

# **A Plague on Both Your Houses**

**The Position of the Working Class in the  
Current Crisis**

**Angry Workers**

If nothing else, the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that the world in which we live is insane. The hundreds of national governments have all pursued openly contradictory strategies to tackle the same global catastrophe, and all have floundered spectacularly. Hundreds of thousands of deaths have been deemed not only acceptable but necessary to maintain an economy which impoverishes the human race. Corporations enjoy the freedom to ignore health restrictions without prejudice, and use them as an additional weapon against their workers when convenient. Now a fight is being waged by vaccine manufacturers to avoid releasing the information needed to make them, in an effort to maintain their bottom lines.

In the face of a new period of recession, capital has renewed offensives against the working class with vigour. It is unlikely, despite the fervent hopes of some union officials and feeble socialists, that this alone will spur workers to intensified struggle. But it's also pointless to wallow in the despair that grips middle classes the world over. Throughout the history of the workers' movement, whether the moment was good or bad, it has been the task of those who want to push our movement forward to find out exactly where the class stands in the current situation, and what can be done to further its organisation and its fight for emancipation.

Our purpose in conducting the interviews summarised here was not to tell people what they already knew – that things are bad and getting worse – but to see what could be done about it. We interviewed two dozen fellow workers about their experiences at work during and after the first Covid-19 lockdown: nurses, postal workers, tube drivers, call centre workers, university lecturers, agricultural workers, school students and more. The initial confusion of bosses in the pandemic forced them to delegate practical decisions to the shop floor where workers picked up the slack. In many cases nonsensical directives from above were completely ignored out of necessity, and health regulations adopted from below. The consequence of this, and the heightened interest in “essential” work, was workers starting to question why it is they have to work the way they do. This did not immediately translate into increased confidence; many capitulated to the ‘fire and rehire’ strategies imposed on them, and even before this crisis, people doubted their ability to fight.

factories, power stations, by the people who run them is not a far-away dream: it's the ultimate end of a process that begins with daily struggles against wage cuts and evictions. We can't rely on other people to do it for us – it's on us to act on our own interests. As a group we want to support this process. The Angry Workers are forming groups wherever we are that get connected to the class and build up its independent structures. We act as a mirror to the class: reflecting on the success and the failures, where we are and where we can go. If you are interested in working with us, get in touch.

were unavoidable, but could have been overcome if deeper issues weren't at play. The first is low confidence: workers know they're being screwed, but they don't feel they can do anything. Taking all the examples, and drawing out where they succeeded and the mistakes that can be corrected is vital here, as will be finding common points of motivation. The second is a lack of organisation and unity. Both within and without the unions, we need to work towards ensuring workers can coordinate with each other, and communicate across company lines. We also need to generalise our activities, whenever possible making connections with other workers, other workplaces, even other countries: the only way to stop scabbing and move as a class. And above all else, we can't always be on the defensive. Sooner or later, we'll have to go beyond managing our own decline.

Once we look beyond our national borders, we can see that around the globe workers struggled despite or because of the pandemic. This started with a series of unofficial walk-outs of car workers in Italy and the US in March 2020 for the temporary closure of their plants. We saw collective actions of hospital workers in many countries against lack of health and safety and low staffing-levels. In the UK it was the collective involvement of thousands of teachers that forced the government to reconsider the opening of schools in early 2021. There is a path forward.

## **Conclusion**

Typically, left groups will end their pamphlets with a pre-thought-out slogan or tactic that the working class should adopt to get out of whatever predicament they are currently in. Standing totally detached, they will coo and sigh over our inability to listen to their wise words. Putting aside the fact their proposals are normally completely illogical, this misses the point. The working class will be at the sharp end of whatever crisis is rocking capitalism, and the only way we stand a decent chance of surviving and changing the world is by banding together as a class. A real organisation of working people, within which we could communicate and coordinate, would be able to work out the correct course of action - and enable us to carry it out. Our task is building that organisation, linking up our disparate, momentary struggles into a global fight to emancipate us all. A working class revolution – the takeover of hospitals, farms,

When, in 1351, the Black Death had killed off a third of the British population, the monarchy and feudal nobility “*considering the grave inconveniences which might come from the lack especially of ploughmen and such labourers*” but also in view of those unscrupulous peasants who “*seeing the straits of the masters [...] are not willing to serve unless they receive excessive wages*” passed the Statute of Labourers. The law set wages to pre-plague levels, despite these being at a historic low after the Hundred Years War, and banned begging and seeking work elsewhere. The disease was only a pretext; in reality a similar measure would have been needed to squeeze the workers regardless of the Black Death. It seems Rishi Sunak has been channelling the spirit of Edward III. It took thirty years for the weak and fragmented peasant masses to revolt, unsuccessfully. The reappearance of plague in the capitalist world doesn't need to take the same path, not if we use this opportunity to discover where and how we can fight back. We have to rigorously, and without fear or blind dogma, examine the situation in which we find ourselves: not as isolated individuals, or workplaces, or even national groups, but as an international class that needs to rebuild its fighting spirit and its links with itself. We need to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of workers' struggles everywhere, draw out their lessons, and learn from honest reflection. Then, we can start to move on the offensive.

