

CHINA MOVES FOR PEACE IN MOSCOW!

by our Eastern European
Affairs correspondent

Vladimir Putin has endorsed the Chinese peace road-map for Ukraine – but it can be implemented only when West and Kiev are “ready” for it, the Russian president said after talks with his Chinese counterpart in the Kremlin this week.

On Monday, Chinese president Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin held almost five hours of informal talks behind closed doors. President Xi’s visit is his first to Russia since the outbreak of the Ukraine war and also his first foreign trip since securing an unprecedented third term as China’s head of state.

Putin praised Beijing’s 12-point peace plan during a summit with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping. The Chinese leader said Beijing continues to strictly adhere to the UN principles over the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, maintaining a balanced position calling on all parties to exercise restraint and a return to negotiations to seek a diplomatic solution to hostilities. “We’re always for peace and dialogue, and we firmly stand on the right side of history,” Xi said.

This was welcomed by the Russian side. Putin, however, said the Western powers are still determined to prolong the conflict. “We believe that many of the provisions of the peace plan put forward by China are consonant with the Russian



• a meeting of minds in the Kremlin

stance and can be taken as a foundation for a peaceful settlement when they are ready for it in the West and in Kiev. However, so far we have not observed such readiness on their part,” he said.

The Americans want to kill the Chinese proposals stone-dead. On the eve of the Moscow summit US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby told Fox News that any possible call by China for a ceasefire in Ukraine was “unacceptable”. US imperialism does not want to see an end to the conflict it has done so much to foster and escalate all along.

By prolonging the conflict the Americans seek to weaken Russia and force their NATO allies to rely further on the USA in security matters so that it can consolidate its grip over Europe. Enormous profits are being made from the 154 per cent surge in demand for US liquefied natural gas following

the sanctions against Russian energy exports and the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines that many believe was carried out by American agents.

But the times they are a changing and not in favour of the Americans. Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who praised Xi’s visit to Russia, is flying to Beijing for talks with the Chinese leaders next week and Ukraine is going to be top of the agenda.

French President Emmanuel Macron plans to visit China in early April, in part to seek Chinese help to end the Ukraine crisis. “The fact that China engages in peace efforts is a good thing,” Macron told the media.

Meanwhile Russia has warned Britain against the planned delivery of depleted uranium (DU) armour-piercing tank rounds to Ukraine, saying the weapons will be treated by Moscow as containing “nuclear

components”.

Putin commented on UK plans to include DU munitions in a forthcoming delivery of Challenger 2 main battle tanks as he spoke alongside Chinese President Xi Jinping following talks in Moscow on Tuesday. Depleted uranium is used to make the hardened cores of armour-piercing rounds. The round’s core evaporates on impact, turning into aerosol and contaminating the environment with uranium.

“I would like to note that if this happens, then Russia will be forced to react accordingly, bearing in mind that the collective West has already started to use weapons with a nuclear component,” Putin stated.

A similar warning was issued by Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu on the side-lines of the Russia–China talks, who said the move would bring the world yet another step closer to a nuclear disaster. “Another step has been taken, and there are fewer and fewer left,” Shoigu told reporters.

FUND

Two weeks into the March appeal and the fighting fund now stands at £1,160 thanks to the bankers’ orders and a Scottish reader who sent in £40 and an Essex supporter who gave us £120. We’ve now got two fund-raising weeks to collect the £2,340 needed to hit our target for the end of the financial year.

While the leaders of People’s China launch initiatives to end the war in Ukraine and boost the economies of the Global South all the imperialists can offer working people is austerity, oppression and war.

Our paper, the New Worker, has fought for peace and socialism from the day it first came out in 1977. We will keep up the fight as long as we can. We can do it – but only with your help. We need a constant and generous flow of money to guarantee our survival. And if you think the New Worker is worth it – and you must do if you’re reading this column – please support the fighting fund.

All donations, big or small, help keep our presses rolling. Please send your donation to: New Worker Fund, PO Box 73, London SW11 2PQ. Cheques and postal orders should be made payable to the ‘New Worker’.

To save a stamp you can also use your credit or debit card to send contributions here:

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THE NEW WORKER

Weekly paper of the New Communist Party

Who guards the guardians?

Baroness Casey has issued a damning report on the conduct of the Metropolitan Police. This independent review was set up last year following the kidnap, rape and murder of Sarah Everard by a serving member of the London police. During the proceedings another member of the Met charged with rape turned out to be a serial rapist and a violent sexual predator who had preyed on women for over 20 years.

London's police say their vision "is to be the most trusted police service in the world". In their own words they say "we contribute to making London the safest global city, we protect its unique reputation as an open and welcoming city, and we want Londoners to be proud of their police". But that's been, once again, seriously questioned.

Whilst the Met is the public face of law and order in London, it's rolled out to control protests and demonstrations and monitor picket lines for the benefit of the employers that they ultimately serve. Catching criminals is another matter and sadly only a small number of perpetrators are ever brought to justice.

Baroness Casey was tasked with determining "whether the Met's leadership, recruitment, vetting, training, culture and communications support the standards the public should expect". Her report concluded that London's police is "riddled with deep-seated racism, sexism and homophobia".

None of us should be surprised at its conclusions or the corrupt and decadent culture within the capital's police that the report exposed. Nor should we expect more from the worthy social worker whose recommendations are little more than appeals for the Met genuinely to reform itself.

Some on the left call for a renewed effort to end the corrupt culture that exists within the Met. Others for the replacement of the Met with a new police authority. Sadly none of this is going to happen, and even if it did it wouldn't change the essential nature of the London police.

The Metropolitan Police is a key instrument of the bourgeois state and its culture reflects that of those who rely on it to maintain the power of the ruling class in the capital of the country they control. Rapists and murderers within the police force are, naturally, severely punished – not just for abusing their power to break the very laws they're paid to uphold but also by bringing the institutions of repression that the ruling class ultimately rely on to maintain their power, into disrepute.

The police are supposed to protect and serve the public, fighting crime and promoting justice for all under the laws of the land.

Who will guard the guardians is a question that goes back to the philosophers of ancient Greece. Socrates believed the solution was to train their souls properly. These days the talk is of "transparency", "accountability" and "awareness programmes".

Communists rightly argue that only a people's police force can justly serve the needs of the working class. But we will only get that when we get a people's government and that sadly is not on the horizon at the moment.

In the meantime, we must argue for the complete overhaul or break-up of the Metropolitan Police to weed out the psychos and perverts in its ranks, and to root out the sexist, homophobic and abusive sub-culture that was exposed in the Casey report.

IMMIGRATION: BRITAIN COPIES AUSTRALIA

by Floyd Kermode

That's right, you read the headline correctly. Normally it's the other way round. Australians copy the UK, at least when we're not copying the Americans. A lot of our culture derives from the UK. That's why we have a foreign monarch's face on our currency and lawyers who wear wigs.

When it comes to barely concealed racism and the treatment of asylum seekers, however, the British government has had a look at the conservative Abbott-Turnbull-Morrison Coalition governments and said "We'll have some of that". Rishi Sunak has taken to giving his speeches from a lectern with "STOP THE BOATS" on the front. The current Immigration Minister [Suella Braverman] has continued her predecessor's policy of paying Rwanda to take refugees the Conservatives don't want. What's going on?

One thing that is definitely going on is that the UK government is in dire trouble. Brexit and the way the Tories have gone about it have not been good for the British economy. The conflict in Ukraine has caused gas prices to rise. There's a wave of strikes as workers such as transport workers and nurses, who were praised as essential during the pandemic, are taking to the streets because they can't live on empty gratitude. Furthermore, and probably the first priority for the party of Cameron, Johnson, Truss and Sunak, their position in the polls is dire. Overall the British public do not trust the Tories to

run the National Health Service nor the economy.

So it is that the Government has cast about for good ideas that will inspire people. What it has pulled up seems to be some of the worst ideas of Australia's Abbott government. Remember when Abbott, asked about the economy, could only answer "We stopped the boats"?

This didn't stop him from being chucked out as leader soon afterwards, so it turns out "We stopped the boats" does not answer every question. Remember when Scott Morrison prided himself on having a little model boat in his office with "I stopped these" engraved on it?

It's important to remember these things because they've been buried under later scandals. The Coalition's mis-handling of the bushfires, its failures during the pandemic and sports scams all piled up on the mis-treatment of blameless asylum seekers, something that has worked for them since John Howard was PM. Remember when Australia paid Cambodia millions of dollars to take a few refugees – the only ones they could find who decided that taking their chances in Cambodia was better than indefinite detention?

The Coalition spent \$4.77 million to re-settle six people in Cambodia. Six refugees were re-settled in Cambodia. Only two stayed there.

The conservative government in Britain has paid Rwanda about \$1.83 million dollars to re-settle, so far, no people – so in that respect, they're outdoing the Coalition in incompetence.

