

This is a report of the mass zoom call organised by The World Transformed and Momentum on Tuesday 14th April entitled '**Coronavirus: towards a National Food Service?**'. Over 350 people attended the call. The speakers were: Steve Jones, Sarah Jaffe, Callum Cant, Louise Delmege, Vijay Prashad and Olivia Blake.

Over the coming days and weeks we'll be looking at how we can continue these discussions and make the best use of online spaces which facilitate input from all parts of the movement, and 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 be kept informed about future zoom calls and all other TWT activities please join our mailing list: [bit.ly/TWTjoin](https://bit.ly/TWTjoin)

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## Introduction

Tonight we'll be looking at the problems with distribution and supply of food highlighted by the Covid crisis and how they are related to the profit-driven food system. This includes talking more about Rebecca Long Bailey's exciting proposal for the creation of a National Food Service. We'll also be talking about the conditions, experiences, actions and proposals of food workers, both in the UK and internationally, during the crisis.

Many of us were first hit by the crisis at the supermarket-- experiencing the shortages, empty aisles and 'panic buying' that have been commonplace ever since. Last week we saw reports that more than 3 million people in the UK are going hungry as a result of the crisis. These problems highlight the fact that food systems driven by profits rather than the public good are not up to the task of meeting our basic needs-- in times of crisis but also in "normal" times.

At the same time, the massive surge of mutual aid groups demonstrates how we all understand the need to come together to support the basic needs of the most vulnerable in our communities in times of crisis. And these efforts can lay the foundations for a nationwide food service for public good, not private profit. While the work of volunteers has been crucial in dealing with this crisis, we shouldn't be left to pick up the pieces where public services have been dismantled by a Tory government.

Another simple fact brought into stark relief by the pandemic is that workers with the lowest pay and worst conditions are the backbone to the basic functioning of our society. Retail, warehouse



and delivery workers are suddenly deemed “essential” by an economic system that until a month ago saw them as disposable.

Delivery drivers, warehouse workers and shop assistants are now being forced to put their and their families’ health on the line to get us the basic goods we need. These frontline workers are also often working in precarious and insecure conditions—low-wage, self-employed or in temporary work, without benefits, unions, or workplace protections. Migrants are also more likely to work in these industries. In some cases, workers have been laid off without warning or compensation, while in others, they have been forced to come into work without protective equipment.

The Coronavirus pandemic should force us to think not only about the pay, conditions and rights afforded to core workers, but also about the fairest ways that basic goods can be produced and distributed during the crisis and beyond. We need to start thinking about how production and distribution of food can be used for the public good and not private profit.

## Speakers

### Steve Jones (CWU National Executive)

- We wouldn’t think that after 72 years of the NHS we’d find ourselves so underprepared for the situation we’re now in. Austerity has been a huge contributor to this.
- In the past 10 years food bank reliance has increased a lot. The most vulnerable are hit hardest by this crisis.
- The fact that this has happened puts a question mark over how society is run and our attitude to people that service us on a day to day basis.
- CWU represents postal and telecommunication workers.
- Royal Mail has the largest fleet of vehicles in the country- 50,000. Workers want to use this infrastructure to deliver to those that are most vulnerable during this crisis.
- There have been many unnecessary stoppages due to lack of PPE.
- CWU calling for unaddressed advertising mail should be immediately suspended.
- We need to maximise the possibility to use Royal Mail’s infrastructure to respond to this crisis- e.g. food supplies, prescriptions, PPE. Postmen are going door to door anyway, why not do this rather than delivering advertising that people don’t want?
- The fact this hasn’t been utilised in this crisis is ridiculous.
- To date they’ve had no response from Royal Mail all the government.
- Most postmen know their customers and who is vulnerable, and are trusted by those people too. This could be linked up with councils, food banks etc. to support the most vulnerable.



