pivoting to Asia", but they had never taken the final step of pulling out of Afghanistan. However, it was not just that Biden did it, but the manner of the departure – hurried and without consultation – that bothered allies.

There were huge ramifications arising from this, not only making allies wary, but also changing the power relationships in the region and beyond, involving China, Russia, Pakistan, Turkey, India and others. In, *US withdrawal from Afghanistan – the fallout*, Simon Korner examines this in depth. Although the United States remains the world's preeminent power it has damaged its reputation and emboldened voices among US allies who want their nations to be less dependent on an unreliable partner. This is particularly evident in the European Union with strengthened calls from many leading politicians, like Emmanuel Macron, for EU "strategic autonomy".

Matters were compounded not long after this when the United States, Britain and Australia formed the AUKUS pact. This further enraged France as it meant Australia cancelling its order for new French submarines in favour of buying US nuclear powered ones instead. As Gary Lefley sets out in, *AUKUS – the pivot to China*, it is not just this further snub which has implications, AUKUS is a new alliance among

several which are being orientated towards confrontation with China. This is a significant escalation of the threat to peace in the Asia/Pacific region and it is particularly concerning that the US is transferring nuclear technology to Australia as part of the submarine deal.

Both Korner and Lefley identify that the United States' strategic priority is now pushing back China. To that end it is building up its military alliances and power in the Asia/Pacific. It is also reorienting the alliances it leads, like NATO, towards China and corraling its allies into following its hostile approach. It has had success at this but relations are increasingly strained with countries which take a different view of how to deal with China (and it should be said Russia), like Germany. This has been exacerbated by the US' contemptuous treatment of them over Afghanistan and AUKUS.

Class politics and climate justice

COP 26 happened in Glasgow at the beginning of November and demonstrated the difficulties that free-market capitalism has in addressing major global challenges which require collaboration and planning. Socialists rightly point this out. However, faced with its own extinction it is not impossible for capitalism to set aside some of its rivalries to try to save itself. Whether it will succeed is another matter and it will be worrying if the future of humanity is left in its hands.

However, as capitalism tries to save itself it will have scant regard for the impact of its climate change policies on working people and the developing world. Workers are rightly sceptical of vague promises about new green jobs. That is why it is vital to fight for socialist, working class-led policies. Frieda Park looks at a specific case study in, *North Sea oil in decline - the impact*

on Scotland and workers. Workers are interested in transferring from an industry in decline to green jobs, but they themselves identify a lack of planning by the UK, the Scottish and local governments to make this possible. Market forces mean that contracts for wind turbines, for example, go abroad and there is a lack of validation of their skills and qualifications if they want to move jobs. Like other workers across all industries in recent decades they have faced casualisation through bogus self-employment, cuts in wages and conditions and health and safety concerns.

Political power

There is an urgent need for socialist policies and working class campaigning, yet some on the left seem to want to dilute our power by introducing proportional representation in UK parliamentary elections. Though seemingly more democratic, this self-defeating, divisive and ultimately undemocratic move would drive politics to the right through enforced coalitions with the Liberal Democrats. These and other problems with PR are spelled out by Calvin Tucker in, *The campaign for Proportional Representation undermines fight for socialism*.

Finally, in, *Some will choose to fight*, Vince Mills reviews a new collection of stories from those in the frontline in the fight for social justice as told to Neil Findlay. The book is called *If you don't run, they can't chase you*. As Mills points out some hard-fought battles ended in defeats, like the Miner's Strike, some are partial wins with the fight for proper justice still in progress, like the Hillsborough campaign, but others, were victories like the anti-Apartheid struggle. We can take inspiration from these accounts and the courage, tenacity and humour of all those in Britain and beyond who chose to fight.

US withdrawal from Afghanistan

the fallout

by Simon Korner

Has the American military withdrawal from Afghanistan weakened America's global pre-eminence?

One right-wing American commentator Michael Rubin of the American Enterprise Institute, seems to think so, writing on August 16 he said: "NATO is a Dead Man Walking... Simply put ... Biden's incompetence now risks the entire post-World War II liberal order ... God help the United States". The liberal American media such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New Yorker*, all expressed similar fears and called for the withdrawal to be reversed. In Britain, Tony Blair, the architect of interventionism, described the US withdrawal as "imbecilic" (BBC, August 22) and blamed the US for backing the corrupt Afghan government and handing victory to terrorists and to Russia and China. Defence Minister Ben Wallace, as well as Labour's Lisa Nandy were similarly critical. More progressive commentators also believe the withdrawal marks a crucial defeat for American power – though they don't necessarily see that as a bad thing. Ex-Guardian journalist David Hearst, for instance, who now writes for *Middle East Eye*, made the following claim: "...this defeat marks the beginning of the end of the western empire, as the dominant organising military and economic world order". (August 17)

Are they right? According to commentator Joseph Bosco (*The Hill*, September 21), Biden and Blinken's "clear message", has been that "unburdened by that 'forever war' in Afghanistan", the US has freed itself to focus on China and Russia. In other words, its exit has made it stronger. But in the short term at least, the withdrawal from such a strategically important territory in Central Asia has weakened America's hand and diminished its power. It posed far more of a threat to China and Russia when it had 130,000 US and NATO troops on their doorsteps than it does now, despite the terrorist threat to those countries from a disintegrating Afghanistan.

Also, the rushed and chaotic way in which America left damaged its reputation globally. The historian William Dalrymple said: "Few will now trust American or NATO promises and we have handed a major propaganda victory to our enemies everywhere" (*The Daily Telegraph*, August 17). The rushed retreat looked weak, and that impression has undermined the ability of the US to terrorise other countries, on which its power depends. That includes its puppet regimes around the world, as well as its NATO allies. Defence Secretary Ben Wallace put it clearly when he said that "a superpower that is also not prepared to stick at something isn't probably a superpower either. It is certainly not a global force, it's just

a big power". (*The Guardian*, September 2) The speed of the departure, which clearly dumbfounded America's closest NATO allies, revealed its total disregard for them, calling into question Biden's claim of a new multilateralist approach post-Trump.

Autonomy from the US

The allied response has been clear – to arm themselves independently. German defence minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer said that Europe should "get more autonomous" (*The Daily Telegraph*, September 2), a view echoed by the Christian Democratic Union MP Norbert Röttgen, once tipped as a potential German foreign minister, who said Germany had to be free to act independently, "Not only in cases where we agree with the USA, but also in cases of dissent. ... We will not be able to realise our goals if we are not able to secure them militarily". (*World Socialist Web Site*, August 26) French president Macron made a similar point at the Baghdad conference of Middle Eastern countries on Iraq's future, where he claimed a central role for French imperialism in the Middle East and Central Asia – with or without the US. The EU's Josep Borrell – effectively the EU's foreign minister – said that the botched retreat from Afghanistan showed the need for "strategic autonomy", and called for an EU rapid-reaction force to fill the vacuum left

by the US. The project to push the European Union as a military player isn't new, but has been held back by eastern European countries who fear a German military resurgence and by Brexit which removed British military power from the bloc. Now, it has been given renewed momentum. Ursula Von der Leyen has called for the EU's own military force to be independent of both the UN and NATO. Macron, meanwhile, refuses to accept what he calls a "bi-polar world made up of the US and China". French defence minister Bruno Le Maire outlined EU ambitions more explicitly: "Europe has to become the number three super-power besides China and the United States" (euobserver, September 6).

NATO leader Jens Stoltenberg has, understandably, expressed worries about the emergence of a parallel military alliance outside US control, as reported in the right wing blog *Breitbart*. (October 5) So, one effect of America's withdrawal is to boost those in Europe arguing for EU military autonomy. And to create deeper cracks within NATO – which have always been there but which are now spreading. This will make NATO unity against China harder to achieve in future. It's no coincidence that the AUKUS deal between the US, UK and Australia – and the deliberate side-lining of America's rival Pacific power within NATO, France – followed hard on the heels of the retreat from Afghanistan, when France, Britain and Germany were also side-lined. What we're seeing is a re-arrangement of US foreign policy which will have global implications. AUKUS may eventually seek to supplant NATO as the vanguard alliance of hawkish western forces, in the light of French and German equivocation over China. But for some time to come, NATO will continue to serve as America's main enforcer, with other alliances ensuring maximum flexibility and geographical reach.

A similar restructuring is happening in the Gulf. The Gulf States appeared

to support the US's departure from Afghanistan, hosting the talks in 2020 between the US and the Taliban, providing stopping off points for the evacuation, and welcoming the fleeing Afghan leader Ghani. But their unease has been clearly expressed by the media mouthpieces of the monarchist regimes. One Kuwaiti commentator warned: "Don't count on the US any more, and don't put all your eggs in one basket". (*Breaking Defense*, August 27) Another commentator from the UAE, Abdulkhaleq Abdullah, said: "The world has entered the post Pax Americana phase and the Gulf Arab States have to be prepared for this". (ibid) The Saudis, who were heavily involved for years in Afghanistan developing Al Qaeda, are particularly worried. Notably

Continued US intervention

This shift away from failed conflicts by the US doesn't mean that America is about to become peaceful – despite Biden's promise of an end to the era of major US military operations to remake other countries. Rather, we're seeing a move from boots-on-the-ground interventionism in a number of different theatres – an end to the Bush and Blair model, which has become deeply unpopular with the US public – towards conducting regional wars through proxies, as the US has been doing in Syria, along with the use of long-distance "over-the-horizon" drone attacks. The other mode of American warfare is of course economic strangulation, which has proved highly effective in Syria



Emmanuel Macron and EU unhappy with US actions

they were not one of the countries helping with the evacuations. Saudi columnist Safouq Al-Shammari has called for stronger regional military co-ordination, based on closer ties with Israel (Middle East Media Research Institute, August 24). And Saudi Arabia and the UAE are starting to break their almost 4-year-long deadlock with Qatar. The Saudis realised the limits of US protection when Yemeni Houthi drones and missiles attacked its oil industry with impunity earlier this year.

from the imperialist point of view. Looking at economic warfare first, Afghanistan was already destroyed by the American and British occupation and by the corrupt government they kept in place. 72% of Afghans currently subsist on less than \$1 a day and GDP per capita was just \$508.81 in 2020. Meanwhile nearby countries like Nepal and Pakistan performed better economically. Living standards in Afghanistan fell under the occupation, maternal mortality rose as did inequality. Contrary to western

PHOTO BY JEREMY BARANDE

propaganda on women's education, girls received on average 1.9 years of schooling, much less than in Pakistan. The vast sums of western money were spent on creating the Afghan army and supplying it with weapons. As a result, Afghanistan is the poorest Asian nation, poorer even than devastated Haiti.

And its economy is now being destroyed even further. The US has blocked access to Afghanistan's central bank's assets of nearly \$9.5bn. (Al-Jazeera, August 18) The money is locked up in the Federal Reserve in New York. The IMF has suspended \$460 million in emergency reserves to Afghanistan. The World Bank has frozen \$3 billion of 'development aid'. The EU's emergency pledge of €1 billion actually amounts to only a tenth of that sum in terms of the money that may, eventually, reach Afghanistan. Afghanistan's central banker Ahmady tweeted in late August: "If the Taliban can't gain access to the central bank's reserves, this would help start a cycle in which the national currency will depreciate, and inflation will rise rapidly and worsen poverty. That's going to hurt people's living standards." And Voice of America reported: "Afghan people are facing both an artificial and natural disaster [there's a drought], rendering them unable to feed their families. The situation has all the hallmarks of a humanitarian catastrophe." (August 14) Economic sanctions like these will further stimulate poppy production for opium, which was almost wiped out under the first Taliban regime and massively revived under the western occupation so that it currently provides at least a fifth of the country's GDP. Sanctions will also foster the trade in weapons left behind by the US.

As for the American long-distance bombing campaign, it's already begun. US drones killed 10 civilians days after its retreat in revenge for the huge ISIS-K attack on Kabul airport. The US defense department's spokesman John Kirby has explicitly stated the US is not wait-

ing for permission from the Taliban to conduct "future over-the-horizon counterterrorism strikes" (CNS News, September 29). Interestingly, Pakistan has refused permission for US drone bases, as have all the former Soviet central Asian republics – so the Americans are using India, with the effect that India is isolating itself within the region in exchange for a close relationship with the US.

Alongside "over-the-horizon" bombing is the use of terrorist and warlord proxies to sow instability. While Trump's deal with the Taliban paved the way for their rapid, almost bloodless takeover, the US is at the same time building up rebel forces

at the same time, both the CIA director and MI6 have been to Kabul, establishing relations with the regime while also seeking to divide it internally. The US has refused to reopen its embassy – instead, it will use recognition of the regime as leverage, and demand that its allies do the same.

China threatened

One US military strategist, Colonel Ralph Peters, wrote after 9/11 that the US no longer needed to win wars, but to organise instability. The article's title was, Stability: America's enemy. (The US Army War College Quarterly, Winter 2001) This



US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo meets with Taliban leaders Doha, Qatar 2020

opposed to the Taliban. The UN Security Council estimated in a report (June 1) that there were around 8,000 - 10,000 terrorists operating in Afghanistan. Hezbollah reported that the US had used helicopters to move ISIS terrorists from Iraq to Afghanistan, to reinforce ISIS-K, who have since attacked several civilian targets. America and Britain are also supporting the rebels who fought in Panjshir, and who are now regrouping in Tajikistan. These include the National Resistance Front of Ahmad Massoud and former vice-president Amrullah Saleh, and various former Afghan army officers and ministers. Meanwhile,

instability is designed to create a serious terrorist threat not only to Afghanistan itself but also to Russia and China. For instance, Russia's close neighbour and ally Tajikistan could soon become drawn into a regional war if it plays host to Afghan opposition forces. China too fears instability – particularly the continued spread into its Uyghur population in Xinjiang of the East Turkistan Islamic Movement, which has a significant presence in Afghanistan. This anti-China terrorist group was taken off the American terror list by Trump, and is still off it under Biden – a clear sign that it's useful to the US. Terrorist attacks

also threaten China's \$62 billion transport network in Pakistan – part of its Belt and Road Initiative – which will link Tajikistan, Xinjiang and Afghanistan to Pakistan's Gwadar Port on the Arabian Sea: nearly all of landlocked Afghanistan's imports come in via Pakistan. The East Turkistan Islamic Movement along with the Pakistani Taliban (TPP) – a separate group from the Afghan Taliban – were responsible for a major bomb attack in July.

