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UKRAINE CRISIS EXPOSES DIVISIONS IN THE WEST

The threat of war Ukraine Taiwan

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Cover photo - *Nato flag from The Presidential Administration of Ukraine*

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COMMENTARY

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The conflict in Ukraine has exposed differences and divisions within the NATO alliance. Under President Biden the US has continued to enforce its role as global superpower, requiring that the rest of the world adheres to its diktats. This is increasingly being done by coercion of allies, and aggression against enemies. Of course, bullying tactics can be successful, but by definition they do not have the consent of the bullied. This places real strains on alliances where other parties have their own interests and do not want to be manipulated or ignored as it suits the US.

Ukraine

In *Ukraine crisis exposes divisions in the West*, Alex Davidson explores the complex tensions which exist across the globe, but which have come into focus over Ukraine. The United States and Britain have taken a more bellicose and confrontational position towards Russia, but France and Germany less so. Within the EU itself there are differences as well, with France particularly wanting "strategic autonomy" for the EU to act independently, but eastern states still wishing a close alliance with the US. Western tensions have an economic as well as a geopolitical dimension. Of central importance is the Nord Stream 2 pipeline which will bring natural gas from Russia to Germany. The US does not want to see this level of collaboration between the two countries and is seeking markets for its own gas. Davidson says that the strategy may well be to provoke Russia into armed conflict, forcing European countries into line and killing off Nord Stream 2.

Over Ukraine, the US and Britain have ramped up the threat of war through rhetoric, providing arms and stationing troops in the region. Russia, which stands accused by the West of threatening to invade Ukraine has, by contrast, so far only deployed troops defensively. Many European countries, including Ukraine itself, are not keen on having an escalating war fought on their soil. Gary Lefley deals with the question of NATO's aggressive strategy in, *The news on Ukraine is not what it seems*. When the Soviet Union ended, the West gave Russia guarantees that NATO would not expand further towards its borders. It quickly reneged on this with 14 new countries joining. Ukraine was to be next, further threating Russia, by contributing its military encirclement by NATO and giving the US the ability to station nuclear weapons within 5 minutes of Moscow. This has led Russia to take a stand, demanding a guarantee that Ukraine will not be allowed to join NATO.

The best hope to resolve the crisis is a return to the Minsk 2 agreements which previously provided a framework to stabilise the situation between Ukraine and Russia. The process involved European States with an interest in deescalating the conflict - it did not involve the United States or the UK.

Taiwan

Although our attention is currently focused on Ukraine, we should not forget that the biggest target the US has in its sights is China. There are similarities between the stand off with Russia over Ukraine and the attempt by the US to manufacture a crisis over Taiwan. In *Taiwan; rolling the dice of war*, Simon Korner reminds us of how dangerous the US strategy is. Here too it has ignored historic agreements, increased tensions through talking up threats of war, war-planning and stationing military forces in the region. Here too both geopolitical and economic factors are at work. The US wants to prevent a peaceful reunification of China, as a separate Taiwan gives it strategic power in the Asia Pacific region. And of course, Taiwan also has a highly advanced semiconductor sector which it does not want China to get access to.

European Union

Contributing to the volatile situation in Europe is the shift in the balance of power within the EU and Emanuelle Macron's pursuit of strategic autonomy, including a European army. This has been made possible by Britian's departure from the bloc and by the end of Angela Merkel's Chancellorship in Germany. in *The European Union after Merkel* Frieda Park considers the major challenges the EU faces without Merkel at the helm and the emerging differences within the bloc.

Britain

Meanwhile people in Britain face numerous assaults on their living standards - inflation, soaring energy prices and cuts to benefits to name a few. In *Sweatshops thrive in the UK garment industry*, Clare Bailey exposes the realities of conditions for workers. Servicing the cut-throat fast fashion industry, they are virtually hidden from view in unsafe sweatshops or homeworking and earning much less than the minimum wage. Legislation is ineffective in improving workers conditions and trade unions find it hard to organise due to the vulnerability of workers who fear for their livelihoods.

Such is the real world for a section of the working class in Britain today. However, the news is dominated not by this, and the many failures of the Tories, but the parliamentary manoeuvring round the fate of Boris Johnson and his personal flaws. One thing is certain when he goes his replacement will be another Tory – so no real change for the people of Britain.

UKRAINE CRISIS
EXPOSES DIVISIONS IN THE WEST

by Alex Davidson

The West, especially the United States and the UK, has been ramping up tensions over Ukraine. Repeatedly using the refrain, 'Russian troops on the Ukraine border', the West has been steadily deploying more troops, missiles and bases to Eastern Europe and the Baltic States. The Western mainstream media continually talks about defending Ukrainian sovereignty but neglects to mention that the Russian troops are actually within Russia defending Russian sovereignty.

It may well be that the US intention is to provoke Russia, impose further sanctions and kill the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project. Russia is intent on stopping the further encroachment of NATO on its borders, while the US is encouraging the entry of Ukraine into NATO membership.

PHOTO BY US EMBASSY

Vice President Joe Biden meets US's man Ukrainian President Yatsenyuk in 2014

Shifting alliances

The tensions around the situation in Ukraine between the West and Russia have further unveiled serious differences, rivalries and contradictions in the West including:

● Germany and Austria have major differences with the US over the Nord Stream 2 gas pipe-line and the US imposition of sanctions on European companies involved.

● France was angered over the secret creation of the Australian-UK-US (AUKUS) nuclear arrangement which led to the aborted submarine deal between Australia and France and the withdrawal of the French Ambassadors from Australia and the US. This was the first time that France has withdrawn its Ambassador from the US since the American Revolution.

● The sharp differences with the US over its withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and the US imposition of sanctions against European companies dealing with Iran.

● The US ending of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

● Tariffs imposed on European companies by the US related to the US-China trade war.

For some time there has been a developing re-configuration of western imperialist alliances.

The AUKUS deal reflected the US pivot to China but also reflects the divergence between the US/UK and the EU.

The core of this Anglo-American alliance is the Five Eyes intelligence gathering and sharing network first established during the Second World War by the United States and the UK, joined in 1948 by Canada and in 1956 by Australia and New Zealand. New Zealand has expressed its disquiet with the Five Eyes moving to a new and enhanced strategy including the promotion of shared values and not simply gathering and sharing intelligence. New Zealand's reservations are largely due to its wish to continue to develop its trade with China and a realisation that China would not welcome Australia being provided with nuclear-powered submarines on its doorstep.
France has been pushing for some time for an autonomous EU Defence Force and the development of AUKUS has further encouraged this in French ruling circles. France,

as the only remaining nuclear power in the EU following Brexit, would be in pole position to lead an EU Defence Force. This would assist its resistance to the German dominance of the EU and it has ambitions to further extend its colonial reach. The US wants its NATO allies to increase their share of the burdens of NATO but it is unhappy with the idea of the development of a separate EU Defence Force not directly under its control. The Anglo-American alliance, or the alliance of the capitalist English-speaking world, is of course under US leadership and is set on keeping the EU tied to its policies and securing other allies.

The recent agreement signed by the British Foreign Secretary, Liz Truss, and the Israeli Foreign Minister, Yair Lapid, on Iran, trade, defence and cyber activities takes British-Israeli relations to a new level. Britain announced that Israel is now a 'tier-one' cyber partner.

Ukraine

Germany and France would prefer Ukraine to be under their tutelage through an association with the EU and have reservations about the US-led NATO approach. This difference of approach was crystalised when the US was cut out of the talks in 2014, known as the Normandy Format, which produced the Minsk Agreement and a ceasefire. The talks which led to that agreement only involved Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France.

Meanwhile the US and Britain are developing their control of Ukraine having engineered regime change in 2014. When Biden was Vice-President under Obama he worked hard to pull Ukraine into NATO's orbit and used Victoria Nuland as the US prime mover on the ground in the coup against Ukrainian President Yanukovych. As well as handing out cookies to demonstrators in Maidan Square she was recorded on 28 January 2014, in a leaked phone call to Geoffrey Pyatt, US Ambassador to Ukraine, discussing who should become President of Ukraine. She was recorded saying, "I think Yats is the guy…". On 27 February 2014 Yatsenyuk became President of Ukraine. The leaked phone call also recorded her saying, "Fuck the EU", in reference to the EU's involvement. Nuland is now back in the Biden administration as Under-Secretary to Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken. It should also not be forgotten that Biden's son, Hunter, was put in as a director of Ukraine's Naftogas, which Trump tried to use to his advantage in his losing presidential campaign.

Britain has also been developing a very close relationship with Ukraine and now has a huge armaments contract with the country. Rosyth dockyard in Scotland has recently signed a contract to build frigates for Ukraine. This will provide work for Rosyth for some years to come. There are also moves to upgrade Ukraine's ports and Britain is taking the lead.

Nord Stream 2

The US threat of further sanctions against Russia, whilst having the explicit aim of preventing a Russian invasion of Ukraine, is also about economics and stopping Russian gas going to Europe. The US are opposed to the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia to Germany as are countries in Eastern Europe which the pipeline will bypass as it runs under the Baltic Sea.

The Nord Stream pipeline carries natural gas from Vyborg in Russia to Griefswald in Germany under the Baltic Sea. The first pipeline was officially inaugurated on 8 November 2011 by German Chancellor Merkel, Russian President Medvedev, French Prime Minister Francois Fillon and Dutch Prime Minister, Mark Rutte. The pipeline, 759 miles in length is the longest sub-sea pipeline in the world and has a capacity to carry 55 billion cubic metres of natural gas.

Nord Stream AG shareholders are the Russian company Gazprom (51%), the German companies E.ON (15.5%) and Wintershall (15.5%), the Dutch company Gasunie (9%) and the French company Engie (9%). The Chair of Nord Stream's Board is Gerhard Schroder, former German Chancellor (1998-2005). His party, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), is committed to Nord Stream 2 as a key way of dealing with Germany's energy issues as well as enhancing Germany's dominance of the EU. Nord Stream AG signed a financing agreement for the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project with the German company UNIPER, the Austrian company OMV, Royal Dutch Shell, Wintershall and Engie. These companies ran foul of US sanctions because of their involvement with Nord Stream 2.

The Nord Stream project has split the EU, which the US is using to its advantage. The Nord Stream pipeline bypasses countries like Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic States. Nine EU countries signed a letter criticising the project. [1] Ukraine, in particular, fears the loss of billions in transit revenue if Russian gas supplies don't pass through their territory anymore once the new pipeline is built. The aim of US sanctions is to block Russian gas supplies to Europe and instead to sell shale gas from the United States.

It is not surprising that Germany sees the American's latest threat of sanctions against Russia as part of a move to export more US gas to Europe and undermine Germany as the gas hub of Europe…

US gas exports

US liquefied natural gas (LNG) export capacity has grown rapidly since it first began in February 2016. In 2019, the United States became the world's third-largest LNG exporter, behind Australia and Qatar. In January 2022 the US became the world leader in LNG exports. Since 2016 and the US-EU Agreement there has been a steep increase in US LNG exports to the EU. [2] Once the new LNG liquefaction units in Louisiana go into service by the end of 2022, the United States will consolidate its position as the world-leading LNG exporter. Since 2016 US exports of LNG to Eastern Europe and the Baltic states have been displacing Russian gas.

- Lithuania's state-owned gas trader signed a deal in May 2017 to buy liquefied natural gas directly from the United States. This is part of Lithuania's efforts to diversify its gas suppliers and reduce its reliance on Russia's Gazprom. The deal is with a unit of US company Cheniere Energy. LNG from the US now provides Lithuania with roughly half of its gas. Gazprom supplies the rest.

- Poland's state-run gas firm PGNiG received its first US delivery of LNG from the US company Cheniere Energy in June 2017.

- Croatia completed the building of an LNG terminal in 2019 and the state is now receiving LNG from America.

Twelve countries bordering the Baltic, Black and Adriatic seas formed a consortium, dubbed the Three Seas Initiative, in 2016, to develop regional infrastructure, trade and energy projects. [3]

On 6 July 2017 a summit of the presidents of the countries involved gathered in Warsaw, hosted jointly by Poland and Croatia. US President Trump took part in the Three Seas Summit and promoted US natural gas exports. The following is an extract from President Trump's address to the summit:

"We're here at this historic gathering to launch a new future for open, fair, and affordable energy markets that bring greater security and prosperity to all of our citizens. We are sitting on massive energy and we are now exporters of energy. So, if one of you need energy, just give us a call…

I congratulate your nations for already beginning the critical projects that open us up to greater access, and you'll be totally open and have access to energy markets and remove barriers to energy trade, such as the floating LNG terminal on the Croatian island of Krk. Did you ever hear of that? Right? Huh? You know all about that. I bet you know all about it…

The United States is proud to see that our abundant energy resources are already helping the Three Seas Nations achieve much-needed energy diversification…

America will be a faithful and dependable partner in the export and sale of our high-quality and low-cost energy resources and technologies. We make the best technology and we make the best, best technology for fighter jets and ships and equipment, military weapons. There's nobody even close, and that's acknowledged. All over the world they talk about the greatness of our military equipment. Nobody comes close. So when you buy and as you buy military equipment, hopefully you'll be thinking only of the United States." [4]

Of course, Trump couldn't resist trying to sell arms as well as gas!

It is not surprising that Germany sees the American's latest threat of sanctions against Russia as part of a move to export more US gas to Europe and undermine Germany as the gas hub of Europe and its control of eastern Europe through the EU.

US sanctions including those against western companies involved in the pipeline delayed Nord Stream's construction for one year. However, at a summit meeting in July 2021 between Chancellor Merkel and US President Biden a deal was struck. [5] This included Biden lifting the sanctions on the European companies involved in Nord Stream 2 so construction was re-started and the pipeline is now ready to be operational. It currently awaits certification from the German and EU regulators. The quid pro quo of the German-US agreement committed Germany to "utilise all available leverage to facilitate the extension of up to 10 years to Ukraine's transit agreement with Russia". Germany also agreed to donate $175 million to a Green Fund for Ukraine and to provide technical assistance for Ukraine's integration into the European electricity grid.

