

WORKERS' fight



No 89 - January 2018

price 30p

<http://www.w-fight.org>
contact@w-fight.org

ISSN 2040-400X

"The emancipation of the working class will only be achieved by the working class itself" (Karl Marx)

Carillion, Four Seasons, Virgin, LET THE BOSSES AND SHAREHOLDERS PAY!

The year 2018 began with the share prices of Britain's 100 richest companies breaking another all-time record. Despite the economy's downward slide and Brexit inflation, the wealthy are clearly doing great!

Yet, at the same time, the NHS is also breaking an all-time record. Despite May's denial, it is in a worse state of collapse than ever - with increasing waiting times in A&E, over 55,000 "non-urgent" operations postponed and a catastrophic shortage of hospital beds.

The exorbitant cost of privatisation

And now we see the private sector rats leaving the public sector's sinking ship, after decades of bleeding its budgets dry.

In December, Four Seasons, a private company and the country's largest care home operator, filed for bankruptcy, leaving 17,000 elderly patients high and dry. What will happen to them at a time when local council budgets have already been shrunk to the point where many are unable to take care of the growing number of homeless households?

And then this January, it has been Carillion's turn to collapse. This company was one of the largest private "partners" chosen by successive governments in their frenzy to outsource and subcontract more and more chunks of public services.

By filing for bankruptcy, Carillion bosses leave 46,000 workers to their fate, with a £580m deficit in their pension scheme; 2000 apprentices are terminated and many more workers employed by small subcontractors have only 2 days pay guaranteed. As to the 18,500 hospital meals and 32,000 school meals that Carillion was responsible for, who knows who will take over? The government, i.e., the taxpayer? In any case Carillion bosses couldn't care!



Parasitism as a way of life...

We are told Carillion collapsed under the weight of its debts. But did it? Sure, Carillion bosses borrowed so as to build a gigantic subcontracting empire, from Canada to the Middle East.

But Britain is its real power base. Carillion got its fingers into just about every public sector pie. It won long-term contracts to build/maintain facilities for Education, the NHS and the MoD, provide hospital and school meals, man NHS helpdesks and manage prisons. Despite its dubious record, it sneaked its way into projects like HS2, CrossRail, rail track maintenance, and a new generation of PFI hospitals in Liverpool and Manchester.

Over many years, Carillion fed on public funds with around 450 public sector contracts - the bulk of its revenue in Britain. But at least 60% of its profits went straight to its shareholders, while it kept investment to a minimum and borrowed money from willing banks, as it was a bit like lending to the state.

... with the politicians' complicity

Without the help of Labour and Tory politicians, Carillion wouldn't have grown this empire. One of its board members held a junior position under Blair, while its present chairman advised Cameron on "corporate responsibility". "Responsibility"?! Carillion, Four Seasons, Serco, private rail operators and the like are only responsible to shareholders - not to society.

The politicians' claim that the private sector was "more efficient" at managing public services was a lie. They only wanted to give the profit sharks a chance to parasitise public funds.

So, since 2018 is the 70th anniversary of the NHS, let's make it the year when the working class stands up for its class interests. After all, the working class owes its strength to its numbers and its role in producing everything in this society. It can use this strength to impose its control at every level, to ensure that society is not run for profit, but for the benefit of all. ☐

Housing

The "net worth" of Britain's whole economy increased by more than £803bn in 2015-16 - an all time record. And most of the increase was due to the soaring value of land. After falling by £1,000bn after 2008, it caught up with its pre-crisis peak in 2014, and has gone up ever since.



• Growing cash pile for the few

The total value of Britain's housing stock has passed £6,000bn for the first time, a rise of over £2,000bn in 10 years. The combined value of homes in London (up by £620bn) and the South East, which saw the biggest increases, is higher than Scotland, Wales and the three regions of northern England put together. This overall increase masks a drastic fall of £29bn in the total value of homes in Northern Ireland, the only region where housing stock is worth less than £100bn.

• Right-to-buy vicious cycle

The right-to-buy policy introduced by Thatcher and implemented by every single government ever since, was billed as a step to a "property-owning democracy". Instead, over 40% of sold-off council homes in England are now privately rented. In seven local authorities the percentage is more than half, including Milton Keynes where it is above 70%. Private rents overall are an average £210 per week, more than twice the average council rent of £88 - and it's even worse in London, with private rents at £359 as opposed to £108 for council rents. That these private rents should reach such extortionate levels is simply due to the fact

Outlandish bounty

So much so, that by now, land makes up more than half of Britain's £9,800bn "net worth".

Who benefits? Mostly the largest landowners, of course - in particular the royals and aristocrats who still own around one third of all land in England and Wales, and even more in Scotland. But, above all, it is the safety of land as an investment, compared to industry or finance, which has boosted the market price of land: while bitcoin may well dissolve into the electronic ether from where it emerged, land remains solidly under investors' feet!

