

This is a report of the mass zoom call organised by The World Transformed on Tuesday 24th March entitled '**Coronavirus: How can we win our demands**'. Around 500 people attended the call. The call was hosted by TWT Steering Group members Lucy Delaney and Fergal O'Dwyer and the speakers were: Valery Algaza, Anthony Johnson, Sharmina August, James McAsh, Rebecca Long-Bailey and Amina Gichinga.

Over the coming weeks we will be hosting weekly Zoom calls on Tuesday evenings which will facilitate input from all parts of the movement, so we can work together to put pressure not just on the Government and employers, but on left wing political leaders, the Labour Party and trade unions to shape their response to the Covid-19 crisis.

To be kept informed about future zoom calls and all other TWT activities please join our mailing list: bit.ly/TWTjoin

To help us sustain our work, you can join our Supporters Network: bit.ly/supporttwt

Introduction

Crises such as Coronavirus are disorientating and can make you feel powerless. That moment where we are left reeling by the crisis gives an opportunity for those in power to take advantage and rearrange society to their liking - Naomi Klein called that the Shock Doctrine.

If we are going to prevent that and create a better future, we need to work out how we can get back on our feet and win. This call will be all about how we can use the power of our movement to win demands in the midst of this crisis.

We're going to hear from activists and organisers building power and winning demands across the left right now, as well as from those in the Labour party who have been fighting at different levels of local and national government. We're going to hear inspiring examples of successes, the tactics that have been used, and the strategies we will need going forward to build a united front across the labour movement, renters movement and the Labour Party to win those demands.

As we are all well too aware, mass meetings and protests aren't an easy option right now. Social distancing has left lots of us feeling disempowered and not knowing how to fight back. Lockdown is going to make this even harder. For those who are stuck at home it's easy to feel disconnected from our colleagues at work and from the wider movement. For many of those still having to go into work or being made to go who shouldn't be, it is hard to know what we can do



to change this. And those in key industries who are holding society together can barely find the time to meet with colleagues and make plans of action. On this call we'll be talking about how we can overcome some of these barriers and develop strategies for collective action.

Current Context

As the crisis escalated, the Government was forced to take unprecedented action. Yesterday, Boris Johnson declared a lockdown, ordering all non essential businesses to close and for everyone to remain in their homes except for essential trips to the supermarkets, pharmacies or to exercise once a day.

We're going to try and cover some of the political implications of the lockdown on our call today but for now we just want to stress that looking after yourselves and each other is extremely important. We're sending solidarity to all of you in what is a very scary and unsettling period

In general it feels like things are moving very quickly at the moment - with new announcements coming thick and fast. For example, in a major concession only last Friday, the Government announced that they will provide grants to businesses, covering up to 80% of wage costs for regular employees to a limit of £2500 per worker. The scale of this wage subsidy plan is unprecedented in British history.

Obviously this will provide welcome relief for lots of workers. But as we all know, these measures don't go nearly far enough. The 5 million people in the UK who are self-employed - for example - are currently guaranteed no financial assistance whatsoever. Likewise precarious workers in the "gig economy", such as medical delivery couriers and minicab drivers, are left out. And casual workers are still being laid off across the country.

All of this will impact the strategy the labour movement takes moving forwards. For example, this victory was won largely because the Government could see a powerful and broad coalition was forming against them - one that encapsulated workers on PAYE and those who are self employed.

At the same time, we can see the beginnings of a shift taking place in how people see work in our society. Cleaners, care workers, nurses and supermarket cashiers, who for so long have been low-paid because employers arbitrarily decided they were "low-skilled", are now shown to be integral to all of our survival and the functioning of our societies.

Speakers

Valery Algaza (Activist, Trade Unionist and part of the Bargaining for Common Good Network)



What should the union movement be doing as a whole now? And what should workers in key sectors be doing to fight for changes that benefit the common good?

