Have we squandered our last chance to fix the Climate Crisis?
On the road to hellfire, damnation and floods: the great COP-out

With BoJo’s leadership of the Tories and the Tories themselves both in freefall, it may seem odd to lead this issue on COP. Anyone on the left craved such a Christmas present for 2021 – or to start the new year of 2022 with such a spring in their step. But whether BoJo falls and the Tories further dwindle in the polls, there is no immediate prospect of the Tories leaving office and, therefore, very little possibility of sufficient measures to stop climate change. But we will – in this editorial – return to the subject of BoJo’s blues shortly.

Glasgow was a greenwash as the lead articles by Stephen Smellie and Mary Church make plain. Both counter that where any source of hope exists for reversing a continuing climate catastrophe, it came from outside the formal COP proceedings. The question for the left that exists is not just how to continue the mass mobilisation that the demonstrations and actions around COP represent but how to use the mass mobilisation to exert leverage on governments and other key actors. This is because while the mobilisations were unprecedented, and built upon the campaigning work of the likes of Extinction Rebellion (XR) and others before them, there was very little evidence that they had any effect on the proceedings. The task is a huge one: for getting all the main countries - with their hollowed out parliamentary democracies - and powerful transnational companies to act as one and in the right direction could be regarded as being as difficult of herding cats. Maybe the expectations of what COP was likely to achieve were too high, given that those that have created the problems are highly unlikely to come up with the solutions to those problems, especially when their vested interests would be challenged. It would be that bit easier to tackle this problem if there was a single world government – or at least a global and all-encompassing body of international governance that had both teeth and resources to coerce the unwilling into acting.

One response to this enormous challenge is to look to what can be done within Scotland, in terms of the SNP Scottish Government, local authorities, other public bodies and campaigns targeted at private concerns and companies. The same is true of that for Britain as a whole. One example is UNISON’s ‘Getting to net zero in public services’ report, launched during COP. Another is Friend of the Earth Scotland’s advice on how to stay active – see https://foe.scot/5-ways-to-take-climate-action-after-cop26/ Whilst this approach is correct and sensible in as much as it represents the ‘think global, act local’ perspective, it is only partially so because there is still the need to ‘think global, act global’. We encourage our readers and supporters to respond to this challenge by getting in touch with suggestions for articles or any feedback letters on the matter.

Turning back to the Tories, BoJo’s seeming strengths of bluff, bombast and bluster are now being regarded as making up his Achilles’ Heel. Many Tory MPs believe these characteristics are so ingrained in him that there is no prospect of him having a makeover or turnaround for 2022. Labour has levelled in the polls and is ahead in some of the more recent ones. Historical trends suggest this is not an endorsement of the opposition, and in particular Starmer’s move to the right and so-called political respectability. Rather, it is a case that the opposition party basks in the reflected rays caused by the Government’s difficulties. The one highlight Starmer provided was to say that BoJo is ‘socially distanced from the truth’ – that was as good as it got, speaking to Starmer’s strategy of targeting BoJo’s integrity rather than his policies and politics. It would have been far better to come out fighting on the issues of the cost of living as the main line of attack. This is because it would more clearly have spoken to the normally hidden class dimension of politics in Britain. But it is also because concentrating on sleaze has paradoxically something of a corrupting influence – when the wrongdoing is identified and then punished, it tends to normalise the system that remains. In essence, taking away the sleaze and corruption then leaves us with a meritocracy where everything is said to be fair because individual hard work and talent are fairly rewarded. Meritocracy is a subterfuge for an unequal society precisely because so-called equality of opportunity – especially through education – never results in equality of outcomes precisely because the foundations that it exists upon are already inherently unequal. Just think about where those children that get to go to the better schools and universities come from in terms of their social class.

So, all this does not bode well for Labour building a positive endorsement of itself and its policies. And, should Starmer lead Labour into office in 2024 – the next scheduled general election – then we should not expect him or his government to be a great reforming Prime Minister or a great reforming government (as was the case with Attlee and the 1945-1950 Labour government). Inevitably, this brings us back to
Scotland and the issue of independence because if progress at Westminster is still ruled out then many will look to see where a ‘Scottish road’ might take us. Increasingly, there is a view that the SNP is part of the problem and not the solution for the cause on independence. Since the referendum on 18 September 2014 and until the earlier summer of 2020, support for independence was always less than 50%. From early summer 2020 until the spring of 2021, support for independence commanded the majority. But then it went into reverse with the last poll conducted of 2021 possibly being an odd outlier (as it gave a significant majority for independence). Much of this movement one way or another would seem to be related to positive and negative perceptions of how the governments of Holyrood and Westminster reacted to the pandemic. With the SNP Scottish Government promising not to move on requesting a Section 30 Order necessary to trigger the process for holding a further referendum until late 2023 at the earliest, the SNP has become something of a roadblock in the view of many. But it is also something of an immovable object not facing an unstoppable force in the form of an independent-of-the-SNP independence movement.

In the meantime, it is only the likes of former Labour supporter, actor, Brian Cox, that has taken a flight of fancy in deeming the SNP to be social democratic (Herald 12 November 2021). He is right that Scottish Labour is no longer social democratic but thinking the SNP has succeeded Labour here is something from a script of a fantasy film. Social democracy is fundamentally defined by the willingness of the party of government to use the levers of the state to intervene in - and alter - the processes and outcomes of the market to the benefit of the mass of the populace. The continuing trail of evidence that the SNP is not social democratic is plentiful, with the latest additions being over allowing private companies to bid for service provision in the National Care Service and appointing a person with no experience of running railways to be the new chief operating officer of Scotrail when it moves into the public sector in April. It was Abellio’s failure to adequately run Scotrail and not the SNP’s commitment to public ownership that has led to the transfer to the public sector.

Appointing Joanne Maguire because of her ‘wealth of leadership experience’ in running private and non-private sector organisations in a new managerialist way merely highlights this.

Finally, we wish our subscribers, readers and supporters a happy new year even though it might be a somewhat forlorn case of hoping against hope. COVID continues to keep the pandemic going in 2.0 or 3.0 versions. We must hope that it does not play any part in preventing the continuation of existing collective struggles - and the emergence of new ones - in the fight for social justice in Scotland and elsewhere.

Erratum
In Iain Ferguson’s review of Neil Findlay’s book in Scottish Left Review (126, Nov/Dec 2021), it was inadvertently intimated that the book covered the Glasgow City Council equal pay strike of 2018. The strike is, however, covered in the review of Jane Hardy’s book in this issue.
Of black clouds and silver linings?
Stephen Smellie argues COP26 delivered on the low expectations of it but progress was made in building a bigger and more powerful environmental movement

COP26 was Glasgow’s fortnight in the international spotlight as the nations of the world gathered to discuss the challenge of the climate crisis facing the planet, its governments, and its people. Some 25,000 people attended the vast complex including the Scottish Exhibition Centre (SEC), the Hydro, Armadillo, several hotels and a vast temporary structure housing two conference halls, meeting rooms, press offices, canteens and coffee bars. A routine of showing evidence of that day’s Lateral Flow Test and compulsory wearing of masks throughout the site prevented the international circus turning into the Covid super-spreader event that was predicted.

We approached COP26 much like the Tartan Army approached the Euros earlier in the year. We were at the big event, hoped for the best but were realistic about chances of success. The analogy continues. Although we got to stay to the end of COP26 rather than being sent home after the first round, there was a similar sense of disappointments at the end, with the failure to achieve much, tempered by a battling draw against England and small improvements in the text of the Glasgow Climate Pact (GCP) keeping open the possibility of progress in future.

There was talk about this being the last chance to save the planet and this being the most important event ever held in Scotland, the UK or even the world, depending on the scale of hyperbole that was being sought. There had been 25 COPs before, all of which had failed to find the solutions to the problem they were designed to address, namely, global warming due to human activity leading to climate change. None of the preceding COP agreements had mentioned the cause of the crisis or the emissions created by burning fossil fuels. Low expectations were entirely justified and COP26 did not disappoint in this respect. Greta Thunberg captured the mood of cynicism towards COP with her description of it as more ‘Blah, blah, blah’ and there was certainly a lot of that.

The United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP) brings together the governments of the world (the parties) to seek agreements on steps to be taken. It is a multilateral process that requires every party to agree to an outcome, that is, an agreement. Developing countries argued in Glasgow for swifter action to halt climate change. The Prime Minister of Barbados described a rise in global temperatures of two degrees as ‘a death sentence’. Developing countries argued for financing to adapt to the existing climate change that they are experiencing and for recognition that the damage already done to their countries has been caused by the carbon burning industries of the rich nations with the consequence that they should be compensated for the ‘Loss and Damage’ that they have experienced and will continue to experience. The rich nations argued for slowly reducing their greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, offsetting their carbon use against the trees of the global south, without it impacting on the profits of the businesses they represent or the living standards of the voters they need to remain in office.

The Parties are joined by teams of officially sanctioned observers from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). These are grouped into Women, Indigenous Peoples, Farmers, Global Justice campaigners, BINGO (Business), RINGO (Researchers), YUNGO (Young people), and TUNGO (trade unions). Then, there are the corporate business interests. Most numerous amongst them were the fossil fuel companies and their lobbyists. This is like having the tobacco companies at the conference to discuss cancer or the arms companies at the disarmament talks. Joining them are those business interests who claim to offer technological, and profitable, solutions, the advocates of nuclear power and carbon capture and storage (CCS).

In private meetings, corridor discussions and open plenary sessions the objective is to produce an agreement that all can sign up to before getting the carbon-zero bus home. This involves demands, commitments, alliances, horse-trading and the bribing and bullying of the poorer nations by the rich nations. Observers and lobbyists attempt to persuade the governments, so their interests are reflected in the final texts. Indigenous Peoples lobby for the rights of the people who have lived in the forests for centuries. Women argue for the impact on women to be recognised. Human rights organisations lobby for all agreements to include commitments to internationally recognised human rights while unions lobby for workers’ rights and for the maintenance and implementation of commitments to ‘a Just Transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs in accordance with nationally defined development priorities’. Fossil fuel companies lobby for actions not to impact on their business models, allow them to continue the extraction and the burning of fossil fuels and to protect their profits. The outcome of all this activity was revealed on the final, extra, day with the product of all these discussions and lobbying contained in the wording of GCP.

The GCP fails to commit governments
to take actions to achieve the ambition of the Paris Agreement to keep the rise in global temperature to 1.5 degrees and no more than 2 degrees above pre-industrial levels. Paris had required each government to produce Nationally Defined Contributions (NDCs) towards achieving these targets. The combined result of the NDCs is the planet heading towards a temperature rise of 2.7 degrees, way above the ‘death sentence’ referred to by the Barbadian Prime Minister. The GCP merely requests that these NDCs are revisited for COP27.

The GCP does commit to reduce emissions from the burning of fossil fuels. It specifically agrees to ‘the phasedown of unabated coal power and phase-out of inefficient fossil fuel subsidies’ and ‘the need to support towards a just transition’.

The inclusion of Just Transition is a victory for the union movement and should give greater strength to their argument for social dialogue and jobs creating industrial policies to address the decline of the carbon industries. However, the use of ‘phasedown’ of coal, at the insistence of India and China, instead of the stronger ‘phase-out’ of the original draft, indicates that even in the face of overwhelming scientific evidence the COP was unable to commit to stopping the burning of the worst form of fossil fuels. The inclusion of ‘unabated coal power,’ a reference to the, so far, unproven technology of CCS, demonstrates the success of the fossil fuel lobbyists in protecting their profits in alliance with the large coal producing and burning countries. Whilst India and China fronted up this weakening of the text, it was agreed with the USA and the EU, in behind-closed-door discussions which were then presented to the developing nations as a fait accompli.

The main agenda item of COP26 was to complete the Rule Book on how to execute the Paris Agreement. This was achieved with agreements on the transparency of reporting on emissions every two years, common time frames for reviewing actions and co-operative mechanisms. Co-operative mechanisms allow countries, amongst other things, to engage in carbon trading such as off-setting ongoing carbon emissions in a rich country by funding protecting forests or not building coal fired power stations in developing countries. This does not reduce emissions in the rich or developing country and is clearly a false solution but a success for the industry lobbyists, and governments like the UK, who are still addicted to greenhouse gas emitting technologies.

The failure to fully include human and labour rights in the Rule Book is of concern. It was reported that China insisted that human rights have nothing to do with actions on the climate crisis and therefore it is missing. The $100bn promised to developing countries to be delivered by 2020 is still a promise that has not been fulfilled and ‘Loss and Damage’ demands are still only to be discussed in future.

Whilst the outcomes of COP26 were disappointing, the mobilisation of a broad climate justice movement was much more successful. Around 150,000 people marched in Glasgow on 6 November with further decentralised mobilisations across Britain (like Cardiff, Manchester and London).

Without doubt these were the largest climate justice demonstrations ever seen in Britain. The day before saw 20,000 mostly young people on the ‘Fridays for Future’s demo. In addition, hundreds of meetings, seminars, conferences, and protest actions took place in Glasgow with nightly rallies to reflect on the negotiations ‘inside’ and actions and discussions ‘outside’ the COP. Unions, churches, community organisations, environmentalists, youth and community groups, including Glaswegians, Europeans, indigenous peoples from Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Australia, and more, were actively meeting, discussing, planning and organising, creating wider and deeper networks and alliances.

UNISON launched its report into the decarbonisation of public services calling for £135bn of investment up to 2035. Rail unions launched their rail charter emphasising the critical role of publicly owned rail services in a green economy. Trade Unions for Energy Democracy, hosted by the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC), published their report on the need for public energy companies. At the People’s Assembly, and Just Transition Hub, hundreds of activists discussed the key issues. Campaigners called for the cancellation of the Cambo oilfield. There were other initiatives as civil society sought to contribute to the issues that COP26 was supposed to be delivering on.

The demos and many of the events were planned, organised, co-ordinated and built by the COP26 Coalition, the broadest coalition ever seen in Britain, of global justice, climate change, faith organisations with, crucially a significant trade union engagement including several national unions and the STUC. The Coalition not only organised Covid safe meetings and actions but co-ordinated accommodation for visitors without local authority assistance, helped to secure visas from hostile UK Immigration authorities, arranged for legal observers at all activities, ran a daily online news channel covering events and linked up with activists throughout the world, ensuring the activism of Glasgow was reported globally.