Next to professional landowners and property speculators, the construction giants are also making a killing, using a trick of their own: getting planning permission for a plot of land dramatically increases its market value and then, all they have to do is to sit on their land

Unsurprisingly, only 3.3% of this wealth is owned by people under 35 years old. Over-55s own 63.3%. According to the Halifax Bank, the total rate of owner-occupation nationally is 63%, but in London, only 48% of private housing is owner-occupied. In fact those benefiting most from this "boom" - or should we say "inflated bubble" - are those who "buy-to-let" and those who just speculate on property!

that tenants have no other choice! And not only does the cost of renting swallow a large chunk of workers' wages but it also inflates the housing benefit bill.

Small wonder, then, that the local government ombudsman is dealing increasingly with complaints from workers in stable jobs, made homeless by arbitrary evictions or priced out of the market by rising rents. Councils, prevented from spending money raised from council house sales, or from borrowing in order to build new social housing, cannot now even meet the growing need for emergency accommodation - which has resulted precisely from "right-to-buy"!

while house prices keep increasing. The homeless charity Shelter estimates that over one million homes could be built straight away on the land thus hoarded by the 10 largest building giants!

Ironically, while Britain's feudal land ownership system still feeds the parasitism of the aristocracy, it also feeds the parasitism of the capitalist fat cats - and, by the same token, the chronic housing crisis faced by the working class. If there was ever a case for the blanket collectivisation of all land, without compensation, for the benefit the majority, this is certainly it! □

Grenfell survivors still waiting

More than 6 months after the Grenfell fire of 14 June 2017, 4 out of 5 households left homeless from the fire are still waiting to be housed. Half of the families faced Christmas in a hotel room or other "emergency" accommodation. Eighteen families even missed out on the extra money which was to be given as a kind of charitable "Christmas box"! This is how the responsible authorities behave: the same kind of inaction which led to the fire in the first place.

Theresa May promised to rehouse survivors within three weeks. Then Sajid Javid, communities minister said it would be by Xmas. Now Kensington and Chelsea council leader Elizabeth Campbell, said she is "absolutely" hoping to have everyone in homes within a year! Apparently finding 300 suitable homes is "really difficult"! Never mind that requisitioning some of the 2,000 plus empty properties in the area, almost three quarters of which are long term vacant is entirely possible.

But we live in a private property worshipping system, so this could never be on their agenda, not in a month of Sundays. In the meantime Grenfell survivors and all those affected must wait. And measures to remedy failures like taking on more fire officers to replace the thousands cut and replacing all the flammable cladding on similar buildings - even these elementary steps have not yet been taken.

NHS/Social care

Four Seasons, the largest care home operator in Britain with its 17,000 patients and 26,000 employed staff, is in financial trouble... again. Since the private equity group Terra Firma bought the business with borrowed money in 2012, it has been repeatedly unable to clear its debt interest payments.

This is not the first time a private care home provider has come under the spotlight. Back in 2011, Southern Cross, then

Social care-less privateers

the largest provider of social care in Britain, went into administration when it couldn't pay the rent on its leased properties.

Indeed, the privatisation of care for the elderly resulted in predatory speculation right from the word go. Shareholders made millions out of it, gambling on the fact that governments would always pay the bills. Except that they didn't, because they didn't care. Budgets were increasingly squeezed. The private care home

operators started cutting costs, while some went bust.

Back in 2011, Southern Cross cut 3,000 jobs and forced a new, more exploitative contract on its workforce. This time, Four Seasons has already announced a "restructuring" deal to appease its biggest lender, the investment firm H/2 Capital Partners. But ultimately, it's once again care workers and patients who will be expected to foot the bill! □

May's "imperfect" NHS: actually, it's gasping

The letter to Theresa May from A&E consultants in 68 hospitals across England and Wales says it all about the latest - and worst, so far - NHS crisis: *The "current level of safety compromise is at times intolerable... the NHS is severely and chronically underfunded.(...) Thousands of patients are waiting in ambulances for hours as the hospitals lack adequate space.(...) over 120 patients a day managed in corridors, some dying prematurely. An average of 10 to 12 hours from decision to admit a patient until they are transferred to a bed."* Some compare the situation to the poorest Third World countries.

They ask May to do something, quick. Yet how does she respond? By repeating ad nauseam that the

government has put more money into the NHS than ever before, taken on more nurses and doctors and that it is treating more people. In short she is in total denial. She claims this is just the usual winter increase in demand due to flu! At the peak of the crisis, she told the Andrew Marr programme that after all, the NHS can't be "perfect"!

Evidently the NHS is seriously underfunded and an increasingly privately-subcontracted shadow of its former, imperfect, self. This year it will be 70 years old. But instead of being a pillar of the universal welfare system which, in 1948, undertook to care for the population "from the cradle to the grave", it is rapidly headed to its own grave. It urgently

NHS



needs the working class inside and outside of it, to intervene and fight for its life. □

• A government-made crisis

All politicians, of all parties, are terrified of being seen to disparage the NHS. So everything they say about the NHS is prefaced with hypocritical words about "wonderful" staff, etc., even if the reality is anything but "wonderful", despite staff effort. The simple truth is that the NHS can no longer respond to need.

