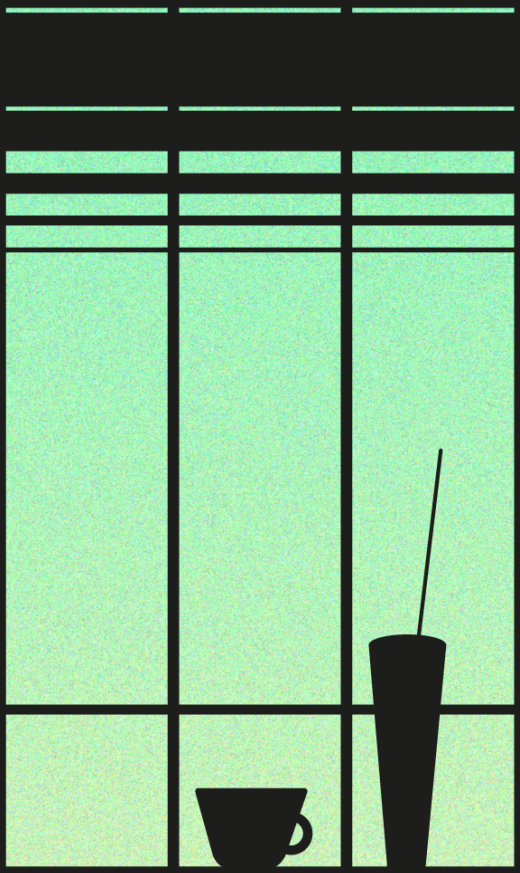
pandemic inquiries



an invert edition

Pandemic Inquiries

An Invert edition.
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contents

introduction

Pandemic Inquiries

Invert

Back in late March, as Britain moved belatedly into national lockdown and the world-historical significance of the Covid-19 virus began to settle in, the dire economic implications of the crisis and equally dire responses of the state came under the deserved scrutiny of various sections of the left. Over the past ten months, many excellent analyses have traced the British economy's plunge into recession and the shedding of jobs, as well as the Johnson government's chilling readiness to let people die on a mass scale.[1] In light of the magnitude of the economic and social crisis at hand, our collective began to think about how precisely this crisis has registered at the level of everyday life. We wanted to create an archive of proletarian experience that could adequately capture the sense of social upheaval we witnessed unfolding. Of course, this is an archive of our own experiences as well – as low paid and unemployed queer, feminised subjects, and people involved in various struggles against capitalist violence – our own lives are reflected in some of the accounts presented here. We recognised that while crisis is often effectively represented as a line on a graph going down, it also manifests in and through social relationships which take on particular valences for feminised and marginalised people, at work, at home, and in the shadow of those arenas, where homelessness and unemployment abound.

1. Included among these are the "Covid Island" reports by Angry Workers' World, reproduced with gratitude at the beginning of this volume so as to detail some of the specificities of the British situation.

Overwhelmingly, the constellation of writing that we have pulled together attests to the crisis of social reproduction that has already been mounting for some time. Years of aggressive defunding has left the social infrastructures relied upon most in the context of a pandemic – the NHS, social care provision – stripped down to a level of woeful unpreparedness. Meanwhile, the hyper-exploitation and disposability of service and care workers over the years has caused the sudden celebratory upsurge in public rhetoric for "essential workers" to ring hollow. The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated and laid bare the violent workings of state and capital both in Britain and globally, intensifying an existing threat to the self-reproducing relationship between human survivability and the futurity of capitalism. As Aaron Jaffe puts it, coronavirus "is shining a light on and clarifying what was hidden or only dimly visible… there is something deeply disturbing in how the wage and the work we are compelled to do for it dominates all our other needs and shapes, or better, *contorts* the way we reproduce ourselves."[2] In the crunch-time of the pandemic, the tenability of the wage – and all those unwaged activities that make it possible and are made possible by it – is called into question. How will these relations bend under the pressure of the pandemic?

This special issue doesn't form a monolithic body of work; instead it is made up of a host of disparate experiences. Our previous issue and overall project attempt to bring together new communist analyses of capitalist feminisation, and thoughts towards the abolition of gender. Here, analysis is located within accounts of experience. Not all of our contributors would identify as communist; what we felt was important here was to

2. Aaron Jaffe, "Social Reproduction Theory in and Beyond the Pandemic," *Pluto Blog.*

bring together a wealth of experience in order to build as broad a picture as possible of life on this "Covid island."