The landscape of the climate justice movement has changed due the Coalition’s efforts. To use the words of STUC General Secretary, Roz Foyer, unions are greener, and environmentalists are redder. It is also true that the Climate Change movement is now more focussed on Climate Justice than it was before. Union demands for Just Transition, the voices of the developing nations for ‘Loss and Damage’, the demands of Indigenous People for land rights, the issues about gender, human rights, disability, and more have fused together with the environmental movement to create the potential for a mass Climate Justice movement that recognises that saving the climate requires action to transform economies, shift power from the rich corporate world, and enshrine human rights in all actions to address climate change. This is just the kind of ‘deep dialogue’ that Eurig Scandrett called for in his recent paper, ‘Beyond Just Transition’, for the Jimmy Reid Foundation.

The key issue now is how that movement can be built into a force able to mobilise at local, national, and international levels the millions of people needed to effect change and address the real problems. The COP26 Coalition Co-ordinating Committee, its very successful Trade Union Caucus, and its many local organising hubs are reflecting, discussing, and trying to resolve that issue.

COP26 presented opportunities for increasing profiles, highlighting issues and, in the case of unions, enhancing bargaining and the effectiveness of threatened industrial actions. First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, kept away
from any official UK government activities, used the stage provided to raise her and her government’s profile on an international stage.

The previously mentioned nuclear power lobby staged events during COP from polished seminars with high profile industry and government speakers to an enthusiastic group of young people who staged flash-mob style actions both within the COP26 complex and during the 6 November demonstration. The falseness of this ‘Youth for Nuclear’ group was demonstrated when at the stroke of 3pm they suddenly departed from the demo as their paid-for time was up.

Ahead of COP, it looked like strike action on rail, buses and council services would go ahead causing major disruption to the COP delegates, as well as the people of Glasgow and Scotland. The COP26 Coalition Trade Union Caucus organised an online rally shortly before COP bringing these disputes and others across the UK together helping to build solidarity and developing a greater understanding that industrial disputes are increasingly climate justice disputes and part of this wider movement.

In the face of these threats the RMT were able to secure an improved offer, UNITE made progress on behalf of bus workers and council workers’ unions received an improved offer on pay. Only the GMB cleansing members finally took strike action for the first 8 days of COP over local issues. The GMB has never been an ally of the climate change movement and actively discouraged branches and regions from supporting the Coalition. However, their picket lines were joined by climate change activists, from indigenous peoples to Greta Thunberg. In return, GMB strikers with banners and placards attended both the ‘Fridays for Future’ and 6 November demonstrations. It is hoped that this will lead to a more open and supportive role by the GMB in future Just Transition and Climate Justice activities.

The UK retains the Presidency of the COP up to COP27 in 2022 which will be held in the military dictatorship of Egypt. Alok Sharma MP will continue his role as COP President in trying to promote the GCP and ensuring that progress is made in advance. Sharma was seen to shed a tear at COP as China and India moved their amendment, in relation to the ‘phasedown’ of coal, weakening the GCP he had negotiated, whilst some no doubt shed a tear at the predicted death of Barbados and other island nations. His continued role gives a responsibility to the strengthened climate justice movement in the Britain to keep pressure on the Westminster government. That would seem like one role for a reconstituted COP26 Coalition to mobilise for.

In relation to COP, the NDCs, including Britain’s, need to be reviewed and rewritten to match the 1.5o Celsius ambitions and to include the commitments to Just Transition. Pressure needs to be put on governments to deliver on their promises to deliver the $100bn to the developing world and to address the need for funds to address the Loss and Damage issue. In Britain, greater actions are needed to achieve the target of Net-Zero by 2050 and 2045 in Scotland. The science demonstrates that these require to be delivered before 2030 or the 2050 target will melt like the glaciers in Greenland, gone forever. These include the investments called for by UNISON to de-carbonise the public sector, the cancelling of licenses for new oil and gas extraction in the North Sea (and not just Cambo), massive retrofitting of homes, expansion of public transport and manifest commitment to the industrial policies needed to deliver a Just Transition to a green economy with job creation policies at the centre of that. The current crisis of sky-rocketing gas prices and energy companies going bust help to demonstrate the need for publicly-owned energy that will secure affordable supply for everyone but work to reduce energy use through efficiency measures. Glasgow TUC’s campaign for Free Public Transport, provided across Scotland for the COP26 delegates, and the STUC’s for publicly owned bus companies, needs to be supported.

Within the wider climate justice movement, the debate around so-called ‘false solutions’ needs to be taken more seriously. The TUC policy of calling for more nuclear power stations, CCS, the development of both blue and green hydrogen, the expansion of airports and air travel, are all controversial and questioned by both climate scientists and climate economists. It is argued that these are ‘business-as-usual’ policies that don’t address the fundamental issues of the destructiveness of extractive industries or the urgency of directing investments to real proven technologies that can deliver emission reductions now, not decades in the future. On the other hand, union concerns for jobs, now and in the future, make investments in construction and maintaining existing infra-structure attractive. The concept of Net-Zero itself is questioned by many who argue the target has to be Zero Carbon.

Critical actions for the unions and the left in the climate movement are to build further upon the alliances that were developed, to learn from each other, from the direct-action tactics of XR to the negotiating strengths of the unions, and to understanding and building upon the science and the enthusiasm of young people for a better and more sustainable future. There is no place for a ‘left’ that wishes to pretend that they have all the answers and does not seek to build the widest and deepest alliance possible.

It is clear from the failure of COP26 and the success of the mobilisations around it that saving the climate needs a transformation of society, economics, and power structures, and only a broad democratic, international movement will be able to achieve that.

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COP to flop: the great Glaswegian greenwash

Mary Church argues it’s hard to view COP26 as anything other than a resounding failure but the summit’s legacy is a movement fit for the fight for humanity and the planet.

Despite the IPCC’s ‘code red’ warning and the grim reality that without deep, systemic changes, we will hit the critical 1.5oC Celsius threshold within the coming decade, those most responsible for causing the climate crisis came to Glasgow with pretty much nothing new in terms of how to solve it. As a result, the Glasgow Climate Pact (GCP) offers nothing but a few process hooks to cling onto for next year’s negotiations.

What needed to happen in Glasgow to unlock the long-term tensions at the heart of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process was for rich historical polluters, including especially Britain as holding the COP Presidency, to come to the table with the political will and concrete policies to undertake their fair share of climate action. This means nations that have done the most to cause the crisis - the industrialised nations of the global North - cutting our emissions deepest and fastest, leaving what very little atmospheric space remains to poorer countries to have a bit extra time to decarbonise as they develop their economies. It also means paying the substantial carbon debt we owe to countries on the frontline of the crisis in the global South through climate finance and other forms of support. This is not wild idealism; the principles of equity and ‘common but differentiated responsibility’ are enshrined in international law under the UNFCCC and must serve as a guide to global cooperation on the crisis.

Instead, what we saw at COP26 was the US, EU, Canada, Australia, Japan and Britain continuing the pattern we’ve seen over the past decade of trying to shift the burden of responsibility for solving climate change onto the shoulders of the poorest. The British Presidency is not alone in spinning the GCP as a success, claiming the talks succeeded in ‘keeping 1.5oC alive’. Simply repeating the words without any action to get there is worse than meaningless, giving the illusion of momentum where there is none.

Take, for example, commitments to bring emissions down, and concrete policies to meet them. Pledges submitted by parties to the Paris Agreement ahead of COP26 put the world on track for 2.4oC warming, though policies to meet them take us to 2.7oC. Hailed by many as proof the Paris Agreement is working - since these numbers are a marginal improvement on the last round of pledges - the fact remains that even 2.4oC is far, far beyond the 1.5oC threshold, more than enough to fry the planet and trigger tipping points that could cause climate change to spiral out of control.

Instead of inspiring confidence that even these targets would be met by committing to the sort of policies and actions that we know are needed - phasing out all fossil fuels, for example - governments pushed through rules on carbon markets riddled with loopholes that allow themselves to keep polluting while giving the appearance of acting. Fossil fuels did make an historic appearance in the GCP text but the emphasis on coal puts the greater onus on poorer countries, letting richer countries off the hook in terms of their climate trashing oil and gas expansion plans. Shamelessly, the Biden administration wasted no time in launching a huge licensing round in the Gulf of Mexico days after the summit closed, while the UK has 40 fossil fuel projects - the vast majority of which are oil and gas - in the pipeline for approval by 2025.

Then take the issue of climate finance, which is vital to help global South countries deliver their own climate plans - both reducing their own emissions and adapting to impacts of climate change – and, therefore, vital to engendering trust at the negotiation table. At the Copenhagen summit in 2009, global North countries promised to deliver $100bn pa by 2020, split 50:50 between mitigation and adaptation. That target - which was plucked out of the air, not based on any actual analysis of what was needed or owed - was not met in 2020. Days before COP26 opened Alok Sharma presented a delivery plan to meet the totally inadequate missed target only by 2023. At the talks themselves, global North countries refused to countenance poor countries’ proposals for a proper process to determine a new long term finance goal, while on short term needs the GCP does little but weakly ‘urge’ developed countries to deliver on the $100bn goal, and balance finance between mitigation and adaptation.

Faced with the financial crisis, governments very rapidly found trillions to bail out the banks deemed too big to fail. Similarly, faced with the covid-19 pandemic, governments found trillions for fiscal support packages. Yet faced with the truly existential threat of climate catastrophe within the all too foreseeable future, governments are choosing not to cough up the mere billions they’ve committed to, to say nothing of the actual trillions required. Also take ‘loss and damage’. It is a concept that recognises that it is no longer possible to adapt to all of the impacts of climate change, whether the human and economic losses from repeat thrashings of extreme weather events, or indeed the loss of whole communities and nations when parts of the world become uninhabitable as a result of sea level rise or extreme heat. Poor countries were powerfully united at COP26 in their demands for financial support for loss and damage - support they would likely not have needed if rich countries had acted on emissions sooner and delivered the finance they owe. But rich countries played a dirty game, pushing discussions into and out of various negotiation strands, with the US ultimately (and not for the first time) blocking any meaningful progress on this front. Instead of committing to finance or any other support for loss and damage, the GCP establishes a process for dialogue: let’s talk about your house burning down for next three years instead of actually helping you to rebuild it after some of it has burnt down.

Hope, then, is clearly not to be found inside the UNFCCC process at present, nor in the outcome of COP26. Even the plants in the Scottish Exhibition Centre (SEC) were dying only half way through the summit. But where...
hope does lie, and was in abundance during the fortnight of the talks, is in the movements organising around the summit for a climate just future.

Each day on the streets of Glasgow saw people taking action to send a clear message about what’s needed to turn the climate crisis around, from protesting the new oil field at Cambo to demanding free public transport, to solidarity on the picket lines with striking refuse workers, and marching with migrant justice groups. Over 150,000 people came together in the biggest climate march ever in Britain, a march that was visibly and powerfully led by Indigenous and frontline communities, while a further 300 actions around the world including 80 in Britain took place. Daily movement assemblies on climate justice thematics were a space to connect and learn from different struggles. A Peoples’ Plenary was held inside the SEC, condemning the failure of world leaders to step up to their responsibility and bringing together collective demands to turn the crisis around, temporarily transforming the main COP26 plenary room into a space of hope, where the real solutions to the climate crisis were articulated and celebrated.

All this activity did not just happen spontaneously. It happened because we have been organising together for the past two years across NGOs, youth, unions, faith groups, migrant and racial justice groups, direct action networks, climate justice groups, under the umbrella of the COP26 Coalition to deepen our understanding of the drivers of the climate crisis and help shape the narrative around what needs to happen to turn it around. Organising to build a strong and diverse movement of movements that recognises the root cause of the climate crisis is an economic system which is also driving multiple other injustices we are struggling against - poverty, racism, sexism, nature destruction to name but a few - and that only by coming together can we hope to make the change that we need to see happen.

Now that COP is over, after some time for rest and reflection, our job is to build on the momentum and possibilities that organising around a summit of this kind creates in the host country and city. The greater understanding of what is at stake that comes from having to engage with a thing like COP26, not just in civil society but also in the media where so much of our influencing work takes place and the political spaces in which we do our advocacy, means the landscape we are operating in is transformed. We can dare to demand and hope for the transformative policies we know are needed to calm this crisis down. Crucially, we must actively bring into our work a new or revitalised awareness of the global injustices at play in the climate crisis and ensure the solutions we organise and advocate for here in Scotland do not further exacerbate these. If it wasn’t already clear before hearing from frontline voices in the various spaces around COP26, a transition for the global North that relies on continued exploitation of Southern resources, and fails to do our fair share of climate action, is not a just transition at all.

What that means concretely here in Scotland is forgetting about the longer-term climate targets and focussing on bringing emissions down sharply over the next decade. A true fair share of climate action here in Britain looks something like a physically impossible 200% reduction in emissions by 2030. More realistically that translates into zero by 2030 plus £1tn climate finance: the longer it takes us to reach zero, the greater the climate debt we owe.

It means building on the successes of the formidable Stop Cambo campaign which has, in a matter of mere months, leveraged the hosting of COP26 to first turn around longstanding Scottish Government policy on drilling every last drop of oil and gas from the North Sea, then cause Shell to pull out and private equity backed Siccar Point to shelve the project. There are a further 36 oil and gas projects and 3 coal projects in the planning, none of which can be allowed to go ahead if we want a climate safe future.

It means the forthcoming just transition plan for the energy sector must move beyond government rhetoric and come up with concrete policies and finance for delivering decent green jobs here in Scotland, with support and protection for workers and communities as regional economies inevitably go through significant changes. It means politicians no longer listening to oil and gas bosses and looking clear-eyed at the timescales and maths of the tantalising - but ultimately false - solutions of carbon capture and storage and hydrogen being touted by industry. The corporations who have knowingly got us into this mess have no place in getting us out for it, other than stumping up the funds to help.

We are way beyond the low hanging fruit of emissions reductions. It’s time for the difficult decisions and transformative policies, the ones that can both save our skins and make the world a better and more equal place in the process.

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COP26 to CON26 – how we need to be at DEFCON level 1 to save our people and planet

Dave Sherry reviews a recent contribution to union campaign to stop climate change

Climate Jobs: Building a workforce for the climate was written and published by the Campaign Against Climate Change Trade Union Group (CACCTU) to coincide with COP26. It is a response to the urgency of the climate crisis and lays out the type and scale of the transition needed to match it. It is essential reading for every trade unionist and climate activist.

It provides a detailed, in-depth update of the earlier work produced by CACCTU, One Million Climate Jobs (2014), showing that there are many more than a million, well paid, skilled jobs that could be created if we get serious and urgently tackle the climate emergency. Packed with ideas, examples, and accompanying technical resources, it outlines the type of workforce needed and argues that to deliver it we need to break from the failed reliance on the market and instead invest in a huge expansion of public sector jobs across all sectors - from transport, energy and food to homes, education and more.