- The current crisis calls on us to organise in a way we haven't before. It's a moment for us to think critically about how we're organising, and how much popular Political Education we're engaging in.
- On the left, we currently don't do enough to highlight the ways in which capital has been taking a huge amount of value out of the public.
- To confront this, we need to bring together our conceptions of the workers and the public- the workers *are* the public.
- We need to be asking and interrogating *who* is benefiting from the way things are currently structured.
- We need to do more to understand the opposition and where the money goes. Who are they? How do they reproduce their wealth? Need to do this more as a Labour movement. Not just about bargaining, directly with our first obstacle, e.g. employers, we need to investigate who else is benefitting, who else are our targets?
- Targeting is key: need to call them by name and be explicit.
- We can't just be allies, we need to align ourselves too to gather power to collectively hit the right target at the right moment.
- A lot of us in the movement are fighting our own corner, without necessarily aligning.
- For example, in the US unions got their bargaining dates aligned at the same time. They are supporting each other and making a historic moment where the powerful have to listen to workers across sectors.
- Thinking about how we can think collectively and bargain collectively is key. This will send a message that it's not a case of divide and conquer. It's an entire community fighting against specific forces.
- We need to centre migrants' rights in our struggles too.
- We need to be bold in a moment of crisis. We tend to be reactive. In a crisis moment we can dream and push for a bailout, public ownership, things that are for the common good and can outlive this.
- This crisis is a moment of shift politically that we need to align with in a way we haven't been able to do yet.
- After this, we're going to be looking at a huge amount of austerity and a new way for capital to extract value. We need to be ready for that.
- We are powerful, we need to be bold.
- Check out [Bargaining for the Common Good](#) to find out about the work they've been doing.



Anthony Johnson (community nurse and organiser with Nurses United)

What are some of the demands being made by healthcare workers and what is the plan to win them? And what obstacles - and opportunities - have you and others been facing?

- Nursing is political and nurses need to organise to win. It is incredibly difficult to organise healthcare workers at the moment because their primary focus is on patients, so the usual activist base has disappeared.
- The wider movement is going to have to step up to help nurses and other healthcare workers during this crisis, they will be reacting and 'firefighting' throughout most of this crisis.
- Working conditions are bad. Workers aren't getting adequate PPE. Sometimes they can't even get hand sanitiser gel. Staff also aren't being tested so are having to self isolate for weeks, depleting the workforce sometimes necessarily.
- Privatisation of services means there are lots of layers of middle management, it's badly organised and difficult to get anything done quickly.
- Outsourced workers in hospitals are not having their rights communicated to them.

What can we do?

- Unions are struggling to get in touch with their members. We need to be telling healthcare workers to phone their unions so we know where things are going wrong.
- Sign Nurses United's [petition](#) of key demands about testing, protective equipment, training etc.
- 20% of healthcare staff themselves will end up in intensive care. We need to highlight in the media where precautions aren't being put in place to protect workers.
- Get involved with mutual aid groups- things as simple as getting healthcare workers' shopping done, providing child care for NHS staff etc.
- Crisis cuts across ideological divides in the public. Wanting to protect the NHS is near universal. We need to work out how to communicate the other issues we care about on the left (workers; rights, adequate housing) are all inextricably linked with public health, and if we don't have them in place it will cripple our NHS.
- Get involved in the [Just Treatment](#) campaign. It's likely that when they're developed, a lot of treatments for Covid-19 won't be free- the private sector will be getting heavily involved in their distribution.



Resources

👉 Join the Shame factory 👉 <https://chat.whatsapp.com/LJYKrqC1qXC5K9ReEnRdHu>

👉 Donate to the IWGB fundraiser to sue the government <https://bit.ly/3dqBdjF>

👉 Become IWGB volunteer <https://bit.ly/2QYowTJ>

👉 Acorn renters petition: <https://bit.ly/2y6XeDY>

👉 IWGB financial assistance for precarious, self-employed and gig economy workers petition: <https://bit.ly/2WfwhkU>

👉 JCWI petition to support migrants during this crisis: <https://bit.ly/2Ue70Nc>

👉 Detention Action petition to Govt to end immigration detention: <https://bit.ly/3afpC4Q>

Nurses together say: Help us fight this crisis <https://bit.ly/39de4xH>

Sharmina August (Councillor, Salford City Council)

What action is being taken by Labour Councillors on the ground now? What have been some of the success stories in Salford been so far, and what have been some of the obstacles?

- Salford City Council had a volunteer framework from crises in the past which they could repurpose fairly quickly to respond to this crisis.
- One of primary goals was to make sure the work was spread about across the city, not letting anyone fall through the net.
- Council weren't willing to wait for the Government to give direction, their projections seemed wrong at the time, and we have now learned they were.
- Started work a while ago. Put out a call for volunteers- over 700 people have come forward.
- Across the country, mutual aid organisations have cropped up. Community spirit has been great but it can depend on luck whether people are reached- they wanted to make sure it was properly coordinated.
- In Salford, there was one number to call and one web form to fill out for all requests for help, so it could all be centrally coordinated.