It's known that there is a

fair bit of interchange between the UK and Australian political systems. Lynton Crosby worked for both the Howard government in Australia and for Cameron in the UK. Tony Abbott, the odd-ball Anglophile who tried to bring back Knights and Ladies to the Australian honours system, is constantly using his generous former-PM perks to pop over to the UK to offer them opinions on how to be right-wing properly (when he's not rubbing up to Orbán in Hungary). So we shouldn't be surprised that the UK Tories sometimes look to Australia for inspiration.

As they rub their hands over new ways of harvesting votes from xenophobia, British conservatives might want to reflect on the ultimate fate of the Abbott-Turnbull-Morrison government. Despite desperate last-minute attempts to stir up some anti-asylum seeker panic, the Coalition was thrashed in the polls by an electorate tired of incompetence, pork barrelling and active hostility to action on carbon emissions. One of Morrison's last actions as PM was to get some text messages sent out warning about "refugee boats from Sri Lanka". That didn't save him from having to pack his "I stopped these" ornament and get out of The Lodge [Australia's No 10]. Racism and fear of foreign invasions can go a long way, but it can't stop the people of a country working out where their real interests are.

**Guardian
Australian communist
weekly**

Rishi Sunak has taken to giving his speeches from a lectern with "STOP THE BOATS" on the front



Workers' Notes

The Final Cost-of-Living Crisis

by New Worker correspondent

We are all very well aware of the cost-of-living crisis, but one neglected aspect of this crisis is the cost-of-dying crisis that is driving increasing numbers of people into pauper's graves.

Whilst the British are not as bad as Americans in terms of extravagant funerals and are not generally inclined to be frozen to be restored to life in a future century, funeral costs can give people a fatal heart attack. The average cost of a basic funeral is now £4,056 according to insurers Sun Life. Little wonder there has been a rise in pauper funerals, now politely called "public health funerals" so that it doesn't sound too bad. These are carried out by local authorities to dispose of the mortal remains of those with no money, or no next of kin to take responsibility. Even direct cremations can cost £1,400.

Pauper graves are generally mass graves and are unmarked, although in one Liverpool cemetery pauper graves were once carefully laid out to serve as drainage thus keeping the paupers working even after death.

In the London Borough of Camden, the local paper the *Camden New Journal* reports there were 63 public health funerals last year. This is in a borough whose northern parts includes some of the most expensive houses in London.

Councils have variable policies, recently Camden pays for undertakers to provide for a "dignified service" including a coffin and a hearse to the crematorium or cemetery.

These 63 public health funerals cost the council £81,089, or £1,287 each. Local Labour councillor Kentish Town councillor Jenny Headlam-Wells, speaking after a high-profile funeral of a homeless woman, said "there are likely to be many more deaths of rough sleepers and socially isolated people in our borough in the future". But Health chief Councillor Anna Wright added that: "The first thing to make clear is the majority of these people are not homeless people." As we will see, being in work does not guarantee avoiding what working-class people regarded as the ultimate disgrace. Indeed, funeral clubs were in many places the first signs of self-organisation by the working class.

Further north, in Bradford

the council spent £141,337 on 89 (an average of a slightly less basic £1,588) on them last year, the fourth year in a row that numbers have increased. Most were for men (68), 29 with no next of kin. Eighty-one were cremations with the others buried in their own grave. 2020/21 was the first year in which they spent a six-figure sum, £115,063 to be precise. In all, £658,353 has been

overcharging. Surprise, surprise. Jessica Mitford pointed that out in 1964 with her gruesome exposure *Death in America*. Councils also get in the act, by making the most collecting cemetery fees. The business is largely unregulated so anybody can set up shop. Many formerly local, family firms are now part of large companies, but the liveliest part of the Co-operative movement

en into account. The paperwork is very complex, and claimants must be in receipt at least one of nine benefits and tax credits to have the slightest chance of being eligible.

Having a low wage automatically disqualifies them, additionally the criteria for who is the responsible person is very complex and inflexible when there are family squabbles. Even



spent by Bradford on 477 of them since 2014.

Marie Curie, the cancer charity, say that 90,000 people in the UK died in poverty in 2022.

The Quaker Social Action (QSA) has recently produced a report on funeral poverty for the United Nations: *Submission to UN Committee on Economic, Social & Cultural Rights on Funeral Poverty*.

The average cost of a basic funeral is now £4,056 according to insurers Sun Life

The funeral business is well able to put up its prices because people do not generally spend time comparing prices when the need arises. In its December 2020 report the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) reported that funeral prices increased above inflation between 2006 and 2019. It also concluded that "a significant proportion" of undertakers, large and small, were

now seems to be its undertaking business.

The Quakers note that social security grants for those on benefits are not enough. In England and Wales, the Social Fund Funeral Expenses Payment (SFFEP) is administered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The average award in 2020–21 was £1,838, 44 per cent of a "basic funeral". In Northern Ireland the equivalent was £1,318, just 41 per cent of a basic funeral. In Scotland the average pay-out of £1,791 was 44 per cent. In all cases these included funeral director fees, transport, care of the body, coffin and officiant fees. They were capped at £700 in 2003 and frozen until 2020, when they increased by 43 per cent to £1,000, well below the increase in basic funeral costs in that period.

People who can least afford it have sometimes taken on expensive debt to cover basic funeral costs, particularly when death is unexpected. Sometimes it can take years for such debts to be paid off, which means that the distress continues much longer. The Quakers demand that UK, Scottish and Northern Ireland governments "must increase the capped element to at least £1,725 to bring it in line with funeral inflation and uprate it annually".

They note that although awards are inadequate, all of them can be reduced further by the deceased's estate being tak-

severely disabled people unable to work or pay for the essential National Insurance are excluded.

The DWP is not always terribly helpful and, the Quakers allege, sometimes give misleading advice about their own rules. Their report also gives numerous examples of councils passing concerned people from pillar to post for ages. There are often delays about whether awards will be granted, resulting in funerals taking place under a cloud of financial uncertainty at a difficult time. In 2021, the same Quakers used mystery shoppers to show that many local authorities were obstructive about pauper funerals. Some were forcing cremation on grounds of costs, which for some religious groups is unacceptable.

Partners not married or in a Civil Partnership are ineligible for Bereavement Support Payment (BSP) established in 2017. It was only last year, after the Supreme and High Courts ruled that denying benefits to partners and children not in legal unions was illegal, that the Government drafted legislation to put that right, but nothing has yet been done. Some 65,139 bereaved partners missed out on BSP up to June 2022, additionally it has not been increased since 2017.

This is not perhaps the worse aspect of the austerity that has ruled Britain since 2010, but it demonstrates the tight-fistedness of the Tory Government.

Strikes Settled or Sell-out?

by New Worker correspondent

Britain's recent strike wave is winding down as unions accept improved employers' offers to settle. Some on the left have been quick to claim that in the case of the five per cent NHS pay offer for England and Wales made last week that there has been a sell-out. There are rumours circulating that Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer KC has been exerting back-room pressure on union leaders to secure a speedy settlement. Whether Starmer actually has much influence amongst the leaders of the union movement is debatable, but the union bureaucrats themselves hardly need any encouragement to settle for a quiet life.

In fact there is solid evidence of considerable discontent at grass-roots level, well beyond the usual suspects in the NHS and education, angered at the suspending of long-running industrial action when the Government makes vague noises about starting pay talks, or when an unsatisfactory offering of a few extra pennies is enthusiastically embraced by the union bureaucracy.

Dons at War

By New Worker correspondent

Friday saw protests by irate members outside the London HQ of the University and College Union (UCU) by members who accused leaders of selling them out in their long-running pensions dispute in the higher education sector. They complain that what was billed as an "informal" e-mail ballot on a vague offer was taken too literally as an excuse to call off action. By some accounts, 10 per cent of the branches have passed motions of no confidence in the leadership of general secretary Jo Grady.

This came after 80 per cent of the members voted to reject a miserable pay offer imposed by employers. The general secretary claimed this offer was a great improvement on earlier deals, but it contained only a vague promise of talks on casualisation issues.

The email ballot was organised by the general secretary over the head of the relevant elected committee and thus has no legal standing according to the union's rules.

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Deal or No Deal

By *New Worker*
correspondent

In the NHS an unholy trinity of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), Unison and GMB all speedily accepted the five per cent offer almost as soon as it was made. Sara Gorton, Unison's Head of Health, only complained that: "It's a shame it took so long to get here. Health workers had to take many days of strike action, and thousands more had to threaten to join them, to get their unions into the room and proper talks underway." But she went on to let the cat out of the bag by adding: "This is better than having to wait many more months for the NHS pay review body to make its recommendation."

Unite took a more ambiguous line. General Secretary Sharon Graham hedged her bets, saying "the offer from government is not one that Unite can recommend to our members", but then added that: "Ultimately it is important that our members make the final decision. Unite will support members in whichever decision they now make."

North of the border, members of both the Royal College of Nursing Scotland and the Royal College of Midwives (RCM) voted, on the advice of the leaderships, to accept a 6.5 per cent pay rise from the SNP government. A similar offer was accepted by GMB for other NHS workers, particularly ambulance staff.