So, while commentators like Nigel Farage (*Newsweek*, August 18) argue that the US withdrawal has gifted China access to Afghanistan's huge mineral wealth worth an estimated \$1 - \$3 trillion, and strengthens its Belt and Road Initiative, it's likely China will be cautious about investing in such an unstable environment. Its major investment in copper mining near Kabul, for instance, has stalled for the time being.

Meanwhile, further potential instability comes from Turkey, whose ambitions have been boosted by the US retreat. Turkey has been running Kabul airport with Qatar, and kept its Afghan embassy open. According to Christina Lin, *Times of Israel* (July 1 2015), using Afghanistan as a foothold, it wants to gain control over a huge region of Turkic countries, including Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, which border Afghanistan, and Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which border Xinjiang, and finally Xinjiang itself. Turkey's historic support for Uyghur secession and separatist terrorism makes it a credible threat to regional peace.

Offering potential stability, by contrast, is the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO), led by China. At its September conference the SCO, which includes all the regional powers, released a statement expressing the hope for an Afghanistan that is peaceful, democratic and unified, free of reliance on opium and free of terrorism. It's not yet clear how far the Taliban will

This will make America more, not less, dangerous in future.

lean towards co-operation with the peace-oriented SCO, or whether its dealings with the warlike US will get in the way.

The trouble is, the Taliban regime is both reactionary and divided, having been ushered into power by the US as part of the counter-revolutionary forces reversing the gains made under the progressive, Soviet-backed People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan government. Promoted right up until 9/11 by the US and Pakistan to enforce order on the local warlords so that energy pipelines could be built, that first Taliban regime proved difficult to control, and after 9/11 it was replaced by the more compliant US puppet, Karzai. A fitful peace might have prevailed had the US, supported by Britain, Australia, Canada and others, not alienated the local population with its brutal repression and thousands of drone strikes that hit mostly villages. This gave the Taliban legitimacy as an anti-occupation force.

In conclusion, the American withdrawal from Afghanistan was part of a long-planned, bi-partisan US strategy to get out of an unwinnable and expensive conflict. Biden followed through on Trump's 2020 deal in Doha, which in turn followed on from Obama's Pivot to Asia. However, the unilateralist, hurried nature of its retreat, and above all the disastrous consequences of 20-year war there, have cost it dear in terms of reputational damage and distrust among its allies, the fallout from which is still happening. This will make America more, not less, dangerous in future. Instead of replacing "relentless war" with "relentless diplomacy" as Biden has promised, the withdrawal

marks the start of a new dangerous period building up to war with China. The AUKUS deal, effectively giving Australia future nuclear capability under US control, is preparation for choking off the shipping lanes that are crucial for China's fuel and trade. This has heated up the new Cold War several degrees. Britain's aircraft carrier fleet and the US navy now have a permanent presence off China, each foray into the Taiwan Straits a dangerous provocation. With the Americas' massive technological advantage over China, there is no prospect of it ceding its global pre-eminence for several decades to come. (Gholz and Sapolsky, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 24 June 2021).

Priorities for action

In terms of what we can do, first, we should support calls for the US, IMF and World Bank to give Afghanistan back its money – which is being held hostage like Venezuela's gold.

Second, we should highlight the hypocrisy of Britain's treatment of Afghan refugees who are being pushed back across the English Channel even as government and media warmongers are calling for the permanent wars to continue – the wars that produce the refugees in the first place.

Third, we should focus more on peace, on standing against all wars of intervention, on opposing the new Cold War which is leading towards hot war with China – and no return of western forces to Afghanistan in future.

Finally, with the proclaimed end to America's war on terror, we should demand the closure of Guantánamo. 220 Afghans – many of them tortured at the US Bagram airbase – were held there along with almost 600 others. 39 men are still imprisoned in Guantanamo, held without trial for 15 years or more.

AFGHANISTAN

Soviet support and United States destruction



PHOTO BY SCOTT L. SORESENSEN BY MAWG64

The Salang Pass tunnel

by Pat Turnbull

In 2011 there was a remarkable exhibition at the British Museum. It was called Afghanistan: Crossroads of the Ancient World. It could be said that it is Afghanistan's curse to be at the crossroads of the modern world.

The highlight of the exhibition was the treasure of Tillya Tepe. Over 20,000 gold, silver and ivory artefacts were found in November 1978 in nomadic graves from the first century AD by a joint Soviet/Afghan archaeological team led by Viktor Sarianidi. This renowned Soviet archaeologist had been born in 1929 in Tashkent in the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic to a father who, as he said, 'looking for a more meaningful life, had immigrated from a village in Greece'. These wonderful gold and jewelled objects, exquisitely crafted, fused elements from many different cultures. The finds were brought to the National Museum of Afghanistan in Kabul. To guard them from theft or destruction by terrorists, in 1988, they were moved to the Central Bank vaults in the presidential palace. [1] This act, which saved the treasure of Tillya Tepe, was ordered by the last president of the

Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA), Mohammad Najibullah. Eight years later he would be seized from the United Nations compound in Kabul in 1992, where he had sought sanctuary after his government fell. Subsequently he was mutilated and killed by the Taliban, which had occupied the city.

Afghanistan is a landlocked country, bordered by Pakistan to the east and south, Iran to the west, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to the north, and Tajikistan and China to the north-east. It has an ancient history - two of the earliest urban civilizations were found there, in the Amu Darya valley in Central Asia in the north, and the Indus valley in the south. It was occupied by many empires and was on the Silk Road - the trade route which connected the East and West from ancient times. However, it was never part of the British Empire, for Britain fought and lost three Anglo-Afghan wars - 1838-1842, 1878-1880, and from May 3 to June 3 1919. Following the Second Anglo-Afghan War Britain succeeded in making Afghanistan a British protectorate, but after the third they had to sign a peace treaty recognising the country's independence.

Soviet support

The Soviet Union had a long connection with Afghanistan. On March 27 1919 it was the first country in the world to recognise Afghanistan as independent and sovereign. In 1920, Soviet Russia, a young state itself and short of everything, agreed to grant Afghanistan gratis a million gold roubles, several aircraft, and 5,000 rifles with ammunition, and helped Afghanistan to build a gunpowder plant and an aviation school. Agreement was also reached on sending technical and other Soviet specialists to Afghanistan. The treaty between the two countries signed and ratified in 1921 was one of the first documents in history which set out relations between a great power and a small state based on equality and non-interference in each other's internal affairs, on friendship and mutual respect. Britain did everything it could to bribe and force Afghanistan and the Soviet Union to break relations, including the 'Curzon ultimatum' of May 1923 demanding Soviet diplomatic personnel withdraw from Afghanistan, which was categorically rejected. Britain organised tribal uprisings, including one in 1928 led by British intelligence agent, Colonel T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia).

After World War II the United States took over from Britain as the dominant power. It saw Afghanistan as a future bridgehead to attack the Soviet Union and tried to impose economic 'aid' on Afghanistan to curtail economic links with the Soviet Union. When in 1955, prompted by the US and Britain, Pakistan deprived Afghanistan of the right to send goods through its territory, the Soviets signed an agreement so that the goods could be sent duty free to third countries via the Soviet Union. In the 1960s and 1970s, the US continued to put pressure on Afghanistan to abandon its policy of neutrality and non-alignment. [2]

Meanwhile the Soviet Union continued to contribute to Afghanistan's economic development. In the 1960s dams were built to provide electricity to towns and cities, and water to irrigate farmland, with construction financed and supervised by the Soviets. The Salang Tunnel, 2.6 km long, connects Kabul to northern Afghanistan. It opened in 1964, and cut travel time for journeys by almost 62 hours. Prefabricated blocks of flats were built in Kabul in the 1960s and 1980s. Kabul Polytechnical University, established in 1963, was a gift from the people of the Soviet Union to the people of Afghanistan. [3]

The 30 million citizens of the Soviet Central Asian republics across the border achieved a degree of material, cultural and scientific advancement far superior to that of any Islamic country in the world, and Afghanistan remained mired in feudalism, tribalism and poverty. 95% of the people were illiterate. Average life expectancy was 25-30 years. Three quarters of the land was owned by landlords and mullahs who were only three per cent of the rural population. Peasants lost their land because they were unable to pay 25% interest on debts that went back to fathers and grandfathers. They became sharecroppers, with the landlord or mullah taking between two-thirds and four-fifths of

the crop, depending on how fertile the land was. The sharecropper was left with barely enough to feed his family. [4] Things remained like this despite intermittent efforts by various governments.

Progressive government under attack

In 1965 the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), a national progressive party was formed as was the Democratic Organisation of Afghan Women whose aims were to eliminate illiteracy among women, and ban forced marriages and feudal dowries. In 1973 a coup by militia officers belonging to the PDPA replaced King Mohammad Saher with Muhammad Daud. But he failed to carry out the promised reforms and ended up arresting almost the whole party leadership. In response a military uprising took place on 27 April 1978 - the beginning of the April Revolution. The military freed the leaders of the PDPA and delegated the management of the state to them. The revolutionary government began to implement reform measures. Decree No 7 of 17 October 1978 was on regulation of divorce matters; Decree No 8 of 28 November was on land reform. In half a year about 1.5 million people learned to read and write for which Afghanistan received a prize from UNESCO. But this progressive government was immediately beset by terrorist violence and the threat of actual invasion. By the end of 1979 the Afghan government had been forced to ask the Soviet Union for military assistance 21 times. These requests were based on Article 4 of the Afghan-Soviet Friendship Treaty of 5 December 1978 and on Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. Soviet military engagement began on 27 December 1979 with the intention to withdraw as soon as Afghanistan's security position stabilised. [5]

While the US and Pakistan were the leading players in the armed interventions in Afghanistan, other

TIMELINE OF WORLD EVENTS 1975 – 1979

- 1975 the Vietnamese finally drove the United States invasion forces out of their country.
- 17 September 1978 Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin signed the Camp David Accords, following ten days of secret negotiations at Camp David, US President Carter's country retreat.
- 3 November 1978 the Soviet Union and Vietnam signed a 25-year mutual defence treaty.
- 25 December 1978 Vietnamese forces entered Cambodia and by 7 January had reached Phnom Penh.
- 29 January to 4 February 1979 Chinese vice premier Deng Xiaoping visited the USA after overtures from US National Security Assistant Zbigniew Brzezinski. He and US President Carter signed agreements, among others, to re-establish consular relations.
- February 1979 the Iranian revolution swept away the Shah depriving the US of a key base in the region.
- 17 February 1979 China invaded Vietnam to then withdraw in March.
- May 1978 NATO approved automatic growth of military budgets of NATO member countries to the end of the century. The United States accelerated long-term armament programmes, set up new military bases far from the US, including in the Middle East and Indian Ocean area, and formed so-called 'quick response' forces. The SALT-2 Treaty on strategic arms limitation was signed but not ratified by the US.
- December 1979 the US forced on its NATO allies a decision to deploy new medium-range missile weapons in several West European countries.

countries were also involved: China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UK among them. There were powerful signs that, as far as the imperialist world went, the period of détente was at an end. It may be useful when considering this to briefly put the events in their world political context (see timeline on previous page).

The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan never had the opportunity to build a decent life for the Afghan people without the violent assaults of internal and external enemies. Immediately after the 1978 April Revolution, about 35,000 radical Islamists from 40 countries were restructured into powerful, armed organisations in the ‘refugee camps’ in Pakistan, and these mujahideen as they were known at the time, were unleashed on Afghanistan, under the direction of the CIA and its Pakistani brother organisation the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). [5] On July 3, 1979, US President Carter authorised a \$500 million covert action programme to overthrow Afghanistan’s first secular, progressive government, code-named by the CIA Operation Cyclone. Thus the USA through the CIA was actively involved in the affairs of Afghanistan long before the Soviet military intervention. In ten years or so, half a million to a million Afghan civilians, 90,000 mujahideen, 18,000

Afghan government troops and 14,500 Soviet soldiers were to die. The CIA recruited Wahhabi missionaries from Saudi Arabia to go to Pakistan and later to Afghanistan to set up Islamic fundamentalist religious schools, madrasas. The CIA and their agents recruited or forced young Afghans to go to these schools, where they became brainwashed religious fanatics. The word Taliban means students in an Islamic school. During the 1980s the number of madrasas increased to some 40,000, as part of CIA covert psychological operations. In 1989, the year Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden, a Saudi millionaire, founded Al Qaeda from terrorists involved in the war in Afghanistan. Bin Laden was operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan during the 1980s. [4]

In December 1984 Soviet magazine *Sputnik* reported how US President Reagan’s ‘brave fighters for freedom’ had, during their raids, destroyed and burned down 50% of all schools in the DRA, the greater part of its hospitals, three-quarters of its communication lines and one-fifth of its state motor transport. Many industrial enterprises and electric power stations were damaged. The terrorists were brutal; they cut off hands, ears, noses, disembowelled their victims, and flayed them alive.

Fact-finding visit

In June 1982 a British fact-finding group of two MPs, two trade union leaders and the secretary of anti-imperialist solidarity organisation Liberation were witness to the efforts being made by the progressive Afghan government, and reported their experiences in a pamphlet called *Darkness to Light*. [6] As one of their hosts said, ‘We are trying to transform a Middle Ages life to modern times.’ To guard against the terrorists, every school, orphanage, factory, housing estate and museum was guarded by Afghan volunteers, often very young. The following were among the group’s other findings:

The DRA had set a legal minimum wage and limits to working time. In two years salaries had increased by 50%. The first Congress of the Trade Unions of the DRA had convened in March 1981, attended by 500 delegates, trade unions being legal for the first time. There were now 160,000 trade union members in a total labour force of 3 million, including 2 million peasants. More than 300 libraries were run by trade union organisations, and literacy courses were run by the trade union movement, along with those run by the Ministry of Education. More than 10,000 workers had been sent to socialist countries for education.