- They have been thinking creatively about how volunteers can help, e.g. taking deliveries to hospitals, driving carers to their appointments so they don't have to use public transport,
- 10 years of austerity means patching things up goes beyond food parcels.
- Some offices had been arguing that we shouldn't be providing everything to everyone, that aid should be means tested.
- The council pushed back on that as the Labour Party, and successfully argued that aid should be universal as vulnerabilities will change over the course of this crisis.
- Council successfully won demand to have no evictions for the duration of this crisis.

James McAsh (Teacher, Labour Councillor for Southwark)

Concessions have been made due to pushes from the left and labour councils. This isn't happening across the board. How can we demand our councils take action? Need to ensure these provisions aren't rolled back when the crisis is over. What has been suggested by councillors across the country? What's the plan to entrench them once the crisis is over?

Need to think of framework to understand the current crisis

- We need to conceptualise a framework to understand the current crisis. It will likely run in 3 different phases.
 1. *Crisis and chaos*- this is where we are now. Chaos- Government making announcements everyday bigger than most governments make in a year. Everything is just responding to what happened in the past 2 days.
 2. *Crisis and (relative) stability*- political sphere becomes a little more stable. Crisis framework in place that we understand and can live within. There is less rapid change.
 3. *Post Crisis World*- immediate crisis is over, we are left with an opportunity to shape what's next amongst the debris.

- We need to think about what social institutions are important and need to be preserved over this crisis.
- Government has introduced draconian measures, as well as social and economic measures.
- These social and economic measures mainly come in the form of injecting cash into the economy. The Government can turn the tap off as quickly as they've turned it on, we need to strategize to prevent that happening.



- Southwark council are ensuring homeless people have somewhere to stay, this has taken the form of requisitioning buildings for that purpose- a measure we should be fighting to keep post-crisis.
- Once that power is there, we need to figure out how we can fight to keep it.

Rebecca Long-Bailey (Labour leadership candidate)

How do you think the party should relate to the demands being put forward by the movement? Since the party has stopped all campaigning activity - can you tell us a bit more about what you are hoping activists will do?

- Focus of the Labour movement needs to be on public safety. Including financial wellbeing within our homes.
- There are a number of immediate issues the party have been pressing the government on, including:
- Self isolating- there has been no definition of what constitutes 'essential work' e.g. sports direct. The government didn't clarify this at all. Labour have been calling on them to define this- without that it's putting workers at risk, as we have already seen many people are continuing to go in and putting their health at risk.
- Workers aren't being given protective equipment- we need to be pressing on this.
- Need to push for much more testing.
- We have heard little from the government on emergency plans in relation to food security.
- The most worrying thing is lack of financial protection put in place. Where is support for self employed people? We need a scheme of income protection. Personal preference is Universal Basic Income because it can be rolled out at speed and give everyone the protection they need.
- If large amounts of government investment will be used, we need to see public ownership, our workforce to be treated well, so that when we come out of this crisis we can build on this, and live in a society that looks after our communities.
- What this crisis highlights is the fragility of all of our existences. No matter who we are or where we're from, we're one paycheck away from disaster. We don't have an adequate safety net to fall back on. We need to demand socialism. This crisis makes the case for it, and once it's over we need to make sure people don't forget that everything we're pushing for now is socialism.

Amina Gichinga (Organiser, London Renters Union)

What demands is the tenant's movement making? What steps can we make to win them?



- LRU has over 2,000 members, hundreds have joined recently because of precarity this crisis puts them in.
 - Many members are worried about their situation.
 - LRU has called to end evictions and to offer rent suspension for all renters.
 - There has been a ban on evictions, though this is only temporary. At the end of this crisis there could be an eviction crisis. Unless the government suspends rents, thousands of renters will be in debt to landlords, despite landlords being given a mortgage holiday.
 - This is a public health crisis, equivalent to a wartime situation. To be as healthy as possible, and protect others, we need everyone to be able to stay at home. If people aren't able to pay their rent, they will continue going to work.
 - Precarious renters are likely to be precarious workers. There has been no bailout for those people.
 - LRU are collecting renters stories online to raise awareness. You can add yours [here](#).
 - Eviction resistance will be a huge part of LRU's work moving forwards.
 - Council staff have started approaching the union for support for people- this is unprecedented, the union are ordinarily protesting councils.
 - Nature of organising in LRU is changing- they can no longer do branch meetings. Need to rethink how to foster a sense of solidarity and protection without ability to meet in person. Need to think carefully about who is left behind if we're only organising online. They are likely the people that will be worst affected, and should be leading decision making of the union.
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- We need to think as a movement how to maintain people that aren't heard in the mainstream who will be materially harmed by this crisis .
 - Collective action needs to focus on harm reduction- both now and in the future.
 - Need to think of framing beyond left siloes to reach everyone affected.
 - Our NHS is crumbling for a reason. This crisis is a product of austerity. We need to be able to communicate that and have these conversations with our neighbors- that's something everyone can do.

