

Assad flees as Damascus falls

by our Arab Affairs
correspondent

Syrian President Bashar al Assad has fled to Russia as his army melts away amid cries of treason. Israeli troops are on the road to Damascus as their warplanes pound abandoned Syrian naval bases and army camps while Iran says Syria was the victim of Israeli and American regime change. The Syrian Arab Socialist Renaissance Party (al-Baath) has virtually dissolved itself – suspending all activities and handing over all its offices and resources to the remaining civil authorities. But some believe other Baathists have gone underground joining the resistance led by Syrian commandos that has already begun.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has accused the USA and Israel of orchestrating the toppling of former Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. "There should be no doubt that what happened in Syria was the result of a joint American-Zionist plot" Khamenei said while also blaming "a neighbouring state", believed to be an allusion to Turkey, for playing a "clear role" in Syria's downfall.

While the Americans work



in the shadows the Zionists are openly gloating over their victory. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu boasts that the fall of Assad's government was a "direct result" of Israel's military campaign against two key allies of Damascus, Hezbollah and Iran. The Zionist leader praised the regime change in Syria, calling it "a historic day in the history of the Middle East".

Meanwhile, in New York the UN General Assembly has overwhelmingly called for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire in Gaza, a symbolic gesture that was rejected by the USA and Israel and a handful of other states, including Argentina, Czechia, Hungary, Paraguay and some Pacific islands that are essentially American protectorates. The resolution, supported by the British government, was adopted by a massive vote of 158 to 9 with 13 abstentions. It urges "an immediate, unconditional and permanent ceasefire" and "the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages" – wording

similar to a text vetoed by US imperialism in the Security Council last month.

This week sectarian Muslim militias, long armed and funded by NATO and the Turks, moved into the Syrian capital of Damascus after sweeping through the country more or less unopposed by the Syrian army.

Mohammed al-Bashir, one of the leaders of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) terrorist gangs based in Turkish-occupied northern Syria, now claims to be "interim prime minister". But his government has little or no power beyond that of the reactionary

Muslim militias that have been fighting for years to bring down the Baathist-led popular front government. Although busily settling old scores with Baathist loyalists amid reports of massacres of prisoners and other atrocities in the north, they've done nothing to resist the Israeli

incursion in the south.

In Damascus, the Secretary-General of the Syrian Democratic Front, Mahmoud Merhi, emphasised the need to develop a new vision for Syria's future and to form a constituent assembly to outline the country's framework. Merhi, a member of the constitutional opposition to the Baathist-led government, said that "the future of Syria cannot be determined by a single party, as Syria is diverse, and we respect this diversity".

"No one should be excluded [from the political process] because it is the Syrians who will determine their constitution" Merhi stressed, adding that consultations and discussions will be held to shape Syria's future. But "we no longer have an army capable of confronting the occupation's aggression". The Syrian army has been dismantled and is now almost dissolved. "What remains are armed groups running the country," he said.

FUND

The December appeal started this week. Supporters sent in £828, ranging from £200 from a London comrade to £13 silver collection at a Metropolitan *New Worker* Supporters Group event a couple of weeks ago. "Every little helps" says a Midlands supporter who donated £50, while other contributions included £100 from a comrade in Hereford; £48 from a Dagenham comrade and £30 from a pillar of the fighting fund who lives in Essex.

The fighting fund helps keep our communist press going. Every month we try to raise the £3,500 needed to hit our target and guarantee the continuation of the only communist weekly in Britain.

The imperialists and their Zionist and feudal Arab lackeys are rejoicing at the fall of the Syrian Arab Republic. They don't care about the death of innocent civilians or how many will die from starvation and disease under the hirelings running the puppet regime in Damascus. Everything's okay as long as they've got their palaces and mansions, as long as the big oil corporations can continue robbing the Arab masses of their oil wealth.

But resistance to imperialism is growing – in Palestine, in Syria and in the Donbas, people are fighting for freedom and a better life for all. We are part of that struggle. Help us keep it going. Your contribution, big or small, counts. All donations 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* will soon be taking its traditional fortnightly winter break.

The last issue of the Old Year will be published on Friday 20th December.

The first issue of the New Year will come out on Friday 10th January.

THE NEW WORKER

Weekly paper of the New Communist Party

Syria's downfall

Baath power began with the Syrian revolution in 1963. It ended this month. For most of that time the Party that led the Syrian Arab Republic was led by members of the Assad family.

Now Bashar al Assad is in Moscow. The Syrian Arab Republic is no more. The Baath Party has been dissolved. The old pan-Arab flag has gone and a new one flies over Damascus – the flag of the bogus “Syrian republic” during French colonial rule.

Although a pan-Arab movement, Syria was always at the heart of the Baath (Renaissance) Party. Born in the 1940s in the struggle to break the chains of colonialism, it evolved into a mass movement when it merged with the Arab Socialist Party in 1952 to become the Arab Socialist Renaissance Party under its famous slogan “Unity, Freedom, Socialism – One Arab Nation! One Glorious Destiny!” that would soon be adopted by Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Arab Socialist Union in Egypt.

Baathist Syria took the road of socialist advance, sweeping away the old guard and the feudal order in the countryside to build a better life for the Syrian people with national health and education services funded by a public sector that also had to support the armed forces needed to confront the Zionist enemy.

From the start Baathist Syria supported the just struggle of the Palestinian Arabs in confronting Israel as well as fighting side by side with Egypt, which was then the United Arab Republic, in two major wars with the Zionist entity. In the 1970s Syria intervened in the Lebanese civil war under an Arab League mandate through a peace-keeping force that remained in the Lebanon until 2005.

Communists and Nasserists had long worked with the Baath as ‘Independents’ in the Syrian parliament but in 1972 this was formalised with the establishment of a popular front, the National Progressive Front, which brought communists, Nasserists and social-democrats into government as junior partners of the Baath.

Baathist Syria was always to the fore in the struggle against imperialism. A pillar of the non-aligned movement, the Syrian Arab Republic stood with the militant Palestinian resistance movements and other progressive Arab republics in the Rejection Front to oppose any surrender peace with Israel. It joined the Steadfastness and Confrontation Front that included the PLO, Algeria, Libya and People’s Yemen to oppose Egypt’s acceptance of the American and Zionist demands that led to the Camp David surrender peace with Israel.

Baathist Syria was a friend of the Soviet Union and the DPR Korea. Syrian trade with People’s China had soared in recent years and only a few months ago Syria applied to join BRICS, the independent economic bloc of the Global South.

This is why the imperialists, working hand in glove with Turkey, Israel and the feudal Arab oil princes, worked to bring down the Assad government. They imposed sanctions and blockades on Syria to force it to end its alliance with the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran. They fomented the sectarian strife that triggered the civil war that began in 2011 and ended in the collapse of the Syrian government last week.

The imperialists and their Zionist and feudal Arab lackeys cannot bring peace to the Middle East. Nor is that their intention. They believe that the best way to maintain imperialist hegemony and preserve the super-profits of the big oil corporations is by keeping the Arab masses weak and divided. It’s worked so far. But this is by no means the end of the story.

Same old tune from the BBC

by Mark Blacklock

There is a page entitled *China-UK relations* on the BBC’s news website that, at the time of writing, features previews of about four dozen individual articles dating from February 2019 to August 2024. They are all about China and almost all have a negative or critical tone.

Elsewhere, in the site’s *World News* section, on a page titled *China*, there is a similar pattern. Ten of the first 12 stories cast a negative light on China. Almost everything portrays Beijing unfavourably, either directly or by association.

The subject matter and language on these pages are very similar. In a typical story, the BBC frames a collision between a Chinese coastguard vessel and a Philippines fisheries department vessel in the South China Sea as an unprovoked attack by China, despite the only evidence being an unverified video supplied by the Philippines. This gives credence to rumour.

Likewise, individuals jailed in Hong Kong under the national security law are characterised as “pro-democracy figures”, implying that the cases against them are “anti-democratic”. Other reports speak, once again, of China as a “security threat” and even cite the Western fantasy of the “China threat”. In China – and for those capable of objectivity – such coverage is nothing more than distortion.