## **The Causes of the Pandemic and its Response**

One of the many symptoms of the disease in our social existence is that most people are isolated in the division of labour, not understanding what happens in other branches of human activity. No clearer example of this disaster can be found than in the public response to the pandemic. The vast majority of people have only been provided the most basic scientific education by the state, most of which was either wrong or incoherent or poorly taught, because better education served no purpose for capital. In addition, they are wholly separated from the practice of natural science, which takes place behind closed doors and operates on unstated principles. When the state appropriates the results of science (with mixed accuracy) for its own purposes, to validate its decisions and cover itself up with a veneer of competence, it causes sections of the working class who rightly distrust the state to distrust the science as well. This leaves

the space open for middle class charlatans to spread nonsense that only exacerbates the confusion.

This is not to say that the science itself is perfect. Because of the separation between mental and manual labour, and the poverty of the so-called “social sciences”, the scientists who may have a correct understanding of microbiology and immunology are limited in their ability to understand society. Only the working class and its organisations are in a social position to really understand the entirety of the current situation, and it is crucial that we do so. Only when we actually understand the facts at hand, and can combine that with a clear view of our own interests, can we plan ahead and struggle on. But none of the groups on the so-called left have been able to take a coherent view of the crisis, going back and forth between puerile pleas to the state to increase repressive measures, and momentary demands without wider consideration of what is happening. We need to integrate the biological and social aspects of the crisis, and root it in our position as the working class.

The virus officially called “SARS-CoV-2” which causes the COVID-19 illness is essentially a simple set of instructions encoded on a chemical called RNA, wrapped in a coat made of protein. The coat is used to enter human cells, which contain machinery normally used to create chemicals the cell needs, but which the virus can use to copy itself. The new copies are then free to spread in the body, and end up in the mucus and saliva, which can be distributed through the air by coughing, sneezing, and talking. Viruses need the cellular machinery of other organisms to reproduce and therefore rely on being able to spread, in this case by being carried in airborne droplets. Their high reproductive rate and lack of complicated checking mechanisms mean that when they reproduce there are lots of errors. These normally result in either no change at all or the death of the virus, but sometimes make it better adapted to spread and thus the change becomes prevalent, leading to a new strain. This will happen more and more as the virus transmits, which is why we see more new variants when the rate of infection increases, which then leads to a further increase.

Heathrow workers struck for four days in early December, and BA cargo workers for nine over the Christmas period. Both were led by Unite, and the attitudes we found on the ground were encouraging. Workers weren't fooled by the supposed ‘pay increases’ that hid cuts to their annual increases, and there was a remarkable level of solidarity. They didn't want higher wages at the expense of their colleagues being laid off, and many older workers wanted to set an example for their younger counterparts and other workers everywhere. The Cargo workers especially had built up massive amounts of sympathy and the desire from various parts to find ways to link up and support fellow workers was brilliant.

Which makes it all the more incredible that these strikes were not coordinated at all – despite both being organised by the same union! Unite balloted the two issues at different times so they didn't align, which was a massive failure right from the outset. Many people weren't even aware Heathrow was striking while it was happening. Throughout the struggle Unite seemed more concerned with courting a media inevitably hostile to it and plastering up pictures of the Grinch than organising its members. It had already delayed the Heathrow strikes until the day the new contract went into effect, and then shut down attempts to talk directly with the people picketing. In both strikes it was unclear the extent to which any effect was had on the companies, which is astonishing seeing as Cargo is currently the only part of BA turning a profit these days. It's certain now that outside companies like Dnata and Menzies were brought in to scab, but there should have been strategies in place for that. The inability of unions to coordinate across workplaces is probably the biggest impediment to real assaults on capital, and the fact they couldn't manage it with two workforces in *the same physical building* is damning. Heathrow was even able to pay off Terminals Security from striking without actually increasing their wages.