Resources

- 👉 Handy guide from the London Renters' Union: <https://londonrentersunion.org/c19rentcrisis/>
- 👉 Join a renters union!: <https://londonrentersunion.org/join/>
- 👉 Acorn: <https://acorntheunion.org.uk/>
- 👉 Living Rent: <https://www.livingrent.org/>



TWT BULLETIN

We wanted to share a few examples of collective action from across the world with you. As you all know, Coronavirus is not just affecting us here, but is also affecting and changing the lives of millions of others across the world. And there are people everywhere raising similar demands and forcing governments, employers and landlords to put people before profit. So here are a few inspiring examples!

In Italy, from tomorrow so-called “non-essential” factories are finally going to close down. This decision, which the government announced on Saturday and published yesterday, is the result of a wave of grassroots mobilisation of factory and warehouse workers which have sprung up in various parts of the country over the last ten days, demanding the closure of all non-essential productive activities and safe working conditions for all.

Rank-and-file unions have been on the frontline supporting these mobilisations since the beginning of the lockdown. The major trade union confederations had instead been, until last weekend, more timid, preferring to attempt the road of dialogue with the government.

However, the government's decision to finally implement a more comprehensive shutdown of factories does not mean that the situation is settled. Following pressures from manufacturing business groups, the list of sectors which would still be allowed to be operational remains very long, and according to the current text of the law, it would be easy for many firms to find a way around the restrictions and remain open.

That is why all major Italian unions have threatened a general strike for tomorrow to demand a more extensive shutdown. Talks with the government are currently ongoing to see if a resolution can be found. Otherwise, workers all over the country will start taking industrial action tomorrow.

In Germany, the alliance “Mietenwahnsinn” (Rental madness) is campaigning in Berlin to stop evictions, legalise squatting of empty flats and achieve the closure of refugee camps and inhumane housing. They were supposed to hold a big demonstration this Saturday. Since they have had to cancel it, they are now planning a balcony/window demonstration on Saturday. Activists are asked to make posters and banners to hang out of their windows and balconies. And then at 6pm everyone will stand at their windows and make as much noise as they can using pots and pans and chanting. They have combined this with a social media campaign: All participants are asked to get creative at home and take pictures with homemade signs and post them on the hashtag #HousingActionDay2020 #togetheragainstcorona.

Last week, before the stricter restrictions came in, the alliance organised a small protest with 20 people at the Berlin town hall with the same demands. To make the protest look bigger they



used actual-size cardboard standups holding banners to increase the number of “participants” and held speeches.

In France, we have seen Amazon workers taking strike action in multiple different regions, demanding the implementation of proper health and safety measures as well as comprehensive paid leave. Whilst tax-dodging multi billion corporation Amazon continues to profit massively from the crisis, seeing a 12% increase in stock value in just one week, they also continue to put hundreds of thousands of employees at risk through unnecessary work and a lack of safety measures.

And workers in France have had enough. There have been mass walkouts from factories through trade union organisation, petitions, and a targeted communications campaign calling out Amazon for contributing to the health crisis, both through its workplace policies but also its avoidance of more than 4 billion euros of taxes which could have gone into funding healthcare.

Despite threats from Amazon, workers have forced the company to concede that products like entertainment, toys, DVDs will not be restocked until April 5th minimum, and that it will no longer ship what it considers to be non-essential items in France and Italy. The Minister of the Economy also announced that Amazon pressuring workers is ‘unacceptable’ and pledged to be in communication with them to address the problem.