In an opinion poll conducted over 20 years ago, more than

eight out of every 10 people in Britain said they trusted the BBC to tell the truth. The public clearly had an unshakeable confidence in the veracity of the corporation’s news reports and, by extension, the lack of bias therein.

This year, another poll by the same research and analytics company found that figure of trustworthiness to have almost halved, plummeting to around 40 per cent. It is not fanciful to interpret these findings as indicating that more than half of ordinary citizens do not believe what the BBC broadcasts anymore, and that they see bias in its output.

It is a terrible indictment of the largest media organisation in the country. People are becoming less deferential and more critically aware of what has always been an establishment voice.

The head of the BBC World Service, Jonathan Munro, told a conference recently that the BBC was “a main delivery point of soft power” for the government. His words echoed those of his boss, the BBC’s director general Tim Davie, at another conference where he said the BBC has a role to play “in driving democratic influence, stability and security worldwide”. Really? Is this really the job of a news organisation?

He also insisted “to be clear – I welcome fair competition and this is not about imposing a UK point of view”. Not true. In fact, that’s exactly what the BBC is about. Nowhere is this more evident than in how the organisation handles its skewed China output.

Some BBC stories about

China are just slim narratives supporting a preconceived view. The bias is blatant, and the worst part of it is that this prevailing anti-China narrative is rarely questioned. It reinforces prejudice and shapes perceptions.

Munro recently complained that Russia and China are each outspending Britain in terms of investment on international news coverage. He told a conference that while the others were pouring billions of pounds into the industry, the BBC World Service had to struggle by on a budget of about £400 million.

This statement suggests that the BBC has positioned itself as an anti-China voice to attract more financial support. Munro’s complaint, in fact, reveals a deeper truth about the BBC’s self-positioning: It is no longer just a news platform, but a media organisation that depends on political capital and divisive rhetoric to survive.

The BBC has opted to ramp up anti-China reporting, using China as a ‘topic’ to garner more financial backing. This approach not only undermines journalistic integrity, but also turns the act of ‘creating fear’ into a method for securing funds.

The BBC should worry less about its funding and worry more about its declining reputation. It is better to uphold the highest standards whatever the cost than to cave in to external pressure. That reputation, once lost, may never be recovered, and the slide has already begun.

Global Times



Workers' Notes

Equal Pay Victory

by New Worker correspondent

Workers employed by Birmingham City Council have won a long-running battle for equal pay. On Tuesday it was announced that 6,000 women workers have secured victory despite the effectively bankrupt council saying it requires £760 million to fund it. The deal will formally be approved this week, bringing to a close the four-year-old dispute. The dispute involved largely female staff such as teaching assistants who have historically been underpaid in relation to those in male-dominated positions such as refuse collectors.

One of the main unions involved, the GMB, said settlement payouts could be as much as four times higher than that offered to workers in 2021, with settlement expected to take place in the middle of 2025.

The union's Head of Industrial Relations, Rhea Wolfson, said: "The women of Birmingham City Council have delivered an historic outcome today. They were told there wasn't enough money, that they must accept that women workers are paid less. But they showed Council bosses that the show doesn't go on without them.

"This result today sends a clear message to employers across the country. Pay discrimination is rife and GMB will not turn a blind eye when women workers are being short-changed."

The BBC reported one of the victors, teaching assistant Pamela Whatley, saying that she was "over the moon" and had "a bit more peace of mind"; however, she complained "it's unfortunate we haven't got our settlements in time for Christmas".

Already Birmingham City Council has paid out nearly £1.1 billion in equal pay claims since a landmark case was brought against the authority in 2012.

Sally Maybury, one of the 174 involved in the dispute that

went to the Supreme Court, said: "I felt undervalued and treated as if I was worthless. It was very difficult, I was earning about £18,000, but as soon as I hit £22,000, there were no more incremental pay rises so my salary was kept quite low. I remember one year, my tax credits went up, even though my salary didn't – that's just crazy."

The council thinks the real costs will be around £300–£400 million. It appears however, that further council cuts to pay for it are still in the pipeline. Assets have been sold off to pay for a £1 billion government loan mostly used to cover the claim. On a more positive note, the Birmingham dispute has been a short affair compared with the similar one in Glasgow that took 15 years.

Small But Worthy Victory

by New Worker correspondent

A victory was secured in the Employment Tribunal case of Strathduie Bar versus Nick Troy. Troy is Chair of the Glasgow branch of Unite Hospitality. Troy briefly worked in the bar on a zero-hours basis but was speedily dismissed after just a "handful of shifts" for the sin that Troy's "vibes don't fit".

As a result of his Tribunal case, he was awarded precisely £14,416.28 in compensation. The Bar's owner, 1839 Ltd, claimed that Nick Troy had been dismissed because of his performance. The judge had other ideas and "concluded that the principal reason for the claimant's dismissal was that he proposed to take part in the activities of an independent trade union at the appropriate time".

From the start Troy told his new boss that he would be unavailable to work Tuesdays due to union work and that he needed time off in the summer to attend conferences.

Even under the Tory's 1992 Trade Union and Labour Relations Consolidation Act 1992, a dismissal is automatically unfair if the reason is that the worker had taken part or proposes to take part in the activities of an independent trade union at the appropriate time.

The pub's boss had given a

verbal warning on 29th June, and later claimed to have documented it saying his performance would be reviewed in two weeks, but Troy was sacked four days later on 3rd July.

Bosses claimed not to know about Troy's union activities, which was clearly nonsense, and it was clear the manager who sacked him was under pressure from his boss. The fact that managers and directors presented different versions did them no good at all, leading the judge to conclude that their evidence "seemed to have been embellished".

Chopper Wars

by New Worker correspondent

While Somerset is best known for its cider, it also produces helicopters. Unite the union is presently demanding that this continue so that when freedom fighters in the neo-colonies are machine-gunned from helicopters it's British gunships that do the job. The union therefore wants a Government commitment to the New Medium Helicopter (NMH) that is built by the Italian Leonardo plant in Yeovil.

The union laments that Starmer's new government backs a "NATO First" strategy which means that national governments have little control over their particular military industries and that the Americans' favoured choices get priority when contracts are doled out.

NMH is now the only British helicopter company. The website Airforce Technology laments that the £22 billion "black hole" in British finances might delay the promised increase in military spending to 2.5 per cent of GDP. They add this is an urgent necessity. Unite seems to agree.

Unite points out that the plant supports 2,800 directly employed workers, with thousands more employed as contractors or in its supply chain. It is, by far, the largest manufacturer in Somerset and one of the largest in the entire South-West, particularly of skilled workers.

Unite general secretary Sharon Graham says: "These are highly skilled workers and a further delay in awarding this contract would have disastrous

consequences for the long-term future of this factory." She says the UK's defence were let down by the previous government's combination of incompetence and indecision, adding: "Now Labour needs to step up to the plate and make sure that these jobs and skills remain in the UK."

The union justify this militaristic stand by saying that "awarding the NMLH contract to a UK-based manufacturer like Leonardo would not only protect jobs but also bolster the country's ability to independently design and produce cutting-edge aerospace technology".

The union's local convenor, Ben Clarke, added: "For over 100 years, Yeovil has been the beating heart of British helicopter design and manufacturing. This site isn't just a workplace – it's a legacy of innovation and craftsmanship. We need the government to recognise that sustaining this legacy is vital for our national interests, both economically and strategically."

Little wonder that Unite's banners are not seen on anti-war demonstrations, if that is the best unions can do about saving jobs. Not a single mention of arms conversion. Just after Unite's demand, on Tuesday another Leonardo Plant, in Edinburgh, was closed by Palestine Action who blockaded the site which makes parts for Israel's F-35 fighter.

Festive Delights

by New Worker correspondent

As this is the season to be jolly there are a number of industrial actions that have a particular impact at this time of year (at least according to sometimes imaginative writers in trade union press offices). At the Princes Foods factory in Cardiff almost 200 workers are to strike over pay. Unite warns that this will affect the supply of fresh fruit juices, which will result in a terrible shortage of Bucks Fizz when the strike begins on Tuesday.

Unite members are protesting after earlier pay offers were revoked by new owners. Unite's members who work as line operatives and engineers had been offered between a four and seven per cent pay rise dependent on

salary by Mitsubishi, the Japanese car manufacturer. After the Italian based multinational Newlat bought the plant, the offer was reduced to only a three per cent pay rise.