The Afghanistan Youth Organisation had over 80,000 members and Tribal Council had also been set up to deal with tribal problems. There were 30,000 Young Pioneers, and the group of British visitors visited the Pioneer Palace in Kabul, where young people could take up activities in art and music, and use the library. On the walls there were photographs of 40 to 50 young people and children who had been murdered because they were Pioneers.

Hospitals, primary health centres and sub-health centres had been established. The Institute of Medi-

Immediately after the 1978 April Revolution, about 35,000 radical Islamists from 40 countries were restructured into powerful, armed organisations in the ‘refugee camps’ in Pakistan, and these mujahideen as they were known at the time, were unleashed on Afghanistan, under the direction of the CIA and its Pakistani brother organisation the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).



View of Kabul 2009

cine had been set up following the April Revolution, and advisers from the Soviet Union were helping to train Afghan doctors. The Soviet Union was also providing printing presses to print medical publications and books in the languages of Afghanistan.

The group also attended a land distribution ceremony where 500 people were there to watch 50 people get land for the first time in their lives. On September 1 1978, all debts to landlords were abolished and a major land reform was underway, where everyone would have equal amounts of land. It goes without saying that the former landlords were not overjoyed; many left for voluntary exile, and some joined the ranks of the armed terrorists. The rents on recently constructed two-bed flats were 10% of wages, and on three-bed flats 15%. The group visited the Jangalak Engineering Factory, which had been established with the help of the Soviet Union 22 years previously. It had 900 workers and 150 apprentices, and produced pumps, engineering products, truck and coach bodies, and repaired lorries.

The group went to the Central Club of the Democratic Organisation of Afghan Women in Kabul. The club had been founded in November

1981. Its main task was organising the professional training of women. There were courses in literacy, sewing, knitting and needlework, for which Afghanistan was famed. There were similar clubs in ten of the 29 provinces. Working women now had maternity rights and child marriage and feudal dowry payments were banned. But the forces of progress had to tread carefully. In 1979 Hafizullah Amin had seized power and under his brief rule women who had been found in literacy classes with men had been killed by their husbands. (Amin is believed to have been a CIA agent within the PDPA leadership and was quickly overthrown.) But the DRA achieved progress: in 1990 Kabul University had 10,000 students, 60 per cent of them women and by 1991 there were 577 primary schools with 628,000 children enrolled, of whom 212,000 were girls. [4]

Reactionary take over

The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan came to an end on 27 April 1992, when the Afghan leaders finally capitulated and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was established. By then the Soviet Union was no more - it had dissolved in December 1991 - and there were no more supportive socialist countries in Eastern Europe. After the with-

drawal of Soviet troops the DRA had had to survive alone, while its enemies continued to be heavily funded by the imperialist camp. However, following the end of the DRA, the war continued, more brutally than before, as various factions fought for power. Big cities, including Kabul, were laid waste. Education provision was destroyed and finally, on 27 September 1996, the Taliban conquered Kabul. [5]

Everyone in Britain who considers the history of Afghanistan, and particularly of British involvement, will echo the words of Dr Matin Baraki, from Afghanistan but now living in Germany, when he says of the current situation: 'Peace...that is the most important thing that the absolute majority of Afghans want... The five principles of international law must be respected on the Hindu Kush. One of these principles is: "No interference in the internal affairs of others." Afghanistan must finally have rest and the people of this battered land must decide their fate themselves. It will not be a democratic and progressive Afghanistan, but that is the business of the people on the Hindu Kush.' [7]

[1] *Afghanistan, Crossroads of the Ancient World*, ed. Fredrik Hiebert and Pierre Cambon, The British Museum Press, 2011

[2] *The Truth about Afghanistan – Documents, Facts, Eyewitness Reports*, compiled by Y. Volkov, K. Gevorkyan, I. Mikhailenko, A. Polonsky and V. Svetozarov, Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, Moscow, 1980

[3] *Five Soviet infrastructure projects that survived the Afghan Wars*, Ajay Kamalakaran, Russia Beyond the Headlines, 18 August 2016

[4] *Afghanistan: Before and After US Intervention*, Professor John Ryan, Global Research, 26 September 2021

[5] *Afghanistan and the USA*, Dr Matin Baraki, Open Democracy, 5 June 2019

[6] *Afghanistan – Darkness to Light*, A Liberation Pamphlet, 1982

[7] *Epochale Niederlage des Imperialismus am Hindukusch*, Dr Matin Baraki, RotFuchs, October 2021

AUKUS

THE PIVOT TO CHINA

by Gary Lefley

AUKUS is the acronym for the new military alliance of Australia, the UK and the United States. It will seek to marshal the Asia-Indo-Pacific region in the interests of US imperialism, with Britain as an established nuclear lieutenant. Australia will be the second country in history, after Britain, to be given nuclear technology by the US, and only the 6th in the world to possess nuclear submarine capability. AUKUS is the latest evidence of US imperialism pivoting towards China as its primary enemy. To most observers, arming Australia with nuclear powered submarines is a worrying breach of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. AUKUS pleads not guilty, based on the dubious loophole that the submarines will, for now, not carry nuclear weapons, even though they will be powered by weapons-grade enriched uranium. And in any case, with these vessels patrolling undetected through the East and South China seas, where is the verification by independent inspections? And why should China believe them?

Military alliances

AUKUS is not the only US sponsored military alliance operating in the region. The so-called QUAD - the quadrilateral military pact in the Pacific area of the US, India, Australia, Japan - was set up in 2007, and re-launched in 2017, with China as the target.

“The UK Integrated Review 2021: The defence tilt to the Indo-Pacific” published on 11th October this

year, undertook to “make a bigger and more consistent contribution to the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA)”, which comprises the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Singapore. This was set up in 1971 to “pursue closer defence cooperation with the 10 nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states.” [1] While the FPDA and ASEAN may not have originally been set up with China as the first consideration, the ‘bigger... more consistent contribution’ and ‘closer defence cooperation’ now being flagged up in the Government review lend themselves to the strategy of a multilateral encirclement of China, with military deployments, while significantly enhancing British imperial clout in the region.

Britain’s Indo-Pacific strategy, with integrated naval security arrangements including India, Singapore, South Korea and more, is at the core of the HMS Queen Elizabeth carrier strike group voyage to the region. HMS Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier is the largest and most powerful surface vessel in the Royal Navy’s history. The strike group consists of 9 ships, 32 aircraft, and 3700 personnel. The carrier will lead several NATO exercises, with US and Netherlands forces fully integrated into the deployment. The major planned stops for the QE carrier are South Korea, Japan, India and Singapore, while its escort ships will “engage with regional and ASEAN partners as part of the United Kingdom’s commitment to be a persistent, credible and reliable presence in the Indo-Pacific”. (ibid)

The 60-year-old ‘Five Eyes’ intelligence gathering and sharing network of the US, Canada, U.K., Australia and New Zealand has shifted its focus toward China. While this has troubled New Zealand, reluctant precisely because it wants to maintain peaceful cooperation with China, Japan is now hankering to join the spy club.

These Indo-Asiatic-Pacific alliances and deployments represent a clear and present threat not only to the people of China but also to Russia and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea). Furthermore, the militarisation of the South China Sea is a concern for a host of other Southeast Asia states. The escalating threat of a nuclear conflagration is a threat to the entire region.

Death of NATO?

The original purpose of NATO remains, and it continues to present a material threat to (capitalist) Russia. This has manifested itself in various ways, including support for the reactionary regime in Ukraine and hostility toward Belarus. Nevertheless, AUKUS and the invigoration of other alliances around the Indo-Pacific, indicate a tilt toward China as the primary focus of US imperialism. This is reflected in the escalated propaganda war against China, initiated by Trump and continued by Biden. These developments are best understood, not as replacing NATO, but rather as supplementing it as a multilateral strategy for isolating and choking the primary post-Soviet threat to US global domination, China. The *raison d’être* for



PHOTO MOD

USS America (foreground) HMS Queen Elizabeth (centre) and the Japanese JS Ise undertaking exercises in the Philippine Sea, August 2021

NATO has continued, while its strategic direction has pivoted towards China. NATO's existential purpose remains:

1. Securing the interests of US capital through force projection
2. Uniting European capitalist states under US hegemony to sustain the interests of imperialism
3. Securing the interests of European capital where these coincide with US capital
4. Thwarting the re-emergence of socialist and anti-imperialist forces globally
5. Containing contradictions and conflict between allied capitalist powers

But there has been a shift in NATO's strategic focus. From its inception in 1949 NATO's key objective was to defeat the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact socialist countries as the systemic threat to the continuation of capitalism, and the source of material support for anti-colonial and anti-imperial resistance. That objective was achieved 3 decades ago. Since then we have seen the US take advantage of its lone super-

power status with a consequential demise in peaceful coexistence and the right of nations to self-determination. The so-called 'war on terror' heralded three decades of US imperialism on the rampage, advancing its interests globally, most especially in the Middle East, through unbridled interventionism. The US positioned itself as the world's indisputable, swaggering hegemon. That is now under threat. Throughout this period China was slowly emerging as a serious economic competitor. The US had been the world's top manufacturer for over a century. Between 2010-2012, it was superseded by China. NATO's response, under US direction, was to orientate toward containing and overcoming China. The US certainly does not want to see the break-up of NATO. As has always been the case, it is looking to secure - and subordinate - additional regional allies. With the rise of China and the exponential growth of trade in and around the Pacific, what we are witnessing with AUKUS and the orientation of other alliances, is a predictable shift in regional priorities.

China's military threat?

The 'Soviet military threat' was fabricated to justify: the Cold War; the

massive US nuclear weapons build up; the multi-trillion dollar transfer of public money to the military-industrial complex; the imperial wars against Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos; endless attempts at regime change in Cuba; the projection of a nuclear first-strike strategy; covert operations funded through the CIA; and the anti-communist McCarthy witch hunt. Similarly, the justification for the 'tilt to the Indo-Pacific' is now the manufactured 'threat of China'. China is an economic threat. In terms of manufacturing, trade and the export of capital it now represents a serious challenge to US global dominance. But in terms of being a military rival and threat, there is no comparison.

The establishment media routinely reports that China has the biggest navy in the world, without mentioning that these forces consist largely of coastguard vessels and small corvettes. It has hardly any ocean-going capacity with just two aircraft carriers and a third being built, none of which are anywhere near the state-of-the-art standard of the US, which has 11 carriers as well as inter-operability arrangements with the two recently built UK carriers, the HMS Prince of Wales and the HMS Queen Elizabeth. Of China's 56 submarines, only six are nuclear-powered with

The establishment media routinely reports that China has the biggest navy in the world, without mentioning that these forces consist largely of coastguard vessels and small corvettes.

reach across the Pacific. All of the 72 US submarines are nuclear-powered and can threaten China's coast.

So where is the China threat? The Queen Elizabeth carrier strike group has recently been criss-crossing the East and South China Seas. When has any Chinese fleet sailed close to the Pacific or Atlantic coasts of the USA? Or conceived a military alliance with Latin American states to run nuclear submarines in the Caribbean Sea? When has it conducted the equivalent of US/UK and NATO war games in seas around the USA? The answer is, of course, never, and we can be pretty certain how Biden would react if it did. If China were now to respond to recent provocations in a manner comparable to Kennedy during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, we would be on the brink of global nuclear war. China has, in fact, shown great restraint.

While several nations have claims on islands in the South China Sea, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and China, among others, none of the AUKUS parties has any claim or any basis for naval activity in the area. That detail has not prevented the Australian Prime Minister from talking about 'preparing to send warriors overseas' in case of a conflict over Taiwan. The internationally agreed One China policy recognises that Taiwan is part of China, whereas Australia, the UK and US have no locus whatsoever regarding its status. Any dispute over Taiwan must be resolved diplomatically and not be used as an excuse for ramping up war with China. It is hard to see any legitimate role for the AUKUS states in such negotiations.

Alongside the propaganda about China's alleged military threat there are also sustained campaigns by the capitalist media round issues like human rights and climate change. Given the origins of these claims and the purposes to which they are being put we should treat them with an appropriate level of scepti-

cism. Nor should they be allowed to be a smokescreen for the build up of hostilities against China.

The people of China can but view these developments and war-games off their coastline with trepidation and they are also a concern for smaller South East Asian countries. It matters not whether you believe China is a socialist country, or transforming towards a socialist country, or simply the USA's biggest rival in manufacturing, trade and capital exports. AUKUS and other military developments targeting China are a significant escalation of the arms race, destabilising the Indo-Pacific region and posing a very real threat to world peace. China will inevitably make a considered military and diplomatic response. That will not be to reduce its military capability. Indeed, if the anti-Soviet cold war was anything to go by, then a key component of US strategy will be to redirect and drain China's economic and social resources by sucking it into a multi-trillion dollar arms race. When Biden euphemistically refers to "multilateralism" he is, amongst other things, leaning on US allies to help drive and fund this project. AUKUS, as a nuclear alliance, is a key development.

Big powers fall out

The USA's pivot towards China is not without difficulties, in particular for NATO unity. First and foremost, France is furious over AUKUS. France had a confirmed deal with Australia to provide a fleet of diesel-engine submarines, at an estimated cost of \$40-50 billion. That deal has been ditched in favour of the nuclear-powered submarines, with technologies provided by the US and Britain, and with the boats to be built in Adelaide.