What's clear from both of these examples, and the various actions taken elsewhere, is that there is real potential for further struggles. Fermenting them and pushing them to go ahead will be its own fight, but we can only wage it if we know the obstacles. Some obstacles like being stuck at home

arrangements, getting reimbursement for work expenses, management bullying, intensifying workload, and increasing red tape were all motivations, undoubtedly the main ones for many. That these issues are everywhere might be promising if they can spur workers to action. In addition, the reaction to the picket from locals on the street was positive, many lending moral support despite a lack of awareness of the strikes and their purpose. The essential problem at the heart of the strikes was the lack of organisation, maintained and enforced by the union. Because workers were at home, maintaining the integrity of the strike was extraordinarily difficult: many workers simply made up for strike days by working more before and after, or carried out tasks they felt “essential” and leaving paperwork. It wasn’t even always clear if workers would lose pay by striking.

Apart from a section of the social workers who successfully sidestepped the union and achieved more pay, independent organisation was non-existent. UNISON had monopolised the space for organisation to the extent that approaching colleagues without being a shop steward was impossible, and militancy from the shop stewards themselves was actively fought. The apathy and passivity of workers is not a deficiency in attitude as some believe, but the result of a state of affairs maintained and manufactured by the unions themselves. They can only endorse tokenistic action, scared shitless by the law and losing money, and the higher up you go, the worse it gets. They drag their heels, limit strike days, replace strikes with protests, and demoralise their members until they don’t have any energy to fight. They don’t even have any decent mechanisms for allowing workers to communicate; people were forced to use easily-infiltrated WhatsApp groups or even the company email! Basic failures like this will undermine any attempt at workers’ organisation, and we need to be able to develop our own methods to overcome them.

Aviation has been one of the big losers in the pandemic, but it seems to have found solace in attacking pay and conditions. Heathrow and BA (British Airways) have both come out with new contracts and ‘fire-and-rehire’ tactics, and both have faced courageous opposition from workers.

This is not a crisis that can be blamed on some unforeseeable act of God. Nor is it a problem of this or that incompetent government. We have seen that the whole world has done similarly poorly in the face of a problem, which is dead simple to deal with from a purely biological point of view. Merely having kept everyone isolated at the original point of contact with the disease until a vaccine had been produced would have kept the death count minimal, but that was patently impossible in our current world. We are therefore left in this vacillating state of lockdowns and re-openings, furloughs and firings, with no hope of a rational plan.

The madness of the response to the virus is merely a reflection of the madness that encompasses every part of the way we are forced to live. We see its horrific consequences every day, now more so than ever, but we are told there is no alternative. Our lives are broken up by the existence of private property; because of it we cannot make things to be directly used in helping people and meeting their needs. Instead, we must make things to exchange on the market for money. Out of this basic irrationality sprouts the monster of capital: money that makes more of itself. It does so by sucking more and more labour out of those with nothing to sell but their own bodies: the working class. This human relationship which now controls us has thrown immense numbers of people together by increasing the concentration of production and it has driven incredible innovations that have greatly increased our productive ability. But none of this is used to improve our lives, or decrease the time we need to work. It is used as a weapon to suck more and more value out of us. Besides - capital ‘giveth and it taketh away’. Our cooperation is opposed by the competition that infests every corner of the social world and prevents us from realising the potential we have. If innovative technologies are too expensive then we will work twelve hour shifts with primitive technologies instead, all in the service of capital.

Pandemics are the result of the interaction between humans and nature, but what regulates that interaction is the relationship between human beings, and every social formation brings its own diseases. Pandemics first arose when we domesticated animals and transitioned to sedentary life. The rapid increase in population density and human contact with

other species created the preconditions for the crossover of disease. From the animals themselves we received tuberculosis, smallpox, and the common cold, while the concentration of waste products in rivers gave us polio and typhoid, and also attracted insects which carried malaria. Our diets became overly reliant on starchy monocultures like wheat because they were more efficient to grow, giving birth to deficiency diseases like marasmus and scurvy. The histories of ancient societies are littered with nameless plagues that periodically tore through communities and utterly exterminated them, brought on by the burgeoning trade links created by the Roman Empire. The rounding of the cape and the discovery of America created the basis for the world market and capitalism, but they were also a biological catastrophe. The Old World gave the New smallpox and measles, killing between a third and a half of the native population; in return the Old World got syphilis. Among the colonial spoils Britannia returned to its people from India in the nineteenth century was endemic cholera; the conditions for the homespun English variety created by industrialisation, and the subjection of the masses to unutterable poverty and filth. We have made immense strides in the treatment of infection in the past two centuries, but all that has meant is the increased prevalence of so-called “diseases of affluence”: cancer, coronary heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, etc. All are linked to the stress and poor diets which are caused by our exploitation and the inhuman way in which we live. This illness is no different.

