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COST OF LIVING WORKERS TAKE ON BOSSES AND TORIES

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Here we go again. Another Prime Minister and another Tory.

Worse than Johnson

In *Tories at war with the working class and a threat to world peace*, Frieda Park points out that there is every possibility Liz Truss will be even worse than Johnson – however hard this might be to believe. Truss has already declared war on the trade union movement by proposing to bring in even more restrictive anti-union legislation which would make it virtually impossible to take legal and effective strike action. She has shown a total lack of understanding of the threat from the cost of living crisis to working class people. She proposes to slash taxes, but without taxes there can be no hope of improving our collapsing public services, including the National Health Service, nor infrastructure which has been neglected over decades. The shocking lack of reservoirs, exposed in the recent drought conditions, was a direct result of a lack of public investment and privatisation. The crisis facing the British people is, at least in part, a product of the Thatcherism that Truss seeks to emulate. She doesn't even pretend to have a "levelling up" agenda and has expressed herself content that the rich will benefit far more from tax cuts than the poor.

The cuts to peoples' living standards are so dire that workers have been forced to strike for pay increases to ensure their survival. Lisette Neill takes an overview of some of the action in *Strikes – workers take on bosses and the Tories*. The battles that are happening are immense and unprecedented in recent decades. They represent a new self-confidence in the working class which can provide a basis for building class consciousness. Union membership is growing and inroads are being made into smaller private sector enterprises and with self-employed

contractors in the gig economy. As Park points out the actions of the Tories, if Truss takes a hard line against the unions, may politicise people more. This represents a risk for the ruling class. The strikes provide a good foundation to start from but there is a lot still to be done to enable the working class to build on current struggles and to achieve longer lasting gains.

War and more war

In a volatile world Truss has advocated world domination by a "global NATO", which would be aggressive and destabilising. She was cited specifically by the Russians as part of the reason they put their nuclear forces on high alert. Although she finds precious little cash to help people, Truss thinks there is plenty to spare to increase Britain's military budget by half and to renew Trident.

She is a "China hawk", pursuing a policy of confrontation with China and in this is a staunch ally of the United States. Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan was a deliberate provocation to China, designed to ramp up tensions as prelude to a possible war. In *US out to destroy international agreements on Taiwan*, Simon Korner explains why this visit was so dangerous as the United States heads towards unilaterally ripping up the internationally agreed "One China" principle which recognises that Taiwan is part of China.

But just as with Ukraine, the US is experiencing resistance from the developing world to its aggressive policies on China. The number of countries giving diplomatic recognition to Taiwan has declined from 28 in 2008 to 13 now. The latest to change its affiliation is the Solomon Islands which has recently concluded a range of agreements with China. It is strategically important in the Pacific area and its closer ties with China have led to threats

against it from Australia and the USA. The significance of these developments is examined by John Moore in, *Solomon Islands – challenge to US domination in Pacific*.

The war in Ukraine also drags on with the UK, the United States and others in the West still committed to its continuation and pouring arms into the conflict. The sanctions imposed at the behest of the United States have hit European economies particularly hard and Alex Davidson looks specifically at how they have impacted on Germany in, *Sanctions on Russia – Germany in trouble*. It is not only gas supplies that are affected, sanctions on Russia will also impact heavily on its key automotive industry. As Davidson says, "The severe blow to Germany's economy will weaken its dominance of the EU and strengthen the influence and control of the US in Europe." Ironically China's car industry may well be the beneficiary of these sanctions on Russia. The war in Ukraine is reshaping the world in more ways than one.

Maybe as this war goes on, as Truss continues to pour arms into the conflict and as people here go hungry and freeze over the winter, there will be more questioning of what is happening. Despite the media barrage, it could yet become an unpopular war.

Political Action

The importance of the current wave of strikes across Britain is enormous and provides the basis for positive advances for the working class, not only in meeting their immediate economic demands, but also in extending trade union membership and collective organisation, increasing class consciousness and the possibility of further developing political consciousness. But all that won't happen on its own. Political action, organisation and education are essential.

TORIES AT WAR WITH THE WORKING CLASS AND A THREAT TO WORLD PEACE



PHOTO BY STEVE BLAKE

Secretary Blinken holds a joint press availability with UK Foreign Secretary Truss

by Frieda Park

The Tories under their inept new Prime Minister, Liz Truss, are at risk of turning economic struggles by workers to stave off destitution into a political fight which could have unwanted consequences for the ruling class.

The widespread industrial action and ballots still taking place across Britain are hugely welcome. There has been massive support for strikes in ballots and solid support for the strikes themselves. Workers have developed a self-confidence to act in their own interests after decades of near passivity as they were battered by the consequences

of the neo-liberal restructuring of the British economy and consequent ruptures in social and political organisation. They have been pushed to this by a crisis in their living standards which means that millions will be struggling over the coming months.

Ruling class problems

The origins of this crisis are in the systemic problems of global capitalism, deep-seated structural problems in the British economy and the choices made by the Tory government which have made things worse. Inflation, high energy prices and post-Covid supply chain problems are not unique to

the UK. However, the Tories have shown that they are so wedded to their ideological orthodoxies and complacency about the underlying fragility of the UK economy with its reliance on the financial sector that they have totally failed to respond. So divorced are they from the real experiences of people that they don't seem to even understand the implications of rising prices for the majority of the population. Their suggested remedies will go nowhere near to touching the sides of the problems being faced. Rather what answers they have are aimed at protecting the profits of energy giants by giving them tax-payers' cash as handouts and loans to enable families to pay their inflated

bills. Perhaps that disdain and impotence by the representatives of the establishment have also emboldened trade union members to assert themselves.

Sections of the ruling class are certainly worried about the possibility of disorder on the streets and we are now seeing wildcat strikes, illegal under anti-trade union legislation. Any breach in the consensus of respect for the rule of law by the working class (though not for the bosses who regularly break laws – remember P&O) is dangerous. The ruling class certainly wouldn't want it to be habit forming.

But the contrasts are stark – a bit of the veil has been lifted from capitalism as workers see bosses earn millions and companies raking in huge profits, while they literally can't afford food and heating.

Yet these remain defensive struggles in the sense that workers are trying to get back to where they were, earning enough to get by. Whether the struggles can be more than that depends on the Tories' actions and the political organisation and consciousness of the working class itself.

When it comes to managing this crisis the ruling class are in difficulties. How can the interests of capital be safeguarded, whilst meeting some of the expectations of ordinary people that they will be able to eat and heat their homes in what is the 5th or 6th richest country in the world? How can they respond so that people do not begin to question the legitimacy of the system that has created this crisis? The answers do not seem to be forthcoming.

Prime Minister Truss

Whilst some in the ruling class might want to try to mitigate the disaster facing British people, the new Tory leader and Prime Minister, Liz Truss, shows little sign of going down that route. She already proved

herself to be politically inept in her leadership campaign. However, she won by appealing to the Thatcherite fundamentalist base of the Party trying to emulate the lost leader's appeal. Her main policy for tackling rising energy costs was to cut taxes which would do little for most and nothing for the poorest who pay very little income tax. That was a huge gaff, even if it went down well with the Party faithful, so she has now been pushed into offering some financial help to people. She still intends massive tax cuts, however, and it is difficult to imagine how she is going to tackle the problems of the Health Service, other public services and crumbling infrastructure with less cash coming in.

She and Grant Shapps are also promoting more anti-union legislation – Britain already has some of the most restrictive anti-trade union laws in the Western world – which would make legal strike action virtually impossible and would effectively do away with the right to strike. Entrenching the government in a face-off against working people may not go well. If trade union leaders, wildcat strike organisers and energy protesters end up in court and in jail, their protests will become of necessity more politicised.

Tory MPs and the establishment would have preferred Rishi Sunak as the next Prime Minister, so in quick succession after Johnson, they have got another Tory leader that they didn't want. His policies would have chimed more with their interests. Truss on the other hand shows every sign of pursuing her own agenda regardless of the peril for capital and the Tory party's fortunes.

Although it hardly seems possible, she is shaping up to be even worse than Johnson. As well as her lack of understanding of politics in Britain and lacking a thought through strategy to defend the interests of capital in a crisis, she is also a dangerous warmonger. While she offers no help for people whose

living standards are tanking she will provide plenty of money for actual tanks. She plans to increase defence spending by half up from 2% to 3% or £20bn more per year. Britain faces no threat from any other country – no one is about to invade us. The increased spending can only be for offensive purposes, usually defined as protecting British interests, which now resemble playing a support role to the United States' attempt to retain its position as the global hegemon. She will also fully renew the Trident nuclear weapons at a cost of at least £31bn. Her remarks over a potential direct confrontation between Russia and NATO, along with statements from other Western politicians, led Russia to put its nuclear forces on high alert. She believes that there should be a "global NATO", which would police the world in Western interests and dangerously destabilise it. War with China is looming.

In domestic politics, what Truss and the Tory membership fail to realise is that this is not the 1980s – things have moved on. Unions are often accused of wanting to drag Britain back to the 1970s, but it is the Tories who are harking back to another time. However, there are big differences between Thatcher's time and now. Even although there was mass unemployment and poverty, she created some buy in from the British people for her policies. Individuals were to benefit from privatisation and the selling off of assets. Workers were given shares in newly privatised companies like BT, people were given the right to buy their council houses at knock down prices, workers were allowed to opt out of pension schemes and so on. None of these measures resulted in any lasting prosperity for the working class, and the buy in to capitalism that they were designed to create has largely evaporated. Shares were sold off by their recipients to realise a bit of ready cash – now gone. People no longer have future prospects of a pension they can live on and while there is a gen-

eration of homeowners who would not otherwise have been in the property market, it is a market their children have been priced out of, with the added burden that, since it was sold off, there is hardly any social housing for them. They are, then, forced to pay exorbitant rents for often sub-standard accommodation to private landlords. Truss cannot emulate Thatcher in this respect as there is nothing left to sell off - the cupboard of supposed goodies is bare and are now living through the consequences. Public services are collapsing, infrastructure is crumbling and the cost of living crisis is a Thatcherite vulture come home to roost.

Of course there is a war. Thatcher had the Falklands and Johnson/Truss have Ukraine. But again this is different. The Falklands Islands is a British Overseas Territory, Ukraine has no such tie to the UK. The Falklands war was expensive in terms of soldiers' lives lost and the long term injuries they suffered, but was a short campaign, lasting only 10 weeks, and as wars go relatively uncstly. The proxy war in Ukraine looks set to drag on with the UK committed to pouring arms into it indefinitely. It is also cited as a cause of rising energy prices and, therefore, may be seen as having a direct impact on the lives of British people in a way that the Falklands did not. This could yet become an unpopular war despite the media barrage in support of it.

Working class political action

The Unions and workers may be made more political by the Tories' actions, however, what of their independent political organisation and consciousness? If there is to be a long term advance for the class coming through these industrial struggles then these need to develop too. There are weaknesses in the movement and the working class to be overcome. Developing unity, extending union membership in the

private sector and the gig economy, consolidating a left which is based on class politics, the political organisation of the working class and developing education and class consciousness are all important.

The movement is now dominated by a few big powerful trade unions as well as influential smaller and militant ones. The big ones especially are in competition with each other to gain members and there is, too often, disunity over demands and tactics. Collaboration between unions to bring their actions together would be really powerful. Yet despite the talk there has, at time of

Public services are collapsing, infrastructure is crumbling and the cost of living crisis is a Thatcherite vulture come home to roost.

writing, been no move towards coordinated strike action, which could amount to a general strike, even if only for a day and would be a major statement by the unions presenting a greater challenge to the government as well as employers. A TUC spokesperson recently said on Channel 4 news that it wasn't the TUC's role to be organising this, that it was up to unions to coordinate, raising questions about what the TUC is for.

As trade union membership declined unions tended to become concentrated in the public sector. In the current wave of industrial action, there have been victories in the private sector for Trade Unions and there is extensive industrial action taking place there. However, a good proportion of this is in industries that were formerly nationalised, like the railways and BT, and where the tradition of union organisation continued. A huge swath of the working class is now in bogus self-employment, working as contractors. Some firms, like Uber and Deliveroo, have built their

business models on this. Organising these workers remains challenging, but inroads are now being made. Trade unions are focusing on this more now which is very positive. As a result of the strike action taking place, union membership is growing and workers in the gig economy and other parts of the private sector may increasingly see the benefits of union membership.

New trade union general secretaries have placed a welcome focus on militant organisation. The current industrial struggles are a massive advance on the passivity of recent years but what they can deliver is

strictly limited without political struggle. Of necessity they focus on immediate demands, pay and working conditions. What about the other vital interests of the working class like housing, health services, nationalisation of energy companies and the railways? Whilst unions may make demands round these issues, they are not what members are currently out on strike for.

As parliamentary action will be required to enact legislation to achieve these aims, distancing unions from the Labour Party that they established is counterproductive. Sharon Graham, Unite General Secretary, has adopted a stance of disengagement from Labour. She is correct that Labour does not represent the be all and end all of politics - far from it. It was set up to be, and remains largely, an electoral machine. She has put disaffiliation of Unite on the table and during her election campaign advocated that the union support community based political action. Community action is good, but

looking around at the plethora of protest groups which have sprung up over the cost of living crisis it is easy to see the limitations as they lack strategies to actually achieve their ends.