France has been snubbed and is not dressing up its anger in diplomatic language. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian described the AUKUS deal as "a stab in the back"

by Australia. Referring to Biden and the US, Le Drian remarked, "This brutal, unilateral, and unpredictable decision reminds me a lot of what Mr. Trump used to do." France has not only lost a deal worth in excess of \$40 billion. It considers itself to be a Pacific power, with New Caledonia as a colony, and was integral to the G7 states and NATO adopting the 'Indo-Pacific Tilt' strategy. Having found itself excluded it took the extraordinary step of withdrawing its ambassadors from both Australia and the US. For NATO this is further complicated by France looking to increase the military projection of the EU and, as the EU's only nuclear weapons power, exercise military leadership.

Membership of AUKUS by the UK is risking its economic relationship with China, a relationship that former Prime Minister David Cameron and Chancellor George Osborne had sought to cultivate. In doing so, Johnson has prioritised the arms industry over all other UK economic sectors.

Australia is taking a huge gamble with its economy, given that 40% of its exports are to China and only 11% to the US. Former Australian Labour Party Prime Minister Paul Keating slammed the AUKUS deal. He said, "Material dependency on the United States has robbed Australia of any freedom or choice." In 2019, he accused Morrison's government of letting "the phobias of security agencies" dominate Australia's foreign policy and said that the "whispered word Communism of old is now being replaced with the word China."

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern commented that New Zealand wasn't invited to join the pact and would have said no anyway. It should "be very clear to all New Zealanders, and to Australia," Ardern said, "why New Zealand would not wish to be a part of that project."

Peaceful solutions

With virtually all western allies questioning the hegemonic role of

the US after its unilateral withdrawal from Afghanistan, the US, and in particular the AUKUS military alliance, is facing anything but untroubled waters. There is good cause for the British peace and labour movements to come up with their own 'multilateralism' and unite with other peace and progressive movements globally to ensure that AUKUS is dead in the water - demilitarisation and denuclearisation of the seas is vital. Forging an independent or non-aligned British foreign policy, along with countries like New Zealand, is central to defusing the US-led war drive. The bedrock of a peaceful independent British foreign policy are the principles of peaceful coexistence and a commitment to the right of all nations to self-determination. That includes the People's Republic of China. The interests of US or UK capital do not define an exception.

[1] <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-carrier-strike-group-in-the-indo-pacific>

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Foreign intervention causes misery in Haiti

by Ken Cable

Haiti is once again in the news. It only features when there is a disaster or crisis of which there have been many in its troubled and complex history. These have usually been caused by a combination of a small but bitterly-divided dominant political elite allied to dominant foreign powers, once European but since the late nineteenth century the United States and now including the United Nations. The current situation is essentially no different, but in its combination of natural disaster and several inter-linked political crises it is different in its intensity, imposing even greater misery on the ninety per cent plus of Haitians who get absolutely nothing from the present system.

This figure is no exaggeration – if anything it is understated. After the 2010 earthquake in the capital Port-au-Prince, which killed more than 200,000 and left more than a million homeless, Paul Farmer, UN Deputy Special Envoy in Haiti and by training a medical anthropologist and doctor with more than twenty-five years' engagement in the country, invoked a medical analogy to describe the situation as "acute-on-chronic". It highlighted the effect of the earthquake on the pre-existing conditions of a desperate lack of housing, sanitation, healthcare and education. More than US\$6.4bn was raised for reconstruction but Haitians saw little of it, mostly it went to foreign contractors, UN agencies, the US military and international nongovernmental organisations, with the

result that Haitians largely remain poor, unemployed and homeless.

The majority of Haitians are now worse off than they were then (the World Bank estimates that 60% of the population are at or below the poverty line in 2021) which has fuelled mounting migration, growing political protest and accompanying crises, and failing foreign engagement. The result is the chaos that now grips the country where well-armed criminal gangs control large parts of Port-au-Prince, murdering and kidnapping for ransom at will.

Disasters force migration

Haiti is regularly struck by hurricanes, four in the last ten years. On most occasions the flooding and storms cause severe damage to roads and buildings along with loss of life. Sometimes this can be substantial. In 2008 alone four hurricanes hit the country killing 800 people and damaging 70% of the country's crops. The last severe hurricane was Hurricane Matthew in 2016 which killed nearly 600 people and left more than 35,000 homeless.

It is also hit by earthquakes. The most recent was in August when a severe earthquake in south-west Haiti devastated the towns of Jérémie and Les Cayes killing more than 2,500 people and injuring 12,000. The difficulties of getting relief to an area where there is only one poorly maintained and severely potholed road was graphically shown on TV news.

To these natural disasters must be added the man-made environ-

mental disaster across Haiti of deforestation and accompanying soil erosion, which, combined with population growth has put unsustainable pressure on the land. The mountainous terrain makes 20-30% of cultivated land unsuited for agriculture and more than 10,000 hectares of arable land is lost each year forcing peasants to abandon their miniscule landholdings and seek a living in the cities and abroad.

The population of Port-au-Prince and immediately surrounding areas has doubled in size in the last 20 years to around 3 million inhabitants, one quarter of the total population of Haiti. The majority of people are unemployed or underemployed and live in makeshift buildings without basic amenities. They live from day to day. Much the same goes for the rest of the country including the other major cities.

The answer has been migration to other countries - traditionally this was as temporary sugar cane cutters to neighbouring Caribbean islands, and especially to the Dominican Republic with which it shares a land border. The exact number of Haitians in the Dominican Republic is difficult to determine, and many persons of Haitian descent were born there. That however has not stopped the Dominican government denying them citizenship and deporting tens of thousands back to Haiti. More recently Covid has led to the Dominican Republic suspending temporary legal status to 150,000 Haitian workers, putting additional pressure on them to return home.

Many more Haitians target the United States and Canada. The Haitian immigrant population in the US has tripled in size since 1980 and now stands at more than 700,000 legally resident with probably around the same number there illegally. In the 1980s they frequently sought to land by boat in Florida but a US policy to return them led Haitians to seek alternative routes with much attention now focused on South and Central America. Many targeted Chile and Brazil where they found temporary work before moving through South and Central America to the US-Mexican border. Recent news stories have focused on the situation at Del Rio just over the border in Texas. More than 14,000 people, the majority Haitian, were seeking entry to the US. Pictures of them being rounded-up like cattle by US rangers on horseback caused global condemnation. The US government has responded once again by seeking to deter entry with a policy of enforced return to Haiti, deporting more than 2,000 people by air to Port-au-Prince.

Political crises

The murder of Haitian President, Jovenel Moise, in July this year, in circumstances that are far from clear, has added to the growing political chaos in the country which was mounting even prior to this date and for which Moise himself bore a large part of the blame. Elected in November 2016 by less than 10% of those registered to vote, his regime was almost a carbon copy of the previous neo-Duvalierist regime of Michel Martelly, characterised by the same experiences of flawed and cancelled elections, massive corruption and rule by decree. [1]

Corruption and impunity have been at the centre of Moise's government. It is exemplified by the PetroCaribe scandal that emerged in 2018. A report of the Haitian Senate showed that more than US\$2bn of assistance provided by Venezuela had been systematically pillaged and misman-



Gonaïves, Haiti after the 2008 hurricanes

PHOTO BY ROOSEWELT PINHIRO/ABR

aged to the benefit of high-level government officials, including Moise. At first he sought to block the report but continuing and escalating demonstrations throughout Haiti caused him to order further investigations which have seen the publication of successive reports by the CSCAA (in English Superior Court of Auditors) detailing the corruption. This showed it to be extensive with 'irregularities' involving 13 ministries, 15 state agencies, the prime minister's office and the state university. To date no prosecutions have been brought. Likewise, there have been none in numerous cases of police brutality and murder in poorer parts of Port-au-Prince, as well as in controlling demonstrations and silencing protesters and journalists.

That and issues around the cost of living and unemployment have fuelled the continuing protests. So also were the actions of Moise in suspending the House of Deputies and two-thirds of the Senate at the beginning of 2020, claiming they had forestalled elections which should have been held the previous October. In turn, he was accused of planning to remain in office after the end of his own presidential mandate in February 2021. That proved to be the case. Moise claimed that a new constitution was needed before elections could take place and that he

had commissioned the drafting of one which he would put to a constitutional referendum to be held later in the year. In the meantime he ruled by decree, one of which severely weakened the powers of the CSCAA. Other decrees have strengthened the powers of the executive and the security and intelligence agencies.

One of Moise's last acts just 24 hours before his assassination was the appointment of a new prime minister, Ariel Henry, who is currently also serving as 'interim head-of-state'. True to form, he has postponed any elections citing unfinished electoral reform and insufficient preparation. In this he is supported by some 150 civil society organisations and The Core Group of international actors with a particular interest in Haiti - the United States, Canada, France, Brazil, the European Union, the Organisation of American States and the United Nations. Opposing it are a national coalition of 200 plus local and regional organisations formed into the Commission for a Haitian Solution to the Crisis who want Henry to step down.

External interference

In recent years the US and the UN have been heavily involved in Haiti. The former is pre-eminent and

The murder of Haitian President, Jovenal Moïse, in July this year, in circumstances that are far from clear, has added to the growing political chaos in the country which was mounting even prior to this date and for which Moïse himself bore a large part of the blame.

charts the general direction of that involvement and on occasion even the details of policy. US diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks show it has in the recent past chosen who was or was not to be president, and its ambassador in Haiti remains perhaps the most important person in the country. To achieve its objectives the US government has committed military forces and spent US\$4.4bn in foreign assistance from 2010-2018, around half of it from its development fund USAID. Of that only 2% went directly to Haitian organisations and firms while some US\$1.2bn went to US firms located in Washington D.C., Maryland and Virginia alone. USAID has since cut back its funding but the US remains supportive of programmes to strengthen the police, including the provision of training and weapons. The Biden administration to date has made no significant changes to policies developed by Trump, including deportation. In September this led the Biden-appointed United States Special Envoy to Haiti, Dan Foote, to resign after only two

months in office citing US policy as “deeply flawed”, “inhumane” and “counterproductive”. He was followed a few days later by Harold Koh, a senior State Department legal adviser, who called the deportations “illegal”.

The UN has been involved in Haiti since 2004 in a variety of forms, including the stationing of foreign troops to maintain order. In 2010 these numbered more than 9,000 and by the time they were stood down at the end of 2017 the UN had spent more than US\$7bn. The experience has been traumatic. In 2010 Nepalese troops assigned to the UN brought cholera, previously unknown in Haiti. Insanitary conditions and lack of clean water in rural and urban areas quickly saw the disease spread throughout the country. Over 800,000 were infected and nearly 10,000 died. The UN at first denied responsibility, admitting it only after six years and a campaign to force it to do so. Cholera is now contained but compensation for victims has been inadequate and delayed. UN forces have also been accused of systematic sexual exploitation and abuse. Action on this has again been slow to follow with less than 100 cases being identified while there is ample evidence of many more. To date very few if any suspects have been prosecuted.

Both US and UN policies in Haiti have comprehensively failed to deliver their stated aims of stability, democracy and development. There is some recognition of this in parts of the US Congress and of the international system but so far little has been done to change direction.

Hope for Haiti?

On October 4th the UN Security Council met to discuss the situation in Haiti. It had before it the regular report by its Special Representative in Haiti, Helen La Lime. She described the situation as “bleak”. The Security Council however did not

reach any conclusions for further action other than to continue its policy of muddling through, which in effect meant following the lead of the US and of prime minister Henry in promoting elections toward the end of next year. Given the demonstrably failed process of elections in the recent past this is likely to resolve nothing without more thoroughgoing change.

Haiti has moved from a situation of acute-on-chronic to paralysis, which the unchecked Covid-19 pandemic has now made worse. There is no agreed way forward which is why increasing numbers of Haitians are leaving the country, including attempting once again to enter the US by hazardous boat journeys to Florida. What is clear, however, is that the actions of the international community in Haiti are more of a hindrance than a help. The future for Haiti needs to be determined by its civil society organisations alone, of which there are more than 500 covering the whole spectrum of society. At present they are divided but they were once united. In 1986 they came together, almost spontaneously, to overthrow the nearly 30-year rule of the Duvaliers and to usher in a period of change. This was ultimately frustrated but such a movement needs to be attempted again if there is to be any hope for Haiti.

[1] The Duvalier regime, father (Papa Doc) and then son (Baby Doc), dominated Haiti from 1957-86. They ruled by a mixture of fear and reward with an emphasis on the former so that all opponents were murdered, imprisoned without trial or exiled. Those who were favoured largely managed to avoid arrest when the regime was overthrown, returning to power in 2010 as supporters of Martelly. They even sheltered Baby Doc when he returned from exile in 2011, and so were known as ‘neo-Duvalierists’. For a discussion of the Martelly regime see: Experience of Haiti: exclusion by election by Ken Cable The Socialist Correspondent No. 28, Summer 2017.

Toussaint L'Ouverture by Pablo Neruda

Out of its own tangled sweetness
Haiti raises mournful petals,
and elaborate gardens, magnificent
structures, and rocks the sea
as a dark grandfather rocks
his ancient dignity of skin and space
Toussaint L'Ouverture knit together
the vegetable kingdom,
the majesty chained,
the monotonous voice of the drums
and attacks, cuts off retreats, rises,
orders, expels, defies
like a natural monarch,
until he falls into the shadowy net
and they carry him over the seas,
dragged along and trampled down
like the return of his race,
thrown into the secret death
of the ship-holds and the cellars.
But on the island the boulders burn,
the hidden branches speak,
hopes are passed on,
the walls of the fortress rise.
Liberty is your own forest,
dark brother, don't lose
the memory of your sufferings,
may the ancestral heroes
have your magic sea-foam in their keeping.

Toussaint L'Ouverture was the brilliant military and political leader of the only successful slave revolt in history which started in Saint-Domingue in 1791. Over the following years the people fought battles against their French colonial masters, the Spanish and the British. Toussaint died in prison in France 1803. However, after the final defeat of the French later that year, the independent black republic of Haiti was founded in 1804. The rebellion of Toussaint and the Haitian people has not been forgotten or forgiven by imperialism.