May dared to claim that opening some GP surgeries during Xmas week would alleviate any extra A&E pressures! But that's like covering a gaping wound with a band-aid. Not that she would care, of course: in her world, people have their own private (paying) clinics!

Yet, the facts are there: 55,000 planned operations and medical procedures postponed, 21 hospitals declaring a "black alert" in England alone, 91 deaths from flu, etc.

And how could it be otherwise? Beyond the chronic under-funding, nearly half (40%) of walk-in centres, originally designed to compensate for unavailable GPs and over-stretched A&Es have been closed since 2010. At the same time 15% of A&Es have been either shut or earmarked for closure. Add the staff shortages, made worse by Brexit fears and the beds shortage (hospital beds have been cut by half over the past 30 years, from around 299,000 to 142,000) - this was a crisis waiting to happen!

• Aiming to make us pay or do without

It should be no surprise that Jeremy Hunt has been given, in addition to his job as Health Secretary, the portfolio of Social Care in May's latest Cabinet reshuffle.

The Health and Social Care Act of 2012, passed by the Tory/Lib-Dem coalition government, already laid the basis for the merger of the two areas - and indeed, practically speaking, they are obviously linked and should be integrated.

But this Act had another, more ominous purpose - to allow a fundamental

transformation in the NHS, if not its actual demise as a centralised, national and most importantly, *public* body, free at the point of use. It fully opened all areas of health and social care to private take-over. It established, finally and for good, the profit motive in health - something the Tories (aided by Blair) have been trying to do for decades. By cutting public facilities to the bare bones, patients were meant to be forced into the clutches of private providers. At first, the health sharks would take part of their payment out of the health budget through outsourcing, then they would eventually charge patients a fee, but only to those who can afford it, of course! Those who can't, the majority, will just have to join the increasingly long queues for NHS care!

• The Hunt for a US model

Further NHS privatisation is underway. The new Sustainability and Transformation Partnerships (STPs) - covering 44 English health districts, are meant to cut out the need for hospitalisation, etc. The important word being "cut", given that the NHS is meant to find £22bn in savings by 2021, by increasing "productivity", as if it were a factory manufacturing a commodity called "health"!

STPs must arrange for all of health/social care needs along with GP Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) and local councils. And this is where Hunt's latest fad, Accountable Care Organisations (ACOs), will come in. Based on an American model, they'd constitute a group of providers (public, or private or both, who knows?) in charge of allocating resources: deciding which services are provided and to whom; which are free, paid through insurance, or paid for out of patients' pockets. Of course, "accountable" is a misnomer, since the whole point is that they wouldn't be! Crucial to this would be resolving how elderly people with assets will pay for their social and nursing care, given the

crisis in this already-privatised sector.

Indeed, while the NHS is still free, Social Care is not. By merging the two, charges could "legitimately" be brought in for health care, merely by changing its definition. And this could possibly achieve a long-standing Tory aim, that is the extension of forms of private medical insurance across a much greater section of the population. Yes, while those deprived of healthcare in the US long for a free, universal British-model NHS, over here, Hunt is busy trying to convert the British model into the socially discriminatory US-model!

• Fake funding

May and Hunt constantly boast about the money they have put into the NHS. But "Lord" Kerslake's resignation in December, as Chair of King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, exposes the real situation. The prestigious King's in London has been put into "special measures" by so-called "NHS Improvement". Despite making all the "efficiency cuts" and hitting "productivity targets" which this NHS "overseer" prescribed, the "agreed" budget deficit of £38 million for 2017/18, rose to £92m! And even this did not allow the Trust to fully meet the health needs of the population it is meant to cover.

In fact two thirds of NHS trusts are in the same situation, with a total net deficit last year already, of £2.45bn. Clinical Commissioning Groups (GPs) were also in deficit by almost £2bn. But the extra money added comes to less than this (£4.2bn) and does not take inflation or growing demand into account. And this under-funding is deliberate, given the plan to change the model of healthcare into a public-private enterprise or, more accurately, a feeding station for capitalist "entrepreneurs" who couldn't care less about the population's health: their only preoccupation is the health of their bank balances.

Crisis watch

A "magic" word has been haunting the headlines lately - "cryptocurrency". Why "magic"? Because these mysterious crypto-coins seem to have a property that our pound coins definitely do not have: the simple fact of owning some is enough to generate huge amounts of money, without having to do anything for that, except to wait and be patient. Or so we are told.

Indeed, the value of the "Bitcoin" - the star of all crypto-currencies, at least for now - has increased 15-fold over the past year alone. Of course, compared to the miserly annual wage increases that workers get, this is "magic". What makes it seem even more magical is that these crypto-coins cannot be seen nor touched, let alone stashed away under a mattress. They only exist in an electronic form, stored on the hard disks of anonymous computers. And yet, they can be bought and sold - on the internet, of course - for good old pounds.