Union leaders are rightly strongly critical of the Labour leader Keir Starmer. At the start of the RMT industrial action he issued an edict that Labour front-benchers should not attend picket lines. This has been widely ignored by senior figures including on the right, like Lisa Nandy, Shadow Minister for Leveling Up, Housing and Communities and Anas Sarwar leader of Scottish Labour. Just as the Tories hark back to the glory days of the 1980s, he seems set on trying to re-create the New Labour of the 1990s. Trying to be only marginally to the left of the Tories and seeking to tack to the elusive middle ground is hardly a recipe to build the Labour Party in such a polarised political situation. Yet given the dire situation that the Tories are in and establishment dissatisfaction with them, he could easily win a general election.

Of course Labour has shifted to the right under Starmer, but that is hardly a new phenomenon since the Party has been right wing for most of its existence. Hard as it is, there is no alternative to confronting the vested interests of the establishment. The alternatives for nebulous community organisation or yet another (inevitably doomed) attempt at a new party are unconvincing. With no serious alternative, the destruction or weakening of Labour would be a big loss. If unions which founded the Labour Party see that it is not fulfilling the role of representing their interests, they could mobilise their resources and their people to change the Party. This doesn't have to be an alternative to industrial struggle, in fact coming off the back of these fights it could be a very powerful force to transform Labour. This would be a far cry from the backroom machinations that Graham rails against.

To move beyond the current defensive trade union struggles a clearer political strategy and organisation is needed.

Unity is strength

Unity is strength and to achieve it we need to overcome divisive ideologies.

Nationalism in Scotland has led to a complacency that things are different there and that everything could be solved if freed from "Tory England". It is not clear how much the current crisis will eat into that mistaken belief. SNP politicians are popping up on the news saying that there isn't the money to meet workers' pay demands and that they have made a good offer to council workers. In this they sound like any other boss or politician, but they can always add the get out clause that they are restricted by Westminster and would do better if Scotland were independent. On

Oppression is rooted in capitalism's exploitation of labour and in pursuit of that it seeks to divide the working class, so building unity is essential to challenging capital.

the other hand workers in Scotland are taking action alongside workers in other parts of the UK maybe that will help forge a new sense of common purpose across the British working class. However, this would be a big political turn around in Scotland and the potential should not be over-stated. The SNP is working hard to keep the focus on independence rather than class issues. In pursuit of that Sturgeon has announced plans for another referendum on October 19th next year, despite the fact that there is absolutely zero chance of this happening legally. The objective is to keep her fundamentalist supporters on board and to divert Scottish people's attention towards the

Tories obstruction of a referendum and away from fighting right now in their interests.

Nationalism is the politics of identity over class but it is not the only example of the negative effects of identity politics and culture wars on the left and the movement. Oppression is rooted in capitalism's exploitation of labour and in pursuit of that it seeks to divide the working class, so building unity is essential to challenging capital. The left should, therefore, seek to develop campaigns which can unify, where people can build common cause. That will involve education and debate, including with ideas which may be negative. Demands that are divisive and a refusal to engage in debate are unhelpful. They are a gift to the Tories who would rather be fighting about symbols which they can use to reinforce divisions in the working class, whilst avoiding the real issues.

Thankfully there are signs that a more solid class-based left is emerging from the defeat of Corbyn. The current strikes help with that. When Corbyn became leader there was virtually no class struggle to anchor the left and begin to build class consciousness and unity.

Whilst some class consciousness will emerge spontaneously from these struggles, to move beyond the immediate issues of survival to a critique of capitalism, then political education will also be needed.

The strikes are proving that the left and the working class movement is far from dead. With the Tories in crisis, much can be won.

STRIKES

workers take on bosses and the Tories

Lisette Neill looks at the rapidly developing action.

“The working class is back and we refuse to be poor any more”, Mick Lynch, RMT General Secretary, speaking this summer on behalf of growing numbers of super-exploited workers threatened with catastrophic real term pay cuts, and the possibility of destitution.

The National Union of Rail, Maritime & Transport Workers (RMT) members voted to strike in the face of a 3% offer after their demand for a 7% pay rise was rejected. In addition, Network Rail’s ‘modernisation programme’ threatened to cut safety-critical jobs such as train guards as well as ticket office staff and others, and to increase working hours. A series of one-day rail strikes since June has involved around 40,000 rail workers from Network Rail and 13 train operators, and they were joined by London Underground staff who staged a 24-hour strike on 21 June.

Over 115,000 Royal Mail postal delivery workers, members of the Communication Workers Union (CWU), have embarked on a series of strikes alongside CWU members in Post Offices and 40,000 BT/Openreach. Workers in the Post Office and Royal Mail were initially offered 3%, increased to a still unacceptable 5%. Royal Mail managers belonging to Unite the Union also voted to take industrial action in a dispute over redundancies and a redeployment programme bringing worsened terms and conditions; the vote for strike action was 86% in the UK mainland and 89% in Northern Ireland.

It looks likely that strike action will escalate later in the year with further major national disputes in the offing. Staff across the Health Service, including nurses and doctors, are set to be balloted for industrial action as are education workers, including teachers and university lecturers.

Workers emboldened

The high profile and general approval ratings for these industrial disputes have emboldened other groups of workers to take a stand against low pay and poor working conditions, in some cases for the first time. And it is private sector workers, together with trades unions such as GMB and Unite, who have achieved some of the best pay victories.

The Office for National Statistics reports that median wage increases are running at about 6.54% a year, but only at 1.3% a year for the lowest paid 3 million workers – with inflation running at 10.1% and forecast to hit 18.6% in January, according to a report by Citi based on latest market prices. (FT 22/8/22).

John Hendy QC, of the Institute of Employment Rights, has said there is “A transfer of wealth from labour to capital...unparalleled since the 1930s” (Morning Star 19/8/22). “The upsurge in industrial action has been compared to the 1970s,” Hendy writes, “but circumstances are very different... The 1970s was the most equal decade in British history. Wages took a greater share of GDP than ever before or since. That achievement was because

85% of workers had their terms and conditions set by collective bargaining between unions and employers. Successive governments have demolished collective bargaining in all but a few sectors ... (and this) was achieved by legal restraints on industrial action, most particularly the outlawing of sympathetic industrial action.”

Gig economy

One relatively new development is the growth of the gig economy and businesses such as Uber and Deliveroo, where technology is used to directly match the buyers and sellers of goods and services. Many private sector companies as well as public sector organisations such as the NHS and universities have outsourced some of their work to agencies, and these workers often have precarious work resembling that of the gig economy. Some 3.5 million UK workers are identified as self-employed, including many of those working in construction, the arts, film and TV, music, sports, restaurants and hotels. They have no protection against unfair dismissal, no right to redundancy payments, nor have they the right to receive the national minimum wage, paid holidays or sick leave. Employers also benefit from the fact that they only pay when work is available, so don’t incur staff costs when work is not there.

There have been a number of legal cases which have led to attempts to more clearly define worker status in law. For example, Pimlico Plumbers lost its appeal in 2017 against a ruling that said one of its long-serving plumbers was a worker, and there-



RMT picket line at Glasgow Central Station

PHOTO BY FRIEDA PARK

fore entitled to basic rights, rather than an independent contractor.

While Uber's CEO earned a reported £45 million this year, drivers' wages have barely changed, while they face fuel inflation of 44% per year and a rise in vehicle costs of 28% on last year - costs that have to be met by the drivers themselves. There have been a series of strikes around the country by drivers represented by the App Drivers & Couriers Union (ADCU), Independent Workers of Great Britain and the GMB. Following a UK Supreme Court ruling of February 2021, Uber and the GMB came to an agreement whereby the union will be able to represent 70,000 Uber drivers, and which consequently guarantees them the national living wage (although drivers can and do earn more), holiday pay and a pension plan. Uber is now attempting to circumvent the Supreme Court ruling, and the ADCU is challenging them in court. Mean-

while the GMB has submitted a Collective Bargaining Schedule to Uber and, if agreement is not reached after negotiation, members will be balloted over whether to take further industrial action.

More strikes

The GMB and Unite are key unions defending workers' rights at the present time, especially workers in smaller workplaces with no track record of industrial action. For example, Budweiser workers in Sarnesbury, Lancashire went on strike for the first time ever this summer, with 75% support from the 275-strong workforce. 93% of GMB members voted to reject the pay offer, citing the cost of living crisis and big bonuses paid to managers: "The economy is tanking, and inflation getting worse. So while (management) is telling us to go back to the shop floor and recommend the 3% rise, we can't do that".

The GMB has begun to make inroads at Amazon, where unofficial action began this summer at Tilbury following an "insulting" and "inadequate" 35p an hour pay rise offer. Wildcat strikes and canteen sit-ins spread to sites including Bristol, Coventry, Doncaster, Rugby and Rugeley, perhaps partly inspired by the notable, ground-breaking victories achieved by the Amazon Labor Union in the US. In Coventry, 70% of workers took part in a mass walk-out. While the GMB was not involved in the unofficial strikes, it has seen a significant increase in union membership, with some staff becoming union reps. Amazon has always been very sensitive to the suggestion of unionisation, and has refused to allow GMB reps near its sites to distribute leaflets. Workers who question employment practices at Amazon are threatened with a black mark, or 'adapts' as they are known, which last 6 months and can lead to dismissal. Amazon's on-



line sales model made it one of the major beneficiaries of the pandemic, with annual revenue soaring to £386 billion in 2020. Sales in the UK alone jumped by 51% in that year. Amazon UK Services reportedly paid no corporation tax in 2021, while stories emerged of workers unable to take toilet breaks and being pushed to reach unrealistic targets. The GMB is calling for a £15 per hour pay rate, and will ballot its members if this is rejected.

Unite has also supported workers in struggle in a wide range of industries this summer, from bus drivers, nurses and junior doctors to airport staff and Co-op coffin makers. Some notable successes include the 11.1% pay rise achieved by Arriva bus drivers in Merseyside, following 30 days of strike action during July and August. An industrial dispute by British Airways staff in July was suspended after the company made “a vastly improved pay offer” of a 13% average pay rise, while bus drivers at Gatwick Airport secured a 21.5% pay increase backdated to April, with overtime to be paid at time and a quarter.

Unions at twenty-six Scottish councils rejected a 2% pay offer and voted for industrial action, in an ongoing dispute which led to overflowing rubbish bins in the streets during the Edinburgh Festival. More than half of Scotland’s 250,000 council workers earn less than £25,000 for a 37 hour week.

In another show of strength for Unite, workers in DHL Services at Northern Ireland’s Spirit Aerosystems, which manufactures parts for aircraft, voted with an 84% majority for strike action, rejecting an insulting 4% pay offer. Meanwhile, 1,900 container port workers at Felixstowe, including crane drivers, machine operators and stevedores voted more than 9-1 in favour of a strike in August – the first to hit the port since 1989.

On 28 June, at the AGM of the British Medical Association, GPs voted to take industrial action over new contracts requiring them to work on weekday evenings and Saturdays.

The Criminal Bar Association (CBA) recently voted for continued strike action, with no resolution having yet been reached in their pay dispute. The CBA says some junior barristers currently make less than the hourly minimum wage, while long-term cuts to legal aid have caused a backlog of 58,000 cases. National Union of Journalists members voted to strike in September, following an unsatisfactory pay offer to journalists working for Reach group newspapers, including the Daily Mirror, Daily Express and other smaller titles. A major bone of contention was the £4 million pay package given to Reach chief executive, Jim Mullen, this year.

University and College Union (UCU) members at the Open University secured a huge win in August, with 4,800 staff taken off fixed term and onto permanent contracts. The UCU is to launch a national ballot for strike action in September over pay, working conditions and pensions. The Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union – a small union of around 20,000 members – achieved successes this year in disputes with McDonalds, Wetherspoons and TGI Fridays. Exam markers at AQA, organised by Unison, have been on strike over pitifully low pay, which aimed to delay exam results and hit the universities’ admissions system.

Hundreds of workers have been involved in so-called wildcat, or unofficial strikes over pay and conditions, including contractors at the Grangemouth petrochemicals giant, INEOS. Under an existing agreement with their employer, the contractors were set for a 2.5% pay rise this year and next, which would leave them suffering a 10% real-terms cut. Walkouts of a similar size were also seen in Teesside, the Humber refinery in North Lincs, and the Valero refinery in Milford Haven.

And more strikes to come

With the value of UK pay packets dwindling by the month, industrial disputes and strikes will only continue while employers offer below inflation pay rises and worsened conditions of employment.

This summer’s strikes and pickets organised by the RMT, which has 83,000 members and growing, have attracted much solidarity and support, despite counterattacks by the Tory government and media. As general secretary, Mick Lynch, said:

“What you are going to get is a wave of solidarity action, generalised strike action, synchronised action. And you’ll see it in every sector of the economy, in education, in health, wider parts of the transport system, the private sector as well. People are fed up with the way they’ve been treated. The British worker is basically underpaid and gets no dignity or respect in the workplace. We’ve got to change that so we get a square deal for everyone in Britain, and that’s what the unions are determined to do”.



PHOTO BY LEGOLAS 1024

by Simon Korner

The island of Taiwan is part of China. One China means exactly what it says: that there is only one country called China, including the province of Taiwan. It is a principle agreed upon by the UN and 181 countries in the world, including the USA, UK, Europe, Japan and Australia.

The official US position as stated in the State Department Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet 'U.S. Relations with Taiwan' is as follows: "The US recognises the Government of the People's Republic of China as the sole legal government of China [and] there is but One China and Taiwan is part of China." The official British position, as set down in a Memorandum of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is similar: "HMG acknowledges... that Taiwan [is] a province of the PRC and recognis[es] the PRC Government as the sole legal Government of China. We do not deal with the Taiwan authorities and we avoid any act which could be taken to imply recognition."

