



## Economic crisis

The world price of oil is now at an 11-year low, after a 69% fall over the past year. In fact, the slump in world prices has hit just about every commodity. Iron ore, for instance, is at a 10-year low, following an 80% fall, while a rare metal like palladium, which is mostly used in cars and electronics, has fallen by 47% over the past year. As regards agriculture, meat and cereal prices fell by 15% over the same period, sugar by 21%, dairy products by 28%, etc.

For consumers, falling prices may sound like good news - that is, assuming retail prices follow, which is far from always being the case.

## Bankers back at the roulette wheel

Banks are again playing their risky casino games, while governments are repealing regulatory measures to allow even riskier practice. In America the repeal of a clause in the Dodd-Frank Act (designed to prevent banks from indulging in the kind of frantic speculation that led to the collapse of Lehman brothers) has allowed US banks to resume the same kind of toxic speculation which led to the 2007 crisis - involving assets which could potentially result in generating debts to a total as high as £6,800bn! That's triple the annual GDP of Britain! And these assets are guaranteed by public funds!

### • **Nationalism - always a lethal threat**

In the 1930s, the rich countries fought an on-going trade war, to protect the profits of their respective capitalist classes. They tried to steal each other's markets by devaluing their currencies, while raising tariff barriers against imports. In the end, this economic warfare shifted to the military sphere: WWII broke out.

In the present crisis, unlike in the 1930s, there have been no "competitive devaluations". But, in reality, the printing of electronic money - the so-called quantitative easing - used by most rich countries to cut the cost of borrowing and provide their capitalists with fresh cash, served exactly the same purpose, only in a more covert fashion.

Likewise, tariff barriers haven't been formally raised. But, in reality, governments introduced all kinds of creeping protectionist measures - usually hidden behind administrative or technical regulations which, effectively, exclude foreign products. Since 2009, the number of such measures adopted each year in Britain increased 5-fold - just as in Germany or France - while it increased 7-fold in the US!

So yes, while "free trade" remains the official watchword, there is a trade

## Oil price fall - not such good news

But due to the perverse operation of the capitalist economy, "good news" may well spell disaster. It already does in the poor producing countries. Not only have their governments responded to this drop in income by slashing already grossly inadequate social budgets, but companies are announcing massive job cuts - like mining giant Anglo-American, which plans to cut 85,000 jobs, out of a total workforce of 135,000.

In addition, there may be another catastrophe in the making. This is because, in order to finance their investment while maximising

dividends, the big commodity companies raised funds by selling bonds representing a share in the value of their future production - much in the same way as, before the crisis, mortgage lenders had sold bonds whose value depended on the future repayment of dubious mortgages. So, today, just as mortgage-backed bonds collapsed in 2007 when the real estate bubble burst, commodity bonds are in free-fall as the commodity bubble bursts. The question is whether, as happened in 2008, this will cause another financial meltdown. ☐

Isn't this just asking for another crash?

It's not just the US banks which are going down this road, of course. British banks are as well. But why should these banks care, when the government is making sure that they will have nothing to answer for, if there is a crash? The House of Commons recently amended a regulation whereby top bankers had to prove that they had acted within the law after a crash - shifting the burden of proof back onto state prosecutors. As the frenzy increases, governments only encourage the gambling, while the next crash gets nearer...



war going on in this capitalist world. And we should never forget what the nationalist fig leaf which covers it, has led to in the past!

### • **Slashing jobs and making billions**

Eight years after the banking crash, after bailouts and handouts, companies are sitting on large cashpiles, paying big dividends to their shareholders and buying out other companies ... while cutting jobs.

The sum spent on mergers and acquisitions internationally in 2015 broke all records, hitting £3,060bn. And the latest report by Capita Asset Services showed that in the 3rd quarter of 2015 British companies paid out £27.2bn in dividends - the largest quarterly sum ever paid - with a predicted total of £85bn for the whole of 2015.

So what about jobs? The American chemical giant DuPont is laying off 10% of its workforce after announcing its merger with Dow Chemicals. Similar jobs cuts are on the agenda in Britain if the mergers between Argos and Sainsbury's and between Shell and BG, go ahead. The British Engineering Employers' Federation has said "tens of thousands" of jobs are to go in 2016... Yes, the capitalist class is increasingly

parasitical, hoarding billions, while closing factories and businesses.