It is going to be a grim winter **UNDER THE TORIES**

by Eddie Livingstone

Every day brings new harm inflicted by the Tories on the people of Britain, not that you would get any inkling of this from their Conference in October. Johnson was telling jokes, Gove dancing, and Therese Coffey was singing “The Time of My Life” hours before cutting benefits and propelling 5.8million people into poverty.

Tory misery

This government has increased national insurance. It has removed the ‘triple lock’ on pensions, which inevitably means a cut in income for millions of pensioners. And it has instituted real wage cuts across the public sector. UK wholesale gas prices soared 37% in just 24 hours from 5th-6th October, which will be passed onto the consumer. For workers the reality is that prices are rising much faster than wages and their living standards are falling. Millions are sinking into poverty. And yes, the government has just cut benefits by £1000 per annum for nearly 6 million people who were already struggling to make ends meet.

The underlying social cost of more than a decade of Tory rule is devastating. 23% of people in Britain, 15.4 million, are living in poverty (Shelter), including more than 4 million children (Institute for Fiscal Studies). In the past 12 months over 2.5 million people, including half a million children, used Trussell Trust food banks (Statista). Sleeping rough has increased by 73% in the last 5 years and nearly 1/3rd of a million British people are homeless (Shelter). A recent UN report was damning of Britain’s treatment of disabled people. More UK children die, as a percentage, in the first month of life,

than in Cuba or Belarus. Corporate profiteering resulted in 71 Grenfell Tower deaths. The figures are out there: youth unemployment, serious crime, stabbings, rape, domestic violence, child abuse; mental health, NHS waiting lists, suicide rates, classroom sizes, the exodus of staff from teaching and healthcare, discrimination against women, racism, pensioners freezing to death, the prison crisis, corruption and more. Much more. Yet Britain remains the 5th richest country in the world and that wealth is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands.

Establishment splits

Although acting in its interests, not everyone in ruling circles is happy about how the Tories are performing. Many commentators were damning about Johnson’s performance at the Tory conference. “Bombastic, vacuous and economically illiterate” was the assessment of his speech, not by Jeremy Corbyn, or even Keir Starmer, but by the free market think tank, the Adam Smith Institute. There are sharp divisions within the ruling class about how to manage the deepening crisis of British capitalism. The Institute is not on its own. Ryan Shorthouse, director of Bright Blue, said: “The public will soon tire of Boris’s banter if the Government does not get a grip of mounting cri-

ses: price rises, tax rises, fuel shortages, labour shortages.” Chairman of Wetherspoons Tim Martin accused the government of “lurching from one unpredictable initiative to another” with the least “commercial savvy” or “guiding philosophy” of any administration for 40 years. Paul Drechler, Chairman of business group London First, referred to the government as “politicians who failed to listen, never had a plan, and still don’t have a plan” and who threaten “turning a crisis into a cost-of-living catastrophe”. Managing restaurateur Sam Harrison condemned the “disingenuous optimism of our Prime Minister who is so far removed from what is happening in the real business world”. Head of the CBI Tony Danker said firms were “infuriated” by Johnson’s conference speech.

There are also tangible divisions within the government, with Business Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng calling for businesses to recruit more British-based workers, while Chancellor Rishi Sunak, in the name of ‘pragmatism’ hinted at recruiting cheap labour from abroad. These differences are hardly petty. They reflect deep divisions within the British capitalist class about how to protect capital’s interests post-Brexit. And there are divisions over international policy post-Brexit as well.



PHOTO BY PM OFFICE

Tory myths

The public relations themes of the conference were in stark contrast to the actual policies being pursued. In essence the themes were:

- Levelling up
- High-wage, high-skill workforce
- Build back better

Levelling Up: Part of the long term strategy of the Tories to hold on to previously safe Labour seats will involve high profile cheap gimmicks to sustain the illusion of a one nation government. Michael Gove has been appointed Secretary of State for Levelling Up. Of course this is not his real job. Gove's insidious role is to identify and legislate for a range of minimal bargain-basement changes and/or state funded subsidies for monopoly capital that can be presented, with

great hullabaloo, to the northern and midlands working class as a transformative levelling up of regional differentials.

High Wage, High Skill Workforce: At conference, Johnson referred repeatedly to developing a "high wage, high-skilled" workforce. But even with the establishment media at his disposal, he will have difficulties making this believable. Where the government has direct control over wages, in the public sector, it has either frozen wage levels, or increased them minimally, below the rate of inflation. If after the past two years the government feels it can get away with an insulting 3% pay rise for NHS workers (after initially offering 1%!) and underscore this strategy with a 0% offer to teachers, then it is hard to take his posturing seriously. In theory the freeze is set to end but it is unlikely that the government

will make pay offers which address the decline in real wages.

It is clear from the private sector that business leaders have no intention of lifting wage levels unless forced to by shortages of labour, indeed they are plain-speaking in their denunciation of Johnson on this issue. It is difficult not to conclude that 'high wages, high-skilled workforce' is little more than distracting rhetoric, part of Johnson's attempt to paper over the divisions within British capitalism over Brexit.

Build Back Better: This is hardly an original slogan. Over the past 18 months it has been used by Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, Nancy Pelosi, Justin Trudeau, Jacinda Arden, Andy Burnham and Keir Starmer, amongst many others. Clearly it means different things to different people with different ideologies. In Johnson's case, as with everything he says, it

is more to do with creating an impression, or an illusion, rather than reflecting serious intent. Johnson would like us to believe the fantasy that his government, responsible for the highest pandemic death toll in Europe and the worst 2020 GDP performance of all the G20 countries, wants to make a post-pandemic Britain better for ordinary people. In fact he wants to make it better for our tormentors, the class he favours as he hands out multi-million pound test-track-trace-PPE contracts to unqualified parasites. For Johnson and co. 'Build Back Better' is referring to capitalism.

Labour conference

Keir Starmer and the Labour front bench remain weak in their response to the Tories, so it was encouraging that he did not get it all his own way at Labour Party conference which was also in October. The right and the media were desperate to proclaim victory for Starmer but the plan for him to crush the left and present his vision for the future of Labour did not go at all smoothly.

The right certainly had crucial victories regarding the rule changes which will make it harder for MPs to be unseated by CLPs and for a left candidate to get on the ballot for leader. New disciplinary processes will undermine members' rights and democratic accountability in the Party. But these were not passed overwhelmingly, nor was the confirmation of David Evans as General Secretary. Starmer had hoped to achieve more, moving to an electoral college for leadership elections rather than one member one vote. In the event he was unable to table all the rule changes he wanted as they would not have passed the NEC. Unions were disgruntled at the failure to consult with them.

The media and a hall packed with loyalists did their best to love Starmer's conference speech, but

it was a big ask. The one and a half hours included a lengthy section identifying his life story and journey with his political narrative and the future of Labour. This was banal and dull. The rest of it comprised attacks on left policies he'd said he would defend in his election campaign, nods towards Blair's legacy, knee-jerk stuff on patriotism and law and order and few specific policy commitments. There were certainly no strong, radical alternatives put forward to capture the electorate's imagination and address the dire future facing the British people. He also failed to create a simple take away message for the public as to what Labour is about.

Further undermining the triumphalist narrative that Starmer's team were trying to create, the left achieved strong results in policy votes. The motion on Palestine was a big victory. It calls out Israel's persecution of the Palestinians, describes its policies as apartheid and supports sanctions. This was a clear statement that Party members stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people, have not been cowed by the attempts to shut down debate on the issue and that the left remains strong within the Party. Starmer was defeated in conference on one of the key battlegrounds that he chose to attack the left.

There were other good motions passed including overwhelming condemnation of the AUKUS pact, for a Socialist Green New Deal, nationalising energy, housing and supporting workers' rights, sitting at odds with Starmer's pro-big business agenda. Andy McDonald resigned from the Shadow Cabinet over an instruction by Starmer not to support a £15 minimum wage. Conference passed a motion promoted by Trade Unions for a £15 minimum wage.

In a welcome move a motion on electoral reform, which would have

committed the Party to supporting PR, was voted down largely by the Trade Unions.

It was also welcome that attempts by pro-Remain hardliners to commit Labour to re-joining the EU going into the next General Election were defeated; however, Labour still has the disastrous policy that sunk Jeremy Corbyn of another referendum on the EU, with the Party position to be decided at a special conference. In his speech, Starmer pushed the boat out a little bit and said of the Tories: "You need a plan to Make Brexit Work.", and went on to say "I do see a way forward after Brexit..." A reverse of his cheer-leading at a previous conference when an unscripted pro-Remain aside earned him a standing ovation. This time his statement was met with silence.

Fight needed

Although the right-wing leadership tightened its grip on the Party machine at conference, it again showed itself to be devoid of ideas to challenge the Tories and transform peoples' lives. The conference gave Labour members and the left hope and confidence that they remain a strong force within the Party. Some Trade Unions showed their unhappiness with the direction being taken by the leadership. Their role will be important in the coming period both for the Labour Party and the working class. They are committed to delivering results for their members which hopefully will mean an increase in industrial battles and pressing their case actively within Labour for demands such as a £15 minimum wage, good jobs, an end to fire and rehire. The battles within Labour don't happen in a vacuum. Campaigns outside parliament will be critical to influencing its direction and challenging the Tories.

The campaign for Proportional Representation undermines the fight for socialism

by Calvin Tucker

Although defeated at Labour conference last September by the card votes of trade union delegates, promoters of proportional representation (PR) are not accepting that democratic no vote, and are busy campaigning and lobbying to overturn the decision at next year's conference. They have already moved closer to that aim by persuading the UNITE union to change its position. If they succeed, the result could be as damaging as the 'People's Vote' campaign of 2018 and 2019 for a second referendum on the EU. As with the People's Vote, the problem is not merely the wrongness of the policy, but the harm done to the labour movement and to the prospects for socialism if the Labour Party were to adopt it.

Abstract democracy versus the will of the people

PR is supposed to make Britain more democratic. But not only do the advocates of PR misunderstand the democratic deficit within our

capitalist society, their proposals would actually make it worse by entrenching it. Despite the appearance of moving closer to 'pure' democracy, proportional representation would actually make Britain less democratic, by erecting additional barriers between what most people want and what actually gets delivered.

Democracy under capitalism cannot be understood if we disregard class and the nature of power in society. In Britain, the majority of people have shown in poll after poll, with huge majorities, that they want nationalisation of the utilities, more state control of the economy, more taxes on the rich, etc. In polls taken after the Labour Party conference in September, a vast majority of voters among supporters of all parties, said they wanted a £15 per hour minimum wage. Overwhelmingly, the people want an end to neoliberalism. Yet our democratically elected governments and the leaderships of all parliamentary parties, including now the Labour Party, work to achieve the exact opposite

of what the people want. And we're all familiar with people whose response, with some justification, is to say: "They're all the same". Corporate control of the media, allied to a pro-capitalist establishment, successfully shifts the debate away from the class issues that unite the working class majority of people onto 'culture wars' that divide people. PR itself has the potential to become a major issue of this sort.

The 2017 election produced a temporary rupture. For a brief exhilarating moment, under Corbyn's Labour it looked possible that you might actually get what you voted for!

So, the real democratic deficit is that under capitalism, there isn't a transmission belt between putting a cross on a ballot paper and achieving the outcomes that most people desire. PR doesn't even claim to address this. Instead it proposes that there should be an exact, or near exact, arithmetical relationship between the crosses on the ballot papers and the numbers of seats in Parliament for the various parties.



Can a left majority be elected to this place?

PHOTO BY JOAQUIM ALVES GASPAR

It has nothing to say about the fact that none of these parties would, or could, form a government to implement what people want.

The advocates of PR generally accept, and largely support, the idea that this would lead to a proliferation of political parties and a permanently hung parliament. But experience suggests that this appeal to abstract democracy actually makes it less likely that promises made to voters in manifestos will be delivered. We don't have to look back very far to see how this plays out in practice from our experience of hung parliaments and coalitions in Westminster. In 2010, people who had voted Liberal Democrat to abolish tuition fees discovered to their horror that they had actually voted for the tripling of tuition fees and a Tory-led government that delivered austerity. When the betrayed complained, Nick Clegg told them from the side window of his ministerial limo that that was the price for achieving power.

Hung parliaments and regressive alliances

Many (though not all) advocates of PR promote something they call a 'Progressive Alliance', the idea of a pact or coalition between the Labour Party, the Lib Dems, and the Green Party, usually also involving an arrangement with the Scottish National Party (SNP). A good example is *The Guardian* article on 29 May 2021, headlined "To beat the Tories we must first join forces to beat the electoral system". The authors being three leading People's Voters: Caroline Lucas from the Greens, Layla Moran from the Liberal Democrats, and Clive Lewis from the Labour Party. [1] The authors take it as read that Labour, the Lib Dems and the Greens are the progressives, and they identify the problem as being that progressives are split into three tribes. The good thing about the article is that it exposes what is not considered by some left advocates of proportional

representation - that the only way that anyone can envisage it being achieved is through an electoral pact at a general election with the Lib Dems and the Greens (but principally with the Lib Dems).

Looking again at 2010, that general election did in fact deliver a what would have been a working parliamentary majority for the proposed components of a Progressive Alliance. It would have been potentially able to win all votes in Parliament with the support or acquiescence of the SNP and smaller parties, including the SDLP from the 6 counties of the north of Ireland. But what actually happened? The Lib Dems - the second biggest component of this supposed Progressive Alliance - demanded that Gordon Brown be removed as leader before they would even consider an alliance with Labour. And then, after having humiliated the centrist Brown, they put the Tories in anyway. If the alternative to the Tories was an actual left Prime Minister intent on implementing policies such as those contained in the manifestos of 2017 and 2019, that would be an instant deal breaker for the Lib Dems.

a populist nationalist party which we could call 'Continuity UKIP', and if required, with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). The latter of course was the outcome of the second hung Parliament in 2017. So, the 2010 hung Parliament led to a Tory/Lib Dem government and the 2017 hung Parliament led to a Tory/DUP government. Of course, the Tory Party opposes PR, because they prefer to govern alone. But they are quite capable of implementing their class-based agenda in coalition. It was the Cameron-Clegg government of 2010 to 2015 that made the biggest cuts to wages and public services for over a century.