However, the US would still like to kill Nord Stream 2. One way of doing that would be to provoke Russia into intervention in Ukraine, impose more sanctions, bring Germany into line and force it to abandon Nord Stream 2.

Germany's position

Germany needs Russian gas as a bridging technology because of its decision to phase out coal and nuclear technology. It imports 119 billion cubic metres (bcm) of gas. Some 37% of Germany's gas is from Russia, 20% from Norway, 12% from Holland, some 5% is produced domestically and 25% is in storage. It has 24 bcm of gas stored in underground caverns. The company, Astora, runs two vast storage caverns in Germany and one in Austria. Astora is owned by the Russian state-company Gazprom. Gas keeps half of Germany's 41.5 million households warm and some manufacturing industries also depend on the fuel. In 2021 Germany imported 34% of its crude oil and 53% of its coal for power generation and steelmaking from Russia.

The previous 'Grand Coalition' government of Germany led by Chancellor Merkel with the SPD's Olaf Scholz as Finance Minister was strongly committed to trade with Russia and Nord Stream 2. However, the new German government, which took office in December 2021 is deeply divided over Nord Stream 2. This government is a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens and the Free Democrats. The governing Cabinet comprises 7 SPD, 5 Greens and 3 Free Democrats with the SPD's Olaf Scholz as Chancellor and the Green Party's joint-leader, Annaline Baerbock, as Foreign Minister.

The SPD are in favour of Nord Stream 2 but the Greens and the Free Democrats oppose the project. Their differences over Nord Stream 2 are probably the most serious of the current differences in the German government. Prior to her appointment as Foreign Minister Baerbock campaigned against Nord Stream 2. She said that she believed providing Nord Stream 2 with regulatory approval would be contrary to EU rules. She argued that since the Nord Stream 2 AG company, which owns and operates the pipeline, is owned by the Russian company Gazprom, it goes against the EU's gas directive. "As long as that is one and the same corporation, the operating permit must not be granted," Baerbock argued. There can be no doubt that the differing views over Nord Stream 2 in Germany and the EU will play out in both Regulator's decisions. Although Regulators, in capitalist society always argue that they are impartial and above politics in the same way that the capitalist state is declared to be neutral, one would need to be naïve to believe that.

The West remains united in its opposition to Russia. However, there are differences over how to deal with Russia and the situation in Ukraine. One recent example is that of the resignation of Germany's navy chief, Vice-Admiral Kay-Achim Schoenbach, who stepped down on 22 January after drawing criticism for remarks he made in relation to Ukraine during a lecture in India on 21 January. Vice-Admiral Kay-Achim Schoenbach in his lecture said, "What he (Putin) really wants is respect…and my God, giving someone respect is low cost, even no cost…It is easy to give him the respect he really demands – and also deserves." In the same lecture, whilst Schoenbach conceded that Russia's actions in Ukraine needed to be addressed, he added, that, "the Crimea peninsula is gone. It will never come back, this is a fact." [6]

Crimea was part of Russia from 1783 until 1954. It was then transferred to Ukraine but still remained within the USSR. After the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia by agreement with Ukraine continued to use the port of Sevastopol as a naval base. The 2014 coup in Ukraine engineered by the US put this under threat as the Sevastopol port is a vital strategic base for the encircled Russia.

Vice-Admiral Kay-Achim Schoenbach understood some other things about Russia. In the same speech he also said that Germany and the West needed Russia against China.

[1] The EU countries signing the letter opposing Nord Stream 2 are the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, Romania, Lithuania and Ukraine.

[2] https://ec.europa.eu/energy/sites/ener/files/eu-us_lng_trade_folder.pdf

[3] The 12 countries in the Three Seas Initiative are Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria.

[4] https://time.com/4846780/read-donald-trump-speech-warsaw-poland-transcript/

[5] https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-of-the-united-states-and-germany-on-support-for-ukraine-european-energy-security-and-our-climate-goals/

[6] https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/german-navy-chief-resigns-over-putin-comments-2022-01-22/

The news on Ukraine is not what it seems

by Gary Lefley

After the demise of the Soviet Union in 1990, the United States gave a solemn undertaking to Russia that, with the Cold War over, it would not seek to expand NATO membership eastwards. It lied. In the interim period NATO has expanded towards Russia's borders with 14 new countries, all east of Germany, joining the military alliance. The United States wants to continue this development with Ukraine next on the list.

If Ukraine joins NATO, then the United States can station nuclear missiles on the Russian border which could strike Moscow within 5 minutes. This development would be disastrous, not just for Russia, but for all of us. If ever there were a technical error or misunderstanding 5 minutes allows precious little time for correction, on either side. A nuclear weapons exchange is likely to destroy half the planet and create a nuclear winter that would render the other half uninhabitable. Needless to say, Russia will never accept Ukraine joining NATO and having United States nuclear missiles on its border. The USSR lost 27 million of its people in World War II when it was invaded from the West by Nazi Germany. The scars run deep and the Russian people, from both sides of the Ukraine-Russia border, will not tolerate another existential threat.

Provoking Russia

Germany, France, Czech Republic, Croatia, Bulgaria and Turkey, all NATO members, do not want war with Russia and are reluctant to follow the US line. Even President Zelensky is urging caution. On 28th January he said: "I don't consider the situation now tenser than before. There is a feeling abroad that there is war here. That's not the case…".

The objective of United States strategy in Ukraine is to provoke a Russian military incursion, which would provide the perfect excuse to proceed with NATO membership and further militarisation. It would also serve to bring reticent NATO and EU states in behind the United States - these states could hardly remain neutral. In addition, it would make it difficult for Germany to proceed with the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia, a deal that Biden is keen to scupper, in part to boost US gas sales to Europe. And all of this to be achieved without United States 'boots on the ground'. This is what Biden means by 'multilateralism' - its allies stumping up the cash, hardware and dead bodies to project United States foreign policy.
It seems that Biden has so far failed to convince the Ukrainian President. Zelensky is aware that a military assault on the Donbass could provoke Russia to intervene militarily, which may be what Biden is after but not what Zelensky wants. The outcome, given that the United States and NATO have stated publicly that they would not commit forces to such a conflict, is either a swift defeat for the Ukraine armed forces, or a drawn out civil war with the prospect of tens of thousands of casualties. Zelensky appears unwilling to entertain either outcome. Nevertheless, he leads a far right government that includes Russophobic fascists, who may welcome such a conflict, especially if it can be portrayed as a war against Russia.

For the United States that leaves a number of options. It can back off and rethink, which is feasible given Zelensky's reticence and the disunity within NATO over this issue. Then there are the tried and tested alternatives to be drawn from the CIA and Special Forces playbook. These include 'false flag' operations which implicate Russia as the perpetrator of an act of war, or some other heinous act. In any eventuality, without effective glob-

> The preparedness of the United States to engage in brinkmanship with the world's second most powerful nuclear state is perhaps indicative of its relative decline as the world's preeminent economic power and the beginning of the end of the United States unipolar world order.

PHOTO BY RUSSIAN PRESS OFFICE

Leaders at Minsk 2 talks in 2015. Left to right : Alexander Lukashenko, Belarus, Vladimir Putin, Russia, Angela Merkel, Germany, Francois Hollande, France, Petro Poroshenko, Ukraine

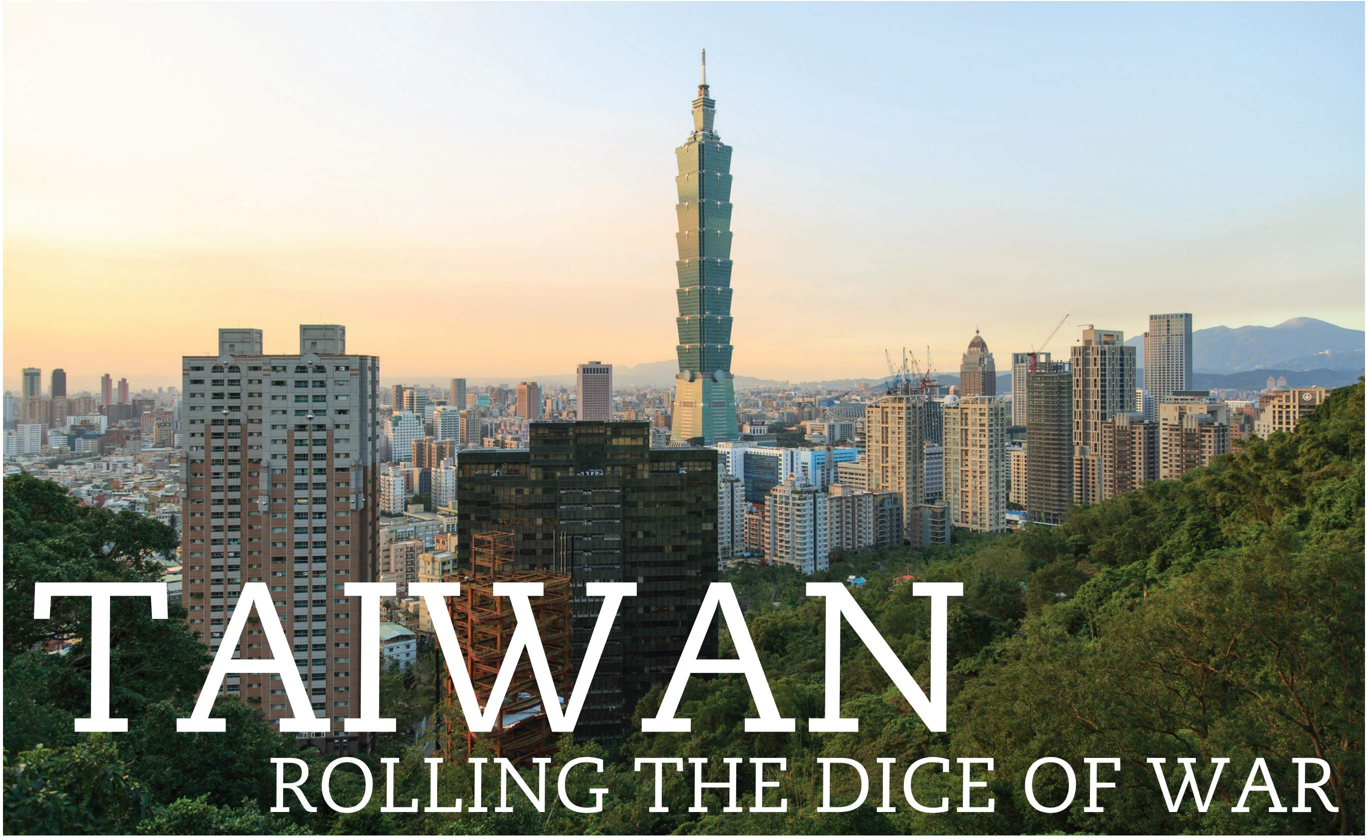
al and domestic opposition, the US is unlikely to abandon its strategy for the continuing expansion of NATO eastwards and the encirclement, containment, and isolation of Russia. It can then focus its attention on China and Taiwan. In this regard, the recent joint China-Russia statement calling for an end to NATO expansion is significant.

Best hope for peace

The best hope for peace resides with the 2015 Minsk 2 Agreement between Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France, and the Russian proposal for Donetsk and Luhansk to have the status of autonomous regions within a united Ukraine. Right now, the priority is to bring pressure to bear on the United States and NATO to take a step back and to negotiate, based on Minsk 2. At some point sooner rather than later, the US has to accept, or be made to accept, that security is mutual and reciprocal. The alternative is war, with cataclysmic outcomes. Longer term peace requires the dissolution of NATO, an alliance whose proclaimed purpose ended with the break-up of the Warsaw Pact. Though in fact the Pact (1955) came into being as a response to NATO's formation (1949).

In the interim the United States needs to honour the guarantees it made in the 1990s, which allow for a buffer zone between NATO and Russia. As an immediate minimum, NATO must reverse its avowed policy of expanding into Ukraine and Georgia, with legally binding undertakings to that effect. Mutual security requires that the US and Russia guarantee not to station missiles or other military forces beyond current positions, as agreed by Kennedy and Khrushchev in the aftermath of the 1962 Cuban-Turkey missile crisis.

The preparedness of the United States to engage in brinkmanship with the world's second most powerful nuclear state is perhaps indicative of its relative decline as the world's preeminent economic power and the beginning of the end of the United States unipolar world order. Unfortunately this makes the world even more dangerous. We are entering a critical period where United States militarism may be used increasingly to prop up its weakening economic and imperial domination.



TAIWAN
ROLLING THE DICE OF WAR

PHOTO BY CEPHOTO, UWE ARANAS

Taipei, Taiwan

by Simon Korner

This year has seen a significant rise in tensions over Taiwan. It is now a flashpoint as dangerous as Ukraine, and it is the US that is deliberately escalating the aggression as it faces China's continued advance – China's GDP is set to lead the world by 2035.

The US has made it clear that it will never allow another power to share its pre-eminent global position. The American government's 2017 National Security Strategy stated that China poses a threat to "American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity". Mike Pompeo put it more bluntly when he said that nations have to "pick a side" (23/7/20), a view echoed by President Biden: "We are in a competition to win the 21st century, and the starting gun has gone off," he said (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 9/6/21)

Taiwan's position

Taiwan finds itself at the epicentre of these tensions because the US regards it as China's soft underbelly. Though the US officially denies any change in its China policy, it is in the process of reneging on its 1979 acknowledgment of the People's Republic of China as "the sole legal Government of China" with Taiwan as "part of China" (Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2017). The historical US position of accepting One China, which it is now seeking to overturn, is most clearly visible in the fact that it still doesn't officially recognise Taiwan as a country. Nor does the UN, or the majority of the world's nations. Only 14 countries recognise Taiwan, down from 15 after Nicaragua switched diplomatic ties back to Beijing in January 2022.