In the U.S. supermarket workers across the country are fighting for pay increases and better sick pay. They are arguing that grocery workers are on the front lines of the crisis and, with a functioning food supply chain being more important than ever, protecting and supporting these workers is absolutely essential. In some workplaces they have already managed to win a 10% pay rise!

In New York City teachers staged a mass sickout because the city was refusing to close schools. They then demanded that some school buildings be kept open to “distribute food to families who need it and as medical centers or care centers for children of healthcare workers.” Following several sick-outs involving over 1000 teachers on late Sunday afternoon, Mayor Bill DeBlasio finally announced the schools would be shut.

National Nurses United, the largest nursing union in the US and a partner organisation of TWT2019, is at the forefront of defending nurses and the public in the current crisis. Last week they sent out a survey to nurses across the US to ask them how prepared their hospitals and clinics were for COVID-19. Within days, over 8200 nurses (including nurses from every state) completed the survey and it became clear that nurses and health workers simply do not have adequate protection to avoid exposure and look after the public. Off the back of that they launched a petition which collected a quarter of a million signatures within days demanding that Congress ensure that nurses and health care workers are immediately given the protections they need to avoid exposure to COVID-19. In the face of government inaction, North America’s Building



Trades Unions (NABTU), an alliance of fourteen affiliated unions collectively representing over 3 million skilled craft professionals in the building and construction industry, announced a partnership with NNU, to donate N-95 respirator masks and other protective equipment to nurses.

And, in the US, they are also working to build a coalition across society: all over the country hundreds of organisations and unions have come together and signed the same powerful statement. It calls for five demands which they are now rallying around: 1. Health is the top priority, for all people, with no exceptions 2. Provide economic relief directly to the people, 3. Rescue workers and communities, not corporate executives, 4. Make a down payment on a regenerative economy, while preventing future crises, 5. Protect our democratic process while protecting each other

Maybe something the UK Left could take inspiration from?

Resources

The Burner, daily morning briefing by James Butler (Novara Media)

👉 <https://soundcloud.com/novaramedia/the-burner-202-its-lockdown>

The Virtual Social Centre by Labour Transformed

👉 <https://virtualsocialcentre.org.uk/>

World Health Organisation Q&A

👉 <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

A week-day daily breakdown of news on the Coronavirus by Politico

👉 <https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/london-playbook/>

Weekly Digest by 'The Economic Change Unit' (econchange.org)

👉 <https://mailchi.mp/econchange/signup>

Coronavirus Tech Handbook

👉 <https://coronavirustechhandbook.com/home>

Coronavirus Support Group for Workers

👉 <https://m.facebook.com/groups/329192668038673>

Protocols for community support and action in the current context by QueerCare

👉 <https://wiki.queercare.network/index.php?title=Category:Covid>

Resources and guidance on setting up or linking into community support groups around the country, including links and templates on safeguarding

👉 <https://covidmutualaid.org/resources/#datamanagement>



TWT Guide: How to run your meetings online <https://bit.ly/3dtEHli>

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Some comments and questions from attendees:

It is criminal to continue to allow construction workers to continue working. The tube is quite obviously a very dangerous place and this makes it even more dangerous for crucial health workers. How can we get the government to quickly pay self employed people when they are not working?

How do we as socialists counter the inevitable right-wing backlash, and prevent austerity on steroids, following this pandemic?

There is indeed a paradigm shift going on, and very fast. Our UK government has found itself forced to take one measure after another it would previously have rejected out of hand. Of course it is not doing enough, and it is trying to help capital more than labour, but the fact is that it has been obliged to change course drastically. We need to take advantage of this and push them in every way possible. One area which people haven't yet taken seriously enough is civil liberties and democracy: while some of the restrictions on our freedom are necessary for quarantine reasons, the fact is that in just a couple of weeks they have removed almost all of our basic freedoms. This cannot go without challenge, and one or two MPs like Clive Lewis and Diane Abbott have begun to talk about this.

Scottish living rent campaign have had a victory eviction private and public to be banned in Scotland:

<https://www.glasgowtimes.co.uk/news/18331317.coronavirus-private-social-sector-evictions-banned-amid-pandemic/>

What can we all do to make a rent suspension happen?

What are the drawbacks of UBI and how does it protect capitalism?

Why not nationalise the supermarkets too and have a permanent national food service?

A lot of people are calling for a rent strike but is that the right strategy? And if so, how can we help organise it?



Who organises betting shop workers? Nobody in my shop is unionised, not sure how to go about starting/joining one.