Critically, PR makes any theoretical parliamentary road to socialism impossible. Under PR, it's hard to envisage a scenario in which a socialist candidate in a British election is seen as the alternative Prime Minister of the country - there would be no more 2017 opportunities. At best, the socialist left would be a very small bloc in a hung parliament, a bloc whose lofty ambition would be to become a junior partner in a centrist-led coalition, and even that is most unlikely.

...if the economic situation for most people in Britain worsens further, PR could also unleash the prospects of national representation for an explicitly racist and fascist party, on the lines of the old National Front or British National Party.

That situation - a hung Parliament where Liberal Democrats always get to choose the government, thus preventing any prospect of a move towards socialism - is an optimistic prediction for the outcome of PR. It ignores the danger of an even worse outcome: permanent or semi-permanent Tory rule in alliance with

And another concern: if the economic situation for most people in Britain worsens further, PR could also unleash the prospects of national representation for an explicitly racist and fascist party, on the lines of the old National Front or British National Party. Left advocates of PR tend to downplay the



PHOTO BY NICK CLEGG

dangers of a revived 'Continuity UKIP' plus an openly fascist party gaining a major foothold in Parliament, sometimes even claiming that this has already happened with Boris Johnson's leadership of the Tories. This view rests on the naïve and mechanistic idea that there is a fixed pool of right wing voters, in which the Tories and more extreme nationalist parties fish for votes. But as the current situation in France and Germany shows, together with experience in parts of Britain, ultra-nationalist, openly racist and fascist parties can, when opportunity presents, gain substantial support from (former) left and centre-left working class voters.

Looking abroad, in post-World War 2 Italy, under a system of proportional representation, the Italian Communist Party (which had become a Eurocommunist party, a sort of left social democrat rather than a revolutionary party) received as much as 35% of the vote in the mid-1970s, but was permanently excluded from office by all other parties. Under that system of PR, there was a regressive alliance of all other parties to exclude the left.

In London, in the proportionally elected Greater London Assembly

(GLA), there is a regressive alliance: the Greens and the Liberal Democrats have teamed up with the Tories to share the chairs of all GLA committees and completely exclude Labour. Or to take another recent example from national politics in Britain: in 2017, the Tories bribed the DUP in order to stay in office, and when the Tory-DUP majority fractured over Brexit, and a 'Progressive Alliance' of Remain-ers had the opportunity to install Jeremy Corbyn as an interim prime minister for just a few short weeks and for the sole purpose of reversing Brexit, they declined the opportunity. Stopping Corbyn was more important than stopping Brexit.

Hung parliaments reduce accountability and encourage pork-barrel politics. Transactional politics become institutionalised. The manifestos, i.e. actual policy commitments, become near worthless and people are left to vote for party 'values' - values which the party leaderships will then be free to interpret in any way they choose. Governments will be formed behind closed doors whilst we wait outside as passive observers for a prime minister to emerge, rather like good Catholics wait for the white smoke over the Vatican to see who has been appointed Pope.

Campaign for PR helps the Tories

The worse Labour is polling, the louder the advocates of proportional representation demand it. But while advocacy within the Labour Party for PR and a Progressive Alliance is an expression of demoralisation and defeatism, it doesn't solve the problem of declining support. The so-called progressives: Labour, Lib Dem, Greens, generally poll around 45% to 50% between them. But voters are not armies that can be ordered by party leaders to vote for other parties. Parties do not own voters. Polls tell us that up to a third of Lib Dems would vote Tory over Labour, and we can safely assume that a good number of Labour and Green voters would stay at home rather than vote Lib Dem. So the combined vote for the three parties would be significantly less when they share out the constituencies and stand as an alliance, than when they stand separately. Even on these very conservative estimates, the notional vote for the Progressive Alliance falls to under 40%. That's less than Corbyn's Labour achieved on its own in 2017.

Such an election would pit the Tories saying: "We'll deal with your problems" (whatever those

problems are, and however illusory their solutions) against this Progressive Alliance saying: “let’s talk about a second referendum on changing the electoral system”, or even “let’s talk about having this major constitutional change without a referendum”. You don’t need a crystal ball to predict the likely outcome of that contest!

What else, apart from PR, would be in the manifesto of the so-called Progressive Alliance? Whatever the politics of the Labour leadership, these would be limited to what the Lib Dems would be happy to sign up to – i.e. centrist policies. Thus, another institutional barrier would be raised against the possibility of policies representing the views and needs of the working class majority being put to the electorate, let alone implemented.

If the Progressive Alliance (or the Labour Party separately but alongside the Lib Dems and Greens, in the absence of an alliance) were to go into a general election promising to implement a form of PR without a referendum, as is implied by the text of the motion promoted by the Labour Campaign for New Democracy, which was defeated at 2021 Labour Conference, then that would raise a very serious problem of legitimacy. More so since, relatively recently, in 2011, there was a referendum on a specific form of PR, the alternative vote (AV). Then 13 million voters, a whopping 68% of those who voted, decided to keep the existing system. It will be hard to rebut the arguments that the Progressive Alliance and/or Labour is trying to do something underhand and anti-democratic. However, if a referendum on PR were to be proposed in the manifesto, you can be sure that it will be decried as a ‘second referendum’ on electoral reform, echoing the circumstances that led to Boris Johnson’s big parliamentary majority in 2019. Further, all the divisions and strife following the 2016 Brexit referendum will be dredged up as arguments against having yet another

UK-wide referendum, and hence as arguments against voting Labour/Progressive Alliance. Nor will there be unity among supporters of PR about the form it should take, opening up further divisions and attacks by the media.

Destroying socialist representation

Thus, merely adopting the policy of PR would entrench Tory rule, without even the prospect of implementing a system of proportional representation. But, if PR somehow could be achieved, what would be the effect on socialist representation in Parliament?

For some people who are understandably very dismayed at the Labour Party’s move back to the right under Keir Starmer, PR appears to offer the attractive prospect that a party or parties to the left of Labour could win seats in Parliament. PR probably would prompt many more people on the left to leave the Labour Party, with a view to joining one of the myriad existing very small ‘left of Labour’ parties, or with the idea that another newly created left wing party could win seats under PR. But nothing in the history of the left outside the Labour Party suggests that anything but further fracturing and electoral irrelevance would occur.

We do have something to go by in reckoning the realistic likely electoral prospects for a non-Labour left under PR, because we already have PR for the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, and the London Assembly, and we had it for the European Parliament. The current number of representatives of parties to the left of Labour in all assemblies and parliaments elected under PR in Britain is zero. A decade or two ago, there was a little flurry in Scotland with Tommy Sheridan and the Scottish Socialist Party picking up a handful of seats. But no signs of life since. In London, not even when Ken Livingstone won

the London Mayorship as an independent, did parties to the left of Labour win a single seat on the GLA.

Because of the structure of British politics, including the nature of the Labour Party and corporate/establishment control of the media, there is no relation whatsoever between the 40% of the vote which Labour could achieve in 2017 with a left wing programme, and the vote that a ‘left of Labour’ Party would achieve if it stood for election with exactly the same programme.

On the other hand, under PR the prospects for a potential right wing split from Labour would be very different. In the early 1980s the SDP, led by four senior right wing Labour figures, split from the Party which was at the time led by Michael Foot. Given massive media backing, the SDP in alliance with the Liberals, won nearly 7.8 million votes, enough to ensure the defeat of Labour in the 1983 general election and prompt the resignation of Foot, who was replaced by Neil Kinnock. But due to First Past the Post, the SDP did not gain enough seats to threaten Labour’s position as the main opposition party. Should events in future result in Labour again moving to the left, PR would make the party very much more vulnerable to the impact of a pro-capitalist split, with the prospect of it achieving even a plurality of parliamentary seats very remote.

And while the Labour leadership and hierarchy are in right wing hands, the potentially devastating impact of PR on left Labour representation in Parliament also needs to be considered. A “party list” PR system, or even a hybrid system comprising a national party list and local constituencies with new multi-member or single member constituencies, would give Labour HQ the opportunity to centralise control, further disenfranchise local party members, and remove all existing left Labour MPs at a stroke.

Most forms of PR also make it very difficult for independent candidates to win, whether that's Martin Bell on an anti-sleaze platform, or a 'save the local hospital' campaigner. So, it means more power to the party leaderships to control the narrative and to quell dissent.

Some left supporters of PR counter that the version of PR which they prefer, and the way Labour applied it, would not cause these devastating results. The problem with this is that once the Party had adopted PR as a policy, as it stands now, it would be up to the right wing leadership and officials of the Party to decide which version of PR would be adopted and how it would be implemented – not the left supporters of PR.

Meaningful change

The claim that PR is needed because First Past the Post ensures perpetual Tory rule is founded on an astonishing act of political amnesia. In 2017,

Labour came within a few thousand votes of becoming the largest party in Parliament. What prevented electoral victory was not the voting system, but the internal right wing sabotage of Corbyn's leadership and the election campaign. Despite the sabotage, a manifesto that embodied what most people want increased the Labour vote dramatically, from 30% to 40%. Labour lost in 2019, not because of the electoral system, but principally because of the Party's accelerating capitulation to People's Vote campaign, which lost it scores of Leave-voting seats and destroyed any prospect of winning the party's target marginal seats in England and Wales, nearly 80% of which were Leave-voting Tory held constituencies. [2]

Now in the form of the PR campaign, we face the new equivalent of the People's Vote - a policy that cannot actually be delivered but will cause all kinds of unintended, or in some cases, intended - negative consequences. What it does do is take

Labour towards the idea, if not the actuality, of a Lib-Lab pact and in doing so make it institutionalised hostages to centrism and a platform that has no policies that haven't already failed.

Rejecting PR is not to accept the status quo. On the contrary, it is to fight to keep the door open to overcoming the status quo, i.e. the system that impoverishes the majority and enriches a tiny minority. And it is a fight for democracy, for the possibility that voting could result in meaningful change.

[1] Caroline Lucas, Layla Moran and Clive Lewis, To beat the Tories, we must first join forces to beat the electoral system <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/may/29/beat-the-tories-electoral-system-first-past-the-post>

[2] Richard Johnson, Labour's path to victory is through Leave-voting Conservative marginals <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2019/02/04/labours-path-to-victory-is-through-leave-voting-conservative-marginals/>

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NORTH SEA OIL IN DECLINE

The impact on Scotland and workers

by Frieda Park

North Sea gas and oil have been a major part of the Scottish economy in recent decades. Even though it is now in decline, in 2019, according to the Scottish Government, the industry still provided 5% of Scotland's GDP (£8.8bn) in extraction alone. Despite financial and other services dominating the economy, oil remains important and a big employer of working class people in its extraction, refining, transportation and supply chains.

The first gas came ashore in late 1966 and the first oil in 1975. Seventeen years later, in 1992, Britain was the 5th largest producer of oil and gas in the world. BP was one of the first companies to strike oil in the North Sea. In 1974 the British Government owned 68% of the company. This share was subsequently sold off under Thatcher's drive to privatisation. [1] Little benefit accrued to the people of Scotland or the UK from this vast wealth. Oil and gas were extracted as quickly as possible and the profits went into the coffers of huge oil companies. Production peaked in 1999. Nearly a quarter of fields are currently running at a loss and the oil is running out in existing fields. New developments are likely to be medium or small scale which might not be attractive for companies to exploit. In 2014 Saudi over-production, aimed at undermining US shale oil, led to a slump in demand for North Sea oil and the estimated loss of 75,000 on and off-shore jobs in Britain.

Though at first the North Sea was dominated by the big oil companies this has now diversified and includes more companies each with a smaller share such as Ineos, China National Petroleum Corporation (a Chinese state-owned enterprise) and private equity backed companies like Chrysoar.

Political importance

Oil has also been a key feature of Scottish politics as nearly all UK offshore oil and gas reserves are off the coast of Scotland. This helped boost the SNP campaign for independence as it argued, selfishly, that keeping the oil wealth for Scotland would make it rich. They never, however, addressed the issue of who actually owned the oil and who really gets the wealth. The SNP's long standing slogan was "Its Scotland's oil" and even at the time of the independence referendum in 2014 it was arguing for the importance of the oil industry to the economic health of an independent Scotland. However, the oil is running out and with the pressure now on to aim for net zero carbon emissions and COP26 in Glasgow, basing Scotland's future prosperity on oil seems redundant. This is causing problems for the SNP as it tries to square its professed commitment to a green economy with having to give up oil and one of its central arguments for an economically viable independent country. Nicola Sturgeon has tried to sit on the fence over the proposed development of the Cambo oil field off Shetland, attempting to avoid stating a view

for or against and putting the onus back on the UK government.

Workers in the North Sea

Workers in the oil and gas industry are no strangers to the challenges facing so many other sections of the working class today, seeing their pay and conditions eroded by casualisation and bogus self-employment. In addition, they face the problems of a declining industry and the phasing out of fossil fuels to halt climate change. It was with a view to addressing the latter question that environmental groups, Friends of the Earth Scotland, Greenpeace and Platform, supported by The RMT and Unite, conducted research in 2020 and 2021 among workers in the offshore industry aiming to look at how a just transition from working in oil to green industries could be achieved. The results revealed a lot not only about the challenges and possibilities of this but also about the conditions of those employed in the industry. [2] & [3]

By mid-2019, 30,600 were employed offshore in oil and gas. However, the report warns that there are no accurate, unbiased figures. During the coronavirus lockdown, with demand for oil slumping, the workforce at September 2020 was estimated to be 23,000

In terms of the respondents to the survey it was interesting that 51% lived in Aberdeenshire and Moray, Fife and Angus and the Highlands and Islands, i.e. relatively local.

34.8% of respondents identified themselves as union members: the biggest being RMT-OILC with 51% followed by Unite. This may well be skewed by the fact that the unions were promoting the survey.