The pamphlet argues this will require a National Climate Service, which can organise, plan and train workers as well as deliver the jobs so urgently needed, amounting to a radical transformation of the public service. It will require a huge expansion of the public sector to create the infrastructure needed to deliver a just transition.

The crisis is spiralling out of control and it is time to break from the failed reliance on the market and instead invest in a huge expansion of public sector jobs across all sectors - from transport, energy and food to homes, education and more.

The COP process cannot deliver because of the failure and the growing existential threat we face. COP26 was a year of unprecedented climate crisis marked by terrifying floods, wildfires, hurricanes and droughts. Tipping points, like the collapse of the Gulf Stream and the Greenland ice sheet, are in danger of being crossed. Meanwhile, the Amazon rainforest now emits more carbon dioxide than it absorbs, making it a source of, rather than a sink for, greenhouse gas emissions.

The crisis is spiralling out of control because capitalism’s inherent inequalities of class, race and gender block any prospect of climate justice. Estimates of who will be displaced by climate change vary dramatically. The most cited figure is that by 2050 there will be 200m climate refugees fleeing harvest failures, droughts and floods. No wonder the UN Climate Report flashed up Code Red for humanity, warning that the worst scenarios can only be avoided by immediate government action.

The COP process cannot deliver because it seeks to contain climate change through market forces. COP economics are rooted in the logic of capitalism and its drive to accumulate. False panaceas - whether nuclear energy, electric cars, geo-engineering, or emissions trading - all fail because we cannot solve environmental problems by trying to recast them as part of the capitalist market.

Instead, we need to force governments to shut down and replace fossil fuel with renewable energy now. If we rely on what happened inside COP26 and see that as our last and only chance, then we’re doomed. It failed to offer even the most basic measures to halt environmental destruction - no surprise given that over 500 fossil fuel lobbyists were admitted to it. The global corporations and their political pals will not be reformed or regulated into thinking the future of humanity and the planet we live on matters more than their profits.

But there was another presence in Glasgow. Hundreds of thousands on the streets showed the rage against inaction at the top. Fortunately, many more people in Glasgow and around the globe -especially young people - are well aware of this and are angered into action by it. Credit to Greta Thunberg for calling on striking Glasgow workers to join the Friday youth strike and the giant protest march the next day. The workers’ response to her call was marvellous! The slogan ‘System Change not Climate Change’ makes sense to more and more people. It is to this growing audience – especially organised workers and community groups – that this pamphlet is aimed.

- Climate Jobs: Building a workforce for the climate emergency is available from the Campaign against Climate Change Trade Union Group – see https://www.cacctu.org.uk/climatejobs - either for paid hard copies or a free pdf download

Dave Sherry is a member of the Glasgow CACCTU Group and a UNITE union delegate to the Glasgow TUC
Zero emission strategies in maritime transport

Alf Baird surveys the various energy options for greening sea transport, whether for passenger or goods

As with all transport modes, the global maritime sector is required to reduce harmful emissions and rapidly move towards zero-emissions. This presents numerous challenges for shipowners, charterers and financiers in coming up with optimal solutions which are practical and affordable, as well as compliant. Current ship orders and specifications are significant in this regard because ships have an expected operating life of 25+ years, which means ships being delivered in the next few years are expected to still be operating until around 2050. Changing fuel type for a fleet of ships is never a simple matter. Fuel costs account for around one third of total shipping expense and marine fuel costs have a tendency to change suddenly.

Ferries are a major part of the maritime industry, often carrying the bulk of traffic in intra-regional and domestic shipping markets. ‘Scrubbers’ have tended to be the favoured modification option for existing Roll-on Roll-off (RORO) ferries, helping reduce CO2 emissions but hardly eliminating them, and still burning fossil fuels. These adaptations are not cheap, usually costing between £2m-£5m per ship depending on its size. Fitting of scrubbers merely extends the life of existing vessels enabling them to comply with lower emission regulations, for now.

New ferries of the larger 180m length for longer overnight routes tend to be specified for Liquified Natural Gas (LNG) fuel. Some have mixed propulsion of LNG and electricity and even larger vessels carrying cars and trucks are being readied for ‘multi-fuels’, i.e., dual fuel engines for diesel/LNG to start with and ‘Ammonia Ready’ to comply with lower emission regulations when these kick-in. Recent huge increase in LNG prices of 350% in the past year means that many operators now use diesel in the dual-fuel engines for much of the voyage, only using LNG and/or battery power for short period manoeuvring in port.

The many thousands of small urban commuter ferries operating worldwide present another challenge. The UK Department for Transport’s Innovative UK Clean Maritime Demonstration Competition provided funding for London’s Thames Clippers/Uber Boats and partners work on different zero carbon options including compressed hydrogen gas, liquid hydrogen, methanol and fuel cells and batteries. Current technology only allows diesels for high-speed ferries, though this is changing. In Norway, ferry company Norled’s 12-year public transport contract to provide high-speed ferry services is largely based around cutting CO2. This will involve continued use of fossil fuels for only the next 6 years whilst Norled is developing a battery concept for all its future fast ferry operations and looking at hybrid designs powered by batteries and low-emission diesel engines.

Biogas is another option and a plant is being readied in Denmark from 2023 to provide a CO2 neutral fuel for ferries. This will be for ferry operator, Samso Rederi, which is building a new gas ferry. Meanwhile, Gotland Line is planning emission-free ships by 2030 which will combine gas and steam turbines able to use multi-fuels.

Battery power has tended to be mainly applicable for smaller and lower-powered vessels and for ferries on short crossings in sheltered sea areas such as Norway’s fjords. The first emission free battery ferry was built in 2015 for a short route of less than one hour duration. However, much larger battery power systems are rapidly becoming available. Battery power is also limited by available shoreside charging capacity.

Publicly-owned, CalMac, built three small 23-car capacity hybrid diesel-battery operated ferries several years ago. These vessels came with a high price tag of around £11-12m apiece, three times the cost of comparable vessels using diesel only. The was only ‘viable’ via state grants to pay for the ships and charging equipment. The considerable extra weight and higher displacement of these earlier battery ferries also calls into question their overall efficiency as they need more power. In addition, CalMac’s order for two dual-fuel LNG ferries at Ferguson was described as a ‘catastrophic failure’, the ships still nowhere near completion after six years of waiting, and with costs spiralling to ten times that of comparable options (perhaps £150m per ship). It is also possible to drastically reduce emissions through selecting superior hull forms and CalMac’s high displacement traditional ‘bathtub’ shaped ferries require twice the power, having twice the emissions of more efficient designs, such as Pentland Ferries proven catamarans.

Stena Line’s Elektra project, run in collaboration with Frederikshavn in Denmark, plans to introduce (by 2030) on the Gothenburg-Frederikshavn route the biggest fully battery energy ship in the world for the three-hour crossing. The two ships envisaged would each carry 3,000 lane metres of trucks and 1,500 passengers, requiring 60-70 MWh battery capacity, which would be re-charged during each one-hour port stay. That requires a 30-40 MW shore connection at either end of the route, implying heavy demands on the shore power grid which is not available yet but will use in Denmark renewable wind energy when installed. So, most of the current battery-operated ferries run on subsidised ferry routes, with much of the added investment cost in vessel systems and shoreside re-charging infrastructure underwritten by state support.

Most cruise ship operators have also opted for scrubbers in the funnels to reduce CO2 emissions on existing vessels, whilst for new boats they specify LNG. P&O Cruises’ Iona is the first of its two LNG-fuelled cruise ships. Other environmental features include installing advanced waste water treatment plants, new food waste treatment facilities and fuel saving boilers. MSC Cruises are currently planning to build one of the world’s first oceangoing hydrogen-powered cruise ships in a joint initiative with Italian state-owned shipbuilder, Fincantieri, and Italian energy infrastructure company, Snam. The new ship is expected to allow for zero emissions using a hydrogen bunkering system. The next stage in the preparatory work is planning the arrangements onboard the ship to accommodate hydrogen fuel technologies and fuel cells, and undertaking the technological and economic analysis of hydrogen supply.
Denmark’s Maersk Line has recently ordered eight 350m long, 16,000 twenty-foot equivalent containers (TEU) container ships which will run on methanol. Improved hull design allows for 20% energy efficiency saving per transported container, also permitting faster port working. Meanwhile in the bulk sector, Himalaya Shipping/Golar has placed orders in China for 12 LNG-fuelled bulk carriers.

As of December 2021, there were over 50 ships on order with engines designed to burn methanol. Its plentiful availability is a key factor (unlike ammonia which is rather more restricted currently). Most main ship engine manufacturers are extending product lines to include methanol. Producing ammonia from renewables is expected to take longer to develop.

E-methanol (made by renewable electricity) is considered the second least-costly alternative maritime e-fuel. One report found renewable fuels most suited to international shipping are methanol and ammonia, primarily in the form of advanced biofuels and e-fuels. Bio-methanol and renewable e-methanol require little to no engine modification and can provide significant carbon emission reductions in comparison to conventional fuels. From shipowners’ perspectives, flexibility is crucial in minimising financial risk and disruption of operations. As leaders in the field, the Norwegian government is funding several pilot projects led by private shipping groups to develop the first fleet initially of bulk vessels fuelled by ammonia, with ships due to enter service from 2024.

Norwegian research organisation, SINTEF, found that e-methanol comes at lowest additional capital expenditure for vessel operators. The e-ammonia and e-methanol pathways, while requiring higher initial investment, offer the highest fuel choice flexibility both in the medium and long term. Researchers at a Swedish university looked at total cost of ownership for large ferries operating on biofuels, bio-electro-fuels, and e-fuels, in terms of fuel production, fuel infrastructure, ship capital expenditure, energy storage, and loss of cargo space. They found renewable bio-methanol and e-methanol show the lowest cost for each fuel category beating the likes of ammonia and hydrogen.

The weight of evidence suggests sustainable, renewable ammonia and methanol are key intermediate and long-term fuels for the shipping industry, but only methanol can reduce maritime emissions satisfactorily in the near-term. The volumes of renewable methanol product set to come onstream in the next decade will help the industry understand the policy, regulation and economics of the net zero carbon economy while the millions of tonnes of renewable ammonia required can be planned for and produced. The industry is starting its move towards ammonia now: French shipping investors having ordered four large ammonia carriers with China State Shipbuilding Corp also being powered by ammonia. Liquid ammonia can be used as an intermediate carrier for hydrogen, offering a transport solution for large capacity liquid hydrogen.

Norwegian firm, Kongsberg, tested and verified a full-scale, full-size, zero-emissions drivetrain powered by hydrogen fuel cells designed for ships and ferries. The testing mirrors operating loads for a small car ferry operating a short route under one hour duration. The project, part of an EU-funded initiative, demonstrates the technology is now available for using hydrogen as an energy carrier. Meantime, a consortium is seeking to deliver another innovative solution with hydrogen as fuel. The aim is to have a scalable and sustainable solution by producing hydrogen onboard using readily available LNG; this solution is expected to be viable in a much faster time than would otherwise be possible.

In summary, there are many positive zero-emission initiatives ongoing, most involving some form of public support for research and development but all driven by innovative private sector actors. Whilst batteries and LNG have a role, the key focus has moved towards alternative fuels such as methanol, ammonia and hydrogen. There are also different solutions for different ship types depending on length of routes and fuel supply arrangements.

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The approach is based on combining LNG with steam to produce hydrogen and CO2. The hydrogen produced will be used directly in a mix with natural gas in internal combustion engines or in fuel cells, thus, eliminating the need for hydrogen to be stored onboard. The CO2 will be liquefied using the cryogenic stream of LNG that would be used as fuel anyway, and later disposed ashore for carbon storage. Tankers can use the stored CO2 as inert gas during discharge. The necessary equipment would be fitted on the deck of a commercial vessel. This would enable the marine sector’s gradual transition from LNG to hydrogen, without major adjustments to a vessel’s onboard technologies.

Ports are also rapidly developing clean emission strategies. Typical of this Kiel which has set itself the goal of reducing its CO2 emissions to zero by 2030. The port’s plan envisages covering 60% of the energy requirements of ships calling at Kiel with green electricity as early as 2022 and by 2025 to reach 80% to 90%. Main actions include installation of shoreside electricity connections for vessels, clean energy vehicles and cranes for moving freight within the port area, including trucks and trains.

In summary, there are many positive zero-emission initiatives ongoing, most involving some form of public support for research and development but all driven by innovative private sector actors. Whilst batteries and LNG have a role, the key focus has moved towards alternative fuels such as methanol, ammonia and hydrogen. There are also different solutions for different ship types depending on length of routes and fuel supply arrangements.

A key factor will be development of fuel costs and supply availability as critical elements in the viability of shipping operations moving towards zero emissions. There is, however, some evidence of unnecessarily costly early procurement mistakes made by less astute state-owned ferry operators running monopoly services and lacking advanced ship design expertise or industry insights or discipline; the latter form essential attributes in the case of private operators active in competitive markets where shareholders require assurances that capital is well managed in an uncertain environment.

Alf Baird was formerly Head of the Maritime Research Group and Professor of Maritime Business at Edinburgh Napier University.

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Being and becoming modern giants – what it is to be human and in harmony with nature

Patrick Phillips looks at a new way of transcending our system of endless economic exchange

‘There appears to be a sort of war of giants and gods going on amongst them; they are fighting with one another about “being”.’ (an ancient Greek teacher, cited in Heidegger and the Death of God by Duane Armitage (2017))

Maybe this is a serious way of looking at the world today and what is happening. The philosophical study of our existence – ontology – has become political. Indeed, it has been a long time. The political reality - the war itself - of our being has also become a question of ethics. This is what is meant when it is said our situation is political, being less a dilemma and more a crisis of our being. By ethics, or moral philosophy, this means that whatever the crisis, there is an alternative – an antithesis to the thesis, the good to the bad. But often, the alternatives are ignored and denied us.

So, who are the unnecessary gods in our world today? And, who are the ruthless giants operating within our economy today? Today’s chief executive officers (CEOs) of corporations are now the planet’s ruling ontological power, being an oppressive force over billions of human lives. Their own raison d'être is more of the same – pursuing profit at the expense of all else until the death of our species. How, therefore can we transcend – get past, get through, get over, get around – the world of their endless economic exchange? To begin to do so, we need to ask ourselves what kind of human economy do we want and what kind of new culture must we create for this? When we consider today’s climate crisis, the best place to start is with our immediate interaction with our natural landscapes as a way to transcend our ontological crisis.