## Resources

- Rebecca Long-Bailey's call for a National Food Service:  
<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/coronavirus-rebecca-long-bailey-national-food-service-self-isolation-a9418266.html>

## Sarah Jaffe (Journalist and author of 'Necessary Trouble', based in the US)

- Farm workers are mainly migrant workers. They're reported that produce that usually goes to restaurants is going to waste, whilst there are shortages in shops- it's currently not that easy to change around supply chains.
- Food processing workers- their workplaces are a hotspot for breeding the virus. Some factories have had to shut due to how quickly it's spreading in these workplaces, which shows how precarious the food industry is- one part of the supply chain can be shut down very quickly.
- Workers are having to prove they've tested positive for COVID-19 to be allowed to stay at home- but most people can't get tested and those that do take 7 days to get results.
- Logistics workers- there have been mass strikes in Amazon just to get PPE and space for social distancing. Some have lost their jobs for doing so.
- Workers are calling for cutting down on delivery of non-essential items so that workplaces are less cramped and busy. The company won't enforce it (with exceptions of Italy and France) and it's not enough to tell people not to buy them.
- Restaurants in the US are largely still open. Restaurant workers have been told that PPE makes customers nervous, so they're not allowed to wear them.
- Delivery workers- there has been a problem with 'tip-baiting' for Instacart- a service where someone does grocery shopping for you and delivers it to your house. People have been putting on high tips before the work has been completed, just to revoke it afterwards.
- Grocery store workers- more densely unionised part of the US retail sector. Have won PPE, social distancing, breaks for hand washing etc.
- Workers who are seeing successes in other workplaces and are pressing harder.
- Worker leverage in certain food sectors is high due to how much more money grocery shops are making.
- We must remember that 'essential work' is usually bad work.
- Trump has letting farmers pay their employees less to reduce pressure on those industries.
- Public opinion now is likely to be more on the side of workers, where perhaps it hasn't been before.
- Some workers have been staging 'sick-outs'- this is a good way to get non-essential work places shut down.



*(Attendee question) Is this organising spontaneous or has it been ongoing for years?*

- There has been some organising in these sectors previously but this crisis has hugely escalated it- workers are more willing to take action, and are less concerned about losing their jobs at this moment.

### **Resources**

- Sarah's podcast Belabored- <http://soundcloud.com/belabored-podcast>

### **Callum Cant** (author of 'Riding for Deliveroo')

- CWU is an example of what trade unions should be doing at the moment. We should support them.
- Capitalism forces us to do work that's profitable rather than work that's useful. Bosses think more about how much money they can get from a commodity rather than how useful that commodity is.
- One of the fascinating things about this crisis is that it's pushing us to make a distinction between what production is socially useful, and what production is solely for profit. Not off the point of view of the economy, or the people who profit off the economy, but just as a means to support ourselves.
- Who has to continue doing their job to reproduce us all in the short term? That's not the same thing as work that keeps Capitalism going and is good for our bosses.
- Not just key workers suffering in this crisis. The self employed are suffering too, because lots of them don't have the option not to go to work.
- For example, Deliveroo has no furlough scheme. Deliveroo isn't self-identifying as non essential and closing down because there's no one there forcing it to.
- Deliveroo currently has schemes for partial PPE. Only for workers that are qualified from doing a certain number of deliveries- in order to 'earn' a mask, you have to do many deliveries without one. You have to prove to the company that you deserve PPE.
- Deliveroo workers don't have a guaranteed minimum wage. If you go to pick up an order and the restaurant is slow because it's busy, you don't earn money from the time that you're sat there waiting. This is increasingly common, as so many restaurants have closed it's put disproportionate pressure on those that aren't. This means workers are earning less and less, and are being clustered together in cramped environments.
- Look at the [IWGB couriers and Logistics branch](#) to find out more about this.

### **Looking towards a National Food Service**

- Deliveroo isn't entirely unintentional. Sometimes you're delivering to people that don't have the time or access to anything else, for example, people with caring responsibilities that can't cook.