### • **Wealthy on our backs**

According to the Institute of Fiscal Studies, the richest 10% in Britain earn, on average, 4 times more than the poorest 10% of the population. Since the crisis in 2007, they have earned between 3.9 and 4.2 times more, year in, year out! So for instance, while house prices keep increasing - by 9.5% last year - a minority of the better-off can afford to own properties worth over £1m. In fact, the number of property millionaires rose by 14% in the past year!

In the meantime, the share of wages as a percentage of GDP - even when taking into account top-level salaries and bonuses - fell by 2% between 2007 and 2015, while real pay was still 9% lower in 2015 compared to the period just after the crisis. At the same time, the share of financial and commercial profits in GDP has actually increased! In other words, in order to keep money filling the pockets of a rich minority, the working class majority must become always poorer!



## Floods and government hot air

Once again, winter floods washed away roads, cut power and forced thousands to flee their homes, in Cumbria in mid-December and Lancashire, Yorkshire, south-west and north-east Scotland two weeks later. Ministers were quick to say the rainfall was "unprecedented", a cynical excuse coming from them. Their commitment to the financial interests of big business comes before everything else. Serious efforts to protect the population from flooding in the future would start with spending money on prevention rather than cutting corporation tax, for instance. It would also mean outlawing the widespread mismanagement of land which benefits only the wealthy,

### Cutting spending on defences

Stronger defences and storage facilities to accommodate flood water are more than ever needed to protect many towns from floods, as "exceptional" rainfall becomes less exceptional. But the process of designing and approving these defences is slow, as proposed schemes compete against each other for funding. After Cameron became Prime Minister in 2010, flood defence spending was cut by a fifth. Spending has only gone up temporarily, to provide emergency relief.

At strategic level, DEFRA, the Department of Environment, Food and

#### • Building in floodplains

For 30 years or more, the government's Environment Agency and its predecessors objected to developments in areas at risk of flooding from rivers or the sea. Since 2001 government planning policy has required developers to assess the flood risk to proposed new development in floodplains, set house floors and access above flood levels and demonstrate that they will not increase the risk to their neighbours. They also had to include "sustainable drainage" of developments of at least one hectare everywhere - measures to contain storm water within sites and control its release so as not to increase flood risk elsewhere. Now, under Cameron, this is only required for developments of five hectares or more.

In practice, flood risk assessments just became hoops for developers to jump through, rather than actually preventing their building in floodplains. Recent analysis of government data revealed that in 2013-14 nearly 10,000 homes, i.e., 1 in 14, were built on river and coastal floodplains in England and Wales. Adding those at risk from groundwater or surface water flooding, might more than double that figure. Meanwhile the EA has disbanded local teams of engineers who used to advise developers on reducing



instead of subsidising it.

"Clearly we should look again at whether there's more we can do," said David Cameron as floods devastated towns in the Pennine valleys and part of York in late December. It sounded familiar. In February 2014

Rural Affairs, is responsible for adapting to the changing climate which is expected to stay more extreme indefinitely. There is an "adaptation programme", but in May 2013 the then Secretary of State, Owen Paterson, cut the number of officials working on it from 38 to 6. No surprise, perhaps, as Paterson is a known climate change sceptic, who was appointed despite, or more likely because, of these views...

When councils were forced to make deep cuts too, spending on emergency preparations was a predictable casualty,

flood risk. Having relaxed the regime, Cameron certainly isn't proposing the total ban on building new homes on floodplains, which is so urgently needed.

#### • Defending abuses by land-owners in lowlands...

Although some careful dredging of riverbeds seems an obvious measure to avoid flooding from swollen rivers, in December 2014 the government proposed that these operations should be de-prioritised. As for flood defences for settlements in the path of such rivers, despite expert advice, governments have always avoided promoting simple measures which supplement good land management and which could hold back water flows, allowing water to remain in the countryside.