The rise came only after the threat of strike action forced the Scottish government into talks. The ballot results were not noted



for their enthusiasm. In the RCN only just over 50 per cent took part, with a narrow acceptance vote on 53.4 per cent. Of the midwives, only 44 per cent took part in the ballot, which saw a 69 per cent vote for acceptance.

Reflecting the narrowness of the vote and low turnout, RCN director Colin Poolman warned that: "Members have narrowly voted to accept this offer but the Scottish government must be under no illusion, much more is required for nursing staff to feel valued and to ensure Scotland has the nursing workforce it needs."

Julie Lamberth, chair of RCN's Scotland board, added: "While members voted by a narrow margin to accept the offer, the chronic staff shortages and low morale that led to the strike mandate are still very real." Her

opposite number at the RCM pointed out that: "While pay is crucial this was also about midwives feeling seen and valued. Improving retention through better working conditions, professional midwifery issues and the wellbeing of staff are also a key component of this."

South of the border within the RCN open rebellion has broken out at the below-inflation offer. *Nursing in Practice* quoted Ruth Oshikanlu, fellow of the RCN, a Queen's nurse and independent health visitor, who said of the offer: "The pay offer should be rejected; we are worth more than five per cent. It's about valuing the difference we nurses make. They asked for 19 per cent and got five. We knew we weren't going to get 19 per cent but five is an insult."

Holly Turner, a mental health nurse in the East of England, lamented: "I hoped that the union would recommend to reject because while we were out taking strike action, losing pay; standing out in minus 5 degrees for 12 hours a day, our union told us that they had red lines drawn for what a minimum offer should be, and this is nowhere near that. The message that we're getting from the union is that this is the best we are going to get, but in December the Government told us that this [four per cent] was the best we were going to get."

"The Scottish government must be under no illusion, much more is required for nursing staff to feel valued and to ensure Scotland has the nursing workforce it needs."

RCN director Colin Poolman

Victory on the Rails

by *New Worker*
correspondent

To end on a positive note: Monday also saw puffs of white smoke arise from the headquarters of transport union RMT in London to announce that a ballot of 20,000 members employed at Network Rail have voted by 76 to 24 per cent on a 90 per cent turnout to accept a realistic new pay offer that

UNDERSTAFFED

UNDERVALUED

UNDERPAID

Fair pay protects patients

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

also brings new conditions and improved security. This was a more positive result than those in the NHS and education.

The details of the deal, which was only put on the table in January after a long run of repeated strike action, include: an increase in salaries ranging from 14.4 per cent for the lowest pay grades to 9.2 per cent for the highest. The total uplift on basic earnings will be between 15.2 per cent for the lowest pay grades to 10.3 per cent for the highest pay grades. In addition, back-pay will be increased and the no compulsory redundancy agreement will continue until January 2025.

Equally important, Network Rail have abandoned a previous demand that their earlier pay offer was dependent on RMT accepting the so-called "modernising maintenance" agenda, which is harmful to health and safety. The cherry on the cake is improved discounts on rail travel for families of Network Rail workers.

Announcing the ballot result, general secretary Mick Lynch said that when the dispute started Network Rail were only offering 2-3 per cent: "However, since then strike action and the inspiring solidarity and determination of members has secured new money and a new offer which has been clearly accepted by our members and that dispute is now over."

He also delivered the warning that: "Our dispute with the Train Operating Companies remains firmly on and our members recent highly effective strike action across the 14 train companies has shown their determination to secure a better deal."

"If the government now allows the train companies to make the right offer, we can then put that to our members but until then the strike action scheduled for 30th March 30 and 1st April will take place. The ball is in the government's court."

**20 years ago
this week
in the New Worker**

**New Worker
28th March 2003**

VETERAN Labour leader Roy Hattersley last week launched a scathing attack on members who were quitting the party just when Tony Blair's warmongering policies and subservience to President Bush have severely weakened New Labour's grip on the party leadership.

"They should be ashamed of themselves," he said in his regular Guardian column, and that their resignations were

acts of unparalleled political stupidity.

"Abdication is the kindest description of their folly. If they thought for a moment about the consequences of their self-indulgence, they might realise that all they achieve is an acceleration of the process to which they object.

"For people who are leaving are those that we most need to put socialism back on the political agenda.

"For the past couple of weeks, it has been the war in Iraq that has caused the carnage of membership card destruction.

"I was against it too. But the cancellation of all those bankers' orders did not stop the war and will not prevent its continual prosecution.

"No doubt some consciences will have been cleared. But last week we suffered enough posturing to last us a lifetime. Now we need action not words."

He recounted his efforts to prevent the hijack of the party by the "invading army" of

"New Labour". "Now we have to decide how to deal with the invading army," he said. "Resigning from the party is unconditional surrender.

"I am not prepared to concede an inch of ground. Labour is at much my party as it is Tony Blair's."

He went on to say that the task of delivering the party from the invaders "is far from hopeless."

He blamed resignations for infecting good members with despair, "and despair is not a socialist emotion".

He called for them to fight back to reclaim the party and for socialists who have resigned to re-join.

"To let the party slip away is to betray our history and our heritage. All those nights canvassing in the rain and the weekends addressing envelopes will be formally designated a waste of time," he said.

He urged socialists to "fight, fight and fight again".

Scott Ritter: Biden Led the Charge to Invade Iraq

by Simes Dmitri
Deputy Director of Sputnik's
English-language department

Joe Biden led the charge to push the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, according to Scott Ritter, who served as the United Nations chief weapons inspector in the country from 1991 to 1998.

In the lead-up to the war, then-Senator Biden used his position as chair of the influential Senate Foreign Relations Committee to help sell the George W Bush administration's plans to a sceptical American public. He gave speeches and organised Senate hearings that promoted the administration's false claims about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programme. In October 2002, Biden spearheaded a joint resolution that gave Bush sweeping powers to use military force against Iraq.

"Joe Biden is one of the main reasons why the United States went to war in Iraq. He likes to pretend that he didn't play such an important role, but I'll say it now and I'll say it forever: Joe Biden's a liar," Ritter said. "Joe Biden's a man who allowed thousands of Americans to be sacrificed for his pride, for his arrogance, for his narcissism, because he knew that one day he was going to be President of the United States."

According to Ritter, Biden brushed moral and geopolitical concerns about invading Iraq aside because he did not want



• Scott Ritter served as the United Nations chief weapons inspector in Iraq from 1991 to 1998.

to face accusations that he was taking a "pro-Saddam" stance. Biden's failure to speak out against the war, he added, helped result in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, tens of millions displaced, and broader chaos in the Middle East.

The conflict was not cost-free for the USA either, resulting in thousands of US troops dead and tens of thousands maimed.

Sputnik News spoke with Ritter ahead of the 20th anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq. Over the course of a 50-minute-long video interview, the former UN

inspector explained how the US government created a false pretext for the war, sought to intimidate dissidents into silence, and why Washington failed to learn anything from its costly debacle.

Road to War

In August 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded neighbouring Kuwait over the oil-rich monarchy's refusal to forgive Baghdad's debts from the Iran-Iraq War. Less than six months later, in mid-January 1991, the USA

and its allies launched a massive aerial bombing campaign followed by a land offensive to dislodge Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

Ritter told Sputnik that the main reason why the George HW Bush administration decided to intervene militarily was because it feared that control of Kuwait combined with Iraq's existing oil wealth would provide Saddam Hussein with disproportionate influence over global oil markets. The problem with this rationale, however, was that few Americans viewed it as a compelling enough reason to send troops abroad. The

Hussein was the Middle East equivalent of Adolf Hitler, and that for his crimes against Kuwait, there would have to be a Nuremberg-like retribution. This was a decisive statement because now the United States was at war against evil."

Although Iraqi forces fully withdrew from Kuwait in February 1991, the American propaganda campaign against Hussein continued moving ahead at full speed. The new focus was on Baghdad's alleged WMD programme, which Washington claimed posed a danger to the USA and the Middle East at large.

Although Iraq had indeed at one point sought to develop WMDs, there were two problems with this narrative says Ritter. The first was that even if Iraq possessed WMDs, they were not much of a threat because the US military had spent decades preparing to fight against potential adversaries who used chemical or biological weapons. Even more significantly however, the USA did not actually want to disarm Iraq.

"We UN inspectors were going into Iraq thinking that we had a job from the highest legal authority in the world to disarm Iraq, but then as we're doing this job, we have [US] Secretary of State James Baker saying in public that even if Iraq complies with its obligation to disarm, sanctions will never be lifted until Saddam Hussein is removed from power."

Ritter explained that US policymakers pushed the WMD narrative because they were embarrassed about Saddam Hussein's continued political survival despite sweeping sanctions against Iraq. They needed a pretext to keep the pressure up on Baghdad and push for regime change. After all, how could they allow a man that they had openly compared to Hitler remain in power?