Sharon Graham said: "Newlat need to get back round the negotiating table before its customers discover they won't have any products on their shelves. Our members work in back-breaking roles on low pay and want a fair slice of the pie. Newlat make 20 per cent of all their revenues in the UK and are making money off the backs of these workers. Yet they want to short-change our members. Unite won't stand for such behaviour and will back our members in any dispute."

The union's national officer for food, drink and agriculture Paul Travers said: "Newlat borrowed huge sums of money to buy Princes and is now looking to cut corners and penny pinch to pay that money back. Unite won't let them do so with our members' livelihoods."

At Princes Food factories in Long Sutton, Wisbech, Bradford and Glasgow workers have also voted for strike action, with further dates set to be announced.

Another well timed strike...

...is taking place at Harrods, the London super-store once favoured by the Royal Family and visiting Arab oil princes, where workers belonging to the United Voice of the World (UVW) are to strike over the pre-Christmas weekend and Boxing Day because the store refuses to talk to them.

Hundreds of retail, restaurant, kitchen and cleaning workers at Harrods will walk out next weekend and on Boxing Day – the busiest retail dates of the year – if the luxury store continues to deny them recognition, a Christmas bonus and improved working conditions. This comes after the members of the small street union voted 95 per cent in favour of industrial action.

Apart from a seasonal bonus workers have many grievances, such as declining real pay, staff shortages, overwork, and scrapping the cover charge in restaurants to get round an agreement about tips going to staff. Over

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the years many benefits such as Christmas bonuses and voluntary bank holiday work for cleaning staff have been whittled away.

They are demanding an annual bonus, starting with a £500 Christmas bonus this year; guaranteed annual pay increases above RPI inflation; more staff in several departments; an end to mandatory bank holiday work for cleaners; an end to the practice of forcing part-time cleaners to work nine days on the trot; and a daily meal allowance for restaurants and kitchen workers.

Ana Ferreira, a cleaner and UVW member, said that: "In my 30 years in Harrods, I have learned that us cleaners are not given any value, we are seen as low people. I do this job because I'm a foreigner in this country and it's the job that I can do and I had babies etc so life got in the way. Harrods has been a total disappointment because they don't seem to value the good workers. Unfortunately now, things have got so bad that they have managed to annoy all of us. We feel they are not treating people fairly, that they seem to think we are donkeys or machines... this had always been a bit like that but now it seems to have got worse."

This is the second time Harrods' workers have voted to strike this year alone and is UVW's fifth campaign at the West End store, following four previous wins for tips, substantial pay rises and against unfair leave policies, the

latter a resounding success that allowed workers to take decent periods of leave.

The union's general secretary, Petras Elia, added: "Contrary to what Harrods bosses say, we are still in a shameful period of their history. Their employees are still feeling the impact of a prevailing and deep-rooted toxic culture. Bosses at Harrods denying their dedicated workforce a Christmas bonuses and fair wages while lavishing obscene sums on its billionaire owners is proof."

Harrods have grandly dismissed the strike threat saying it involves only 10 per cent of what it calls "colleagues". It also made it clear that "UVW is not a recognised union by Harrods and therefore we do not engage with this organisation on our policies".

And another...

...involves 57 North Air fuel tanker drivers based at Edinburgh Airport who are taking a well-timed walk-out from Wednesday for over a fortnight.

Unite warned of industrial action if North Air failed to provide an improved offer on its 4.5 per cent pay deal. Sharon Graham pointed out that: "North Air is a highly profitable company that can fully afford to make a fair offer to our members but has refused to do so." North Air bleats that: "We successfully concluded negotiations with Unite at six other sites ahead of the annual review this summer,

which has seen colleagues across the business receive a 4.5 per cent increase in pay – significantly above current levels of inflation. Among the airlines affected will be international routes by United Airlines and Emirates.

Meanwhile PCS, the main civil service union, is also involved in industrial action that could see high-castes going hungry as 155 members employed by G4S in Whitehall offices join other outsourced catering and security workers in dispute over pay.

PCS general secretary Fran Heathcote said: "For as long as G4S refuses to talk with us, this dispute shows no sign of ending. G4S could end this dispute tomorrow by increasing their pay offer, introducing company sick pay and increasing annual leave for our members."

And two days of industrial action next Thursday and Friday at the Shropshire-based logistics company Culina is also on the cards. Culina delivers the birds from abattoirs to warehouses run by Tesco and Marks & Spencer. This action, the union says "could see empty tables this Christmas". That is unlikely, but this correspondent has seen fierce battles at the poultry cabinets in M&S the day before Christmas.

In case there is a turkey shortage, supplies of peanuts are ensured with renewed pay talks at KP snacks at Ashby-de-la-Zouch, Leicestershire, where USDAW has called off a strike after Man-

agement agreed to restart pay talks. The union's area officer, Ed Leach, announced on Monday that: "Over the last few days, USDAW has been in negotiations with KP Snacks in an attempt to

reach an offer which we believe is acceptable to our members and find a resolution to the current pay dispute. USDAW has therefore agreed to suspend current plans for industrial action."

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

10th December 2004

OCCUPATIONAL PENSIONS are under threat all round as public sector unions prepare to defend existing retirement ages, and industrial workers who have paid into pension schemes for years, even decades, now see them vanishing before their eyes.

The GMB general union is one of those threatening to ballot its 250,000 local government members for strike action if it is not allowed to negotiate over proposed changes to the local government pensions scheme.

Currently unions are barred from negotiating on the

proposals by Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott to change the contribution rates and benefits for local government employees.

Among the proposals included in the new Local Government Pension Scheme 2008 are: Increased contributions for nearly all of the scheme members; a significant reduction in benefits that impact most heavily on the lowest paid; and a reduction in costs for local authorities despite the extra £1 billion set aside in the pre-Budget report to help local government and reduce the pressure on council tax.

GMB public services national secretary Brain Strutton said: "These proposals as they currently exist will create a new generation of pension paupers and unless the Government allow us to negotiate on behalf of GMB members over the term of the LGPS 2008 we will ballot for strike action.

"Many of the employees that GMB represents are extremely low paid and cannot afford to be members of the existing scheme. The proposed new scheme will reduce take-up even further and will lead to poverty in

retirement for tens of thousands of employees.

"My office has been inundated with calls from angry local government employees who are worried about what the future might hold for them."

The giant union Unison took a similar stand.

The PCS civil service union also warned the Government that it is facing widespread industrial action over a planned "assault" on public sector pension benefits.

The union says it fears the government is about to attempt an "historical transformation" of the Civil Service final pension scheme and switch to a pension based on "career averaging" with a resulting fall in pensions. The union also fears retirement age will be raised to 65.

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) pensions officer Paul Woolstenholmes said: "The pensions of millions of public sector workers are under threat – apart from MPs and judges who have the most generous pension arrangements in the country."

Russia returns to Afghanistan

by Dimitri Kosyrov

A bill explaining the procedure of how Russia removes organisations from the lists of terrorists has just went to the Russian parliament and maybe it will clear it this week.

It's about Afghanistan, of course. Previously the law gave no clues for what to do if the Russian government decides to disagree with the UN or anybody else who keeps on listing someone as international terrorists.

Media reports tell us that the general decision to stop calling the Taliban a terrorist organisation has been taken at the very top, so the legal procedures are only a formality. That formality is probably a final part of a long process of Russia's return to Afghanistan, and doing it not alone but with the Kremlin's long-standing Central Asian partners.

The just concluded visit of President Vladimir Putin to Kazakhstan is a part of that collective regional effort. Kazakhstan and Kirghizia have already relieved Taliban of its terrorist status in their consecutive legislations.

Yet another visit, that of Sergei Shoigu, currently the Secretary of the Security Council, to Kabul these days broadcasts the same message: we are back, and we are not alone in that regard.

The general idea of Russia and its partners in Central Asia, as formulated by the *Vzglyad* (View) internet publication, is as follows: Moscow is testing a new type of its South-Eastern policy, the type that takes time and patience. First, any kind of business strategy in Eurasia simply cannot bypass Afghanistan. Second, if we do bypass it, that country will assuredly be used by the West to create problems for everyone in the region, be it India, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan or even China. So the rulers in Kabul, whoever they currently are, must be a part of all kinds of



• Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan.

regional projects.