Woodlands absorb groundwater and stop the ground becoming saturated. Simple dams made of twigs, bracken and heather allow water through in normal conditions, but slow down torrents generated by storms. But for centuries, rural drainage practice has aimed to drain agricultural land as fast as possible and few landowners want flood water stored on their land. So their interests have been allowed to dominate the "Internal Drainage Boards", funded by levies on

## Floods

he had promised to "make sure lessons were learned" while visiting flooded villages in Somerset. When the floods actually happen Cameron and co., talk about preventing them. Meanwhile, they preside over practices that make them more likely. □

even as flooding emergencies got more common. People whose homes and shops were flooded in York and Leeds found the council response non-existent; in Leeds online requests for sandbags brought up error messages and the telephone service was little better. Cuts in fire and rescue services have resulted in volunteers being drafted in - some teams rescuing people from flooded homes in Carlisle, came from as far as Warrington, 100 miles away!

farmers, with contributions from councils and the EA. These Boards still prioritise maintaining ditches, to speed the passage of rainwater from farmland into rivers - which recently contributed to the sudden flooding of York from the river Foss!

#### • ... and the uplands

Management of upland moors for grouse shooting, a favourite pastime of the rich, often involves burning of heather and the building of unauthorised drainage works on the moors. By destroying not only vegetation, but bogs, this vastly speeds up run-off into streams. Bizarrely, grouse moors even qualify for agricultural subsidies!

Residents of Hebden Bridge in West Yorkshire have campaigned against the intensification of these activities on an estate above the town, since a retail tycoon bought it in 2002. Natural England, the government nature conservation watchdog, prosecuted it - only to abandon this in 2012 and do a deal which involved giving the estate £2.5m of public money to go on much as before. The reasons for the U-turn were never made public, but it is no secret that the minister responsible, Richard Benyon, owns a grouse moor himself. Last month Hebden Bridge suffered its worst ever flood...

## Sports Direct

## When thieves cry, "Catch the thief"

The Sports Direct scandal exposed how one of Britain's retail giants failed to pay the minimum wage. Although a bosses' outfit like the Institute of Directors called it a "scar on British Business", this is just the tip of the iceberg of systematic racketeering of low-paid workers by some of the largest companies, whether directly or indirectly, through subcontractors!

The extent of this racketeering is shown by the officially estimated number of workers paid below the minimum wage - 250,000! And the fact that only 705 such cases were investigated last year speaks volumes as to the government's refusal to take on Scrooge bosses.

This is why Osborne's "National Living Wage" - to be introduced at £7.20/hr next April - is a con. It will

### The pennies that made the millions!

Just after the Sports Direct scandal, the spokesperson of one of the two main subcontractors at the retailer's Shirebrock warehouse said that "we do not breach national minimum wage legislation". But that is exactly the point. There are all sorts of loopholes in the law which allow bosses to pay workers peanuts. In this case, Sports Direct has invented many dirty tricks to steal pennies from the minimum wage of these workers and is doing so legally for

#### • Zero-hour contracts: from workplaces to workhouses?

The worst of it is that 80% of the workers in this warehouse are employed on zero-hour contracts. In other words, they do not know how many hours they will work in the week and they can be called in to work at short notice. In some cases they were told to turn up for work with just 24 hours' notice. In less busy periods, workers turned up for work, but found that they were not needed that day!

Of course, such contracts mean that workers are more likely to feel obliged to accept all sorts of exploitative and humiliating practices at work. Unsurprisingly, such zero-hour contracts are increasingly widespread. Official figures show that 1.6m workers in Britain were on a zero-hours or similar contract and that this number has increased by 19% over the last year. And most people on these contracts earn less than £300 a week. In other words, Sports Direct is just one among many companies employing workers on terms which give them no



still be too low to make ends meet and will only apply to the over 25s. But, in addition, its enforcement mechanism will be the same as for today's minimum wage - meaning that the bosses have nothing to worry about!

the most part!

The under-cover Guardian reporters who worked at the Shirebrock warehouse reported that all the workers go through rigorous searches (lasting 15 minutes!) down to the last layer of clothing every day, adding an hour and 15 minutes to the working week for which the workers are not paid! If they clock in even a minute late, they are fined 15 minutes of their wages. But if they work 5 or 10 minutes extra, they do not

guarantee of even receiving a pittance from one day to the other.