- Deliveroo is often care work for people who can't otherwise get by. The Deliveroo work is about looking after each other.
- As socialists, we need to find parts of the work we do under capitalism that are socially useful, and expand and develop those.
- Some people do really valuable work, but in bad circumstances.
- The delivery of food to people that need help is socially useful. E.g. meals on wheels, that has been cut because of austerity.
- We can imagine without much manipulation of the infrastructure Deliveroo uses to offer socially valuable work that hugely benefits people's wellbeing.
- E.g. communal canteens. At the moment Deliveroo have 'dark kitchens' doing just deliveries. Those sites are mini warehouses that could be taken back and set up as community canteens in our neighbourhoods. They could be responsible for food preparation and delivery networks.
- In bigger picture terms, this is about who can provide care? Not profit driven businesses. Care should be for us and by us.
- We all need to look at our work and think about what we can take from it that's socially useful. We need to ask how we can organise with our co-workers against the interests of my bosses for that purpose?
- That's one of the positive things we can take from this crisis- that it's forcing people to think these things through.

## **Louise Delmege** (director at National Food Service)

- National Food Service (NFS) is a campaign to tackle food security through community networks.
- Food is a right that no one should have to go without.
- Cooking on mass is more sustainable and more efficient.
- Community space is just as important. We need spaces to interact with and projects to become part of. We are rapidly losing these spaces, and will even more after this crisis.
- NFS are demanding rent freezes on community spaces.
- It's not just about feeding people, but about feeding communities. Even under this crisis people are coming together under a shared project.
- The project is locally specific but nationally accessible.
- Solving hunger isn't difficult or expensive. The food industry stands in our way.
- Will soon become easy for the state to support this initiative, and ridiculous for them not to.
- During the crisis they've moved beyond communal eating and switched to emergency provision.
- They are operating in many towns and cities across the UK. Use a phone line system to make sure people are still connected and cared for.



- NFS is working with local councils, community and mutual aid organisations- the state is now reaching out to work with NFS.
- Bristol giving out 650 meals per week and growing. Connected to community organisers in Bristol.
- They are working on a limited budget, only just making ends meet and all volunteer led.
- Same tactics as always. Talk to people, find out what they need and make it happen.
- Yes, it's time for a National Food Service and it's already being done.

*(Attendee question) Should NFS be incorporated into state provision? Is it possible to scale up this work without it being embedded in local or central government structures?*

- Trialling different models across the UK- e.g. a membership model like a union.
- Volunteer led means it's easily scaled.
- Shouldn't be dependent on the government- any change could easily destroy these initiatives.
- Perhaps a combination model- e.g. in Brazil, some public eating spaces take on state support, others refuse it.

## Resources

- <https://www.nationalfoodservice.uk/>

**Vijay Prashad** (director of the Tricontinental Institute, chief editor at LeftWord books)

- This crisis illustrates the difference between a capitalist, imperialist and socialist country.
- For example, yesterday, Vietnam sent PPE to the US, despite being in living memory of the Vietnam war.
- Kerala is a state in India of 35 million people. Currently their government is a communist government. For the last 7 decades, public action has been supported by the state. There are robust trade unions, women's organisations and co-operatives.
- Largest of cooperatives is called Kudumbashree, it is women only and has a membership of 3.5 million people.
- Kerala's socialism isn't just about fixing the distribution of services and goods, it's also about production and decommodification of the economy.
- Because of this history of having a communist state, and having public action fundamentally supported, Kerala's response to the crisis has been quite special.
- The health minister, in January, saw the reports from Wuhan and acted then, mobilising state resources from 5th January. The US didn't create a task force until March. Kerala's government contacted TUs, cooperatives and women's organisations as part of this.



- Because of this, they saw massive public action separate from the state. Before the crisis hit workplaces had put in washing stations, community kitchens had opened. Communism here isn't about state action.
- Things done in a communist society shouldn't be done by the state, they should be done by communities themselves.
- The slogan has been 'break the chain', not 'flatten the curve'.
- Instead of 'social distancing', 'physical distancing, social solidarity' is the slogan from the government.
- In a Capitalist society, the best we can think of is some sort of Universal Basic Income. Real relief is setting up community kitchens and other services. If we just give people cash, markets will inflate the prices of food.
- We must try to decommodify as many parts of social life as possible. This is a fundamental aspect of Indian Communism. Focus is enhancing people's social existence without the use of money.
- When you live in a capitalist society, after years of austerity, social institutions have been destroyed. Trade Unions are under immense pressure to defend the rights of workers, and are unable to be co-operative and creative to build a new society. In Kerala, because they've not been under attack, they've been able to defend the rights of workers as well as provide a cultural intervention on how people should live their lives.
- The response in Western Capitalist states to the Coronavirus crisis has been laughable to the rest of the world. In Kerala, they have broken the chain. As have China.
- We can't minimize the scale of this crisis. After this, we must defend key workers. If we don't, we have lost our moral compass. These are not just essential workers in a crisis- you can't just call someone essential when you need them, and throw them away when you don't. That's the moral failure of Capitalism, and we need to make sure to remember that.