The United Nations (UN) kicked out the Nationalist Chinese in 1971 after the People's Republic was recognised as the legitimate holder of China's UN seat. The rival Chinese Nationalist government, which had fled to Taiwan from the mainland in 1949 after losing the war with the Communists, had initially been offered dual representation by the UN. The authoritarian Generalisimo Chiang Kai-shek – leader of the Republic of China, as the Nationalist entity was known – refused. "The sky is not big enough for two suns," he said. His refusal led to the Republic of China's expulsion.

The highest point in US-China relations came in 1979 when - acting on the promise Nixon had made in 1972 on his famous visit to China - the Americans officially recognised the People's Republic and withdrew their forces that had occupied Taiwan since World War 2 (WW2).

What's happening now is the reversal of this rapprochement, and with it the deliberate creation of enemy images and the stoking of war psychosis. This hinges on the propaganda campaign that the Chinese are about to invade Taiwan. The US is thus framed as the defender of a small country against its bullying neighbour – cover for the US attempt to redraw China's borders, a blatant attack on China's national sovereignty and territorial integrity. The WW2 peace treaties made it very clear that Taiwan and all the Japanese-occupied Chinese islands would be returned to China, whose sovereignty had extended to Taiwan for hundreds of years. Agreements were signed in Cairo in 1943 – by the US, Britain, the Soviet Union and China (then under Chiang Kai-shek) – and reiterated at the Potsdam Proclamation in 1945. These clear waters were muddied in 1951 during the Cold War, when the US and Britain drafted the Treaty of San Francisco – the West's belated formal peace treaty with Japan. Neither Chinese Nationalists nor Communists were invited to the signing. The USSR, signatory of both the Cairo and Potsdam agreements, objected to the Chinese exclusion and, correctly, saw the treaty as an attempt to rewrite the post-WW2 settlement. The US reversed the bad faith of the San Francisco treaty temporarily, for long enough to use China against the main Cold War enemy, the USSR, which was finally defeated in 1991. Since then, China has become America's new enemy number one, and is coming under sustained diplomatic, economic, and media attack in preparation for war. The US is busy arming Taiwan and fostering divisions between it and the People's Republic, while claiming not to be interfering.

For its part, China's position on Taiwan has never varied. The only change is that now it is confident enough to insist on adherence to the WW2 peace treaties. For China, reunification with Taiwan means righting a historic wrong – a final end to the legacy of the Japanese occupation during WW2. Reunion would complete the historic reversal of China's humiliation, marking the end of centuries of colonial conquest and dismemberment.

US vital interests

But why is the US so determined to prevent Chinese reunification?

Continued US control over Taiwan gives it the ability to disrupt China's economy by military means. Taiwan occupies a crucial geographical position, guarding the main trade route for China's imports of energy supplies, raw materials and goods as well as its exports. In the same way, the US squeezed Japan's energy supplies and other raw materials prior to WW2, which in turn led to Japan's Pearl Harbour 'surprise' attack (not such a surprise considering American economic strangulation of its imperialist rival). The new AUKUS alliance between the US, UK and Australia is an attempt to ramp up the ability to interfere with China's trade.

For the US, then, control over Taiwan means nothing less than maintaining its position as the global superpower. If it loses Taiwan, it loses the whole of east Asia. The loss of Taiwan would mean not only the end of its ability to threaten China but the unravelling of its decades-long domination of Japan, South Korea and the Philippines – countries where it's had a major military presence since WW2. Freed from the American embrace, these regional powers, above all Japan, would begin an arms race to replace the US hegemon, according to Iskander Rehman, of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments.

> The WW2 peace treaties made it very clear that Taiwan and all the Japanese-occupied Chinese islands would be returned to China, whose sovereignty had extended to Taiwan for hundreds of years.

Another key factor is that the US wants to keep control of the crucial semi-conductor market. Taiwan's main semi-conductor company, TSMC, leads the world in producing semi-conductors, or chips, which are vital to all computer and phone production, as well as cars. This makes the island "Pound for Pound… the Most Important Place in the World", according to Ruchir Sharma, chief global strategist at Morgan Stanley (*New York Times*, Dec 14, 2020). China's semi-conductor technology lags several years behind Taiwan's, so that reunification with Taiwan would provide it with a significant technological boost. This is what the US wants to prevent, while its own Silicon Valley relies on Taiwan's supply of semi-conductors, which it needs in order to maintain US dominance over all high-tech fields.

Threats of war

Another important reason for the US strategic focus on controlling Taiwan is that reunification would deprive the Americans of a perfectly positioned base from which to launch a military attack on China. Such an attack is being planned and war-gamed quite seriously. A major report commissioned by the US Army in 2016 called 'War with China: Thinking Through the Unthinkable' concluded: "We postulate that a war would be regional and conventional.... We assume that fighting would start and remain in East Asia, where potential Sino-US flash points and nearly all Chinese forces are located." But this complacent military assessment is challenged in an article in *Forbes* magazine (June 15, 2021), which points out the very real dangers of nuclear war: "If a fight over Taiwan occurs, the Air Force plans to wage conventional warfare against China by flying nuclear-capable aircraft into its airspace - or by launching cruise missiles from outside its airspace from other nuclear-capable aircraft." But it goes on to say: "Either way, Beijing would have no quick way of determining whether the attacking US bombers were carrying nuclear or conventional munitions. "Its nascent strategic warning system would not be able to differentiate between a nuclear and non-nuclear attack until weapons actually started exploding on its territory, and China's highly centralized nuclear command authority might not be willing to wait that long before responding."

The US would not play to lose, and nuclear engagement would therefore escalate inevitably. There are precedents for this nuclear danger. During the 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis, President Eisenhower told his commanders that conventional armaments should be used first, but a secret report – released only recently by the US Security Archives – shows that the president's written and spoken comments to other officials "left little doubt ... that he was prepared to use nuclear weapons."

Current US strategy under Biden calls for a "combat-credible" US military presence. US marines and special units are already in Taiwan, secretly training the Taiwanese military, while the Americans are pushing Taiwan to arm itself with billions of dollars' worth of US weapons – for example, last year they sold Taiwan $1.8 billion worth of arms. Even though Taiwan is "now being converted into a de facto military ally of the United States" (Michael T. Klare, *The Nation*, Jan 14, 2022), American hawks such as Michael A. Hunzeker (*Texas National Security Review*, Nov 18, 2021) worry that the Taiwanese leadership is insufficiently warlike and want to "confront Taipei" to accede to US plans more fully.

America's aggressive policy towards China is bi-partisan. Biden is following the same hard-line approach as Trump. And Britain is fully integrated into this drive to war – having sent its aircraft carrier fleet with over 3,700 troops, along with the Dutch fleet (another former colonial power in Asia, also with expansionist ambitions) to join the huge and permanent US navy fleet in east Asia. Western ships sailing through the Taiwan Strait – which is only 100 miles wide – come about as close to mainland China as the Isle of Man is to Lancashire. This deployment of deadly naval weapons is fraught with the danger of accidents. In early October last year, an American nuclear-powered submarine in the South China Sea crashed and potentially leaked nuclear material. A similar accident could easily trigger a war. Despite the catastrophic consequences such a war would entail, Biden has warned explicitly that the US will act to prevent union between Taiwan and China.

Contrary to the western media's deliberate seeding of the impression that China is an aggressor, Chinese planes have never intruded into Taiwan's airspace as recognised internationally by air traffic control – they have simply flown within their own airspace.

As for the Taiwanese Nationalist regime, ever since 1949 it has actively pursued its claim as the sole legitimate government over both mainland China and Taiwan. Project National Glory was the regime's military plan to recapture mainland China, preparations for which began in 1961. By 1991 Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui unofficially accepted that Taiwan would no longer challenge Communist China. Yet Taiwan's expansionist constitution remains in place, claiming China, Mongolia, and the entire South China Sea as its territory. Taiwan's self-declared Air Defence Identification Zone is also highly aggressive – covering, as it does, parts of the south-eastern Chinese mainland. Contrary to the western media's deliberate seeding of the impression that China is an aggressor, Chinese planes have never intruded into Taiwan's airspace as recognised internationally by air traffic control – they have simply flown within their own airspace. Yet these perfectly legitimate flights are designated an incursion by Taiwan – a ludicrous claim.

Peaceful reunification

China's 2005 Anti-Secession Law emphasises the One China policy, which was endorsed by both Chinese Nationalists and Communists 70 years ago and remains the agreed international position, notwithstanding US attempts to disrupt it. The fact that China was under Nationalist rule when the peace treaties were signed, and subsequently came under Communist rule, does not alter the fact that Taiwan was legally handed back to a single, unified, China by Japan.

For its part, China has made clear it wants to reunite with Taiwan peacefully, and that it would resort to war only if Taiwan develops nuclear weapons or fully secedes. Either of these developments would pose an existential threat to China because they would mark the removal of all constraints on the US using Taiwan as its main forward base against the mainland.

Rather than fomenting conflict, the West could be promoting better relations between China and Taiwan. Co-operation had begun to improve in the 1980s and still has great potential. Many Taiwanese companies have offices in mainland cities, especially those geographically closest to the island. Taiwan is the biggest 'foreign' investor in China. Cross-strait trade in 2018 was worth $150 billion (*taiwan.gov.tw*). Up to 1.2 million Taiwanese live on the mainland (*The Economist*, 19/11/20) – one city near Shanghai, where 100,000 Taiwanese Chinese live and work, is known as Little Taipei. The descendants of the 1949 Nationalist refugees keep up strong family ties in mainland cities; there are intermarriages and strong cultural and family exchanges, with people travelling back and forth constantly, at least pre-Covid. The two peoples share a language and the same cultural landmarks – the Lunar New Year, the Dragon Boat festival, the Moon festival, the Lantern festival. Most Taiwanese want to "maintain the status quo", according a recent poll by a Taiwanese university (SupChina 7/10/21). This is the peaceful co-operation and unity the US is seeking to destroy.

The US and British move into the South China Sea is as provocative and dangerous as if China were to send warships into the Caribbean or off the coast of California to ensure "freedom of navigation".

By contrast, China stated officially in 2014: "China will never seek hegemony or engage in military expansion now or in the future, no matter how developed it becomes." China's nuclear arsenal is a fraction of the size of America's – around 130 nuclear warheads capable of reaching the USA, compared to the Americans' 1,550 intercontinental missiles. The US vastly outspends China on arms: $738 billion a year, compared to China's $252 billion.

Commentator David P. Goldman believes that a wing of the US establishment "would rather roll the dice of war than allow China to surpass the United States in military and economic might… Like the French in 1914, they believe that if they do not fight now, they may never have the opportunity to do so in the future" (*Asia Times*, Oct 26, 2021).

This is the war we must try to prevent.

The European Union after Merkel

by Frieda Park

Angela Merkel is no longer German chancellor. Her 16 years in the job saw Germany firmly established as the hegemon in the European Union with France playing second fiddle. The German economy is the biggest in the EU and nothing happens without German approval. Standing on top of this, Merkel was the dominant figure and de facto leader of the bloc. No current politician within Germany or any other EU country can fill the pivotal position that she held. Merkel's departure will increase strains within the Union.

It is not only she who is leaving office, her party is too. Merkel's Christian Democratic Union and its sister party the Christian Social Union together recorded their worst performance ever at the German elections in September last year. It is Olaf Scholz of the Social Democratic Party who is now the new chancellor. Scholz won't find it easy stepping into Merkel's shoes. He will have a big job managing the contradictions within the EU and the tensions beyond its borders. His task will be even more difficult as he will also have to manage a diverse coalition of parties in government. In this new, uncertain situation Emmanuel Macron will certainly seek to assert his and France's authority at Germany's expense.

Areas of difference within the bloc are over:

- Who leads the EU – Germany or France?
- Further centralisation of power in Brussels versus national sovereignty
- Moves towards fiscal union or not
- Austerity and neo-liberalism imposed on member countries
- Social and political liberalism versus authoritarianism
- Strategic autonomy and an EU army versus alliance with the United States
- Relations and trade with countries outside the EU, particularly Russia and China
- Should the EU expand further? There are growing tensions with countries in the Balkans who had expected to join but are making no progress – not to mention Turkey
- The unequal roles of different countries in repelling and 'warehousing' refugees.

Economic problems

There is not only political turbulence, there are economic problems too. The EU's recovery from the impact of the pandemic has been slower than the United States and China who have both now exceeded pre-pandemic levels. At the end of last year, by contrast, the EU economy remained 3% smaller than before, although there are projections for continued growth. [1] German exports were hit by the pandemic and there was a decline in trade with the UK post-Brexit. The future of its industry, particularly the important car industry and its supply chains, remains uncertain. And there is the challenge of moving from fossil fuel to electric powered vehicles.

Germany is wedded to neo-liberalism which other countries, particularly the United States, are diluting with some state intervention. But Germany has been dogmatic within the EU about sticking to free-markets and austerity and has a "brake" on government debt which limits deficit spending written into its constitution. Scholz, the new Chancellor, is committed to retaining the brake. Although he is seeking to fudge the rules, it would require a 2/3rds majority in the Bundestag to change the constitution, which at present is impossible. The result of this in Germany has been crumbling infrastructure, including digital infrastructure. This rigid adherence, domestically and within the EU, to neo-liberalism means that Germany and the bloc have less flexibility to enact different solutions to address capitalism's problems. The eventual agreement to issue mutual EU debt, Eurobonds, to help countries over the coronavirus pandemic may not be the start of a new direction, but a one-off not to be repeated.