#### • Who needs their helpline?

What was the government's response to the Sports Direct scandal? When the question was raised in the House of Commons as to whether there will be an investigation by HMRC into such practices, the Treasury tried its best to persuade the speaker that the question wasn't "at all urgent and should not be aired".

And when it was eventually discussed, the initial response of the junior business minister, Nick Boles, was that the workers could phone the ACAS hotline if they were too scared to complain about their bosses. Finally, MPs got their act together and agreed to call for a parliamentary enquiry, and they added that the appearance of the Sports Direct boss, Mike Ashley, before a parliamentary select committee (which the MPs are not too confident of) would be seen as a "test of parliamentary strength"! Although almost a month has passed,

The working class can't expect anything from the goodwill of the bosses' trustees in government. It has never made any substantial gain without fighting for it - and this applies just as much to winning a living wage. □

get any extra pay! As a result, the effective rate of pay comes down to £6.50/hr, instead of £6.70/hr according to the same reporters.

If calculated on the basis of an average of 5000 workers employed per day, such a pay cut amounts to adding £365,000 to the company's profits per year. Yes, billionaires like Mike Ashley (current owner of Sports Direct) don't give a damn if their billions come from the stolen wages of the poorest workers.

they still haven't been able to persuade the HMRC even to lift a finger with regard to their already "agreed" further investigation!

#### • All's well that ends well!

In his bid to "set a high moral standard... among the FTSE 100 or 250 companies", but really to try and shore up the share price which had plunged after the scandal, Mike Ashley has announced a very petty wage rise for the workforce - i.e., a 15p per hour pay rise for 15,000 workers employed casually or by agencies. This will cost the company a maximum of £4.6m/yr (assuming the 15,000 employees are all full-time which is certainly not the case) - which represents just 0.17% of its £2.7bn annual revenue!!

And from the government, Mr. Ashley has got another good deal! He has been let off by HMRC without paying a fine for an effective infringement of the minimum wage law, let alone being forced to compensate his workforce for looting them for years.



## Doctors to cure Hunt's disease?

Even if the first NHS hospital doctor's strike in 40 years doesn't take place on 12 January, the issue the doctors are fighting over, i.e. hours of work and a proposed cut in overtime pay, highlights the present drastic NHS crisis. Sure, there are too few doctors, nurses and ancillaries working too many hours - but this is just part of the picture. Hospital trusts throughout England are in financial meltdown, reflected in a current overall deficit of £2.2bn for 2015. Given that at least £30bn is needed just to keep the NHS going until 2020, compared to the just £8bn allotted by Osborne for the next 5 years, £22bn-worth of "efficiency savings" by 2020 have been imposed on this already seriously underfunded NHS. Which is obviously why health secretary, Jeremy Hunt, is initiating this particular cut in 45,000 "junior" doctors' pay.

It's dishonestly proposed under the guise of gaining "a 7-days-a-week NHS" by 2020, even though staff already cover it 24/7. Doctors



get paid time-and-a-half between 7pm and 7am on weekdays and for the whole weekend. Hunt wants overtime pay to kick in, instead, at 10pm on weekdays, with Saturday paid at basic rate till 10pm.

### • Even more perverse cuts

One section of NHS workers - student nurses - has already decided to join the doctors in taking industrial action. They propose to do so during the doctors' third strike, scheduled for Wednesday 10 February, when doctors intend to be "all out". On that day doctors will provide no cover at all, whereas on 12 and 26 January, their strikes will be partial, as they will be providing emergency cover.

Student nurses have been told that "their contribution" to "efficiency savings" will be the loss of their training bursaries, because apparently the NHS can't afford them any more and if they took loans instead, "like all other students", then more of them could be trained! The worst aspect of this is that these students actually work "for free" during their training, forming an indispensable part of the NHS workforce, and the bursaries were meant in part, to be in acknowledgement of this small fact!

The nurses aren't taking this lying down and already staged a very lively demonstration to Westminster on Saturday 9th January. They are right to protest. All NHS staff and all other workers for that matter, should be preparing to fight alongside those in the frontline against the attack on the public services we all need!