"We had to reshape this conflict by focusing not on the geopolitical reality, but on creating a cartoon-like enemy out of Saddam Hussein," he said. "When Bush addressed a fund-raising crowd in Dallas, he said that

Saddam

"We [inspectors] were just there as a placeholder to create a political situation that allowed the continuation of sanctions," he said. "It was never about disarmament, always about getting rid of Saddam Hussein. The problem is, after six months, Saddam was still there. Now, what do you do? What's the next step?"

Ritter revealed that although there were back-channel communications between the transition teams of President-elect Bill Clinton and Baghdad about

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resuming relations, these negotiations were cut off after US intelligence agencies faked an Iraqi assassination attempt on George HW Bush, who had just left the White House, during a visit to Kuwait in April 1993. Clinton retaliated by firing missiles at Iraq and maintaining the sanctions regime against the country. In 1998, he signed the "Iraq Liberation Act", which stated regime change was the official objective of US policy in Iraq.

Silencing Dissent

Despite this political background, Ritter's team of UN inspectors worked to avert war by dismantling Iraq's remaining WMDs. "We accounted for 95-97 per cent of their weapons of mass destruction," he said. "We were monitoring the totality of their industrial infrastructure so they couldn't rebuild these weapons. Anything that wasn't unaccounted for would have aged out, same goes for precursor chemicals."

Yet the US government constantly tried to move the goal posts for the inspectors, demanding that they prove with 100 per cent certainty that Iraq had no WMDs (an objective that was effectively impossible to achieve). Ritter sought to raise his concerns with senior US officials, including the director of the CIA, but was repeatedly brushed aside.

Things took a decided turn for the worse in 1996, when the FBI began harassing Ritter and his family, even threatening him with arrest. This persecution only intensified after Ritter resigned from his UN inspector role in 1998. On the very same day as his resignation, the FBI leaked a false allegation to CBS *Evening News* that Ritter had been passing on state secrets to Israel. In reality, Ritter had been engaged in an intelligence liaison activity that was approved by none other than the CIA itself.

Although the accusations against Ritter were obviously false, the CBS *News* report led to the Southern District of New York opening a three-year long investigation into him.

"So here I was, an American citizen trying to do the right thing and the FBI was investigating me for falsified crimes that carried the death penalty. That investigation went on

for three years. I ended up winning and they dropped the charges, but I couldn't get employment during that time," he said. "Every opportunity that was provided to me was shut down because the FBI said: 'He's a spy, he's a criminal. You can't do business with him'. That's what the FBI, the US government does to people who have the audacity to try and speak truth to power."

Lessons learned?

Twenty years after the Iraq Invasion, Ritter sees little evidence that the American foreign policy establishment has learned from its mistakes. He explained that US policymakers have absolutely no incentive to embrace realism and restraint because most of the major political donors support military interventionism abroad. This problem is compounded by the fact that there is no meaningful anti-war movement in the USA. Criticism of US foreign policy is usually driven not by principle but by opportunistic party politics.

Ritter suggested that America's era of political complacency may be coming to an end, however. He noted that the main reason why many Americans turned a blind eye to their government's reckless foreign policy adventures was because they were able to isolate themselves in a "cocoon of consumer-driven comfort". Yet this sort of escapism is becoming less and less viable.

In the face of rapidly mounting political, social, and economic problems, Americans will be confronted with the choice between reforming their country or perishing.

"The nation that emerges [from this crisis] won't look anything like the nation that exists today. It can't because this nation is fundamentally broken, sick, diseased," he said. "We have to cure the disease, heal the wounds, and recast ourselves as a nation of one of equals, one that can sit down at a table with the rest of the world and not try to dictate outcomes, but instead talk with people and negotiate outcomes that are mutually beneficial to all, but more importantly, that are beneficial to the American people instead of just the American political elite."

Sputnik

China's legislature maps out the future

by Duncan McFarland

Earlier in the month the Western corporate press was filled with the news of Chinese President Xi Jinping's election to a third term and the country's increased military spending, but the annual meeting of the Chinese legislature focused on topics that went well beyond just those two issues.

Some 3,000 delegates to China's National People's Congress (NPC) met in Beijing from 5th to 12th March, passing laws addressing a wide range of issues to advance towards the goal of building "a modern socialist country by 2050," that is "green and democratic".

The NPC oversees 31 provinces, provincial level autonomous zones and megacities, as well as 26 state-level institutions.

The Congress was lively and active, as China's economy is once again accelerating, hitting a five per cent growth after three years of COVID19-imposed limitations. Managing and implementing economic policy is a major task of the NPC, as is adopting and administering the national budget and securing social programmes.

At the session, the country's leadership spoke with unusual directness on war and peace and the need to safeguard China's core interests and national sovereignty, both of which are under pressure from US imperialism. Military spending will increase by 7.2 per cent coming on top of last year's 7.1 per cent increase.

All the country's top government officials are elected by the NPC delegates. As mentioned, Xi was elected for a third term as President of China, and Li Qiang from Shanghai was chosen as Premier of the State Council. Qin Gang, ambassador to the USA, was elevated to the post of foreign minister. Anti-corruption chief Zhao Leji is the new chairman of the Standing Committee of the NPC, the legislature's permanent body between meetings. Other top government appoint-



Deputies to the 14th National People's Congress (NPC) leave the Great Hall of the People in Beijing after the closing meeting of the first session

ments were made as well, including the new leadership of the Central Military Commission.

Resisting the new Cold War

The relationship between China and the USA attracted much attention at the session. Xi explicitly called out the US as a "hegemonic power" trying to contain and suppress China in an all-round way.

"We must fully promote the modernisation of national defence," Xi said, "and build the people's armed forces into a Great Wall of steel that effectively safeguards national sovereignty, security and development interests."

Qin Gang, the new foreign minister, expressed disagreement with US President Joe Biden's "guard-rails" theory, which says the USA is engaged in "fierce competition" to out-compete and defeat China. But since war is not desirable, according to Biden, the major powers should keep their competition within "guard-rails".

This was intended to convey that the US strategy of slandering and pressuring China is a "legitimate" big power competition. China's leaders disagreed with this picture. They regard the USA's "fierce competition" strategy as highly risky and irresponsible.

Qin said that the "guard-rails" could slip and fail. "If the US persists in this approach, there is a good chance of conflict and confrontation, then who will bear the responsibility

for this catastrophe?" Qin asked. "Relations should be based upon respect and cooperation, mutual self-interest and benefit."

At a press conference, Premier Li said: "China and the United States should co-operate and must co-operate. When China and the US work together, there is much we can achieve." He added: "Encirclement and suppression are not advantageous for anyone."

On the matter of Taiwan, the Congress declared, again, that China stands firm on the Taiwan question, namely that there is one China and Taiwan is a part of it. Despite US agitation on the issue, the Congress was clear: "Only the Chinese people will decide the future status of Taiwan."

Encouraging global co-operation

At the same time, the NPC session stressed that China – a victim of colonialism and imperialism from 1839 to 1949, during what in Chinese history is called "the century of humiliation" – emphasised the country's connections with the developing world and the Global South.

International governance, Congress documents said, should be more democratic, and the developing world, which has a majority of the global population, should have more say at international meetings and institutions.

The Congress greeted the welcome news that the Chinese Foreign Ministry had facilitated a rapproche-

ment between Iran and Saudi Arabia, with the two rival countries agreeing to re-establish diplomatic relations – to the chagrin of the US government.

Investment in projects that are part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – China's landmark programme for economic engagement and partnership with the developing world – is now approximately one trillion US dollars. Most of this investment is in much-needed infrastructure in the less developed world, including highways, railroads, airports and sea-ports, and basic industry.

Although there have been some less viable projects in such a huge programme, it is overall productive, based on mutual benefit, and welcomed in most countries worldwide.

Accusations in the corporate media that the BRI is a "debt trap" for participating countries continue to be largely fiction, as 80 per cent of the developing world's debt is owed not to China but to multilateral institutions and Western banks.

China is participating in the debt servicing initiative of the G20, and later in 2023, the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Co-operation will be hosted by China.

Domestic policy

When it comes to domestic economic recovery and post-pandemic growth, decisions to restructure government administration are one sign of the NPC's priorities. The State Council is creating new bodies to

improve central control of the financial system, speed up progress in science and technology, and modernise the government's ability to manage data and oversee the advance of the digital economy.

Policies for post-COVID19 economic recovery are shifting towards less strict regulation of non-public corporations and the real estate market, raising some eyebrows amongst those who are weary of the private sector. Efforts to attract foreign capital are being re-emphasised after several years. President Xi met with business leaders of US-sanctioned Chinese companies and emphasised the need for unity in mapping out a recovery plan.

"People-centred development," the banner theme of the Congress's policy orientation, means improving the income and living standards of the people. Under that directive, rural revitalisation and providing support for the ageing population are priorities.

A number of amendments to the constitution were debated prior to the Congress and voted on during its session. Many of the proposed amendments concerned strengthening the system of what the government refers to as "whole process socialist democracy", and include granting more authority to the local people's congresses – the legislative bodies at lower levels.

There were also numerous proposals and laws related to environmental protection, such as the Yangtze River Protection Law.