To remind you, exactly six months ago I wrote an essay called *Don't call them terrorists: Taliban gets an image upgrade*. So, what has changed in half a year?

Most important, we now have a clear picture of possible investment projects, in principle and very generally approved by the Kabul government and well known to investors in Russia, Kazakhstan and other regional nations. A real flurry of visits of prominent Russians to Kabul, as well as several Taliban delegations to business forums in Russia, have helped to make that picture clear.

Alexander Knyazev of the Moscow Foreign Relations State University puts above everything else the need for a railway, usually called the Trans Afghan link. That rather famous mega-project has mainly been pushed by Uzbekistan, but now it is popular with all the neighbours of Afghanistan.

The benefits of the quick deliveries on the route from Belarus to Russia to Kazakhstan, and then to Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and then to the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf via Pakistan, are all too obvious. The missing link is

only the 760 kilometres across Afghan territory.

Then there is a huge irrigation network, mostly called the Qosh Tepa waterworks. It is already in existence in Afghanistan, but it looks like a double-edged sword for its neighbours. A simple look at mountains and rivers in the area tells us that water sources and water flows here are a troublesome problem, and there better be one irrigation system – or else the issue becomes a constant irritant. Like with the Mekong river in South East Asia, there can only be one general plan for its use for several nations placed, one after another, along its banks.

Finally, there is that very old and well-known bonanza of Afghanistan's mineral deposits, which may easily pay for all and every development plan for that country. Lithium is the current craze, and Kabul is "a lithium Saudi Arabia", as Americans loved to say 10–15 years ago. Moscow's Rosatom corporation already has experience with developing lithium resources in Bolivia, and now has some contacts with Kabul.

Nothing is wrong, also, with the good old copper deposits in Afghanistan, which the Chinese investors used to

crave. There are also iron, oil and gas, which, again, may favour Russian investors.

All in all, we are talking about maybe up to three trillion US dollars' worth of all kinds of deposits, capable of turning the whole of Central Asia into a yet faster development area. No other region of the world may boast of having such a potential springboard for explosive growth for decades to come.

These prospects have helped to change of Russia's public opinion on future dealings with the Taliban. The West helped a lot to get such results. Let me revert to my above-mentioned column of six months ago, quoting Peter Akopov, a *Russia Today* columnist.

"Everything has changed during two decades of the American occupation of Afghanistan. The Talibs not only kept their influence in the society, they managed to take power bloodlessly after the American retreat. The Talibs are learning the art of managing a nation, they destroy the poppy plantations that used to flourish under the Americans. They want to build new relations with the Islamic world and with their neighbours so they are not terrorists any-

more," he said.

Today, there are much stronger statements in the Russian media. The Taliban is not a terrorist organisation anymore assert several experts surveyed by the *Vzglyad* publication. Senator Konstantin Dolgov puts it very concisely: there are actors on the international scene who merit this title much more than the current masters of Afghanistan.

"The US and the European nations actively support Kiev," says the senator. "So that means that they actually murder civilians [in Russia and Ukraine], they are shelling civilians in Russia with Western weapons and with the help of Western military personnel. They are the real threat. I think that you cannot even start to compare [the] Taliban with that."

Here we have a point, sorely missing from all kinds of peace proposals for the war in Ukraine. It's about the abhorrent methods of waging war employed by Ukrainians and those aiding them. What makes a terrorist? Which actions are legitimate, and which are asking for an international tribunal? Why not insert a point about punishing war criminals in any final document about the future of what will be left of Ukraine?

You may say war crimes are one thing while terrorism is another. So how about using civilians as human shields, or hostages? How about staging fake incidents with "war atrocities", murdering quite real people in the process, as happened in the town of Butcha in 2022? And here we are not even starting to talk about the current war in the Middle East!

In any case, a movement that was blacklisted for 'only' being guilty of supporting terrorists in the early 2000s, looks plainly angelic compared with criminals of today's wars. So rebranding of the Taliban is only natural today.

Trump and the decline of US imperialism

by Mick Kelly

A speech given at an international conference convened by the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP) in Amsterdam last month on the topic of national liberation from imperialism.

The election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the USA is symptomatic of a monopoly capitalist power in decline. His return to power reflects a failure of the other party of monopoly capitalism (the Democratic Party of Biden/Harris) and its inability to address the needs and aspirations of the working class. Drawing from a toxic brew of national chauvinism and reactionary currents of all kinds, Trump's return to the White House will signal the sharpening of a host of contradictions domestically and internationally.

Trump has referred to himself as "Tariff Man", promising to slap 20 per cent tariffs on all imports and substantially more – 100 or 200 per cent – on things such as electric vehicles from China. The people around him, like some of the Biden crowd, look towards "delinking" the US economy from the People's Republic of China.

In his outstanding work, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Lenin made the point that one of the features of imperialism, of decaying monopoly capitalism, was that big capital finds it increasingly difficult to utilise science and holds back advances in the productive forces.

This phenomenon is on full display in the USA, where someone such as 'vaccine sceptic' Robert F Kennedy Jr will be put in charge of public health, and where industrial policy is turning against technologies that cause less harm to the environment, such as electric vehicles.

The role of the USA in the world economy is shrinking. In 1960 the USA had about 40 per cent of the world GDP. Today it is about half that. There was a day when American imperialism championed free trade. For the past decade-plus, Washington has moved away from the neo-liberal trade model, erecting a growing tariff blockade. The abandonment of the Trans-Pacific Partnership and paralysis of the World Trade Organisation [WTO] are signs of things to come.

After the Second World War the USA constructed a web of economic intuitions where Wall Street and Washington occupied centre place. That world is gone, and it has been replaced by a fragmenting world economy, where the decline of US imperialism is picking up speed. Trump will accelerate the process.

One of the symptoms will be a sharpening of inter-imperialist contradictions, which will have political and military dimensions. For example, Trump's view of the Ukraine is that it is mainly a concern of Europe and that too much US time and treasure has been wasted on it. If implemented as policy, this shift on the Ukraine



• The Palestinians fight on!

will force the European imperialist powers, especially Germany, to carry out a military build-up while putting new stress on NATO.

What we are seeing is clearer definition in the developing spheres of influence and domination – where the USA has a smaller role to play. Also worth noting is that the two other monopoly centres of monopoly capitalism, ie Japan and the EU, are also producing a smaller share of the world GDP.

People versus imperialism

The principal contradiction in the world today is between the peoples, nations and countries of the developing world versus imperialism. The USA is presently the principal

between imperialism and Zionism is so strong. The broad masses of people throughout the Middle East hate foreign domination and want it to end. Israel is the cop on the beat for Western imperialism, a reliable night-stick that can be used against those who want freedom and independence. This means that Trump will double down on the Gaza genocide facilitated by Biden/Harris.

It is also worth noting that things can turn into their opposite, that Israel can move from being an asset to a liability: if the genocide and carnage in Palestine and Lebanon provoke uprisings in the Arab world, the position of imperialism will be impacted.

The fact that many of the forces fighting imperialism and Zionism are not led by the working class does not change the revolutionary, anti-imperialist nature of the struggle that is taking place. Stalin, an outstanding Marxist-Leninist and path-breaking theorist on national question, wrote in the great work *The Foundations of Leninism*: "The struggle that the Emir of Afghanistan is waging for the independence of Afghanistan is objectively a revolutionary struggle, despite the monarchist views of the Emir and his associates, for it weakens, disintegrates and undermines imperialism; whereas the struggle waged by such 'desperate' democrats and 'Socialists', 'revolutionaries' and republicans as, for example, Kerensky and Tsereteli, Renaudel and

Scheidemann, Chernov and Dan, Henderson and Clynes, during the imperialist war was a reactionary struggle, for its results was the embellishment, the strengthening, the victory, of imperialism."

That said, the struggle for working class leadership in the movements for national liberation is important, and as communists we have the responsibility to support other communists who are contending for leadership in the national movements – be it in Palestine or anywhere else.

Marxism-Leninism and the fight for national liberation

In an environment of declining imperialism, there are some important things to keep in mind.