### • Rendering us care-less

Social care providers in England claim that "devastating financial collapse" is

imminent. Indeed, with £4.6bn in council funding cuts since 2010, an estimated 500,000 elderly and disabled have already been denied the care they need. And of course, since the "care they need" is meant to be provided by the private companies which have slowly but surely taken over this sector in the hope of pulling a profit out of (mainly) the public purse, these privateers are threatening to close their doors, which will create an even greater crisis in social care. One company has earmarked 23 care homes for closure and has already shut 9.

While paying scandalously low wages to staff and providing generally poor care, many in the sector now say that even paying the pathetically low new minimum wage will make their "businesses" un-viable. And Osborne's "helping hand", i.e., giving councils the right to raise council tax by 2% to help fund social care, will not, apparently, plug the £2.9bn funding gap predicted by the sector by 2020.

What's the answer? Strangely enough, this reactionary government itself has proposed the merger of the inter-reliant NHS and social care sectors. But of course it intends this as a radical cost-cutter, not a way to integrate health and social care and return both fully to the public sector, where they belong. Indeed, removing the profit motive would go some way to addressing the problem: it has no place anywhere in health or social care provision.

## NHS

But most hospital doctors routinely work over their hours; it's the nature of the job. The EU Directive eventually restricted their working week to 48hrs (6X8hrs), but calculated as an average over 6 months! The system of fines for hospitals whose doctors exceed this, hasn't prevented 90-hour weeks... But now Hunt wants this system relaxed too - another sticking point for the doctors' union, the BMA.

The 4-week arbitration with ACAS which resulted in the BMA cancelling the strikes called in December, has yielded nothing. Or maybe one good thing: the BMA negotiator publicly issued a detailed update of the failed talks on 24 December, defying the usual "secrecy" claimed by union leaders, and infuriating NHS bosses! Hunt's offer of an 11% basic pay increase certainly won't make up for the 26% pay cut inflicted by the proposals. Let us hope doctors fight this through to the end - but also, that other workers join them! □

### Letter from Sussex

A few years ago, Wealden District Council, which covers over a third of East Sussex, moved its HQ to Hailsham, about 8 miles north of Eastbourne. The council now seems intent on making a mockery of its own motto, "in the heart of the countryside" with its latest plans for housing development. This plan would literally double Hailsham's population and probably create a continuous urban development stretching to the coast. Yet there is no plan for infrastructure to keep pace with any increase in population.

No doubt the council is trying to increase revenue by riding the rise of housing prices in the south of England. Never mind that the whole "development" area is low-lying and prone to winter flooding - indeed, the nearby Cuckmere river just flooded!

Not only are they not planning necessary social infrastructure, they are busy cutting what exists. Adult Social Care faces special savagery. In Hailsham, brand new sheltered housing for the elderly is to be sold off as commercial flats. Already, an old hospital site north of Hailsham has been turned into a substantial housing estate. However this particular project backfired, literally, when the sewage system started blowing back, creating just the kind of stink which they deserve!

## Jobs and wages **Blackmail and sell-outs**

Since the financial crisis of 2007, wages haven't stop falling - partly due to the casualisation of work and the generalisation of precarious jobs, but also because of the deterioration of pay in already existing jobs.

The case of digger-maker JCB, is one example among many. In September last year, the company announced 400 job-cuts, while its CEO argued that the industry was facing "very tough trading conditions". So JCB bosses, with the backing of the GMB union leadership, recommended a "deal" by which workers would be forced to reduce their working hours, resulting in a de facto 13% pay cut, in return for fewer redundancies, 290 instead of 400.

This is not the first time that JCB has tried this trick. Back in 2008, an



exact-same "deal" was forced upon JCB workers, with the full backing of GMB union officials, when working hours, and therefore wages, were cut under the pretext of "saving" 332 jobs. Which didn't prevent the JCB from coming back with another 97 job cuts a month later!

No, workers cannot fall for the

blackmail of the bosses. Nor can they afford the spinelessness of the union officials. If the workload happens to decrease, for whatever reason, the work can be shared among the existing workforce, without any redundancies and without pay cuts! This is what is worth fighting for! ☐

### Playing with fire

During the severe flooding in York, neither of the city's specialist water rescue teams were deployed! The Fire Brigades Union has explained that this was a deliberate move to lay the basis for cutting this service.