The relationship between the natural landscape and our imagination is essential to our being in the world. Such a relationship was once an intrinsic part of our human culture. For example, our local history represents folktales of a once active and animate relationship with the natural landscape, creating a sense of continuity towards our unity with nature. Without the mountains, we would have no history of giants, saints or heroes. But where have they gone? Today’s living local legends and their stories are no longer recorded, providing no recognition or realisation of who they are and what they represent. In no other civilisation like the one we live in today has there been such a disconnect between us and nature – between us and our imagination, economy, family and humanity. Is this how we truly imagined ourselves to be and what we have now become? How then, can we become the giants we once were and, therefore, recreate a life made for living rather than just existing?

The age in which we live is one where our present socio-economic model is only about the ontological security of a few. Our being and what we philosophically understand ourselves to be is being further narrowed, undermined and eroded by today’s ontological elite because of the captains of capital’s (the CEOs) quest for endless profit-making as the only way to be in the world. In consequence, we are no longer part of a human economy and so our survival as emotional and mental beings is becoming harder and harder. The only value we now have in society is the level of exploitation we are prepared to endure. Critically, our ontological crisis is now ontological. The collapse of the climate is being accompanied by our collapse as humans.

But what would be the ontological alternative to our present crisis? I see it as being the fundamental difference between living our current form of transient existence and our eternal one. But this can only happen if we are now prepared to put nature first and at the heart of our local and national economies. By putting nature first, we recognise that part of our ontological crisis today is the consequence of our present socio-economic model. Our fight today then is for the ontological right of everyone (including nature) to survive and, therefore, exist and flourish.

Our fight for democracy today must be the fight to transcend the entire ontological hell we are subjected to by the profiteers (CEOs plus directors, bankers, shareholders and elite politicians). This is, ultimately, a political fight. It is about power. At the centre of our crisis is the relationship between those with unnecessary economic power – which we cannot change – within our present socio-economic model and the billions of us that do not wield power. Our task, therefore, is to overthrow those who have been selected and elected into power so that we can change this relationship by ending the existence of that relationship. The selected and elected have no desire to transcend the ontological crisis. They are only capable of continuing to exacerbate our ontological crisis further.

With the continuing dominance of neo-liberalism, left reformist parties have been left in opposition, struggling to find a way to transcend the crisis. Indeed, any attempt to introduce new infrastructure within our present socio-economic model today would be naivé. Instead, we must attempt to transcend our present socio-economic model from within our present infrastructure and without limit. For example, a Universal Basic Income can be provided to every citizen now and could be a means of transition and, thus, transcendence, because financialised capitalism cannot simply be overthrown and there cannot be a return to ‘just’ capitalism. Therefore, what we do right now is critical in creating a new civilisation – a new expression of life.

This would mean a new human economy based upon the essence of what it is to be human, involving not only wellbeing but the complete realisation of humanity itself. We are at the precipice of that new civilisation – all we have to do is take a giant step and leap, finding new horizons as modern giants.

Here, the human imagination will no longer be excluded from the (new) socio-economic system as we will no longer be defined by what we consume
or are subject to. We will be free to
determine who and what we are in an
ontological sense. There could be many
different ontologies now open to us to
choose from. They would be liberating
and not confining.

Today’s global economic elite must
be unimagined as ‘giants’, financial or
otherwise. Instead, they must become
giants with feet of clay because they are
not giants of humanity. They are giants
of mass human exploitation, not mass
human liberation. The so-called ‘little
people’ can and should be the new
giants of humanity, ethical and worldly.
This potential is in each and every one
of us.

So, our present crisis is about more than
just the unsustainable narrative of neo-
literalism and financialised capitalism.
It is fundamentally about how we see
ourselves today and what we become
in the future. If we are truly to end our
ontological crisis, we must urgently
begin the serious work of reimagining
our future with a new way of being; a
new imagination is absolutely essential
to this new universal becoming. This is
also essential if we are going to survive
today’s global economic tyranny and
finally go beyond a human economy that
is still based upon base survival.

Patrick Phillips is an eternal
revolutionary, artist and writer (https://
www.patrickphillips.online/). He lives
and works in a mountain village in
Scotland. His recent book, ‘Eternal
Mountain: Essays from Afar’ was
published in the summer. He is now
working on his latest project, ‘The
Modern Giant: How To Be A Giant In An
Age of Neo Ontology’.

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**Political poems for a imagining a better world**

We are pleased to published further poems by David McKinstry and David Bleiman.

**Cult of Career**

*By David McKinstry*

Have we paid too dear
For the cult of career?
Are opportunities past
For new friends and
Wider horizons to caste?

Are we too worn
To change our way?
Must we dole out
Our dull day?

Can we imagine
Another route,
Missing brief case
And business suit?

Is there another way
To mark our day,
Other than
Work for meagre pay?

**Retail Town**

*By David McKinstry*

Everything has a price,
In retail town
And with time,
All products marked down.

In casino capitalism
Take your chance
As you roll the dice,
And everyone has
A cash out price
A price they have
Is the price you pay,
Lying down with dogs
You will scratch
And rue the day.

**Fruit of the magic money tree**

*By David Bleiman*

In that golden time
we tasted fruit of many trees
and were content
to hold with stories sold and told
and never knew
we were butt naked.

There came a tougher time
when teachers borrowed chalk
and parents lay in corridors
of wards which had no beds–
our leaders said
there was no magic money tree.

There was one tree in the garden
whose fruit we weren’t allowed to taste,
whose apple was, for reasons known,
according to eternal laws,
austerity and common sense,
a strange, forbidden fruit.

We hacked and burned the trees
to plant cash crops, raise cattle,
there came a flood,
then foot and mouth,
eruptions blocked the sky,
The garden turned to dust.

A pestilence blew in,
avoid your neighbour, love yourself,
we queued for toilet rolls,
blew kisses, clapped our hands,
the oxygen ran out,
the garden centres closed.

There was no work and,
Eden on the brink,
our leaders found a secret grove
in which survived a magic money tree
and spread its green and papery fruit
around a fearful land.

Unfold and hold its leaves to hide
our shame at how we lived,
regret the lies we long believed,
for we have got its taste now
and when a serpent whispers in your ear,
it may be time to try the fruit of knowledge.

David Bleiman is
a retired union
official, author of
‘This Kilt of Many
Colours’ (2021,
Dempsey and
Windle – which
was reviewed in
Scottish Left Re-
view, issue 124)
and ‘Gathering
Light: A Cra-
mond Cause-
way’ (2022).
15 years of covering the covers for Scottish Left Review

Nadia Lucchesi is an artist, illustrator and printmaker and has delivered bright and bold covers for Scottish Left Review. After many years, she has decided to hang up her ‘easel’, so this is a good opportunity to publicly thank Nadia for her work and to speak to her about her work. Her website https://www.nadalucchesi.co.uk/ provides examples of her work.

How long have you been designing the cover for Scottish Left Review and how did this come about?

Myself and Scottish Left Review go along way back! An art school pal put me in touch with the editorial team: a friend-of-a-friend scenario. She knew I was interested in editorial illustration and politics, so it seemed like the perfect match. And it was! I started contributing illustrations as far back as 2004. My first commissioned cover was Issue 33, Mar/Apr 2006.

You’ve designed the covers for free and done so on top of having a full-time job. What’s been your motivation to do so?

I make art all the time, whether or not it is ‘for’ anything, but getting regular briefs from Scottish Left Review has given me a focus I may not have had otherwise and helped me to push my work further. The fact that I am illustrating issues that really matter to me is a factor too, of course. Besides, what artist can resist the idea that their work is popping through letterboxes and sitting on coffee tables all over the country?!

For each cover, you get a brief from the editor of what the editorial committee of Scottish Left Review has decided will lead the forthcoming issue. How do you interpret that and what ideas do you draw upon to come up with the visual image for the cover for what you’re trying to convey?

To start with, I think about what the cover headline might be and how I can create a punchy visual to sit alongside it. Regular readers might have noticed I’m fond of a visual metaphor, and puns. I’ll write down key words, then words I associate with those words … then at some point the note-taking turns into doodles, sketches and graphic ideas. Most of my finished illustrations are digital, but they always begin life as a drawing.

Are there are covers you think work particularly well and why?

I’m a very harsh critic of my own work. But an early cover I was really chuffed with and still like is ‘Heroes and Villains’ (Issue 54, 2009). It is a very straightforward but playful interpretation of the theme. It taught me that you don’t necessarily need to be too literal. I still love ‘Opportunity Knocks’ (Issue 86, 2015) – I like the idea of the ‘Elect-us-aurus!’ – and ‘The Union Issue’ (Issue 98, 2017) – both exemplify what I always strive for, namely, a strong idea, executed with simplicity and some élan - I hope! My most recent favourite might be ‘Facing the Future’ (Issue 121, 2021) with the clueless fortune teller. See what I mean about a visual metaphor?

Where does your interest in and training in art come from?

I’ve always drawn, all the time, and I’ve always been fascinated by how images and words work together, perhaps because I’m a bit of a bookworm too. I specialised in Illustration and Printmaking at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design in Dundee, where I worked in a range of media – this is where I started incorporating drawings, collage and printed patterns with digital illustration. I also fell in love with lino print, a form of relief printing. I am now a member of Glasgow Print Studio where I continue my practice, and where I had a featured artist exhibition in 2019.

Could you tell us something about your own politics and what you may have been involved?

I’m a product of my upbringing, I suppose, and my politics have always been on the Left. I support Amnesty International – especially now, when human rights are really under attack in so many places – and Shelter: Homelessness is such a terrible scourge, and it’s shaming that it exists at all in this country. Though I’ve never belonged to a political party I am pro-independence – I can’t see how else we’re going to protect our NHS and many hard-won rights, but my most recent march was at the COP26 protest. I believe the Climate Crisis will come to dwarf everything else on the agenda, and soon. It’s fitting, if a little sad, that this is reflected in my last Scottish Left Review cover.
Parting with Parliament to spend more time on politics

Scottish Left Review interviews Neil Findlay about a new project to bring capacity building skills to progressive community campaigners

Neil Findlay left the Scottish Parliament in May 2021 after 10 years of being a Lothian list Labour MSP. With two others, he has now set up the social enterprise called Unity Consulting (https://www.unityconsulting.scot/).

Neil was born in 1969 and, after leaving school in 1986, became an apprentice bricklayer in his father’s business, and spent ten years working there. During this time, he also studied at the University of Strathclyde, gaining a Bachelor of Arts in Geography and Politics, and going on to become a housing officer in 1996. After working for Almond Housing Association in Livingston for seven years, Neil completed a PGCE at the University of Glasgow in 2003 and became a teacher in Falkirk for the next eight years.

When did your interest in politics begin?

I live in Fauldhouse, a mining community in West Lothian. I was 14 when the miners’ strike started and was politicised by it. None of my immediate family worked in the pit but my granda on my mum’s side was a miner and the influence and culture of living in a coal village was hugely influential. I couldn’t understand why the government wanted to put my pal’s da out of work. I watched every bit of the strike on TV and Scargill, McGahey and Heathfield became my heroes. Following the strike came the poll tax which reinforced my belief that politics was about class. I was hooked.

When did you become active in politics?

I went to an anti-poll tax meeting in the miners’ welfare club. Dennis Canavan, then a Labour MP, was speaking. After the meeting my pal’s mum who was chair of the local Labour party branch asked me to come into the meeting which was in the same building. I did and listened to the guest speaker, a young ambitious Stirling council leader who was urging members to support the campaign for a Scottish Parliament. It was Jack McConnell. I agreed with him on the need for a Scottish Parliament and from that day on I became a political activist.

What were your formative influences?

In terms of causes the strike, the poll tax, hatred of Thatcher and what she was doing to my community were hugely influential. On a personal level my political influences were Tony Benn, the greatest political communicator of my lifetime and Tam Dalyell, my local MP who took me under his wing. He and I could not have been more different. He was an old Etonian who came from an aristocratic family and lived on a big country estate. I went to my St Kentigern’s Academy, worked as a bricklayer and lived in a council house but we struck up a great friendship and he saw something in me. He regularly called me to ask for advice and my opinion on issues of the day, he became my mentor and tried to get me to take over from him at the 1997 election but I said no as I had no interest in going to Westminster. Thankfully, we convinced him to stay on. He was a political giant, great man, with the utmost integrity, completely fearless and a dogged, skilled campaigner – he taught me a huge amount. I was honoured and privileged to have been asked to do one of the eulogies at his funeral. I miss him greatly.

What led you to seek election in 2003 to the West Lothian Council for the Falkhouse and Breich Valley ward?

The sitting Councillor was standing down after decades of service and because I had been heavily involved in helping organise local community campaigns – opposing landfill and opencast developments – I was asked to stand, so I did. By that time, I had been to night school then university and worked in the social housing sector. I was more confident and knowledgeable and felt the time was right.

What would you say were your achievements and highlights as a councillor?

Undoubtedly, the highlight was representing people who I lived amongst and a community I love. I was able to drive key local projects such as a new £7.5 million partnership centre bringing all public services under one roof in a new building and the creation of a very successful community development trust that goes from strength to strength. I was also involved in negotiating a community benefit deal with windfarm operators that brought hundreds of thousands of pounds into the community. I was also proud to be involved in campaigns to demolish poor housing and a number of educational and environmental projects.

You were re-elected in 2007 but then choose to seek election to the Scottish Parliament in 2011. What was your motivation?

I had built a decent reputation for organising effective campaigns and some of my pals in the trade unions and the party encouraged me to stand. I have never really been an ambitious person but the encouragement from them and my family made me put my name forward.

What would you say were your achievements and highlights as an MSP?

I am very proud of putting together a team in my office who always prioritised constituents. We relentlessly pursued cases on behalf of constituents and did everything we could to help them. I am also proud of the work I did raising the profile of many campaigns such as blacklisting, the spycops scandal, drugs decriminalisation, miner’s justice, the transvaginal mesh, social care, and the children’s ward at St John’s hospital. I forced three independent reviews...
of policy, introduced a Members’ Bill that was legislated for, secured a mesh injured women’s fund and the Miners’ Pardons Bill going through parliament just now.

You stood against Jim Murphy for the Scottish Labour leadership in 2014. Do you think this helped pave the way for Richard Leonard becoming the first left-wing Scottish Labour leader for some time?

I am 100% convinced that had I not stood there would have been no Jeremy Corbyn as UK leader and no Richard Leonard as Scottish leader. I say this because such was the situation in the aftermath of the 2014 referendum and 2015 election we could have had Keir Hardie as leader and we would have still gone down to the biggest defeat in our history. Had I won, I would have had a very different policy agenda and approach but would still have suffered a huge defeat largely because of the fallout from the disastrous Better Together fiasco. That would have led the Labour right wing and party establishment to say, ‘that’s what happens when you elect a left winger, don’t vote for Corbyn or Leonard.’