It has been a tactic of the media to separate the ‘natural’ crisis from the ‘economic’, either to argue for the need to open up or the need to lockdown again. But this distinction is false: the pandemic is merely the latest act in a deeper social crisis in how we produce our world and ourselves. Reactionaries have blamed the virus on a particular perversion of China (or better yet – “*communist*” China!) but the wet markets from which the virus emerged are intimately bound with the needs of capitalist agriculture. Since the 1990s, the small middle class farmers in China have been squeezed by the *longtou qiye* - industrial food production conglomerates. These conglomerates drove down prices until the smaller farms couldn’t compete. Many faced total ruin until they found an alternative: the rearing of wild and exotic animals for niche markets,

### **Struggles in the Lockdown**

Unions were close to useless during the crisis. Most paid lip service to the attacks faced by workers but failed to organise any action or take measures to prevent it. The CWU even cancelled industrial action in the early days of the pandemic to help with the “national emergency”. Some branches of the UCU banned effective protests against mass redundancies of casualized workers by allowing only protests no larger than six people. Their supposed desire to “respect social distancing” became all the more ridiculous after nurses in their hundreds were able to march safely. More common were small acts of collective action taken independently: in Amazon some workers banded together to ask for more shifts, in Wetherspoons workers decided to self-isolate and demand full pay after a colleague tested positive. In various places, there was a spontaneous rearrangement of working duties to cover for people off sick. These were few and far between, however; the general mood has been of passive acceptance. As one worker put it, “*People are angry, but also knackered, they don’t want an extra argument.*” There were, however, two noteworthy struggles in the pandemic period for which we were present: Heathrow and Tower Hamlets.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2020 Tower Hamlets fired and rehired nearly 4000 council workers – the opening salvo of the attack it called “Tower Rewards” and its victims knew as “Tower Robbery”. The new contract typified the strategies capital is now using to lower labour costs and reinforce discipline all over Britain and beyond: cutting travel allowances and flexible working, revamping pay grades, and dramatically reducing redundancy payments. The response, on the other hand, was the first large-scale organised pushback by council workers in England. Of the four unions present in the council only UNISON decided to strike, and the nine days of limited strike action spread over two months they enacted was a far cry from the unlimited strike members voted for in February. Still, we learned valuable lessons from how things progressed and the conversations we had on the picket.

Around 1500 workers across the council received strike calls, and their grievances extended far beyond Tower Rewards. Hot desking

as any private company. The division of the NHS into various Trusts and CCGs, which function as independent companies with their own budgets and decision-making capabilities, meant there was no clear direction to health workers from above. We heard from one student nurse about confusion over whether they were allowed to perform CPR on COVID patients. Workers were given no extra time to implement rigorous new hygiene protocols, they were often forced to take on extra work to cover for ill colleagues irrespective of whether they were qualified, chronic shortages of PPE were never addressed, and many are now suffering psychologically from the intensity of what they have experienced.

This is not to say those stuck at home had it easy either. The demoralising effect of being unable to leave combined with the intense gaze of managers with nothing else to do has been a massive source of stress. Many jobs being done at home were nearly impossible to do that way, and workers were often given no directions about how to compensate. Workers with children (and oftentimes women were expected to pick up the slack) were in a doubly difficult position of having to work and look after children at the same time. Without access to the support networks of friends and vulnerable grandparents, and the whole range of mechanisms like play dates, and breakfast and after-school clubs, that allowed women to go to work, the fragility of the working class family was laid bare. Domestic abuse proliferated and, in many cases, women found it harder to escape than before.

After lockdown, the return from furlough was fitful. Some companies had come to realise either that they wouldn't be able to keep on as many workers as before, or that they hadn't really needed them in the first place. We heard about lots of planned redundancies and cancelled shifts and reduced hours. The strategies employed by capital to tighten its belt after the immediate crisis will inevitably fall hardest on the working class: slashing wages, reducing benefits, increasing hours and intensity of work. What remains to be seen is how we will respond.

catering to the well-off Chinese. The continuous invasion of these animals' habitats and their concentration in the wet markets was a powder-keg for disease crossover, but similar tendencies exist in every part of the world market. They are just one particular consequence of the international mode of production, and we detail how Tesco works along these lines in the workers' inquiries in our book. Capital's relentless need to grow without recourse to the needs of the human race leads to environmental destruction in general: the expansion into every crevice of the earth, the colossal waste of land and resources, the sacrifice of the long-term fertility of the soil, the concentration of human beings into dense urban centres, and the intensification of global warming. Bourgeois campaigns for 'sustainability' will never stop this destruction (for what else are they trying to 'sustain' but capital?) and will never consider how their actions affect workers. The ensuing loss of biodiversity, all in service of profit, will inevitably cause further pandemics because those species that survive will play host to more and more pathogens.

