

Belarus: Free union leaders and activists



In the last couple of months, Belarus has experienced rigged elections, mass protests, and severe violence carried out by the security forces.

Union leaders, members of the Belarusian Independent Trade Union (BITU), have been arrested and imprisoned for participating in protests and strike action.



At the center of these events is the JSC Belaruskali potash fertilizer site. Dozens of activists and strike committee members at Belaruskali have been prosecuted, threatened, fined and deprived of benefits at work for their activities. BITU vice chair Siarhei Charkasau and three of his comrades, Pavel Puchenia, Yury Korzun and Anatol Bokun are in prison now. One sentence has followed the other while they were still serving their sentence.

BITU and IndustriALL are demanding an end to the persecution of employees of Belaruskali for their participation in the strike, and also those who continue to “work to rule” at Belaruskali. They are demanding an immediate release of the BITU leader and jailed activists. **Please take a moment to support the online campaign – click here.**

And please share this message with your friends, family and fellow union members.



Eric Lee

Luxfer doit vivre : itw d'Axel Peronczyk, délégué syndical CGT de l'usine

Luxfer doit vivre : itw d'Axel Peronczyk, délégué syndical CGT de l'usine

Political training in South Africa under “lockdown”

“SOCIALIST REVOLUTIONARY WORKERS PARTY

We are born of class struggle, in the fight to demolish the capitalist system that insists on the continued exploitation of most of society by a few humans. We seek to educate, agitate, mobilise and organize the working class into our political organisation.

The working class must fulfil our historic mission: to defeat imperialism and capitalism, establish a Socialist South Africa, Africa and World, as a prelude to advancing to a truly free and classless society: to a Communist South Africa, Africa and World!” (SRWP homepage)

It turns out that political organising and education can take place a lot more effectively than some comrades feared online, even during “lockdown” when physical gatherings of any size are impossible within the state’s arrangements for dealing

with Covid-19. Some of the resources which have assisted imperialism to step up exploitation across the globe, such as computer technology and modern communications, are also tools in the hands of the workers' movement.

At time of writing, the Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party of South Africa (SRWP) has just contributed to members' political education online with two talks on Marx and the early beginnings of capitalism by SRWP Deputy General Secretary Dr. Vashna Jagarnath and a session with Vijay Prashad of Transcontinental: Institute for Social Research and Chief Editor of LeftWord Books.

Vijay Prashad's contribution on "CoronaShock & Imperialism" on 23 April 2020 is the one I would like to discuss here. It can be viewed on the SRWP Facebook page, so I urge the reader to do that, and I will make no systematic attempt to summarise his contribution here. It contained a number of important and useful observations.

Although Vijay Prashad only makes a couple of passing references to the Corvid-19 pandemic, he does lay out succinctly an analysis and a conception of present-day imperialism. Unfortunately, very informative though this presentation is, it does not shed light on how and why, in the course of the political struggle between the working class and the bourgeoisie at an international level for more than a century now, we got to the point which society has reached today. Vijay Prashad merely lists as objective facts the changes in features such as technology, communications and banking and finance which facilitate the current form of imperialist plunder. Nor does his presentation refer to or illuminate the aims of the SRWP stated above: "our historic mission – to defeat imperialism and capitalism, establish a socialist South Africa and World", etc.

His references to the class struggle are all about forms of it which can be contained within the framework of existing

bourgeois society. These are either trade union struggles over the extraction of surplus value in the form of “unpaid labour time”, or the politics of pressure on the bourgeois state to set limits on the rapacity of the bourgeoisie, provide welfare and other essential services, and so forth. These have been historically very significant ways in which the class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat has been waged, and indeed continue to be so. However, it has always been the understanding of Marxists that the culmination of this struggle must be what is expressed in the aims of SRWP set out at the head of this article.

In the globalised economy described by Vijay Prashad, these two forms of struggle are held in check for reasons which he describes lucidly. His economic analysis of the workings of imperialism is linked to certain considerations of class relations, but the political issue of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalist society, of which imperialism is the highest expression, and progress towards a higher, Communist society is not mentioned.

But it was for precisely that purpose that Lenin wrote his famous little book: *Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism*, early in 1916.

Vijay Prashad does refer to the book. He notes that Marx and Lenin viewed imperialism as being rooted in the political economy of capitalism. This is to his credit: there are those on the left who try to separate the two completely. However, in presenting Marx and Lenin’s views on the matter, Vijay Prashad carefully steers around some core issues and mishandles others.

Vijay Prashed discusses certain topics which Lenin dealt with in *Imperialism*, but leaves other vital matters out. He (Prashad) picks up Lenin’s description of the changes on the world scale within capital accumulation as the 19th century

ended and the 20th century opened as “concentration of production and monopolies”; Vijay Prashad refers to the “finance capital and the financial oligarchy” which Lenin dealt with, and he also mentions the “export of capital”. (These are all section headings in Lenin’s book).

By the way, Lenin also mentioned “the division of the world between ... powerful trusts” and comments that this: “does not preclude redivision if the relation of forces changes as a result of uneven development, war, bankruptcy, etc”.(1) He also devoted a whole section of his pamphlet to “Division of the World Among the Great Powers”(2) which catalogues the forms this took 100 years ago; the forms have changed but the essence remains today!

But Lenin’s Imperialism is about so much more! For a start, Lenin emphasised that the development of imperialism is a dead end for capitalism:

“Monopolies, oligarchy, the striving for domination and not for freedom, the exploitation of an increasing number of small or weak nations by a handful of the richest or most powerful nations – all these have given birth to those distinctive characteristics of imperialism which compel us to define it as **parasitic or decaying capitalism**”(3). (My emphasis – BA)

In discussing the concentration of production and the growth of enormously powerful industrial and financial monopolies Lenin noted:

“Capitalism in its imperialist stage leads directly to the most comprehensive socialisation of production; it, so to speak, drags the capitalists, against their will and consciousness, into some sort of a new social order, a transitional one from complete free competition to complete socialisation.”(4)

Lenin believed that the “new social order” of imperialism is a

contradictory one, a “transition” from complete free competition to complete socialisation. He certainly did not believe that the necessary outcome (complete socialisation) can be achieved by methods which leave the social, economic and political power of the bourgeoisie intact. The transition will not take place spontaneously or without the deliberate destruction of the bourgeois social order as thoroughly as the bourgeois revolution destroyed the feudal social order that preceded it.

He devoted a significant part of the book to a critique of socialist theoreticians, such as Karl Kautsky, who thought that a stable and peaceful form of imperialism could be attained without violent disruption. Lenin had learnt his Marxism at the feet of such Marxists of the Second (Socialist) International as Kautsky, but at the outbreak of World War I they found themselves on opposite sides!

One of the problems socialists face today is the prevalence, in public discourse and indeed of peoples’ minds, of reformist approaches to imperialism, attempts to rein in the system’s truly degenerate and destructive features and achieve a system of peaceful and progressive nation-states without attacking capitalist social relations at their root.

Lenin wrote in 1917 in a new preface to *Imperialism*:

“This pamphlet was written with an eye to the tsarist censorship ... It is painful, in these days of liberty, to re-read the passages of the pamphlet which have been distorted, cramped, compressed in an iron vice on account of the censor”(5)

Nevertheless, what stands out in reading the pamphlet, even as published in 1916 under the whip of the censor, is Lenin’s extremely plain language when he is dealing with former Marxists like his own respected teacher and guide, Karl Kautsky, who now proposed that a peaceful and fruitful way

forward would be possible under imperialism:

“No matter what the good intentions of the English parsons, or of sentimental Kautsky, may have been, the only objective, i.e., real social significance of Kautsky’s ‘theory’ is this: it is a most reactionary method of consoling the masses with hopes of permanent peace being possible under capitalism, by distracting their attention from sharp antagonisms and acute problems of the present time and directing it towards illusory prospects of an imaginary ‘ultra-imperialism’ of the future. Deception of the masses – that is all there is in Kautsky’s ‘Marxist’ theory”.(6)

And yet it was a version of Kautsky’s theory which came to dominate in the Communist International after Lenin’s death and the defeat of Lenin’s followers by the bureaucratic caste which later took control in the Soviet Union.

The main expressions of the Kautsky-inspired politics of Stalin and his supporters were (1) asserting the possibility of building socialism in a single country, relying on “peaceful co-existence” with the imperialist powers, (2) the abandonment of revolutionary politics in the richer capitalist countries in favour of reformism (“Popular Fronts” and reformist socialism) and (3) the limitation of the revolutionary struggle of those peoples oppressed and subjugated by imperialism to national independence under their “own” bourgeoisie (the “Third World project”).

Any analysis of imperialism which does not address these issues is bound to be of limited value because it leaves too many vital questions untouched. Imperialism exists today in the extreme form that Vijay describes in part. But imperialism has only been able to rot every more deeply because the working class and the masses have been disarmed politically by Stalinism. It was the Stalinist politics of the SACP leaders which led to South Africa’s first democratically-elected government being firmly in the hands of big business and big

financial groups. And these are precisely the question which were raised by the decision on the part of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) in 2013 to split the reactionary, Kautsky-inspired alliance of Cosatu, SACP and ANC and find a way back to the genuine, Marxist policies of Lenin.

It is important to emphasise these points because without accounting for the fate of the Bolshevik project, the seizure of power in 1917 and establishment the Communist International and its eventual fate, there can be no all-round understanding of imperialism in its current iteration. If imperialism survives until today and takes on even more extreme and even absurd forms, it is because of the degeneration and collapse of that Leninist project.

Without studying and understanding that, the historical account of imperialism is simply reduced to “one damn thing after another”, with no connection or thread of continuity, and consequently the collapse of the USSR is simply an objective “event”, a false step in history, at best a convincing reason why nobody can now ever look beyond the limits of the imperialist system. And yet that system is in front of our eyes falling into the ever-deeper forms of “decay and parasitism” that Vijay Prashad describes so vividly.

That is why Vijay Prashad can regard the epoch of imperialism such as Lenin described it as being over and done with, replaced by a new period of “globalisation” defined by new and in his view specifically different forms of financial capital from the ones Lenin analysed, involving more than just the “export of capital” but actually “new ways” in which capital accumulates. If the imperialism Lenin defined is over and done with, then so are the tasks it posed in front of the working class and the masses by that period.

This is how Lenin presented dialectically the changes between capitalism in the nineteenth century and capitalism at the beginning of the twentieth century:

“Half a century ago, when Marx was writing *Capital*, free competition appeared to the overwhelming majority of economists to be a ‘natural law’. Official science tried, by a conspiracy of silence, to kill the works of Marx, who, by a theoretical and historical analysis of capitalism had proved that free competition gives rise to the concentration of production, which in turn ... leads to monopolisation. Today monopoly has become a fact”.

Vijay Prashad treats modern-day financialisation as something essentially different from the “finance capital” that Lenin described.

He argues that whereas Lenin talked about the “export” of capital across borders, such borders are insignificant today as far as finance capital is concerned. They are only “borders” for the workers imprisoned in one country or another. But while such a distinction is not without its significance, it surely does not indicate a *systemic* change; it is merely an intensification of the contradictions of the imperialist epoch.

A better way to look at it all might be this: Imperialist policy in the last fifty years has successfully played on its ability to divide workers in the advanced metropolitan countries from workers in the rest of the world, which itself is in no small part caused by the leaderships of mass movements dominated by Stalinist and now post-Stalinist politics. Vijay Prashad gives graphic and compelling examples of how this works out, but not of the political developments which allowed it to happen. The results are that classic and significant weapons of the working class in advanced capitalist countries, like trade union militancy and parliamentary political pressure, are held in check by the threat (and the practice) of shifting production to underdeveloped countries. Meanwhile the factory owners in many a “developing” country can (and indeed must) impose savage rates of exploitation on their workers under the threat of

“losing the contract” if production costs rise. By the way, the current setup frees the Multi-National Corporation, brand or main contractor from the obligation to fund the investment in production in the “developing” country: the local entrepreneur has to scrape that together somehow, further intensifying the pressure to exploit “their” workers.

These workers’ wages are kept extremely low, even to the extent of compromising the reproduction of the labour force and with devastating cultural and social consequences. The tax bases of governments in underdeveloped countries are also eroded, so these governments have to turn to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for permission to borrow money, which is only granted on the condition of sustained cuts in living standards and wages. And so, the “Third World Project” is over. Meanwhile attempts to copy what was achieved in Cuba have resulted in long and debilitating and in the end fruitless guerrilla wars.

Most governments in former colonies have become “compradores” effectively servicing imperialist looting (while lining their own pockets at the same time, and stripping away any real democracy or the rule of law). Vijay Prashad can describe the ability of Multi-National Corporations and financiers to lord it over a global system which seems to offer no limit, but he fails to put his finger on the aspect of this that Lenin identified: These features are the characteristics of constantly intensifying “parasitism and decay”.

“Globalisation” is not a completely new period in the history of capitalism, however essential it is to know at any stage “what is going on” and to take that into account when providing political leadership to workers. The fundamental features of imperialism are continued and intensified and above all unresolved today. The continued existence of capitalism in imperialism and the indeed increasingly absurd forms that takes testify not to the strength and viability of capitalism as a system but to the problems which have arisen

in constructing the leadership of the working class.

It is indeed extremely difficult to raise these matters directly in most places. "official science" and "a conspiracy of silence to kill the works of Marx" join with a mood of resignation in many parts of the working class following the ignominious debacle of the Soviet Union and a series of industrial and political struggles frustrated by the "globalising" tactics which the imperialists have adopted.