The National People's Congress of March 2023 and the preceding 20th Congress of the Communist Party of China held last autumn are, together, important milestones in China's modernisation and its effort to advance to a more developed form of socialism.

Many of the ideologues of US imperialism and foreign policy hawks in Washington dread the coming-of-age of a modern socialist country the size of China and will try to stop its realisation.

US activists can help the struggle for peace by opposing all the moves toward provoking a new Cold War – whether from the current White House administration or any that follows.

People's World (USA)

Pouring oil on the flames of war

by Xin Ping

As the 52nd session of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) coincided with the one-year anniversary of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Ukraine issue inevitably came under the spotlight. The slogan "Stand With Ukraine" and weeping for the Ukrainian people more or less became mealtime prayers in the speeches, especially those from Western delegates.

According to latest data of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, at least 8,000 non-combatants have lost their lives and nearly 13,300 have been injured since the outbreak of the conflict. No doubt, victims of war deserve the sympathy and support of the entire world, and peace is the only option lying ahead of us.

Yet the way the West "stands with Ukraine" is awfully puzzling. Instead of calling for peace talks, James Cleverly, the British Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, explicitly mentioned the use of sanctions in his speech at the high-level segment of the HRC session.

At a side event concerning Ukraine, some Western countries re-affirmed their support for Ukraine "no matter how long it takes" without mentioning peace talks, as if they were offering Ukraine sticks and asking Ukrainians to calm a bear's anger by poking it.

dialogue and peace talk

What's more puzzling is this fervour "to fight fire with fire" that has reached such a pitch that the West believes that the only way out of the crisis is not bringing Ukraine to the negotiating table but to the battlefield to fight until the very last Ukrainian.

For them, even the slightest allusion



• Russians inching forward in Bakhut

to dialogue and peace talks is tagged as "pro-Russian" and "soft", whilst supporting Ukraine to fight an endless war has become the touchstone of a country's respect for democracy and human rights. Those countries who dare to suggest otherwise are arbitrarily labelled as "authoritarian" and must be denounced.

Even worse, lavish offers of military aid have become a requisite for Western countries to "defend democracy and freedom". Whilst some countries are still wearing the fig leaf of providing "non-lethal support", others have clamoured for "no limits" on military aid.

EU has spent a whopping €3.6 billion on Ukraine

In the last year, the EU spent a whopping 3.6 billion euros on Ukraine, and the USA, a true warmonger, frittered away 31.8 billion dollars of taxpayers' money. A month

ago, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen travelled to Ukraine and brought Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky a new 450-million-euro assistance package, beaming as if incognisant of the ravages of weapons and war.

For many countries, the year 2022 was not an easy one. Ukraine, facing financial collapse, whose economy was paralysed and manpower was in shortage, muddled along on Western aid.

Russia suffered heavily from extreme sanctions imposed by the USA and its allies. The USA was faced with the dilemma of whether to keep carrying the unbearably heavy burden of assisting Ukraine or to fall down on its promise. Europe ended up being a battlefield again more than seven decades after the Second World War, plagued with soaring energy prices, capital flight and public discontent.

"To fight fire with fire" is not and should never be the answer to the Ukraine

crisis. Otherwise, why does humanity assemble negotiating tables and establish international mechanisms and initiatives supporting dialogues?

We live in an age rife with challenges but also full of hope. Human

civilisation has lasted for 10,000 years. Undoubtedly, there is a wiser way to achieve a lasting peace in the world.

Xinhua

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LETTERS

Dear Comrades

I was recently invited to a meeting on the war in Ukraine with three official speakers. One of the three represented what she called “an independent trade union in Belarus”. She was campaigning for the liberation of ‘independent trade unionists’ jailed in her country, in what she said were horrendous conditions, on false charges of subversion and terrorism whilst all they demand is the right to strike and the right to organise “against the Lukashenko regime”.

Most participants in the meeting were rank-and-file British trade unionists. They seemed swayed by the speaker and some of them promised to put resolutions of support through their trade unions. As I was the only person to oppose this, I will explain why.

The speaker said that her ‘independent’ trade union is a small organisation that broke from the main trade union centre, the FTUB, in the 2003–2009 years. She described the FTUB as “a yellow trade union federation” because it supports Lukashenko and because, like Lukashenko, the FTUB supports Russia. She made especially clear that her union was created in opposition to Russia in the early years, and now “in opposition to the war of Russia on Ukraine”.

This speaker described her union as “anti-war” because it wants Russia to withdraw from Ukraine. She condemned Zelensky also because he represses the trade unions of Ukraine, and she condemned NATO for supporting Zelensky. The comrades who say that she sided neither with Zelensky/NATO nor with Russia may be right in this regard.

In debate, I pointed out that the sympathy of the speaker for the workers of Ukraine did not extend to the workers of the Don-

bas who are pro-Russian and violently assaulted by Zelensky. Since the speaker opposes Russia, I conclude that her ‘independent trade union’ is not about to send comrades to support the anti-fascist, anti-NATO fight of the pro-Russian comrades in Donbas.

It is not true that the speaker condemned the EU sanctions. She simply condemned the EU sanctions for harming the Belarus economy and not the Lukashenko regime. She does not condemn the EU as such, therefore, and was obliquely asking the EU to get on with regime change. When her two other co-panellist speakers had spoken at length against the ‘regime change’ that NATO uses to expand in ‘territory’ in Eastern Europe, she did not say to them that her sort of ‘regime change’ is from below (from a trade union) as opposed to the regime change of the EU and NATO, which is from above. This distinction was made afterwards by others, to justify the speaker.

Friends who commented on this meeting afterwards reckoned that the speaker, and therefore her ‘independent union’, does not think of guarding against the sort of regime change that the EU, the IMF and NATO like to engage in, as they did in the 1970s in Poland for instance. Then, ‘independent’ trade unionist Lech Walesa allowed the tentacles of regime change from above to operate secretly and silently in his ‘regime change’ from below – for him to become PM. The result was not only the return of Poland to the capitalist menagerie, but this time, in the counter-revolutionary service of its IMF, World Bank, ILO, EU and NATO masters.

Independent trade unions that seek regime change in Belarus have the duty to specify that they have studied, understood and condemned the return of Poland to capitalism through the works of a so-called independent trade union. In Belarus, they have the duty to defend the almost entirely nationalised or State-controlled economy. One does not achieve workers’ control, if this was the aim, by handing the economy back to private property.

It is the organisers of this meeting who had the duty to check on all these things themselves and to

involve their comrades in such preparation. They did not do this, however. The fact that they indict Russia themselves, and call for its withdrawal from Ukraine, leaves them wide open to being used by NATO and the many organisations of capitalist perpetuation-restoration that lurk at all levels in the labour and trade union movement.

**Marie Lynam
North London**

Dear Comrades

It took more than seven years of legal challenge before mining companies based in South Africa, faced with a class action for compensation by gold miners affected by Silicosis and TB, gave in to pressure and set up a compensation scheme. Since 2019, only a small percentage of an estimated 500,000 former miners under this scheme have received compensation. Hundreds of thousands of miners or their widows are still waiting for compensation to be paid. Every day one more life is lost to the painful disease caused by exposure over many years to fine silica dust, caused by mining.

Mining companies have known for more than 100 years of the risks to health – the cancer caused by silicosis in particular. Until now however, miners were entitled to very limited benefits or support when they were dismissed from work because of ill-health due to silicosis or TB.

Quite literally, miners were dying for gold; their families left destitute. Despite efforts to monitor and manage dust levels by the industry, more could be done. A research study published in the *British Medical Journal* in 2004, was the first South African study of the prevalence of silicosis amongst in-service Black gold-miners over 40 years of age, looking at dust-exposure estimates. It concluded: “The high prevalence (almost 20 per cent) of silicosis amongst older in-service black mine-workers confirms the existence of a significant epidemic of silicosis in the South African gold-mining industry.”

The roots of this approach lie in the colonial-era, bringing massive

industrialisation of mines, extracting mainly gold and later other minerals, to benefit Western governments and their populations. In order to extract the minerals from South Africa’s particularly deep mines, cheap labour was exploited by the mining companies who set up special ‘recruiting offices’ in rural areas. Black men were transported to mining locations, often forcibly, and became virtual slaves to the industry. Trapped without other means of work, millions of men from across the region were ‘recruited’ into what might be called ‘the killing fields’ of gold.

Although the mining industry claims to have improved its practice (and certainly since 1994 apartheid laws were overthrown by the people, mining companies have had to adapt their tactics and strategies), why was compensation resisted for decades? An average compensation award today is R83,000. That’s just £4,368.

Compensation is just one aspect, however. Based on the impact for human life and the climate, surely we need to ask ‘is the global price of gold still too cheap?’ Why must millions of people suffer slow and painful deaths, and families live in poverty, to keep the cost of gold mining to an acceptable ‘market price’?