We also feel it important to acknowledge that we have been living and trying to work under the very same conditions that have made this issue necessary. Initially, we wanted to put something together quite quickly, capturing the first weeks of the lockdown. But, for collective members and contributors alike, the difficulties of reproducing ourselves and those around us amid circumstances unprecedented in our lifetimes got in the way. Over time, the project has morphed into something different: rather than a snapshot of the panic and confusion we were all feeling back in March and April, this issue now presents a variety of feminised and marginalised experiences from different points across this almost-year of pandemic. Some contributors sent us their writing several months ago, others more recently. We have left in material which dates older pieces. As such, the edition is structured thematically, rather than chronologically, each section spanning different periods of 2020's jumbled timeline.

The issue begins with two slightly abridged reports by the Angry Workers, one from June and the other from October. These pieces chronicle the political climate as it's shifted through different phases of the pandemic, providing an analysis of the Johnson government's murderous response to the pandemic amid the backdrop of Brexit, ongoing economic crisis, workers struggles and the global resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. They give a solid basis for and contextualisation of the experiences archived in the main body of the issue.

We then move on to three pieces on 'the household.' Households, Wail Qasim notes in their reflection on the radical possibilities of living beyond the strictures of the couple form or nuclear family, have become the unit by which we are surveilled under lockdown measures, as well as the space to which most of us are now confined. In their piece simply entitled 'Household', Qasim discusses the violence of the system of property ownership, our need to live within it, and how this exacerbates the violence and destruction of a contagious disease.

Next, Heather Bandenburg draws on feminist struggles around the devaluing of social reproduction – particularly motherhood – and critiques of the family as sole provider of care. She discusses her experience of suffering from post-natal depression, and how it was compounded by the social isolation brought about by a lockdown in a society structured around the nuclear family. Bandenburg also elaborates on how feminised people, particularly those with children, are being forced to mitigate the effects of the crisis of social reproduction augmented by the pandemic, through unpaid or underpaid work.

The section on the household closes with an inquiry into the effects of the pandemic on people's relationships to home, family, education and their communities. This piece is drawn from interviews with twenty people, ranging from the ages seven to ninety-seven, about their experiences during the pandemic. Rather than attempting to draw particular conclusions from these interviews, this inquiry seeks to archive a variety of experiences of lockdown.

The second section turns away from the interiority of the household and looks outwards. Weeks before

official lockdown measures were brought in, mutual aid networks sprung up in local areas around the UK. This was in part a pre-emptive response to inaction on the part of the government, but also attempted community building and alternative models of care outside of the state. These networks have co-ordinated food and medicine collections for people shielding or self-isolating, organised community childcare for those unable to not work, and much more. Here, we archive two very different radical mutual aid projects:

Sophie Carapetian's 'Mental Health Self Care Mutual Aid Notes' is an almost-manifesto for mental health care in lockdown, and also forms the foundational principles for the podcast project *Social Crisis! Mental Crisis!* of which Carapetian is co-host. This project addresses the crisis of mental health brought about by a lockdown in which people are isolated from their support networks. Carapetian's notes are part self-care guide, part screed against the alienation inherent to capitalist social relations. She insists that we must not return to normal once the pandemic finally abates, but instead look toward a communist horizon.

Elizabeth Vasileva and Sam Garrett's 'Community building through the Squatted Night Shelter Project' discusses a mutual aid project which pre-existed the Covid-19 pandemic, but reflects on how the pandemic has forced the collective to change the way it organises. Vasileva and Garrett put forward a reflexive analysis of an ongoing project to squat homes for unhoused people in Brighton, a project with which they are both heavily involved. They also detail the effect the negligent management of the pandemic is having on homeless people – one of the most

vulnerable groups in our society – and argue that an anti-state, mutual-aid based response is needed.

The final section consists of two 'inquiries.' The first was conducted in collaboration with the Brighton Education Workers (BEW) collective. Education workers across primary, secondary, college and university sectors were invited to contribute, and the majority of participants are on low-paid and/or precarious contracts. This inquiry was carried out several months ago, so doesn't take into account more recent changes in education work: the reopening of schools and universities, despite mass resistance from education workers across the sector, and the university sector being plunged into an economic crisis. This inquiry archives the months between March and July, when education workers were contending with moving their work online, or being made suddenly unemployed or yet more precarious.