The "magic" of capitalism

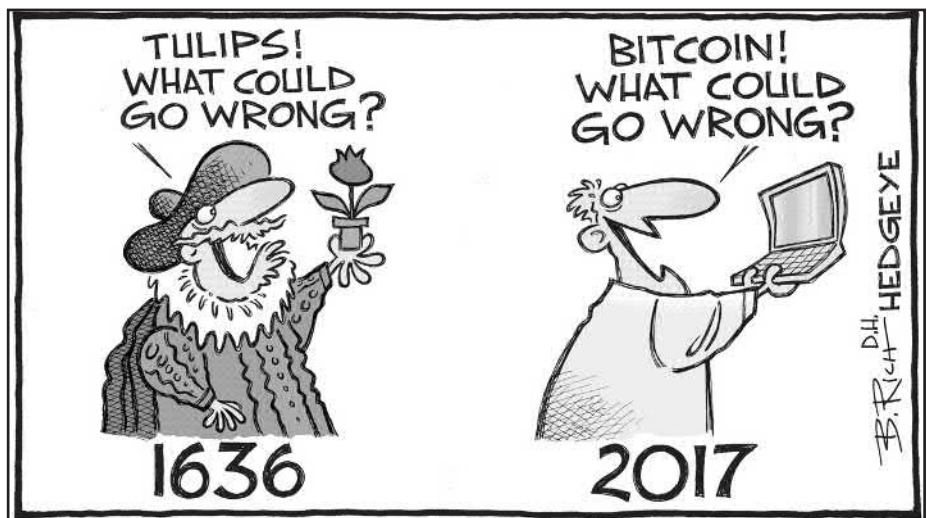
The trick is to buy Bitcoins when their price is low and to wait until their price is high enough, before selling them on. Where do the extra pounds come from? How is it possible to get richer without doing anything when, for millions, it takes an hour's work to earn just £7.50?

This is where the "magic" comes in - or, rather, the "magic" of capitalism. Indeed, this is, in a nutshell, what the lives of the capitalist fat cats amount to: they get richer and richer doing nothing - or, in any case, doing nothing useful. Whether they're company owners, shareholders or financial speculators, all they have to do is to wait until they can sell what they own at a higher price than what they paid for it. In other words, they get richer on speculation. But, of course, whichever way they get their profits, the fat cats take them from the value produced by workers' labour.

• Why do share prices go through the roof?

We're still in the middle of a crisis, which is aggravated by Brexit. So why has the London stock market started the new year by breaking another record?

In fact, this is part of a broader worldwide trend. But as the saying goes, all that glitters is not gold. The stock markets' meteoric rise reflects a massive shift of speculative capital from bonds to

Bitcoin bubble: a bit of a dangerous con!

Capitalism is exploitation plus speculation. The "magic" of crypto-coins is just that. The pounds used to buy Bitcoins come from the value produced by the working class - the Bitcoins being just the transitional form that these pounds take for a while. What drives the price of Bitcoin through the roof is the fact that there are colossal sums which could be invested in production but are not and that the capitalists would never miss this a "magic" opportunity to make such a fat profit out of their pile of unused cash.

Crazy irrationality

However, while Bitcoin is the star, it is only one of today's 1,432 different kinds of crypto-currency. Among these, 339 are worth nothing (i.e. zero pence!), another 1,058 have a total (worldwide) market value of under £1bn and, among the remaining 35, only one has a market value of over £100bn (the Bitcoin). In fact, for every one type of crypto-coin which takes off, dozens fail, causing massive losses. Moreover, the values of crypto-coins change a lot and very fast: even Bitcoins have repeatedly lost 20% or more of their value within a single day.

The irony is that these huge variations are precisely what attracts

the rich speculators, because this means they can make even bigger profits provided they move in and out at the right time. But, by the same token, the larger the sums of money used to buy Bitcoins (or obtained by selling Bitcoins), the wilder are the ups and downs of its value. And so the vicious circle which feeds the speculative bubble goes on.

There have been many speculative bubbles in the past, from the speculation on Dutch tulip bulbs in the 17th century to the speculation on hi-tech shares in the 1990s. All ended up in tears and the latter, the "dotcom" bubble, paved the way for the real estate speculation which produced the 2007 banking crisis. And yet, all of these were at least based on real assets. Whereas this growing crypto-coin bubble is just speculation on thin air. When will crypto-coin speculators finally decide that their gambling has become too risky? And what damage will they cause by withdrawing massively their funds? No-one can be sure. But the bubble will burst.

In the meantime, what this crazy fad shows us, once again, is the mad irrationality of a system which is based on profiteering - i.e. speculation - a system that mankind simply cannot afford. □

The scale on which this shift is taking place means that speculative bubbles are building up on stock markets. How long will it take for them to burst? The build up, taking place against the backdrop of a stagnating economy, shows that another crisis is in the making. Whether it breaks out is no longer a matter of if, but a matter of when.