EU strategic autonomy

While all US allies were upset by its unilateral withdrawal from Afghanistan, France was absolutely incensed by the sudden announcement of the AUKUS pact and as a consequence the cancellation by Australia of its order for French submarines. The talks aimed at resolving the crisis in Ukraine, and also encompassing wider European security concerns, kicked off in January between Russia, NATO and the US. However, demonstrating the division within the West, the EU was not included at this stage. Discussions about Europe, but without the biggest bloc on the continent. With the change of government in Germany and the UK out, Macron has become more forceful, particularly in promoting "strategic autonomy" for the EU. This is underpinned by the belief that the EU cannot rely on the United States as an ally and that the EU must develop the capacity to act in its own interests.

While Germany dominates the EU in every other respect, France is its pre-eminent military power, actively intervening in other countries and possessing nuclear weapons. US actions have given a new impetus to those arguing for an EU army. How much headway Macron will make is uncertain, however he assumed the 6-month rotating presidency of the EU on the 1st of January this year. This puts him in an ideal position to pursue his bid to lead the EU towards greater autonomy, to have an independent army and to define its strategic interests as the EU, not just as individual countries or as part of wider Western alliances. This is a step on from provisions of the Lisbon Treaty and PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation). The budget of the European Defence Fund to develop military cooperation has grown from €590m for 2014-20 to €8bn for 2021-27 and it would have been more but for the Covid pandemic. Macron has the support of Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen – a strong alliance at the top to push this agenda forward. But not all countries in the EU are comfortable with this course and Macron's outspokenness has signalled further tensions with NATO and the US.

If France/Germany cannot win unanimous support in the EU for these major developments, however, then they are prepared to ignore the wishes of other member states. In November a leaked draft of the EU "Strategic Compass", its foreign and defence policy, proposed the idea that EU military forces could be deployed without unanimity in the bloc. The plans allow for the deployment of 5000 military personnel and von der Leyen has made clear that the purpose of any such force would be to intervene abroad in conflict zones - that is to say the same failed model of Western war-making that has caused death and destruction across the globe. She also explicitly spelled out that these forces would be independent of NATO.


Olaf Scholz with Angela Merkel

PHOTO BY SANDRO HALANK


PHOTO BY MSTYSLAV CHERNOV/UNFRAME

Refugees in the Mediterranean

A statement on EU-NATO cooperation is making slow progress within the EU. There are differences over the issue of EU autonomy between those who want greater freedom of manoeuvre and those who want a close relationship with the US.

By and large of course the big imperialist powers have similar interests in confronting the rise of countries they see as rivals, such as China, Russia and Iran, however, they all want to represent their own interests as well and have their own ideas about how this should happen. This is at the heart of growing tensions. Up till now, under Merkel, Germany preferred a less confrontational approach to Russia and China, developing collaboration on trade, including the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia to Germany, which is bitterly opposed by the United States. Duisburg, a former industrial city on the Ruhr, is the European terminus for China's Belt and Road initiative, with 70 trains travelling between the city and China every week. [2] Having said that, changes in Germany may make the bloc more susceptible to US pressure to conform to its anti-China, anti-Russia policies. The Greens who are now in government in Germany are hostile to China and Russia.

Although Macron and von der Leyen hope that in 2022 the EU will develop an autonomous army and foreign policy they still have to contend with domestic issues, divisions within the EU and the power of the US to dictate terms in international affairs. Despite this however, they are demonstrating clearly that they want to define and pursue French, German and EU interests independently. Their determination to press ahead with this represents a further stepping up of militarism within the EU and of the threat of war in Europe and beyond.

Refugees

There is no EU army as yet, but the first EU militarised force has been established in the shape of Frontex – the European Border and Coastguard Agency. Although initially set up in 2004 it now has significant and increasing funding and has been given new powers to try to stem migration to the EU by refugees. Frontex forces are not only deployed within the EU, but further afield in, for example, Albania and Montenegro, with civilian staff being deployed in Niger, Turkey, Senegal and Serbia.

European countries have erected 600 miles of border fencing in the last 30 years...

The hypocrisy of von der Leyen's condemnation of Belarus, and for some reason Russia, over migration policies is astonishing. Especially since Belarus had no part in the wars which have brought migrants to the EU's borders while the EU very much did. Belarus is blamed for the EU keeping migrants out.

The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum is notorious for its treatment of asylum seekers and refugees as it pushes them back across the Mediterranean and led to the deaths of over 20,000 people last year. Refugees are warehoused in terrible conditions in camps, with no legal rights and often in third countries like Turkey, which are funded by the EU to do this. Countries in the EU who don't want to take refugees can pay the EU towards the costs of having them deported instead. [3]

There are increasing demands from countries on the edge of the bloc for funding to erect physical barriers to prevent the entry of refugees. Though this is not yet the policy of the EU it has been praised by EU Home Affairs Commissioner, Ylva Johansson – she described Lithuania's border fence as a "good idea". European countries have erected 600 miles of border fencing in the last 30 years, most of it since 2015. Donald Trump would be proud.

The UK Home Secretary, Priti Patel, has put the new Nationality and Borders Bill (aka the Anti-Refugee Bill) before Parliament. It was part of what was dubbed "Operation Red Meat" to take the pressure off Prime Minister Boris Johnson by distracting people from the scandals surrounding him and bringing Tory MPs back on board. It would severely restrict the rights of refugees and asylum seekers to enter the UK and, like the EU, proposes detaining them in third countries. Patel suggested some possibilities, including Ghana, without even consulting them. It has declined the offer as have others, including Norway and Albania.

The EU, however, has been relatively successful at exporting its control of refugees. The inhumanity of these practices was further exposed in The Economist (15/1/22) collaborating with the Outlaw Ocean Project. The article was entitled, *An EU funded horror story*. Since 2017 the EU has paid the Libyan coastguard to prevent refugees from making it to Europe, effectively shifting the EU border to the Libyan coast. This has been successful – since then numbers arriving from Libya to Italy have slumped by 44%. However, the impact on refugees has been horrendous. The estimated risk of death for those attempting to cross has risen from 1 in 50 to 1 in 20. The detention camps refugees are being held in in Libya are even worse than those in Europe with tens of thousands enduring squalid conditions, torture and physical and sexual abuse. Detainees may also be forced into slave labour and prostitution. There have been instances of guards shooting people dead, fatal accidents and suicides. Individuals are coerced into requesting payments from their families to secure their release – an average of $500 per person. Despite all this being well-known, the EU continues to fund the scheme.
The "coastguard" is in fact run by local militias as there is little effective government in Libya in the aftermath of its destruction by the west when its military intervention overthrew Colonel Gaddafi.
To these dubious recipients the EU has given six fibreglass boats, dozens of four-wheel drive vehicles and hundreds of radios, uniforms and satellite phones worth tens of millions of Euros. Frontex runs arial surveillance, alerting the Italian and Maltese authorities about the movement of refugees, who then pass information on to the militias/coastguard. The EU pays for some basic essentials for refugees detained: a sleeping bag, soap, an ambulance to take them to hospital if needed and, if they don't survive, a body bag.

In 2018 it asked the International Maritime Agency to create an inappropriately named "search and rescue zone" stretching more than 100km from the Libyan coast thus giving the Libyan militias/coastguard jurisdiction well into international waters. Meanwhile organisations rescuing refugees in the Mediterranean, like Médecins sans Frontières, are often barred from entering ports in the EU. Italy closed its ports to boats with refugees in 2018 when it stopped its own search and rescue missions.

The EU certainly faces many challenges over the coming period – victims of its refugee policy face many more critical to their very survival.

[1] Economic Key Facts Germany - KPMG Germany (home.kpmg)

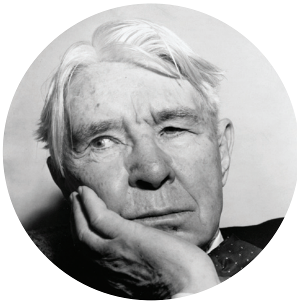
[2] Special Report Germany, *The Economist* 25/9/21

[3] Fortress Europe - the EU is killing refugees I *The Socialist Correspondent* Spring 2021

Ready to Kill by Carl Sandburg

Ten minutes now I have been looking at this.
I have gone by here before and wondered about it.
This is the bronze memorial of a famous general
Riding on horseback with a flag and a sword and a revolver on him.
I want to smash the whole thing into a pile of junk to be hauled away to the scrap yard.
I put it straight to you,
After the farmer, the miner, the shop man, the factory hand, the fireman and the teamster,
Have all been remembered with bronze memorials,
Shaping them on the job and getting all of us
Something to eat and something to wear,
When they stack a few silhouettes
        Against the sky
        Here in the park,
And show the real huskies that are doing the work of the world, and feeding people instead of butchering them,
Then maybe I will stand here
And look easy at this general of the army holding a flag in the air,
And riding like hell on horseback
Ready to kill anybody that gets in his way,
Ready to run the red blood and slush the bowels of men all over the sweet new grass of the prairie.

Carl Sandburg (1878-1967), who worked variously as milkman, porter, bricklayer, farm labourer, political organizer, secretary to socialist mayor of Milwaukee Emil Seidel, biographer of Abraham Lincoln, reporter, editor, poet. According to one contemporary, he 'put America on paper.'



EYE-WITNESS AT VENEZUELAN ELECTIONS

by Calvin Tucker

If I had to select one image from the three elections I have monitored in Venezuela that best encapsulates the media war on truth, it would be the confusion that washed across the faces of my fellow international observers as they read on their mobile phones that there were no international observers in Venezuela. As far as the Western media - conservative or liberal - was concerned, we officially didn't exist. Our erasure, presumably, was a matter of editorial policy. In that darkly humorous moment a few days before the 2018 presidential election, we were at one with the millions of ordinary supporters of the Venezuelan revolution, who, alongside their trade unions, social movements, and political parties, also did not exist.

Acknowledging the huge base of support for the revolution and 'Chavismo' as a political movement rooted for over two decades in working class barrios across the country, would puncture the media narrative of an oppressed population struggling for democracy against a vote-rigging dictatorship. It would also lead to a more nuanced debate about the many achievements of the revolution in health, housing, education, and political rights, and the extent to which US sanctions and destabilisation are responsible for the current economic crisis and collapse in living standards.

Observers go unobserved

In similar vein, the existence of the international election observer mission was more than a minor inconvenience. Our findings, if properly reported in the Western media, would have blown a hole in the perennial but unevidenced claims of electoral fraud that serve to justify US and EU sanctions, coup attempts, and the recognition of the Juan Guaidó, a made-in-Washington colour-revolutionary who self-identifies as president but has never actually stood for the position.

Things were little better back in Britain. At the London Labour Party conference in 2019, the then shadow foreign secretary Emily Thornberry, who was demanding fresh presidential elections, admitted to me that she had no idea that observers had been present throughout the country.

Thus, our official non-existence continued until 26 March 2020 when, for reasons that are still unclear, we suddenly burst into life. The BBC website reported retrospectively that "He [Nicolás Maduro] was elected to a second term in May 2018 in an election seen as flawed by international observers." It was nice of the BBC to finally acknowledge our existence. But we had never said or implied anything of the sort! I know, because I was in the meeting that drew up and approved the final observers' report certifying the presidential election was free and fair and had met international standards. The BBC story was a complete invention.

Drawn from 86 countries, the observer mission included former prime ministers and presidents from Spain, Ecuador, and Honduras, delegations from the African Union and the Caribbean nations, the Latin American Council of Electoral Experts, the South African electoral commission, and parliamentarians and city mayors from around the world. The 200 international observers spent over a week in Venezuela, visiting polling stations and political rallies, auditing the count, and meeting with ordinary voters as well as with the President, politicians, and campaign chiefs of the main political parties. Notable by their absence were the official representatives of the USA and the EU, who declared in advance of the vote that the result would be fraudulent, and from the outset sought to delegitimise and discredit the process with a near daily barrage of evidence-free claims and allegations.

Yet Venezuelan elections are amongst the most secure and robust on the planet. Jimmy Carter, who observed the 2004 presidential recall referendum, described the voting system as the best in the world. The fully automated touch-screen voting system uses thumbprint recognition technology and prints off a receipt which is put into a ballot box and counted in front of opposition witnesses who then sign the tally

PHOTO BY ENEAS DE TROYA

Nicolás Maduro answers questions on television

sheets. The triple-lock of the computer printout, the tally sheets, and the results for each machine posted on the website of the CNE electoral commission, guarantees the integrity of the result. If the numbers don't match, fraud is self-evident. [1]

The night before the 2018 presidential elections, I put these points to the campaign chief of the main opposition candidate, Henri Falcón. "Are you able to give a categorical guarantee you will respect the result of the election?" I asked in a taped Q&A session. "Yes, we are going this way tomorrow," he replied. [2] But his assurances proved worthless. Just as the results were about to be announced on live TV, Falcón, who had come under pressure from other opposition leaders for breaking the electoral boycott, tweeted that Maduro's win was illegitimate.

Electoral victory

By 2021, it was clear that Juan Guaidó's ludicrous but highly profitable slush-funded "presidency" was in a death spiral and the two main opposition groupings agreed to re-enter the electoral process following talks with the government in Mexico. However, they failed to create an electoral pact to contest November's regional elections, and the governing Socialist Party (PSUV) took full advantage of opposition disunity and chalked up wins in 20 of the 23 state governorships with about 45% of the popular vote.

Meanwhile, despite a slow economic recovery and new Chinese, Russian, and Iranian investment in the beleaguered oil industry, the Washington DC-based Centre for Economic and Policy Research estimates that sanctions and asset seizures (the British government has confiscated over a billion dollars of Venezuela's gold reserves) have caused the deaths of 40,000 Venezuelans, with another 300,000 at risk due to a lack of access to medicines.

The Venezuelan revolution has proved considerably more resilient that its critics expected. Bolstered by an inept and divided opposition and hitherto empty US military threats, the government is likely safe for the next few years. In the longer term, the survival of the revolution will depend on its ability to deliver tangible improvements under the cosh of what may well turn out to be a permanent Cuba-style economic embargo, and critically to follow through on Maduro's promise to reconnect with and re-energise a social base grown weary of seemingly endless privations.