First, there needs to be a strategic alliance, a "union" as Lenin put it, between the working class in the advanced capitalist countries and the broad masses of the oppressed in the developing countries. There are hundreds of millions of people in rural areas locked in semi-feudal property relations, which in part provides the material conditions for people's war.

Second, while there has been a resurgence of the communist and national liberation movements, party building and the construction of revolutionary, commu-

nist organisations is a vital task in the present period. Ending, or breaking free of imperialism is not easy, and to successfully do so over the long run requires organisations that embody the theory and practice of Marxism-Leninism. Building a new communist party should be the central task of revolutionaries in the USA, and great

progress is being made on this front.

Third, national liberation movements that weaken imperialism are objectively progressive and will hasten imperialism's end. Self-determination of oppressed nations is a democratic demand and, to the extent and degree that the fight for self-determination weakens imperial-

ism, those fights should be supported. This has an application in multinational states, including the USA.

Fourth, monopoly capitalism is a law-governed system where the drive to seek the highest rate of profit is basic. While capitalism is always incapable of genuine long-range planning, imperialism in decline is

animated by the shortest of short-term gain and contingency. One of the things that makes the Trump administration dangerous is precisely a reactionary pragmatism that is reshaping the American empire. It is a recipe for more wars and intervention, particularly in Latin America and the Pacific.

Finally, we need to be

proletarian internationalists who are serious about uniting the working and oppressed people of the world. Looking around this room, that is exactly who we are. Mao made the point that imperialism is strategically a paper tiger. He was right – in the short term imperialism is an 'iron tiger', it is dangerous. In the long

run it will certainly be defeated.

Long live proletarian internationalism!

Long live the unity of the people of the world!

Long live the unity of working and oppressed people – we have nothing to lose but our chains!

Fightback News
(USA)

On the 'spiritual plunder' of colonialism

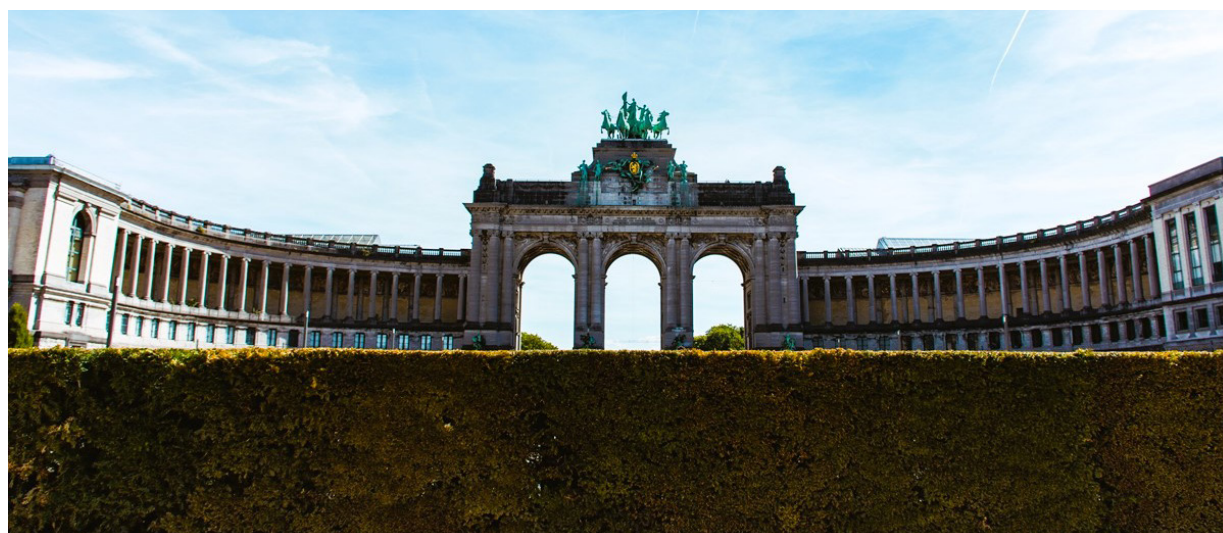
by Ding Gang

Thirty years ago, in Brussels, the Cinquantenaire Park became my preferred spot for evening walks. The majestic triumphal arch initially captivated me with its grandeur. Still, after learning its history, this symbol of Belgian colonial power seemed to silently remind me of a past built on cruel exploitation and plunder.

This architectural marvel carries a dark legacy, constructed with wealth accumulated through the brutal exploitation of labour in the Congo Free State under King Leopold II (1835–1909).

These grandiose structures were funded with the proceeds of Congolese rubber, a fact well-known at the time. According to an article published in the *Guardian* last November, one Belgian socialist politician spoke of "the arch of severed hands", a reference to the horrifying fate that awaited Congolese workers who failed to meet their rubber quota.

This realisation added a layer of complexity



• Cinquantenaire Park in Brussels

to my memory of evening strolls, prompting me to reflect on the darker aspects of colonial history. But was wealth the only thing the colonisers plundered?

This historical reflection gains new significance in light of the recent landmark ruling by Belgium's Court of Appeal. The court found the Belgian state guilty of crimes against humanity for forcibly separating five mixed-race children from their mothers in colonial Congo.

This ruling is a significant step toward acknowledging and rectifying the deep-seated psychological and cultural violence of colo-

nialism.

The court awarded €50,000 to each of these five women, now in their 70s. These women were systematically kidnapped between 1948 and 1953, sent to Catholic institutions hundreds of kilometres from their homes, stripped of their identities and registered as "children of sin".

The psychological impact of such policies extends far beyond the immediate victims. These children were not only physically separated from their mothers but were also forced to internalise a value system that deemed their very existence problematic.

They were made to feel ashamed of their mixed heritage, demonstrating how colonial power operated not just through physical control but through psychological domination. This psychological domination involved imposing a value system that denigrated colonised cultures and identities, leading to deep-seated shame and inferiority among colonised populations.

This legal recognition of colonial crimes against humanity represents a crucial step in the decolonisation process. It acknowledges that colonial injustice wasn't merely about economic plunder, ex-

ploitation or political control. It also involved deep-seated psychological and cultural violence that continues to reverberate through generations.

This ruling not only provides justice to the immediate victims but also establishes a precedent for addressing colonial injustices across Europe. It highlights that even though European colonisers have left the historical stage, we still need a more comprehensive understanding of decolonisation's long-term impacts.

The ongoing process of decolonisation requires us to understand that healing colonial

wounds involves more than material reparation, it is a long journey that demands a deep acknowledgment of cultural trauma, restoration of stolen identities and reconstruction of damaged psychological landscapes.

Recognising the "colonised and plundered mind" is also an important step in the cultural reconstruction of developing countries, especially for South-South co-operation, where exchanges on the shadow of colonialism play an important role in deepening understanding and promoting the development of common interests. This is not to better pursue the accounts of the former colonial powers, but rather to gain a deeper understanding of how to enhance the responsibilities and roles of the South in the restructuring of the global order.

The author is a senior editor with the *People's Daily* and currently a senior fellow with the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at the Renmin University of China.

LETTERS

Dear Comrades

Developments in Syria do not lend themselves to euphoria and celebration. On the contrary, they are a cause for serious concern and do not bode well for the people of Syria or for the wider Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East region. They bear the risk of new bloody conflicts, devastation and more refugees. They bring to the fore extreme fundamentalist forces. They strengthen the two occupying powers in our region, Turkey and Israel. They are paving the way for the dismemberment of Syria.

AKEL underlines that the international community must not accept the plans for the dismemberment of Syria but must defend the territorial integrity and unity of the country as a sovereign and independent state, where the people of Syria themselves will freely decide their future, away from foreign interference. The position of the Republic of Cyprus must be guided by international law, the UN Charter and the UN Security Council Resolutions.

The whole of humanity should be concerned by the developments in Syria because the outcome of the so-called “Arab Spring” and Western military interventions to “export democracy” is well known. In the case of Syria too, existing issues of democratic freedoms and human rights were instrumentalised by the West in order to destabilise the country while at the same time, extreme obscurantist forces were dubbed “liberators” and

“democrats”.

This makes it clear how nightmarish the scenario of Syria becoming a “new Iraq” or a “new Libya” is.