Hands off workers' rights!

The Environment Secretary Michael Gove, together with his Eurosceptic cronies in government, is arguing for the scrapping of the EU Working Time Directive. Introduced in 1993, and then updated in 2000 and 2003, the directive gives minimum rights to workers: it limits working hours to 48 per week, sets a minimum of one day off in a worked week or two days off

every fortnight, guarantees pay holidays including for part-time workers, among other basic rights. Inadequate as it is, none of this had ever existed before in British employment law!

Of course, workers may still have to work 12 hours at a stretch and the bosses can still try to twist workers' arms into signing away their rights under this directive, either individually or

• The car companies' Brexit blackmail

The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT) has reported that car sales in Britain fell by 5.7% in 2017. This was the first fall in annual sales since 2011. It was also the largest drop since 2009. Production fell by 4.6% in the year ending November 2017. The SMMT put this down to the uncertainty over Brexit, rising interest rates and the fall

in the exchange rate of the British pound against the euro - and this is no doubt correct. It said car companies could start implementing "contingency plans" cutting "thousands of jobs" if there is no clarity on the post-Brexit transition deal by March.

But car workers are already being made to pay. The car bosses are using the Brexit pretext to squeeze even more

• Retail jobs under the Brexit hammer

45,000 retailers in Britain are now facing "significant financial distress", up 22% compared to last year. Of course, with Brexit inflation and the biggest decline in incomes faced by workers in any decade since the Napoleonic Wars, consumption has fallen. In fact, in the first three weeks of December, there were 10% fewer high street shoppers than in previous years.

So now retailers are increasing their attacks on wages and conditions. Toys R Us is planning to cut 800 jobs and close 26 shops next year. Wholesaler Palmer and Harvey cut 3,000 jobs last year and 900 more are under threat. The furniture

chains Multiyork and Feather & Black are in administration, putting 600 jobs at risk. More than 800 Asda shopfloor workers are facing redundancy, after 300 jobs were cut last year, while thousands of other workers will see their hours and wages, cut. Tesco and Sainsbury are also planning cuts this year... the list goes on and on!

Brexit is not even here yet, but the working class is already being presented with the bill. That's why workers need to organise today in order to be able to counter the dirty tricks that the Westminster Brexiteers are cooking up for tomorrow!

• Home Office: breaking its own laws to harass migrants

The High Court has found that the Home Office's deportation of EU migrants on the grounds of sleeping rough is illegal. Since 2016, the Home Office has designated rough sleeping as an "abuse" of EU free movement rights! But why are EU migrants sleeping rough? Because they don't earn enough to pay for a roof over their heads due to exorbitant rents, especially in London! Scrooge bosses and greedy landlords are the only real abusers here! Nevertheless, 5000 EU citizens have been deported in the last 12 months, the highest number on record and a rise of 14% on the previous year!

Why hasn't the High Court penalized the Home Office for this? As if this

government and its army of lawyers didn't know they were breaking the law! In fact they simply relied on the fact that their victims would be either unaware of their rights or unable to defend them, as they so often do. Well, for once they got caught red-handed!

• Brexit and Ireland - the craziness of artificial borders

Brexit has threatened to create borders not only between Britain and the EU, but also to reinstate the border between Northern and Southern Ireland. This artificial border, drawn in the 1921 partition of Ireland, was more or less rubbed out by the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 which removed all physical customs and passport checks. Indeed, had it not been

Brexit watch

collectively. So much so, that today, 13% of workers are still working more than 48 hours per week!

But for Michael Gove and the bosses, even these very limited rights are intolerable obstacles to the bosses' "freedom" to exploit workers. Brexit for them is supposed to be a bonfire of regulations - including all the workers' rights which stand in their way! □

out of fewer of them, for less. Vauxhall has announced 250 additional job cuts at its Ellesmere Port plant - bringing the number of redundancies at the plant over the past 3 months to 650, or more than a third of the workforce. Behind the shadow-boxing between the government and the car companies, it is car workers that are being made to pay for Brexit.



for the "Troubles" this would already have happened, given that both countries were in the EU.

Since 1998, the economies of North and South Ireland have become increasingly integrated. Today, an estimated 30,000 workers cross the border every day. With Britain now withdrawing from the EU, the prospect of a new "hard" border with Ireland looms, since the border would become an international customs border separating Northern Ireland from the EU single market and customs union. In this crazy Brexit game, a new border would reintroduce reactionary divisions in the population and divide Irish once more! But ironically, it may also provide the impetus, lost after the Good Friday Agreement, for a new push towards a united Ireland!

The cancer of Brexit

It seems that leaving the EU is going to mean leaving the European nuclear "club", known as Euratom. At least Theresa May and David Davis insist that this is the case. And if Britain does exit from Euratom, it will no longer have free access to the essential medical products (among others) which are

produced by Europe's nuclear industry.