*(Attendee question) What are the main things that socialists in the UK and other Western Capitalist countries need to consider when thinking about new forms of food production and distribution, to ensure it's not built on the exploitation of countries from the Global South?*

- National Food Service is good, but it's a distribution system, not a production system.
- The World Transformed needs to articulate a 30 year project- a serious socialist project for our society.
- We can't create socialism immediately in a crisis. You need a long project that creates public action.
- When I've visited TWT previously, I was happy to see so much enthusiasm. That enthusiasm has to be institutionalised- we can't privatise enthusiasm.
- In every locality enthusiasm needs to translate into public action. If we fail to institutionalise enthusiasm, we won't see change. The 1968 generation failed to institutionalise their enthusiasm. They allowed their enthusiasm to become nostalgia. We can't let that happen to us. We are the generation of the 2015 student movement, we can't let our actions become nostalgia. It has to be institutionalised to create a public



socialist culture in Britain. If we do that, in 30 years we will have completely transformed the entire country.

## Resources

- Vijay's articles on the response to COVID-19 in China- <https://peoplesdispatch.org/2020/04/14/how-china-broke-the-chain-of-infection/>

## Olivia Blake (Labour MP for Sheffield Hallam)

- We should all be supporting NFS- we need more support for groups already on the ground.
- Passionate about making sure working environments of people in the food industry are good.
- Sheffield's industrial history shows how much food matters e.g. miner's strike, care from the community came as food provision.
- There's a long history of co-ops in Yorkshire in the 1970s which are still present today.
- We do have some co-operative food production in the UK. It's not strong or well supported. Ultimately, without national support it won't be successful. Need support from the state to ensure it has longevity beyond this crisis.
- Community hubs have been really attacked by 10 years of austerity.
- We need to focus on both cooperation and universalism. The Labour Party needs to be pushing this e.g. UBS, making food a right.
- We need to ensure the work that's happening now continues after this crisis. What's happening on the ground has the answers, we need to listen to these activists and scale it. It can't be a top-down process.
- Access to food is not just about income disparity- people with disabilities and the elderly at risk of losing out.
- Labour movement needs to take the importance of food justice seriously after this crisis.

*(Attendee question) What role could Labour and Momentum members play in scaling up this project?*

- Get on Momentum's mutual aid map.
- Get involved in Acorn or NFS groups in your area.
- Donate money to these groups if you're able to.

## Resources



- Olivia's article for Labour List:  
[https://labourlist.org/2020/04/now-is-the-time-for-a-national-food-service/?fbclid=IwAR34IwPKiSfCM0fFPaEj8zV3pDXIf0\\_hqDAGVSmwnYcrNi6cAD\\_s6u8j\\_cQ](https://labourlist.org/2020/04/now-is-the-time-for-a-national-food-service/?fbclid=IwAR34IwPKiSfCM0fFPaEj8zV3pDXIf0_hqDAGVSmwnYcrNi6cAD_s6u8j_cQ)

## Resources

- Support TWT: <https://theworldtransformed.org/support/>
- Join TWT's mailing list: [bit.ly/TWTjoin](https://bit.ly/TWTjoin)
- TWT's guide to running political education online:  
[https://cloud-cube-eu.s3.amazonaws.com/pupuh35gi0f8/public/documents/How\\_to\\_run\\_your\\_meetings\\_online\\_1.pdf](https://cloud-cube-eu.s3.amazonaws.com/pupuh35gi0f8/public/documents/How_to_run_your_meetings_online_1.pdf)
- Momentum's mutual aid map: <https://volunteercoronavirus.com/>