But the class struggle never stops, never goes away entirely until it is actually resolved. The mass outburst of working-class resistance that led to the Marikana massacre and the subsequent wave of industrial action in South Africa lifted a corner of the blanket of "official science" and "killing the works of Marx", and that is what made the 2013 Numsa special congress decisions and the work to establish the SRWP so important, not just in South Africa but on the international stage.

Workers International greeted these decisions and encouraged their implementation. They open the door to a fuller and franker discussion on the past and the future of the workers' movement than is probably possible anywhere else on the planet at the moment.

These are the matters which deserve to figure most prominently in the political education of SRWP members, when they are preparing themselves to lead the political struggles of the South African working class. SRWP members need to make themselves familiar with all issues around the struggle for working class political power: the fate of the Paris commune, the Russian Revolution, the split with reformist "Marxism" and revisionism, the struggle to build the Communist International, how and in what way the Soviet Union and the world communist movement degenerated.

A cadre of politically-educated South African workers will not

only be a powerful force in South Africa, it could also play a significant leading role in building anew the revolutionary proletarian leadership of the world socialist revolution.

Bob Archer

23 May 2020

1. *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Moscow 1968
p.66

2. *Ibid.* p.71

3. *Ibid.* p.118

4. *Ibid.* p.23

5. *Ibid.* p.3

6. *Ibid.* p.111

Comments on some contributions to a discussion on the significance of the Coronavirus pandemic and the way forward

Comments have been requested on a number of texts (see below Ed.) which have arisen in left-wing, socialist and Marxist circles in response to the Coronavirus crisis and the background of chronic economic and environmental crisis.

Both Cde Shaheen Khan in South Africa and the “Public Reading Rooms” comrades in the UK make a number of serious analytical points in describing the current situation. Shaheen (1) writes: The capitalist system is in deep crisis and the rule of the capitalist class on a global scale is in jeopardy”. *No Going Back* describes the coronavirus crisis and the feeble economic recovery from the 2008 banking crisis as arising from “the structural limits of the entire system of social reproduction”. (This latter document also adds that “The wanton destruction of nature by capital creates the perfect conditions for the emergence and spread of pandemics”). All three documents present proposals for a fresh impulse from the socialist movement and the working class to respond to these accumulating crises.

Both Shaheen and *No Going Back* emphasise the international and systemic character of the crisis. “As the pandemic spreads across the globe, the global health emergency is rapidly evolving into a crisis of the entire existing world social order”, says Shaheen (1). “The pandemic is global; it cannot be stopped in one country” says *No Going Back*.

This is why Shaheen (1) says: “The task in the days, weeks and months ahead is to build a conscious socialist leadership throughout the world”. (This assertion is missing for some reason in Shaheen [2]). *No Going Back* calls for “The convocation of a *Zimmerwald* conference – which united the anti-war left in 1915 – for our times, to unify all those prepared to fight for a fundamental change in society; who understand the necessity of renewing the left’s strategic and theoretical framework as well as going beyond its existing organisational forms.”

All three documents lay great stress upon the activity and consciousness of the working class. In “Our Perspectives and Tasks” Shaheen Khan states “The working class is not taking this lying down ... these are the molecular processes where the class is gradually beginning to comprehend the problems

arising from the social crisis. Consciousness is determined by conditions". He then takes the thought further: "A revolutionary party bases its tactics on a calculation of the changes of mass consciousness. While the party must impress through its propaganda and agitation ... the dangers of the epidemic and the need for physical distancing we must begin to take leadership of the mass protest movement that is gaining momentum. The working class on its own is fighting and breaking down the parameters of the bourgeois lockdown and we need to direct this anger in the right direction and in the right quarters". Both of Comrade Shaheen's documents contain sets of proposals for a programme of action to bring this about.

The *No Going Back* theses state:

"The most important factor in world politics is the struggle of working people, the poor and dispossessed to remake the world; most immediately it is to defend themselves against both the pandemic and the poverty of their everyday lives ..."
And a bit later on, emphatically: "The pandemic indicates the possibility of ending the permanent subordination of labour to capital".

Both Shaheen and *No Going Back* reject reformist policies and solutions. Shaheen (2) explains:

"These are difficult times, not only for the bourgeois but also for the leadership of the working class. Many bourgeois economists and NGOs have been making recommendations to the government to adopt a Keynesian economic approach rather than the neoliberal path they have been following. This is a nationalist capitalist trajectory which does not in any way serve the interests of the working class". Although Shaheen addresses his proposals to the Socialist Revolutionary Workers' Party, he is critical of the leadership of the National Union of Metalworkers' (NUMSA) who established that party. "The NUMSA open letter to the President is different"

(from the Keynesian economic approach). “However we think it fails to address the question from a class struggle perspective and remains an economistic approach to the question”.

No Going Back is even harder on reformism: “There can be no support for those in the labour movement who present the struggle against the virus as a national crisis in which class-struggle is suspended”. Quite right: the way the COVID-19 crisis is dealt with strikingly reveals aspects of class struggle which are even accentuated in this context. They go on: “Leaders of the movement who fight for the interests of their members must be given every backing”. And so they should; but who determines which leaders are fighting “for the interests of their members”? Like Shaheen Khan, the “Public Reading Rooms” implicitly set themselves up as the judges of that. They go on: “But we cannot support those who seek to corral the working class into subordination to the existing system. The institutions of social democracy have failed to adequately challenge capitalism, and have even failed to defend their own achievements”. As the argument goes on, all “social democrats” are (wrongly) identified as “embracing of neo-liberalism in the 1990s” which “made them complicit in the savaging of the welfare state.” So *No Going Back* throws into one pot all the groups in, for example, the UK Labour Party, when that includes in its ranks both unreformed Blairites (who were rather more than just “complicit” in the attacks on the welfare state between 1997 and 2010) and the supporters of former party leader Jeremy Corbyn who have spent a great deal of time elaborating precisely a “Keynesian economic approach”, but did that mainly in order to defend the democratic, economic and social rights of the masses (“the many”) including the working class. *No Going Back* concludes this paragraph with a resounding phrase: “The pandemic exposes the illusory nature of systemic transformation through incremental social change”. In plain English they are saying: We think the Corbyn initiative in the

Labour Party has fallen flat on its face and we would like to make recruits among its remnants”.

What is clear in all three documents is that none of the discussion and the shaping of policies and programme demands arise in close connection with or on the same wavelength as the main groups of workers in struggle. **All the authors' remarks arise from contemplating the various media reports of the current situation, refracted through the discussion in a milieu of educated people for whom ideas matter as ideas.** There is of course nothing wrong with that: we all have to orientate ourselves daily, hourly, minute by minute as the crisis unfolds at various levels, reflected in the media.

But it is not enough to proceed directly from the **impressions** in one's own head, having seen a news item and tossed it around in social media, to formulating proposals for action to place in front of workers.

Or to put it differently: if you are in an ongoing involvement in workers' attempts to deal with the class struggle and the issues that arise within it, then you will be very clearly (often painfully!) aware of the contradictions and moments within workers' consciousness and the preoccupations they bring to the struggle, what their priorities are. Your thoughts, when fresh and probably contradictory impressions flood in, will in that case be how concretely particular workers and groups of workers can be persuaded to react, how they themselves will take proposals on, reshape them and fashion them into real weapons of struggle.

This is a long way away from “A revolutionary party bases its tactics on a calculation of the changes of mass consciousness” based on a few impressions. “Mass consciousness” has a past and a future and its present is anyway contradictory. Slogans and programmes which are slightly (but not too far) ahead of the working class are powerful levers to action. Those that are too far ahead risk falling flat on their faces. Doing this

involves a really demanding, actually scientific, “calculation of the changes of mass consciousness”.

It is one thing to pontificate about the working class as an abstraction; it is quite another to work in sensuous involvement in class struggle, engagement within the forms of organisation which exist in the working class in every country.

To identify one’s own reactions to the news with the reaction aroused in the working class is in itself a grave mistake. To proceed from these subjective impressions and use them to decide for ourselves what practices workers should adopt is to succumb to pure contemplation – a form of idealism, if that is where you leave it.

It is even worse if – like Shaheen (2) – you add: “we must begin to take leadership of the mass protest movement that is gaining momentum”. Being guided by the fruits of one’s own untested thoughts is one thing: informing workers that these thoughts are the only correct ones and that they need to follow them is another, and it has nothing to do with providing leadership!

These approaches add up to the petit-bourgeois “left-wing communism” which Lenin excoriated in his 1920 pamphlet of the same name. Lenin asks: “How is the discipline of the proletariat’s revolutionary party maintained? How is it tested? How is it reinforced? First, by the class consciousness of the proletarian vanguard and by its devotion to the revolution, by its tenacity, self-sacrifice and heroism. Second, by its ability to link up, maintain the closest contact and – if you wish – to merge, in certain measure, with the broadest masses of the working people – primarily with the proletariat, *but also with the non-proletarian masses of working people*. Third, by the correctness of the political leadership exercised by this vanguard, by the correctness of its political strategy and

tactics, provided the broad masses have seen, from their own experience, that they are correct ... without these conditions, all attempts to establish discipline inevitably fall flat and end up in phrase-mongering and clowning. On the other hand, these conditions cannot emerge at once. They are created only by prolonged effort and hard-won experience. **Their creation is facilitated by a correct revolutionary theory, which, in its turn, is not a dogma, but assumes final shape only in close connection with the practical activity of a truly mass and truly revolutionary movement".**

The only organisation with the potential "to link up, maintain the closest contact and – if you wish – to merge, in certain measure, with the broadest masses of the working people" in South Africa is the Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party (SRWP), set up as a result of the struggle of the National Union of Metalworkers' of South Africa (NUMSA) and their break with the African National Congress -South African Communist Party alliance.

Fortuitously, the Socialist Workers Revolutionary Party has just used social media to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Lenin's birth. Virtually alone in the world among mass workers' organisations, NUMSA boldly (and rightly) brandishes the banner of Lenin.

Their FaceBook remarks on this auspicious occasion steer carefully clear of laying out and specifying Lenin's actual contributions to our movement. The same is true of a half-hour radio broadcast by Dr Vashna Jagarnath, Deputy General Secretary of the SRWP (Radio 702, 10.30am 21 April 2020). Dr Jagarnath made some interesting observations about Russian history, Lenin's biography and family background, his early studies of capitalism in Russia and his influence in former colonial territories. She avoided any mention of Lenin's theoretical contribution or his role in the formation of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party, later its Bolshevik

faction, later still the Communist Party Communist movement and in establishing the Communist International.

What emerged from this interview was that Marx was a “theoretician” and Lenin “put his ideas into practice”, but there was not really a lot about what these ideas actually were, except that they might have special application in the “global south”.

All this makes the SRWP leadership look like a party which has broken with Stalinism (in the acute form of the ANC-SACP), but only incompletely. The decisive tragedy of Stalinism is that it was a political force which first falsified and then obliterated Marxism and Leninism in the movement it dominated. Many former “hardliners” have recoiled from the direct expressions of Stalinism, but their break took them in the direction of liberal bourgeois politics. Even the best ones hesitate to name significant insights that marked the work of Lenin: **that revolution (in whatever part of the world) needs to uproot and destroy bourgeois social relations, production for private profit, and that this requires an international leadership.**

In that same *Left-Wing Communism* Lenin wrote (in 1920):

“At the present moment in history, however, it is the Russian model that reveals to *all* countries something – and something highly significant – of their near and inevitable future. Advanced workers in all lands have long realised this; more often than not they have grasped it with their revolutionary class instinct rather than realised it. Herein lies the international ‘significance’ (in the narrow sense of the word) of **Soviet power and the fundamentals of Bolshevik theory and tactics**” (my emphasis – BA).

We are no longer in that “present moment” (of 1920), and only middle-class radicals masquerading as Bolsheviks can pretend that we are. However, we hope that the leadership and

membership of the SRWP will reach for Lenin's writings – all the major ones at least, and find their current relevance. A good look at the booklet *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*" would be a useful start and would aid an understanding of an aspect of the current crisis.

These are the horns of the dilemma on which the SRWP is caught, striving to break from Stalinism but still under the influence of Stalinist evasion and mangling of theoretical questions. But that fact itself can and must be taken together with the position of the working class and the masses in the last five decades. In considering how to encourage a genuine move towards Marxism in the SRWP, we need to devote some thought to those decades.

The context

Outstanding characteristics of economic and social life over the last fifty years have included

- break-neck, revolutionary, increase in the rate of technical development and its social impact
- dismantling of barriers to the reach of trade around the world
- a parallel huge growth in banking and finance
- massive shift in industrial production from its former heartlands to "emerging markets".
- In the course of the above, workers in the formerly under-developed world were manoeuvred into competing with workers in the old industrial centres, brutally breaking a tradition of solidarity internationally between workers' movements. This has led to further contradictions in working class consciousness in those centres as jobs and industries disappeared and blind resentment grew. It appeared as if workers could only defend their existence by opposing and

doing down workers elsewhere.

- a massively-focussed assault on all socialist ideas as the guiding principles of workers' movements and organisations, not to mention states. This contributed to the discrediting and collapse of the bureaucratic state in the Soviet Union and its allied states.

All these drives interact with and feed each other. All have had powerful impacts on the way people live and the choices facing them.