You were also the Scottish campaign chief for Jeremy Corbyn during his 2015 leadership bid. Looking back on those times, what did the left get right and wrong?

I was delighted to chair Jeremy’s campaign on both occasions: those were exciting times. We brought together a great team who got the campaign tactics right, the policy agenda right and the grassroots mobilisation right. We campaigned on a popular socialist agenda that enthused a new generation and brought back many who left us over issues like Iraq. When Labour defied the pundits in 2017 the establishment and media shut themselves at the prospect of Labour victory at the next election and with the help of opponents within his own party they unleashed the hounds of hell on Corbyn and anyone and anything associated with the project. The treatment of Jeremy was a shameful, disgusting way to treat a good, decent, compassionate human being.

Why did you choose not to seek re-election as an MSP in 2021?

I am someone who knows in my gut when to move on and felt that the time was right to make a contribution in another way. A few years previous my wife was ill – she is thankfully back to full health – and I know it’s a bit clichéd but that time did make us reappraise our lives. Whilst I loved working on behalf of constituents, meeting different people and my campaigning work, I felt that life is too short to be ground down by never ending internal party wrangles with people who have been at the forefront of Labour’s decline over the last 20 years. It was time to move on.

The report by UNITY Consulting for the rail unions, published in October 2021.

You launched Unity Consulting along with Tommy Kane and Michael Sharp. Tell us about why it is needed right now and what is seeks to do.

The business community and financial sector dominates the political agenda in Scotland. I have seen first-hand how they work and how charities, trade unions and community groups are too often ignored. Unity Consulting Scotland is a not-for-profit social enterprise that was set up to help provide research, campaigns support, political and media advice. Some of the projects we have been working on are with the joint rail unions on the future of Scotland’s railway, the BFAWU bakers’ union on the right to food, the FBU firefighters’ union on COP26, pay and funding for the fire and rescue service, a local food charity on developing food dignity for all and Scottish Hazards on the health and safety of workers. We are very pleased with how things are going and look forward to working with more groups in future.

So, would it be true to say you have followed Tony Benn in leaving Parliament to spend more time on politics?

Absolutely, I am a campaigner as are Michael and Tommy, it’s in our blood. We will always be involved in grassroots campaigns, union and community work and socialist politics. We believe we have a lot to offer the movement and want to help use our skills and knowledge to advance causes and deliver for our class.

You’ve also started publishing a number of books like ‘Socialism and Hope: A journey through turbulent times (Luath 2017), ‘Life in the Raws: Memories of a Shale Oil Village” (Luath 2020) and ‘If You Don’t Run, They Can’t Chase You’ (Luath 2021). What has been your motivation here and what do you hope will be achieved?

I enjoy writing and hope that what has been published is interesting and thought provoking. ‘Socialism and Hope’ is about my involvement in campaigns, the referendum and Corbyn campaigns. ‘Life in the Raws’ is my granda’s memoirs of his life and work growing up in a West Lothian shale mining village and ‘If you don’t run, they can’t chase you’ is a collection of accounts of class heroes who have been at the forefront of major social justice campaigns. Their stories are fascinating, educational and hugely inspiring. I hope they will motivate a new generation of campaigners and activists.
The local elections this May will be challenging for Alba but are equally a great opportunity for a still fledgling party. The mainstream media blackout imposed in May will likely continue but the party is growing in membership and its activist base will be campaigning hard around the country. Organisation and structure missing for the Scottish Parliament elections last May are now being established and, as Alba strengthens, it is often at the expense of others, especially the SNP. Others though – from all parties and none – are rallying. The manifesto will be not just local but national.

The push for independence now has never been more required. Many who doubted the need last May or thought that action would be taken by others have been sadly disappointed. Not only is time of the essence but a radical prospectus is required to motivate the populace, where more and more people are being ground down relentlessly. The scale of harm and suffering being imposed makes even Thatcher seem benign.

The damage being done to Scotland’s economy and society is immense. It’s a kleptocracy in charge with no shame and little compunction. The harm being done’s incalculable and the long-term threat immeasurable. Even the NHS – once viewed as sacrosanct – is being hollowed out. This Tory government is also changing civic society, ensuring that if it is ever defeated, then the ability of any incoming administration to exercise radical change will be stymied. Meanwhile, the undermining of the Scottish Parliament as a bulwark to those threats continues unabated. As opposition to Brexit was ignored and a hard Brexit imposed, the threat to our democratic structures grows. The brave rhetoric of resistance spouted by the SNP has vanished into thin air and the consequences are felt by business and individuals across the land.

Now this is being compounded by threats to our health and wellbeing. Coronavirus in all its variants is continuing to threaten and will keep doing so as long as 4.7bn people in the developing world remain unvaccinated, not simply awaiting a booster jag. Britain and United States have been complicit in creating this situation with their actions. The Westminster Government has added to this with its failure to address travel restriction issues. Yet calls for a Four Nation approach are met with the same contempt and disdain as requests for a Section 30 Order for an independence referendum.

So, Alba’s principal call will be for a galvanisation of the push for independence that has been abandoned by the SNP. A ‘neverendum’ was meant to be a pejorative remark from a unionist but has become the policy of the Scottish Government. Talk of a referendum in 2023 is fraudulent and not just fanciful.

Alba will articulate over coming months. Its why other routes must now be used. A national convention that should have been called after Johnson’s rejection at the polls in Scotland back in 2019 is now required more than ever. The local elections allow a platform for that call to be made and for a convention to encompass not just MPs and MSPs but also councillors. That convention can be the basis not simply to drive forward the push for independence but coordinate opposition to cuts and threats from a Government which Scotland has comprehensively rejected.

But in addition to those for action against Westminster, there will be challenges to the Scottish Government which has either failed to protect or have even consciously taken action that is harmful and authoritarian. These are actions that many thought they’d never seen in Scotland, and certainly not under an SNP administration.

Simply being more competent than Johnson or less damaging than the Tories is not enough. Mitigation, whilst welcome, is inadequate and small ticket steps simply do not go far enough. Some actions taken by the Scottish Government are proving positively harmful. Some are national in dimension whether concerning the Gender Recognition Act and the dangers of self-identification for women’s sex-based rights or the proposed cuts to services such as rail. The almost complete lack of strategy for an industrial policy is shown by the debacle of Ferguson Marine or the absence of a jobs windfall from the renewable revolution. Cuts to council budgets overall are damaging and remote communities have been left bereft through the abysmal handling of the Cal Mac saga.

Alba councillors will also reject the supine acceptance of Scottish Government diktat that has been the hallmark of most SNP administrations. Supporting a government is one thing but selling out your community quite another. Yet in cuts or the imposition of policies, SNP councillors and especially SNP councils have been marked by their silence and submissiveness. That has seen harm imposed such as library closures in the most deprived parts through to vituperative attacks on public sector workers for having the audacity to oppose what was being done to them or their communities. Sins of commission have been compounded by sins of omission, whether on the failure to deliver on rent controls or a tourist tax or to push for powers over AirBnB and the resource for the social housing that is badly required.

The people of Scotland are crying out for action. People are being hurt and the threat faced is severe. Alba goes into these elections with hope and optimism, seeking to galvanise the radical call for independence that ignited our country in 2014 and which has been allowed to dissipate. It’s that radical vision that’s required and it’s that – along with protecting sex-based rights and defending our communities – which Alba will articulate over coming months.

Kenny MacAskill is an Alba MP for East Lothian.
Not independence but self-government!

Colin Kirkwood argues against the replicating of centralised systems of government under independence

In the 1960s, the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, developed a concept he called ‘limit situations’, which he believed can evoke ‘limit acts’. Limit situations are experienced initially as blocks in people’s lived reality and which seem insurmountable like walls. But as their confidence grows and their investigative and creative capacities develop, Freire argued, people can come to realise that limit situations are not places where possibilities end but rather where new possibilities begin.

I believe that in Scotland (and also in England, Wales and Northern Ireland) many people have out-of-date, rigid and impoverished ideas about what is possible. This results from the absence of real democracy in their societies, an absence which is perpetuated by the hostility of many of their elected representatives to such an outrageous notion.

Specifically in Scotland, the concept of independence has been promoted as the legitimate objective of our political endeavours. To me this concept is vague and verging on the unintelligible. It serves as a block to real creative thinking.

The SNP, of which I have been a hopeful member for forty years, since the launch of the Campaign for a Scottish Assembly, has increasingly come to resemble the old British Labour and Tory parties: conservative, centralist, with hierarchical command structures, excessive admiration for national leaders, and overreliance on a narrow circle of advisers.

Another helpful Freirean concept is the idea of submergence, and the need for people to emerge, so that they can perceive more accurately the culture, assumptions and values in which they have been immersed. Scotland, its people, its institutions and specifically the SNP and some of its leaders are still unconsciously immersed in the old British political culture of hierarchy and central command, and unconsciously reproduce these long-established norms of British culture and society in their thinking and action.

I believe we, the people who live and work in Scotland, need to emerge from these age-old centralist, authoritarian norms which generate cowed, authority-dominated cultures and mind-sets through all four countries of the Union. We do not need a Scottish centralism, with Edinburgh as its imperial headquarters, and Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon as big Daddy and big Mummy who manage the show and occasionally fall out (which of course causes deep distress to the children).

What we need at the centre is certainly confident, competent and above all visionary leadership, with an emphasis on vision, not behaviour management. And alongside that, we need manifest de-centralisation to ourselves: to personal, local, community, district and regional levels, throughout the country, where new ideas can be tried and new initiatives can be taken.

The current system of local government is overly hierarchical and now also technocratic and informatic, though still grounded in the antique fantasy of the crown-in-parliament. It has been modified more times than I can remember since John Mackintosh’s seminal book, The Devolution of Power, first emerged in 1968. In each of these successive waves of restructuring, the underlying rationale has always been about larger units, efficiency and streamlining, making me wonder whether these objectives might be better achieved by simply abolishing the population, as Irish writer, Dean Jonathan Swift, once imaginatively proposed. What is needed is not restructuring: we need re-orientation, and re-vision.

We must gently shunt aside and replace these shibboleths, and do so in the present, not in some post-independence paradise which will always remain as out-of-focus as it is now. Let us enable and empower ourselves as citizens, conceived of as persons in relation, in every field of enterprise, service and endeavour. I am old enough to remember the energies released by the cross-party initiatives of Task Force and Young Volunteer Force Foundation in the late 1960s and 1970s. And don’t tell me there are no such initiatives happening today. Think for example of the Scottish Centre for Geopoetics, based on the Isle of Luing, and reaching out across the world.

The people of Scotland do not need independence. What they do need is full self-government, responsible autonomy and interdependence. We are capable of self-determination, working together in collaboration with others. This is also what the people of England, Wales and Northern Ireland need. I see no good reason why the people of Scotland should not lead the way. There is no need to wait for the Westminster Government’s permission. The tired old edifices of Westminster could rapidly be converted into houses and community learning centres for homeless and unemployed people. This is not an invitation to the SNP to abolish itself, but to convert itself into an inclusive and creative popular movement. Over to you, Nicola! If not now, when?

Colin Kirkwood is a poet, adult educator, community activist, counsellor, psychoanalytic psychotherapist and writer. He regards himself as both a democratic socialist and a social democrat. His most recent paper, ‘Adults Learning, Democratisation and the Good Society’ will be published by UNESCO in Convergence in February 2022.
They’ll never understand why I’m here’ – James Connolly, the left and the Irish War of Independence

Peter McColl looks back on the creation of the right’s dominance in the Irish republic in order to explain why independence did not mean revolution.

When, on the 24 April, Easter Sunday 1916 on Sackville Street, Dublin, a group of rebels seized the General Post Office, proclaiming an Irish Republic, one of the most prominent of the rebels was the great socialist James Connolly. Their belief in independence enjoyed relatively little public support, but the ruthless treatment of the rebellion, and in particular the rebels, turned public opinion. Just over two and a half years later, the party of independence, Sinn Féin, won a landslide victory in the December 1918 election.

The new majority party of nationalism refused to sit in the Westminster Parliament, and instead convened the first Dáil Éireann with 73 of the 105 parliamentarians elected. They declared independence, ratifying the 1916 proclamation. The British response triggered the Irish War of Independence leading eventually to the partition of Ireland, and - over the next 30 years - the creation of the Irish Republic. But despite the prominent position of the left at the GPO, the politics of Ireland has been dominated by the right since the 1920s. This is because the Easter Rising, like the composition of the independence movement was an alliance of the left and the institutionally much more powerful Catholic nationalists. When faced with British violence and unionist intransigence, this meant the leftist character of Irish independence was marginalised by the power of the Church and its supporters.

Ireland was Britain’s first colony, and the independence movement in Ireland inspired anti-imperialist movements throughout the twentieth century. The revolutionary rupture of 1916 was a combination of what we would recognise as left forces and romantic nationalists. The most notable figure on the left was Connolly - one of the most significant figures of the early twentieth century left - and other significant figures included Jack White. But the left’s vision of Ireland was very distinct from that of the romantic, Catholic nationalists such as Pádraig Pearse. The confrontation with the British state led to an almost complete victory for Catholic nationalists, which has left modern Ireland by turns a clerical state and a beacon for neo-liberalism through the Celtic Tiger.

Connolly is reputed to have told his wife before his execution: ‘They’ll never understand why I’m here’ which reflects the ambivalence he expected from the international left. Was Connolly painting nationalism red? The outcome of the Irish revolution certainly suggests that he was, but the reasons why are not clear. Here, I examine the history and politics of the Irish revolution and try to draw out reasons for the failure of the left.

The ‘Irish Question’ dominated British politics in the late 19th century. The movement for Home Rule created the third-largest block of MPs at Westminster. The ‘Question’ dates back to the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland in 1169. It encompasses a period of settler colonialism during the Plantation, where Scots and English planters were granted land - largely in Ulster. And it came to a head with the 1798 United Irishmen uprising. Following this rebellion, the Kingdom of Ireland came to an end and the Crown was assimilated into the unitary monarchy that included the English and Scottish crowns.

The United Irishmen were a broadly progressive force, similar in character to the bourgeois revolutionaries of France and America. They sought to unite the Catholic Irish with dissenters (who were largely of Scots descent) to overthrow the Anglican ascendancy. The rising failed to overthrow the government, but Anglican ascendancy ended. It was replaced by full integration of Ireland into the British parliamentary system through the 1801 Act of Union. The Orange Order, emerging from militia who were engaged in anti-Catholic activity in County Armagh in the late 18th century came to consolidate a Catholic-Protestant division, especially in Ulster. This replaced the division between Anglicans, on the one hand, and Catholics and Presbyterians on the other.