International agreements

International law is clear: the 1943 Cairo Declaration signed by the US, UK and China, stated that all Chinese territories occupied by Japan, including Taiwan, should be restored to China. The Potsdam Proclamation of 1945 restated this commitment, and Japan promised to abide by it after its surrender. Even Taiwan's own Constitution of 1991 accepts that China is one single country – with Taiwan laying claim to the whole of mainland China, including Mongolia, and the South China Sea. Authoritarian ruler Chiang Kai-shek – leader of the defeated Nationalists who fled to Taiwan in 1949 – refused the UN's 1971 offer of dual Chinese representation at the UN, saying: "The sky is not big enough for two suns", a refusal that led to the Republic of China's expulsion from the UN.

Only thirteen countries (plus the Vatican) recognise Taiwan diplomatically – down from twenty-eight in 2008. The latest country

to change its affiliation was the Solomon Islands, which established closer ties with China this year, much to western fury. Many of the countries that previously recognised Taiwan were in Latin America and the Caribbean, a region under longstanding US domination. The fact that Costa Rica (2006), Panama (2017), Dominican Republic (2018), El Salvador (2018) and Nicaragua (2022) have all dared defy the US by recognising China demonstrates the shifting balance of power between the US and China.

While the US and UK officially support the One China principle, they are doing all they can to destroy it in practice. The August visit to Taiwan by Nancy Pelosi, who is Speaker of the US Congress, a hugely influential politician and second in line to the presidency after Vice-President Kamala Harris, broke decades of US diplomacy in its relations with China and served no other purpose than to challenge One China. Representing the strategic aims of US foreign policy, Pelosi

was trying to goad China into a response that could serve as a pretext for future war in the Far East.

Further western provocations are now planned, including a visit by a delegation from the US Congress and a similar one from Britain's foreign affairs select committee.

China responds to Pelosi

After Pelosi landed in Taipei, the Chinese Foreign Ministry warned that her arrival would have "a severe impact on the political foundation of China-US relations, and seriously infringes upon China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. It gravely undermines peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, and sends a seriously wrong signal to the separatist forces for 'Taiwan independence.'...These moves, like playing with fire, are extremely dangerous. Those who play with fire will burn themselves," it continued.

China's response was restrained. It did not as some trigger-happy commentators on Twitter called for, intervene to divert Pelosi's flight, or even shoot it down. That would have given the US what it wanted. As the Chinese *People's Daily* newspaper commented: "China's countermeasures will not be one-off but a combination of long-term, resolute and steadily advancing actions" (3/8/22).

China's first response was to stage live-fire drills in the seas around Taiwan. These measures established its presence in the waters off its own coast, through which western navies, including Britain's, frequently sail warships as they have ever since the Opium Wars of the 19th century. The drills were unprecedented in scope - the first time live-fire missile tests crossed Taiwan, flying over densely deployed US Patriot anti-missile batteries. The drills were also the closest to Taiwan ever conducted and the first time the island had been encircled. They established actual Chinese

control over the Taiwan Straits, ensuring that this narrow stretch of water, so vulnerable to enemy disruption of Chinese trade, cannot be choked off by western navies. Similarly, the drills ensured that the airspace between Taiwan and China cannot be monopolised by Taiwan. This is airspace claimed by Taiwan as part of its so-called Air Defence Identification Zone, and extends over a huge area of the south-eastern Chinese mainland, far beyond Taiwan's internationally recognised airspace. China's drills have challenged such expansionism.

China also suspended imports on around 100 Taiwanese food and agricultural firms (*Politico*, 3/8/22). Chinese natural sand exports to Taiwan - used to make Taiwan's

Further western provocations are now planned, including a visit by a delegation from the US Congress and a similar one from Britain's foreign affairs select committee.

computer chips as well as in construction - were also suspended (*China Daily*, 3/8/22). As China supplies around a third of Taiwan's sand requirements, the Pelosi visit will hit the Taiwanese economy, and beyond it the rest of the world which relies heavily on Taiwan's semiconductors.

In short, China demonstrated its readiness to defend itself in a series of carefully calibrated measures in response to rash western provocation.

World reaction

World reaction was not wholly favourable to the US. The ten member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) - a bloc consisting of Singapore, Thailand, Philippines,

Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Brunei - expressed concerns over rising tensions over Taiwan. The *Straits Times* newspaper in Singapore (3/8/22) reported that "political watchers in Singapore" believed Pelosi's visit "was unnecessary and did not serve any strategic or foreign policy goal." Leading Indian newspaper the *Hindu Times* similarly called the situation an "Avoidable Crisis" (3/8/22). South Korea's president was away 'on holiday' when Pelosi visited the country after she was in Taiwan. Pakistan condemned the visit outright, saying that it supported "China's sovereignty and territorial integrity". Regional powers of whatever political stripe are understandably wary of the US bringing war and ruin to east Asia

as it has to Ukraine and Europe. Others expressing their longstanding commitment to the One China principle were Russia, Belarus, Serbia, North Korea, Syria, Iran, the Arab League, Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Palestine.

Even some in the western media were equivocal about Pelosi's visit - worried, like Henry Kissinger, about the US waging war against China and Russia at the same time. Simon Jenkins in the *Guardian* called it "blatantly provocative" (3/8/22). One prominent *New York Times* columnist, Tom Friedman, called Pelosi "utterly reckless, dangerous and irresponsible" (1/8/22). These criticisms don't reflect major cracks in US bi-partisan strategy on China, but more a question of tactical differences and timing.

After all, Trump drew up the \$7 billion arms deal which Biden continued, as part of an effort to “draw closer to Taipei” according to the *Wall Street Journal* (16/9/20). The \$7 billion deal was on top of the \$15 billion worth of arms already sold while Trump was in office, and in addition to Obama’s \$14 billion of arms during his two terms. Meanwhile, Mike Pompeo, Trump’s Secretary of State, openly supported Pelosi’s visit and even offered to go with her.

Taiwanese reaction

The majority of Taiwanese regarded Pelosi’s visit as destabilising and would like the status quo to continue. Protestors shouted outside Pelosi’s hotel: “We don’t need America to treat us as a pawn.”

Though the current Taiwanese government of President Tsai Ing-wen is against unification and for secession, this hard line is a recent development in the island’s politics. The main opposition party the Kuomintang (KMT), which did well in local elections in 2018, has had a long-held policy of dialogue with China and has traditionally favoured close ties with Beijing (*Reuters*, 7/6/22). However, the KMT lost the 2016 national elections to Tsai Ing-wen’s Democratic Progressive Party. The KMT represents in part the interests of those Taiwanese capitalists who have the closest business relations with China. There are around one million “taishang”, wealthy Taiwanese businessmen with vested interests in China (*Pulitzer Centre*, 24/7/20). The party more broadly favours economic ties with China, spearheaded by Taiwan’s influential elected mayors.

Clearly there is room for diplomacy between China and Taiwan. The island’s rapid economic rise, after decades of crushing authoritarian rule from 1949 to 1992, is closely bound up with that of China. Cross-strait trade in 2018 was worth \$150 billion (*Taiwan gov.tw*). Up to 1.2 mil-



Nancy Pelosi and Taiwan’s President Tsai Ing-wen August 2022

PHOTO BY WANG YU CHING

lion Taiwanese live on the mainland (*Economist*, 19/11/20) – one city near Shanghai, where 100,000 Taiwanese Chinese live and work, is known as Little Taipei. For 73 years, China has allowed the close economic, cultural and family ties to strengthen the bonds between it and Taiwan in the knowledge that peaceful reunification will eventually come. China has stated that it will not send in troops unless Taiwan declares independence or acquires nuclear weapons. Pelosi’s visit was clearly an attempt to boost the pro-independence forces in Taiwan to the point where they become emboldened enough to act.

Peace and diplomacy are the last thing the US wants. The US 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”. As Alexander Huang, the KMT’s head of international affairs, put it: “We have to understand that the sole standard of the US’s Taiwan policy is based on American interests, not those of Taiwan” (*The Diplomat*, 8/2/22).

Taiwan matters to the US

For the US, Taiwan provides a vital land base from which to launch an attack on mainland China. On a regional scale, Taiwan is key to the US’s “first island chain” military strategy which was developed during the Korean War in 1951 by renowned anti-Communist John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State under Eisenhower. This strategy, strengthened by the recent AUKUS alliance between the US, UK and Australia, is designed to maintain US control over the chain of islands along the Chinese mainland from Japan in the north down to Borneo in the south, in order to contain China’s access to the South China Sea – the sea through which almost all its trade passes.

Control over Taiwan is also vital for maintaining US hegemony over its own East Asian allies, in particular, Japan, South Korea and the Philippines. Losing its hold over Taiwan would signal to these powers the unravelling of US domination of the whole region.

Another crucial element is Taiwan's semi-conductor production, which supplies vital computer chips to Silicon Valley. The US will do all it can to prevent China from acquiring Taiwan's cutting-edge semi-conductor technology and thus gaining control over global chip production.

Elbridge Colby, who was formerly in charge of US defence strategy in his role as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy at the Pentagon envisages a Ukraine-style proxy war over Taiwan. In his influential book *Strategy of Denial*, Colby suggests that China should be "tempted" to strike Taiwanese civilians, whose deaths would provide an excellent pretext for a western-backed military response. The book calls for a coalition of countries in Asia to help execute this strategy, just as European countries are now backing NATO in Ukraine. Colby spells out US policy in no uncertain terms: "Physical force, especially the ability to kill, is the ultimate form of coercive leverage. While there are other sources of influence... they are all dominated by the power to kill."

Colby's "coercive leverage" – the "power to kill" – is provided by the massive US Pacific navy (200 ships/submarines, 1,200 aircraft, and over 130,000 personnel), which patrols China's territorial waters under the banner of Freedom of Navigation. It regularly sends guided missile-armed destroyers through the narrow 81-mile Taiwan Strait – just as a century ago its gunboats encroached on the Chinese coast and rivers to plunder the country in the name of freedom of navigation and free trade (Sara Flounders, *Covert Action*, 18/8/22). On the day Pelosi visited Taiwan, the US navy carried out major military exercises involving all the G7 countries – as part of RIMPAC (Rim of the Pacific Amphibious Assault Training), the world's biggest training programme.

Provoking war

For its part, China has always made clear it wants to reunite with Taiwan peacefully. But if Taiwan were to develop nuclear weapons or declare independence, it would pose an existential threat to China, marking

the removal of all constraints on the US using Taiwan as its main forward base against the mainland. 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 less than a tenth. The US vastly outspends China on arms: \$738 billion a year, compared to China's \$252 billion. But China has made it clear that it will defend itself, if its sovereignty is attacked.

An empire in crisis, the US is provoking war after war as it seeks to preserve its world domination at any cost. Its war in Ukraine is killing thousands of people. In Kosovo, an entity carved out of Serbia by NATO's Yugoslav war, the US has been provoking skirmishes on the border with Serbia, in part to warn Serbia off its pro-Russian stance. Most serious of all would be a US war with China, begun by encouraging secessionist politicians in Taiwan to cut off the island from its natural partner on the mainland.

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Solomon Islands

challenge to US domination in Pacific



Flag of the Solomon Islands

by John Moore

The Solomon Islands nation in the Pacific, 2000 kilometres north-east of Australia, has dared to assert its own independent foreign policy after decades spent under foreign tutelage. Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare hailed an agreement between his country and China, including a security pact, as a “milestone”. He said: “We need to diversify the country’s relationship with other partners. What is wrong with that?” China was not pressuring his country into signing the pact, he insisted, adding that “the Solomon Islands themselves requested the treaty.”

The USA and Australia are nevertheless threatening military intervention to prevent the deal from being enacted. The issue is a potential Chinese military presence in the Solomons under an agreement that would allow Chinese ships to visit and “carry out logistical replenishment” and allow Chinese police to assist in “maintaining social order” in the country.

Even though Sogavare assured the West that there would be no Chi-

nese military base on the Solomon Islands, Daniel Kritenbrink, the chief US diplomat for East Asia and the Pacific, made this veiled threat: “Of course, we have respect for the Solomon Islands sovereignty, but we also wanted to let them know that if steps were taken to establish a de facto permanent military presence, power projection capabilities, or a military installation, then we would have significant concerns, and we would very naturally respond to those concerns” (Guardian, 26/4/22).

Australia has warned that any Chinese base on the Solomons would represent a “red line”. The new Labor prime minister Anthony Albanese and his foreign minister Penny Wong accused the previous government of committing “the worst Australian policy failure since the second world war” (Guardian, 23/5/22) in allowing the Solomon Islands’ deal with China. Media oligarch David Llewellyn-Smith (Macrobusiness, 25/3/22) made explicit threats: “There is no way that Australia can allow this deal to proceed. If it must, the nation should invade and capture Guadalcanal such that we engineer regime

change in Honiara...If we don’t respond to this – it has to be us and Washington – then mate, it’s game over...China will have freedom of the seas with its navy throughout the South Pacific.” As the Australian newspaper put it, the deal “could hardly be more geopolitically significant for the challenge it presents to long standing US hegemony in the region.”

Strategic importance

It is the Solomons’ position in the south-eastern Pacific that makes the country so strategically significant for America’s future war against China. The impoverished country of 700,000 inhabitants has several deep-water harbours and sea-lanes which Australia and the US currently control and are determined to retain. The Solomon Islands was historically colonised by the British, then the Japanese, and became a key battleground during World War 2, when the US ousted Japan from the country during the six-month Battle of Guadalcanal in 1942-43. That battle was vital to the US victory against Japan, which established US domination over the Pacific up to the present.