They all arise from deliberate decisions adopted by the capitalist class – the bourgeoisie – in order to confront the systemic social and economic crisis which surfaced in the 1970s (about the time the US was being driven out of Vietnam).

The results have been profound. The “advanced” nations of Europe and North America have been more and more stripped of traditional industries and trading patterns, with hugely damaging social consequences. Meanwhile, a country like China, which 40 years ago stood almost completely outside of world markets and whose citizens were mainly employed in agriculture, is now the industrial workshop of the world and a powerful leader in technical development. China has also become a major political power and challenges the hegemony of the United States.

Bangladesh, which has existed as a country for barely 50 years, has today cornered a huge wedge of the textile and clothing industry which two hundred years ago made Manchester great, although the social, legal and civil rights of the textile workforces there are in some ways worse than the mill workers of Lancashire knew.

But both of these (and many other) economies still rely on selling their products to customers in the wealthy countries of the world. They are thoroughly enmeshed in a variety of ways in “global chains” of supply, production and value.

While huge numbers of people have experienced a significant increase in their living standards from these changes, many have also experienced extremes of exploitation, while others have been expelled from world markets and marginalised from society. But above all huge profits have been made by a comparatively small group of the population. The results of this development of imperialism has been an increase in every dimension of inequality.

This kind of “globalisation” may have helped raise populations out of extreme poverty, but it has also blocked countries’ incipient development and triggered severe social crises.

Banking and finance have assumed enormous importance in daily life. They have been released from traditional controls and have been significant in enabling the “delocalising” of industries. Debt and the trade in debt have become major instruments of economic disruption and restructuring. The “casino” economy ensures that all businesses and industries face a standing holy inquisition based on the “bottom line”: if their business functioning does not yield the absolutely maximum profit, they are closed down, the “assets” realised and the workforce told to go away and die. Many an attempt by a militant working class to win back a little more of the surplus value they create at work has been undermined by the nimbleness of hyper-mobile capital.

Capitalist relations of production

Inspired by the idea expressed by Adam Smith that each individual ensures the benefit of all by pursuing selfishly their own interest, the lords of finance feel exonerated from contemplating the effects of their activities on the masses, or of even wondering how those masses protect themselves from famine, plague or poverty. This foundational conception for capitalism is most seriously brought into question by the coronavirus pandemic.

The damage inflicted on the workers' socialist movement over the last fifty years has been profound. None of the great political organisations of the working class have emerged unscathed from these years and many, in adapting to the onslaught, have become ever-less ambitious in setting goals and establishing political programmes. This is understandable: the arrangements of capitalist economic globalisation have severely weakened working-class organisation in the workplace and in society. While the trade unions have continued in many places to be a potential bastion of class defiance, the best among them have been fully aware of fighting on the back foot. The old equation of working-class industrial militancy and confidence with political class consciousness, which kept many a Marxist grouping together in the post-World War II period, is worn painfully thin, and mainly lives on among middle-class activists.

(*No Going Back* quite rightly refers to aspects of imperialist policy in the past period, but this is not related to a half-century of class relations and how they have worked out. For them, working-class consciousness is not the outcome of material social processes, it is an abstraction).

The best trades union and socialist political leaders are well aware of this context however, because they deal with it every day. They are very aware that for many workers their confidence in socialism is severely sapped. The collapse of the Soviet Union and of mass Communist Parties, as well as the vile work of the capitalist media contribute to this lack of confidence, just as the versions of global supply, production and value chains imposed by imperialism since 1970 turn worker against worker and have fostered a nationalist back-lash.

It is unions like Unite the Union in the UK and NUMSA in South Africa which deal with these and other problems on a daily basis. And at the moment that is where the main struggle for the consciousness of the working class is focussed.

And in the absence of real confidence in a socialist future, apparently “reformist” policies demanding government action to secure welfare, protect businesses from bankruptcy and defend workers’ living standards can play a role, if they rally a body of the more conscious workers to take their own fate in their hands as a working class leadership.

At a global level, the climate crisis and now the coronavirus pandemic cast a glaring light on the world that imperialism has fashioned. The productive forces of society (industrial capacity, technique, science and above all human labour) are constrained by the social relations of production (capitalism, business, the role of money, the hegemony of the bourgeoisie). So long as the profit motive – that major element in the social relations of production – continues to dominate over the needs of the producers (and of the potential producers currently excluded), the more human society undermines the very conditions for its own continued existence on Earth.

This is the issue posed now. Our job is to assist recognition of this in the working class and in a mutual relationship of struggle. We do need to forge a new relationship between socialist intellectual and worker-activists. At the moment, certainly in the richer established capitalist nations, there are divisions between the better educated, socially-empowered and liberal-minded section of the labour-force which has generally done rather better out of “global” economy (which is where many of the socialist groups draw their membership) and those employed in less secure and rewarding jobs, who in the best cases are members of “blue-collar” trades unions. This division is one of the big obstacles to overcome.

But our movement has a rich history of resources which can help us to overcome the problems of working-class consciousness which mirrors this division.

A vital text to study

A text which is worth looking at carefully in connection with the current crisis (arising out of the dead-end and serious turning point in “globalisation” is a fragment by Friedrich Engels, part of a planned work (to be called *Forms of Bondage*) which was never completed. At the time Engels was writing, by the way, it was quite normal to refer to “man” as the representative of all human beings. This is not acceptable today, but we should be patient with the text on that account. There are some other aspects of Engels’ ideas in this text which reflect the limitations of the scientific notions of the day.

Because the fragment starts with considerations of *The Part Played by Labour in the Transformation from Ape to Man*, that is the title under which it was ultimately published. The text is available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1876/part-played-labour/index.htm>.

Engels’ topic in these few pages is how human beings are (like all life) part of nature. But they are a part of nature which has also evolved the ability to both envisage and execute changes in nature in order to achieved a desired goal. He explains: “The animal merely *uses* its environment, and brings about changes in it simply by its presence: man by his changes makes it serves his ends, *masters* it.”

But then Engels – this was in the early 1880s – issues a stark warning:

“Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature. For each such victory nature takes its revenge on us”.

There follow a number of examples of historical human-generated environmental disasters. Engels points out about each “victory” that:

“in the second and third places it has quite different,

unforeseen effects which only too often cancel the first”.

He continues: “Thus at every step we are reminded that we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like someone standing outside of nature – but that we, with flesh, blood and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst, and all that our mastery of it consists in the fact that we have the advantage of all other creatures of being able to learn its laws and apply them correctly.”

Explaining that “with every day that passes we are acquiring a better understanding of these laws,” he goes on: “we are more than ever in a position to realise, and hence to control, even the most remote natural consequences of at least our day-to-day production activities. But the more this progresses, the more will men not only feel but also know their oneness with nature, and the more impossible will become the senseless and unnatural idea of a contrast between mind and matter, man and nature, soul and body”.

(For Engels, the need for a materialist method of thought and opposition to idealist methods was a permanently important matter, and his advice must be taken seriously by all socialists. This is a point which will be expanded later.)

He concludes that “the social science of the bourgeoisie ... examines only social effects of human actions in the fields of production and exchange that are actually intended ... **As individual capitalists are engaged in production and exchange for the sake of immediate profit, only the nearest, most immediate results must first be taken into account.**” (my emphasis).

“In relation to nature, as to society, the present mode of production is predominantly concerned only about the immediate, the most tangible result; and then surprise is expressed that the more remote effects of actions directed to this end turn out to be quite different.”

Engels explains very simply and lucidly the content of the struggle and the aims which the Socialist Revolutionary Workers' Party has adopted: "... by concentrating wealth in the hands of a minority and dispossessing the huge majority, this instrument" (he meant modern industry) "was destined at first to give social and political domination to the bourgeoisie, but later, to give rise to a class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat **which can end only in the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the abolition of all class antagonisms** (my emphasis – B.A.). But in this sphere too, by long and often cruel experience and by collecting and analysing historical material, we are gradually learning to get a clear view of the indirect, more remote social effects of our production activity, and so are afforded an opportunity to control and regulate these effects as well".

Sadly, at the moment there are few established workers' organisations around the world in which these issues are seriously discussed, or can even be raised. The SRWP must be one of the ones where this is possible! Naturally, workers will look for a discussion of aims which look achievable within the current framework of social relations. This is entirely understandable, and gains made within this framework can be very valuable, as workers in the UK and US know.

But the current coming together of a major economic crisis, a major health crisis and a chronic environmental crisis does mean that a body of SRWP members needs to be conscious of the way Engels presented this problem of humanity and nature.

Selecting and putting forward proposals for action

Besides making available some of the best teachings of past socialist leaders, the best way to educate a movement of workers and temper the political consciousness of its members is to develop a systematic programme of demands which enables members to take action over burning everyday issues but in doing so opens the way for a discussion of the wider aims.

In the two recent documents submitted by Comrade Shaheen Khan (*The Coronavirus, Capitalism and the Response of the Working Class* and *Our Perspectives and Our Tasks*), various proposals are made which he probably believed would appeal to workers as solutions to the immediate problems associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, but also strengthen their awareness of their own power, which is a necessary preparation for looking for ways to make that power prevail.

The problem is that such demands cannot be successful if they are dreamed up in the heads of one or more intellectuals on the basis of their own plans and aspirations. They have to be anchored also in the minds of, in the first place, those special workers who are going to persuade and lead many others, arguing on the basis of their daily experience, building up their confidence and their communal action with other workers. Sadly, it looks as if Comrade Shaheen Khan has chosen a set of proposals based on the thoughts in his own head and now casts his bread upon the waters in the hope that it will be returned a hundredfold, whereas it is more likely it will fall on stony ground.

My first reaction (from thousands of miles away in London) was that it is not clear which audience among workers Comrade Shaheen Khan thinks he is addressing. He has a clear conception of the problems they face, and a fairly detailed set of proposals for dealing with them. But there is no sign of how these proposals could be discussed with the SRWP leadership and membership. Comparing the second document with the first, one can see that some proposals in the first document have been dropped, but there is no account given about why this is so. **That leads me to suspect that the proposals don't really find much traction among workers, because if there was, they would start to change and take on a concrete form as they developed from the "abstract idea" (in Comrade Shaheen Khan's head) towards the "practical idea" (as concrete plans in the hands of workers).**

The contemporary significance of Engels' concept

Dealing with a deep crisis in "the fields of production and exchange" in the 1970s, world capitalism, led by its American arm, chose the deliberate course outlined nearer the beginning of this text. People know it variously as "The Washington Consensus", "supply-side economics", the "Chicago School" and of course "globalisation". While revolutionary socialist movements around the world were being side-lined, defeated, undermined and corrupted, conditions were created for massive but one-sided "development" in the "third" world and China.

Maybe Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and Henry Kissinger spared a thought for the "remote effects" of their drive to "globalisation" forty years ago. Maybe not. They probably consoled themselves with J M Keynes' dictum that "in the long run we are all dead". Certainly, they are not alive to see the actual results of their actions.

A form of globalisation which thoroughly and properly and thoughtfully shares with the rest of the world the advances which have marked European and North American societies would have been and will be a good thing, because it will eradicate poverty, ignorance and inequality. But it must be done for the benefit of all future human beings and in consciousness of the "remote effects" of all the actions involved, applying science and human measures to the process. Uncontrolled globalisation in the interests of capital has involved a huge anarchic expansion of "smoke-stack" industries and reliance on oil and coal power, which now destabilises the entire climate of the world. Only now – very late in the game – has capital turned to new forms of energy, and only when it can turn a profit from them.

Capitalist – anarchic – deregulation of global trade and movement of people means a giant city the size of Wuhan has a population which a generation ago mainly lived in the countryside. Adaptation to urban living and the needs of urban

hygiene have always been problematic under such circumstances, and it is not clear that the entrepreneurs who have turned Wuhan into a world city prioritise the fostering of urban hygiene and modern culture of life among the whole population. Many workers do not enjoy the full rights of citizenship, and live on the margins. The experience of the European industrial revolution could have been extremely instructive in this regard, but it is not clear how far lessons have been learned from this. Meanwhile around the whole world, developed and “developing”, layer after layer of regulation has been stripped away. Bodies with responsibility for public health have been deprived of experienced personnel and re-purposed or simply abandoned.

Wuhan is so integrated into the world that a local incident where (so far as we can tell) a virus formerly limited to other animals which has adapted to infecting human beings has been carried by infected humans virtually uncontrollably right across the world. Globalisation of trade and general intercourse, without applying the long and painful lessons of modern public health, has exploded beyond any chance of catching and suppressing such an outbreak early on. But it doesn't need to be like this.

The need for socialist globalisation, alert to the “remote consequences” of actions taken, was never greater. But recognition of this fact is only significant if it is embedded in the consciousness of the working class. And we now need to look at some of the factors which affect that consciousness.

The working-class response to the coronavirus crisis

Right across the world, the working-class response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been extraordinary.

When the 2008-2010 “sub-prime” banking collapse hit society with shattering effect, the most painful thing for conscious socialists was to see the bemused and confused response

throughout the social layers affected most sharply, evicted home-owners, small businesspeople and laid-off workers. People reacted to their situation by camping in town squares as “indignados”, in the “Occupy” movement, engaging in frantic but eventually fruitless debates about what had gone wrong and how to go forward in a different way. The organised working class and its trades unions were put on the back foot. Even talk about the working class – as opposed to undifferentiated “citizens”, was denounced as outdated dogmatic nonsense.

Many Marxists will remember the difficult discussions with individuals and groups blown into the air by the effects of the finance crisis who didn't want to be lectured about how the system works by people they suspected of being sectarian word-jugglers.