Calvin Tucker - official observer during Venezuelan elections in his capacity as Campaigns Manager at the Morning Star

[1] This can be viewed at: https://www.facebook.com/VenSolidarity/videos/1945747852104575

[2] This can be viewed at: https://skwawkbox.org/2019/01/29/video-venezuela-may-2018-opposition-campaign-chief-accepts-presidential-election-result/

COP 26

A failure to address vested interests and inequalities

COP26 activists demand climate justice

PHOTO BY DEAN CALMA / IAEA

by David Wickham

The UN Conference on Climate Change, COP26, took place in Glasgow 31st October – 13th November 2021. What progress, if any, did it make?

Setting the scene

Climate change, or more accurately, global warming, is caused by the accumulation over time of greenhouse gases in the earth's atmosphere. Carbon dioxide (CO_2) comprises 75% such gases. [1] The last 7 years have been the hottest on record [2] and 2021 saw a string of natural disasters attributable to global warming ranging from record-breaking heatwaves in Canada to forest fires in California and across the Mediterranean to unprecedented flooding in Germany and Belgium.

CO_2 production is a natural process, but today's CO_2 emissions are produced by the fossil economy which began in the mid-19th century when coal was introduced to power the British cotton industry. [3] Fossil fuels (coal, oil and natural gas) generate 80% of global energy [4] and are responsible for 89% of C02 emissions. [5]

The world's temperature today is 1.2°C above pre-industrial levels. On current policies, according to Climate Action Tracker (CAT), the temperature increase will be 2.7°C higher than pre-industrial levels by the end of the century. [6] Warming makes extreme weather events, such as those already mentioned, more likely to occur and with greater intensity. According to the IPCC, a 1.5°C rise increases the risk of abnormal rainfall by 70%. Consequently, COP26 must be judged on action to replace fossil fuels.

It was British, European and American capitalists who imposed the fossil economy on the rest of the world making today's global warming "the rolling invasion of the past into the present"

Good COP - Bad COP?

The Glasgow summit was attended by the 168 signatory-countries to the 1994 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Its purpose was twofold:

- to commit to emissions reduction targets consistent with the aim of limiting global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels by 2100, a target agreed in Paris in 2015
- to focus particularly on the present decade because of the alarming trends identified in Paris.

CAT provides a helpful summary of the Glasgow agreement:

- if targets for 2030 alone are met, the temperature increase reduces from 2.7°C to 2.4°C
- if all targets are met, the temperature increase reduces to 2.1°C
- if all targets, including net zero targets, long term strategies and nationally-determined contributions (NDCs) are met, the temperature increase reduces to 1.8°C

So, best case scenario, a 0.3°C shortfall from the target remains. And every 0.1°C counts.

One positive from Glasgow was the USA-China bilateral agreement committing "to meet the Paris 1.5°C target". A second was the decision to reconvene in November 2022 in Cairo (COP 27) to make further efforts. Overall, however, CAT's conclusion is that the 2030 targets are "totally inadequate and put achieving 1.5°C at risk" mainly because delegates failed to kick the fossil habit [7], with the final declaration committing to "phase-down" rather than ban coal. Western sources blamed this failure on China and India, who together are responsible for 35% CO2 emissions. Such finger-pointing conveniently ignores the fact that neither is responsible for today's global warming. It was British, European and American capitalists who imposed the fossil economy on the rest of the world making today's global warming "the rolling invasion of the past into the present". [8]

The World Inequality Report shows that the richest 10% of the world's population is responsible for 50% of emissions and the poorest 50% for 12%.

"That may be," some might say, "but what's past is past, we must act now". True, but only if those responsible shoulder the financial responsibility for energy transition. Which they signally failed to do at Glasgow. Kicking the fossil habit will have to be paid for.There was anger that the developed countries did not deliver an annual $100 billion to finance decarbonisation in developing countries. Symbolically important, this sum probably falls far short of what will be required. [9]

Whatever the amount, much will have to come from taxation. Typically, carbon taxes hit the poorest hardest. Unsurprisingly, they are unpopular and allow populists like Australian Senator Matt Canavan to make decarbonisation the enemy of poverty because, "coal is good at getting people out of poverty". Wealth taxes would be fairer. The World Inequality Report shows that the richest 10% of the world's population is responsible for 50% of emissions and the poorest 50% for 12%. Carbon inequality reflects wealth inequality in a world where the richest 10% owns 76% global wealth. [10]

Time running out

Glasgow kept the 1.5°C commitment alive but the timescales for action are too slow. To be consistent with meeting the target, says CAT, emissions must be halved by 2030. However, Big Oil feels under no pressure to act: at the World Petroleum Conference, December 5 - 9, Darren Woods, ExxonMobil CEO said, "under most credible scenarios including net zero pathways, oil and natural gas will continue to play a significant role in meeting society's needs". [11]

Left alone, the vested interests of fossil capital will continue to block decarbonisation. State intervention is needed [12] and governments must be forced to act. To this end, attention must be focused specifically on the owners and supporters of fossil capital.

[1] Our World in Data

[2] Copernicus, the European Union's Earth monitoring programme. Financial Times 10 January 2022

[3] Andreas Malm, Fossil Capital, Verso 2016, Who Lit This Fire? University of Chicago, 2016

[4] Earth 104 - Energy and the Environment, Pennsylvania State University

[5] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report 2018 cited in ClientEarth Report 11 November 2021

[6] Climate Action Tracker "Warming Projections Global Update" November 2021. CAT is an independent scientific consortium tracking climate change since 2009.

[7] CAT op. cit.

[8] A. Malm, Fossil Capital, p.10

[9] Mark Carney, ex-Bank of England Governor, now UN special envoy on climate change and finance, estimates $100 trillion "is the minimum amount….needed for the sustainable energy drive over the next three decades." Financial Times 29 October 2021

[10] World Inequality Report 7 December 2021. See chapters 7 & 8 for analyses of Corporate and Wealth taxes. P Lysandrou, Commodity, Routledge Focus 2018, on the need for a Global Tax Authority.

[11] FT Energy Source 9 December 2021

[12] The French state nuclear programme of the 1950s & 1960s for example.

BLACKROCK
A new breed of financial monster

by John Moore

"By 2028 BlackRock Corporation and Vanguard are set to control $20 trillion of assets. That's more than the combined GDP of India, Japan and Germany." This is a degree of capital concentration that is historically unprecedented. Have you heard of BlackRock Corporation? Maybe not. Yet BlackRock is the biggest finance company in the world, with more than $8.2 trillion under its management (*Yahoo Finance*, 13/1/21).

Shadow banking

The financial crisis of 2008 threw up a new breed of capitalist monsters, according to Werner Rügemer (*Strategic Culture*, 23/4/21), including hedge funds, 'locusts' (private equity investors) and asset managers like BlackRock. BlackRock manages and invests money like a bank but without being restricted by banking regulations. The immense power of this 'shadow bank' is based on its control over a vast network of interests, giving it a hold over almost every sector of the economy. In the US, BlackRock is the controlling shareholder of all the major banks, big pharma, oil and tech giants, agribusiness, airlines, automotive companies, arms manufacturers and the media. It effectively has a controlling interest in Google, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Facebook, Tesla, Pfizer, Goldman Sachs and JP Morgan. BlackRock's reach extends to at least 30 other countries, including France, the UK, Switzerland and Germany. In Germany, it is the biggest stockholder on the DAX index, equivalent to the FTSE.

In Britain, BlackRock controls assets worth double the UK's annual GDP, according to Nils Pratley (*The Guardian*, 6/4/17). It has a stake in every FTSE company and is the biggest shareholder in over half. Its biggest stake by value is its £9 billion investment in HSBC. Other major shareholdings worth more than £5 billion are AstraZeneca (of which it owns 10%), British American Tobacco, GlaxoSmithKline, and Royal Dutch Shell.

BlackRock's power is largely hidden. Heike Buchter, who has written about the company, titled the first chapter of her book: "The most powerful company no one's heard about." Buchter says: "If you only look at the individual businesses BlackRock is involved in, you don't necessarily realize there's a problem. But add them all up – all the [company's] lines of business and advisory roles – and you end up looking at a massively complex structure, where you have to wonder: Wow, what kind of monster have they created here." BlackRock's method is to buy up around 5-10% of a company's shares, which appears unthreatening – but that slice of ownership gives it enough lobbying power to control it, especially when it acts in concert with Vanguard and State Street, the third of the Big Three asset management companies.

Because BlackRock is not legally a bank, it can evade banking regulations, which were tightened after the 2008 crash. Its unregulated status enables it to deliver higher returns to investors than any bank. BlackRock uses shell companies in tax havens like the tiny US state of Delaware, the Cayman Islands and Luxembourg to avoid tax and scrutiny. Delaware, since the 1920s, has been home to the powerful pharmaceutical company DuPont (recently merged with Dow), of which BlackRock is a major shareholder. Throughout World War 2, DuPont provided technology to the Nazi war effort and made profits from IG Farben's slave labour in Auschwitz. With Joe Biden as its Senator between 1973-2009 Delaware grew into the world's biggest corporate financial haven.

Interestingly, BlackRock is willing to submit to Chinese regulations in order to acquire stakes in China's leading companies and to obtain licenses for financial operations in China.

BlackRock's global power

Before the 2008 crash, Goldman Sachs played a similar role to BlackRock, on a smaller scale. Like Goldman Sachs, BlackRock is usually on both sides of mergers and acquisitions, which means it can shape them to its own benefit. But unlike Goldman Sachs it is not a bank and doesn't invest directly, but rather manages other people's investments. It's a shadow bank. The term 'shadow bank' was coined by economist Paul McCulley in 2007. Laura E. Kodre of the IMF traces shadow banking back to the sale of individual US home mortgages which were bought up by finance companies and sold together in packages. This was how BlackRock's CEO Laurence Fink made his money in the 1980s.

Shadow banks take out short-term loans from the money markets and lend them on to investors as long-term assets. In the lead-up to the 2008 crash, as Kodre explains, "investors became skittish about what those longer-term assets were really worth and many decided to withdraw their funds at once." When these investors defaulted on their loans, the shadow banks could not, by law, borrow money from the US central bank, whereas commercial banks could. Shadow banks also didn't have traditional bank depositors, with funds covered by insurance. This made them vulnerable. Because shadow banks were outside regulation and were not open to scrutiny, nobody knew the true value of their assets, and confidence in them crashed. Former US Treasury Secretary, Tim Geithner blamed a run on the shadow banks for triggering the 2008 crisis. But BlackRock managed to use the crash to its advantage – a case of one parasite feeding off another. In 2009, when credit was squeezed and many banks were failing, BlackRock saw an opportunity when Barclays Global Investment ran into trouble and needed to sell. It acquired Barclays Global Investment for $13.5 billion, using money from investors worldwide, in one swoop devouring the world's biggest asset manager and becoming the leading player itself. "They were in a position to play offense while everyone else was scrambling," says financial analyst Kyle Sanders.

The Covid-caused financial crisis represented an even bigger opportunity for BlackRock than the previous crash. The US central bank, the Fed, handed over to BlackRock the right to distribute the $2 trillion stimulus package agreed by Congress to prop up the US economy. All scrutiny of its role has been closed off by the suspension of the Freedom of Information Act for the Fed. As Kate Aronoff, writing in the *New Republic*, concludes: "BlackRock is having a very good pandemic." Pepe Escobar goes further (*Islam Times*, 6/4/20): "Now, for all practical purposes, it [BlackRock] will be the operating system – the Chrome, Firefox, Safari – of the Fed/Treasury."

PHOTO BY JIM.HENDERSON

BlackRock HQ

Bloomberg calls BlackRock "The fourth branch of government". During the 2008 crash, BlackRock CEO, Laurence Fink, a major donor to both Democrats and Republicans, offered the company's risk analysis expertise to the US administration. Obama relied on BlackRock, just as Biden relies on it today. BlackRock executives play a key role in the current US government, providing the administration's chief economist, deputy Treasury secretary and the chief economist for Vice-President Kamala Harris. BlackRock's role 'advising' central banks is not limited to the US. It advises the European Central Bank, and its influence in Germany is exerted through former politicians such as Friedrich Merz, ex-chair of the CDU in the Bundestag, and bankers like Michael Rüdiger, who is on the board of Deutsche Börse. In the UK until early 2021, BlackRock was paying George Osborne a £650,000 salary to act on its behalf. On the global stage, Laurence Fink is now the acknowledged spokesman for the World Economic Forum (Davos). He is vocal on climate change, calling for a renewed green capitalism.

Meanwhile, BlackRock controls the biggest fossil fuel and mining companies in the world, with $85bn (£62.1bn) invested in coal. A report by watchdog Majority Action found that BlackRock and Vanguard defeated 16 climate-related shareholder resolutions in 2019.

BlackRock represents a dangerous new stage in the monopolisation of finance capital, the high degree of which makes for tremendous instability. Crises are inherent in the irrational capitalist system and cannot be averted. The more monopolised the system, the more quickly a financial infection can lay the whole system to waste as we saw in 2008. Financial commentator Martin Wolf bemoans the fact that the "dynamic" capitalism he once knew has degenerated into a system of "unstable rentier capitalism" (*The Financial Times*, 18/11/19). Nothing has changed since 2008. The parasitism has only deepened, and the monopoly power of BlackRock threatens the system as a whole.

Another financial crash is only a matter of time.

The battle over Boris Johnson

by Helen Christopher

Despite seeming to teeter on the brink, it is entirely possible that, by the time you read this, Boris Johnson will still be Prime Minister. One thing is certain, even if he is not PM, then the person who is will be a Tory. So whatever the outcome of the "Partygate" drama there will be little change for the people of Britain.