The award-winning documentary film, *Dying for Gold*, tells the story of this colonial scar inflicted on the people of Southern Africa in horrendous detail. Acton for South Africa (ACTSA) has been part of the campaign for compensation since 2017, and now four years after the settlement, we’ve been asked to re-open a campaign with our partner in the region Justice for Miners. Our campaign includes screening the film and inviting people to get involved to support Southern Africans as they continue to battle for their rights. You can read more here <http://www.dyingforgold.com/>.

You could also approach local film festivals and/or independent cinemas in your area and ask them to consider screening this film. The more people who see it, the better for the claimants and their families.

Justice for Miners (JFM) is a non-profit campaign and support initiative between former miners, their families and wider society. JFM’s primary task is to monitor the roll out of compensation and to act as a watchdog that alerts institutions to problems with the intention of seeing improvements in timely and appropriate payments to those who qualify under guidance of standards set by the South African government. It’s not straightforward however, due to language, distances, lack of access to documents, physical frailty and sometimes the sheer inhumanity of the system. To ACTSA, the system repeats the disadvantage, and the racism, that colonial-era mining operations set out to exploit. The campaign call ‘our health before your wealth’ developed by former miners sums up the challenge.

To get involved follow us @ACTSA_UK or email us: campaigns@actsa.org and put JFM in the comments/subject line. You can help us host screenings, write letters, share stories and build up our social media following so that we can support the #health-beforewealth voices. For too long Black lives have paid the price for excess wealth in the global North. Only in solidarity can we demand that this changes. ACTSA calls for an end to complicity with racist histories. We specifically call on mining company shareholders to demand that the lives of miners and their families are respected equally, without delay.

**David Kenwyn
Vice Chair of ACTSA
Glasgow**

Diary

UNTIL 31 MARCH
Victoria and Albert Museum: Ospaal: Solidarity and Design: Cuban posters supporting Third World movement. Cromwell Road, London SW7

UNTI 21 APRIL
Working Class Movement Library: Shirley Baker Photographing Salford. Exhibition. Wed-Fri afternoons. WCML, 51 Crescent, Salford M5 4WX

SAT 25 MAR
International Ukraine Anti-Fascist Solidarity campaign: Free all Ukrainian Political Prisoners! End the fascist reign of terror! Picket 14:00 – 15:30 opposite Downing Street, Whitehall, London SW1.

SAT 25 MAR
Palestine Solidarity Campaign: Barclays: Don’t Bank on Apartheid – Day of Action! Nationwide events on PSC website.

SUN 26 MAR
Morning Star Conference: Scotland in a World of Crises, 12:00-16:00: Scottish TUC, 8 Landressy Street, Bridgeton, Glasgow G40 1BP

THUR 30 MAR
Palestine Solidarity Campaign: Land Day protest to stop the JNF. 18:30-20:00, online webinar. Register on PCS website.

THUR 30 MAR
Working Class Movement Library: Book launch: Ralph Darlington’s Labour Revolt in Britain 1910-1914. 19:30-21:00, WCML.

MON 3 APRIL
No2Nato Scotland: Launch event in Glasgow. 19:00 venue to be announced. Register on Eventbrite.

THUR 13 APRIL
Marx Memorial Library: Book launch: Michael Roberts’s Capitalism in the 21st Century through the Prism of Value. 19:00. Online and onsite.

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Scottish Political News

by our Scottish political affairs correspondent

Whilst the battle for the throne continues amongst the biggies in the Scottish National Party, Labour looks on hoping to pick up the pieces in the aftermath of the SNP factional bloodbath that the opposition hopes will severely dent support for the nationalist cause on the street.

In the past Labour took its Scottish supporters for granted. Labour won the largest share of the vote in Scotland at every UK general election from 1964 to 2010. It won every European Parliament election from 1984 to 2004, and it won the first two elections to the Scottish parliament in 1999 and 2003.

Labour won 56 seats in the first Scottish parliament election. Now they're down to 22. They were smashed by the nationalists at the 2015 general election, losing 40 of their 41 seats to the SNP. After the Scottish parliamentary elections the following year Labour lost 13 of its 37 remaining seats, pushing them into third place behind the Scottish Conservative & Unionist Party.

Labour has, at least, overtaken the Tories in recent opinion polls, but whether that marks a true revival in the party's fortunes remains to be seen. Although Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar is doing his best to exploit the current divisions within the SNP he is still hindered by the fact that his lack-lustre leader in London, Sir Keir Starmer, does little or nothing to inspire enthusiasm on the street. Nevertheless, with Labour now only 10 points behind the SNP in the opinion polls, whoever takes over the nationalist mantle cannot now simply ignore the Labour challenge.

In the nationalist camp the final stages

of the election for a new leader bears all the marks of a civil war that has sent the SNP membership fall into the depths of despair whilst opposition politicians have a new-found spring in their step.

The SNP has sent out over 78,000 ballots, electronic and paper, to their 72,186 members, and we can expect more fun and games when the ballots are finally counted – particularly if the result is a narrow one.

The SNP membership-numbers issue is not simply a bureaucratic question nor even one of the competence of the SNP head office. It could be seen as evidence of deep-rooted high-level fraud within the SNP, whilst embittered former SNP leader Alex Salmond claims that CEO Peter 'Mr Sturgeon' Murrell "systematically lied" about the falling membership.

The numbers question saw the departure of the Press Officer Murray Foote who had earlier described reports in the *Sunday Mail* that membership had dropped from 104,000 by 30,000 as "inaccurate and "not just wrong, it's wrong by about 30,000".

The figures were in fact entirely accurate, resulting in his speedy voluntary resignation on the grounds that he had been misled by senior staff. One wonders why he was so naïve about what would be known at SNP HQ where he worked.

Some nationalists won't miss him. Foote is a former editor of the *Daily Record* who only declared his support for independence after leaving the newspaper in 2018. When he ran the *Daily Record* he wrote *The Vow*, which was published on the eve of the 2014 Independence Referendum, offering greater devolved powers from Labour and Tory politicians to Scotland after a 'No' vote. Many nationalists think this swayed the vote and have never forgiven him, so are glad to see him go.

Nor are they too dismayed at the resignation of 'Mr Sturgeon', who's wisely jumped rather than be pushed over the

row over the figures.

Yousaf's Law

Meanwhile Humza Yousaf, best placed to win the SNP race, has been reported to Police Scotland for breaking the Hate Crime and Public Order Act, which was introduced during his lamentable period as Justice Secretary.

This was in response to a comment at a hustings meeting in which he stated that the notorious double-rapist Isla Bryson is "not a genuine trans woman" who "should not be in a woman's prison. Isla Bryson is a rapist who's completely at it."

A "Concerned Citizen" wrote to the Chief Constable (who incidentally is on his way out having had enough of his political masters) saying that: "Mr. Yousaf's comments could be considered insulting and potentially stigmatise transgender individuals by suggesting that Ms Bryson is not a 'genuine' trans woman, and is seeking to exploit her gender identity for personal gain."

The "Concerned Citizen" was technically correct about Yousaf breaking Yousaf's law, which also went further and completely overturned the whole basis of the controversial Gender Recognition Reform Bill of which Yousaf is a keen supporter as it denies anyone the right to reject anyone's self-declaration of gender.

The Polls

The effect of all this can be seen in the polls, both at the ballot box and of the opinion variety. There have been two by-elections since Sturgeon announced her departure.

In the leafy Edinburgh ward of Corstorphine & Murrayfield the Liberal Democrats romped home with 56 per cent of the vote in the first count. This was a by-election caused by the resignation of an SNP councillor who had a falling out with his fellow councillors, his would be successor only secured 13 per cent.

The other was in equally posh Dunblane & Bridge of Allan in Stirlingshire, where the death of an SNP councillor resulted in the Tories winning the seat, taking 41 per cent of the first preference votes with the SNP on 37 per cent. This makes them the largest single party on the council with eight seats.

In the more abstract world of opinion polls, recent events seem to have done the SNP surprisingly little harm in both Holyrood- and Westminster-election future voting intentions. Its slight loss of support seems to have gone to the Greens and the SNP-breakaway Alba Party. Most of the gains Labour makes are at the expense of the Tories. Labour simply cannot make it back into government at Westminster without doing much better and recapturing a respectable number of the seats it lost to the SNP in 2015 and 2019.

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For a better, shared future for the peoples of the world

by *New Worker* correspondent

NCP leader Andy Brooks, along with Robert Laurie and John Maryon from the Central Committee of the New Communist Party, joined hundreds of other representatives from political parties and movements from around the world last week at an online seminar organised by the Communist Party of China in Beijing.

The meeting was opened by Xi Jinping, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China and President of the People's Republic of China. He was then followed by other leaders of the Global South including President Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa and Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro, as well as the presidents of Serbia and South Sudan and senior government figures from Grenada, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, Russia, Timor Leste and Togo.

Leaders of over 500 political parties and organisations from more than 150 countries attended the *Communist Party of China in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-Level Meeting* on 15th March. Together, they discussed the important theme of the *Path Towards Modernisation: the Responsibility of Political Parties*.

The initiative calls for respect for the diversity of civilisations, upholding the common values of humanity in pursuing peace, development, equity, justice, democracy and freedom, and promoting robust international people-to-people exchanges and co-operation.