The precarious work arising from casualisation was highlighted by workers as the main problem they faced, exacerbated by the volatility of the industry. This has made workers vulnerable to pay cuts. One worker quoted in the report summed it up:

“Morale is low, certainly in Aberdeen where 75% of the people are contractors...companies repeatedly cut the rates of contractors, saying ‘your rates are cut 10% next month, take it or leave it’. I know guys who have had two or three pay cuts over six months, no negotiations, nothing. If one engineering company cuts rates, all the others do too. I’ve honestly long suspected there is a cartel around this, you’ll find that if one cuts by 10%, the others will follow in a week or two.

When the oil price is low, the companies just cut rates arbitrarily, but when demand is on the rise again, the rates start to rise too.

There have always been a lot of contractors, but maybe if you go back thirty years, the BPs and Shells employed a lot of engineers themselves. In 1990, BP basically outsourced all of their engineers to Brown and Root, with a lot of engineers taking the golden handshake of two years’ salary before moving to be contractors.” [2]

In 2014 oil workers took a big hit, experiencing pay cuts, reductions in numbers and a change to shift patterns, so that they spent an extra 5 weeks offshore for the same pay.

Safety issues are important in a high-risk environment. As well as day to day safety concerns there have been rig disasters and helicopter crashes. The Piper Alpha fire in 1988 led to 167 deaths and prompted an upsurge in union member-



PHOTO BY GARY BEMBRIDGE

ship including the establishment of a new union, OILC. OILC is now part of the RMT.

Yet safety did not feature as prominently as one might expect among workers concerns. The average response indicated that workers were neither totally satisfied nor dissatisfied. The report’s authors speculate that unsatisfactory safety standards have become so normal that they are simply accepted, compounded by the feeling that there is nothing that workers can do about it for fear of victimisation. There is no formal role for trade unions on safety committees.

Another huge area of dissatisfaction was round training and certification

to work. As self-employed contractors, workers have to foot the bill for this themselves. A further report by the environmental organisations in 2021 explored this in more depth. [3] The report cites a figure of 74.5% of workers as being self-employed. It found that:

- Workers were paying on average over £1800 in training costs per year.
- 69% spent over £2000 of their own money on training including safety and trade-specific courses in the last two years, which is up 15% from before 2015.
- 65% said their employer contributed 0% to their training costs including safety and first aid training

in the past two years, which is up from 45% before 2015

■ There was a lack of passporting between different companies within the industry and from it across to renewables. That is to say, safety and training certificates are not recognised even when they are relevant and up-to-date. Workers are, therefore, continually being required to repeat training. This even happens sometimes with their current employer.

The reasons workers identified for these problems were:

- Negligence by government and regulatory bodies
- Increased casualisation of the offshore oil & gas workforce
- Lack of support for workers and communities
- Profiteering training companies

...last year 8 oil companies announced that they were ending a long-standing collective bargaining agreement so that they could cut costs.

Union organisation

It has been notoriously difficult to organise in the North Sea due to the location of workplaces – platforms far out in the deep seas. This has been made worse by the casualisation of the workforce making it difficult to know who is employed where and to organise collectively. But there has been industrial action

and unions remain active. A year on from Piper Alpha there was a strike of 7000 oil workers over safety concerns – something which some thought impossible to organise. There were further strikes the following year over union recognition, safety and pay, with 74 installations affected. There are other examples – in July 2016, 400 Unite members went on strike for 24 hours on Shell platforms against pay cuts and rota changes. July 2018 saw Unite members go on strike against Total imposing new rotas. The strike lasted till September when Total eventually revised the rotas after losing production of 13 million cubic metres of gas per day and around 70,000 barrels of oil per day. Unite members took further action in March the following year, once again over rotas. [4]

To improve joint working between unions in the sector the Offshore Coordinating Group was launched in February 2016 and is composed of all the unions operating offshore, including UNITE, RMT, GMB, Nautilus International, Prospect and BALPA. However, last year 8 oil companies announced that they were ending a long-standing collective bargaining agreement so that they could cut costs. Nevertheless, in February this year, the RMT, Unite and the GMB announced that they had reached an agreement with 13 contractors in the North Sea to establish a collective bargaining framework for thousands of engineering and maintenance workers.

The future for workers

Workers want secure, well-paid jobs that make use of their skills and experience. The highest level of dissatisfaction in terms of their work was with job insecurity. Such is the disillusionment with precarious work and other issues among offshore workers that 81.7% of respondents to the survey said they would consider moving out of the industry. There was a lot of positivity about moving to similar jobs in green industries, particularly off-

shore wind, renewables and decommissioning oil rigs. More than half of workers were willing to consider a just transition out of oil and gas and into green industries if there was training in place. However, there was a low level of confidence in Government support. Workers felt that government at all levels had failed: local, Scottish and UK. They highlighted issues such as:

- The inadequacy of Universal Credit
- Lack of regulation round labour standards
- Contracts going overseas
- Lack of investment in regional development
- Training

Despite all the challenges unions are still fighting for their members interests. Workers themselves have clearly expressed a desire for secure jobs which value and reward their skills. However, there is little sign of the Scottish or UK governments responding to these justified demands for better conditions now and supporting moves out of oil extraction to green jobs in the future. Instead matters are still being left to the market and the very companies which have attacked workers and undermined working conditions and pay.

[1] The Grangemouth refinery was also sold off as part of this privatisation and the ensuing vicious attacks on the workers and their union at the plant is the subject of *Taking on a corporate giant – Ineos, Unite and Grangemouth* – a chapter in *If you don't run, they can't chase you* by Neil Findlay reviewed in this issue of *The Socialist Correspondent*

[2] Offshore: Oil and gas workers' views on industry conditions and the energy transition – Friends of the Earth Scotland (foe.scot)

[3] Tickets & Training: The Hidden Costs For Offshore Oil & Gas Workers – Friends of the Earth Scotland (foe.scot)

[4] Through time: offshore strikes in the North Sea (offshore-technology.com)

Quantitative easing, post-lockdown crisis and the super-rich

Container ship in Los Angeles

PHOTO BY DOWNTOWNGAL

by Noah Tucker

Well into our second year since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus pandemic, the world capitalist economy is now also suffering from a new malaise, a global economic pandemic involving some symptoms which seem entirely new and others which have not been seen for many years. But, however unfamiliar they appear, these symptoms can only be understood in terms of capitalism, and of the actions taken by the capitalist states and central banks to shore the system up. As a consequence of Covid, this is both a crisis of the pandemic and the panacea. It involves price inflation. This is not caused by workers demanding higher pay, but by the use of monetary policy to protect big business and the ultra-rich. Yet Labour right wingers, such as Wes Streeting, speak as if higher wages would lead to an inflationary spiral. [1]

Supply, demand and wages

In Britain, we hear the parochial claims that our ‘empty shelves’ in shops are mainly caused by Brexit, and accusations that, for instance, the rocketing prices for gas and

electricity are all the fault of Vladimir Putin. So it is worth hearing an American account of this malaise. As Derek Thompson wrote in *The Atlantic*: “The U.S. economy isn’t yet experiencing a downturn akin to the 1970s period of stagflation. This is something different, and quite strange. Americans are settling into a new phase of the pandemic economy, in which GDP is growing but we’re also suffering from a dearth of a shocking array of things—test kits, car parts, semiconductors, ships, shipping containers, workers. This is the Everything Shortage.

The Everything Shortage is not the result of one big bottleneck in, say, Vietnamese factories or the American trucking industry. We are running low on supplies of all kinds due to a veritable hydra of bottlenecks...

The most dramatic expression of this snarl is the purgatory of loaded cargo containers stacked on ships bobbing off the coast of Los Angeles and Long Beach. Just as a normal traffic jam consists of too many drivers trying to use too few lanes, the traffic jam at California ports has been exacerbated by extravagant consumer demand slamming into a shortage of trucks, truckers,

and port workers. Because ships can’t be unloaded, not enough empty containers are in transit to carry all of the stuff that consumers are trying to buy. So the world is getting a lesson in Econ 101: High demand plus limited supply equals prices spiraling to the moon. Before the pandemic, reserving a container that holds roughly 35,000 books cost \$2,500. Now it costs \$25,000.” [2]

Indeed, these are all manifestations of insufficient or reduced supply in a global market economy, unable to meet high or even merely maintained demand, resulting in shortages and rising inflation. But this appears to be the opposite of the kind of economic crisis which capitalism usually generates due to the internal processes of the capitalist market.

Thus for example, in 1921 to ’22, then in the depression following the 1929 crash, and more recently in the crisis of 2008 and onwards, the underlying problem was more and more goods and services being produced (with the expectation of profits) than people could afford to buy, because, in the interests of profits, their wages being kept too low to purchase all those goods and services. The result during those

classical capitalist crises was not shortages and higher inflation, but unsold products, high unemployment and a risk of deflation. Deflation is a special worry for economists because it can lead to a spiraling vortex of falling prices and plunging profits, as occurred in the 1930s - hence central banks being given inflation targets, to ensure average prices keep rising at least one or two annual percentage points above zero.

Before going further, an upside to the present debacle must be acknowledged. The perennial economic struggle between workers and employers, i.e. between labour and capital, is one in which, paradoxically, the fewer there are who are willing and able to supply

pushing for better pay. In the USA, the 10th month of 2021 was dubbed 'Striketober' because of the surge in industrial disputes. Britain is also seeing a wave of action and pay demands by workers, with successes recorded from the binmen's strike in Brighton to, Liverpool lorry drivers who have won a 17% pay rise.

Alongside the ramifications of coronavirus, there are other factors impacting the supply side of the economy. Among them, there is the age profile in some industries, with big proportions of workers approaching retirement (this itself having resulted in large part from low pay and harsh conditions which young people are reluctant to sign up for); last year's cold winter in Asia, resulting in the depletion of gas stocks; and

and the influenza pandemic of 1918 to 1920. Although nearer in time, the lessons of the 1918-20 pandemic are somewhat less clear because the lockdown period was relatively brief and its immediate economic impact in most advanced capitalist countries was relatively low in comparison to Covid-19, and its wider effects merge with those of the end of World War 1, demobilisation and the return to a peacetime economy.

The Black Death, on the other hand, was an enormous event with utterly devastating human cost. Estimates of the proportion of the European population who died vary from 30% to 60%. This tragedy, however, led to an improved bargaining position for the surviving peasantry and rural and urban workers. In England, the ruling classes of the time were so alarmed by this that they enacted two pieces of legislation, the Ordinance of Labourers (1349) and the Statute of Labourers (1351). The preamble of the latter complained that: "Whereas lately it was ordained by our lord King and by the assent of the prelates, earls, barons and others of his council, against the malice of servants who were idle and not willing to serve after the pestilence without excessive wages, that such manner of servants, men as well as women, should be bound to serve, receiving the customary salary and wages... it is given to the King to understand in the present parliament by the petition of the commons that the servants having no regard to the ordinance but to their ease and singular covetousness, do withdraw themselves from serving great men and others, unless they have livery and wages double or treble of what they were wont to take in the twentieth year and earlier, to the great damage of the great men and impoverishment of all the commonality..." [3]

The act commanded all able-bodied persons under the age of 60, with no other means of support, to work for any employer that required

Two historical examples of epidemics followed by economic and social disruption have been widely studied: the Black Death, which peaked in Europe between 1347 and 1351, and the influenza pandemic of 1918 to 1920.

their labour (or to be more exact, who are willing and able to provide that labour at a particular price) the stronger becomes the side of the workers and the weaker the position of the employers. Our current situation follows decades of wages stagnating, and even falling in many instances. The impact of this in Britain was masked in recent years by the employment of workers from eastern European countries where average pay rates are even lower. Although far from being the main cause, Brexit has made a contribution to the changed situation in Britain. Now, with a workforce whose availability has been reduced mainly due to Covid, workers are sensing the improvement in their relative power and are

the fragility of the global supply chain, with reserves cut to the bone to reduce costs and boost profits. But the trigger and the common element to the 'hydra' of restrictions on supply is the impact of Covid and the lockdown measures. And it is the monetary response of governments and central banks, acting to protect the big corporations and the wealthy in these conditions, which has unbalanced the other side of the equation - demand.

Middle ages crisis

Two historical examples of epidemics followed by economic and social disruption have been widely studied: the Black Death, which peaked in Europe between 1347 and 1351,



David Cameron

them, and it set maximum wage rates based on the pre-plague pay levels prevalent in 1346, with terms of imprisonment of forty days for a first offence, followed by a quarter of a year for subsequent offences. This legislation did somewhat restrain the pressure for better pay, but the main factor which defeated the aspirations of the 'malicious servants' for a higher standard of living was a change in the money supply. As Professor David Routt of the University of Richmond, Virginia notes: "In some instances, the initial hikes in nominal or cash wages subsided in the years further out from the plague and any benefit they conferred on the wage laborer was for a time undercut by another economic change fostered by the plague. Grave mortality ensured that the European supply of currency in gold and silver increased on a per-capita basis, which in turn unleashed substantial inflation in prices that did not subside in England until the mid-1370s and even later in many places on the continent. The inflation reduced the purchasing power (real wage) of the wage laborer so significantly that, even with higher cash wages, his earnings either bought him no more or often substantially less than before the magna pestilencia. [4] To be clear, what caused the post-plague inflation, which devalued

the workers' gains in money wages, was not cost pressure from the wage rises themselves, but the fact that the Black Death had killed off people, while the same amount of gold, silver and coins remained as before- therefore the supply of money per person rose rapidly. This was accompanied in 1351 by an official reduction in the weight (per coin) of English silver coinage, creating additional funds for the King without having to impose taxes on the barons, earls and prelates, while further devaluing the value of the currency. With production now limited by the smaller size of the surviving labouring and peasant population, rampant inflation took hold, reducing or even wiping out the gains in real wages.