This may seem ironic to formal thinkers, but right across the US and Europe the last thing many of these people wanted was a Marxist explanation of how the crisis had come about!

(The “Arab Spring” also came as a reaction to the – global – banking crisis and its effects, but although this series of uprisings shared many traits with the “indignados” this movement really did seriously shake governments across the Middle East and North Africa.)

The most exceptional development anywhere in the world after 2008-10 was the magnificent class movement of South African workers unleashed by the massacre of the Marikana miners. This also led to the exceptional decision by the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) to break the trade union movement's alliance with the ANC and SACP and set out to establish a working-class party based on revolutionary Marxism. This was the only development internationally that adequately reflected the depth of the finance crisis and identified its significance for the working class, but even then NUMSA has had to work hard to get the Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party off the ground, and to find a way

back to genuine Bolshevism.

In this 2020 crisis the working-class emerges directly as the heroes of the whole of society.

And it is not just the working class as an undifferentiated mass of the population, but the working class in its trades unions which has taken the crisis in hand and made its presence known. This is, in any case, the experience in the UK.

Postal workers here have kept up deliveries right through the lockdown (although they are now instructed to deliver only genuine mail, not the advertising junk-mail they have more recently been obliged to deliver). They emerge as the genuine face of the community where families and pensioners and the chronically ill are penned into their homes. Their union – Union of Communication Workers (UCW) – is engaged in a long-drawn out struggle to defend members' rights and resist the impact of privatisation on Royal Mail.

Unite the Union represents many groups of workers, including bus drivers, who have heroically continued to work so that other “key” workers can get to the hospitals treating virus victims and manufacturing and logistics workers can get to work producing and distributing medicines and equipment.

Employers like Transport for London (TfL) needed to be pushed hard to make sure that drivers are protected from infection and that buses, trains and underground trains are regularly deep cleaned and disinfected. Anger exploded among union members as the death-toll of drivers mounted. The union has won and imposed certain measures of protection for these heroes.

Other Unite members working in sanitation (dust-bin collection) have had to fight for proper Personal Protection Equipment (PPE). From government ministers downwards to local managers, the initial response is always a bare-faced lie,

i.e. that the employees have been issued with adequate equipment as laid down in the guidelines and have nothing to complain about. If the equipment wasn't where it was needed, it was on its way. It would arrive tomorrow or the next day. The workers have had to explain each time that COVID-10 isn't "normal" and unless workers have the appropriate emergency PPE when they need it, many of them will get infected and possibly die and another vital service will just collapse.

Workers are starting to stand up and fight this through their unions and they are taking that fight right through the community. And they are often winning because the community is recognising their worth and importance, which has been concealed by decades of deliberate slander, disrespect and being discounted as insignificant (since the Thatcher government smashed the miners' union in 1984-1985 and brought in class-based laws to take away trade union rights).

Lowly-paid supermarket staff have done amazing work keeping stores open and safe and supervising "social distancing" among customers.

And none are more aware of the lie about PPE than National Health Service (NHS) hospital staff. From senior doctors to nurses and on to catering staff, porters and cleaners, they are in minute-by-minute contact with highly infectious coronavirus patients. So, too, are workers in the care sector who either care for elderly and vulnerable people in care homes or visit such people in their own homes. This group is an undervalued, underpaid and exploited section of the workforce.

They have had to fight tooth and nail to get adequate supplies of PPE, and they have had to face government ministers and hospital managers telling them that it is safe to work with inadequate protection, that they must work with inadequate protection, that fresh PPE is on its way, that the army is rushing PPE to them as we speak and so on and so forth. Many

of these key workers have become infected and died. (A recent example of this came in the *Guardian* newspaper, 17 April 2020: "NHS staff told 'wear aprons' as protective gowns run out. Exclusive: U-turn on original guidelines of full-length waterproof gear for high-risk procedures".)

Resistance to COVID-19 has galvanised the mass of society, and "key" workers (and it turns out that large numbers of "mere" workers are "key" to society in one way or another – go figure!) are at the heart of the community response.

Indeed, the right-wing Conservative and Thatcherite Prime Minister of the UK, Boris Johnson, on his way to a hospital intensive care bed with the virus, came on air to assert that "there definitely is such a thing as society". (The Iron Lady herself is said to have asserted the exact opposite view! How things change!). More about thatcher and Thatcherism later.

Naturally, social conditions in the "rich" (I.e. imperialist) nations involve certain working-class gains won over centuries of struggle. In the USA and the UK, the various "lockdown" measures mean millions of workers in "non-essential" trades have been thrown out of work and various types of welfare arrangement have been put in place to keep them fed and supplied with necessities during the "lockdown". We can expect some quite sharp struggles over how this works out; for example, the government promised there would be no evictions as tenants on "lockdown" ran out of cash for the rent. But, actually, there have been many evictions and some vulnerable people have died. Undocumented refugees are particularly vulnerable in all aspects of their lives. By-and-large, however, most people are unlikely to starve, or at least have the conception that society will not let them starve.

But in many parts of the world workers have not been able to win the right to even a bare existence. A report has been published by the "Haiti Support Group" (here in the UK) under the headline: "Garment factories Re-open in Haiti Despite

COVID-19 Fears". The report, which might have come from any number of countries in Latin America, Africa or Asia, explains: "Garment workers at Haiti's Caracol industrial park are expected to return to work on 20 April, following an announcement by Prime Minister Joseph Jouthe."

The report continues: "Many have been left with no pay due to cancelled orders and factory shutdowns, or forced to work in high-risk conditions as factories reopen before the crisis has passed."

"When asked about the reopening of textile factories across Haiti, Georges Sassine, factory owner and president of L'Association des Industries d'Haiti (ADIH), the main organisation of Haiti's manufacturing sector, has said: '**the question was whether to die of hunger or coronavirus**'."

It is further stated: "In a letter addressed to workers on 3 April, S & H Global informed them that the 50% of their salary promised by the Haitian government had not yet arrived and would only constitute 50% of the already meagre 500 gourdes minimum wage, 5 US Dollars per 8 hour working day (already four times lower than the average cost of living in Haiti)."

"Prioritising profits over the wellbeing of workers" (my emphasis), the Korean textile supplier tenants at the (Caracol) park had originally issued the letter to announce that factory production would recommence on 13 April. While the company stated that government-advised health and safety measures would be implemented (the wearing of masks and hand-washing), local unions and international garment sector NGOs remain unconvinced ..."

The rest of this highly-informative report is available on <https://haitisupportgroup.org/garment-factories-reopen-haiti-covid19/> .

In this, one of the poorest countries in the Caribbean, class struggle is waged and the working class come to the fore as a

major social factor.

As we shall see later, “prioritising profits over the wellbeing of workers”, and the rejection of this attitude, is a serious matter which engages opposition from workers (and wider society). There can be no doubt at all that a profound shift is underway in the relations between the class of factory-owners and bankers and the working class at the heart of the world’s masses.

The coronavirus pandemic is certainly unprecedented in its severity. Its ultimate impact on world economy is difficult to assess at the moment but it will eventually be hugely destructive: things will never look quite the same again. It is the current social and economic conditions prevailing around the world which have turned this new biological hazard (novel Corvid-19) into a massive crisis for every dimension of human life. The origins of the outbreak thus certainly do lie in the character of modern capitalism-imperialism.

By and large the pandemic has revealed that the real “heroes” are the doctors, nurses, hospital technicians, scientific researchers, paramedics, aides, cleaners, transport, sanitation and logistics workers and the many volunteers who have stepped in during “lockdown” to feed, help and support the vulnerable.

This has produced in the UK at least a different general outlook from the one associated with “globalisation”, the pure capitalist Adam Smith view that my individual commercial success is all that is required for happiness in society. “Neo” liberals like Margaret Thatcher are said to have taken this further, proclaiming that “there is no such thing as society”. The UK has seen a decidedly Thatcherite Prime Minister – Boris Johnson – assert that there certainly is such a thing as society. He had just been successfully treated by the UK National Health Service for coronavirus, and (he was still a bit woozy from the disease) poured fulsome praise upon

his foreign-born nurses.

This may only be a passing effect in Mr. Johnson's case, but it reflects a swing in the general social attitude to workers, and this swing cannot fail to have its effect among workers. The responses of bus and other "key" workers show that it is having an effect. But that effect needs space to develop. It will not be strengthened by calls for "a new Zimmerwald", but it might be expressed first by an improvement in the general activity and level of involvement of trades union branches and regional and national committees and associated bodies.

It could be reflected in workers getting involved in the Corbyn movement in the Labour Party, if the discussion there can concentrate on issues affecting workers.

Marxist and socialist intellectuals can encourage a discussion of principles by encouraging the development of trade union activity after decades of a down-turn in that sphere.

A real development of mass consciousness needs to happen in that context. Attempts to force the issue by promulgating noisy statements will end up in "phrase-mongering and clowning". But it doesn't need to be like that. There is a genuine job of work to do. But it can only be done if the working class is a material part of our work, not something separate and abstract.

Bob Archer, April 2020

Shaheen Khan (in South Africa): (1) "The Coronavirus, Capitalism and the Working class" and (2) "Our Perspectives and Tasks". (See below)

Public Reading Rooms (UK): "No Going Back – The COVID-19 Pandemic: Theses".

The Coronavirus, Capitalism and the response of the working

class by Shaheen Khan, 21/03/2020

The spread of the coronavirus to all countries of the world in the past week has laid to rest any sceptic view that this is but a normal flu and does not require special attention from socialists and the working class. As the pandemic spreads across the globe, the global health emergency is rapidly evolving into a crisis of the entire existing world social order. As the death toll rises, major cities are in lockdown, and hundreds of millions of people are faced with the loss of their jobs and incomes; the social, economic, political and moral bankruptcy of the capitalist system is being utterly exposed. Capitalism not only creates the conditions for the existence of viruses and pandemics but the failure of the major capitalist governments to prepare for a pandemic is resulting in thousands, and potentially millions, of deaths, "The number of cases is already approaching 300,000 and it is rising rapidly. The number of deaths has passed 11,000 and is increasing exponentially. A pandemic of this character was both foreseeable and foreseen. However, the most basic requirements to secure the health and safety of the population were ignored".

The capitalist system is in deep crisis and the rule of the capitalist class on a global scale is in jeopardy. For the second time in little over a decade, the world economy is in a state of breakdown, this time on a far greater scale than 2008. In 2008, the downturn in real estate—by way of subprime to funding markets and from there to the balance sheets of major banks—threatened an economic collapse. In the winter of 2008-2009, more than 750,000 job losses were recorded every month—a total of 8.7 million over the course of the recession. Major industrial companies like GM and Chrysler stumbled toward bankruptcy, and "for the global economy, it unleashed the largest contraction in international trade ever seen".

It is too early to confidently predict the course of the economic downturn facing the world economy now due to the

coronavirus. But a recession is inevitable. The global manufacturing industry was already shaken in 2019. All the elements of a new financial crisis have been in place for several years and the coronavirus is the spark or trigger of the stock market crisis, not the cause. . The stock market bubble is bursting before our very eyes and the *Financial Times* provides an estimate for the three largest investment funds, BlackRock, Vanguard and State Street, whose market value of assets is estimated to have fallen by \$2.8 trillion in just under a month.

With the coronavirus spreading exponentially across the globe, the world's major economies will be shut down for at least several months. Factories are closing, shops, gyms, bars, schools, colleges, and restaurants shutting. Early [HYPERLINK](https://www.epi.org/blog/coronavirus-shock-will-likely-claim-3-million-jobs-by-summer/) "https://www.epi.org/blog/coronavirus-shock-will-likely-claim-3-million-jobs-by-summer/" indicators suggest job losses in the United States could top 1 million per month between now and June. That would be a sharper downturn than in 2008-2009. For sectors like the airline industry, the impact will be far worse. In the oil industry, the prospect of market contraction has unleashed a ruthless price war among OPEC, Russia, and shale producers. This will stress the heavily indebted energy sector. If price wars spread, we could face a ruinous cycle of debt-deflation that will jeopardize the world's huge pile of [HYPERLINK](https://www.ft.com/content/27cf0690-5c9d-11ea-b0ab-339c2307bcd4)

"https://www.ft.com/content/27cf0690-5c9d-11ea-b0ab-339c2307bcd4" corporate debt, which is twice as large as it was in 2008. International trade will sharply contract. Investment bank Goldman Sachs announced on Friday that it expects the US economy to contract by an unprecedented 24 percent in the second quarter of the year (April-June), as production and service industries grind to a halt. This would be the largest quarterly contraction in US history, far surpassing even what took place during the Great Depression. The International Labour Organization reports that up to 25 million workers worldwide could lose their jobs over the next several months,

but this is a vast underestimation. In the United States alone, 14 million jobs in the leisure and hospitality sector will be affected by mandatory shutdowns. Moody's Analytics reports that nearly 80 million jobs, or half of the US economy, are at risk.

While the pandemic has triggered the crisis, the causes of the economic breakdown lie far deeper. The process of financialization—the systemic and unrestrained separation of the accumulation of staggering levels of wealth from real productive activity—created a massively unstable global economy, based on the unlimited transfusion of liquidity by the central banks (i.e. quantitative easing) to drive up the equity markets to ever more unrealistic and unsustainable levels. The capitalist system is being exposed as a society that subordinates everything to the obscene greed and corruption of the oligarchy. An indescribable level of selfishness, egotism, and indifference to human life pervades the ruling class, which treats the lives of workers as dispensable.