The inhuman laws of capital that drove the emergence of the virus are presented to us as laws of nature, and are the states' excuses for flip-flopping. "We want to save lives," they say, "but not at the cost of livelihoods." Not one of the politicians or pundits ever acknowledges the barbarity of a world in which those two things are opposed. Deprived of the power and information needed to make decisions about our lives in general and our health in particular, we are forced into whatever bullshit jobs we can get and told to leave everything to the state. The purpose of the British state is to represent the interests of capital, whose taxes and credit keep it servile, but different parts of capital have different interests. Industrial capital and capital tied to essential services like supermarkets and agriculture has largely been exempted from furloughing workers, and so it can stomach long lockdowns with a view to eventually returning to normal trading. On the other hand, capital in hospitality, tourism, commercial aviation, etc. is hell bent on ensuring the most minimal lockdowns possible to prevent loss of profits, or even bankruptcy. Similarly, landlords face the ruinous consequences of tenants being able to delay payments or even miss them entirely, and so they too join the chorus for an easing of restrictions. The middle class business owners and

managers are under acute pressure and large sections have already sunk into the working class. All these groups are represented in parliament, and the bitter arguments, U-turns, late starts, nonsensical directives, etc. are the process of capital negotiating with itself. While it appears to be a power standing over society, in reality the state is dominated by the interests of capital, even when they conflict with the interests of humanity.

The state is currently touting its “world-beating” vaccination program like a proud peacock. What it leaves out is the massively uneven distribution of vaccines, which favours the more developed capitalist nations. The poorer countries will remain a site for the virus to spread and mutate, eventually into strains immune to any vaccine, and continuously reinfect the world. This is because a small number of companies rely on securing the pharmaceutical market through patent protection, and the possibility of achieving high profits in times of scarcity. The information needed to manufacture vaccines is then only sold at prohibitively high costs to other private companies, like the Serum Institute in India, which can then join in on the profits. A global approach is the only way to lift the threat of this and future pandemics, but this is impossible in a world dominated by the fragmented interests of private industry and nation-states.

The only real solution to pandemics like this one is the complete transformation of the world that we live in. A single human community, with a united means of making decisions and producing what we need to survive. One where the private interests that drove the emergence of the virus and massacred those infected with it no longer exist. This is not some fanatical utopia, and we are not a cult with ulterior motives. We are working people who have realised that if we band together and fight for our own interests, then we will not have to live this way. That fight begins with an analysis of where we stand.

### **The Experience of the Working Class in Lockdown**

For some, the pandemic and ensuing lockdown has been the most violent change to daily life ever experienced, while for others it has only intensified their relentless exploitation. Some have felt their burdens

eased, and still others have faced more gruelling conditions than ever. The different reactions to lockdown based on type of work, age, and sex have been keenly felt across the class and must be reckoned with, and it has to be recognised that different parts of the class will have different interests. But these momentary differences are only the outward appearances of our common exploitation, and we can only move forward as a united class.

Before the first lockdown, whispers of the coming pandemic had already reached Britain, but few took notice. Some workers had begun to implement their own safety procedures when the international situation became more apparent, but most were lulled into a false sense of security by the nonchalance of managers and the state. That all changed when the government initiated the first lockdown. The severity of COVID-19 was emphasised to the working class like it was to everyone else, but unlike the office managers who could do their jobs at home, many of us had to continue as before. Our bosses responded to the crisis by ignoring the health restrictions when possible, and exploiting them when they could.

We heard from Amazon workers explicitly forced to work crowded grids only to be “red-carded” and berated by “Two Metre Nazis” whose job it is to walk about policing them with a two-metre stick. In supermarkets, workers had hours less to prepare for arbitrarily expanded opening hours, and at the Royal Mail, workers were told not to share vans to avoid social contact – and then had to use public transport instead! Safety precautions were taken more seriously in areas facing customers directly like restaurants and shops, but often behind the scenes they were completely ignored, with workers being told to just go home if they didn’t feel safe. Many workers, having contracted COVID or been a contact, were told to come into work anyway. It is no wonder that so many workers have come to disbelieve in the pandemic when this is the farce they see daily; capital has used their health as a weapon against them.

Inside the NHS, confusion reigned. The chauvinism behind pride in “our NHS” obscures the extent to which our “socialised” healthcare is dominated by market interests, and just as viciously exploits its workers