The second piece is an inquiry into the experiences of incarcerated or recently incarcerated people in the doubly oppressive environment of lockdown in prison. The inquiry is made up of several accounts from members of the Prisoner Solidarity Network. Two currently incarcerated members discuss conditions in prison and their fears that lockdown will become the 'new normal' amid efforts from the Prison Officer's Association to impose greater restrictions on prison regimes in order to 'regain control.' John Bowden, an ex-prisoner and abolitionist activist describes the last weeks of his 40-year sentence at the beginning of the pandemic, and reflects on his release into a world in lockdown. Sarah Jane Baker – an ex-prisoner and founder of the Trans Prisoner Alliance – writes about her concerns for

currently incarcerated people who are forced to live in an environment extremely conducive to the spread of the virus, and her experiences campaigning for their release.

Each of the pieces collected here reveal how the pandemic as deepened forms of social immiseration, and demonstrate how blatantly at odds the logic of capitalism is to human well-being and flourishing. As such, this collection only scratches the surface of the state-administered cruelty that has unfolded in 2020. From racist policing to the propulsion of so many into wagelessness, every time it seemed like this year couldn't get worse, it did. But throughout this volume and among the class of the dispossessed more broadly, moments of deep solidarity and refusal have endured, with the horizon of "abolition" entering public political discourse and shaping the self-activity of proletarians fighting for a non-alienated life. Though sometimes appearing as discontinuous elements, the international movement for Black liberation, resurgence of student and tenants' movements in Britain and renewed efforts to provide migrant solidarity on the English Channel have all exemplified what working-class comradeship can look like in fragmentary times. The list of forms we wish to see abolished forever may have expanded wildly, much to the vexation of the trad left. But for us this only affirms that the call to abolish the police/family/prisons/borders and the call to abolish capitalism are part of the same movement of totalisation, "for the 'totality' is wholly present in each of its 'moments' or parts."[3]

As the Conservative party embarks upon its project to 'Build Back Better,' we must resist the re-imposition of

3. Richard Gunn, 'Marxism and Philosophy: A Critique of Critical Realism', Capital & Class 13, no. 1 (1989), 91.

'normality', which will surely be borne through aggressive economic restructuring and austerity (albeit with a new name) to protect the economy against a new wave of recession brought on by endless economic crises, Brexit and the pandemic. As the contributions to this collection show, the seeds of resistance to such a re-imposition have already been sewn. Amid the horror and destruction of 2020, a real movement has arisen in forms of communist collectivity and militancy. The reinstitution of 'business as usual' can only be made untenable if we build on and bring together these pockets of struggle, hammering that final, Covid-shaped nail into capital's coffin.

Reports from Covid Island

Angry Workers

Part 1 - What's going down on Covid Island? June 2020[1]

The Covid-19 situation

With over 43,000 official deaths, the UK has one of the highest death rates in the world. On the 2nd of March the government was warned that the virus was highly contagious, on the 13th of March the government announced their strategy of 'herd immunity', deciding not to implement a large-scale lockdown like most EU countries. National lockdown was only declared on the 23rd of March after public pressure. Inability or stupidity are not the primary reason for this delay, but a political dispute within the political class about whether they could get away with risking the lives of thousands of 'unproductive' older people. According to a senior Conservative, the initial strategy was summarised by Johnson's adviser Dominic Cummings as "herd immunity, protect the economy, and if that means some pensioners die, too bad." This isn't just the opinion of 'wicked' Cummings. Johnson wrote an article for the Daily Telegraph in 2007 titled, 'Global over-population is the real issue.' In it, Johnson laments how, "it is a tragic measure of how far the world has changed" that "the fertility of the human race" can no longer be publicly discussed as a government policy. This is not an attempt

1. The unabridged version of this report can be read here.

to fabricate a conspiracy theory, but to demonstrate the general political perspective of the leading governmental figures. These politicians don't have a wider social vision *à la* Thatcher, but primarily think in terms of how to manipulate and manage various social groups in order to maintain the status quo.