Social opposition is growing internationally. Wildcat strikes and walkouts in Michigan and Ohio forced a temporary shutdown of the North American auto industry, as workers refused to let the auto companies “kill them on the line” for the sake of profit. There is seething anger amongst the working class and soon we will see mass explosions in different parts of the world. The capitalist crisis and the pandemic will not silence the class but stir its basic instinct to struggle and in the process develop the necessary revolutionary consciousness to deal decisively with the capitalist system.

Capitalist Crisis, the Austerity Budget and the State of Disaster address

In South Africa the Apartheid-Capitalist system is crashing right in front of our eyes. Mining is in shambles, finance under massive attack from digital money and a very weak

manufacturing base. The energy sector is barely limping along and the 'negotiated settlement' has lost its legitimacy and has expired.

The State of Disaster address by President Cyril Ramaphosa on the evening of the 15th March 2020 was the first serious attempt by the South African state to respond to the Coronavirus which had already infected more than 150 000 people internationally at that time, including South African citizens who were stranded in China for almost three months. Nothing much was said about the virus by the President at his State of the Nation (SONA) address on the 13th February 2020 nor by the Minister of Finance, Tito Mboweni at his budget speech on the 26th February 2020. In fact the budget speech massively cut costs on basic social services in general and health in particular. They did this knowing full well that the Coronavirus would soon be upon us with a public health system that was in a total state of decay.

The budget speech of the Minister of Finance came straight out of the Treasuries 'Economic Strategy Document' which is a rightwing, neoliberal, austerity budget geared to slashing the public wage bill and cutting costs on basic social services in general and the public health services in particular. This was a mean budget directed against the working class and poor! Health services have been hammered by neoliberal austerity measures for a quarter of a century where the South African working class has carried the burden of a range of disease areas like malnutrition, child mortality, Tuberculosis, high blood pressure, diabetes and obesity. Above this can we forget the devastation wrecked on the population of over 350 000 deaths from HIV and Aids under the Mbeki regime?

This budget which continues to be implemented exposes the hypocrisy of the President's appeal that the coronavirus "will unite us and bring us closer". Behind this appeal for

national unity and a common approach to the problems we face as a society lies the greed of the ruling class which is seen in the kind of decisions they have made to address the virus. These decisions threaten the safety of the working class and poor of our society. Cyril Ramaphosa, Tito Mboweni and the entire leadership of the ANC government are responsible for any death of any worker from the Coronavirus!

The Context of our struggle

COVID-19 arrives in South Africa against a public health system that is in deep and structural crisis.

South Africa has a split health system, one for the rich and one for the poor. Even those working class people who have managed to buy themselves out of the public health system find that the supply of health services is precarious as they run out of benefits on a regular basis, falling back into the collapsing public health system.

The health system of the rich, a private health system has all the facilities needed to respond to COVID-19 – testing facilities for the virus, laboratories that can generate results quickly and efficiently, clean hospitals, access to water, a stable supply of electricity. On the other side we have hospitals of the working class – water that runs on and off, unstable electricity supply, a demoralised and apathetic staff (who themselves do not use these hospital facilities as they have state medical aid), hospitals and clinics with little or no medication, chaotic administration and laboratories that are ill-equipped to deliver reliable services.

The reason for the high burden of disease in South Africa is because we are the most unequal and one of the poorest countries in the world. The South African working class is a poverty stricken class where the burden of non-communicable diseases (NCD's) is three times higher than in countries of

similar levels of development. The South African working class had higher levels of precariousness and systemic exposure to poverty than their poorer counterparts in other parts of the world.

South Africa is also a country trapped in deep, systemic and structural violence. This plays out in our townships where gangsters rule and violence is directed not only at communities but more especially on women and girls. Women and girls while in the frontline of these attacks are not the only ones. The 'foreigner' is often used as a cover to face assault for the austerity measures of the ruling class.

The epidemic of unemployment faces large sections of the working class, where 40% of the population and 50% of the youth are unemployed. This unemployment level is a catastrophe.

The class divisions in our society, in every aspect of life is a result not of any misunderstanding nor of a 'lack of will'. It is a product of the rule of a comprador bourgeois who protect and advance the interests of a white monopoly capitalist ruling class. This comprador bourgeois carried out the massacre at Marikana and is conducting a vicious battle to privatise the SOE's, Eskom, SAA, the railways while at the same time cutting the wages of public sector workers.

It is time for revolutionary politics and a new strategy to meet the social and political needs of the masses. It is time to unite the working class, the employed and unemployed behind the revolutionary party, the SRWP which must be ready to take on capitalism and defeat it.

Our Strategic Perspective

There are times in history when sudden events – natural disasters, economic collapses, pandemics, wars, famines – change everything. They change politics, they change economics and they change public opinion in drastic ways. Socialists

regard these as “trigger events.” During a trigger event, things that were previously unimaginable quickly become reality, as the social and political map is remade. On the one hand, major triggers are rare; but on the other, we have seen them regularly in recent decades. Events such as 9/11, the Iraq War, Hurricane Katrina, and the financial crash of 2008 have all had major repercussions on national life, leading to political changes that would have been difficult to predict beforehand. COVID-19, the coronavirus pandemic, is by far the biggest trigger event of our generation. It is a combination of natural epidemic and economic collapse happening at the same time.

The task in the days, weeks and months ahead is to build a conscious socialist leadership in the working class throughout the world.

Every event of the past week has demonstrated the necessity of putting an end to capitalism and fighting for socialism. The pandemic exposes in concrete form the inability of a society based on private profit, on the endless accumulation of wealth, and on the antagonisms of nation-states, to address any of the problems of mass society.

We must appreciate that the Coronavirus is not a medical crisis but **it is primarily a social and political crisis!** While big pharma rush to find a vaccine, which will take a year and a half to test for its safety and veracity in human beings, the working class, particularly its leadership, has to *organise* society so as to slow down and finally reverse transmission of the virus. Even after a vaccine has passed clinical trials we will have to contend with global monopoly capital and its desire to make billions out of it.

The immediate question is raising the **consciousness** of the working class and poor and developing a sense of social solidarity. This is done through elementary interventions like pamphlets, posters, television, community radio

stations, loud hailing etc. This must take place at every level of the party and must take place not only at the homes/living quarters of workers but also at schools, churches, taxi ranks etc.

This approach on organisation has to take account of the danger of spreading the virus and must consist of *localised organising* in small groups and meetings of small groups that can address issues. As our influence in the communities grows and more people join up the small groups themselves will grow both broader and deeper into the class.

The aim is to form Solidarity Action Committees (SAC's) which are local neighbourhood structures. These structures once formed must conduct only small localised meetings in communities so as to protect communities from spreading the virus. The success of our endeavour to build such structures depend on how widespread our organising is and how deep we can reach into the communities in the first place.

The immediate aim of these SAC is to create health structures for anti-coronavirus defence in the working class. We must create social and physical infrastructure that the working class can access in the struggle against the virus. These structures are those we demand from the state and those we set up on our own through our organised communities.

The working class demands:

Immediate and *full access to water and sanitation* – a major defence against the virus is washing hands with soap on a regular basis. We must demand that the state set up thousands if not millions of temporary hand washing facilities across South Africa. This must start with the immediate provision of water to informal settlements, taxi ranks, train stations, shopping malls, clinics, schools, libraries, community halls etc. All places of employment must be compelled to install water/soap points or sanitisers. Our trade unions must monitor

this. The armed forces must be organised to deliver water to all areas where there is no water available.

That all *hospitals to be nationalised* and private healthcare facilities to be abolished. – away with the two-tier health system!

A *coronavirus testing system that is free* – we reject the payment of a fee for testing for the virus and it must be free to all people at all facilities, whether they be private or public hospitals and clinics. The immediate roll out of testing stations to all areas of need, where people can access them within walking distance.

The state must immediately *take command of all laboratories* – this will allow a more efficient and well run system of testing where results will be released timeously.

Production and free distribution of *appropriate masks* – every person in the country must have an appropriate mask to protect themselves against the virus. The state must set up mass production facilities for the production of masks immediately.

The production of *essential medical equipment* – essential medical equipment like drips, protective clothing etc needs to be produced on a large scale immediately. These will be critical for establishing temporary quarantine facilities. This will only be able to be done on the basis that such factories be expropriated as is taking place in many countries of the world to deal with the virus.

Feeding schemes in townships to meet the needs of children who are not any longer at school as well as hungry and malnourished members of the community. Set up key feeding points at churches, community halls and other spaces.

Food parcels for all those people who are ill and in isolation or quarantine.

A *basic income grant* for the unemployed – the working class and their children suffer high levels of malnutrition and are food insecure. In order to fight the virus the immune system must be boosted by nourishing food which the unemployed and poor do not have access to.

The *closure of all non-essential production*, with full income to those affected (initially for one month, but longer if necessary); safe working conditions in industries essential to the functioning of society.

No dismissal or retrenchment of workers who are ill. Guaranteed paid leave for all workers who are ill or for firms that have stopped operating or are on short time. This must not impact the leave due to workers nor the UIF payments . Companies must make extra-ordinary arrangements to ensure that they carry these workers till they can return to work.

The State implement strict *adherence to WHO rules* governing cleanliness and safety in the workplace.

The state make *working class transport safer* – the working class travel in taxis and trains that are overcrowded. While laws governing this has been promulgated communities structures together with taxi associations must monitor this to ensure it is implemented.

Cut interest rates to zero for the duration of the epidemic and cancel all home loan and debt repayments for the next three months or until things get back to normal.

We must defend the working class! The building of Solidarity Action Committees must proceed immediately. We must explain the middle class programme of 'self-isolation' does not defend the working class against infection from the virus. This approach must be replaced by a more holistic approach that focuses on preparing infrastructure that will be needed to deal with thousands of cases that need isolation. With our communities we must identify facilities that can be converted

into holding spaces for community members that need to be isolated or quarantined. These facilities include churches, community halls, universities, colleges etc. Some of these like universities already have basic infrastructure like running water, canteens for cooking, electricity etc.

We will work carefully and ensure we do not contribute to spreading the virus. This means we will take special care in the way we organise in small groups, using electronic and social media methods where possible to reduce direct contact. While we will take extreme care and consider every organisational move we make, we will not be paralysed by fear of the virus nor infection!

We will move from the defence to the offensive in time! The building of SAC's is in line with the SRWP Central Committee resolution to lead the struggles of the working class and build party branches in the cauldron of battle. The coronavirus comes at a time when the capitalist system is in such deep crisis that it is possible to prepare to rid society of it and build a socialist humanitarian society.

Shaheen Khan

21/03/2020

World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) "The Spread of the pandemic and the lessons of the past week", 21/03/2020

(Financial Times, "World's three biggest fund houses shed \$2.8tn of assets" [HYPERLINK "https://www.ft.com/content/438854a8-63b0-11ea-a6cd-df28cc3c6a68"](https://www.ft.com/content/438854a8-63b0-11ea-a6cd-df28cc3c6a68)

<https://www.ft.com/content/438854a8-63b0-11ea-a6cd-df28cc3c6a68> published on 15 March 2020).

A. Tooze, "Is the Coronavirus Crash Worse than the 2008 Financial Crisis?", 18/03/2020

WSWS, "The Spread of the pandemic and the lessons of the past week", 21/03/2020

Banda Aswell, whatsapp message 11/03/2020

Khanya College, "In the Eye of the Storm", 15/03/2020

E. Toussaint, "The Capitalist pandemic, Coronavirus and the Economic Crisis", 19/03/2020

Our Perspectives and Our Tasks by Shaheen Khan 17/04/2020

"Theory, my friend, is grey, but green is the eternal tree of life" (Goethe)

This was one of the favourite quotes of Lenin who combined the science of Marxism with the art of struggle, how to act. Such a moment lies before us today and what we need to do is not to repeat 'formulas' but deal with the *concrete* economic and political conditions of the particular *period* of the historical process. In line with this we must not forget that Marx and Engels famously reiterated ad nauseum that "Our theory is not a dogma, but a guide to action".

The Capitalist System is in deep crisis

We are not going to deal with an in-depth analysis of the capitalist crisis, its economic, social and political character as this has been done by many analysts and political groups. We wish only to outline some elements which we believe are of decisive importance:

The capitalist system is in its deepest crisis ever and the rule of the capitalist class on a global scale is in jeopardy. What is increasingly becoming clear is that this crisis is more than a mere recession but a deep depression, as even the bourgeois IMFBlog outlines in its April *World Economic Outlook* "we project global growth in 2020 to fall -3

percent. This is a downgrade of 6.3 percentage points from January 2020, a major revision over a very short period. This makes the Great Lockdown the worst recession since the Great Depression, and far worse than the Global Financial Crisis.”

The capitalist class will of course blame the pandemic for the crisis of the system. This is not true as the the pandemic emerged at a crucial turning point in world politics. In 2019 two key developments of historic proportions took place. First, the most severe slump of the capitalist world economy began. And, secondly, a global wave of class struggles and popular uprisings were taking place in many countries simultaneously and it covered nearly all continents.

The bourgeois are panicking as the world has changed dramatically in three months and “The magnitude and speed of collapse in activity that has followed is unlike anything experienced in our lifetime”.

In South Africa the Apartheid-Capitalist system is crashing right in front of our eyes. Mining is in shambles, finance under massive attack from digital money and virtual banking and this on top of a very weak manufacturing base. The energy sector is barely limping along and the ‘negotiated settlement’ has lost its legitimacy and has expired.