And they have good reason for concern. They have faced 5 years of cuts, which have seen at least 6,000 firefighters jobs being lost,

and pensions attacked. And now Theresa May has announced more cuts. As part of her "relentless focus on efficiency", she plans to merge the fire and police services into one department. Does she realise she's only repeating a move that was tried a 140 years ago and given up precisely because of its inefficiency? But it is not the efficiency in saving

lives threatened by floods or fire that May was concerned about anyway...

And she obviously didn't notice the irony in merging two forces, one of which, the fire service, is specifically designed to save everyone's lives, while the other, the taser-armed police, is specifically designed to protect the private property of the rich against the poor.

### • Tube fares to accelerate

As part of the crippling cuts to the Department for Transport, Transport for London is to lose its whole government subsidy of £700m a year, giving London the dubious distinction of being the only European capital without a subsidised transport network.

This will mean that the cost of these subsidies will fall on the shoulders of workers. For one, TfL will cut its costs, by cutting tube workers' jobs and wages. For another, it will raise fares even more, when commuters already shoulder 91% of its operating costs. This, when a worker on the minimum wage already has to slog for 32.8 hours a month just to pay for a monthly all-zones tube pass. For many of London's 4.8 million daily commuters, that's nearly a week's wages gone on tube fares!

The London Transport commissioner, Peter Hendy, who earns a tax-payer-funded annual salary of £650,000, admitted that if the inequality in public transport isn't addressed, there could be "social unrest". Too true! These austerity-mad politicians are digging their own graves.

### • British child soldiers

When the House of Lords attempted to introduce an amendment to reduce the voting age to 16 for EU referendums, it came up against the resolute opposition of the government. The civil justice minister said, "we may be in danger of placing too great a responsibility on them". Never mind that youths of the same age were able to vote in the Scottish referendum, and didn't seem to be overwhelmed by the "responsibility" of putting the right ballot paper into the right slot!

But apparently these same politicians don't seem to think that recruiting 16 and 17 year-olds into the army places "too great a responsibility" on them. Britain is the only European country to recruit under the age of 18. The army regularly visits schools, usually those in poorer areas, to tell students how it is "challenging and fun", and hosts websites aimed at 14 to 16 year-olds offering a shooting game.

This "democratic" state prefers to teach youths to kill and die - and above all to learn the discipline of the barracks - rather than allowing them to get a taste of the most elementary democracy.

### • Thatcher under the hammer

The daughter of former Tory PM Margaret Thatcher recently organised a car boot sale of her mother's possessions at Christie's, the biggest art auction house in London. Everything which belonged to the late Thatcher had to go.

From a wedding "ensemble" (sold at £25,000) to bits and bobs, including the red dispatch box she bought (from the state for £100) when she left office, which fetched £242,500... But they didn't dare auction the less than savoury letters from Thatcher's son, Mark, asking for introduction letters to arms dealers and help to keep out of jail, after he was arrested for trying to help organise a coup in Equatorial Guinea (in Central Africa).

Of course, it's hard to take any of this seriously. We're even told that one of the articles up for sale was a pencil that Thatcher "might have chewed" and which was found by son Mark and daughter Carol down the back of a sofa, and auctioned for... £6,000!

If true, there is more than one witch in the family. And this one has managed to turn her allegedly "iron" mum into gold...



## **A matter of life and death**

In the midst of Osborne's indiscriminate cuts, Network Rail will get an extra £2.5bn. Are we (happily) to suppose this is to improve the tracks, on which dangerous cracks have led to repeated delays and speed restrictions?

Oh no. It's for the governments' vanity projects: Crossrail and HS2, which, Cameron told us, are supposed to magically transform the de-industrialised north of England into

a "powerhouse" of jobs and opportunity. Somehow, this magic seems also to have produced an extra £61bn for these projects - which is ironical, since, last year, no there was no money to increase Network Rail workers' pay.

Meanwhile, the day-to-day budget of Network Rail, which it spends on maintenance and repair of the existing rail system, is as tight as ever. In line with the infamous 2011 McNulty

report, workers face further job losses as their work is only applied to "critical, as opposed to non-critical assets, reducing the number of inspections and associated costs".