At present, most of the radio-isotopes used in cancer treatments are imported from the EU. Any delay or interruption in treatments for cervical cancer or prostate cancer, for instance, would mean not curing the disease. This is serious. Just as serious as the potential problems which will result from the fact that 80% of the necessary

diagnostic equipment is also imported from the EU.

But hardline Brexiteers like David Davis, don't care. He and his fellow ministers put their own prejudices before the interests of medicine and science and the population's well-being. It is incredible that this is even possible. But that's this decrepit political system for you! Well past its sell-by date!

Ford Dagenham estate (Essex)

- **Polar bears vs the cough**

This debate over diesel versus petrol, is called "confusing" - and it really is! Diesel is "demonised". But it produces less CO2 than petrol so it helps prevent climate change. However it produces more nitrous oxide, which is bad for our breathing... Ford claims its clean diesel is fine - but since they don't produce the evidence we can only assume they're hiding something. [Workers' Fight bulletin Ford Dagenham 10/1/18]

- **Ford's diesel cheat**

By the way, Bloomberg says that Ford-US is being sued over its F-250 and F-350 Super Duty diesel pickups, for spewing emissions as much as 50 times the legal limit... while marketing them as "the cleanest super diesel ever"! The lawyer involved has said the trucks should have been called "Super Dirty." Of course, no-one should ever have believed a word Ford said... we

know that. [Workers' Fight bulletin Ford Dagenham 10/1/18]

- **The F-150 fuel saver**

But doesn't this mean that there may be a problem with the diesel engine for the F-150, which we're meant to be making here in the Den? We've been told we'll be producing for the US on 3 shifts from March. Does the Lion need super-cleaning first? [Workers' Fight bulletin Ford Dagenham 10/1/18]

- **Den double days stays?**

If the whole thing does go ahead, we still insist that we stay on double-days (earlies-lates). If Ford wants more engines, it can recruit a dedicated night shift. At least, according to the medical specialists, this is less bad for your health. They say your body clock eventually adjusts... And it would mean a whole shift's worth of extra jobs created!

[Workers' Fight bulletin Ford Dagenham 10/1/18]



- **Strike at Craiova!**

Good news! We're pleased to hear that workers at Ford's Craiova plant in Romania walked out! On 22 December over 1,000 staged an unofficial protest over Ford trying to impose a lousy 2-year pay deal, which would've increased monthly pay by only £57! These work-mates are demanding to keep the current system of one-yearly pay deals. The union leadership, under their pressure, is now being forced to prepare for official strike... We hope our mates over there win this fight. Our solidarity goes to them! [Workers' Fight bulletin Ford Dagenham 10/1/18]

BMW Mini centre (Cowley, Oxford)

- **The most dangerous?**

No-one should be expected to make an unsafe journey to work in ice and snow - or back home afterwards. But cancelling only one early shift ignored the weather forecasts that there would be consecutive freezing nights... Even by the Monday evening what had been slush was freezing to treacherous ice on local roads and drives and cycle tracks were impassable, with the worst conditions happening just around going home time... [BMW Oxford mini plant 13/12/17]

- **Thanks for coming in!**

Our "reward" on nights for struggling in and back again, with enough of us to

run the shift, was announced by management during the night: we would be asked to do overtime to make up for a production deficit for the rest of the week! No surprise there, but it sure wasn't news to warm the cockles of our hearts... [BMW Oxford mini plant 13/12/17]

- **Apprentice wage slaves**

Rudolph & Hellmann are recruiting ten government-subsidised apprentices to work as warehouse operatives for 12 months. According to the job spec this is a "fantastic opportunity" to "start a career" in, er, warehousing. Not even a R&H "Academy of Excellence" for these guys. Training will be "on the job", working 8-hour shifts in rotation just like the rest of us. And R&H demands 5 good



GCSEs and "excellent" written skills - for £7.50/hour. If they're under 24, will they even get the rise in the National Living Wage to £7.83/hr next April? A handy way to get workers at rock-bottom wages for 12 months, not just 12 weeks - assuming there are any takers! [BMW Oxford mini plant 13/12/17]

Mount Pleasant mail centre (London)

- **A sell-out in the making**

We're told that Royal Mail and the union are close to reaching an agreement? And that a strike will be averted? So says Terry Pullinger, general secretary of the CWU - telling us that those of us who're "obsessed" with taking industrial action should get real and take his word that the world has changed! He says the mediator's report outlines "new" ground for a deal. But as far as we can see, she's recommending almost exactly the same offer that we all overwhelmingly refused in October - and were ready to strike over! [Workers' Fight Mount Pleasant bulletin 13/12/17]