COVID-19 arrives in South Africa against a public health system that is in deep and structural crisis. South Africa has a split health system, one for the rich and one for the poor. Even those members of the working class who have managed to buy themselves out of the public health system find that the supply of health services is precarious as they run out of benefits on a regular basis, falling back into the collapsed public health system. Unemployment has reached epidemic proportions, where 40% of the population and 50% of the youth are unemployed. This is a catastrophe.

The class divisions in our society is a result not of any

misunderstanding nor of a 'lack of will'. It is a product of the rule of a comprador bourgeois who protect and advance the interests of a white monopoly capitalist ruling class. This comprador bourgeois carried out the massacre at Marikana and is conducting an austerity programme as seen in the vicious battle to privatise the SOE's, Eskom, SAA, the railways while at the same time cutting the wages of public sector workers.

The Scientific Model is a bourgeois model

The capitalist government of Cyril Ramaphosa has taken the nation into its confidence and placed before the nation the medical/scientific basis for the lockdown. While this makes perfect sense from a scientific point of view it does not address the social character of the problem. Bourgeois science divides life into separate categories and the outline of the medical team in its analysis fails to address the question in a way that provides social solutions. In fact the epidemiologist concludes that since we are to return to normal conditions of economic and social activity the pandemic is inevitably going to kill thousands of people, particularly the elderly but also those that are immuno-compromised. What he is not saying is that those who are going to die are the black working class who are most vulnerable to the spread of the epidemic.

The lockdown in bourgeois hands is a hydra-headed monster. On the one hand it is necessary to ensure the safety of the population through 'flattening the curve'. On the other hand, because of the capitalist system, the working class and poor have been reduced to high levels of hunger and suffering. The condition of the employed working class is subject to claims and processes from the UIF which has placed the class in a very precarious position. The unemployed who eked out a living through precarious and part-time work have been thrown into abject poverty. The lockdown in its current form is untenable and represents a hell-hole for the working class and poor. The class is beginning to respond to this in the form of food

protests and fighting the police who are part of a high-handed repressive bourgeois approach to the lockdown.

The bourgeois is in a tizz, caught between the competing interests of its different fractions. While initially frightened by the prospect of mass deaths of its labour force (and that is the reason why the lockdown took place in the first instance), it has already started non-essential productive activities like opening the mining industry . It plans a phased return to work and releasing the lockdown, even before it is safe to do so, which may cause the rampant spread of the epidemic and the death of millions of black workers. The cynicism of this is mind boggling – they place profits ahead of people!

A revolutionary and socialist approach to the pandemic

Lenin as well as Trotsky liked to quote Napoleon who said “*On s’engage et puis ... on voit.*” (“First engage in a serious battle and then see what happens.”) Our task is not to wait until things unfold before us but to analyse, understand and intervene to change things in such a way that it serves the interests of the working class and oppressed.

These are difficult times, not only for the bourgeois but also for the leadership of the working class. Many bourgeois economists and NGO’s have been making recommendations to the government to adopt a Keynesian economic approach rather than the neoliberal path they have been following. This is a nationalist capitalist trajectory which does not in any way serve the interests of the working class. The NUMSA open letter to the President is different as it has as its main consideration the effects of the lockdown on the jobs bloodbath that will flow from it. However we think that it fails to address the question from a class struggle perspective and remains an economic approach to the question. We think it is not the approach to follow.

The salient issues we must consider are:

While there may be questions related to the medical/scientific outline presented by Professor Salim Abdool Karim his presentation confirms that the lockdown has been successful in keeping down infections and the spreading of the virus. More so the study indicates that if the lockdown is lifted too soon there will be an exponential increase in the number of infections and consequential death of thousands of people. These thousands of people will be black working class people living in townships and urban settlements. The danger of the NUMSA open letter is that it may expose the workers in the manufacturing sector to this danger. Already businesses that have been operating are reporting COVID-19 infections, so too prisons, police stations, the SANDF and private hospitals. The big bourgeoisie are very unhappy with the lockdown as seen in the responses of Trump, Bolsanaro and our own Democratic Alliance. They want to return as soon as possible to business as usual through a phased approach. Their concern is the profitability of their system, not the lives of people, particularly the working class and poor.

As socialists we cannot agree with the lockdown in its current form; ours. While we recognise the essential need for physical distancing we also understand the absence of 'social needs' that is causing the working class to experience great difficulty and suffer under conditions of the lockdown. While there are a myriad of social issues to be addressed the immediate needs are that of food, a basic income, healthcare and the question of retrenchments and job losses.

The working class is not taking this lying down. Hunger and the insecurity of life is leading to conditions of revolt brewing in the class. These are the molecular processes where the class is gradually beginning to comprehend the problems arising from the social crisis. Consciousness is determined by conditions.

A revolutionary party basis its tactics on a calculation of the changes of mass consciousness. While the party must impress through its propaganda and agitation (media/newspaper/pamphlets) the dangers of the epidemic and the need for physical distancing we must begin to take leadership of the mass protest movement that is gaining momentum. The working class on its own is fighting and breaking down the parameters of the bourgeois lockdown and we need to direct this anger in the right direction and to the right quarters.

The mass anger must be directed at the ruling class, the ANC government and the provincial authorities to demand a right to a decent life under the current conditions. This must include the following:

'Food for All' – we demand a mass government funded food distribution programme. This must take place on a weekly basis with food parcels allocated and distributed to all people living in working class communities. This must also include all those people who are ill and in isolation or quarantine. We also demand immediate *feeding schemes in townships* to meet the needs of children who are not any longer at school as well as hungry and malnourished members of the community. Set up key feeding points at churches, community halls and other spaces.

A **'Basic Income Grant'** for the working class employed and unemployed, for the middle classes including small business people who are facing the brunt of the lockdown. The funding for this must come from the reserves held by the Reserve Bank and the super-profits from the Mining, Industrial and Banking sector.

The **'Nationalisation of all Hospitals'** –all private healthcare facilities to be abolished, away with the two-tier health system! A *coronavirus testing system that is free* – we reject the payment of a fee for testing for the virus and

demand a humanitarian programme of mass testing which must be free to all people at all facilities, whether they be private or public hospitals and clinics. The immediate roll out of testing stations to all areas of need, where people can access them within walking distance. The state must immediately *take command of all laboratories* – this will allow a more efficient and well run system of testing where results will be released timeously. The production of *essential medical equipment* – essential medical equipment like drips, protective clothing etc needs to be produced on a large scale immediately. This will only be able to be done on the basis that such factories be expropriated as is taking place in many countries of the world to deal with the virus. The immediate establishment of temporary quarantine facilities.

‘Full Pay for all Workers! No Retrenchments and No loss of Jobs’ – we insist that only the most essential of services focussed on food production, health equipment production and those workers involved in any other essential activity be allowed to work under safe and hygienic conditions (monitored by labour and health inspectors and the trade unions). The pandemic is caused by capitalism and the capitalist class must bear responsibility for it. Workers must be paid their full salary and responsibility for claiming wages from the special UIF fund must fall on the bosses. This must not impact the leave due to workers nor the UIF payments . We will not accept any retrenchments and all work on hand must be divided between all the workers without loss in wages. Those enterprises that close down must be Nationalised under Workers Control. This must become the clarion call of the trade union movement! Guaranteed paid leave for all workers who are ill.

‘Social Responsibility Programme’ – there must be immediate and *full access to water and sanitation* – a major defence against the virus is washing hands with soap on a regular basis. We demand the immediate provision of water to informal

settlements, taxi ranks, train stations, shopping malls, clinics, schools, libraries, community halls etc. While the state has started such a programme we must insist it be rolled out to every area in the country. The production and free distribution of *appropriate masks and sanitising material*—the state must set up mass production facilities for the production of masks and sanitising material immediately. The state make *working class transport safer* – the working class travel in taxis and trains that are overcrowded. While laws governing this has been promulgated communities structures together with taxi associations must monitor this to ensure it is implemented. *Cut interest rates* to zero for the duration of the epidemic and cancel all home loan and debt repayments for the next three months or until things get back to normal. *Stop all evictions and rent payments* for the duration of the lockdown. *Immediately reduce the cost of airtime and data by 50% across all networks* – this must be done immediately to facilitate access to online learning for all children. *Stop the brutal repressive tactics of the police and army!* These people must perform useful tasks and not carry out the repressive agenda of the ruling class and the madman placed in charge of them. They can be useful in the distribution of food and water and other essential tasks.

Our Tasks!

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” K. Marx, [HYPERLINK “https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm”](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm) Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (1852)

What is very clear is that Capitalism is a system in extreme decay; climate change and the destruction of nature is the source of the epidemic and this on top of the biggest depression in the history of capitalism. The capitalist class is in a state of utter confusion and desperation as to how to

address this triple crisis, but what comes naturally to it is to shift the burden onto the backs of the working class and poor. Already mass retrenchments, growing levels of unemployment, deepening inequality, impoverishment and veritable hunger of the working class and poor pock-mark our society. The working class and its organisations, primarily the SRWP, must make a choice – either the class is totally decimated and disorganised by these conditions or we fight back and begin a serious and organised defence of the class! The very conditions of existence of the working class is at stake and so too the future generations.

We must immediately organise the following **Campaigns**:

A ‘Food for All’ campaign – is a call for a mass government funded food distribution programme. The working class and poor are already running out of food and soon their hunger will be criminalized. We must anticipate mass food riots and looting which will be harshly dealt with by the state through a declaration of a state of emergency and or the imposition of martial law.

A ‘Basic Income Grant’ campaign – the unemployed have no source of income and the salaries of the working class have been cut.

A ‘Single National Health System’ campaign – a fight for the nationalisation of private health care facilities so that a national health response to the epidemic can be rolled out.

A ‘No Retrenchments, No Job Losses, Full Wages’ campaign – the working class is under severe attack and the bosses are effecting restructuring of their enterprises through retrenchments and cutting of salaries of workers. The very integrity of the working class as a social entity depends on our ability to win this fight.

A ‘Social Responsibility Campaign’ – full access to water and sanitation, production and distribution of masks on a mass

scale, stop evictions and rent payments, zero interest rates, reduce the cost of airtime and data, an end to repressive tactics of the police and army, use the resources of the Reserve bank and the super-profits of the big Monopolies tied up in the banks for a social responsibility programme.

Our **Organisational Tasks**:

We must defend the working class!

We must call on the working class to form Workers Committees in work places and Solidarity Action Committees (SAC's) in every township and village. We must explain our programme of demands and get these committees to lead the fight for such a programme. As far as the virus is concerned we must explain that the middle class programme of 'self-isolation' does not work for the working class and poor. We call for **physical distancing and social solidarity**! With our communities we must identify facilities that can be converted into holding spaces for community members that need to be isolated or quarantined. These facilities include churches, community halls, universities, colleges etc. Some of these like universities already have basic infrastructure like running water, canteens for cooking, electricity etc.

We must lead the struggles that are currently unfolding in the townships!

The working class and poor are starving under conditions of the lockdown. While a lockdown is beneficial as far as the spreading of the virus is concerned, it cannot be that people must go hungry and literally starve to death. We must get involved directly in these struggles waged by communities and pose the questions as outlined in our programme. We must also be sensitive to local issues that may arise.

From defence to offense! The coronavirus comes at a time when the capitalist system is in such deep crisis that mass scale struggles of the class may erupt soon. These are the important

moments in history when revolutionary parties are tested. The building of SAC's are embryonic forms of Soviets, 'Worker Councils', that spring up as the organised expression of the working class in struggle. While we may be far off from this becoming generalised, we must lay the foundations for democratic working class organisations where our party cadre are leading the fight. This will also allow us to build party branches in the cauldron of battle.

Forward to the defence of the working class!

Forward to the Socialism!

Aluta Continua!

Shaheen Khan 17/04/2020

T. Cliff 'Building the Party'.

IMFBlog "The Great Lockdown: Worst Economic Downturn Since the Great Depression.

RCIT : The COVID-19 Global Counterrevolution: What It Is and How to Fight It, *A Marxist analysis and strategy for the revolutionary struggle*

ibid

Banda Aswell, whatsapp message 11/03/2020

RCIT: The COVID-19 Global Counterrevolution: What It Is and How to Fight It *A Marxist analysis and strategy for the revolutionary struggle*

International Appeal from Namibia Fishermen United

Workers International is proud to circulate this appeal for international solidarity with the fishermen of Namibia.

Open letter to Namibian Nation

Out Now! Latest issue of Die Werker, June 2019

latest issue of Die Werker

In this issue:

The discrimination against the San continues unabated.

Organisation and program in place of hopelessness – Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party launched in South Africa

Message from the WRP to the SRWP.

Birth of the United Seafarer's Association.

The Committee of Parents petition the United Nations High Commission for Refugees for accounting on the atrocities committed against Namibian refugees.

Where have all the trains gone?

TSUMEB: The Endobo Hostel fraud.

Workers Advice Centre pledges to join SAFTU in the giant federation's fight against the organised criminality of the

First National Bank.

TCL miners resume their struggle for their stolen pensions.