This led to opposition in the predominantly Protestant north of Ireland to Irish independence. Following the potato famine, in which a million Irish died in the late 1840s, the movement for Irish ‘home rule’ gained substantial support. Home rule for Ireland came to dominate British politics through the last two decades of the nineteenth century. In 1914, a Home Rule Bill was finally passed at the third attempt but was suspended after the outbreak of WW1. The leader of the Irish Nationalist Party, which had argued for Home Rule supported the War and recommended that supporters should enlist to fight for the British Empire in order to increase support for Home Rule in London.

The Easter Rising ended in abject failure – put down within a week and with the main figures quickly executed by the British. But those executions channelled growing ill-feeling about the British conduct of WW1 and deeper distrust of British imperial power. Quickly the mood changed, and Irish independence became the favoured option of most Irish people. The Irish Nationalist Party was replaced by Sinn Fein at the first
election after the rebellion.

The Proclamation of Independence was a progressive document. It contained a provision for ‘religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens’, and commitments to universal suffrage and to ‘cherishing all the children of the nation equally’. The signatories were singled out for execution by the British.

That the revolution would lead to a conservative, clerical state was not inevitable. Many subsequent 20th century revolutions were led by the left, in coalition with nationalist forces, and the left-leaning leadership had to be removed by imperialists as happened with Patrice Lumumba in Congo and Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso. Yet in Ireland there was no clear strategy by the British to eliminate the left leadership. The execution of the 1916 revolutionaries was rushed and had little strategic underpinning. So, while Connolly was executed, so were the more romantic nationalist and Catholic infused signatories of the Declaration of Independence.

Two key characters emerged from the Rebellion - Michael Collins and Eamon de Valera. Both were involved in the Easter Rising but escaped execution by the British. de Valera was deemed too insignificant, while Collins evaded the selection of prisoners for further interrogation and was instead taken for internment in Wales. Neither figure was of the left - de Valera’s future career indicated he was of the populist right.

The Irish War of Independence led to a stalemate, leading to negotiations led by Collins. This produced a ‘Treaty’ which has defined the party character of Irish politics ever since. The Treaty contained the proposed partition of Ireland, with two administrations. One was to be responsible for the majority Protestant north-east of the island. This became the Stormont government of the 6 counties that became known as Northern Ireland. The other government, based in Dublin has governed the other 26 counties, known as the ‘Irish Free State’. The leader of the pro-treaty group, Collins, was assassinated by anti-Treaty forces but the Party supporting the Treaty, Cumann na nGaedheal, governed the ‘Free State’ for its first decade under W.T. Cosgrave. After lodging power, it merged with two other organisations to form Fine Gael. Cumann na nGaedheal favoured order and stability, and became the party of the landed and moneyed classes. This desire for order aligned with the desire of the British government, who still had forces in Ireland.

A number of Soviets were declared during the War of Independence, most notably in Limerick. Here, the Trades Council took over the town and acted as the government, going so far as to issue money. But when support for a general strike was refused by the Irish Labour Party and the Trade Union Congress, the Soviet came to an end. Other Soviets came into conflict with both pro and anti-treaty forces, but were eventually put down by the conservative forces who won the Irish Civil War. Learning from the revolutionary experiences in Russia and Germany conservative elements were able to out-maneouvre the Soviets.

The Great Depression and the economic difficulties Ireland suffered through the 1920s resulted a desire for change. The party that defeated Cumann na nGaedheal was Fianna Fáil, led by Éamon de Valera. The difference was much less ideological and much more about the differing positions on the Treaty. Fianna Fáil, though, adopted a more conservative populist position, which led to them being in government for much of the mid-20th century.

The Spanish Civil War gives a reflection of the nature of Irish politics of the 1930. The leader of Cumann na nGaedheal’s Blueshirt paramilitary, Eoin O’Duffy raised a force to fight on the side of Franco - he later offered to do the same for Hitler. Meanwhile anti-treaty politician, Frank Ryan and his Connolly Column, fought for the Spanish Republic.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Fine Gael moved to the centre, becoming a classic Christian Democratic party. Fianna Fáil flirted with populist neo-liberalism, and ended up creating the ‘Celtic Tiger’ - an economy based on inward investment and high levels of inequality and runaway house price inflation. This was extremely susceptible to a cyclical downturn, and when this came in 2008 it produced a massive crash. The response by the Fianna Fáil-led government was to implement brutal austerity, which was continued by the Fine Gael led governments from 2011 onwards.

The only really remarkable character of the current Irish Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael government is that it is the first time the parties of the Civil War adversaries have governed together. The Irish left remains fractious and divided. While contemporary Sinn Fein holds many leftist positions, there are a significant number of TDs (members of Parliament) from more radical parties. The leftist critique of Sinn Fein is that it is often authoritarian, and the decision to campaign against carbon taxes in 2019 cost the party much progressive support. The Irish Labour Party did itself enormous damage in a coalition government with Fine Gael from 2011-2016. Before the 2011 election, Labour was a serious contender to be the largest party. Labour currently holds 7 of the 160 seats in Dáil Eireann.

The Irish left came to revolution perhaps too late - lacking the factor of surprise enjoyed by the Bolsheviks. The underdevelopment of most of what became the Free State meant the labour movement was weak, and when Soviets were declared there was insufficient support to transform these into revolutionary moments with a class character.

Ireland during the Celtic Tiger was a crucible of neo-liberal development. The internal contradictions of this neo-liberalism are subtly different to those of earlier eras. That creates a dynamic worthy of analysis. And the left’s success in driving change on issues like abortion rights and equal marriage shows there is considerable progressive potential. The decision by Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil to govern together is a sign of weakness - not a sign of strength. It opens the door to a Sinn Fein-led government at the next election, and the opportunity to resolve the questions of reunification and progressive change at once.

We may see the reconciliation of the pro and anti-treaty parties as the first stage in the development of class-based politics in Ireland. But a class-based politics that arises from an antagonism to neo-liberalism, which will tell us much about how radical politics in the 21st century will work out. And then maybe we will understand why Connolly was so central to the Irish fight for independence.

Hailing from Belfast, Peter McColl is a charity worker in Scotland, Scottish Green Party member and edits the Bright Green blog https://bright-green.org/
An Ann Cleves crime in Shetland worthy of a Jimmy Perez investigation: privatisating Shetland College

Andrew Anderson looks at the lessons which must be learned from the case of Shetland for the rest of Scotland

Shetland College was privatised on 1 August 2021. This was the first time in Scottish history a Further Education (FE) college has been transferred from public ownership and control into a private company limited by guarantee. Despite the Scottish Government’s recent assurances that they are committed to FE remaining in the public sector, their non-departmental government body, the Scottish Funding Council, endorsed Shetland College’s privatisation and remains ideologically committed to this ‘governance’ model.

Shetland College was part of Shetland Islands Council, as many colleges in Scotland were until a few years ago before they merged to form new public sector FE colleges, until it was privatised in August 2021. It had been merged with Train Shetland (also part of the Council) and the NAFC (North Atlantic Fisheries College) Marine Centre, a vocational college governed by a Board of Trustees.

The lecturing staff at Shetland College were not opposed to the merger, which will hopefully create opportunities for learning and education both within and outwith Shetland, although the two colleges are very different in how they have developed and in the way they operate, with one having a more diverse curriculum and the other concentrating on marine, fishing and aquaculture-based training and qualifications. However, the idea that this newly created college should be registered as a private limited company, instead of as a public body is unfathomable to me, colleagues, and many in our community.

Privatisation means the new college is not subject to the same level of Scottish Government oversight as the vast majority of other colleges throughout Scotland are and it won’t be accountable in law to the democratically elected Scottish Parliament. Board members will only be liable up to the financial ceiling set when the company is formed (as little as £1 per member) meaning they can all walk away if their company – our college – is not financially viable. Although it will be run not-for-profit, the private limited company can build up unlimited financial reserves, unlike incorporated public colleges, meaning money does not have to be re-invested into teaching and learning. Instead, it can be hoarded. This is despite the majority of funding continuing to come via the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) i.e., tax-payers’ money. The new college will not be subject to full reporting by Audit Scotland on its financial stability, and the Board of Management cannot be withdrawn by Scottish Ministers if necessary. So, privatisation is an affront to democracy itself.

Whilst union life in Shetland is, perhaps, a bit different from that in the Central Belt – political activism is less obvious and ‘in your face’, campaigns are less frequent, with folk often less likely ‘to put their head above the parapet’ - the level and extent of opposition to privatising Shetland College from members and the public is very telling. It is clear, there is a manifest depth of commitment to ensuring further education remains public in Shetland.

It was the Scottish Government’s non-departmental body (the SFC which funds FE and HE in Scotland) which originally recommended to Shetland UHI’s Shadow Board, set up to progress the merger, that privatisation of the new college would allow for more ‘flexibility’ in managing finances. It was also the same SFC which advised all stakeholders, including Shetland Islands Council, of the process for merger including that a 12-week consultation period would be carried out by the Scottish Government prior to the new college’s ‘vesting day’, i.e., the day it became a new entity. This would mean the Government had some oversight of the process including the business case, which recommended privatisation.

Contrary to this previous advice from the SFC, which Shetland Islands Council relied upon, a consultation period prior to the merger and vesting of the college, i.e., prior to privatisation, did not take place. The SFC had apparently ‘assumed’ Ministerial approval would be required but somewhere along the line it changed its mind. The College passed from public ownership and control into private hands, despite remaining publicly funded, without any scrutiny over the governance arrangements.

It was Shetland Islands Council which took the decision to merge and to proceed with the option of ‘outsourcing’ the college to a private limited company, but on the basis of a decision-making process which relied on advice from the Scottish Government’s non-departmental body, the SFC, which is accountable to Scottish Ministers and,
ultimately, to the Scottish Parliament and tax payers.

The SFC is governed by a Board of Management containing people with a wide variety of business interests – family businesses through to consultancies - and professional Public Board members from the Law Society of Scotland, the Police Authority Board, other educational institutes and organisations, and looser networks. A veritable who’s who of public appointments in Scotland. The Chief Executive was formally Alex Salmond’s Principal Private Secretary and worked with the Scottish Government in a variety of roles until 2019. And it seems not one of them actually made the case against using public money to privatise a college.

 Whilst the union was accused of being ‘ideologically opposed’ to privatisation, which it is, the same can be said for those in charge of our tax payers’ money – they are ideologically supportive of accumulating surpluses in an opaque manner, away from public scrutiny and accountability. The Scottish Government, for all its rhetoric of inclusive growth, fair work, collective bargaining, and lowering the attainment gap, seemed content to stand back, claiming this was an ‘operational matter’ for Shetland Islands Council and the new Shetland College Board, and that they have no locus in the governance of FE colleges, despite the SFC’s misleadings being pointed out.

The SFC published a ‘Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability’ in June 2021. The recommendations in the main report include that the Scottish Government should review the classification of all colleges in line with English classification by re-classifying them all as private sector bodies in order to remove Scottish Ministers’ powers ‘of direction and consent, their role in the governance of individual colleges, and college requirements relating to the Scottish Public Finance Manual and national bargaining’. The Scottish Government has now provided assurances that FE will remain classified as public sector, but this does not help Shetland.

We believe there needs to be a look beyond current economic trends to provide long-term quality education for students in Shetland and across Scotland. Education is a public good and should be a public service, with the emphasis on the educational provision for all, regardless of personal circumstances and income, rather than seeking to generate income or, in other words, ‘surpluses’. It is worth noting here that Shetland Islands Council and Shetland UHI, relied very heavily upon the arguments relating to generating surpluses to persuade councillors and board members to approve privatisation. Their very own financial forecasts predicted no ‘surpluses’ over the next 5 years - this strongly suggests the arguments relating to being privatised, as you can retain ‘surpluses’ to be a massive ‘red herring’.

It is evidently clear from staff in privatised colleges that being employed by a company limited by guarantee reduces your security of employment and, historically, these colleges have had poorer terms and conditions. This resulted in very committed staff choosing to leave these colleges. These concerns over terms and conditions and security of employment would clearly have an impact on staff morale and the stability and breadth of provision for students. One of the manifest concerns is that operating as a ‘private’ company will mean the primary objective will be to ‘balance the books’ to the detriment of providing inclusive and accessible learning.

This will simply mean there is an ever-increasing concentration upon the courses where there are naturally higher student numbers and that a ‘stack ‘em high’ approach to education will prevail rather than a concentration on the quality of education. There is a concern that being governed by a company limited by guarantee and the desire to generate surpluses would mean economics, rather than educational benefit, is driving provision. This would result in a less diverse range of courses being offered for the residents of Shetland.

The right to education is a key human right and privatisation is a clear threat to human rights, as Philip Alston, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, wrote in September 2018 when he highlighted the inequality in the UK caused, in part, by being wedded to a neo-liberal agenda of which privatisation of public services is intrinsic. There is a plethora of information on why ‘public is better’ not least of all that collected by the We Own It campaigning group (https://weownit.org.uk/people-not-profit). From energy to transport, we know that privatisation simply increases costs on the consumer. Instead of being a shareholder, keeping costs low, there is a never-ending drive for competition which puts profit before people. We see it now with our NHS. Where once it was straightforward to get tests and treatment, we now see a slow creep of other companies shoring up the gaps, creating false choice.

For us, it is about democracy, transparency and accountability. We do not want to work, to educate, being dictated by the whims and business interests of others. There is something much more fundamental to teaching and learning, namely, inclusive and accessible teaching and learning for the sake of education as a principle.

Though the College opened as a private limited company on 1 August that does not mean we have given up. Transport workers and their unions have fought tooth and nail to have our railways and buses re-nationalised - not just for themselves and their terms and conditions but for the public service. That fight is beginning to pay off. Unions are stymied by anti-union legislation in terms of taking industrial action over privatisation. However, staff are very concerned about any future changes to terms and conditions. In that case, we would need to consider all options including industrial action. We were supported in our campaign by Scottish Labour and the Scottish Greens. We can only hope this support continues. We will continue to argue for Shetland College to returned to the public sector as a public service. We will keep a close eye on the upcoming mergers of Lewis Castle, North Highland College and West Highland College to ensure there is no further privatisation in Scottish FE. Privatisation must become a dirty word again in our public services – with the negative impact on students and staff of privatisation continually highlighted.