**Central Committee
AKEL (Progressive Party
of Working People)
Nicosia**

Dear Comrades

With regard to the article *South Korea's Martial Law Lifted* [NW:2281, 6 Dec 2024] I would like to comment as follows: In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s martial law was commonplace in south Korea. Successive dictators such as Park Chung Hee, Chon Du Hwan and Roh Tae Woo used to declare martial law or states of emergency at the drop of a hat. In 1980 about 5,000 citizens of the southeastern city of Kwangju were massacred by the south Korean puppet army after martial law was declared. Many south Korean rulers came from the south Korean military and were trained in the USA. South Korea supposedly underwent ‘democratisation’ in the late 1980s but this was fraudulent; it simply meant that a change from a military fascist dictatorship to a civilian fascist dictatorship. It was a skilfully crafted propaganda move by the US imperialists who are the real rulers of the “Republic of Korea” to present the image of a fake liberal democracy to the world.

Of course freedom, democracy and human rights in south Korea are but an illusion. Deep down south Korea is a fascist state, an ultra-fascist state in fact, controlled by the USA. President Yoon’s declaration of martial law was not something unusual or untypical, it was quite normal for south Korea. In south Korea communist and leftist activities are banned by the National Security Law. In the past communist leaders were executed.

Despite the repressive nature of the “Republic of Korea” many European and American liberal academics and journalists have been recruited by south Korea to create false propaganda that both promotes south Korea as a “liberal human rights paradise” and a “model of prosperity”, as well as continually attacking the socialist Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) and creating all kinds of malicious disinformation about it.

Yoon declared martial law not to supposedly “root out pro-North Korean forces” – such an assertion is nonsense, not least of all because the DPRK itself abandoned the goal of unification in 2023, but to suppress opposition to his crisis-ridden rule.

The Yoon regime in south Korea is in deep crisis. There have been dozens of corruption scandals around Yoon. Moreover, there is increasing suspicion that his wife Kim Kon Hui is the real power behind the throne and is manipulating her husband.

South Korea has an external debt of \$664.5 billion. Probably the highest in the world. It also has one of the highest suicide rates in the world. So Yoon’s declaration of martial law was a desperate attempt to stay in power.

Why did Yoon suddenly reverse the decision. It was not because the south Korean National Assembly voted against it, Yoon would have simply dissolved the National Assembly and arrested its deputies. It was because the incompetent Yoon forgot to inform his masters, the Yankee imperialists, about his declaration of martial law. Yoon did not ask big boss Sleepy Joe Biden for permission to declare martial law. The “Republic of Korea” is a US colony, a creation of the USA. None of its rulers were elected by its people (the elections

are fake). They are really selected by the USA. South Korea is still occupied by 30,000 US troops and the USA is the master there. Nothing happens in south Korea without the say so of the USA.

Clearly the US imperialists are happy to throw Yoon under a bus. In the past, the south Korean puppet dictators proved to be liabilities for the USA. The Americans packed their original puppet Syngman Rhee off to Hawaii when things went pear-shaped for him in 1960, and Park Chung Hee was shot by his own head of security in October 1979 on orders from Washington. The Americans obviously thought there was no mileage in keeping the Yoon regime in power. Moreover, by displaying blatant and openly fascist characteristics Yoon effectively demolished in one go the finely constructed fake image of south Korea as a ‘democracy’. The US policy makers decided that having a fascist maniac in charge in south Korea was not beneficial to their propaganda campaign against the DPRK. Now Yoon faces a very uncertain future. He has avoided impeachment (which is meaningless in south Korea anyway) but will probably be replaced by someone from within the ruling regime – yet another puppet of imperialism.

In contrast, the DPR Korea faces no such issues as it has an independent people’s government. Coups and instability are unknown in the DPR Korea because there exists a solid invincible, single-hearted unity between the people, party and the leader.

**Dermot Hudson
London**

Dear Comrades

New directives from the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), have led the media outlets to promote nor-

continued on page 9...

Diary

Check the Palestine Solidarity Campaign and Stop the War Coalition websites for emergency Gaza protests across the country.

UNTIL 30 DEC

People’s History Museum: Banner Exhibition, Left Bank, Spinningfields, Manchester M3 3ER.

UNTIL APRIL 2025

Townsend Theatre Productions: *Behold Ye Ramblers*. Touring play by Neil Gore. See TTP website for details of venues.

UNTIL 15 JULY

Tate Britain: *Artists Against Fascism and War*. Exhibition at Millbank, London SW1P 4RG.

UNTIL 25 JUL

Working Class Movement Library: Collectors, The Cameraman, The Poets and the Pits: Miners’ Strike 40th Anniversary Exhibition. Afternoons.

SAT 14 DEC

Palestine Solidarity Campaign: National Day of Action for Palestine. Includes Rally for Palestine: End the Genocide 14:45–15:45, Parliament Square, London SW1 and other local events.

TUE 14 JAN

Marx Memorial Library: Introducing Marx & Marxism. 19:00–20:00, online event. Register on MML website.

WEDs 15 JAN–26 FEB

Working Class Movement Library: Trade Union History Course. In person: WCML, 51 Crescent, Salford M5 4WX. Book on WCML website.

WED 15 JAN

Socialist History Public Believe Nothing Until It Is Officially Denied: Claud Cockburn and the invention of Guerrilla Journalism. 19:00, Zoom meeting. Register on SHS website.

THUR 16 JAN

Marx Memorial Library: John Foster on the 1926

General Strike. 19:00, Online event. Register on MML website.

SAT 18 JAN

Palestine Solidarity Campaign: End the genocide in Gaza. National demonstration Assemble 12:00, BBC, Portland Place, London W1A 1AA.

SAT 25 JAN

Scottish CND: Burns Peace Poetry Fundraiser. 15:00–17:00, Quaker Meeting House, 38 Elmbank Crescent, Glasgow, G2 4PS. Book on CND website.

SAT 1 FEB

Palestine Solidarity Campaign: Annual General Meeting. 09:30–16:30, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1 4RL

SAT 8 FEB

Cuba Solidarity Campaign: Latin America Conference. 10:00, Hamilton House, Mabledon Place, London WC1H 9BB. Details and tickets at latinamericakonference.co.uk

MON 14 APRIL–FRI 25 APRIL

Lakenheath Alliance for Peace: Camp protesting against US nuclear weapons returning to Britain. RAF Lakenheath, Brandon Road, Lakenheath, Brandon, Suffolk IP27 9PS.

THUR 20 FEB

Marx Memorial Library: Steve Silver on Anti-Fascism in the 1930s/40s. 19:00. Online event. Register on MML website.

THUR 6 MAR

Marx Memorial Library: Rachel Holmes on Eleanor Marx on Clerkenwell Green. 18:00, in person, MML 37a Clerkenwell Green, London, EC1R 0DU. Book on MML website.

The editor welcomes letters from our readers. If you have a contribution to make please make sure it reaches us before Wednesday.

You can send your letters to: PO Box 73, London SW11 2PQ, or email party@NCP.clara.net

...continued from page 8

malisation with Israel and criticise the Palestinian movements. Simultaneously, sympathetic voices to Palestine and Palestinians are criminalised. These directives are applicable to the native Saudis as well as the residents and pilgrims.

Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, the Public Investment Fund (PIF), has facilitated and benefited from human rights abuses, says Human Rights Watch in a report released on 20th November. The 95-page report found that Saudi Arabia's vast fossil fuel-derived state wealth is effectively controlled by one person, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Human Rights Watch found that the crown prince wields this enormous economic power in a largely arbitrary and highly personalised manner rather than for the Saudi people's benefit and that the PIF is used to whitewash the Saudi government's abuses. "Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has unchecked control over the country's nearly trillion dollar Public Investment Fund" said Joey Shea, Saudi Arabia researcher at Human Rights Watch. "The crown prince has used the Saudi sovereign wealth fund's economic power to commit serious human rights violations and white-wash the reputational harm from these abuses."