Cracked or broken rails have become only too common in the past few months, and are a life-threatening disaster waiting to happen. Passengers and railworkers cannot afford another Hatfield. The re-hiring of track inspection and maintenance staff is vital!

### **BMW Mini centre (Cowley, Oxford)**

## **BMW's planned (and unplanned) holidays**

Workers at BMW's Mini assembly plant in Oxford return to work on Monday 11 January after a three week holiday. Generous of BMW? Hardly. BMW has shut the plant for longer and longer in recent years, under the pretext of building work, or line engineering, for new models, though workers coming back don't always notice much difference.

Instead, BMW expects workers to cover its own required shutdowns with their annual leave. If that is used up, they are expected to use their "working time accounts" (WTA) - and must pay the time back to BMW later. Thus BMW can make workers do the extra hours when it chooses. With a three-shift system since 2014, this can only happen at

weekends - when the hours can be repaid at premiums, like overtime. BMW even debits shifts cancelled for machine breakdowns or parts shortages in the same way. So workers never know if they will have enough hours left in their WTA "bank" in order to be paid during such lay-offs. Unlike some working time account systems, BMW's is not annualised - credit or "debts" can be carried forward indefinitely, with a limit of 300 hours, or 100 hours for agency workers.

In 2015 the number of compulsory shutdowns left workers with virtually no annual leave days to take off when they chose. In November BMW announced its plans for this year. Out of a typical annual leave



entitlement of 26 days plus public holidays, BMW has decided when workers have to take 22 of them, leaving only 4 days off for workers to choose themselves! The system was originally "sold" as benefiting both sides, allowing workers to accumulate hours and take more holidays at times approved by management. But BMW now shuts the plant so often that most workers haven't been "in credit" for years!

### **Ford Dagenham estate (Essex)**

#### **• Panther job 1 - coming soon!**

Hmm... yes, this Job maybe coming soon to a line near you, but it's certainly not here yet! So maybe this champagne-less celebration was just a tad premature! T-Shirts given to us, plus "certificate" to commemorate the launch of the brand new Panther engine! We do look forward to seeing a fully "armed" Panther (or more than one?) but aren't counting on it! [Workers' Fight Ford Dagenham 09/12/15]

#### **• Our moans can be heard miles away!**

But what's even worse, in terms of Ford's disorganisation, is that we then get told that our mini pay rise (due end November) is delayed till week 2 in January now! Apparently Payroll wasn't "ready" to pay the 3%... Was it expecting us to be out on strike? Perhaps we can oblige - and come back mid-Jan, when they've got their figures straight: pay rise, back-pay, bonus,

AND added WONGA-interest! [Workers' Fight Ford Dagenham 09/12/15]

#### **• A dirty deal we won't forget**

Talking about pay rises, our pay - thanks to that dirty 2-tier deal which we at Dagenham voted against - certainly didn't rise by the £2.55/hr which it needed to, in order to catch up! A grade 3 on 3 shifts got just 60p per hour rise! "Average wages are still 8.9% below their pre-crisis level"! [Workers' Fight Ford Dagenham 06/01/16]

#### **• He already had a tail**

We do hope that the Tiger (machine-shop) foreman who locked "his" team in a room and tried making all kinds of threats, thus provoking us to stop work, has learnt his lesson? Ford didn't move this madman away, but gave him a tail - another foreman to "mind" him, to try to keep him in line. They needn't have - we knew how to do it, but that was precisely Ford's problem!



BTW, if it had been us locking foremen in a room, we wonder what would've happened then? Might be an idea...? [Workers' Fight Ford Dagenham 06/01/16]

#### **• Snakes and ladder-frames**

The hectic rush on Puma is senseless given it's all meant to wind down next April or whenever (but did Ford ever stick to a timetable?). Things could run slower. Yet even with parts shortages and machining breakdowns, we're pushed to do 8 days/week! And then we also have to avoid poisonous bites from foremen if we decide to take a much-needed breather? Very crazy! [Workers' Fight Ford Dagenham 15/12/09]

## Saudi Arabia

*The rich powers have the criminal allies they deserve*

Saudi Arabia, the western countries "best friend" in the Arab world, began the year 2016 by executing 47 opponents across the country in just one day. Some were shot by a firing squad, others were beheaded. In many cases their dead bodies were crucified and publicly displayed for several days. There is not much to choose between the Saudi royals' executions and those propagated on social media by ISIS!