After the Solomons gained independence from Britain in 1978, western supervision passed predominantly to Australia, with New Zealand a junior partner. Following a low intensity civil war from 1998-2003 over demands for secession by the poorest and most populous island Malaita, Australia occupied the country with a 2,000 strong force of troops and police as ‘peacekeepers’, imposing IMF austerity on the public sector and putting down strikes. Australia’s presence from 2003-2017 only stoked

the rivalries between Malaita and the main island, Guadalcanal, where the capital Honiara is.

The game changer occurred in 2019 when the Solomons switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the People's Republic of China after 36 years. In response, US Republican Senator Marco Rubio threatened, during a visit, that the US would cut off the Solomons' access to global financial markets.

The following year the US gave \$25 million in so-called 'aid' to Malaita – a far larger amount than aid to the Solomon Islands as a whole. These US bribes to Malaita, and threats to the national government, were part of an orchestrated strategy to use Malaitian secession demands as a divide-and-rule stick

Underlying the ongoing unrest in the Solomons is poverty and mass unemployment. The Solomons has the lowest Human Development Index and second lowest electrification rate of any small Pacific state, according to the World Bank. It's no wonder that the Solomons government is attempting to free the country from western domination. Liu Ze, general secretary of Solomon Islands Chinese Business Council explained: "The economic structure of the Solomon Islands has not made any progress in the past 15 years, which made the ruling party realize that cooperating with the West did not result in development." Now they have found an alternative major power in China that can provide a level playing field (*Global Times*, 25/5/22). China is now the Solomons largest

nication co-operation. Kiribati, a small Pacific island nation that switched diplomatic recognition to the People's Republic of China along with the Solomons, is to sign a deal giving China special fishing rights in one of the world's biggest marine protected areas. Vanuatu has recently signed a contract with China for the construction of a new airport runway to give access to larger aircraft. Samoa has recently also signed a cooperation agreement with China (*Guardian* 2/6/22).

The advantage for these countries is that China, unlike western powers, does not seek to exploit their vulnerabilities. Chen Hong, president of the Chinese Association of Australian Studies, explained: "China believes that countries, no matter big or small, should be treated equally – they are not there for anyone to win over and to control."

The Solomons has the lowest Human Development Index and second lowest electrification rate of any small Pacific state, according to the World Bank.

to force the national government back into the western fold. Encouraged by the US, the right wing separatist group Malaita 4 Democracy demanded the immediate expulsion of all Chinese nationals from the island.

Then in 2021 around 1,000 separatists, egged on by the Malaitian prime minister Daniel Suidani, travelled to the main island Guadalcanal, targeting Chinese retail businesses and attacking Chinese locals. The rioters flew an Israeli flag and burnt government building in what was effectively an attempted colour revolution orchestrated by the US and Australia. But they failed to unseat the government; a later no-confidence vote in parliament was also defeated. China has since deployed around a dozen police to train local forces.

export destination, receiving 65% of the Solomon Islands' exports, mainly timber, and Chinese investment and tourism have increased massively under the Belt and Road Initiative.

But China's growing economic presence is being obstructed at every turn. A major contract with Huawei to lay a fibre-optic cable from the Solomons to Australia was cancelled in 2018 after Australia pushed for a no-confidence vote in the Solomons government, accusing Sogavare of corruption over the deal.

Yet China's links with the Pacific islands are advancing nonetheless, aiding development in a poor region of the world. China is hoping to sign a major deal with ten Pacific island countries covering security, trade and data commu-

Threat of war

Meanwhile, the western powers are doing all they can to stem the loss of their hegemony. The Solomons is the most populous and influential of the Pacific island nations and on the diplomatic front they are pressing the five remaining Pacific Island states that still recognise Taiwan not to follow the Solomons' powerful example in recognising the People's Republic of China.

The West's moves to stifle the Solomon Islands' independent foreign policy are one aspect of the larger struggle to maintain imperialist control over the Pacific, which includes drawing Australia more closely into the US embrace. The development of Australia as the "southern anchor" for US military power – boosted under Obama's Pivot to Asia that saw a major US base established in Darwin, northern Australia – puts it in the frontline of a war with China.

The nuclearisation of Australia came a dangerous step closer with the recent AUKUS deal between it, the

Children playing outside a schoolhouse in the Solomon Islands



PHOTO BY ALEX DECICCIO

USA and the UK. AUKUS has undermined the UN Non-Proliferation Treaty by providing eight or more US built nuclear-capable submarines and accompanying technological know-how. China says this has set a “dangerous precedent” in providing nuclear material to non-nuclear states (*ABC News Australia* 21/7/22). In a recent report by the Chinese Arms Control and Disarmament Association and the China institute of Nuclear Industry Strategy, China argues: “Given the fact that Australia already has a body of nuclear weapons-related knowledge accumulated historically and that it will get into its hands nuclear-capable delivery system, once the country takes the desperate step to develop nuclear weapons again, the lead to a nuclear breakthrough will be too short for the international community to respond effectively.” (*Daily Mail* 21/7/22). The \$100 billion worth of submarines will have a far longer range than the French submarines Australia had agreed to purchase, and will be used to enforce any US naval blockade of the Pacific shipping lanes on which China relies for raw materials and goods. In effect, AUKUS represents an extension of

NATO into the Pacific Ocean. Solomon Islands Prime Minister Sogavare complained that his country and others in the region “should have been consulted to ensure that the AUKUS treaty is transparent since it will affect the Pacific family by allowing nuclear submarines in Pacific waters.” But of course they were bypassed, just as the French were deceived by their imperialist rivals.

Despite the close US-Australia alliance, it is clear that the US is unhappy with Australia’s performance as its Solomons gendarme. The closure of the US embassy in the Solomons in 1993 and the outsourcing of its security to Australia has been criticised by former senior US diplomat James Carouso, who said it had been a “mistake”. Now the US is planning to re-open its embassy in the capital Honiara to regain direct control. So much for respecting national sovereignty – an idea frequently invoked to promote NATO’s proxy war against Russia over Ukraine.

Not that Australia is any better, with its frequent references to the Solomons as “our backyard” (*Daily*

Mail, 4/5/22). This insulting term was condemned by Sogavare who said a backyard was a place “where rubbish is collected and burned”, and “where we relieve ourselves”. Compare this to China’s view that the Pacific Islands are “neither the backyard of any country nor an arena for great power games” (*CGTN*, 19/4/22). Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, a Solomon Islander academic at the University of Hawaii, observed that the western position was to lay down the law and say “you can’t have this kind of relationship with China. The irony is that we can and we do.”

The insistence by the western powers on retaining control over the Solomons is not some faraway problem for us in Britain; rather, it represents a clear and present danger to world peace. Biden’s recent off-the-cuff reversal (22/5/22) of the US’s long-held One China policy over Taiwan shows that the US is deadly serious in its intention to prevent China’s rise. Western threats to invade the Solomon Islands make that country one of the flashpoints where the US war on China could begin.

Sanctions on Russia

Germany in trouble

by Alex Davidson

The conflict in Ukraine and western economic sanctions against Russia are having a huge impact on European economies and working people. EU officials have warned of an impending “crunch point” when countries start to feel acute economic pain while also still being asked to help the Ukrainian military effort.

Russian gas exports to western Europe had fallen to 20% capacity due to a short halt for regular maintenance and also a gas turbine being repaired in Canada and then its return delayed due to western sanctions. Now, Russia has stated that the gas flow will be suspended indefinitely.

Gas crisis

Germany is particularly affected by the loss of Russian gas. Some years ago Germany had taken the decision to phase out its use of coal and nuclear technology and of course was counting on Nord Stream 2 coming online before it was halted by western sanctions. Some 37% of Germany’s gas is from Russia, 20% from Norway, 12% from Holland, 5% is produced domestically and some 25% is in storage. Gas keeps half of Germany’s 41.5 million households warm and many manufacturing industries depend on the fuel. In addition to the gas imports, Germany imported 34% of its crude oil and 53% of its coal for power generation and steelmaking from Russia in 2021.

The main German utility company, Uniper, reported a loss of more than

€12 billion (\$12.2 billion) for the first half of 2022, ranking among the biggest in German corporate history and laying bare the unprecedented crisis engulfing Europe’s energy markets. The size of the hit for the utility company, which in July received a government bailout of \$17 billion, shows just how severe the situation is. “Uniper has for months been playing a crucial role in stabilizing Germany’s gas supply -- at the cost of billions in losses resulting from the sharp drop in gas deliveries from Russia,” Chief Executive Officer Klaus-Dieter Maubach said in a statement detailing the firm’s financial results. Reduced supply of gas from Russia forced the company to buy gas in the spot market to fulfil contracts, pushing it to the edge of insolvency. That led to a multi-billion euro rescue package from the German government to prevent the company’s collapse.

Germany is now racing to build sufficient stockpiles to avoid severe rationing when the weather turns cold. The government has urged lower consumption, is seeking to revive coal power plants and is rethinking the phasing out of its remaining nuclear power plants. It has also slapped a levy on gas use, leaving households bracing for higher energy bills and exacerbating the Europe-wide cost-of-living crisis.

Uniper will have to deal with the full economic loss of replacing Russian gas until 30 September, when the government will introduce a mechanism to allow utilities to pass on 90% of costs to customers. “There is no end in sight to this development,” Maubach said. “For globally active foreign oil and gas

companies, such losses might be bearable. In Germany, on the other hand, there is not a single energy company that such a development would not bring to its knees.” Notwithstanding the drastic impact on the German people in terms of the cost-of-living and heating bills, German Foreign Minister, Annalena Baerbock of the Green Party, has stated, “I will put Ukraine first no matter what my German voters think” or how hard their life gets in the winter.

Nord Stream 2

Wolfgang Kubicki, Vice-President of the German Parliament, said on 19 August 2022, that Germany should allow the blocked Nord Stream 2 pipeline to begin pumping Russian natural gas so “people do not have to freeze in winter and that our industry does not suffer serious damage.” Kubicki, a member of Finance Minister Christian Lindner’s Free Democrats (FDP), called for activating the pipeline “as soon as possible” to fill gas storages ahead of winter. He said there is “no sound reason not to open Nord Stream 2”, because Germany is already getting gas through the older Russia-to-Germany Nord Stream pipeline. Getting “gas from Nord Stream 2 is no more immoral than from Nord Stream 1. It’s just a different pipe,” he said. Kubicki said opening Nord Stream 2 would test whether Russian President Vladimir Putin is willing to increase gas shipments to Germany. Several FDP members criticised Kubicki’s remarks, including Marie-Agnes Strack Zimmermann, chair of the Bundestag’s defence committee, who said, “Nord Stream 2 is dead.”



PHOTO BY TEGGASENGINEERING

Liquefied Natural Gas Terminal

The United States had the aim of stopping Nord Stream 2 long before Russia's 24 February 2022 military operation in Ukraine. In 2017 parts of the US sanctions against Russia, Iran and North Korea were aimed at businesses involved in piping Russian natural gas via the Nord Stream pipeline. One of the aims of the sanctions was to block Russian gas supplies to Europe in order to sell shale gas from the United States. In a joint statement on 15 June 2017, the then Foreign Ministers of Germany and Austria stated that, "The draft bill of the US is surprisingly candid about what is actually at stake, namely selling American liquefied natural gas and ending the supply of Russian natural gas to the European market." [1] US liquefied natural gas (LNG) export capacity has grown rapidly since it first began in 2016. In 2019 the US became the third largest LNG exporter behind Australia and Qatar. In 2022 the US is now the world's largest exporter of LNG.

Lithuania signed a deal in May 2017 to buy US LNG and received its first delivery in August 2017. Poland received its first delivery in June 2017. Croatia completed the building of a floating LNG terminal on the island of Krk in 2019. President Donald

Trump speaking at a Three Seas [2] summit on 6 July 2017 said, "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...In fact I want to congratulate the government and the people of Poland for receiving their first shipment of US liquefied natural gas last month. And you made a very good deal, I understand." [3] American LNG is much more expensive than Russian natural gas so it was certainly a good deal for the US and its energy companies.

The US/NATO provoked the war in Ukraine by its expansion up to Russia's borders, its support of Ukraine's attacks on the Donbas and its opposition to the Minsk Agreements. As Jens Stoltenberg has stated, "NATO was there [in Ukraine] since 2014". When Russia responded to the provocations on 24 February 2022 the US then imposed more sanctions, brought Germany into line and got it to abandon Nord Stream 2. One of America's major aims had been achieved, namely, the killing of Nord Stream 2. However, it has caused severe energy problems for the Europeans. The EU could not achieve a united response to the stopping of Russian oil and gas and

had to settle for exemptions from the sanctions for some countries including land-locked Hungary.

Car production - shortage of key elements

Germany's automotive sector already had a lot to cope with before the conflict in Ukraine. First, there was the COVID-19 pandemic and a global semiconductor shortage. Later came rising oil, gas and coal prices, which have continued to skyrocket since the war in Ukraine. Now there is a fresh threat of supply bottlenecks and price hikes for other key materials from Russia and Ukraine. The supply shortfalls for important raw materials for car manufacturers and their suppliers is now beginning to hit. This is leading to rising prices, longer waiting times for new cars for customers and slowing down the move to electric vehicles.

Ukraine is one of the most important suppliers of neon, a gas needed for semiconductor production and chips have been in in short supply worldwide for almost all industries for some time now.