- **The way forward is strike**

Indeed, there's hardly a dot or comma different! So what we say now to

the CWU negotiators, Pullinger and the rest is "no sell out"! The only way forward is to strike - otherwise we're going to lose! And no, it's not because we're "obsessed"! It's because we're realistic - and because we've learnt from the past disasters, the worst being when we had almost 100% for a strike against the flotation/privatisation and the union leaders bottled it! The question is now, whether we'll even be given a say over this? [Workers' Fight Mount Pleasant bulletin 13/12/17]

- **RM isn't actually budging**

In fact RM already claimed before our strike ballot that its pension offer was a "wage in retirement scheme" (a misnomer) - so to now say that the ground has radically shifted because they're offering



this, is either plain dishonesty or amnesia on Pullinger's part. And how can there be "one pension scheme for all" on offer if DC pensions are continuing - with some "improvements"?! On wages, need we mention that inflation is near 4%? As for one hour off the working day, a "pathway to 35 hours" (how many thousands of miles long?) and last letter at 4.30pm instead of 5pm ... please, spin us another one! [Workers' Fight Mount Pleasant bulletin 13/12/17]

King's Cross railway station (London)

• 100% concerned

Where does Virgin get its managers from? They're certainly a special breed... The "Customer Inexperience Director" fancies herself as... a union adviser?! She's trying to tell us who is and who isn't "concerned" by the RMT ballot over pay. She'd "love" to tell us how to vote... We will be showing her and all the other Twitters just how concerned we all are... [Workers' Platform King's Cross 13/12/17]

• We hope to join these strikes asap!

ISS managers come from a similar disgusting stable. They sacked two of our fantastic workmates for helping to tank a train when we were short of hands (due to job cuts these bosses imposed!) because they allegedly "did not follow procedure" (but it had no consequences other than helping the train leave on time!). Two others have been made scapegoats and sacked unfairly. And on top of it all,

our shop steward is still suspended!! We've awaiting a strike ballot. We can't wait to fight this cowboy company! Gloves off! [Workers' Platform King's Cross 13/12/17]

• NR testing our patience!

With KX signal box due to close, we're told our "migration" from here will begin in October 2018. But we're also being told that a closed list of jobs for us to move into should be published at least one year before this happens. That should have been October 2017! But no list has materialised! And potential jobs are being advertised generally, reducing the number for a closed list. We're running out of patience with this... maybe it's time to "migrate" downstairs to the exit gates...? [Workers' Platform King's Cross 13/12/17]

• New roster, new chaos

Every time we think Virgin East Coast can't possibly do worse, they surprise us. The latest is them managing to forget staff on the roster, giving us totally different start or



finishing times than rosters indicate, etc., etc. Is there a special school for this?... [Workers' Platform King's Cross 13/12/17]

• More workers right now!

Since VT's cutting jobs on the station, several agency mates have applied and got a permanent job on board where a few new jobs have been created (far fewer than we need!). Yet where are these mates? On Sunday, when the new on-board roster came into effect, many trains were short of hands! We heard the new starts were "too needed" on the station to be released! So will the station cuts be reversed? [Workers' Platform King's Cross 13/12/17]

• VTEC Bailout: Public spending for private profits

Virgin Trains East Coast (VTEC), owned by Stagecoach (90%) and Virgin (10%) has decided that it will not be paying the government what it promised, when it made its bid for the franchise in 2014. It was supposed to hand over £3.3bn between 2015 and 2023. Now VTEC wants that amount cut by £2bn, with Stagecoach claiming that

since last June, the company had made an £84m loss. Yet Stagecoach made a £228m profit on this franchise the previous year. So where did that go?

Instead of forcing VTEC to pay what it owes out of past profits, or confiscating its franchise since VTEC has breached its contract, the Department for Transport is bailing

it out by writing off the additional £2bn they owe. And it is preparing to create a public-private partnership until 2023... for which Stagecoach will be allowed to bid again! This government, which is cutting NHS and welfare benefits in the name of cutting public spending, seems to find plenty of cash to line these delinquent capitalists' pockets!

• Rail strikes: a different policy to win

The Rail and Maritime Union, RMT, has always said that the job of the train guard on board is "safety critical" and cannot be axed. Yet, so far, it has not pulled out all the stops to prevent these jobs from being lost. It called scattered days of strikes across different sections of the network in December and January.

After workers on Virgin West Coast went on strike on 15th November for a reduction of their working week, their strike on 22nd December was called off by the RMT just as workers on CrossCountry Trains were striking on the following two days (23rd and 24th December) over rosters and Sunday-working. The strike dates for West Coast in January, on the 5th, 8th, 26th and 29th were

also called off by the union leadership, with no explanation. And this, when the workers of five other rail companies (South Western Railway, Greater Anglia, Merseyrail, Arriva Rail North and South Western Railway including the Isle of Wight's Island Line) were striking on 8th, 10th and 12th January against guards' jobs being cut, while Southern workers also struck work on 8th January over the same issue.