The second reason for the high death rate is the holes in the productive fabric of the health and industrial sector in the UK, created by austerity and lack of investment during the last decade. The lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and Covid-19 tests and the inability to produce sufficient resources aggravated the situation. In June 2020, the UK ranked as number 20 out of the 31 European countries with available data for coronavirus testing per capita, screening only 31.59 people for every thousandth of the population. Significantly poorer Eastern European countries such as Lithuania (99.14 per thousand), Estonia (57.74), Latvia (52.9) and Belarus (49) have tested far more people relative to their population sizes. It also became public that the government fudged the official figures of how many people were being tested per day, over-reporting testing by around one million tests. The fragmentation of the health sector into various NHS trusts, private clinics and care homes created further problems and fatal levels of disorganisation. Between the 17th and 15th of April, around 25,000 people were discharged from hospitals into care homes. Only small numbers of these people were tested. In mid-June the media announced that 30% of all deaths occurred in care homes, over 14,000 people in total.

A further reason for the high death rate is the high level of social inequality and impoverishment in the UK.

Figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) showed that between March and May, people living in the poorest 10% of England died at a rate of 128.3 per 100,000, compared with a rate of 58.8 per 100,000 among those living in the wealthiest 10% of the country. Brent in West London had the highest overall age-standardised rate, with 210.9 deaths per 100,000 people. Many of our former workmates in the food factories and warehouses live in Brent, where the combination of overcrowding at home and on the production lines[2] and the fact that government advice was rarely translated for migrant workers, has proved fatal.

This has been exacerbated by continued outsourcing of 'essential work'. After suspending commissioning rules, Tory ministers have awarded exclusive coronavirus-related state contracts worth £1.7 billion to private companies. Corruption is not the reason, but a by-product of this. Here are just a few examples. Randox, a private healthcare firm that happens to employ Owen Patterson, one of the richest Tory MPs, has been awarded a £133m contract without any competition. PestFix, which has just 16 staff-members and net assets of £19,000 was given a government contact worth £108m in early April to provide items such as gowns and face masks to the NHS. The US company Palantir was given a contract to use AI technology to track the coronavirus outbreak. The company has been funded by the CIA and has ties the Vote Leave-linked technology firm Faculty, which received seven government contracts within the last 18 months period. Journalists who have asked about the handling of NHS data by Palantir have been stone-walled.

2. Angry Workers, 'Corona-Crisis: Can Workers Fight Back Against the Jobs vs. Health Trap?', *Angry Workers of the World* (blog), 26 March 2020, and 'Workers, Act Now or Pay Later? - Tune in and Sick Out!', *Angry Workers of the World* (blog), 13 April 2020.

So far, there have been some critical questions by 'experts' regarding the handling of the Covid-19 crisis by the state, but no collective response as yet by those who have suffered most. There have been collective actions of workers against the lack of health and safety – see below – but the initiatives of family members of deceased Covid-19 victims who try to hold the state to account are still small in number. Unsurprisingly, an attempt to declare the initial government strategy as 'illegal' has been squashed.

The economic slump

In June 2020 the OECD reported that Britain's economy is likely to suffer the worst damage from the Covid-19 crisis of any country in the developed world. A slump in the UK's national income of 11.5% during 2020 will outstrip the falls in France, Italy, Spain, Germany and the US. The Bank of England suggests UK unemployment will double to 10-12% this year. When lockdown measures were first introduced in March, voluntary liquidations by small businesses rose to twice last year's levels. The particular severity of the UK's recession is partly due to the double-whammy of Covid-19 and Brexit, but as we will see, the economic decline has a longer running tendency.

Like in most countries, the UK lockdown had massive impacts on the hospitality sector, where 85% of workers have been affected. One in four workers in this sector have lost hours, one in ten have lost their job altogether, and half are furloughed. Other highly affected sectors are: education, with 60% of employees affected and nearly half having lost hours; manufacturing and construction

(55% affected); and wholesale, retail and motor trades (54% affected). During the first two months of lockdown the number of hours worked fell by a record 94.2 million in April – a drop of almost 9% – but not as high as the percentage of people who were furloughed or lost their job. This might be due to the fact that these companies employ too few people and expect them to work overtime.

Sectors which were already in trouble before the Covid-19 pandemic included the automobile industry and the aerospace industry. In construction, more than 470 infrastructure projects in the UK worth £6 billion remain on hold and the number of new contracts and tenders in the sector has plunged due to Covid-19. There are only a few sectors that have boomed during the lockdown and are likely to grow in the future.