However, the Saudi dictatorship was careful to present these executions as part of the western "war on terror", by portraying some of those executed as members of Al-Qaeda. But several among the 47 were known for having been prosecuted due to their involvement in the country's little-known "Arab Spring" - a long series of protests, between 2011 and 2013, in the eastern Saudi province of Qatif. Among the protesters who were executed was one of the most prominent voices of the opposition to the regime, the Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr.

The province of Qatif is home to most of its Shia minority (close to 25% of the population) which is, traditionally, the victim of a systematic social discrimination. The Sunni rulers of Saudi Arabia have always considered this minority as a threat, not so much for religious reasons, but because, due to this discrimination, secessionist demands have become increasingly popular among the Shia minority. And since most of the country's oil reserves happen to



March against the Saudi bombings in Sanaa

be in Qatif, this is something that the Saudi rulers just cannot afford.

Saudi Arabia's western allies have long chosen to look the other way. The 157 executions which were carried out last year did not attract much blame from the British government. Last October, foreign secretary Philip Hammond even told the Commons: "I do not expect Mr Al-Nimr to be executed. Our judgement is that we achieve most by speaking privately and regularly to our Saudi interlocutors". Well, this "speaking privately" didn't do much good, did it? But then, what does Hammond care about the victims of the Saudi dictators, anyway?

Nor do western leaders give a damn about the Saudi aggression against poverty-stricken Yemen, which has caused more instability in

the region and has resulted, since it began last March, in 6,000 victims, tens of thousands wounded and 2.5 million refugees. As to the role played by the Saudi regime in fanning the flames of the Syrian civil war, by sponsoring various jihadist militias - including ISIS, in its early days - it does not even stop the likes of Hammond portraying it as a "factor of peace" and a "key partner" in the future political settlement of the Syrian crisis!

But the truth, of course, is that the rich countries' leaders are determined to carry on using the Saudi rulers as their regional police, because of their "effectiveness" in crushing any form of resistance from the population. □

## Blood profits

Of course, the relationship between the rich countries and the Saudi dictators has a lot to do with mega-contracts, mostly in oil, since Saudi Arabia controls 16% of the world's oil reserves, but also in the arms trade. And this has immediate, bloody consequences.

In Yemen, on January 6, remnants of a US-made CBU-58 cluster bomb were found in the capital, Sanaa. Originally designed for the Vietnam war, these bombs are particularly lethal because, in addition to containing 650 submunitions, each submunition contains many 5-gram

incendiary pellets. The bomb found in Sanaa had been manufactured in 1978 in the US state of Tennessee. US export records show that 1,000 CBU-58s were officially sold to Saudi Arabia in the 25 years up to 1995. So, old as they may be, these bombs are now being used to kill and maim in Yemen! And US leaders keep selling arms to Saudi Arabia: in addition to a £5.4bn contract for 600 Patriot rockets, another contract for the supply of laser-guided bombs and direct attack munitions has just been approved by Obama.

But the US are not the only "bad guys" in this respect. In November, a British-made cruise missile, manufactured by Marconi, destroyed a ceramics factory in a village near Sanaa. Data for arms sales by Britain are difficult to get, but human rights groups have worked out that over 100 British licences for arms exports to Saudi Arabia were delivered since the bombing of Yemen began. Just for the first 6 months of 2015, these licences covered more than £1.75bn worth of equipment - mostly for the very same Saudi air force which is bombing Yemen!

In addition to this monthly paper, we publish fortnightly bulletins in several large workplaces in the South East, a quarterly journal, "Class Struggle" and the "Internationalist Communist Forums" - a series of pamphlets on topical issues.

If you wish to find out more about our ideas, activities and publications, contact the Workers' Fight activist who sold you this issue of our paper, or write to us either by e-mail, at [contact@w-fight.org](mailto:contact@w-fight.org), or by postal mail at:

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