“Hi-viz vests”: Unions slow to join the dance

The below article is a translation of an article appearing in French on the Mediapart website:

(<https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/231118/gilets-jaunes-les-syndicats-hesitent-entrer-dans-la-danse>)

(Notes)

(CGT, Force Ouvriere and CFDT are the three main and separate union congresses in France, broadly-speaking divided along political lines, SUD is the common name for some more radical independent, breakaway unions. It is difficult to really know how best to translate “gilets jaunes” (yellow waistcoats), which applies to both the fuel-tax demonstrators and their “uniform”, the hi-viz safety jacket.)

“Hi-viz vests”: Unions slow to join the dance

23 November 2018: By Mathilde Goanec and Dan Israel.

If most national trade union leaders hold their noses when the “hi-viz vests” are mentioned, activists locally are taking the plunge citing the levels of social crisis. Nevertheless, there are still raw edges, mainly because of instances of racism and some of the demands about cutting taxes.

When we called CFDT member Pierre-Gael Laveder off the cuff, he replied (hi-viz vest on his back) straight from the Magny

road-block at at Montceau-les-Mines (Saone-et-Loire). Last year, this man was one of the main actors in the fight against the closure of the Allia factory at Digoïn. Now “newy redundant” he is a “hi-viz vest”.

However, Laurent Berger, the national secretary of his union, has not called on his troops to join the movement. On Monday 19 November he even denounced the “totalitarian” tone of some of the meetings. Nevertheless, concerned about the movement’s increasing popularity, the leader of the CFDT on Saturday proposed to Emmanuel Macron to quickly unite unions, the employers and associations “to set up a social pact for ecological conversion”, a proposition which the government turned down flat. All this means little to Pierre-Gael Laveder, who wears no label when he goes to the “hi-viz vests” meetings, quite happy to play locally the role of go-between his national secretary hankered after.

“There’s a bit of everything on the road-blocks: tradesmen, shopkeepers, public service people ... and quite a few trade unionists”, Laveder explains. “I think it’s important to be there because what we’re fighting for here are things we stand up for in everyday union work: an increase in buying power and a wage rise. It makes sense to me”.

Like the CFDT, most union leaderships are hesitating, while on the ground many union activists have taken the plunge, even though the “hi-viz vests” always start a lot of arguments. The CGT position, for example is somewhat embarrassing. Less than a week ago Philippe Martinez was hammering out the line: “The CGT does not march alongside either people on the far right or bosses who talk about taxes but also mean social (National Insurance) contributions.”

All the same, on 20 November the national union published a statement calling on the government to respond to the “urgent social situation” which the “hi-viz vests” emphasise. Visiting Rouen last Thursday, Philippe Martinez went further, conscious

of the pressures in his own organisation: "What worries us is not the 'hi-viz' movement but those who try to exploit it".

There was the same shilly-shallying at Le Havre, a town the authorities are keeping a very careful eye on because it hosts a port, docks and refineries. A general assembly of the local CGT discussed "hi-viz" on Wednesday 21 November. Activists didn't want to "be associated with 'hi-viz'", but planned to carry out a series of actions in parallel, especially since some of them are already out on strike over wages, for example at Total (six of whose seven French refineries are affected this Friday). On Thursday morning a two-hour leafletting session and a partial roadblock took place at the Oceane roundabout, where "hi-viz" have been setting up off and on since Saturday.

Sandrine Gerard, the secretary of the local CGT branch, has also informed Mediapart that there will be "growing popularity" from Monday 26 November with a possible blockade of "the economy" at Le Havre, almost certainly referring to the refineries. According to our information, the Le Havre CGT docks and harbour group, which has an extremely high percentage of union membership but is very tight-lipped where the media are concerned has been even clearer and passes the line on to members calling on them "not to let the caravan of anger pass by" but mix "their red vests with the yellow vests".

For all their concern about who might be trying to exploit the movement, the group believes "there is a place for the CGT in this movement" and calls on "all members to participate in progressive assemblies". Their comrades in La Mède (Bouches-du-Rhone Department) have already taken the plunge: they have been blockading their Total refinery alongside "hi-viz vests" since Thursday 22 November.

Even before 17 November, the union's chemical industry group was warning that the "hi-viz vests" anger was not

“illegitimate” and calling for a mobilisation a mobilisation in all the main sectors such as transport, oil, energy, ports ... and the Lavera refinery and the fuel depot at Fos-sur-Mer in Bouches-du-Rhone have been regularly blockaded by “hi-viz vests” since Saturday.

Force Ouvriere union’s national leadership is undergoing a big internal crisis and has not really adopted a stance. However, their Transport section, which is the strongest union in road transport and ambulance drivers, has officially called on members to join the “hi-viz vests” and join in actions in favour of greater buying-power. “We call on them to come to the support of existing movements” General Secretary of the transport section of the union, Patrice Clos, explains, one of three candidates standing to replace Pascal Pavageau at the head of the national union.

If the unions are going forward on tip-toe, the official reason given for that is first of all the occasionally racist, sexist and homophobic tone of a very disorganised movement which is pulling in all kinds of directions. The CGT is sticking to its guns: “This period of powerful contrasts of light and shade can give birth to monsters, and citizens should not allow their anger to be diverted by those pushing xenophobic, racist and homophobic ideas”, the union says, referring to instances of physical and verbal violence experienced at a certain number of assemblies since 17 November.

Specifically the CGT section covering Customs Officers responded in a very lively way to publication on social media of a Facebook video showing “hi-viz vests” at Flixecourt (Haute-de-France department) congratulating each other on discovering migrants in the cistern of a tanker lorry and calling the police, and by the way making fun of the customs service. “Confident in their racist convictions, they preferred to call the police rather than an aid organisation which could have helped them”, the union group says in a press

release. "This video shows protagonists calling for a 'giant bonfire' All this is reminiscent of very sad and inglorious events in our history". The union follows up with an official complaint for slander and defamation of their service and incitement to racial hatred.

Acrobatics

CGT activist Vincent Labrousse was prominent in the struggle to save jobs at the La Souterraine factory (Creuse Department) in September. Now sacked, he too is careful in discussing the composite character of the movement. "I can't march with people from the fascistosphere. It goes against nature", this activist explains. "But they are not the only ones in the movement. Others simply want to denounce the society of exclusion we are being led into. I support them". Moreover, about fifty of his comrades were present at the road blocks on Saturday. "In our CGT industrial group there is no rejection. Some of us support it but don't go. Some do go there. Others will go".

The sociologist Jean-Michel Denis, who specialises in trade unions and social movements, points out that most trade union bodies are in "horror of spontaneous movements". "Most of those demonstrating here are wage-earners", CGT member Fredo, who we met in Rouen, states simply. "What do they want? More purchasing-power. Our job is, without imposing anything, to get them to think about the question of wages. After all, that's the heart of the matter."

Activists also claim that the movement can also help to restore faith a little. "I'm really struck by the conviviality, the atmosphere ... We've obviously got a lot to tell them, but a lot to learn as well", explains Manu at Rouen. "What's not to like about blockading Disney, supermarkets, petrol stations?" notes Laurent Degousse, who is a member of the independent union SUD Commerce in Paris and one of the founders of the social front "Front Social" "In any

case it's very effective. 2000 people gathering together on 17 November. If it works, it's mainly because you can come as you are and it's on your doorstep. These are lessons for the social movement to bear in mind".

Xenophobic, sexist and homophobic language which does occur in certain assemblies also do not discourage this "Solidaires" (independent union) activist, although he too mentions strong pressures within his organisation, which is used to sticking close to the social movement but is also involved in particular in anti-fascist and anti-sexist struggles. "Concretely, it's not enough to say 'that stinks' and 'that's infected by the far right', and in any case that's not the atmosphere on the road blocks. Even if it can crop up, since there is all sorts of everything in this movement, which has neither structure, leaders, or security stewards. But I think the determining factor is the rejection of Macron's policies and his very person". On Saturday he will put on his violet vest (union colours) to join in with the yellow crowd. "If you go there to play the red professor, it's guaranteed that it won't work, so no preachy-preachy".

"Solidaires" in any case spoke along more or less the same lines on 19 November, but without an official call to demonstrate. This trade union body firmly opposes neo-liberalism and the far right and its representatives, but it proposes to draw all forces together and to "look for what we agree on". It has also, in vain, invited the other national union bodies to meet to discuss possible mobilising strategies.

The national unions are just as much at sea as the political leaders. They are grappling with contradictions and prepared to adopt fairly acrobatic postures in the process. "Some trades unions have had such a hard time of it in recent years that they are telling themselves, for once things are moving, let's not miss the boat" notes researcher Jean-Michel Denis. "But it's still very complicated. The values expressed by the

demonstrators are very mixed in character, not to say pretty reactionary.” For example, what they have to say about fiscal matters, often anti-tax, doesn’t go down well with activists very attached to the public services and a redistributive system.

“In other spontaneous movements like the ‘nuits debout’ (when protestors spent entire nights awake in crowds) or the indignados, there was a kind of left-wing consciousness, a shared culture which made a link”, Denis emphasises. “Nothing like that here. The people we are dealing with don’t seem to have any habit of mobilising, or to have lost it. In their yellow vests, you also see small-scale craftsmen, home helps, liberal nurses, etc. these are categories of people who don’t work in big businesses with big groups of trade unionists, and where they live, work has been more and more de-structures. That doesn’t help when it comes to building bridges with traditional organisations.

A few trades unionists on the ground admit to a little bitterness at seeing struggles which have for years been carried on in the shadows suddenly emerge into the light – outside of the trade union field. “We fight year-in-year-out in the workshops, in the street, for wages, pension rights, against unemployment. When we go and ask the ‘hi-viz vests’ to help us against the reforms of pension rights, will then turn up?” asks Jean-Luc Bielitz, CGT delegate at Smart on the Moselle. But he won’t throw everything overboard: “I think we should jump onto the movement if it keeps going. The union is there to walk with them. Who in this crowd is going to negotiate with the government? Who is the leader today!”

Nevertheless, the period resonates as a lesson for Pascal Raffanel of the CFE-CCG at Bosch. “Trades unions have a few questions to ask themselves. If the resistance struggle is carried out solely on the basis of social networks or citizens’ movement, that could be the death of trade unionism.”. Laurent Degousse, who has long campaigned in the Front

Social for a very aggressive trade unionism, is even clearer: I think that because of our repeated setbacks on the social level, we have created a monster, and the void has been filled s best it could. It is mainly the people in power who are responsible, including those we have been walking with in trade union work and politics for 15 or 20 years.

How Labour's right wing tried to fight back: An eye-witness report

Workers International draws our readers attention to this article by a leading Trade Unionist describing the ongoing struggles inside the British Labour Party. (Unite is the largest union in Britain and Ireland with 1.42 million members, a commitment to democratic structures and is a key player in the fight to build a workers party)

*Taken from:
<https://unitedleft.org.uk/how-labours-right-wing-tried-to-fight-back-an-eye-witness-report/>*

How Labour's right wing tried to fight back: An eye-witness report

Originally published here: <http://labourbriefing.squarespace.com/home/2018/6/27/how-labours-right-wing-tried-to-fight-back-an-eye-witness-report?rq=mayer>

United Left Chair Martin Mayer served as a UNITE delegate on Labour's NEC – and was there during the crucial period when

Jeremy Corbyn's leadership came under sustained attack from Labour's Right. See his article recently published in Labour Briefing

FOR THOSE OF US ON THE LEFT of the Labour Party disillusioned by Tony Blair's neo-liberal economics, and frustrated by the timidity of Ed Miliband's attempt to shift the party back to the centre-left, Jeremy Corbyn's election as leader in autumn 2015 was little short of a revolution. We thought we had won the party back. It soon became apparent that winning the leadership alone was not enough.

The most public show of opposition to Jeremy Corbyn's leadership came from within the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), where right wing MPs displayed extraordinary public disloyalty and openly plotted for his removal. What is less well known is how the official Labour Party machine – a structure created and nurtured under Tony Blair – became crucial to that resistance. The party's rejection of neo-liberalism under Jeremy was greeted with ridicule and indignation in Labour HQ at Southside on Victoria Street, presided over by general secretary Iain McNicol.

While it was difficult to attack Jeremy, an early strategy was to denigrate his vast new army of supporters, many of whom had flocked into the party. They were "Trots" and "infiltrators" who were taking over "our" Labour Party. Smearing his supporters as bullies and wreckers, and later using false charges of antisemitism, became dual strategies to undermine Jeremy's leadership. While Labour MPs voiced the public attacks, it was Labour HQ which organised and implemented what became Labour's witch-hunt.

During the 2015 leadership election, as Jeremy's support surged, right wing MPs spoke out against bullying, including online social media abuse, with the clear implication this was a brand new development and all attributable to Corbyn supporters.

There is no doubt there was some shocking abuse on social media. During that first leadership election in 2015, Labour HQ responded with unprecedented vigour to any complaint from right wing MPs. It was clear from the start that the same vigour did not apply to those insulting or attacking Jeremy or his supporters. Thousands of Labour Party members were automatically suspended and denied a vote in the election, without any real explanation or right of appeal. After the election, which Jeremy won with 60% of the vote, the vast majority had their membership restored with no action taken, in many cases several months afterwards.

The attempted coup in June 2016 after Jeremy 'lost' the EU referendum saw an organised mass resignation from the shadow cabinet and all but some 40 or so Labour MPs signing a vote of no confidence in Jeremy. In July 2016 Angela Eagle announced she would stand against Jeremy and force a re-election for leader. However, forcing a new election was pointless if Jeremy was allowed to stand as he would surely win again.