Despite this disorganised state of affairs, it's not too late: the guards are still on the trains (except on Southern where they are now 'On Board Supervisors'), so they are still in a position to effectively stop the railways - along with the rest of their workmates!

• Rail companies' unregulated greed

British rail fares, already the highest in Europe, have increased yet again - by an average of 3.4%. While this is already 50% more than the average wage rise that most workers received in 2017 (and many did not receive even this), the sham "regulation" of fares conceals even bigger increases. So-called "regulated" fares (such as season tickets and off-peak returns) are "allowed" to increase by an average of RPI+1% (rather than the lower CPI percentage measure which is used for

state pensions and benefits!). Thus, with RPI at 3.9%, Arriva, the private operator of Northern Rail, is within its "rights" to increase its fares by an average 4.7% and FirstGroup by 4.6% on its TransPennine Express franchise. According to these "regulations", individual regulated fares can even be increased by as much as RPI+5% as long as the overall average remains at RPI+1%.

These regulated fares, however, make up only half the total fares - the rest are



only "regulated" by the greed of private rail companies! Thus, the off-peak day ticket from London to Slough on Great Western trains is set to rise by 9.4%. As a result of this non-regulation, overall fares have increased on average five times faster than wages since 2010. Fare "regulation" under privatisation was always designed to guarantee a minimum return on investment for shareholders. There was never any guarantee built into it for passengers, neither for cheap fares, nor safety, nor reliability.

Iran-Tunisia

In late December and early January, tens of thousands of workers and poor people took to the streets, first in Iran and then, in Tunisia. Although these waves of protests are unlikely to have been connected, their causes are largely similar: huge price increases in basic commodities against the backdrop of a double-digit inflation, rising unemployment, a growing backlog of unpaid wages and a general resentment against a predatory capitalist class which is using these countries' repressive regimes to impose its dictatorship on the whole population. In both cases, the majority of the population is paying a high price for the ripples of the world crisis - which, in the case of Iran, have been aggravated by the economic sanctions of the rich countries - while a thin layer of privileged parasites enjoys an ostentatious, luxurious life under the protection of the regimes' armed thugs.

Western commentators have been quick to draw parallels with the 2009 "Green Movement" in Iran and the 2011 "Arab Spring" in Tunisia. But the latest protests were quite different. This time, in both cases, the bulk of the protestors came from the poorest layers in society - rather than from disgruntled sections of the middle class youth expressing their frustration at being kept out of the best government jobs by the ruling clique. Significantly, in particular, the leaders of the Iranian regime's "reformist" wing, who had been so prominent in the 2009 protests, have remained cautiously silent.

In fact, these protests expressed a growing anger which had been brewing for a long time among the poorest. In Iran, they were preceded by a wave of illegal strikes over unpaid wages, in particular in privatised sugar refineries and among the oil workers of the South Pars field. Likewise, in Tunisia, workers had staged a series of general strikes over wages since September, in the metal and engineering industries, in particular.

In Iran, ironically, the movement was triggered by an

The class struggle is back in the streets



ultra-conservative faction of the regime calling people to protest against cuts, in order to undermine president Rouhani, on 28 December. As it happened, however, this call unwittingly set alight the smouldering anger - which was definitely not the conservatives' aim. And the protests immediately spread to dozens of towns across the country, lasting for almost a week.

In Tunisia, the protests began just after New Year, in response to new price hikes and new taxes. They spread rapidly to most of the main towns, until they reached their peak, on 14 January, for the celebration of the 7th anniversary of the previous dictatorship's downfall, in 2011.

In both countries, the protesters have been confronted with brutal repression. In Iran, several dozens of protesters were shot dead and many more were injured, while the official numbers of arrests is said to be just over 500. In Tunisia, although "only" one protester was killed, there were at least as many injured as there were in Iran, and the official number of arrests was even larger - at almost 800. Nevertheless, in both countries, countless official buildings have been burnt down and the protests have clearly expressed anger.

In both countries, the authorities boast of having brought the protests to an end - of course, they would! But have they really? Will

the working class and poor of these countries be satisfied with the meagre concessions that their rulers seem now willing to make? Or, on the contrary, will these concessions bolster their fighting determination to impose a real change in society? Only the future will tell.

But what is certain is that, both in Iran and in Tunisia, the real strength of the protesters has been their capacity to express the anger of the proletarian masses as a whole. Should they aim at - and succeed in - mobilising these proletarian masses into action on a large scale, behind fighting objectives representing their class interests, this would open in front of them an entirely new perspective.

Instead of replacing one set of capitalist politicians by another at the top of the state, as the protests of the "Arab Spring" did, such a mobilisation could put on the agenda the only form of change which can offer a future to the poor masses: a change in the social organisation of society, freeing it, once and for all, of all forms of capitalist exploitation, by the imperialist multinationals as well as by the local capitalists, whether they hide their exploitation of the proletariat under a religious mantle or a secular one. □

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, or by postal mail at:

BM Workers' Fight - LONDON WC1N 3XX.