John Hughes
Bahrain Freedom Movement
London

Dear Comrades

My name is Christer Ryd and I am a retired trade unionist. I have worked in my union for 47 years. I am writing to you with a request. I collect recordings of different bands with songs from the broad left (socialist, communist, anarchist protest, trade union songs). My question is, can you help me with recordings from your country. Of course I will pay for both

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the recording and the shipping cost. You may be wondering what I will do with my collection when I am no longer around. I have bequeathed the collection to the Labour Movement's archives in Sweden. I can be contacted on: christer.rydh@telia.com and I am looking forward to positive responses.
Christer Ryd
Stockholm
Sweden

Scottish Political News

by our Scottish political affairs correspondent

The campaign for the 2026 Holyrood election has unofficially been launched under the guise of the Scottish Budget. Finance Secretary Shona Robison pulled a variety of goodies out of her hat that she hopes will woo the voters, but she will have to hope nobody asks too many awkward questions about where the money is coming from. She also has the problem of actually getting it passed given that the SNP is in a minority and is effectively at war with its former allies, the Greens.

The latter have piously declared that: "The Scottish Greens cannot back the SNP's proposed budget as things stand." In particular: "This budget fails to deliver on Green proposals like expanding free school meals for P6 and P7 or a price cap on bus fares. It slashes funding for core local services like schools and for key climate projects like the Nature Restoration Fund."

The SNP have also been wooing Liberal Democrats by announcing that their little read *Building a New Scotland* papers will no longer be published – a small but telling concession to the Lib-Dems who have long wanted it cut. This was not the only concession granted to the Lib-Dems.

The fact that the word "independence" was not once mentioned in the speech was noticeable to friend and foe of the nationalist cause.

The centrepiece of the Budget was the announcement that the SNP Government would provide

funding effectively to abolish the "two-child benefit cap" in Scotland. The main purpose of this is of course to cause embarrassment for Scottish Labour, whose leader Anas Sarwar has previously opposed the two-child cap, one of his few public disagreements with the party's UK leadership.

An extra two billion has been found for health and social care bringing the budget up to £21 billion and local government gets an extra billion. Income tax levels will remain unchanged, but thresholds for basic and intermediate rates will rise by 3.5 per cent. Nevertheless, council tax rises or even more cuts to public services seem unavoidable.

The SNP-controlled Convention of Scottish Local Authorities made the understated announcement that the Budget "will not stop Councils from having to make difficult decisions to protect services given ongoing pressures, including inflationary increases, pay awards and the significant strain on social care".

Other treats on offer were £800 million for social security benefits and slightly less for "affordable" housing, while £34 million more is going on culture.

History at Risk Again

In our issue for 11th October [NW:2213, 11 Oct 2024] we reported that the People's Story Museum, Edinburgh's museum of working-class history, was under threat of closure.

Thanks to a widely supported campaign, this has now been reversed and it has now reopened, months earlier than the planned "temporary" closure which many feared would be permanent.

Now the Labour- and Lib-Dem-run council will have to look elsewhere to save the princely sum of

£260,000. On the other side of the country however, another important heritage site is running out of time. This is Auchindrain, in Argyllshire, the last surviving example of a pre-clearance 1800s Scottish farm township.

Since the last crofters departed in 1962 it has been an open-air museum where visitors can see re-enactments of past times in the original buildings.

It has been run by the Auchindrain Trust, but now the 22-acre site has lost funding from Historic Environment Scotland (HES). They provided £600,000 in grants over the last three years, which accounts for about 90 per cent of the site's funding.

This withdrawal means that its Winter closure is likely to be its last. Trustees have informed staff they are at risk of redundancy, saying: "The cost of caring for such a large and complex historic site is far greater than the income that can be generated from visitors or in other ways, particularly in a rural location such as Mid Argyll."

Curator Bob Clark said: "It is the Stirling Castle of ordinary people, a testament to the rural working class. Millions of people worldwide with Scottish ancestry are descended from those who lived and worked in townships like Auchindrain. Now, this last surviving example is in danger of being lost." He might have added Donald Trump's ancestors lived in similar circumstances and suggest he helps out.

It is indeed an agreeable place to visit, weather permitting. This correspondent fondly recalls a trip there, but that was in 1980s, which partly explains its problems, it is indeed well off the beaten track.

HES has awarded financial support to the Trust since 2013 and is currently providing a three-year funding package that concludes in March 2025.

They now say: "The Trust can consider an approach to HES towards accessing any of our relevant grant open funding programmes via the standard application route." So perhaps all is not lost.

At the Parish Pump

The last two council by-elections of the year have taken place, remarkably both had a 21.7 per cent turnout.

In the Partick East/Kelvindale ward of Glasgow the contest was caused by the death of a long-standing SNP councillor. In line with recent trends, Labour gained the seat in with 37.5 per cent of the vote with the SNP well behind on 23.1, followed by the Greens and the Tories. The result means that Glasgow now has 36 SNP councillors, 33 Labour, 11 Greens, and two each for the Tories and Independents.

On the same day in Stirling East, an astonishing event took place. For the first time in 20 such contests the SNP won. This was caused by the Labour incumbent departing for Westminster and his wife attempting to hold on to it. Labour came second while newcomer Reform UK came in third.

Meanwhile Labour has no end of scandals involving leading councillors to contend with.

A former Lord Provost and present-day councillor in Glasgow has been suspended from the party when he was charged with stalking offences.

Earlier the Inverclyde Council leader stood down after being charged with assault and threatening or abusive behaviour towards a woman. And in Edinburgh the Labour council leader has also stood down after being accused of sending sexually explicit messages to Ukrainian refugees in the city.

Vietnam: still a safe haven for travellers

by Ray Riches

Recently, news has spread across the world about several deaths at a backpacker hostel in Laos. Deadly methanol was sold as regular alcohol, causing illness and death. The concern on everyone's mind is whether this could also happen in Vietnam.

The popular Lao-tian tourist destination of Vang Vieng is well known for young adventure seekers. Located in the high country around 120 km north of the Laos capital, Vientiane, the small town is awash with hotels and hostels welcoming people from all over the world.

For backpackers, the scene is electric, with low-budget options available all over the 'outdoor capital' of Laos. Unfortunately, this is also the last place that two Danish tourists, an American, a British woman and two Australians consumed tainted alcohol that led to their deaths.

Laos, being a neighbour of Vietnam, shares some supply chains, raising the question of whether this could also happen in bars across Vietnam.

It would be difficult to categorically say no. It is a complex mix of laws, operators and locations that, I believe, would make this type of scenario unlikely, but possible, in Vietnam.

To start, Vietnam does not have a bar culture similar to other countries. The culture of consuming alcohol is very different. For this reason, some spirits used to make mixed drinks are not popular



• The bar scene in Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City).

in Vietnam, lowering the demand and market for these types of spirits.

Couple this with the fact that bars and similar places frequented by backpackers are often owned and operated by foreigners, further reducing the likelihood of intentional use of fake alcohol.

Due to the lower demand for some spirits, bar owners in Vietnam are more likely to have a single supplier and it is the supplier that is key to this situation.

Suppliers of alcohol in Vietnam are usually large corporations that either own or have close relationships with major manufacturers and importers of alcohol. This means they have a secure supply line that ensures the alcohol they sell to bars is real and safe to drink.

Also, bar owners are aware of the small fake alcohol market in Vietnam. For this reason,

most bars will not purchase alcohol from local suppliers or in local markets because there is no certainty of the product's origin.

Overarching all of the supply chain assurances are the laws in Vietnam. Bar owners are well aware that if they intentionally harm a person by selling a dangerous product, the country's laws will deal with them and they could find themselves in jail.

All that aside, the one definite risk is if there is intentional swapping of alcohol by a person selling the product. Whether it be an employee of a bar or an unscrupulous bar owner, there is always a risk that a dishonest person could do something similar to what occurred in Laos recently.

That being said, I would suggest that the overall risk of this happening is no more than in any other Southeast

Asian country or anywhere in the world for that matter.

There are reports, from time to time, of people in Vietnam dying from methanol poisoning. This, however, is not from fake alcohol and not from consuming drinks in a bar.

The most common cause of alcohol poisoning deaths in Vietnam comes from purchasing home-made alcohol from street markets or contacts. The price is usually very cheap and the alcohol content is exceptionally high.

On one occasion, I visited a friend's home in Saigon and was given alcohol purchased at a local market in a province in the north of Vietnam. Its alcohol content was in excess of 70 per cent and it was clearly not made by a reputable manufacturer. After consuming it, I was very ill for three days.