Palladium is required for automotive catalytic converters which



German foreign minister Baerbock meets US Secretary of State Blinken

US aims to preserve dominance

The United States has so far succeeded in stopping Nord Stream 2, brought Germany into line on sanctions and prolonged its proxy war in Ukraine. It has little concern about the huge loss of Ukrainian lives nor of the impact of sanctions against Russia on its allies in western Europe.

Germany has been steadily militarising and playing a prominent role in the NATO deployment in Eastern Europe in recent years, albeit with some initial reluctance in the recent conflict in Ukraine. Macron has been intent on putting France into pole position in the EU military apparatus and with Britain out of the EU France is the only nuclear armed member.

The severe blow to Germany's economy will weaken its dominance of the EU and strengthen the influence and control of the US in Europe. At the same time Macron has stated that while France is an ally of the US it does not want to be dependent on another country.

The US sees its economic dominance under threat particularly from China. It seems set on provoking China with its support for Taiwan's independence contrary to long-standing international agreements. The US has a history of turning to its military power when it feels its position of world dominance is under threat. It is a danger to the whole world.

[1] https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/EN/infoservice/Presse/Meldungen/2017/170615_Kern_Russland.html

[2] 12 countries bordering the Baltic, Black and Adriatic seas formed a consortium in 2016. It was dubbed the "Three Seas Initiative". The 12 countries are Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria.

[3] <http://time.com/4846780/read-donald-trump-speech-warsaw-poland-transcript/>

clean exhaust fumes in petrol and hybrid vehicles. With a global market share of 38%, Russia is the second-most-important supplier after South Africa with 39%. The price of palladium has risen sharply since 2015 and rose again in March 2022 after the latest outbreak of the Ukraine conflict. It is difficult to see how supply issues of palladium from Russia could be bridged by other producing countries as the palladium market has been in deficit for some years.

Nickel is used in stainless steelmaking and is an important component for lithium-ion batteries, which are needed to power electric cars. Russia is Germany's biggest provider of nickel accounting for 39% of the country's supply. Sanctions as well as the pre-existing shortages will push up electric vehicle prices and slow their production. This will hit the German car industry hard.

China benefits

Electric car and battery manufacturers in China, on the other hand, could benefit from the sanctions against Russia by offering to buy the raw materials from Russia. China already has a strong position in the battery metals supply chain and would further strengthen its global competitive position if it were to buy Russian nickel because of the sanctions.

The only option left for Western manufacturers is to expand business relationships with other nickel-producing countries such as Indonesia or the Philippines. Indonesia took a decision to ban the export of nickel in 2020 with the aim of encouraging domestic production of refined nickel products. The EU filed a case against it last year with the World Trade Organisation. However, Europe's dependency on China would increase as Chinese companies play a key role in the main nickel mines in both countries.

The German economy is much more dependent on China than the other way round. This happened in the first half of 2022, with direct investment and the German trade deficit reaching new heights. At the same time, growth in German exports to China weakened significantly. German investment in China amounted to around €10 billion (\$10 billion) between January and June 2022, far exceeding the previous peak half-year value recorded since the turn of the millennium of €6.2 billion. China's share of German imports rose to 12.4% in the first half of 2022, compared with 3.4% in 2000, while German imports of Chinese goods surged in value terms by 45.7% year on year during that six-month period. Germany's trade deficit with China had leapt to almost €41 billion by mid-2022.

NUCLEAR WEAPONS

who is threatening who?

by Brian Durrans

Since the start of Russia's military incursion into Ukraine on 24 February, a growing chorus of pro-US, pro-NATO politicians, media commentators and senior soldiers have claimed that the Kremlin is threatening to use nuclear weapons against the West. The supposed nuclear threat is made to seem more likely the more Russia's military is thought to be failing, its leaders divided and its president variably ill, "desperate", the epitome of evil, or subhuman.

For NATO's ruling classes the most obvious advantage of scaremongering about the Kremlin's intentions is to help sell anti-Russian sanctions and increased military taxation to a public likely to resent extra pressure on already plunging living standards. It also deflects blame for inflation and hardship from the West's own corporate profiteers and their governments, onto a demonised scapegoat. Almost as obviously, nuclear threats – whether real, veiled, exaggerated, or fabricated – serve the arms industry, especially in the US at a safe distance from present warzones.

Reports of Russian nuclear threats also allow the US and NATO, already with Ukraine as a proxy, to proclaim themselves defenders of humanity while keeping Moscow guessing about their next moves: a hazardous gambit for any nuclear power squaring up to another. Strongly worded warnings from Russia, however,

The Gembaku Domu Hiroshima, one of only a few structures left standing after the US dropped the atom bomb on the city

may have reduced the risk of direct military engagement with NATO or at least deepened existing divisions in the Western camp. This is not a stable situation; before it is too late, a negotiated settlement is needed in Ukraine and an effective global framework for nuclear disarmament and climate control.

Part 1 of this article considers the first few statements and commentary in late February (and one from 2 June) that shaped the continuing Russia-NATO propaganda war around the so-called nuclear option. Part 2 looks at the unfolding of US nuclear strategy, again with a focus on how the whole terrifying business began.

Pat 1: Talking of Nukes

In Russia the "nuclear option" has been mentioned in some blogs and TV and radio discussions but has never been seriously *argued for* by any authoritative figure from the

government or military. This assertion is based on information available to the writer up to 13 July 2022.

President Putin's TV speech on 24 February, announcing the 'special military operation' in Ukraine warned that foreign intervention would face "ominous consequences...such as you have never seen in your entire history." [1] As reported by *Reuters*, the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, alleged that Putin's speech, "...threatens anyone who wants to intervene [opposing Russia] to use... nuclear weapons against them."

Borrell's reading of Putin's words matched his accompanying demand for radical measures against Russia and in support of Ukraine. In the same report, however, *Reuters* explicitly distanced itself from Borrell's interpretation by going out of its way to remind readers that "Putin did not mention the use of nuclear weap-



PHOTO BY ARIAN ZWEGERS

ons.” [2] Unlike Borrell’s, the *New York Times* comment, published two days later, on 26 February, refused to describe Putin’s warning as a nuclear threat. Taking its cue from the EU’s Borrell, rather than from the cautious approaches of *Reuters* and the *New York Times*, the *Economist* was eager to push the “nuclear threat” argument.

On 27 February, Putin announced that Russia’s nuclear deterrent was being put on high alert – and explicitly blamed the decision on aggressive sanctions and statements from the West, including those made by Liz Truss earlier the same day. [3] In its 28 February issue, the *Economist* referred to Putin’s “nuclear escalation”. [4] Not all media, however, were prepared to take this line: the BBC, for instance, said putting his deterrent on high alert didn’t mean he was about to use it.

In the same vein, and on the same day, Tass news agency reported the Director of the Russian Nuclear Forces Project and Senior Researcher at the UN Institute for Disarmament Research, Pavel Podvig, as saying Putin’s decision to put the country’s nuclear arms on high alert was to make his forces less vulnerable to a first strike, *but that did not mean Russia was going to attack first.* (emphasis added) [5] UK defence Minister Ben Wallace told LBC radio, “No we’re not going to have a nuclear war. President Putin is dealing...in rhetoric. He wants to distract from what has gone wrong in Ukraine. He wants us all to be reminded that he has a nuclear deterrent...No-one is going to do anything to *unnecessarily* provoke him or indeed to escalate this beyond trying to deter him from his actions in Ukraine. We know that he gets *deterred by might*” (emphasis added). If Truss was hawkish, the more condescending Wallace was hardly dove-like (how dove-like would *necessary* provocation be?).

Neither was the *Economist* growing more dove-like when it marked the first 100 days of Russia’s spe-



Nuclear missile in launch silo

PHOTO BY ZCOBB99

cial military operation, on 2 June. [6] Referring to Putin’s 24 February speech launching the operation, with its strong warning against Western intervention - which more prudent commentators refused to interpret as a nuclear threat – the *Economist* implied that “Russian TV chit-chat about Armageddon” revealed Putin’s true intent. It then loftily said this suggested evidence that Russia has eroded “the moral revulsion that restrains the use of nuclear weapons” – as if the morality of the Kremlin were obviously inferior to its own.

Even while admitting that “Russia is unlikely to use a nuclear weapon in Ukraine”, the *Economist* finally showed its hand, regretting that, “Mr Putin’s threat has prompted NATO to limit the support it is prepared to offer the government in Kyiv”. The *Economist* thus offers two important lessons. First, that strongly worded warnings from the Kremlin may be having a cautionary effect; second, that any voice encouraging scope for direct conflict between nuclear powers forfeits its claim to moral superiority.

Part 2: Using Nukes

Setting the scene for the world’s present vulnerability to nuclear catastrophe is the asymmetry of the entire history of the atomic/nuclear arms race. Physicists in the US Manhattan Project, who developed the atomic bomb during World War 2, thought it was meant to deter the Nazis from using one first. When US intelligence learned that Hitler had abandoned his own atomic bomb programme, this fact was kept secret. Hearing it from a British source in 1944, two members of the Manhattan Project resigned to campaign against all such weapons, but were still sworn to secrecy, one under threat of deportation.

The continuation of the Project after Germany had abandoned its own programme and the secrecy surrounding it provided further evidence that the US was making nuclear weapons with the Soviet Union in mind. This was confirmed by the US’s decision to use its atom bombs in 1945 without military justification, to annihilate the Japanese cities of Hiroshima

and Nagasaki. In 1947, two years before the USSR tested its own atomic deterrent, US War Secretary Henry L. Stimson wrote a widely read magazine article which, unrepentant about the atom bombs on Japan, clearly revealed the strategy already in place against the new enemy:

“I am firmly convinced that the Russians will eventually agree to the American proposals for the establishment of an atomic energy authority of worldwide scope, provided they are convinced that we would have the bomb in quantity and would be prepared to use it without hesitation in another war.” [7]

Such words were as clear a threat to “the Russians” as Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been two years before, but according to the biography of one of the key leaders of the Manhattan Project, Stimson’s article concealed a subtler strategy. Although the article, “achieved America’s propaganda needs, highlighting the decisive role of the bomb in securing a humane (sic) victory, discounting the Soviet contribution to defeating Japan, and distracting attention from the political and strategic aims of American wartime policy – from keeping the Russians in line, to the long-term diplomatic impact of nuclear fission – that had been foremost for himself and [his adviser, Vannevar] Bush for the start of the bomb effort [those intentions] were nowhere to be found in the 11 page article.” [8]

Even before the Soviet Union had developed its own deterrent, therefore, the US nuclear strategy towards it was both a threat and a deliberate deception. That strategy’s most prominent whistleblower, Daniel Ellsberg, reveals that in this respect it has remained unchanged right up to the present, and that the threat and deliberate deception were directed not just at the “enemy” but also at the American people and everyone else:

“The declared official rationale for such a system has always been primarily the supposed need to deter – or if necessary respond to – an aggressive Russian nuclear first strike against the United States. *That widely believed public rationale is a deliberate deception.* Deterring a surprise Soviet nuclear attack – or responding to such an attack – has never been the only or primary purpose of our nuclear plans and preparations. *The nature, scale and posture of our strategic nuclear forces has always been shaped by the requirements of quite different purposes: to attempt to limit the damage to the United States from Soviet or Russian retaliation to a U.S. first strike against the USSR or Russia.*” [9]

During the United Nations’ Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference (August 2022, in New York), the US, France and the UK issued this statement: “nuclear weapons for as long as they exist, should serve defensive purposes, deter aggression, and prevent war. We condemn those who would use or threaten to use nuclear weapons for military coercion, intimidation, and blackmail.”

Zia Mian, a member of the UN Secretary General’s Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters, had this to say about the statement of these three NATO powers: “The US, France and the UK [are] saying, ‘Our nuclear weapons are good. Your nuclear weapons are bad’, even though we all know, the US, and the UK and France make nuclear threats. It is called nuclear deterrence. The very practice of nuclear deterrence is military coercion, intimidation and blackmail. It’s just that when we do it, we call it deterrence; when they do it, you call it for what it is, which is coercion, intimidation and blackmail.” [10]

This echoes Ellsberg’s main argument except in one critical respect: Ellsberg correctly insists – and other evidence confirms – that from the dawn of the atomic/nuclear age, US nukes were meant

...Tass news agency reported the Director of the Russian Nuclear Forces Project and Senior Researcher at the UN Institute for Disarmament Research, Pavel Podvig, as saying Putin’s decision to put the country’s nuclear arms on high alert was to make his forces less vulnerable to a first strike, *but that did not mean Russia was going to attack first.*

for a first strike against the USSR. This history does not justify an equal allocation of blame between the US, on the one hand, and the Soviet Union, and now the Russian Federation on the other: the one calls the shots and still does; the other struggled to catch up and is still doing so. The eastward expansion of NATO puts Russia at greater risk of a US/NATO first strike; hypersonic missiles might help deter that but are unlikely to give Russia overall strategic parity.

Two further observations should make this difference even clearer. First, between 1983 and 1993, the US spent \$30bn to develop an anti-Russian missile system known as the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), nicknamed Star Wars. Western commentators argued about whether it was a realistic objective, over-ambitious, or too expensive, but not whether it was “well-intentioned”. [11] Its timing, however, strongly suggests it was meant to break the Soviet economy by obliging the USSR to catch up. President Reagan used the excuse of testing SDI to abandon the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and block a US-Soviet agreement on mutual nuclear abolition (Ellsberg, 2017). That escalation of the arms race was a US initiative that helped end the Soviet Union. Having done its job, it was scrapped by President Clinton.