What has been most revealing about the debacle has been the light it has shed on the workings of the state as different factions within the elite battle over Johnson's future. This major split has its origins in the Brexit referendum between the dominant trend which supported (and still supports) EU membership and the successful minority trend which supported Britain's exit. The Remainers continue to push back against the Leavers and are having some success – the ousting of Dominic Cummings, the resignation of Lord Frost and Liz Truss, erstwhile Remainer, established as Foreign Secretary and taking charge of the fraught negotiations over the Northern Ireland protocol. Truss has also made it clear that she is a candidate to replace Johnson. The pro-EU faction have never been happy with Johnson and, as his failures become harder to excuse or hide from, increased the pressure for him to go.

Media agenda

People are right to be angry about the endless stream of parties at Number 10 during lockdown. However, while they are being invited to be angry about this by the media, they are not being invited to be angry about the many worse things the Tories and Johnson have done which, among other things, have led to at least 150,000 deaths from Covid. The media want us to be angry about what is portrayed as the character flaws of one man. This is relatively safe for capitalism as it doesn't challenge any fundamentals and makes the transition to another Tory Prime Minister straightforward, without raising questions about in whose interests they govern. As friends got huge Covid related contracts – billions squandered on useless PPE, energy bills soar, benefits cut, inflation surges and people continue to die in the pandemic we are not asked to base our judgement of Johnson's record on that, but on his personal fitness to lead.

All of this demonstrates the continued power of the traditional broadcast and print media to set the agenda, aided and abetted by a drip feed of emails, photos and whistleblowers. The information about the Number 10 parties has clearly been around since they happened, but it is only now that it is being put into the public domain. It would be interesting to know the sources of these strategically planned leaks.

All of this was having considerable success, with newly elected Tory MPs representing working class constituencies suddenly finding that Johnson was no longer an asset and fearing for their seats. Letters were going in to the 1922 committee seeking a confidence vote. There were resignations and one Tory joined Labour, where Keir Starmer was glad to welcome him despite his record – dire even by Tory standards.

Police intervene

Diversionary tactics were quickly employed by Johnson loyalists like the announcement of the abolition of the BBC licence fee, the unmasking of a Chinese "spy" and Britain war-mongering in Ukraine. But that didn't make the story go away. The usual delaying tactic was then resorted to of ordering an investigation by Senior Civil Servant, Sue Gray. Unfortunately for Johnson it was turned round fairly quickly providing an insufficient time for the ball to reach the long grass. Step forward Dame Cressida Dick, (former) Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. She suddenly announced that the Met would now be launching investigations into the parties, having previously refused to do so. She then "requested" that sections of Sue Gray's report be redacted. The report, whatever Gray's initial intention, tells us no more than we knew before and no more than Johnson had already fessed up to. In addition the police involvement gave Johnson the opportunity to argue that judgement should be suspended until that was complete. Then the Met said that they would not release the names of anyone fined in relation to the parties.

Dick comes from an establishment background. She was privately educated and her parents were academics at Oxford University. Antecedents on her mother's side include a Wing Commander in the Air Force, a banker and a Head of Rugby School. She was in charge of the operation when an entirely innocent man, Jean Charles de Menezes, was shot dead, which didn't stop her promotion to Commissioner. (Prior to becoming Commissioner, she spent some time at the Foreign Office where she was in an unspecified role, believed to be security related. The Foreign Office has refused to release any details of her job there.) She presided over a force where officers' behaviour led to questions about the culture within the police. This included the murder of Sarah Everard by a serving policeman and Dick's response to that. She continued to defend "stop and search" tactics which disproportionately target black and minority ethnic people. She tried to obstruct the publication of a report in 2021 into the murder in 1987 of Daniel Morgan, an investigative journalist who exposed police corruption. The report found that there was "a form of institutional corruption" in the Met which had concealed or denied failings in the case.

So Dame Cressida had the right experience to provide cover for Johnson. She owes her position to Johnson's Home Secretary, Priti Patel, who, despite, or perhaps because, of her record extended Dick's contract as Commissioner. So they could call on her for support. However, now Dick appears to have been a further casualty in the war over Boris Johnson. She was eventually forced to resign ostensibly over her inaction in relation to a nasty culture of highly discriminatory attitudes uncovered at one police station. Challenged publicly about this by Sadiq Khan the Labour Mayor of London, she eventually went. It seems reasonable to assume, however, that her intervention in "Partygate" to help take the pressure off Johnson also played its part.

PHOTO BY KATIE CHAN

Cressida Dick

Ineffective Starmer

Whilst the Tories' rifts become more evident Keir Starmer continues to provide no opposition which might inspire people to actively oppose Tory policies and get out and fight. Partly that is because he is pretty ineffective and partly it is because that is the last thing on his mind. His strategy is straight from the New Labour playbook, but without the charisma and dynamism. Don't say anything controversial or principled, position yourself very marginally to the left of the Tories and wait for them to fail. The exception to this is when he decides to loudly embrace British and US imperial interests and joins in warmongering over Ukraine, also attacking the peace movement and the left. Of course, he was given a strong steer on this by the British establishment when another arm of the state, The Monarchy, let the country know what it finds acceptable in a Labour leader with the knighting by the Queen of Tony Blair. Millionaire war criminals good – socialists bad.

> Dick was eventually forced to resign, ostensibly over her inaction in relation to a nasty culture of highly discriminatory attitudes uncovered at one police station.

There has been improvement in Labour support vis-à-vis the Tories in opinion polls, but largely because the Tories and Johnson are performing so badly. A more competent pair of Tory hands in Number 10 could easily reverse that.

What Starmer and the partisans for Blairism seem not to have noticed is that that ultimately New Labour failed and one of the rocks it foundered on was Blair's enthusiastic support for George W Bush and the disastrous war in Iraq. Over Ukraine Starmer is reprising tragedy as farce, believing that he can ingratiate himself with the establishment by imitating Blair and that that will be his route to power.

New Labour in common with many social democratic parties across Europe declined because it ceased to provide a radical vision for the electorate. This has been fertile ground for the far right as people want change, not more of the same. In Scotland disillusioned former Labour voters shifted their hopes to nationalism and the SNP. Sadly Starmer is offering as little as he can possibly manage dressed up in jingoism and attacks on the left. This will only be a recipe for success if the Tories fail to sort themselves out before the next general election and the media are deployed to support Labour and Starmer in their place. The other route to power is to genuinely represent the interests of the British people, who face an onslaught on their living standards, and to provide leadership and support for trade union, peace and community struggles.

Sweatshops thrive in the UK garment industry

PHOTO BY WIKICOMMONS

by Clare Bailey

The structure and organisation of the 21st century garment industry in the UK is determined by the online fast fashion business, where demand is volatile and articles of clothing are designed to be worn once then thrown away. Furthermore, competition between suppliers drives prices and wages down to levels parliamentary committees profess repeatedly to be shocked by. Manufacturers win orders and survive by being able to respond rapidly to brand buyers, via suppliers who place the orders directly with the usually very small factories and often with home-workers who appear on no one's payroll. According to Unite the Union, labour exploitation in the garment industry is at an all-time high, which is saying something. Employment practices that would have been familiar to workers in 19th century factories are widespread in today's industry.

A historic industry

Britain has a long history of producing textiles and clothing. It began by exporting wool in the 8th century, and by the 12th century these exports to weavers in Flanders were creating huge wealth, not least for the Monarchy through taxation. For over two hundred years wool was the most important component of the English economy – sheep took over the landscape from the Pennines to the South Downs. The Highland Clearances - clearing the way for sheep - inflicted famine and destitution on the population of Scotland in the 18th and 19th centuries.

In the late 18th century spinners and weavers, working alone at home or in twos and threes, were forced by employers to work at looms in water-driven mills. Then as steam power took over and the first industrial machines were developed, work moved into factories where conditions were brutal. The cloth industry grew fast: in 1813 there were 2400 power looms in Britain, by 1850 there were 250,000.

Until the 19th century ready-made clothing had been restricted to military uniforms; then standard sizing began to appear and the invention of industrial sewing machines in the 1860s saw the beginning of factory production of clothing. By World War I the clothing industry was one of the biggest employers in the UK. The size of individual manufacturers, compared with textiles, was however typically small. In fact workers were often 'outworkers' doing piece work at home and records of employment were not kept. This remains the case today where the 'sweating' of mid-19th century clothing workers is replicated in cities where the industry is concentrated. Factories are small and investment low because the technology involved in clothes manufacturing has not essentially changed in almost 200 years. Machinery can't easily replace human skill when dealing with a material as hard to handle as cloth and this fact has been the determining feature in the history and development of the industry.

Low investment means low productivity and the intensive exploitation of labour. As Unite the Union puts it: "...manufacturer's wages are the highest single cost, thus in 'high-wage countries' clothing producers continually attempt to drive down wages for profit." This was as evident in the 1840s as it is in 2021 where industry workers in Leicester routinely earn below the minimum wage and often as little as £3-£4 per hour.

Hidden from view

By far the greater part of the industry today is spread across a few hubs in North London, Manchester and the East Midlands. Data from industry sources and the Office for National Statistics (ONS, March 2020) suggest it currently employs something in the region of 100,000 people. It's impossible to be sure of the precise number of people working in the industry, however, because so much employment is off the record and because the numbers fluctuate all the time. The industry expands and contracts according to demand and – regulations being so poorly enforced – because it can.

In the same way, it's difficult to be precise about the number of factories, workshops and manufacturers. One Statista chart shows the number of garment manufacturers over a10 year period between 2008 and 2017 remaining fairly steady at just under 4,000, close to numbers others give for 2021. Numbers are perhaps growing currently due to the expansion of online fast fashion in recent years – a trend that accelerated during the pandemic lockdowns. Other Statista research shows the relative size of about 5,000 manufacturers (including footwear) and the very clear clustering of high numbers at the smaller end of the scale. Roughly 3,400 of them have a turnover of under £500,000 per annum, which places them well outside the scope of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. According to M Shahbandeh, writing for the site in June 2021: "In 2009, wearing apparel manufacturers in the UK produced a turnover of around 2.56 billion British pounds. Over the following six years this figure increased, reaching 3.38 billion British pounds in 2015. In 2019 the turnover of wearing apparel manufacturers declined, to around 2.44 billion pounds."

ONS data at March 2020, however, shows a much bigger annual turnover of around £11bn and industry sources claim it exports between £7bn and £9bn worth of goods annually – these differences in data proving the point that all numbers relating to this industry should be read with a sceptical eye.

Boohoo's ruthless tactics

Unite the Union argues it is not enough to blame exploitative factory owners for conditions in the industry: 'Retailers' purchasing practices create a race to the bottom culture in the industry through their demand for cheap prices, rapid deliveries and a punitive financial culture which imposes huge fines on producers [for late production].' Prices are driven down at suppliers' meetings with manufacturers – here is an account of one such meeting with Boohoo, the UK's biggest fast fashion brand: "Boohoo holds weekly meetings at its Manchester head office, where suppliers bring samples to the product teams in a single room with 10 to 12 large tables. 'It's like a cattle market,' says one person from a supplier who did not want to be named. 'Say I'm the buyer, and [you've] just given me the price of this [dress] for £5. I will literally hold it up to the next table and say, 'How much for that?' and he'll tell you £4. It's ruthless.'"

> Machinery can't easily replace human skill when dealing with a material as hard to handle as cloth and this fact has been the determining feature in the history and development of the industry.

This is the fast fashion model based on small batch orders with a rapid turnaround, that encourages unauthorised subcontracting by suppliers in order to meet the rapid production times and the volumes required. This in turn opens the door to the exploitation of workers and non-compliance in terms of working conditions. It also facilitates wage fraud in many forms, especially for the more vulnerable workers.
Boohoo owns PrettyLittleThing, Warehouse, Oasis, Burtons, Wallis, Dorothy Perkins and Debenhams. It has a value of £4.6bn and grew by a massive 44% in the early months of the pandemic as online shopping surged. It featured prominently in the news in 2020 when employers in poorly ventilated Leicester factories supplying the brand were reported by an undercover Sunday Times investigation to be making workers work through Covid illness and in dangerous conditions. It led to an independent review being set up in September 2020 and this in turn produced 34 recommendations including the publication of Boohoo's long withheld supplier list.

According to Labour Behind the Label (LBL), an organisation campaigning for garment workers' rights worldwide: 'It has been reported by workers that many Leicester factories continued operating throughout the lockdown. The principal cause was sustained orders, primarily from the biggest brand sourcing from Leicester, Boohoo, which continued to operate and trade online. By the 22nd April, even before the lockdown on

These workers are vulnerable to abuse as a result of their immigration status, language skills… and higher unemployment rates. There have also been numerous allegations of links to modern slavery and trafficking.'

businesses reopening was lifted, factories were reportedly operating at 100% capacity.' Operation Tacit, set up by Home Secretary, Priti Patel, in response to these investigations and an independent review, involving 4 separate agencies, has not brought a single prosecution.

In response to this attention, Boohoo finally produced its UK supplier list in March 2021. But it's also possible a US threat to ban Boohoo imports due to its use of 'slave labour' had something to do with its compliance. The Leicester Mercury reported in March 2021 that US Customs and Border Protection believed there were sufficient grounds to launch an investigation into Boohoo.

Modern Slavery

One of the pieces of legislation ostensibly designed to protect workers from the worst forms of exploitation in this and other industries is the Modern Slavery Act (2015). At a hearing of the parliamentary Environmental Audit Committee (EAC) in 2019, one MP asked Sarah O'Connor of the Financial Times (FT), who had been investigating the garment industry for some time and was giving evidence: "What is the success of the Modern Slavery Act (MSA) if you are telling us it does not have any impact? O'Connor's response was straightforward: "When it first came out I was astounded by how weak it was because … you just have to write a statement. That is all you have to do. Even then, if you do not write the statement there does not seem to be any sanction." Not only did the MSA permit companies to claim full compliance with its Section 54 on supply chain transparency simply by making an online statement on their own websites, it only required companies with an annual turnover of more than £36 million to make such a statement, thus excluding the vast majority of small clothing manufacturers from its scope. Unite has called for the complete revision of the MSA's Section 54. The MSA was so widely acknowledged to be toothless that, by the time of the 2019 Environmental Audit Committee hearings, two reviews of it had already been carried out.