Within days, Iain McNicol called an emergency Labour NEC with 24 hours' notice to set the election timetable. But the primary purpose was to secure an interpretation of the rule that the incumbent (Jeremy) should require even more nominations – 51 – to stand, a sure way to prevent him from standing again.

McNicol had resisted all legal advice except from his preferred choice of barrister, the only legal authority to back this interpretation of the rule.

The balance on Labour's NEC was finely balanced between Jeremy's supporters and opponents. Some of Jeremy's supporters, including myself, were away on holiday. With barely 24 hours' notice of the meeting, Unite flew me back from France. The meeting started with the most extraordinary claims from some NEC members of online abuse and demands for a secret ballot for their own protection. The NEC is a

representative body and, as a union delegate, my vote is public and accountable, but we narrowly lost the vote on this proposal – a secret ballot it was to be.

After hours of gruelling debate we won the secret ballot by 18 votes to 14 to allow Jeremy to stand and not have to seek nominations. This decision was later challenged in the High Court which ruled in favour of our interpretation of the rule. The coup attempt had failed and Jeremy went on to win his second leadership election in twelve months with an increased majority.

Angela Eagle faced hostility within her Wallasey CLP for her role in this. Claims of bullying behaviour and homophobic abuse at CLP meetings and vandalism of the CLP office were taken so seriously that Labour HQ suspended the CLP for almost a year and charges were brought against a number of members. In the event the vandalism allegation was disproved. Charges were eventually dropped against all but one individual and even he – a Unite member – was exonerated on the main charge of bullying behaviour.

We first saw organised smears of antisemitism at the Labour Young Members Conference, which narrowly elected Progress-supported Jasmine Beckett – by a one vote margin – against Unite's James Elliott. Unite secured evidence of tweets from Jasmine's campaign in which the allegations of antisemitism against James Elliott were actively encouraged. Unite also presented evidence of manipulation of the conference and ballot process by Labour officials.

These complaints were ignored by Labour HQ. Jasmine Beckett was confirmed as the elected NEC member, James Elliott was placed under formal investigation of antisemitism and Baroness Royall was appointed to investigate alleged institutional antisemitism within Oxford University Labour Club where James Elliott was a member. Royall failed to find antisemitism but did report that some Jewish Labour members of the club felt

“uncomfortable” – presumably because of the club’s strong support for the Palestinian cause.

Many months later, James Elliott was exonerated of the charge. At the following NEC meeting I asked that he receive an apology which was denied. I later found out about social media posts attacking me for this.

Many of us on the left were bemused by the increasing allegations. We had never witnessed antisemitism in the party and believed it to be the preserve of the extreme pro-Nazi and fascist right. It was not true that antisemitism was “rife” in our party, was it?

I read with interest an article by Asa Winstanley of the Electronic Intifada about the involvement of the Israeli Embassy and secret services in contact with right wing Labour MPs to maintain a stream of charges of antisemitism against Jeremy and his supporters. I circulated this article widely. Months later I was contacted by the Sunday Times for comment on an article they were intending to publish, attacking me for being antisemitic solely on the basis that I had circulated this article to which the Jewish Labour Movement (JLM) had objected.

Following a strong legal challenge by Unite, the paper toned down the article. Nevertheless, I did receive some abusive texts as a result, including one describing me as “Nazi scum”.

The second leadership election in 2016 saw an astounding 6,000 members suspended following a scrutiny of social media posts on an unprecedented scale. The vast majority were no more than rude comments about Jeremy’s opponents within the party by over-enthusiastic Corbyn supporters. Totally innocent people were caught in the net, including a Sheffield Labour branch officer who simply re-tweeted a Green Party tweet defending the NHS.

But abuse of Jeremy and his supporters went unchallenged.

Peter Mandelson boasted that he tried to undermine Jeremy Corbyn every single day but no action was ever taken against him. Months later the vast majority were exonerated and had their membership restored. It seemed Labour HQ had resorted once again to a futile strategy to deny as many Corbyn supporters a vote as possible. The massive trawling and scrutiny operation carried out at Labour HQ in the end made no difference to Jeremy's 62.5% majority out of an electorate of 550,000.

Of those 6,000 members some 200 did face proper investigation and a small number of those were guilty of antisemitism. I was genuinely shocked to see some of the examples presented to the NEC. I had believed the existence of antisemitism in our party to be a fabrication. Antisemitism does exist in our party and we must not tolerate it, just as we must not tolerate any other form of racism. However, after the most extensive trawl in the party's history, the discovery of such small numbers out of 550,000 members proves that antisemitism is definitely not "rife."

Jeremy commissioned the Chakrabarti report which found no evidence of institutional or widespread antisemitism but made a number of practical proposals to deal with the issue. The second part of the comprehensive report made a number of recommendations about Labour's flawed disciplinary process. Chakrabarti criticised the lack of a right of appeal, the ease with which members can be suspended or even automatically excluded on flimsy evidence with no right of redress and the length of time people have to wait before a hearing. The recommendations of a fairer and swifter disciplinary process were stalled by Iain McNicol's office.

I have little doubt that the witch-hunt, including many false charges of antisemitism, is part of a wider strategy to undermine Jeremy's leadership, engineered by those who firmly believe he and his supporters have no right to be in control of 'their' party. Too many members have been left waiting too

long for justice, smeared by unsubstantiated allegations without any opportunity given to refute them, and denied a right to take part in party activity.

The witch-hunt has claimed a number of victims such as Marc Wadsworth, a leading Labour black activist who was recently expelled, even though the original charge of antisemitism was found unproved. Jackie Walker, a leading left black Jewish activist, is still waiting for a hearing date almost two years after her suspension.

McNicol's successor as general secretary, Jennie Formby, is fiercely loyal to Jeremy and the anti-austerity politics he represents. But be aware she has a mammoth task to change the culture in Labour's Southside. We discovered that winning the leadership of the party with Jeremy Corbyn did not mean we had won back control. So, too, changing the person at the top of Labour's HQ will not mean everything will be put right immediately. But it gives real hope that the witch-hunt will end and the party machinery will fight for, rather than against, our twice democratically elected leader.

South Africa: Thousands on strike against poverty-level minimum wage



SAFTU statement on National Strike Today!



SAFTU-led march – an historic victory for the workers

Wednesday 25 April 2018 will be recorded in the history of the South African trade union movement as an historic turning point, when workers took to the streets in their many thousands to demonstrate against a poverty minimum wage and amendments to labour laws which threaten the basic

constitutional right to strike.

The South African Federation of Trade Unions congratulates and thanks all the members of its affiliated unions, civil society groups, political parties and members of the public who flooded the streets of Johannesburg, Cape

Town, Durban, PE, Bloemfontein and Polokwane, plus thousands more in rural areas and small towns who joined the protest by not working on the day.

The marchers delivered a thunderous warning shot to the government, employers and sweetheart union leaders that the people of South Arica are angrily opposed to the proposed national minimum wage of R20 an hour minimum wage, which entrenches poverty, legitimizes the apartheid wage gap and will keep thousands of workers in a daily struggle to survive, to feed the family and to pay for their children's education. It will make the world's most unequal society even more unequal and leave millions of the poor effectively excluded from the economy with all their meagre income being used just to survive.

There is no less anger at the proposed bills to amend labour laws, which will make it even more difficult for workers to exercise their constitutional right to strike.

Existing laws already require secret ballots to be held before workers can get a certificate for a protected strike, which most unions already use but as decided democratically by the members, not imposed by government.

Under the new amendments unions will have to navigate even more procedural obstacles, including extra laws on how secret ballots must be conducted, an even longer period for conciliation and picketing rules to be drawn up before a strike can begin.

A new clause will allow employers to sit tight, make no attempt to negotiate and then go back to the CCMA and argue that the strike has been going on for 'too long' or is causing 'too much damage' and demand arbitration of the dispute, which will become compulsory unless unions object within a short period during which they have to consult their members. If they miss the deadline the arbitration can become

compulsory, which would be an unconstitutional way to force workers back to work.

These bills will cause a particular problem for small unions with limited resources, and even more for groups of workers not in any union, who make up 76% of all employees but who have exactly the same constitutional right to strike. They cannot possibly comply with all these rules.

The effect of these bills will be to strengthen the power already dominant employers, and the teams of lawyers they hire to represent them. It will enable them emasculate trade unions, deny workers their basic human rights, allow their bosses to continue to exploit increasingly vulnerable workers and shift the balance of power even further in their favour.

If passed, these bills will severely worsen the already desperate plight of millions of workers, who face more job losses, casualisation of labour, a rising cost of living after increases in VAT, fuel levy and road accident fund levy, and deplorable levels of service in education, healthcare, and all other essential services.

The bills have been referred back to the Department of Labour for redrafting to include the submissions made to the parliamentary Portfolio committee on labour, one of which was made by SAFTU on 17 April 2018.

The federation will study the new drafts and demand that they are referred back for further discussion by Nedlac, but a Nedlac with SAFTU admitted, so that we can expose and oppose the scandalous deal on the bills which leaders of COSATU, FEDUSA and NACTU negotiated behind workers' backs and then signed off with government and business.

The bills will then return to Parliament and SAFTU will continue to persuade MPs to support its demands. Already we have convinced three parties to support our views – the Economic Freedom Fighters, the United Democratic Movement and the African People's Convention. We hope to convince more, including some ANC MPs.

We are also taking legal action on a possible court challenge to parts of the bills.

But our campaign will never depend on MPs or courts to succeed, but on more of what we saw today – mass action on the streets, which will get bigger each time, until we finally achieve our goals which are for a living minimum wage of R12

500 and amendments to labour laws to make it easier, not harder, for workers to be able to enjoy their constitutional right to strike.

Zwelinzima Vavi, SAFTU General Secretary: 079 182 4170

Moleko Phakedi, SAFTU Deputy General Secretary: 082 492 5111

Patrick Craven, SAFTU Acting Spokesperson: 061 636 6057

Appeal from Ukrainian Trade Unions

Appeal for international solidarity!

A major dispute is developing in the industrial city of Kryviy Rih in south east Ukraine. Trade unions from both federations, the confederation of free trade unions of Ukraine (kvpu) and also the federation of trade unions of Ukraine (fpu) have united in their demands and held a join conference to launch the campaign.

Their dispute is with the steel giant Arcelormittal, part of the Mittal steel company which is a world-wide corporation. the workers in Kryviy Rih are calling for international solidarity in their struggle. International support is important and has assisted the Ukrainian unions against the mining company Evraz and more recently to defeat the trial of 94 miners for protesting. Ukraine solidarity campaign will be publicising the campaign and calls for assistance in this campaign. We publish below a report by kvpu on the conference to launch the campaign.

Trade unions have united to protect the interests of workers of the pjsc “Arcelormittal Kryviy Rih”

On march 27, the conference of the labor collective of the

pjsc "Arcelormittal Kryviy Rih" that was announced at a rally organized by nine trade-union organizations on 14 march was held in Kryviy Rih. At the conference, the representatives of the labor collective of the pjsc "Arcelormittal Kryviy Rih" made requirements to the Chairman and CEO of steel group "Arcelormittaland" Lakshmi Mittal and to the CEO of pjsc "Arcelormittal Kryviy Rih" Paramjit Kahlon.

Employees organized this Conference, despite the efforts of the administration of the enterprise to disrupt its conduct. At the same time, the administration organized an alternative conference in the office of the enterprise. Moreover, before the Conference of labor collective delegates faced with the public disinformation campaign and pressure.

At the Conference, all primary trade unions at the PJSC "ArcelorMittal Kryviy Rih" have united to protect their members' social and labor rights. They demand to raise wages, to provide safe working conditions, to stop reducing personnel and persecuting trade unionists.

The trade unions hoped for a dialogue with the administration, but management didn't want to talk about workers' problems. Taking this into account, the labor collective conference voted for ousting from offices the Director of the Personnel Department Elena Pilipenko and her deputy Iryna Futruk.

Delegates of the conference approved the composition of the joint representative body of trade union organizations at the enterprise, which will represent employees in a collective labor dispute with the employer. It was also decided to begin preparations for a strike if the management of the "ArcelorMittal Kryviy Rih" rejects the demands of the workers and conciliation procedures doesn't bring any results.

The Chairman of the Independent Trade Union of Miners of Ukraine (NPGU) Mykhailo Volynets claimed during his speech at the Conference: "It's a significant situation when employer's

action and attitude has united almost a dozen different trade unions for defending the employees' rights".

Demands of the labor collective of PJSC "ArcelorMittal Kryviy Rih":

1. To raise the average monthly salary of employees to 1000 EUR from 01.04.2018.

2. To ensure safe working conditions for all workers.

– To conduct a comprehensive examination of all buildings, structures, equipment and mechanisms of the enterprise by the state organization in accordance with the approved schedule.

– To develop a comprehensive plan of measures for the examination of all floors, roofs, and construction of the PJSC "ArcelorMittal Kryviy Rih".

– To develop measures for elimination of standards violation with specific deadlines.

3. To carry out an expert examination of all buildings and constructions of the converter shop and to give a report on the results of the inspection to the labor collective and the trade union organizations.

– To make an overhaul of the roof overlapping of the unit No. 2 of the converter shop until 01.04.2018.

4. Stop the policy of reducing job places and outsourcing the workers.

5. To ensure the implementation the state construction in the ablution placement

6. To cease the antisocial and anti-union policies of the administration.

– To dismiss those who are responsible for conduction of such policies.

Further information from: [Ukrainesolidaritycampaign.org](https://ukrainesolidaritycampaign.org)