Another chilling example of the US’s deceptive nuclear strategy came to light in 2015, when the National Security Archive at George Washington University published the newly declassified list of the US’s nuclear targets in 1956 that “specifically and explicitly targeted ‘population’ in all cities, including Beijing, Moscow, Leningrad, East Berlin, and Warsaw”. Purposefully targeting civilian populations directly conflicted with the international norms of the day, which prohibited attacks on people per se – as opposed to those merely too close to legitimate military targets. [12] Given that the current (secret) US

nuclear target-list could still illegally include population centres, the release of the 1956 document seven years ago might well signal a far more serious threat to Russia than even the strongest words from Russian officials threaten the US, NATO or anyone else.

[1] Address by the President of the Russian Federation - President of Russia (kremlin.ru)

[2] EU says Putin’s ominous threat to those who hinder him marks ‘critical moment’ / *Reuters*

[3] Ukraine invasion: Liz Truss comments sparked Putin decision to put nuclear deterrence forces on high alert, Kremlin says / *Politics News | Sky News*

[4] Putin puts the unthinkable on the table / *The Economist*

[5] Press review: Why Putin put nuclear forces on high alert and liberation of Donbass continues / Top stories from Russian press on Monday, 28th February 2022, 10am Press review: Why Putin put nuke forces on high alert and liberation of Donbass continues - Press Review - *TASS*

[6] A new nuclear era / *The Economist*

[7] Henry L. Stimson, The decision to use the atomic bomb, *Harper’s*, February 1947

[8] Jennet Conant, Man of the Hour: James B. Conant, Warrior Scientist. New York, *Simon & Schuster*, 2017, p 389. JBC, the biographer’s grandfather, helped develop the atom bomb but favoured nuclear control and strongly opposed a “secret [nuclear] armament race” with the USSR.

[9] Daniel Ellsberg, the Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear Planner. London & New York, *Bloomsbury*, 2017 E-book [ISBN 9781608196746]

[10] Warnings Grow over Nuclear Annihilation as Tensions Escalate Between U.S., Russia & China | *Democracy Now!*

[11] Reagan’s ‘Star Wars’ Defense Program Promised to Block Nukes From Space - HISTORY

[12] Declassified US Nuclear Targets - *Future of Life Institute*

I am grateful to Gregor Tassie for his help in preparing this article but its final form is my responsibility alone.

From The Socialist Correspondent 10 years ago

“Britain was third in the Olympic medal table. But it is only 18th in the world league of physically active nations.

Some 37% of Britain’s Olympic medallists attended fee-paying schools, even though the sector educates just 7% of the population. At these schools there are excellent sporting facilities and highly qualified coaches. Independent schools are particularly well represented in rowing, sailing and equestrian sports. David Cameron went to a school with an Olympic rowing lake in the grounds.”

Issue 16 Autumn 2012

Real legacy of the London Olympics

Pat Turnbull

Western intervention in Russia and its neighbours

by Gregor Tassie

When Margaret Thatcher met a leading secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) at Chequers in October 1984, she said this is 'a man that we can do business with.' Just six months later that man, the late Mikhail Gorbachev, became the General Secretary of the CPSU. Unknowingly the Iron Lady had almost blown his cover for he masterminded the break-up of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev's policy of 'New Thinking' in 1985 led to the appointment of party leaders who were aligned to his policies. He selected republican leaders as 'fifth columnists' who had grievances against Soviet power, having had family who suffered during the 1930 purges.

Leaders of the commonwealth of Independent States. Left to right Ilham Aliyev, Nikol Pashinyan, Alexander Lukashenko, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Vladimir Putin, Sadyr Japarov, Emomali Rahmon, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow and Shavkat Mirziyoyev

Central Asia

Nowhere was the transfer to private enterprise more evident than in the Central Asian Republics where huge untapped natural resources attracted foreign capital - effectively colonising the former Soviet peoples. Corruption and abuse of power were common phenomena as the concepts of a socialist state disappeared while finance capital stole the country's wealth assisted by a state-backed oligarchy. A typical example is the former Kazakh President Nazarbayev, who signed the treaty dissolving the USSR, and who went on to prosper. His family are worth \$8 billion. While this monstrous theft from the peoples of Central Asia has happened, millions have emigrated to seek work and those left behind live in poverty.

The transfer from socialism to despotic capitalism has been masterminded by the National Endowment for Democracy, initiated by the

Reagan Administration in 1983. As one of its directors Allen Weinstein stated, 'A lot of what we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA.' [1] Currently, the organisation is most actively engaged in Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The UK government supported Westminster Foundation for Democracy is presently active in Armenia and Kyrgyzstan. The Soros Foundation has been prominent in Georgia backing the Rose revolution, to the tune of \$2.5 million.

The Uzbek President Karimov, who was another fifth columnist appointed by Gorbachev in 1989, moved towards independence which was followed by assassinations, repression of opponents, and atrocities such as the 400 striking miners who were killed in Andijan in 2005. The World Bank came in with loans and foreign companies exploited the country's wealth. Uzbekistan has the second highest rate of modern slavery in the world



PHOTO BY RUSSIAN PRESIDENTIAL OFFICE

**Interestingly,
Ukrainian President,
Volodymyr Zelenskyy
- despite promising
to defeat corruption
- was named in the
Pandora Papers and
it is thought he may
be worth \$850 mil-
lion. His properties
include several flats
in London, and
yachts and properties
around the world.**

- currently 1.2 million Uzbeks are slaves. [2] In 2001 a US base was established where rendition to Guantanamo was carried out. Uzbekistan is bountiful in minerals, gas, coal, oil, copper, silver, uranium, and gold and is among the world's main exporters of cotton. Karimov died in 2016 leaving \$1 billion in personal wealth.

Mirziyoyev's presidency has permitted Western-backed NGOs and US radio and media, while the Soros Foundation funds universities fostering 'western values and freedoms.' Uzbekistan is one of the countries targeted by the US Endowment for Democracy for 'new awakenings', and 'sustained organized movements'. The UK has not been absent either. Secretary of State for Defence, Ben Wallace recently visited Tashkent agreeing on military cooperation, and Charles Michel of the EU has offered collaboration. In June 2022, a US delegation met with Mirzhoyev and agreed on joint military exercises and cooperation with the US.

The state of Karakalpakstan in Uzbekistan has an economy based on agriculture and fishing. However, the discovery of oil and gas deposits has led it to become the focus of international capital. Growing protests emerged in the capital Nukus and other cities against increasing costs of living in April 2022 which was used by pro-western journalists Kallikhanova and Turdanov to put a lawyer/journalist Tazhimuratov into power. Over several days - between 26 June and 2 July - protesters called for 'an end to totalitarian powers against freedom loving people' in line with the narrative of western-backed NGOs. Thousands marched on the city council in Nukus, police officers were shot - some in the back - leaving 20 people dead including 4 policemen, and 300 were hospitalised. Martial law was introduced and among those arrested were three western citizens. The Uzbek president Mirzhoyev - who has a personal wealth

of \$300 million - visited the city, sacked his head of administration and imposed a curfew.

In January 2022, Kazakhstan President Tokayev requested military help from the regional Organisation of Collective Security when riots erupted throughout the country. Later a visit to the Kazakh capital in June by the Head of the US Central and Middle East Command led to military cooperation, and joint military exercises in August 2022. This coincided with the sale of energy resources to the EU by Tokayev, in place of Russia's sanctioned gas and oil contracts. Kazakhstan has also positioned itself with China in regards to military cooperation. As of September, Russian will no longer be taught in schools, and there has been violence against Russians some 4 million of whom live and work in Kazakhstan. In a recent meeting with Tokayev, Russian President, Vladimir Putin reminded his Kazakh counterpart that Russia is Kazakhstan's largest trading partner and that their ties should be strengthened. There are planned military exercises between Russia and Kazakhstan to enhance their mutual bond. Tokayev has been playing a game of three sides and it will be some time before we can see exactly what is going to happen. However, he has announced a presidential election for the autumn along with a major switch in policy by going to a free-market economy and selling off state owned assets in the country. These are wholesale concessions to the pro-western opposition who organised the riots in January this year. Tokayev's personal wealth is \$14 million.

Kyrgyzstan is a member of the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Organisation of Collective Security. The country's greatest assets are gold, coal and uranium. In 1990 clashes emerged over selling off collective farms for private housing and there was an attempted coup in 2005 during the 'Tulip' revolution

in which 80 demonstrators were killed including 3 parliamentarians. America was invited to use the Manas Air Base. Further riots in 2010 led to Russian troops being invited as peacekeepers. The Westminster Foundation for Democracy has focused on bringing the country towards 'international standards. Concentrating on young people, the media and democratic controls.' [3]

After 1991, Turkestan's President Niyazov imposed a repressive regime closing hospitals, schools and libraries and loss-making areas of the economy. At his death his wealth was \$3 billion. His successor, President Berdimuhamedov developed relations with the US, including a meeting with State Department officials in March. The US funds an International School in the capital Ashgabat

Tajikistan has a history of strikes and massive demonstrations - the population voted 97% to keep the USSR in 1991. As the economy declined many left to work in Russia and China. The US Head of Central Asia Military visited recently to discuss military cooperation in June and military exercises will be held in the autumn.

Turkey's President, Recep Erdogan's policy of Pan-Turkic empire-building embraces Cyprus, Libya, Syria and Iraq, and more recently has leaned towards Central Asian states. Turkey and Kazakhstan have signed an agreement on military cooperation including sharing intelligence and the manufacture of military drones. Erdogan's son-in-law owns the Bayraktor drone company.

The Caucasus

The Azeris have a strong alliance with Turkey which assisted their military takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan is the most pro-western state in the region. Following pogroms in 1990 and a coup attempt in 1993, Gaydar Aliyev (sacked by Gorbachev in 1987)

took over and leading Azerbaijan to become an associate member of NATO and with strong links to the EU. Ilham Aliyev took over after his father's death. With the country accruing huge wealth through the oil industry, corruption has risen to an unheard of degree with \$900 million owned by the Aliyevs.

Armenia has been the focus for huge demonstrations in recent years. It was Soviet power which gave the Armenians sovereignty after the Turkish genocide and there have always been friendly relations with Russia. There is a Russian army base as part of a peace-keeping operation. [4] In July, President Pashinian had discussions with William Burns Head of the CIA followed by meetings with senior State Department officials. [5] The US embassy in Yerevan has the biggest US embassy in the region with at least half of the staff working for the CIA. [6] Yerevan is the centre for US infiltration into Iran, however Armenia has been cautious in maintaining relations with Russia and the CIS while coveting relations with NATO and the US. [7] The UK, through the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, provides support both to the media and NGO groups to 'build relationships between democratic actors and institutions across the political spectrum.' [8]

Break up of Russia

In 1991 the US was already pursuing suppression of Russia's sovereignty with the aim of making Russia a vassal state. Former US Vice-President, Dick Cheney said he 'wanted to see the dismantlement not only of the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire but of Russia itself, so it could never be a threat to the rest of the world.' [9] This concept was raised in an authoritative article in *The Atlantic*, 'The West must complete the project that begun in 1991. It must seek to fully decolonise Russia.' [10] In 1993, the leader of the Monarchist Party, Anton Bakov proposed forming the Greater

Urals Republic which got support from Yeltsin which was however dropped. [11] Today the Yeltsin Centre in Yekaterinburg has become increasingly active in proselytising western values of 'freedom and democracy.' [12]

The US Congress Helsinki Forum acts with the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and with the EU to arrange conferences in which the break-up of the Russian Federation is planned. Among these plans are: Germany to have Belarus, Turkey to have a mandate over Crimea and the Caucasus, while Japan will have the Russian Far East. [13] In May and July 2022 the Forum of the Free Peoples of Russia met in Warsaw and in Prague, calling for the restructuring of Russia and for it to be, 'decolonized, de-imperialized and depu-tized'. The aim is to break up the Russian Federation through sabotage and demonstrations. [14] Those taking part included oligarchs such as Khodorkovsky, politicians from Poland, the Czech Republic, the Baltic states, journalists from both the west - including Luke Harding of the Guardian - and individuals from Russia such as the chess champion Gary Kasparov, Alekhina - a member of Pussy Riot, and the Belarus 'leader' in exile Tikhanovskaya. [15] The group is funded by the US Endowment for Democracy, the British Embassy in Kiev, and a host of neo-liberal groups. [16]

Interestingly, Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy - despite promising to defeat corruption - was named in the Pandora Papers and it is thought he may be worth \$850 million. [17] His properties include several flats in London, and yachts and properties around the world.

New balance of power

The first attempt to colonise Russia followed the 1917 revolution when Britain, the US and France organised an intervention for, as Churchill proposed, the 'strangling

of Bolshevism at its birth.' The Entente's invasion was thwarted due to Soviet workers' solidarity. The threat did not disappear though, only the great depression delayed invasion until 1941. When the Nazis were defeated both the US and the UK were working against the Soviet Union – the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were warnings of the overwhelming might of the US.

It is disingenuous to claim that the proxy war between NATO and Russia is a struggle between global empires. Russia is only the twelfth biggest economy in the world. Recent conflicts have been to protect Russia's sovereignty. In Georgia, and Chechnya, Russia's forces withdrew after securing a peace treaty. In the case of Crimea, 96% of the population voted to join Russia after the unlawful coup in Kiev. The granting of Crimea to Ukraine in 1954 has been shown as unconstitutional. [18]

Unquestionably, the NATO-led provocation in the Ukraine will lead to a new balance of power. It may well be that the economic and political cost of waging a proxy war will lead to failure by NATO and the EU. Instead of a world dominated by one power – there will be a multi-polar political and economic structure unlike anything we have seen.