A history of my union’s campaign against privatisation can be found here: https://www.eis.org.uk/Content/images/FELA/Shetland%20Timeline%20Updated.pdf

Andrew Anderson has been a committed trade unionist all his working life and became EIS-FELA branch secretary for Shetland College in January 2014. He has been a lecturer for 16 years, mainly within Community Learning which provides accessible and inclusive learning for a wide variety of students.
Dougie Harrison recalls why he joined the Communist Party in 1968 and resigned from it in 1990

Few reading this article who are under the age of about sixty will have any first-hand understanding of how important the Communist Party of Great Britain remained in Scottish life for many years, and not just in the unions. Probably few even of my age will fully understand the impact the party has had on all sorts of areas of Scottish life. It was, for example, one of the driving forces behind the Peoples’ Festivals, established largely to bring Scots folksong to Edinburgh during the Festival in the early 1950s, by people like Hamish Henderson and others. And this wee folk-music add-on, along with the work of the Communist Party in helping found Glasgow Unity Theatre, has grown into the Edinburgh Festival Fringe - widely believed to be the biggest arts festival in the world. It’s possible that without the Communist Party’s cultural work, there would be no Fringe. Think that’s a fanciful claim? Just thoroughly read the history please, as I have tried to do, before you judge.

In politics, Britain’s fundamentally undemocratic first-past-the-post electoral system has not only ensured that there have been few governments in British history which have been elected on a majority vote of the people. It also meant that the Communist Party struggled to have a handful of MPs elected, just as despite a significant total Green vote today, the Greens have only one MP, and will have to work very hard indeed to increase that number at Westminster. In the Scottish Parliament, a degree of proportional representation means the Greens have been represented since the Parliament’s re-birth in 1999. There were eight Green MSPs; it became seven after one, deservedly, accepted the chair of Holyrood after election as a Green in May 2021.

By far the longest-serving Communist MP was from Scotland. Paisley engineer, Willie Gallagher, represented the west of Fife, dominated by the mining industry, between 1935 and 1950. Many believed that he was only defeated then, at the start of the Cold War, because Labour selected a candidate, Willie Hamilton, who was fiercely anti-monarchist, although otherwise conventionally right-wing. I think the largest Communist parliamentary vote since 1950 was in 1974, when Jimmy Reid, party member prominent in the UCS struggle, and by then Rector of Glasgow University, managed 14.6% of the vote in Clydebank, despite priests warning from pulpits against him, in a constituency in which the Roman Catholic church had some influence.

Well into recent history in the 1960s and 1970s, there were groups of Communist councilors in Scotland, especially in Dunbartonshire (‘the Vale’ and Clydebank), and Fife. Ex-miner, Willie Clarke, was councillor for his home community of Ballingry in Fife for over forty years, and when he recently decided to retire for domestic, not political reasons, he was in 2015 the last self-described Communist in Britain to hold public elected office.

But whilst Communists, even in Scotland, were rare in elected public office in the sixties and seventies of last century, many were elected to positions of leadership throughout the union movement – except in the electricians’ union, where they were ineligible to stand because of their politics.

So, my decision to join the Communist Party in 1968 was not as strange or irrational as may appear today. It’s always necessary to put things in context, if one is to understand them. The Communist Party was still a credible force in Scots public life then. And Marxist theory began to answer some of my hitherto intractable questions about the intellectual shortcomings of the neo-classical economic theory I’d been taught as a student.

As the seventies passed, I began to be identified with the ‘traditionalist’ wing of the Communist Party, which was largely mischaracterised as having an unthinking loyalty to the Soviet Union. Some called us ‘tankies’ as they presumed that we supported the use of Soviet tanks to crush the ‘Prague Spring’ of 1968.

I hope I was no blind loyalist to anything. I knew of Krushchev’s ‘secret speech’ to the Soviet Union’s 1958 Party Congress, in which for the first time within the Soviet state and the rest of the socialist world, at least some of Stalin’s crimes against humanity were revealed in public. I carefully studied Carr’s fine multi-volume history of the Soviet Union. I was no fool, and knew better than most folks do, of the dreadful abuse which Stalin’s leadership had used to drag a country then newly liberated from feudal serfdom into the twentieth century. I knew of Stalin’s erratic leaps in attempts to stave off the danger of invasion by Hitler’s forces, which caused Party members across the globe to jump from one political position to its near-opposite.

But the verdict of many serious historians of the Second World War was that its real turning point was at Stalingrad, when unthinkable heroism by the entire population, not just the Red Army, finally turned Hitler’s attempted invasion into a retreat. Whatever evils Stalin may have perpetrated – and we may have yet to learn the full extent of their horrors – the Soviet people had achieved remarkable economic advances, and were united in defence of their country. The Soviet Union also had some remarkable achievements paradoxically because of the some of the positive outcomes of his leadership.

We now know that the British Communist Party did receive some ‘Moscow gold’ through to at least the 1970s, and maybe beyond, of which its members were unaware. There was certainly hidden financial assistance, like the large daily orders for the Morning Star, which was until the 1980s effectively the voice of the party, although it was legally independently owned and controlled. These orders from the USSR and its allies undoubtedly helped the paper survive as a daily. It survives daily yet despite the disappearance of ‘Moscow gold’.

So, I was most certainly aware of the shortcomings of the Soviet Union, and at least some of the less attractive aspects of the history of the Communist Party in Britain and elsewhere internationally. In my view, they were overwhelmed by the positive achievements of the Communist Party,
Scottish Executive Committee. There I was soon elected to its national leadership, the one of its ‘highest’-positioned members of Britain (CPB), and because I was of Great Britain as the Communist Party ‘reconstitution’ of the Communist Party divisive behaviour, including lies, to were deep, and the by-then crumbling was still a constitutional requirement admission to membership, such support. At the time we were refused re-admission because we had previously party-supported Morning Star. At the time we were refused re-admission to membership, such support was still a constitutional requirement of Party membership. The divisions were deep, and the by-then crumbling party leadership resorted to remarkably divisive behaviour, including lies, to ‘defend’ their position.

Thus, I participated in the ‘reconstitution’ of the Communist Party of Great Britain as the Communist Party of Britain (CPB), and because I was then, as an STUC Assistant Secretary, one of its ‘highest’-positioned members anywhere in the union movement, I was elected to its national leadership, the Executive Committee. There I was soon to discover that at least some in that ‘leadership’ had indeed retained less-than-democratic practices, and it was this that caused my resignation from the CPB in I think the late summer of 1990.

The Executive Committee vigorously debated the draft programme it was to present for debate at the following decision-making Congress. One issue on which there was division was on energy policy. My personal political experience led me to argue vigorously that the party should continue to support the continuation of nuclear power in electricity generation. This was contentious, and there was a debate on the issue within the Executive. This went to a vote, in which I argued fiercely that we needed to retain UK nuclear capacity. (I no longer hold this view, over thirty years later, but did then – and I knew a fair bit of the issues involved.) It went to a vote, and nuclear power was retained as Party policy. Not overwhelmingly, as best I remember, but decisively. But when the Executive received its copies of the draft programme which were to put to the membership, support for a nuclear component in UK electricity generation had been deleted.

I was livid. Lies appeared to remain part of the then party leadership’s nature. I was so livid that I resigned, not just from the Executive but from the party. Despite a long political discussion with two Scots comrades whom I deeply respected, I remained unconvinced, and my resignation stood. But I refused to go down the road used by some who had previously left the party, like Jimmy Reid, and make my resignation public.

I was not going to use the right-wing-controlled mass media and give it anything with which it could attack people and policies in which I still believed. Indeed, as I write this over thirty years later, this is the first time I have made my position on this public. I have for two decades or so now unequivocally supported Scottish independence, and am as active a member of the Scottish Green Party as my age and health allow.

Dougie Harrison is a former STUC Assistant Secretary (1976-1990). He has been a school teacher, student union president, bus driver and director of a number of charities and campaigns.
Steve Sprung, writer/director,  
**The Plan That Came From The Bottom Up, 2018**  
Reviewed by Jackie Bergson

The need for the human race to counteract, mitigate and reverse catastrophic impacts of climate change on an industrial scale is currently undeniable. In particular scientific, corporate and political quarters, it was no less so, forty years ago. This is why this documentary touches in particular relevance and currency today.

*The Plan That Came From The Bottom Up* opens, and is threaded, with the cynical, world-weary, spoken narrative of a woman who lived through the Thatcher years. She addresses a younger male narrator, who reflects upon and comments about her views. Their call and response voiceovers evoke a time in history when factory workers and communities were cast adrift, trapped by an allegorical fog of oppression, which was imposed upon them by ‘unseen forces’ of the market.

Significant focus is given to turbulent changes that surfaced in Britain during the 1970s, when a technological boom, international competition and traditional job losses combined, thus, generating a perfect economic and cultural storm. Specifically, a number of Lucas Aerospace engineers who authored the titular Plan feature predominantly in the film. We learn why and how they created a detailed conversion manifesto, to design and manufacture products such as wind turbines, hybrid cars and heat pumps, instead of military jets.

Sprung directs a narrative reminder that prior to Margaret Thatcher (PM 1979-1992), the political manoeuvrings of Harold Wilson (PM 1966-1970, 1974-1976) and Ted Heath (PM 1970-1974) governed our public purse strings. Consequently, voracious capitalism sustained and fulfilled investment appetites which lacked either will or foresight to mobilise socially useful industry. Meanwhile, upcoming generations became increasingly sold on fashionable consumerism. Sprung’s film highlights the paradox of younger generations being systematically sold into attainable, future affluence, whilst working class industrial communities fell into deeper depression as a result of mass job losses.

Sprung stated in interviews that his documentary was intended as a contradiction to the Thatcherite paradigm, it being a reiteration of neo-liberalist political concepts. Wikipedia defines neo-liberalism as ‘the 20th-century resurgence of 19th-century ideas associated with free-market capitalism... it is generally associated with policies of economic liberalisation, including privatisation, deregulation, globalisation, free trade, austerity and reductions in government spending in

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**THE PLAN that came from the BOTTOM UP**

*No To Arms Production*  
*We WANT Socially USEFUL Work!*  
*We NEED Socially USEFUL WORK!*
The first section has contributions from a wide variety of activists from food bank to the Muslim Women’s Association. It also moves from contemporary activism to historical struggles of lesser-known women activists, such as Helen Crawford, Scottish representative of the International Committee of Women for Permanent Peace in 1919.

What is remarkable about these memoirs is their ability to remind us of the struggles of ordinary working-class people who fought unequal battles against oppression and yet were able to help shape a better, more socially just society. Bill McKeraghan, a food bank volunteer in Edinburgh, expressed his humane motivation with devastating simplicity stating that he was ‘motivated simply to try and lessen the misery in our midst’. His activism is also imbued with an historical perspective. Having left Scotland before the dawn of Thatcherism, he returned to a more divided and impoverished country. He observed that change can also move backward as well as forward.

The memoirs recount iconic class struggles from the rent strikes to the miners’ strike, by way of Clydeside. Whilst these seminal moments, deserve their place in labour history, what is more interesting are memoirs of the lesser-known figures and events. In particular the role of unsung women heroines has resonance. Liz Rae Shaw recounts the role Mhairi Mhor nan Orain played in the Skye Land League fighting for social justice against the landed aristocracy who robbed crofters of their homes and livelihoods. Also, it is a damning indictment of how rural Scots were treated by a nineteenth-century legal system where class dictated judicial decisions. Kate Armstrong in her work on Mary Brooksbank continues the theme of the prominent role working-class women played in the fight for social justice in Dundee.

Armstrong skilfully synthesises the symbiotic relationship between labour struggles and working-class cultural life, depicting Brooksbank, as a rounded individual who worked in the Jute mills but was also a folksinger. These short pen portraits of working-class women remind us that our forebears were multi-dimensional and that the fight for social justice also took place outside male-dominated industrial Scotland.

The theme of the role that culture played in working class identity is continued by Alistair Findlay. He pays homage to Hugh MacDiarmid’s role in the Scottish literary renaissance but also contextualises MacDiarmid’s contribution within the wider context of working-class intellectual culture that promoted critical thinking and laid the foundations for the attack on Kailyard culture. Where the book falls short is its inclusion of contemporary depiction Glaswegian slang by Sophie Park in ‘A Love Letter to Glasgow’. Her depiction of sharing the virtues of the Glasgow dialect with her Oxford don is a piece of cultural appropriation in its crassest form. However, its unintended comedy value overrides its offensiveness.

The memoirs of unsung heroes stand shoulder-to-shoulder with one of Scotland’s iconic leaders – Jimmy Reid. David Betteridge offers concise analysis of the strength of union organisation. Above all it reminds us of the power of oratory. Reid was a great speaker who could appeal to his immediate audience and wider society to articulate working class discipline and courage to fight for labour dignity. For this piece alone, this anthology is worth having on your bookshelf.

The book’s second half contains twenty vignettes about the lives of working people. Geraldine Gould’s Smell of Coffee is a portrait of a middle-aged educated working-class woman reflecting on her university days over a cup of coffee in her old university haunt. The character is caught between the worlds of her origins and her university experience. She poignantly describes how the character did not have the confidence to fully enjoy her intellect and the beauty of her youth. This is a story that many first-generation graduates can readily identify with.

Continuing with the theme of working-class life, Andrew O’Hagan’s Cipher is a stream of consciousness piece written in Scot’s dialect. It depicts the character’s dead father’s literary legacy of his book collection whilst observing the drudgery of his life. The anthology also engages in class injustice beyond Scotland. Leela Soma’s Locked In provides a powerful description of British imperialism in India as seen through the eyes of the colonised. It is a searing portrait of how Indians were economically and sexually exploited by their colonial masters. In order to be saved from destitution, the female character in the story has to be
subjected to the missionary imperialism of Christian charity. This anthology is an engaging read portraying the extraordinary life of working-class people and their struggles for social justice. The book skilfully blends memoir and fiction to portray a culturally rich and diverse working-class experience both within Scotland and internationally.

Dr David McKinstry is a Poet and History Teacher at Holyrood Secondary School in Glasgow.

Sally Rooney

Beautiful World, Where Are You? Faber & Faber, 2021
Reviewed by John Wood

Rooney’s Beautiful World, Where Are You? was hotly anticipated by critics and by her broad fanbase after the acclaim and mainstream commercial success - aided by the popular and captivating BBC adaptation of her second novel, Normal People - of her earlier work. Much like her first novel, Conversations With Friends (TV adaptation in production), this latest one focuses on what might be described as a ‘love quadrangle’ between four young Irish people finding their way uncomfortably into adult life. Alice, a young writer dealing with the burden of early success, and her close friend Eileen, enjoying a low-profile life working in a publishing house in Dublin, are the two lead protagonists, each with complex relationships to two very different men, Felix and Simon.