The target of the Modern Slavery Act at the time was less internal UK supply chains than those running from countries such as Cambodia and Bangladesh, where the Rania Plaza building collapse in 2013 killed 1,138 garment workers and focused attention on conditions in clothing factories supplying UK brands. In fact, the loose terms of the Act and the lack of enforcement may have been incentives for the 're-shoring' of business noted by the parliamentary Environmental Audit Committee in 2019. Many companies have moved business back to the UK, where conditions are ideal for fast fashion in other ways too - supply chains are far shorter and response times correspondingly faster.

The fact that UK garment factories are operating freely in unsafe conditions and that there are confirmed reports of workers not being paid at all for work done is well known, as is non-compliance, not only with the MSA but also with other employment legislation. There is evidence found by PricewaterhouseCoopers in their compliance review of the MSA that 70% of companies large enough to be required to comply had missed at least one of the 6 areas that government guidance recommended should be addressed. A second review carried out in 2019 found that 40% of eligible companies had not been complying at all.

For garment workers in the UK the situation is bleak. The Modern Slavery Act is not the only inadequate piece of legislation. Other laws and regulations are also routinely ignored without sanction. Basically labour law doesn't apply. There are many different enforcement agencies involved but they do not cooperate where necessary and they have inadequate powers to follow through on what they find. There has been no shortage of investigations into and reports on the industry in recent years – the conditions 1000s of workers have to endure are, as the FT's Sarah O'Connor put it, 'an open secret'. Fixing Fashion, the report produced by the Environmental Audit Committee in 2019 following its hearings, made many specific recommendations for addressing the problems they had found. The Tory government rejected all of them.

HMRC, responsible for tackling minimum wage offences, irregularly publishes lists of companies found to be underpaying garment workers along with the outstanding fines owed but no company has been prosecuted for non-payment. The Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA), set up in 2005 after the drownings of cockle pickers in Morecombe Bay in 2004, published a 'protocol' on the apparel industry in 2018, calling for a more joined up approach between agencies and better information gathering generally. It announced it was focusing its attention on the textile industry in 2021, recognising it as ‘a high-risk industry for labour exploitation’ but it has no real powers and even has difficulties securing warrants to inspect factories. The Labour Market Enforcement Board report summary for 2019-20 does not even name the clothing industry as one of the high-risk areas for labour exploitation – it lists: car washes, agriculture, hospitality, construction, care, shellfish gathering, nail bars, poultry and eggs, warehouses and distribution centres. And yet buried deep in the report is a footnote on the Leicester garment industry naming numerous investigations and reports over the last 20 years – all of which led nowhere.

Vulnerable workers

‘A £4 dress is only a ‘bargain’ because someone somewhere is paying the true price.’, says Labour Behind the Label. It’s report ‘Boohoo and Covid-19’, focused on Leicester, describes the workforce as follows: ‘It is estimated that most garment workers are from minority ethnic groups. Around 33.6% were born outside the UK (e.g. from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh but also Somalis and increasingly Eastern Europeans). These workers are vulnerable to abuse as a result of their immigration status, language skills… and higher unemployment rates. There have also been numerous allegations of links to modern slavery and trafficking.’

The lack of documented resident status or entitlement to work means many workers accept jobs without formal contracts or minimum wages. This also contributes to a situation where they are unable or unwilling to speak out about labour rights abuses for fear of deportation. The UK Home Office hostile environment policy targets and punishes migrant workers as opposed to addressing exploitation and promoting systematic change in labour malpractices. Unite has called for ‘firewalls’ between immigration enforcement and services for the support and protection of garment workers.

PHOTO BY A P MONBLAT

Fast Fashion at Oasis

Workers living as precariously as this, even those with the right to live and work in the UK, are understandably reluctant to draw attention to themselves by joining a union and union membership is consequently very low. Globally it is estimated that fewer than 10% of garment workers belong to a union and after her investigation into the Leicester factories Sarah O’Connor said ‘I did not see much evidence of trade unions.’ When asked directly at the EAC hearings whether Boohoo’s factories recognised unions, the company’s co-founder Carol Kane said there was ‘no real reason’ for them, ‘there does not currently appear to be a demand’ and that they had an ‘employee forum’ instead. When pressed, Kane added that ‘if the workers would like it’ Boohoo would recognise a union. Since 2020 the TUC Midlands has been working with Leicester Trades Council and brands ASOS and New Look (and other brands though not, it seems, Boohoo) to establish Workplace Support Agreements, which guarantee unions access to garment workers to recruit. In its report ‘Fixing Leicester’s Garment Industry’ the project was hoping two outreach workers would start work in November 2021. So, more ‘fixing’ to come.

That so many clothing manufacturers have been re-shoring their business in recent times should tell us as much as we need to know about how things stand, for this industry and the diminishing UK manufacturing sector. Far from being the ‘world-leading’ high tech economy projected by government propaganda, the reality is that the UK is a low wage, low productivity economy with businesses given a free hand to exploit skilled workers as they please and to break the law with impunity.

The lack of documented resident status or entitlement to work means many workers accept jobs without formal contracts or minimum wages.

AGRICULTURE

Tories squander Brexit opportunities

by Marianne Hitchen

PHOTO BY RF VILA

Cows on farm in Yorkshire

British farming is in decline. This is nothing new: British farming has been in decline since records began in the mid-1800s. But the scale of this decline is new, as illustrated by some shocking statistics. Farm income has fallen by over 50% in the last five years alone (*BBC Panorama*). In the last two years, one third of the UK's 150,000 farmers have quit the industry. What is going on?

When Britain left the European Union (EU), and with it the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), many hoped this could signal a fresh start for British agriculture. CAP was a poor deal for British farmers from the time of joining in 1973. EU spending on the UK was only £4 billion in 2018, while the UK paid £13 billion into the EU budget in the same year. Even the pro-EU *Economist* (26/11/20) said that Britain should be able to come up with better farming policies outside the EU; indeed, farmers could "not do worse".

Four years ago, less than 1% of the UK's working population was employed in agriculture, and this figure continues to decline. Around 60% of the total workforce on farms was accounted for by farm owners themselves and those with whom they had an immediate family or business relationship. A further 20% were regularly employed farm labourers, and around 15% were casual and seasonal workers. This picture is already changing, with a rapid decline in the numbers of regularly employed farm labourers in particular.

From the quantity of TV programmes about young, successful smallholders selling niche products from rare breeds of sheep and pigs, one might think the farming sector is flourishing. The reality is that such enterprises are a tiny fraction of agriculture as a whole. They rely on significant financial investment and on working all hours of the day, whilst being uncertain of security or success. The familiar picture of small dairy, beef and sheep farms passed on from parent to child, is already out of date and the decline has not been halted by leaving the EU. Why is this?

Agriculture Transition Plan

British farmers are facing huge changes in the support they receive from government, and these do not bode well for smaller businesses. Last year marked the start of a seven-year transition away from the EU's Common Agricultural Policy. Each of the UK's devolved governments will enact new agricultural policies, although they are unlikely to be fully implemented before 2025. Meanwhile as the National Farmers' Union (NFU) notes, the government's Department for Rural Affairs (Defra) will reduce and then stop all direct payments, i.e. subsidies, to farmers by 2027. Defra "plans to invest money freed up by stopping direct payments to support agriculture in different ways".

EU subsidies are to be replaced by a number of schemes and funds, that farmers have to apply for. This process will favour larger concerns

How can trends in self-sufficiency, eco-friendly measures and sustainability be maintained at the same time as the imperatives of neo-liberalism? What will be the effects of these changes on the British countryside?

at the expense of smaller ones. Some of these schemes come under the heading of Environmental Land Management, such as the Sustainable Farming Incentive, Local Nature Recovery and Landscape Recovery. Farmers will be required to achieve a number of targets in these areas, to receive funding. They can also apply for grants from, among others, the New Entrants' Scheme, the Slurry Investment Scheme, the Future Farm Resilience Fund, plus a lump sum exit scheme for farmers wishing to leave the industry. It is this last scheme that many struggling farmers are taking advantage of, and which will see British agriculture concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. In the meantime, the NFU projects that livestock farmers will lose between 60%-80% of their income by 2024 as a result of direct payment reductions.

Response from farmers

Farmers are generally considered to be conservative in outlook, yet the NFU has been increasingly vocal in speaking out against the changes. "Expecting farmers to run viable, high-cost farm businesses, continue to produce food and increase their environmental delivery, whilst phasing out existing support and without a complete replacement scheme for almost three years is high risk and a very big ask…There are also many uncertainties during this policy transition, not least the new trading arrangements after we leave the transition period, recovery from Covid 19, and the global challenge of climate change…Moreover, the long-running price war in UK retail often sees farming and growing caught in the crossfire." (Minette Batters, NFU President).

The NFU has been asking Defra to provide an assessment of the economic impact of the Agricultural Transition Plan for the last four years, and is still waiting. It has called on ministers to "address abuses of market power", and "be mindful of the impact sudden drops in income could have, including seriously jeopardising the viability of farm businesses, and the knock-on impacts for domestic food production".

Farmers are contending with a string of problems, including the post-pandemic labour shortage, which has already resulted in unpicked produce rotting in fields, and a cull of healthy pigs on farms. This is before British agriculture has felt the impact of new trade deals with the major food producing nations of Australia and New Zealand. The NFU says that these are really bad deals for the UK, as all tariffs and quotas on imports of Australian beef and lamb will be removed after the initial phasing-in period. British farmers are being abandoned to the cut-throat world of market forces in other words, without any of the previous checks and balances and with potentially catastrophic consequences.

All this makes a mockery of any talk of sustainability and self-sufficiency. As Minette Batters has noted, "What is decided now will decide our levels of self-sufficiency".

Improvements were starting to be made in this area, with UK domestic production meeting 60% of our food needs recently, compared with only 30% in 1947. How can trends in self-sufficiency, eco-friendly measures and sustainability be maintained at the same time as the imperatives of neo-liberalism? What will be the effects of these changes on the British countryside? Minette Batters again, "Agriculture underpins the entire rural economy. In some…parts of the country, if you didn't have agriculture, the village schools, the local community, the allied trades, the local vet…are all put at risk."

From **The Socialist Correspondent** 10 years ago

"The recent announcement that the US is shifting its military priorities - away from the Middle East and Europe towards greater naval and air power in the Pacific – puts down a clear marker to China that the US will not allow it to compete with it as a superpower.

The already formidable US military presence in the Pacific is being beefed up… In a nutshell, the new US strategy is to exaggerate the threat posed by China, build a string of bases encircling it and deploy missile systems near China…"

Issue 14 Spring 2012
US Imperialism's strategy in the Pacific

Simon Korner

FOOTBALL

Billionaire owners strain loyalty of fans

by Steve Bishop

Being a football fan is tantamount to accepting a ticket to ride an emotional rollercoaster. None more so than being a fan of Newcastle United, the team which has suffered more ups, downs, almosts and maybes than any other in the Premier League. The heady days of Kevin Keegan and Bobby Robson, the team led by the goal scoring machine, Alan Shearer, have long since passed, being replaced over the past decade or more by the dead hand ownership of sports tycoon Mike Ashley.

Toon failed by billionaire

Ashley's tenure at St. James' Park started off in 2007 in a blaze of optimism, with boozy pints down the Bigg Market and fans welcoming the Cockney entrepreneur as an adopted Geordie. Sinking into the Championship in 2007/08 the team bounced back first time and by the 2011/12 season had achieved the dizzy heights of fifth place in the Premier League.

It was of course a false dawn. Indifferent results, mediocre performances and poor player purchases resulted in a further relegation at the end of the 2015/16 season, which not even the revered Rafael Benitez could prevent. However, another bounce back saw top flight football return to St James for 2017/18 riding a further wave of optimism, that the tight fisted and increasingly despised Ashley would at least provide Rafa with the resources to strengthen the squad. It was not to be. At the end of 2018/19 a frustrated Benitez parted company, much to the disappointment of the Toon Army and local lad, but hardly exciting managerial prospect, Steve Bruce, took over the reins.

For non-football fans, already stifling a yawn, why is any of this important?

Saudi money

Two immediate reasons spring to mind. Firstly, football is big business and the Premier League is the world leader. Secondly, while the pressure on Premier League clubs to increase income has resulted in ever higher ticket prices, attendance at football matches in the UK is still a predominantly working class activity and what happens in and around the sport still has the power to influence attitudes.

As Newcastle United's fortunes on the pitch declined so too did Mike Ashley's interest in owning a 'trophy', albeit trophy-less, football club. The years of rumour and counter rumour about new buyers finally reached a conclusion this season when a consortium led by the Saudi Arabian Public Investment Fund (PIF) coughed up the £350m Ashley had been holding out for and bought Newcastle United.

The Premier League had to engage in some fancy diplomatic footwork to approve the deal, given that it has a commitment only to approve 'fit and proper' owners. Not least was turning a blind eye to the scale of the PIF stake, being satisfied with assurances that the Saudi dictators will play no part in the running of the club. However, with Crown Prince Mo-

Who flies the flag for Newcastle United?

PIC BY ARDFERN

hammed bin Salman as the Chair of PIF, other Saudi ministers being on the board and the Saudi Royal Family as the major stakeholder, with 80% ownership, the Premier League could be accused of either being naïve or disingenuous. The fact is that in the Premier League, money talks, and the Saudis represent big money.

The Saudi deal is not the only dubious football purchase in recent years or the only example that money dictates the play on the international football stage. Roman Abramovich, may have been a knight in shining armour to many Chelsea fans, but less than a hero to many overworked and underpaid Russians. The oil rich Arab dictatorships have been moving into football in a big way recently. The Abu Dhabi royal family takeover of Manchester City in 2008 set the trend. Qatar will host the first desert-based World Cup in

2022, in a nation with no history or tradition in the game. To prove their bona fides the Qataris did proceed to buy French club, Paris St. Germain, showing that they have the interest of the sport at heart!