[1] Allen Weinstein, *The Washington Post*, 22/9/1991.

[2] Uzbekistan Has Second Highest Prevalence of Modern Slavery in the World – Report / *Eurasianet*

[3] Kyrgyzstan / *Westminster Foundation for Democracy* (wfd.org)

[4] Why did the CIA director fly to Yerevan / *Vestnik Kavkaza* (vestnikavkaza.ru)

[5] CIA Director Visits Armenia (azatutyun.am)

[6] What does CIA chief's arrival in Armenia mean? – *Aze.Media*

[7] CIA chief arrives in Armenia | Report.az

[8] www.wfd.org/what-we-do/our-programmes

[9] Casey Michel, Decolonising Russia' *The Atlantic* 27/5/2022

[10] Casey Michel, Decolonising Russia' *The Atlantic* 27/5/2022

[11] Anton Bakov, Uralskaya Respublika : Kak eto bylo

[12] Yeltsin Center May Have To Accommodate Russian Leadership / MEMRI

[13] Decolonizing Russia / CSCE

[14] Srbin.info. – 28/7/2022

[15] The Forum of the Free Peoples of Russia took place over the weekend in Prague – *Forum24* – europe-cities.com

[16] The Free Russia Forum - news, articles, broadcasts, videos (forumfreerussia.org)

[17] Volodymyr Zelensky's \$850 Million Accumulated Assets Questioned by Dutch Party After Campaign Vows Against Corruption During Elections / *HNGN* - Headlines & Global News

[18] "CRIMEA ACTS" OF 1954: INTERNATIONAL LEGAL PRINCIPLES (cyberleninka.ru) also http://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2015/06/150627_russia_mironov_crimea

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Charter cities will impoverish the working class

by Clare Bailey

William Blake would recognise a charter city. Published in 1794, his poem *London* opens with lines that record the suffering of people living in a city owned and operated by commerce in the interests of profit:

*I wander through each charter'd street
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.*

Charters were active everywhere in 18th century England, conferring rights on wealthy corporations at the expense of everyone else. Thomas Paine had much to say about them in *The Rights of Man*: “Every chartered town is an aristocratical monopoly in itself... [charters] are sources of endless contentions in the places where they exist, and they lessen the common rights of national society... [a man’s] rights are circumscribed to the town, and, in some cases, to the parish of his birth; and all other parts, though in his native land, are to him as a foreign country.”

The loss of rights under the charters in Paine’s time find their mirror image nowadays in the experiences of workers in special economic zones (SEZs) across the world, where national laws and rights are suspended and companies operating in them are more or less free to do as they please. SEZs – sometimes referred to as ‘open zones’ – take different forms; freeports and charter cities are both forms of SEZ.

In 2009 the American economist Paul Romer, who coined the term

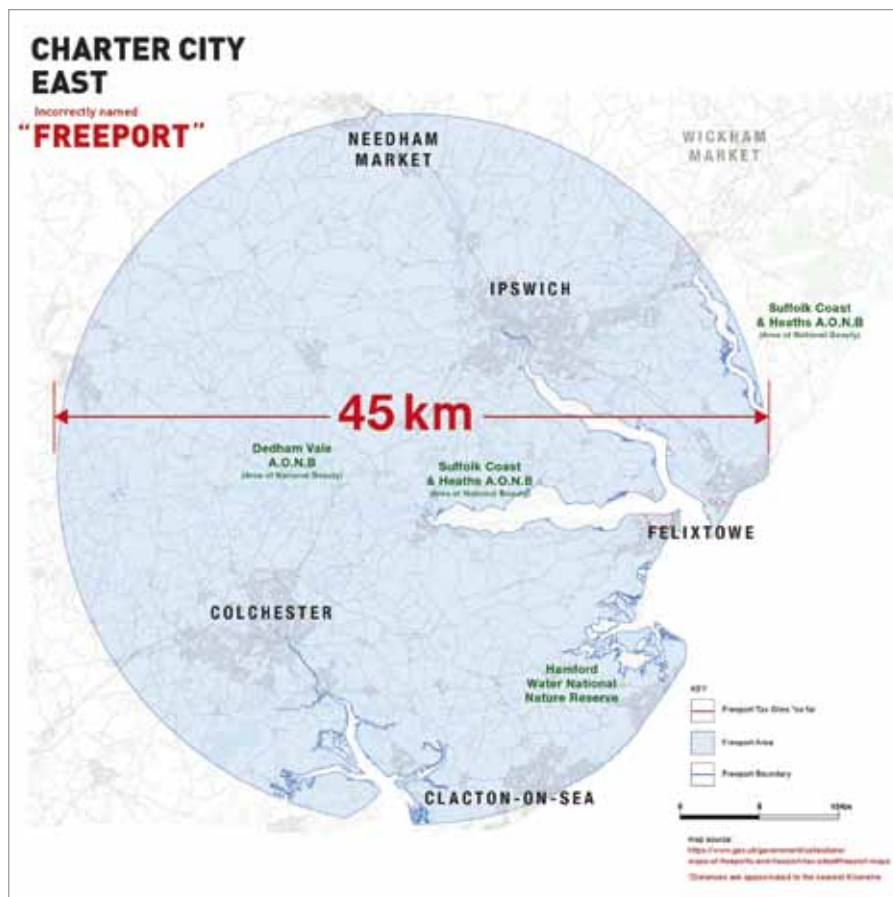


IMAGE BY STAN FONTAN/TWITTER

charter cities, described them as new cities with special rules operated by foreign governments. The first attempt to establish one of these private cities in Honduras in 2012 was resisted by the local population, whose lands would have been appropriated, and the scheme finally collapsed under the weight of corruption evident at every level of the process. Madagascar, Rwanda and El Salvador have also been targets of this kind of experiment. Initially involving foreign government participation, the idea of the charter city has developed into a “a public-private development partnership between the host country government and a private devel-

oper”, according to the Charter Cities Institute (CCI) – echoes of the early colonial methods of the East India Company, one of the first corporations to be granted a charter by Elizabeth I.

Charter cities are a flexible concept, adaptable to country and context, and are often linked in reports and discussion papers to problems posed for capital by refugees and migration, problems which can also be opportunities missed according to Dr Mark Lutter, founder and board member of the CCI. He sees establishing charter cities – he calls them “Prosperity Cities” – in existing refugee camps as “a politi-

cally attractive proposition”, which would not only provide a cheap source of labour but would also alleviate migration-related concerns of European countries by “reducing refugee flows”. Bingo.

Driving down wages

In charter cities wages would follow the reality of existing SEZs, in the Philippines for example, where they are far lower than wages nationally. The CCI Governance Handbook explicitly states that “lower income people are the primary target residents” of charter cities and that wages in charter cities should be pegged at 20-40% of the national average, where the national average is already very low.

In the UK this would mean garment workers in Leicester currently earning £4 an hour would be earning the right sort of money for companies setting up manufacturing plants inside a charter city. Leicester is inside the recently designated East Midlands Freeport and, looking at it through the charter city lens, the long-term failure of all responsible agencies to enforce UK labour law and the minimum wage in the city’s garment industry begins to look less like poor coordination and a lot like an experiment in a hitherto unofficial SEZ in the UK.

Freeports are SEZs where normal tax and customs rules do not apply and companies based inside them are free to add-value to imports, goods may then be processed and re-exported without paying tariffs or taxes. Eight new freeports were created in the 2021 budget: East Midlands, Felixstowe, Humber, Liverpool, Plymouth, the Solent, the Thames, and Teeside. Though the UK has experimented with freeports since the mid-1980s, these new versions are much more extensive and the ambitions for their role in the UK economy much higher. Freeports are not only mini tax havens. Len McLuskey in 2021 called them “sinkholes, draining decent jobs

and wages away from our communities.” They will “sidestep employment rights, minimum wages and basic standards”.

Charter cities would go even further. The Charter Cities Institute envisages that the cities would in most cases develop their own banking systems, though it recommends frankly that they should not try to develop a healthcare system because public health is too complex and too expensive for any insurance model to work. The Institute is talking about charter cities in the Global South but the model is clearly transferable and is being transferred.



While there have long been SEZs of different kinds in the big capitalist economies, there has yet to be a fully-fledged charter city experiment. Watchers of the freeport system in the UK are wondering whether it is about to take place here. Some already argue that the new freeports are to all intents and purposes charter cities – as in the image below which shows the extent of the Felixstowe freeport area, that is the area inside which depots, warehouses, assembly plants etc can be established. The Amazon warehouse in Tilbury falls within the boundary of the Thames freeport.

Questions are being asked about what is happening in Liverpool and whether a charter city experiment is taking shape there. In July this

year, Liverpool City Council voted to abolish the role of directly elected mayor and to return to a leader and cabinet model with much greater direct accountability from May 2023. In response, on August 19th the government moved effectively to take over the running of the city. On the same day, the Liverpool Echo reported the appointment of a commissioner to “oversee the authority’s financial management and to transfer the council’s governance and financial-decision making to the commissioners along with powers over recruitment.” A “strategic advisory panel” will develop a long-term plan to “shape the future of the city”. Peel Ports – a land-hoarding infrastructure company involved in innumerable scandals and controversies and already criticised heavily for wielding excessive influence on development in Liverpool – is no doubt standing by.

Less than a week later, ahead of a Tory leadership hustings visit to East Anglia, Liz Truss had this to say: “If elected prime minister, I will turbocharge the economies of places like Norwich, Great Yarmouth and across East Anglia by unleashing the private sector with tax cuts and better regulation, cracking down on strike action slowing our economy, and repealing the EU regulations that do not work for our rural communities.”

The Felixstowe dockers have had something to say about that prospect.

THE GREAT STRIKE OF 1972

building workers versus employers & the state

by Pat Turnbull

In 1972, after a national strike, building workers achieved the largest single pay increase ever negotiated in the building industry: an immediate pay increase of £6 per week for craftsmen and £5 per week for labourers. This was on a previous national minimum rate of just £20 for a skilled worker and £17 for a labourer. It was a magnificent victory for the workers and their trade unions.

At the time working conditions on building sites were second only to coal mines for fatalities and serious injuries. Facilities like toilets, washbasins, lockers and so on were few and far between. Trade union organisation was hard because of the nature of the industry, where workers moved from one site to another, and organising to

defend wages and working conditions had to start all over again with a new group of people. To make it even harder, the employers funded a secret organisation, the Economic League, to maintain a blacklist and keep active trade unionists off the sites.

Organisation was also made harder by a payment system called 'the lump'. The workers were not seen as employees of the building firm. Instead they were regarded as 'self-employed' and were paid a lump sum of money for the work they did each day or week, out of which they had to pay their tax and national insurance. They had various allowances for travel, clothes, lodgings, tools etc that were signed off by the employer, and paid income tax on a much smaller amount than a directly employed worker. What the lump meant was that

workers were trading off working conditions and health and safety on sites for higher pay. Many employers refused to take on direct labour. They knew many would be trade unionists ready to fight collectively for better pay and conditions, and that the 'lumpers' would dilute the unions' strength.

The strike

1972 saw the highest number of strike days in Britain since the General Strike of 1926. The Conservative government called a state of emergency twice, in February during the miners' strike, famous for the battle of Saltley Gate coke depot, which involved 15,000 trade unionists, and in August during the dockers' dispute. Attempts by the government to use the Industrial Relations Act 1971 were a failure.

Demonstration against the cuts in London



PHOTO BY CLEM RUTTER

...in August an all-out strike was called and union members began to organise flying pickets to go to smaller, out of the way sites to persuade the workers to support the strike. The tactic was successful and on Tuesday 14th September 1972 the union side agreed the settlement with the employers, though without the reduction in the working week. It was a massive victory.

The National Joint Council of the builders' unions was formed of four unions: the Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians (UCATT); the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU); the National Union of General and Municipal Workers (NUGMW); and the Furniture, Timber and Allied Trades Union (FTAT). The joint council submitted a pay claim for £30 a week and a basic 35-hour week for all trades. The National Federation of Building Trades Employers rejected the demands and in May 1972, the unions called a national strike. First they called out the members in towns and cities, on the bigger, better organised sites. Some employers conceded the claim but the unions wanted the agreement to be national, so in August an all-out strike was called and union members began to organise flying pickets to go to smaller, out of the way sites to persuade the workers to support the strike. The tactic was successful and on Tuesday 14th September 1972 the union side agreed the settlement with the employers, though without the reduction in the working week. It was a massive victory. One of the least well-organised groups of workers had taken on the employers and won.

But some of the building workers were to pay a heavy price as the employers sought their revenge. The group of pickets known as the Shrewsbury 24 were falsely accused of offences while picketing on September 6th 1972. The heaviest penalties were paid by Des Warren, who was sent to prison for three years, John McKinsie Jones who had a nine-month sentence, and Michael Pierce with six months. They only had their convictions on these trumped-up charges quashed at the Court of Appeal on 23 March 2021 after a huge and persistent battle had been conducted over the years since their trials in 1973 and 1974. By then six of the 14 final appellants had died.