With many critics apparently lining up to find fault in Rooney’s writing even before publication, Beautiful World, Where Are You? may have faced a difficult entry to the world but any reader (and judging by sales there are many) will take pleasure in immersing themselves in Rooney’s characters and begin to care deeply about their various (mis)fortunes. Each main character reflects Rooney’s sharp wit, contemplating deeply the state of the modern world and what it means for social relations among those born into it. Relevant or not, Rooney’s self-proclaimed Marxist analysis is the subject of much ill-informed debate, not to mention the root of some tabloid nonsense the author has been subjected to (‘How Sally Rooney loaded bestselling books with communist ideas’ ran the Daily Mail). But it is undeniably refreshing for a novel to take such deep exploration of politics, sex and society in its stride and continue to be so readable.

As with lead character, Alice, Rooney’s talent is, perhaps, the real cause of irritation among some critics. Her depiction of young male characters is once again extremely impressive: something this nearly-young male reader can particularly appreciate. This skill gave us Normal People’s Connell whose unlikely heartthrob status was put beyond doubt by Paul Mescal’s charming BBC performance. And, the book expertly incorporates social media and email in a way many writers often struggle to deliver without clunk.

‘I think of the twentieth century as one long question, and in the end we got the answer wrong. Aren’t we unfortunate babies to be born when the world ended? After that there was no chance for the planet, and no chance for us? Or maybe it was just the end of one civilisation ...’ writes Alice in one of her intimate emails to Eileen.

Three books in, a trademark type of ‘Sally Rooney character’ has begun to emerge but this won’t be a problem to those who enjoyed Rooney’s previous offerings and who wish to enjoy more of the same. What feels like light reading will take you along with these troubled young intellectuals to profound places pondering the state of our beautiful world.

John Wood works in the public sector and has for many years supported Scottish Left Review by voluntarily proofing its contents.

Colin Burnett

A Working Class State of Mind, Pierpoint Press, £9.84, 9781914090158
Reviewed by Sean Sheehan

The title of the first short story in this set of twelve, ‘A Working Class State of Mind’, gives its name to the collection as a whole. The story transforms Robert the Bruce into a depressed young man contemplating suicide as he sits alone in his freezing cold flat. Alone that is except for a spider he observes trying ‘to swing oantae the shelf wae aw its being, but still couldnae muster the strength tae to make it’. The spider’s indomitability imbues the man with the Beckettian resolve to try again, probably fail again but at least to ‘fail better’.

The tale, superbly well-written, shifts between inner turmoil and the social plight of those on the verge of giving up the struggle to get through another day.

This opening story casts the light of harsh reality over the droll antics of a resilient set of pals determined not to be sunk by the systems of the state. Dougie, the main narrator, is learning from his experiences while the irresistible, Aldo, and their friend, Craig, are able to cope with their penchant for the innocuously named white powder, ‘snow’, they sniff on a regular basis.
Written in east coast Scots the stories have a masculine bias that occasionally irks but the comic spirit, infused with a Frankie Boyle-like spiky humour, makes them a hoot to read. They also display the fierce class loyalty that distinguishes James Kelman and this gives them an extra punch.

Sean Sheehan writes for The Eye of Photography, Lens Culture, The Prisma and other publications.

Jim Sillars


Reviewed by Will Podmore

Jim Sillars is a talented man. This intriguing book covers many different topics, on all of which he has something interesting to say. Sillars opposed the SNP’s Hate Crime Bill, calling it ‘one of the most pernicious and dangerous pieces of legislation ever produced by any government in modern times in any part of the United Kingdom’. He asserts ‘it is not possible to legislate racism out of society. That malignant social virus will be eradicated only by open discussion of its inherent falsehood and the wickedness and inhumanity that can flow from it. It is the disinfectant of free speech that will finally rid us of it’.

As Sillars wrote in 1999, ‘today’s issue of the single currency is not about the economics of the European Union. It is a major stepping stone to a federal super-state. The adoption of the single currency removes one of the core aspects of national sovereignty, control over the currency and reserves, and transfers it to Brussels … A federal EU will require, in addition to monetary and fiscal policy, the other core sovereign competencies, defence, foreign affairs and law and order to be similarly transferred to Brussels. That would not amount to Scottish independence in Europe. It would keep us as a vassal state of an all-powerful centre’. The EU may want a separate Scotland to join it, but Spain certainly does not. As Sillars points out: ‘For them, ‘Scotland’ means Catalonia. When the Spanish consul general in Scotland made a speech saying Spain would not veto Scottish entry, he was sacked’. Some in the SNP even say they want to call a referendum when the British government legitimately opposes calling one. As Sillars notes, this would just be a repeat of ‘the foolish, illegal referendum in Catalonia …’. He observes of Nicola Sturgeon’s campaigning for Britain to stay in the EU: ‘In going down to England to campaign, she legitimised the question on the ballot paper, which was whether the UK [not Scotland] remained or left the EU.’

Sturgeon now claims that the election result in Scotland gave her a mandate for separation, but that is not what she said when she was trying to win votes. She said on 26 April 2021: ‘If I was asking people a week on Thursday to vote for the question of whether or not Scotland should be independent, I am not’. When asked: ‘What are they meant to do if they want you but not independence?’ she replied: ‘They should vote for me safe in the knowledge that getting through the crisis is my priority’. Sillars describes the SNP’s ‘policy of advancing the case for independence through manufactured grudge and grievance. The ‘they are taking back powers’ rage is an example. Grudge and grievance complaints against Westminster, combined with vitriolic attacks upon unionists via social media, make for a stupid policy’.

**Will Podmore is an author, who has just published his seventh book, ‘Capability Britain’, and a recently retired college librarian and UCU member.**

Jane Hardy


Reviewed by Eleanor Kirk

If there’s a central theme in this book, it is optimism. Drawing on both secondary data analysis and interviews with activists from across the union movement and beyond, the book provides a rich portrayal of the transformation of our workplaces, economy, urban landscape and society (much of it depressing) but also, thankfully highlights ‘successful struggles in a dismal period for trade unions, where the tenacity and resilience of some groups of workers have shown is humbling’ (p11).

The first part is given to debunking a number of dubious narratives about contemporary work and resistance. Hardy pithily deconstructs many of the policy discourses (surrounding for example the gig economy, future of work, precarity and their supposed novelty) and propaganda exercises of neo-liberal governments. Some such narratives are plainly ideological, while others which have been overstated by some academics, who might be seen as more interested in their own status than of working people, or in truth. In any event, the effect of many of these unchecked narratives is to contribute to making us believe that the challenges of neo-liberal capitalism are all but
From this vantage, Hardy outlines some of the most important and exemplary struggles that challenge the narrative that there is ‘no alternative’ to neoliberal policies. She draws on several notable examples of organising in adversity that while off the radar of mainstream media are probably known to most on the left, albeit, the case studies she provides are enthralling and, to this reader, balanced accounts.

Chapters on the hidden histories of migrant workers as well as the details of sub-contracted cleaners, the Glasgow and Birmingham women’s inspiring victories on equal pay are particularly riveting contributions, illuminating less well-known elements of working class and union history in Britain. Hardy’s investigation takes in many regions, including Scotland, which can be neglected in British industrial relations texts of this kind.

The book will no doubt be a provocation to unions, particularly the larger ones in terms of managing their bureaucracies, and the tensions between rank-and-file and the officialdom. Hardy’s righteous anger against the capitulation of the previous UCU leadership is clearly stated and reverberates in discussions of other hierarchical tensions. This extends to missed opportunities like at Sport Direct warehouse where the ‘vacillating’ support of UNITE is described as a key factor in the failure to sustain an organising campaign. Hardy urges that workers join when unions take action.

Particularly in its opening chapters, this book is beautifully crafted, multi-faceted, bold and hopeful but, in terms of a few minor quibbles, it is also a little uneven in the level of detail and theoretical analysis it offers. In some sections, the level of detail of the data can feel a little overwhelming, whereas in other places, interesting arguments are stated without details or references to follow up. The introduction sets up the expectation of a highly theoretically informed piece. The case studies for all their insights deliver less on this front. The introduction sets up the expectation of a highly theoretically informed piece. The case studies for all their insights deliver less on this front. The conclusion might have developed some of the many interesting themes further. Hardy wishes to resist avoid a mechanical tool-kit for activists, noting some respectful criticism of Jane McAlevey’s popular organising manuals. Hardy very briefly extols the virtues of socialism in terms of going beyond even radical trade unionism, and suggesting a political-economy of alternative values. A fuller airing of this analysis and its logical extension might have added a further layer of insight and offered activists clearer ideas for how to bolster their campaigns.

Ultimately, with the urgency in the present moment of a dramatic change of direction, given the ‘looming environmental disaster,’ the ‘dire consequences’ of which ‘cannot be averted without a complete reorganisation of society and changed priorities’ (p217), we might forgive Hardy these minor limitations. At a time in which we need courage to take bold action to address a host of grievances, rooted in an entire political economy of neo-liberalism, there is a sense that the ‘unprecedented’ times of the pandemic present a brief historic moment for action. Recalling the titular theme of the book, the concluding chapter highlights a point made an unnamed worker Hardy interviewed; that ‘if we organise and fight back there is no guarantee that we will win, but for sure, if we don’t, we will lose- that is the only thing that is certain’ (pp216-217). Hardy’s aim, successfully achieved, promotes action rather than pontification.

Eleanor Kirk is a researcher, based at the University of Glasgow School of Law, and a UCU member.

**NOTHING TO LOSE BUT OUR CHAINS**

**WORK & RESISTANCE IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY BRITAIN**

**JANE HARDY**
Few have made the transition from COP to flop with such outstanding speed as Boris Johnson. He had, in the space of five short weeks between the conference and mid-December, gone from hobnobbing with world leaders to being a dead man walking. Everything is unravelling around him at such an alarming pace that the knives were already out for him even before the debacle of the North Shropshire by-election.

It is probable that Johnson will still be Prime Minister at the start of January, which is either good news or bad news depending on how you look at it. Obviously, for the good of the country, it would be best if he were to go quickly. However, for sheer entertainment value, most of us would prefer his end to be as slow, painful and humiliating as possible. Rather than being stabbed in the back in a back-bench coup, it will be so much more cathartic to see him hanging on by his fingertips as he sustains a prolonged kicking from all sides.

It was all so different in the middle of November, when he used the platform of COP to spout a whole load of hot air about how Britain is leading the world in tackling climate change. How we would reach net zero in next to no time, in the much the same way as he promised to ‘send Coronavirus packing in twelve weeks’ back in March 2020. And, we all know how that turned out.

It is hard to view the whole fortnight of COP without agreeing 100% with Greta Thunberg’s criticism of it as ‘Blah, blah, blah’. And, let’s face it, no-one is better at ‘Blah, blah, blah’. And, let’s face it, no-one is better at ‘Blah, blah, blah’. And, let’s face it, no-one is better at ‘Blah, blah, blah’. And, let’s face it, no-one is better at ‘Blah, blah, blah’.

Scotland, of course, temporarily achieved Net Zero over the fortnight of COP, as it was impossible to drive in Glasgow city centre, and the M8 was shut to allow Joe Biden, and Barrack Obama’s motorcades to get from Edinburgh to Glasgow.

It’s ridiculous enough in the age of Microsoft Teams that world leaders should be flying half way around the world to talk about what we can do to stop burning fossil fuels.

But then to factor in a needless ninety-mile round trip of a daily commute was insane. It’s not as if there are not enough rooms for rent within walking distance of the conference site itself. At The Campanile in the car park of the Hydro, you can usually get a single room for under fifty pound a night albeit a very ropey one. Mine had an unpleasant stain on the armchair, as if the previous guest had shat themself.

But when you consider the effects of cleaning fluids on the ozone layer, a filthy hotel room is a small price to pay for ensuring the future of the planet. Talking about shit, back to Boris Johnson and his ‘mensis horribilis’, as he would doubtless describe the month before Christmas. We had the shambles of a speech at the CBI conference when he kept dropping his notes, rambling on endlessly about his trip to Peppa Pig World and constantly kept mumbling ‘forgive me’. Bit late to be asking that, having ruined the economy and presided over 150,000 deaths in the past year or so.

We then, of course, had the endless revelations about parties at Downing Street and Alegra Stratton’s resignation in a flood of crocodile tears, presenting a very wet face for someone who had been hung out to dry. Johnson, having initially denied that a party had taken place, then changed his story and claimed he didn’t know it had happened. Which is a stunning admission for any Prime Minister to make. It was happening at his address and he failed to notice it. If there is a massive piss-up going on in your own house and you don’t even know that said massive piss-up is going on, you really do not possess the powers of basic observation required to lead the country.

His next gambit was to claim it wasn’t a party but a Zoom quiz. Presumably the first question in the quiz was ‘who’s been to Peppa Pig World?’ But, as we know, the shit continued to hit the fan. The rebellion of a hundred backbenchers over Covid restrictions was followed in a couple of days by the loss of the North Shropshire ‘bye’ election, a Tory seat for two-hundred years. In other words, a seat the Conservatives have held since we actually had a proper system of voting. And, if that weren’t enough, the mini-crisis series, ‘Cash for Curtains’, continues to rumble on. I personally think that we should all chip in to pay for the refurbishment of the PM’s private residence, as long as we use the same cladding as they did in Grenfell Tower. Perhaps that would provide the most fitting end to Johnson’s career. He would be guaranteed his place in history as he sustains a prolonged kicking from all sides.

Everything is unravelling around him as if the previous guest had shat an unpleasant stain on the armchair, albeit a very ropey one. Mine had an unpleasant stain on the armchair, as if the previous guest had shat themself.

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A NEW SCOTLAND

Building an Equal, Fair and Sustainable Society

EDITED BY GREGOR GALL

Coming soon from the Jimmy Reid Foundation and published in conjunction with Pluto Press
ScotRail is failing to deliver for the people of Scotland. The performance of Abellio has been truly terrible. The company has failed to recruit enough drivers, is continually skipping stations, does not have enough rolling stock, has used HSTs that have not been refurbished, and has a history of poor industrial relations. But we don’t want to replace one failing private train operator with another because the model is broken. It is clear to everyone – to businesses as well as passengers, and to everyone who works in the rail industry – that privatisation has failed. The Tories privatised our railways and the SNP refuses to bring our services back into public ownership. But it’s time to stand up for Scotland and run our railway as a public service, not as a vehicle to make a private profit.

Mick Whelan, general secretary
Dave Calfe, president
Kevin Lindsay, ASLEF’s organiser in Scotland