The Saudi deal with Newcastle United is by no means the only questionable issue of ownership in the Premier League. However, it does outstrip the others in the open and close involvement of members of the ruling dictatorship and the extent of their engagement in other dubious practices with the British government. It is estimated by Campaign Against the Arms Trade that more than £20 billion worth of arms have been sold to the Saudis by Britain since the bombing campaign against Yemen, started in 2015, a conflict which has seen an estimated 150,000 lose their lives and which the United Nations describes as the world's worst humanitarian disaster.

The Saudi led airstrike on a prison in the city of Saada in Yemen in January, resulted in an estimated 80 dead and over 200 injured. At the same time, in a strike on the port city of Hodeidah in the south, three children were killed. Beheadings, 90 last year alone, and public floggings continue to be the order of the day in Saudi Arabia. The rights of women are severely restricted and political opposition silenced. Quite how the Premier League regard these as the actions of fit and proper owners is questionable to say the least. Would a company 80% owned and controlled by Kim Jong Un, with a promise that the North Korean government would not directly interfere in the day to day running of the operation, have passed the Premier League's scrutiny? Unlikely, unless Kim were to spend more time cavorting with the British Royal Family and buying UK manufactured weaponry!

Dilemma for fans

As a financial operation the Premier League is unequalled in world football. As an ethical proposition it is sinking ever deeper into a mire of its own making. The extent to which football as an industry is bound to the world of international finance capital continues to grow. The recently mooted European Super League failed to materialise this time but the idea in some way, shape or form will be back.

Amnesty International have stated recently of the Newcastle United deal, that it risks making the Premier League, "a patsy of those who want to use the glamour and prestige of Premier League football to cover up actions that are deeply immoral, in breach of international law and at odds with the values of the global footballing community."

For fans the dilemma is where to draw the line. Many baulked at handing over hard-earned cash to Mike Ashley, given his position on workers and trade union rights, but bit their lips to continue to support their team. Do the multi-millionaire Glazers, accused of asset stripping Manchester United, deserve our hard-earned cash or Russian oil gangster Abramovich? The list goes on but all have been deemed fit and proper by the Premier League. The league itself was the brainchild of marketing executives in the Murdoch empire, keen to get their new Sky TV channel off the ground. How many are now without a Sky satellite dish or a subscription to Sky Sports?

As socialists we are compromised daily. Can we be sure that those Nike trainers did not originate in a Thai sweatshop or that the cotton shirt we pull on was not made at the end of a 12-hour shift in a Bangladeshi garment factory? How many of us have not received an Amazon package recently? We are entirely dependent on capitalism to get through our daily lives with some of its goods being even more ethically unacceptable than others, but that is not to say that choices cannot be made. The boycott of South African goods played its part in raising awareness of the apartheid regime. The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) Movement is working to end international support for Israel's oppression of Palestinians.

For many though the choice not to support their local team runs too deep. Football matches are bound up with socialising before and after games, meeting friends and family, being part of the shared highs and lows of the team's fortunes. For most of the 50,000 regulars at St. James' Park these ties are stronger than the fact that the team itself is now largely owned by a medieval dictatorship. Many Newcastle fans own up to being 'conflicted' but do not see the Saudi deal as being any worse than many others in the Premier League. They are not alone but the recent takeover has thrown the issue of club ownership across the league into sharp relief. Individually, fans will have to choose what they can live with but it may be that it is time to apply more rigorous standards across the Premier League as a whole.

The fit and proper persons test for owners and directors has clearly failed in the case of PIF. However, it can be done differently. In Germany, in order to obtain a license to compete in the Bundesliga, a club must hold a majority of its own voting rights. The rule is designed to ensure that the club's members retain overall control by owning 50% of shares +1 share, protecting clubs from the influence of external investors. The system is not without its contradictions or challenges but is one example of a different approach. Whether the rest of Europe can resist the lure of international capital indefinitely remains to be seen. The Premier League clearly cannot but is by no means leading by good example.

DOPESICK
(TV miniseries 2021)

Reviewed by Brian Durrans

In January 2022 actor Michael Keaton won a Golden Globe award for his leading role in *Dopesick*, a dramatised TV miniseries on the Disney+ subscription channel, about the opioid epidemic which has plagued the US since the late 1990s. Based on a book of the same name by journalist Beth Macy, *Dopesick* exposes how the Sacklers, the family owning the Purdue Pharma company but hitherto best known as art-world philanthropists, played a leading role in the epidemic itself. The Sacklers lied about the addictiveness of the prescription pain relief, OxyContin, which they aggressively marketed to physicians serving millions of mainly working class Americans. [1] OxyContin sales accounted for the greater part of their accumulated wealth officially estimated in spring 2021 at $11bn, much of it legally transferred from the company to their private bank accounts. Three months later, the total economic cost of the epidemic, including crime, healthcare and lost productivity, was calculated as running year-on-year at nearly $124bn. [2]

The death rate (the ultimate lost productivity) was even more striking. Between 2014-2016 average life expectancy in the US fell for the first time in a century, caused by drug-related suicides and overdoses, which tripled from 1999 to 2017 while opioid overdoses rose sixfold. [3] The epidemic claimed half a million Americans from 2000 to 2018 and even now kills about 100,000 more every year. [4] Whilst overshadowed by the dramatically higher US death rate from Covid (about 847,000 in 2020 and 2021), the causes of the opioid epidemic and how it is being resisted, reported and interpreted, hold lessons at least as pressing as those from the more widespread Covid pandemic for achieving a healthy, sustainable future. In the meantime, both AstraZeneca and Pfizer, the leading and massively state-aided companies producing Covid vaccines, have both publicly declared that making profits was the last thing on their minds [5]: perhaps a sign, whatever its sincerity, that Big Pharma is at least for now feeling the heat of public revulsion against Purdue as well respect for the dedication of health workers.

Individuals and the system

The activities of particular capitalist enterprises rarely attract a TV mini-series, so what is it about the spectacular rise and fall of Purdue Pharma that caught the eye of the Disney Corporation, of Home Box Office (HBO) whose excellent two-part documentary *Crime of the Century* was screened in 2021, of Netflix who are bringing out their own mini-series in 2022, and of a small legion of writers whose output of books and articles exposing and analysing the epidemic shows no signs of drying up? The obvious answer is human interest and a story with no end in sight, though there is a little more to it than that.

Capitalist media are also pro-capitalist media, experienced in making a profit out of stories with strong public interest while keeping capitalism itself out of the spotlight or the dock. The opportunities and risks are high, not least because widespread outrage against those who most obviously fuelled the epidemic is likely to continue, given frequent updates on the legal wrangling over the Sackler fortune and culpability, or on the latest effects of the epidemic itself, both still ongoing. In the spotlight are: one family (the Sacklers), one company (Purdue), one industry (pharmaceuticals), and one aspect of declining capitalism's collateral damage (domestic drug-dependency) rather than its even more devastating impact in death, destruction, impoverishment, malnutrition and injustice through 'business as usual', war, and looming environmental catastrophe. Under capitalist rules, exposing the back-story of the first drop in life expectancy for a century in the world's richest nation is co-opted into a damage-limitation exercise.

Although occasionally mentioned in other analyses of the crisis, several additional pharmaceutical companies have also been illegally involved in making and supplying opioids, including some already penalised for breaking the law or likely to be, among them Allergan, AmerisourceBergen, Cardinal Health, CVS, Endo International, Johnson & Johnson, McKesson, Mallinckrodt, Teva, Walgreens and Walmart. [6] Only a comprehensive view of the context in which the crisis evolved can best help prevent it from happening again, but perhaps it is already too late to enlarge the rogues' gallery beyond the Sackers and their Purdue entourage.

If neither Purdue nor even their voracious appetite for profits deserve all the blame, two candidates to share it with emerged in the first two decades of post-war America. In the early years of the Cold War, in reaction against both the socialised medicine of the socialist countries and temporary improvements under Roosevelt, private healthcare reached a dominance unchallenged until the advent of over-hyped Obamacare. Then, in the early 1960s, mildly-addictive sedatives were developed for over-the-counter access and marketed for self-managing a wide range of conditions, moods and anxieties, which, even if only imagined, advertisers could persuade people were real. Individualising medication and expanding its scope was deliberately planned in the 1960s by the Swiss company Roche Pharma with the help of Arthur Sackler, then working for the advertising company McAdams, which came up with the term "broad spectrum" for Librium and Valium to give them an aura of scientific legitimacy. [7]

Profitably splashing the crimes of Purdue Pharma across the broadcasting, print and social media comes at a price, however, and capitalism doesn't hold all the aces. *Dopesick* and similar accounts tell a story which poses questions for their audiences. Drugs-based crime has long been popular staple of fictionalised films and TV series, but one of these, the Netflix series *Ozark*, now uses a thinly-veiled version of Purdue and the Sacklers to make its plot-line more convincing, and even has a member of a Mexican drugs cartel family reminding the Sackler-like owner of the Purdue-like pharmaceutical company that her family had killed more people than his. The reality of the opioid pandemic which *Dopesick* reveals, and even *Ozark* refers to, is getting into people's living rooms even when it might not make today's news: the terrible consequences of the Sacklers' profiteering for those they lured into addiction in run-down mining villages in West Virginia; the duplicity of self-serving corporate publicists, lawyers and accountants; the dedication of those seeking justice and compensation; and, occasionally, even the vision of those beginning to realise the need for radical change. Because it has such an obvious connection with real and ongoing experience, the drama that plays out on the page or screen is unlikely to stay there.

Manufacturing addiction

Launching OxyContin in 1995, Purdue argued that it offered twelve hours of pain relief by means of a special coating designed to release its contents slowly, and that this made the tablet safe to prescribe since the coating made it hard to crush then snort or inject for an immediate and dangerous high. Knowing the tablets were easy to crush, the company focused instead on the need to take them as prescribed. It was able (with inside help from an official who later joined the company as a much higher salary) to persuade the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) to approve OxyContin on the basis that an addiction risk of less than one percent had been proved in a clinical trial when in fact no such trial had been conducted. The Sacklers' philanthropic reputation was an asset here, but they were not going to take any chances, so they wrote the terms of the FDA's approval and unprecedentedly steered the whole approval process.

FDA approval gave Purdue the green light to develop a hyper-profitable marketing strategy knowing that eventually some users would become abusers by crushing the tablets or non-users would get hold of them if they became widely prescribed, and that people would (or could be encouraged by their doctors to) start taking more - or more concentrated - tablets more often and become addicted in that way even if each protective coating continued working as claimed. Demand, sales and profits were boosted in several ways: by targeting working class communities especially liable to past occupational pain and its chronic legacy; by winning support (and raising the profile) of medical pain specialists with the argument that pain of whatever cause deserves the status of a "fifth vital sign", for the patient to measure using a simplified scale, giving a spurious objectivity without regard to wider factors; inventing the idea that when withdrawal from OxyContin produces symptoms resembling those of an addict, then the addiction must be "false" and treated by increasing the dosage; by incentivising marketing reps with unlimited bonuses; and by bribing unprincipled or avaricious doctors to get more OxyContin into far more patients than could be medically justified.

With all these measures in place, OxyContin prescriptions, addictions, drug-related crime, family breakdowns and drug-related deaths skyrocketed. But neither the epidemic nor public concern about it could be brushed aside. By 2018, the Sacklers faced fraud charges and worse. The crisis which OxyContin did most to generate began to move onto cartel-sourced opioids like heroin and the more powerful Fentanyl and related products.

Will justice be done?

The medical assessment of opioid addiction increasingly recognises Opioid Use Disorder as a chronic brain disease, not a character defect. Rehabilitation, with dedicated support, social therapy and controlled medication, is therefore critical if more are to survive the epidemic, which is why fully funded provision matters to campaigners. The origins of the epidemic and where its devastation is greatest make an overwhelming case for tackling the poverty and austerity, and their capitalist roots, to which drugs are no answer.

In July 2021, a legal settlement was reached that would have protected the Sacklers from prosecution themselves, in exchange for Purdue declaring bankruptcy and releasing both $4.5bn to pay opioid claims and some 33 million company records potentially revealing the full extent of its collusion with public and professional institutions and individuals. Those who sought to hold the Sacklers individually liable for their crimes were outraged by this decision until it was overturned by another judge in December. At the time of writing (late January 2022), the Sackler lawyers are seeking to rescue the July 2021 bankruptcy deal by overturning the December ruling against it. [8]

[1] In this article, *Dopesick* refers to the TV series rather than the book.

[2] https://oversight.house.gov/news/press-releases/committee-releases-documents-showing-sackler-family-wealth-totals-11-billion; https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/data-visualizations/2021/the-high-price-of-the-opioid-crisis-2021

[3] https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/nchs_press_releases/2021/20211117.htm *Dopesick* and this review are only about the US where the media coverage is greatest and the political stakes highest, but opioid over-prescription or misuse may also be a (potential) problem elsewhere. In 2018, for example, the UK recorded the highest level of opioid use in Europe, increasing fourfold during the previous decade: https://www.bjanaesthesia.org/article/S0007-0912(17)54182-3/fulltext

[4] https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-02686-2

[5] *The Race for a Vaccine* (14 December 2020), BBC Panorama, about Oxford University and AstraZeneca; and Mission Possible: The Race for a Vaccine (6 April 2021), produced by Pfizer; both available on YouTube.

[6] https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/76-billion-opioid-pills-newly-released-federal-data-unmasks-the-epidemic/2019/07/16/5f29fd62-a73e-11e9-86dd-d7f0e60391e9_story.html

[7] Patrick Radden Keefe, *Empire of Pain: The Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty*. London, Pan Macmillan, 2021.

[8] The current security and future fate of those 33 million documents, and whether any have already been shredded, and by whom, is also unclear at the time of writing.