In his opening remarks, Comrade Xi Jinping gave Chinese answers to a series of thought-provoking questions such as "what kind of modernisation do we need and how can we achieve it".

"As our own future is closely connected with that of other countries and peoples, we will strive to provide new opportunities for world development, add new impetus to human-



ity's exploration of paths towards modernisation and make new contributions to the theory and practice of humanity's modernisation as we make new progress in Chinese modernisation," Xi said.

Noting that the history of human development is full of twists and turns and that the path to modernisation is also arduous, Xi said that: "In today's world, multiple challenges and crises are intertwined. The global economic recovery remains sluggish, the development gap is widening, ecological environment is deteriorating, and the Cold War mentality is lingering," meaning that we are once again at a crossroads of history.

We must put the people first and ensure modernisation is people-centred. The ultimate goal of modernisation is the people's free and well-rounded development. "Modernisation is not only about indicators and statistics on the paper but more about the delivery of a happy and stable life for the people."

We must uphold the principle of independence and explore diversified paths towards modernisation. Each country must consider its own national conditions and unique features. "It is the people of a country that are in the best position to tell what kind of modernisation best

suits them. Developing countries have the right and ability to independently explore the modernisation path with their distinctive features based on their national realities."

We must uphold fundamental principles and break new ground. "We should work together to reform and develop the global governance system and make the international order more just and equitable as we advance humanity's modernisation in an environment of equal rights, equal opportunities and fair rules for all."

Xi went on to add that we must help others to succeed whilst seeking our own success: "We stand firmly opposed to the practice of preserving one's own development privilege by suppressing and containing other countries' endeavour to achieve modernisation."

He noted that: "The journey of over 100 years that the Party has traversed to unite and lead the Chinese people in pursuing national rejuvenation is also an exploration of a path towards modernisation."

"Chinese modernisation is one of a huge population, of common prosperity for all, of material and cultural-ethical advancement, of harmony between humanity and nature, and of peaceful development," adding: "We will

stay committed to the right direction, right theories and the right path. We will not veer off course by changing our nature or abandoning our system..."

"China will neither tread the old path of colonisation and plunder, nor the crooked path taken by some countries to seek hegemony once they grow strong... we firmly oppose hegemony and power politics in all their forms..."

"The world does not need a new Cold War. The practice of stoking division and confrontation in the name of democracy is in itself a violation of the spirit of democracy..."

"No matter what level of development China achieves, it will never seek hegemony or expansion... there are bound to be setbacks on humanity's journey to modernisation, but the future is bright."

Spanning the course of human history, over thousands of years, various civilisations have come into being, developed, and have in turn promoted the overall development of human society. Diversity has been a prominent feature of civilisations.

Despite differences in histories, cultures, political systems and development phases, countries around the world share the common aspiration for peace, development, equity, justice, democracy and free-

dom – the common values of humanity.

People need to keep an open mind in appreciating how different civilisations perceive values, and refrain from imposing their own values or models on others, and from stoking ideological confrontation.

As the world is facing old and new challenges, there are more reasons for us to promote dialogue and consultation when addressing international issues, and to let cultural exchanges transcend estrangement, mutual learning transcend clashes, and co-existence transcend feelings of superiority.

Spanning thousands of miles, the ancient Silk Road embodied the spirit of co-operation, mutual learning and mutual benefit. The year 2023 marks the 10th anniversary of a new 'Silk Road' – China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), another project for the benefit of the masses that has brought tangible benefits to the people of the participating countries and promoted people-to-people exchanges.

The diversity of civilisations is in nature a source of vitality and momentum in human development. Promoting people-to-people exchanges and mutual learning is of great value in summoning the enormous wisdom and energy needed to advance the progress

and development of human civilisations.

The BRI has delivered fruitful outcomes and won widespread support and participation. It has created jobs, improved infrastructure and promoted common development, especially in the developing countries.

Security is the pre-condition for development. The Global Security Initiative calls for peacefully resolving differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation and supporting all efforts conducive to the peaceful settlement of crises.

The recent Saudi Arabia-Iran dialogue in Beijing is a successful case of the practice of the Global Security Initiative, leading to the resumption of diplomatic ties between the two countries.

The futures of all countries are closely and increasingly connected; and tolerance, co-existence, exchanges and mutual learning amongst different civilisations play an irreplaceable role in advancing humanity's modernisation process.

To realise a world with lasting peace and ever-improving welfare, we should embrace the Global Civilisation Initiative and draw on it to jointly create a better, shared future for humanity.

Or as Xi Jinping says: "A single flower does not make spring, while one hundred flowers in full blossom bring spring to the garden. Together, we can make the garden of world civilisations full of colours and life."

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Fear of TikTok is idiotic. Will they ban chopsticks next?

by Mark Blacklock

In my working life as a journalist I have been routinely searched many times before entering a criminal courtroom to report on a hearing. Once, an over-zealous security guard examined the backpack in which I carried my laptop, camera, digital recorder and sundry other work-related items. After peering into the bag, he reached inside and removed a charger and cable for a mobile phone, telling me that I would get it back only when I left the building. When I asked him why he was confiscating an ordinary electrical plug, he replied: "Because people come here to steal our electricity."

I had no intention to charge up my mobile phone in any power socket, not least because this was a time when the use of mobile electrical devices – phones especially – was not permitted in courtrooms. Even though there was no evidence I could, or would, charge my phone however, the guard's mere misguided suspicion was enough for him to act pre-emptively.

Is this, I wonder, how the British government was thinking of TikTok when it took the decision to ban the app from government-owned smartphones



• Members of "The Trending Gang" dance with fans during a TikTok filming session in Vilnius, Lithuania,

and other devices? Not because there was clear evidence of any security threat, but because they have a vague notion that there might be.

TikTok is a massively successful business. It has been downloaded more than two billion times globally, yet it is being portrayed as malicious by increasingly hysterical news reports. The truth is that it has a large target on its back simply because it is Chinese-owned. Politicians are muttering increasingly agitated criticisms, even though they probably don't know their apps from their elbows. In the current ten-

sions existing between China and the West, they can find capital in attacking Beijing. And now both the British and the US governments are limiting the use of the app on the grounds that it might constitute a security risk. The evidence for this seems to be – rather like that of the courtroom security guard – mere suspicion.

What drives this suspicion? Is there real evidence? Will anyone please show me the proof? Or is it – like, unfortunately, so many things these days – enough for it to be Chinese for it to be traduced by politicians in my part of the

world, and for this casual, racially-charged slander to be faithfully repeated, often without challenge, in the media. Perhaps there is something to worry about, something that only security services know and which they say they cannot share with ordinary people. After the lies told by our governments however, for example to justify illegal war in Iraq, we can be forgiven for refusing to accept their assertions at face value. Their 'word' has been degraded and xenophobia is not evidence.

Barely a year ago, the British government was launching its own Tik-

Tok channel. Now, it is slavishly following the USA's ill-informed lead, along with Canada and the EU, and declaring it a threat. Confusingly, some politicians are suggesting its citizens might want to stop using the app on their phones, whilst at least one UK government minister says he will continue to create video for the platform on his private devices.

There are contradictory messages from the USA too. Some senators are calling for the app to be banned from their country and dozens of states have introduced TikTok bans on their official devices. Yet when one cautious state, Connecticut, was considering a similar move and asked the FBI for advice the Bureau admitted to having no further evidence

After the lies told by our governments to justify illegal war in Iraq, we can be forgiven for refusing to accept their assertions at face value.

to support the claims of security risk.

Despite TikTok's de-

nials, and the paucity of evidence, and a plethora of international experts highlighting the massive hypocrisy that non-Chinese apps such as Facebook and Google harvest much more data than their Beijing-based rival, and despite there being nothing to prove it is a greater risk than any other social media, this Sinophobic witch-hunt gathers pace. What is driving this suspicion? Evidence? Fear? Or simply the knowledge that TikTok is Chinese?

In this kind of deranged atmosphere, fear will always trump facts, and we should be concerned at where this will lead.

Where will we end up? Perhaps chopsticks will be banned by NATO for fear of being used to tap out encrypted messages by clicking in a secret rhythm on dining tables. Or they will be outlawed as potential weapons, disguised as eating utensils. Perhaps the traditional dancing dragons of Chinese New Year will be exposed as not representations of mythical creatures but rather as a military device inside which the People's Liberation Army can smuggle its battalions into cities all over the UK and USA.

It's idiotic, yes, and idiocy is not evidence. And neither is xenophobia.

Global Times

US crimes against Iraq still unpunished

Although 20 years have passed since the USA launched a blatant invasion into the sovereign state of Iraq, justice has not been done for Iraq and its people, many of whom are still suffering from the pain created by the unjust war.

During the more than eight-year war and ensuing years of violence after the 2011 US pull-out, more than 200,000 civilians were killed and over nine-million others displaced in Iraq. Much of the country's

infrastructure was also destroyed during the relentless bombings launched by the US-led coalition.