Among the charges levelled at the pickets was one of conspiracy. At his trial in 1973, Des Warren said from the dock:

'The conspiracy began with the miners giving the government a good hiding last year. It developed when the government was forced to perform legal gymnastics in getting five dockers out of jail after they had only just been put there. The conspiracy was between the Home Office, the employers and the police...The question was hovering over the case from the very first day: why were there no arrests on the 6th September? That would have led to the even more important question of when was the decision to proceed taken. Where did it come from? What instructions were issued to the police? And by whom? There was your conspiracy.'

The jury in this trial were asked to look upon the word 'intimidation' as having the ordinary everyday meaning. My interpretation is 'to make timid', or 'to dispirit', and when the pickets came to this town to speak to the building workers it was not with the intention of intimidating them. We came here with the intention of instilling the trade union spirit into them, and not to make them timid, but to give them the courage to fight the intimidation of the employers in this area.'

Many thanks to the Shrewsbury 24 Official Campaign website for the information carried in this article. Des Warren's autobiography 'The Key to my Cell' is also available from the campaign.

[The Official Shrewsbury 24 Campaign](#)

HS2 WORKERS

and the construction companies



HS2 demolition site at Euston

PHOTO BY MATT BROWN

by Pat Turnbull

In autumn 2021 Unite the Union blamed a recent spate of serious accidents on the HS2 tunnelling and track laying project in London on a shortage of safety reps. The latest accident reported on 30 September was when a worker suffered arm injuries after clay fell on them from height. It resulted in a safety shutdown on the project. This and other serious incidents were judged to be because of the excessive hours the majority of workers were undertaking on the site. [1]

The accidents had occurred on the section being built by a joint venture between the companies Costain, Skanska and Strabag. On

other sections of the project Unite had been allowed to speak freely with workers during their breaks in the welfare facilities, essential to allow the union to discuss working conditions and recruit safety reps. Only Costain/Skanska/Strabag refused, saying they would provide a separate room, meaning workers who wanted to visit the union would have to walk past the offices of the site managers. This was interpreted as a form of intimidation, especially as Skanska and Costain are proven blacklisters, and while the vetting database, The Consulting Association, was closed down in 2009, there is no doubt that blacklisting continues. In August 2021, 200 construction workers from across the UK took part in a

protest at Euston against the joint venture as workers were not receiving the correct overtime rates, were receiving too few holidays, and were not covered for death and serious injury. [2]

The HS2 project will be a high-speed rail link between London, Birmingham, Manchester and the East Midlands. Plans to also connect to Leeds have been scrapped. Phase 1 between London and Birmingham was due to open at the end of 2026; this is now expected between 2029 and 2033. Phase 2 has also been pushed back, from 2032-33 to 2035-40. The estimated cost as of 2021 was between £72 billion and £98 billion. The original budget was £55.7 billion. According

to the BBC, rising costs are due to 'management issues and unrealistic land valuations'. [3]

Problems of employment conditions in the construction industry go back many decades. Unite Construction Allied Trades and Technicians section says on its website: 'At the heart of our industrial activity is the core policy that Unite wants to see all construction workers directly employed under the terms and conditions of the collective agreement relevant to their trade.' This is vital to maximise workers' unity in fighting, through their unions, for better pay and working conditions.

In 2020-21, 969,000 sole traders, 7,000 partnerships and 134,000 limited companies had deductions made from their pay via the Construction Industry Scheme which is unique to that industry. Workers are considered to be self-employed, but unlike any other form of self-employment the great majority are taxed at source, which leads the union to conclude that this is bogus self-employment. [2]

The three companies involved in this joint venture all have interesting histories.

Skanska

Skanska Cementgjuteriet was founded in Sweden in 1887 as a maker of concrete and its head office is still in Stockholm. It changed its name to Skanska in 1984. Its website says: 'We grew to construct churches, roadways and power plants... Today we design and build some of the largest, most complex structures on earth.' Under 'What we do', it says: 'Our operations are focused on three distinct streams: Construction, Commercial Development and Homes.' [4]

In 1897 the first contract outside Sweden was for hollow concrete blocks for telephone cables in the UK; in 1956 Skanska built silos in Iraq; from 1960 to 2000 it built pow-

er plants, irrigation plants, infrastructure, schools and hospitals in several developing countries such as Bangladesh, Hong Kong, India, Malaysia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Colombia, Panama and Peru; in 1971-78 it built its first projects in the US, subway systems in New York and Washington DC. In 1993 commercial property development operations were launched in Poland and the Czech Republic. From 2007 to 2014 the UN headquarters in New York were renovated. In 2012 the Elizabeth River Tunnels project was Skanska's first Public Private Partnership contract in the US.

Financially, in 1964 its sales exceeded SEK (Swedish krona) 1 billion for the first time. In 1965 it registered on the A list of the Stockholm stock exchange. In 1989 it made its first company acquisition in the US, Slattery – this was followed by Karl Koch, Sordoni and others. Between 1994 and 2000, in international expansion, construction companies were acquired in Finland, the UK, Norway, Poland, the Czech Republic and Argentina and revenue increased to SEK 165 billion. By 2001 the number of employees was around 80,000. From 2000 to 2008 there was restructuring to increase profitability, with the focus on selected home markets. Operations in Africa, Asia and Russia were divested. In 2015 Skanska's share price reached a record high of SEK 208.40.

Costain

Costain was founded in 1865 in Liverpool by Richard Costain and his future brother-in-law who crossed from the Isle of Man trading as jobbing builders and undertakers. Its website says: '...it was the move south to build houses in the booming suburbia around 1920s London that really sparked the family firm's expansion...' [5] The website says, one major project was 'Dolphin Square in London's Pimlico. The largest block of flats in Europe

at that time, the first 600 apartments were ready for use just a year after construction started in 1935. The second phase contained [a] novel centralised heating system, involving waste heat being piped from Battersea Power Station on the opposite bank of the Thames.'

In the 1930s Costain moved overseas for the first time, building an 11-mile section of the Trans-Iranian Railway through the Alborz Mountains. Although it made a substantial loss, the technical feat greatly enhanced its reputation. 'Iran was also the site of Costain's first foray into petrochemicals, with the building of the refinery at Abadan in 1938.'

After the Second World War Costain's projects included thousands of semi-permanent concrete houses and the Festival of Britain site on the South Bank of the Thames. In the Middle East it built a 10 million gallon-per-day water distillation plant in Kuwait which was important to its modern development. Costain states: 'Links with Kuwait continue to this day with the influential Kharafi construction family holding a major stake in the company. Airports in Bahrain and Dubai followed, as did the world's largest dry dock and the Middle East's largest deep-water port in Dubai.'

Costain broadened into open cast mining in Scotland (Westfield) and Australia, but a venture into 'geologically troublesome deep mines in the US... was a major factor almost bringing down the company in the mid-1990s.' However, Costain survived to build infrastructure and major buildings in Hong Kong, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Sydney and Tomsk. In the UK it was the lead constructor on the Thames Barrier, and helped build the Channel Tunnel, the Channel Tunnel Rail Link, and the revamp of St Pancras Station.

Costain has about 3,100 employees across the UK, and the adjusted

group revenue for year end 31 December 2020 was £1,070 million.

Costain and Skanska UK were two of seven big construction companies which in 2019 agreed to pay out £1.9 million in compensation to 53 blacklisted workers. The others were Balfour Beatty, Kier, Laing O'Rourke, Sir Robert McAlpine, and Vinci. There was an eighth member of the group, Carillion, but by then it had been liquidated. The settlement followed a previous £19.34 million award to 412 blacklisted victims. The companies acknowledged having conspired to run The Consulting Association as a vetting database which kept building workers who were active trade unionists out of a job. [6]

Strabag

Strabag is an Austrian construction company based in Spittal an der Drau, with its headquarters in Vienna. It has its origins in two businesses. One was Baumeister Lerchbaumer-Isola-KG which was founded in 1929 by Anton Lerchbaumer and his son-in-law, Franz Isola. It became known as Ilbau AG in 1972. The other was Strassenwalzenbetrieb founded in 1895, known as Strabag from 1930. The two businesses came under the common ownership of BIBAG Bauindustrie Beteiligungs Aktiengesellschaft in 1998. The company was subsequently renamed Strabag SE. On its website Strabag/Zueblin International says its international activities are executed by its subsidiaries Strabag International GmbH and Zueblin International GmbH. Their activities comprise transport infrastructures (roads, railways, airports, and test tracks for the automobile industry), building construction (turnkey construction, industrial facilities), and civil engineering (bridges, dams, hydraulic asphalt engineering, tunnelling, pipe jacking, microtunnelling, cooling towers and harbour facilities). [7]

Strabag was one of the main profiteers of the Nazi building projects

during the Second World War and before. It was a main contractor of Organisation Todt and built concentration camps, the Westwall (known in Britain as the Siegfried Line) and Norway's Blood Road. Organisation Todt (OT) was a semi-military engineering organisation in Nazi Germany from 1938 to 1945, notorious for using slave labour. At its peak, the organisation controlled a workforce counting 1.5 million people. Most of the Soviet prisoner of war workers were assigned to OT. An online exhibition by the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology mentions Strabag by name. It includes an excerpt from a letter of December 1943 from the local OT subdivision to the leaders of Strabag in Stavanger saying, 'I wish to emphasise that abuse against prisoners of war is unacceptable and also beneath the dignity of a German and an OT worker.' These hollow words are exposed by Max Erich Feuchtinger, responsible for the workforce in OT, writing in 1944: 'The workers from the East are in a special position... They can and must be treated much harder than the culturally superior people of ... Western Europe.' [8] From 1943 to 1945 OT administered the construction of all concentration camps to supply slave labour to industry.

In the post war period, Strabag was involved in major projects in Iraq in 1988, Denmark 2002, New Zealand 2002, Bulgaria 2006, Montenegro 2007, Ireland 2010, Canada 2013 and Tanzania 2015. A video on its website says that it completes more than 15,000 projects every year. It has been in Poland since the 1980s and is the market leader in Polish transport infrastructure. It also mentions the Hamburg dancing towers, and the Gotthard base tunnel, the world's largest railway tunnel, where it is sole contractor for one third of it. [7]

Both Skanska and Strabag were involved in a public scandal in Slovakia, where in December 2013 the Supreme Court of the Slovak Republic confirmed that in 2004 one of the companies of the Strabag Group

participated in a bid-rigging cartel of construction companies together with companies of the Skanska Group and Mota-Engil Group. The illegal conduct was associated with the tender for the execution of works for the construction of the D1 highway in Eastern Slovakia.

Trade Union access

In its spring 2022 newsletter, *Building Worker*, Unite was able to report that national officer Jerry Swain had secured agreement for new guidance in the agreement between the unions and the Construction Industry Joint Council. It states that union officials will be given access to workers in welfare facilities including site canteens, and that they will be able to meet and speak to workers during rest and break periods, exactly what Unite had been requiring from the Costain/Skanska/Strabag joint venture on the HS2 project. [9]

[1] Serious HS2 safety failings a result of union busting tactics, Unite the Union 30/9/21

[2] *Building Worker*, Unite the Union Autumn 2021

[3] HS2: what is the route, when will it be finished and what will it cost?, *BBC* 18/11/21

[4] Welcome to Skanska / www.skanska.com

[5] Home / Costain

[6] Blacklisters agree a further £1.9m compensation, *The Construction Index* 14/5/19

[7] STRABAG SE - STRABAG SE

[8] Grossraum: Organisation Todt and Forced Labour in Norway 1940-45, The Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology

[9] *Building Worker*, Spring 2022, Unite the Union

VIA NEGATIVA by Ian Duhig

Not circumcellion, beggar, gyrovague
but Lagos Christian college boy.
Not abbey-lubber but job-seeker.

Not City of God but Motorway City.
Not office career but casual labour.
Not Union member but *Last In First Out*.

Not My Father's Mansion but Chapeltown slum.
Not *Welcome Brother* but *rent up front*.
Not Empire pilgrim but evicted vagrant.

Not *Amubulare pro Deo* but *Wandering Abroad*.
Not *Ave Maria* but Black Maria.
Not demonic visions but brain damage.

Not Church Latin but medical Latin.
Not Catechism but questionnaires.
Not Pentecost tongues but echolalia.

Not the African Fathers but *the African Mind*.
Not Divine Spark but ECT.
Not Cloud of Unknowng but Largactil fog.

Not confessional boxes but cardboard boxes.
Not the Body of Christ at Holy Communion
but the cold host of a Leeds moon.

Not *via negativa* but fugue state.
Not River of Life but *Rivers of blood*.
Not rosary beads but bubbles of air.

Not fisher of men but fished from a weir.
Not heavenly throne but pauper's grave.
Not heavenly choir but football chant:

*And you shouldn't trust a copper
if your name's Oluwale
and you can't find your way home.*

David Oluwale drowned in the River Aire on 18th April 1969. Two years later, in November 1971, two police officers - Inspector Ellerker and Sergeant Kitching - were prosecuted for involvement in his death and were found guilty of various assault charges. The events leading to his drowning have been described as "the physical and psychological destruction of a homeless, black man whose brutal, systematic harassment was orchestrated by the Leeds city police force."

The terminology of Ian Duhig's poem reflects Oluwale's Christian faith.

A blue plaque in memory of David Oluwale was installed in Leeds on 25th April 2022 near the place where he drowned. Ian Duhig read at the ceremony. Five hours later the plaque was stolen. A new plaque is being made and another ceremony is planned for September. A memorial sculpture is also planned.

<https://thetetley.org/exhibition/hibiscus-rising-creating-a-memorial-for-david-oluwale-with-yinka-shonibare-cbe/>

<https://rememberoluwale.org>