For tourists travelling

groups and get references about budget locations. Also, ask around and see how other tourists' experiences have been before you buy alcohol.

The best advice is if there is any doubt, only buy unopened bottled and canned beverages and make sure they open them in front of you. That way, you know you are getting the real thing.

Vietnam is a very safe place to travel. You can tour this country knowing that you are welcome and the systems around you work for the good of all the people, locals and tourists alike.

I think the final advice is 'be aware, not alarmed' because in every country there are risks. Thankfully, the statistics and people's experiences clearly show that Vietnam is one of the better countries in the world for travellers of all ages. Enjoy your next adventure in Vietnam!

VNS

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London SW11 2PQ.

Terrorist forces overthrow Syrian government

As terrorist forces overthrow the Syrian government, Israel invades and the Americans hold on to Syrian oil. On Sunday 8th December – after over a week of intense fighting between the Syrian government and the terrorist group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its allied factions, who gained control over key cities in the country – Syrian President Bashar al-Assad fled Syria. The news was announced by the Russian Foreign Ministry, which also informed that with his resignation al-Assad instructed his prime minister to stay in charge of the state to oversee a peaceful transition of power to opposition forces. The development happens 14 months into Israel's genocide in Gaza and weeks after Benjamin Netanyahu signed a ceasefire agreement with Hezbollah in Lebanon. Below are reflections from Vijay Prashad regarding the takeover and key elements to understand it.

Vijay Prashad

The Syrian state that fell this weekend had been devastated – first by the civil war which began in 2011 and then by the sanctions placed on the country by the USA and its allies in the years since. The Syrian Arab Army (the official state army) never fully recovered in the aftermath of the major fighting of that earlier period and was incapable of ever taking back the main cities of Hama, Homs and Aleppo.

The continued Israeli bombardment of Syrian military facilities over a long period further weakened the Syrian armed forces' logistical and ordinance capabilities. These attacks were sustained and painful for the Syrian armed forces.

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the assassination of Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah over the last few months weakened the ability of Hezbollah to operate even within Lebanon's south, which forced the recent 'cease-fire' agreement with Israel. This demonstrated that Hezbollah was not in any position to enter Syria again to defend



• Israeli warplanes hit stricken Syria.

the Syrian government against any armed incursion on the Hama to Damascus road (Highway M5).

The attacks on Iranian supply depots and military facilities in Syria as well as the attacks by Israel on Iran prevented any build-up of Iranian forces to defend the Syrian government. The weakening of Hezbollah also in turn meant a weakening of Iran's role in the region.

The nearly three years of conflict in

Ukraine denied Syria the ability to call upon further assistance from Russia – which has been providing military aid to the al-Assad government for years – to protect either Damascus or the Russian naval base in Latakia. Therefore, Syria's government no longer had its Iranian and Russian military allies for assistance against the reinforced rebels.

The Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, formed in 2017 out of existing al-Qae-

da terrorist formations, drew together various military forces, ranging from Turkey to the Uyghurs – with a large number of other al-Qaeda-influenced fighters – and built up its forces in Idlib over the last decade. HTS has received aid and support from Turkey but also covertly from Israel, according to a highly placed intelligence official in Turkey.

Now that the secular al-Assad government is gone, what will the new HTS-led Islamist

government do regarding the many social and religious minorities in Syria? What will the new HTS-led government do regarding Syria's Golan Heights region, which Israel invaded and occupied on Sunday? What will the new government do regarding the Israeli military incursion in Quneitra?

This story is not over yet. There will be much further unrest in the country led by ISIS as well as the Kurdish groups in the north; al-

ready Turkish-backed groups are in combat against the Kurdish YPG (People's Defence Units) and PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) forces in Manbij.

US forces are already stationed in eastern Syria, where they say that they will remain as a "buffer" against ISIS – and importantly, will therefore retain control of much of Syria's oil.

Israel, meanwhile, now has its troops in control of the buffer zone in Syria's Israeli-annexed Golan Heights. There will be tension between the governments of Turkey and the USA regarding what the new HTS-led government must and must not do.

I hope very much that the statements made by the HTS Islamist leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, that retribution must not be the new culture, will come true. The real fear remains, however, as to how whatever new government emerges will treat the minority populations. There is also no word yet if the militia groups in Iraq will enter Syria. Much of this depends on what happens to places such as the Sayyida Zaynab shrine in Damascus.

People's World (USA)

Bhopal victims demand justice

Last week Bhopal victims marked the 40th anniversary of one of the worst industrial disasters of the 20th Century. Shortly after midnight on 3rd December 1984, in the Indian city of Bhopal, tons of lethal gases leaked from a pesticide factory run by the American Union Carbide corporation. Between 8,000 to 10,000 people lost their lives within days.

Thousands more died in the following years, while survivors, their children and grand-children are still suffering from chronic health is-



sues due to the leak and the toxic waste that was left behind by Union

Carbide, which was later purchased by the US multinational Dow

Chemical.

Survivors and their advocates took to the

streets of Bhopal as they continue to fight for justice four decades

later. One organiser of the protest, Rachna Dhingra, told reporters: "Today, 40 years later, we are asking pretty much the same things as people were asking 40 years ago. People of Bhopal are seeking that there be a special medical commission on Bhopal, set up so that there is appropriate, free healthcare for gas victims and their children, who continue to bear the scars of the Union Carbide disaster even today. We are asking that the global toxic hot spot that emerges in the middle of the city be cleaned up by Union Carbide and Dow Chemical."

Radio Havana Cuba

No tears for slain Healthcare boss

Normally when someone is shot dead, people feel sad for the victim. But in the case of Brian Thompson, CEO of the biggest private health insurance company in America, shot before dawn on the streets of Manhattan on 4th December, a large majority of public comments are that empathy is "out of network".

For example, Anthony Zenkus, a lecturer at the Columbia School of Social Work, posted on X: "Today, we mourn the death of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson, gunned down ...

wait, I'm sorry – today we mourn the deaths of the 68,000 Americans who needlessly die each year so that insurance company execs like Brian Thompson can become multimillionaires."

On TikTok a woman described being nine months pregnant when her one-year-old daughter had a medical emergency: "We sat in the hospital for three days, because UnitedHealthcare refused to approve the transfer via ambulance from the hospital where we live to another state. And at that point, I was ready to just get in my car and take her there myself. But UnitedHealthcare told us if we left the hospital by

our own will, and it wasn't via ambulance, they were not going to cover her at the next hospital we went to."

Other posts quoted *Pretty Boy Floyd* – a Woody Guthrie song that goes "some will rob you with a six-gun, some with a fountain pen". Responses to UnitedHealthcare's Facebook post bemoaning the slaying of Thompson included over 90,000 "laughing" emojis.

These are all expressions of widespread mass hatred of the for-profit health care industry. It appears that this hatred may also have motivated the shooter; words written on bullet casings found at the

site included "delay" and "deny".

UnitedHealthcare stands out among all the greedy health insurers for denying the largest percentage of claims: about one in three. These refusals have led to tens of thousands of deaths as well as preventable illnesses and financial hardship for those who live after their health care needs are denied.

Thompson collected over \$10 million in earnings in 2023, and his company took in \$32.4 billion in profit. Understandably, many people were hoping that Luigi Mangione, the alleged shooter, would not get caught.

But whatever the alleged shooter's fate, the

crimes of the for-profit health insurance industry will continue. Every claim denied means money in the pockets of UnitedHealthcare, Blue Cross Blue Shield and the other health insurance barons. The root of the problem is capitalism, a system that prioritises corporate profits over human lives.

What a contrast to this murderous system is socialist health care in Cuba! No one is denied health care in Cuba. Infant mortality is lower in Cuba than in America, and there are eight doctors for every 1,000 Cuban people compared with 2.5 doctors for every 1,000

people in the USA.

Fighting for a single-payer 'Medicare for All'-type system is important, as that would be a big improvement over what exists right now in the USA. Winning that struggle will not be easy, as even the modest Affordable Care Act is being threatened by the incoming Trump administration.

But what is really needed to put an end to the profit-gouging by the likes of Thompson and company is a socialist system, where human needs come before profits and health care is a guaranteed human right.

Workers World (USA)