As a result, Iraq, a rich country before the invasion, quickly degenerated into a poor state, and it is still mired in poverty and chaos due to the political instability and economic hardship caused by the US invasion and its impact.

The US government justified its invasion of Iraq on concocted lies about Iraq possessing weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), but no trace of such weapons has been found. On this point, Washington owes

Iraq and the international community a thorough explanation.

Iraq has neither received any formal apology from Washington for its illegal invasion, nor received any financial compensation for the massive destruction of its infrastructure and the crimes committed by American troops against Iraqi civilians.

Meanwhile, none of those in Washington who made the decision to invade a sovereign state in blatant violation of the UN Charter have been brought to justice. None of those who encouraged

or committed the heinous war crimes against civilians in Iraq have been truly prosecuted.

Worse still, if those who committed such crimes as invading a sovereign country could escape any punishment, they will repeat them again and again. As long as the USA continues its hegemonic and belligerent policies, the world will never be peaceful.

Indeed, with its previous crimes unpunished, the USA regards itself as being above the UN charter and other norms guiding the international order. Thus Washington is always

tempted to repeat such crimes to serve its own interests, as shown by its launch of air-strikes against Libya and Syria not long after the Iraq War.

Even today, US politicians insist that invading Iraq and ousting its government was a right thing to do. Washington still readily threatens to use force to interfere in the internal affairs of any other country that refuses to obey its orders. The world continues to live under the shadow of war and insecurity.

History has proven that though claiming itself as 'peace loving', the USA

is indeed a 'war empire'. Ever since its founding in 1776, the country has been at war for 93 per cent of its existence. Even former US President Jimmy Carter admitted that the USA is undoubtedly the most warlike nation in history.

Although little can be done to bring the US warmongers and criminals to justice for now, because the USA remains the sole superpower, it is believed that the time of atonement will eventually come. Justice can be late – but it won't be absent forever.

Xinhua

France: mass revolt to defend pensions

By G Dunkel

With thousands of tons of uncollected garbage rotting in the gutters of Paris's streets, hundreds of protesters arrested daily and the vast majority of the workers demanding the removal, if not the head, of French President Emmanuel Macron, his government survived a vote of no confidence in the National Assembly this week by just nine votes.

Macron has been pushing for a significant reduction in the benefits offered by France's pension system, ever since he was re-elected to a second term in 2022. The proposal, placed before Parliament this year, calls for raising

the age for full retirement from 62 to 64 years of age. It requires more years of active work, and gives less support for women and for people with physically demanding jobs or for those who work under harsh conditions.

All major French unions and student organisations have recognised Macron's proposal as a major attack on the working class and have united in a coalition to combat it. The coalition held its first demonstration on 19th January, which drew over two million protesters all over France, including in the big cities such as Paris, Marseilles and Toulouse.

Many protesters had to make use of their constitutional right to strike to

join the action because 19th January was a workday. Workers in some unions – working in refineries, electric distribution and production, and public transportation – held one- or two-day walkouts.

Since then, there have been eight days of protests/strikes called by the union coalition. All the protests have involved millions of workers on the streets. More than 3.5 million people joined the protest on 7th March.

Two significant strikes began on 7th March. The major refineries went out, and sanitation workers in Paris, as well as in Le Havre, Nantes, Antibes and Rennes, stopped working. By 15th March, 10,000 tons of garbage were piled up on

the pavements of Paris.

After the French Senate passed Macron's package on 15th March, the following day Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne invoked constitutional provision 49.3 before the National Assembly to declare Macron's proposal adopted as law. Using 49.3 removes all pretence that this move is 'democratic' – it is rule by decree.

As Borne attempted to speak, the parliamentarians belonging to France Insoumise (France Unbowed) stood up waving signs and singing the *Marseillaise*. The parliamentarians belonging to Rassemblement National (National Rally), Marine Le Pen's semi-fascist movement, banged on their desks and yelled "Re-

sign!" as they tried to exploit the mass anger at Macron with demagogy.

Some of the other members of parliament just sat at their desks and waited for the din to die down, whilst others walked out to protest against Borne's undemocratic but constitutional proclamation.

Outside Paris, the General Confederation of Labour (CGT, the leading union group) called some of the more militant and organised protests, which were attacked by the police with water cannons and tear gas. There were large marches through major shopping centres and department stores in Paris by a group of youthful workers calling for a

general strike. The strikes at the French refineries are intensifying and in some areas petrol has become hard to find.

In Paris and a few other cities where sanitation workers are on strike, protesters set fires in the dumpsters that were filled with rubbish as the cops chased them through the streets.

One can hear tweets of workers' chants that invoke the 1789 French Revolution: "Louis 16th, we cut off his head; Macron, Macron, we can start this again," and a group of sanitation workers – referring to the current war in Ukraine – chanting: "Money for wages, money for pensions, not for war!"

Workers World (USA)

Netanyahu pushes back judicial changes deadline

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has softened his hard-right government's judicial changes plan, an apparent concession to more than two months of unprecedented nationwide protests and misgivings voiced by Western allies.

Netanyahu had looked set to ratify the package of reforms by the Knesset's 2nd April recess. Most of its elements will now be shelved, however, until the Israeli parliament reconvenes on 30th April.

The parts of the legislation that are still scheduled for ratification in the next two weeks would shake-up Israel's method of selecting judges – an issue at the heart of the reform controversy, with critics accusing Netanyahu of trying to curb the independence of the courts. He insists his goal is

balance amongst branches of government.

The uproar over the legal changes has plunged Israel into one of its worst domestic crises. Beyond the protests, which have drawn tens of thousands of Israelis to the streets and have recently become violent, opposition has surged from across society, with business leaders and legal officials speaking out against what they say will be the ruinous effects of the plan.

The legislation would give more weight to the government in the committee that selects judges and would deny the Supreme Court the right to strike down any amendments to so-called Basic Laws, Israel's quasi-constitution.

Monday's coalition statement used more circumspect language than in the original bill introduced on 4th January but said it would continue to check the power of judges on the selection panel to use what it deemed an "automatic veto" over nominations to the bench.

The statement further noted amendments made to the bill in a Knesset review session on Sun-

day, whereby the selection panel would be expanded from nine to 11 members as originally planned but with a make-up that grants the government less potential clout.

Previously, the bill envisaged the panel including three cabinet ministers, two coalition parliamentarians and two public figures chosen by the government – spelling a maximum 7-4 vote majority. In its amended form, the bill envisages the panel being made up of three cabinet ministers, three coalition parliamentarians, three judges and two opposition parliamentarians. That could spell a slimmer, more precarious 6-5 majority for the government.

The amended bill further stipulates that no more than two Supreme Court justices can be appointed by regular panel voting in a given Knesset session. Any appointments beyond that would have to be approved by a majority vote including at least one judge and one opposition MP amongst selection panel members. "We are extending a hand to anyone who genuinely cares about national unity and the desire

to reach an agreed accord," the coalition statement said.

The judicial overhaul is a cornerstone of Netanyahu's administration, an alliance with ultra-Orthodox Jewish and extreme-right parties which took office in late December.

Some critics have said Netanyahu, who is on trial for corruption, is driven by personal grievances and that he could find an escape route from the charges if these changes are put through.

Radio Havana Cuba

A tool of American imperialism

Despite its high-sounding rhetoric or manipulations in various forms, it is increasingly clear that 'democracy' has become a tool of the USA to maintain its hegemony and to instigate division.

In 2022, democratic pretensions, dysfunctional politics and a divided society continued in the USA. Corruption, identity politics, social rifts, and the gulf be-

tween the rich and poor, worsened, according to a report titled *The State of Democracy in the United States: 2022*.

Despite these mounting domestic problems, the USA continues to behave with a sense of superiority, pointing fingers at others and posing a "lecturer" of democracy to serve its own interests, says the report released by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Monday.

But a 'lecturer' who trumpets a gravely ill democratic model worldwide amounts to a 'poisoner' rather than a partner.

American 'democracy' is in name only. For example, freedom of speech in the USA is upheld only according to self-centred "US standards". Partisan interest and money politics have become the "two big mountains" that weigh on free speech.

Americans are increasingly disillusioned with their own democracy. Americans' pride in their democracy has dropped sharply, from 90 per cent in 2002 to 54 per cent in 2022, according

to a joint *Washington Post/University of Maryland* survey.

To maintain its hegemony, the USA has long been monopolising the definition of "democracy" and instigating division and confrontation in the name of democracy. Its hosting of farcical *Summit for Democracy* is a case in point.

Behind the US narrative of democracy is a Cold War mentality, a hegemonic logic and a preference for camp-based politics. America's so-called democracy has created instability and chaos worldwide, afflicting people in many countries.

Democracy is a common value of humanity and must not be used as a tool to advance geopolitical agendas or counter human development and progress.

What the world needs is not hegemony or division. Pseudo-democracy must be jointly rejected and greater democracy promoted in international relations. After all, diversity is a feature of civilisations and political systems alike throughout human history.

Xinhua