So should the workers of the mid-14th Century have therefore limited their aims, and refrained from demanding higher pay for fear of setting off a wage-price spiral? Definitely not. Had they not achieved higher money wages, the value of their pay would have slid even further behind prices, as the inflation which occurred was due to increased monetary demand resulting from a completely different and independent cause. That was the huge per-person increase in the amount of money, the bulk of which, of course, was in the coffers of the 'prelates, earls, barons and others' of the ruling class, rather than in the pockets of labourers and peasants.

The parallels between 1351 and 2021 are for sure inexact. One of the main differences is that the recent vast increase in the money supply via 'quantitative easing' is entirely deliberate.

QE a free lunch for the ultra-rich

Deployed by the central banks and governments of all the major advanced countries which have their own currencies, and by the authorities of the EU's Eurozone, quantitative easing has become the

all-purpose method of choice for ensuring that those who benefit most from capitalism continue to prosper irrespective of systemic economic challenges, and that cuts in public services and incomes for the masses can be implemented without destabilising effects on the overall economy.

There are innocent claims, cloaked in abstruse jargon, that the purpose of QE is merely to expand the volume of money so as to prevent the inflation rate from falling too low, thus fending off the danger of deflation. In fact QE is the electronic printing of many hundreds of billions (of pounds, dollars, yen etc) which are provided by the central bank, via purchases of government bonds, to the central government. Since the crisis of 2008, QE has become a major source of state revenue for the advanced capitalist powers. Due to the prominence of the City of London in global finance, Britain was uniquely (for a major advanced country) exposed to the impact of the 2008 crash. For the Conservative leadership under David Cameron, the depth of the crisis, which was still unresolved in 2010, provided both the need for a radical way out, and an opportunity. The chosen way forward avoided the need for any increased taxes on the rich, or any increased control by the state in the productive economy. This way forward, which became known as 'austerity', was made possible by quantitative easing.

QE played a hugely important and almost entirely unacknowledged role in facilitating the deep austerity cuts under the Tory/Lib Dem coalition government of Cameron, Osborne and Clegg from 2010 to 2015. These were, effectively, big transfers of resources from the poor and the general population to the very rich. The huge scale of the cuts in the public sector, combined with the reductions in the purchasing power of the population due to cuts in wages, would have sent the economy, and with it the public finances, into a

steep nosedive if the government had had to rely only on revenue from taxation on the mass of the population and borrowing from the private markets. (This was indeed predicted by former Monetary Policy Committee member Danny Blanchflower.) But a third major source of revenue had been discovered – the provision of newly minted electronic cash, supplied almost directly by the Bank of England.

Given the ongoing deflationary ramifications of the 2008 crash, combined with the effects of austerity, the British state was able to create and spend £435 billion of its own money from QE, without causing any rampant inflationary effects except for the big rise in asset values. That, of course, was a very welcome side effect from the viewpoint of the ultra-rich, who have accrued large increases in wealth as a result. But the real value of QE is more than just a side effect. The value is that governments have, so far, been able to meet major economic challenges to the system that benefits the very rich, and even to make changes that skew the system further in their favour, without facing economic meltdown and without having to draw on the wealth of the very rich via taxation, or reduce their power.

Hence, in dealing with the challenges of Covid and its consequences from early 2020 onwards, the advanced capitalist states reached for QE as their monetary tool to address the challenges of the pandemic and lockdown, to avoid increasing income taxes on the top 1%, or implementing wealth taxes on them, or instead of intervening more directly in the economy. In Britain alone, an additional £450 billion has been created in QE money since March 2020, covering for the extra costs of lockdown (the furlough scheme cost a ‘mere’ £69 billion up to the end of August 2021) plus the losses to the Treasury due to reduced economic activity. [5]

One consequence has been the highly unusual phenomenon of wealth increasing during a recession. As noted in a Resolution Foundation report in August 2021, the bulk of this wealth has been accrued by the richest. The 2021 *Sunday Times* Rich List recorded an extremely rapid rise in the wealth of the extremely rich, with a 24% increase in the number of billionaires in Britain to 171, with a combined wealth increase of 21.7%, to a total of assets of £597.2 billion, though this is probably an underestimate. [6] As a phalanx protecting the almost unbelievable riches of these 171 individuals stands not only the British government, but also the new leadership of the Labour Party, which refuses even to contemplate requiring this tiny elite to pay a bit more in tax.

Roosting chickens

But as the current situation shows, monetary policy does not provide an everlasting ‘free lunch’ without consequences, even for the very rich. Increasing panic over rising inflation is fuelling speculation that QE will shortly be ‘tapered’ off and interest rates increased. But, with the system remaining fundamentally unchanged, this will only add to the risk of a further economic crash. Politically also, the processes of class society, whether purely internal or when impacted on by other phenomena, e.g. a pandemic, always favour the richest but nevertheless inevitably rebound in rebellion. The Black Death, and subsequent inflation and repression of wages, was followed by Peasants’ Revolt. World War 1, the Spanish Flu and 1921-22 crisis were followed by the 1926 General Strike. The crisis of the 1930s and World War 2 were followed by the 1945 Labour government, the nationalisation of some industries and the welfare state which lasted for a generation. The 2008 crash led to the anti-austerity movement, which for a few years made Jeremy Corbyn the leader of the British Labour Party.

So far in the lockdown and post-pandemic period of 2020 to 2022, the working class is winning some strikes. There will be more to come.

[1] https://twitter.com/Angry_Voice/status/1446064043840655360

[2] America Is Choking Under an ‘Everything Shortage’ - *The Atlantic*

[3] https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/citizenship/citizen_subject/transcripts/stat_lab.htm

[4] <https://eh.net/encyclopedia/the-economic-impact-of-the-black-death/>

[5] <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9152/CBP-9152.pdf>

[6] <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/uk-rich-list-sunday-times-billionaires-wealth-rise-pandemic-b936423.html>

From The Socialist Correspondent 10 years ago

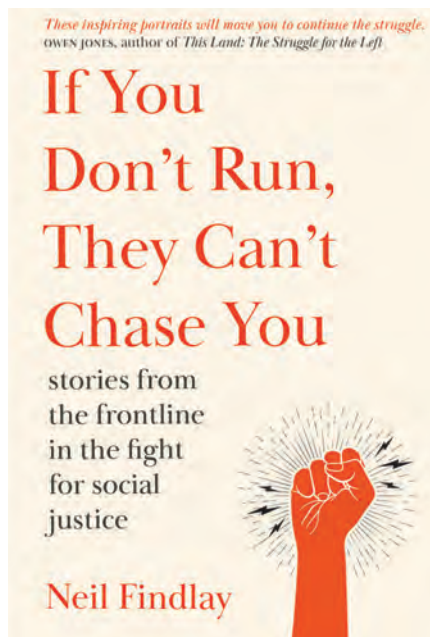
The phone hacking scandal at the News of the World – coming after the banking crisis and the MPs’ expenses scandal – has exposed for a brief moment the workings of capitalist democracy: with elected ‘representatives’ terrified of the rich and powerful, and the police hand-in-glove with ruling class lawbreakers.

At the centre of the scandal is the Chipping Norton set – “the social wing of the Murdoch empire” – one of the informal power structures that rule Britain.

Issue 13 Autumn 2011
**The Murdochs and the
hacking scandal**

Simon Korner

Some will choose to fight



IF YOU DON'T RUN THEY CAN'T CHASE YOU

by Neil Findlay,
Luath Press,
Edinburgh 2021

Review by Vince Mills

*"The scars of the past are slow to disappear
The cries of the dead are always in our ears
And only the very safe can talk about wrong and right
Of those who are forced to choose, some will choose to fight"*

Paul Doran

This book is a collection of first-hand accounts of campaigns by those who, in the words of Paul Doran's *Natives*, chose to fight – campaigners, all at the core and many at the inception of major campaigns on social justice.

Despite the author's background as an MSP and Councillor, they go well beyond the political to cover industrial, social and community struggles. Some of these are older, industrial defeats that still hurt like the miners' strike (1984-85) and the Ineos dispute, while others are much more recent, like the Spycops and the Mesh scandals, where there has been some level of redress, even if the campaigns are still very much alive. Others still, like the anti-apartheid movement which operated on an international level and the more local campaign against the Football Act enacted by the Scottish Parliament can be described as, pretty well, unqualified successes.

Taking on the state

The book is a collection of interviews transcribed by the author and he succeeds in communicating the raw anger in many of the campaigns, especially I think in the women.

Here is Margaret Aspinall who lost her son, James at the Hillsborough disaster, describing what happened when Mrs Thatcher, then Tory Prime Minister, came to offer condolences:

"She came to me and I said, 'I'm sorry Mrs Thatcher, I do not want to shake your hand just now.'
'Why ever not dear?' she said in that voice.
I said, 'Until you can tell me the truth about my son dead having attended his first ever away game, then I won't shake your hand.'"

Despite revelations about incompetence and cover-ups, the Justice for the 96 campaign is still pursuing redress for those who died that day.

The strength of this kind of collection is that the reader can reach their own conclusions about the kind of state we live in without the author preaching. Those who come into conflict with it, as many who tell their tales here, reveal a system where surveillance is a common tool - an intrusion that nearly destroyed the life of Andrea who married an undercover cop. His job was to get information on her friends, one of whom was involved in the anti-blacklisting campaign. And though perhaps we should not be surprised that Brian Filling, a key anti-apartheid activist, was subject to ongoing surveillance, it is worth noting that striking miners and MPs supporting them and even it would appear community activists trying to get the Football Act abolished were not beyond the interest of the forces of law and order. This is Paul Quigley who was at the centre of Fans Against Criminalisation, the campaign founded in 2011 to contest a piece of emergency legislation which curtailed the rights of football fans. The Offensive Behaviour at Football Act was eventually repealed in 2018:

"The surveillance was really in your face. From the moment we stepped off a supporters' bus or a flight we were followed and filmed till the moment we got back on."

This is not just information gathering - it is, as Brian notes, intimidation. But it is far from the only form of intimidation that campaigners face. The description of the pain and injuries the mesh campaigners had to suffer is some of the most harrowing that the book has to offer, among much, it has to be said. What are we to make of a system, where women who have suffered all this, one of them in her wheel chair because of medical incompetence and corporate greed, are then subjected to the kind of treatment faced by Elaine Holmes of the Scottish Mesh Survivors 'Hear Our Voice' campaign, which brought together hundreds of other women suffering the effects of polypropylene mesh implant surgery:

"At one meeting I was being cross examined by three senior surgeons and officials who wouldn't let up and were pressing me aggressively on a number of issues...they broke me under intense pressure, so Olive stood up and wheeled me out." The 'Olive' referred to is Olive McIlroy, a co-founder of the Mesh campaign.

Indeed, being looked down on and dismissed, not least by those whose profession inflicted this catastrophe on them in the first place, is a common feature many of the campaigners experienced.

Dave Smith, who was blacklisted, worked on building sites as a civil engineer: "You couldn't get a start on the big projects and any jobs you did get were on the smaller projects, where the money was less. And even then it wasn't long before they got rid of you...I went to the politicians and raised the issue, but they dismissed it as a conspiracy theory or said I was making it up."

Courage, persistence, creativity and humour

Despite this, despite the legal system, the police, the put downs, the surveillance, despite all of this, working-class campaigners have

refused to back down. They have shown courage, persistence, creativity and, of course, humour.

Terry Renshaw faced jail time and several of his mates served it after being 'fitted up' as part of the Shrewsbury 24 picketing case: "In December '73 the first trial ended and saw Des Warren, Ricky Tomlinson and John McKinsie Jones go to jail...The second trial was January 1974 - three went to jail, found guilty on all charges...My barrister told me 'they have you down as Des Warren's right-hand man and if you don't plead guilty you are going down for three years.' I refused to plead guilty..."

In the end Terry received a suspended sentence but the courage he and his victimised comrades showed was immense.

Maria Fyfe who died in 2020 was the very embodiment of persistence. Despite the prevalent sexism in both the Glasgow Council chambers and the Westminster chamber where Maria was the only woman MP elected in a group of 50 Scottish Labour MPs in 1987, she continued to fight for increased representation of women and women's issues throughout her career:

"On the day my bill came before parliament, the clerk was about to read out the name of my bill. Tory Nicholas Soames was sitting beside me and asked me what my bill was all about...Then the clerk shouted out, 'THE TAMPON SAFETY BILL!' and Soames slumped in his seat and said audibly, 'What is this place coming to.'"

Alistair Mackie was the Trade Unionist who was at the core of the Workers' Action Committee that won the Scottish Daily News as a workers' cooperative in 1975, after the workforce had been made redundant by Beaverbrook Newspapers. It took a highly creative strategy to hold together groups of workers historically divided on the

basis of craft and to win the support of large sections of the population who, for a while at least, supported the paper. Eventually it was taken over by Robert Maxwell and collapsed. Here is Mackie:

"...I got a phone call from senior Glasgow Labour MP Hugh Brown who said to me, 'Have you thought about setting up a cooperative to take over the paper?'...I put the idea to the Action Committee and pointed out that we could either go for the cooperative idea or the paper would shut within a month. That was the stark choice before us."

Some final words from scouser Tony Nelson who was at the centre of the Dockers Dispute 1995-97. The Mersey Docks and Harbour Company tried to crush resistance to casualisation but dockers refused to cross the picket line of sacked colleagues. The ensuing dispute generated extraordinary solidarity and collaboration of dockers globally and despite all of hardships of that campaign, Tony is still able to make you laugh.

One of the outcomes of the dispute was surprising. Using money raised by a film that Jimmy McGovern had made in support of the locked-out workers, the dockers opened Casa Bar to provide premises for meetings and social gatherings for any progressive organisation. Despite their best endeavours to keep it exclusive to acceptable left wing causes and hence avoid trouble, one night a group of lecturers booked a fancy-dress party, and unfortunately it was themed on the second world war:

"My partner Jackie ...came through needing a hand from me: Tony you'll need to come through, one of the lads has just knocked out Adolf Hitler."

Vince Mills is Chair of Unite West of Scotland Education Branch