The impact on workers

The state launched the coronavirus jobs retention scheme (CJRS) in March 2020, allowing companies to send workers home, with the state paying 80% of their usual wage and employers paying the other 20%. This is also known as the 'furlough' scheme. According to government figures published in early June, around 9.1 million workers in the UK were put on the scheme (the private sector employs 27.3 million). On top of this, 2.6 million people were receiving a similar sum through a payment scheme for self-employed workers. So far, the scheme has cost the state around £29 billion. While there are less people furloughed in university towns like Oxford or Cambridge, industrial areas like Slough or Birmingham saw over a third of local workers furloughed. Economically, the Covid-19 crisis has hit women workers

harder than men. While the 2008 crisis saw more men losing jobs, this time more women have lost their job, partly due to the types of jobs affected, as well as the issue of childcare, as schools and two thirds of nurseries were closed. Many working-class families are collapsing under the additional pressure of the Covid-19 lockdown and children are the first victims of this – the number of children brought into foster care due to abuse or neglect increased by 44%.

It became clear fairly quickly that given the large amounts of flexible, temporary, freelance or informal work relations in the UK, many working-class people would fall through the cracks. A report from the Treasury Select Committee alleged that 1 million people who lost their job due to Covid-19 were not receiving the designated state benefit, but according to other sources this was more like 3 million. An additional £6 billion of household debts will aggravate an existing crisis.

There were material differences within the working class in terms of who could work from home and who couldn't, or who was furloughed and who lost their job without receiving state benefits. Another fault line runs, as usual, between renting and home-owning segments of the class. During the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, the state made sure to signal to the home-owning segment of the working class that they would get a 'mortgage-holiday' if required, whereas tenants were not given such protection. 1.8 million people have taken advantage of a three-month mortgage holiday scheme (one in six mortgages) and repayments on 1.5 million credit card accounts have been paused. Even the Labour Party recently watered down their 'opposition' for their

demand for renters' protection. Their policy has now changed from rent suspension to rent deferment. In April somewhere between a quarter and half of all residential rents went unpaid, and the protection against evictions that the government put in place will end in late August. An increase in evictions is to be expected, also because of a backlog of previous orders that couldn't been processed during the lockdown.

The government money papered over the cracks, but only temporarily but as the furlough scheme closed to new applications on the 10th of June, and employers will have to pay progressively more for furloughed workers from 1st of August until the scheme runs out in November 2020. This means that the number of job cuts is likely to rise from now on, as bosses don't want to pay the bill. The number of people claiming Universal Credit (basic benefit for the unemployed) rose by 856,000 to 2.1 million in April and to 2.8 million in May. The state administration is not prepared to deal with such a large increase, as government cuts during recent years has meant that spending on employment programmes is just £200m, a quarter of its 2016 level, and a sixth of its level before the 2008 crisis. In this scenario, Labour's new Shadow Work and Pensions Secretary, Jonathan Reynolds, said that Britain's welfare system needs a stronger link between "what you put in and what you get out". Those who have made "greater contributions to the system" should receive more out of it. At least they are honest: in a situation where the state cannot keep everyone happy they have to apply divide-and-rule.

The re-emergence of the state and leftist illusions

Confusing to many on the Labour left, the Tory government exercised the function of a capitalist state in times of economic crisis by intervening strongly in the national economy and labour market. In mid-March, the government announced state-backed loans of at least £330 billion to support UK businesses, which would total 15% of GDP. This has been made possible by the UK central bank cutting interest rates from 0.75 to 0.1% in March and quantitative easing (QE) (buying of debts, primarily government bonds) of £645 billion. A further £100 billion was announced in June. We can see that the amount of QE money thrown on the fire increased steadily without much impact in terms of economic growth: £200 billion in 2009, £375 billion in 2012, £435 billion in 2016, and £745 billion in 2020. Most of this 'free money' ended up fuelling the 'hunt for returns' and increased share prices. In May the Office for Budget Responsibility was forced to raise its estimate of the cost to the state of the pandemic to £123.2 billion, from its previous calculation of £103.7 billion. Public sector debt is at its highest since 1963, but a public sector debt ratio of 100% of GDP is not exceptional. France, Italy, the US and Japan have crossed that mark, too.

A left that thought that the main defining feature of left politics was state intervention in, contrast to market liberalism, was stunned. Unsurprisingly, the main criticism was that the state was still not spending enough and that the loans for businesses were not reaching them in time. The fact that Health Secretary Matt Hancock was able to announce in April that £13.4 billion of 'NHS debt' – an internal balance sheet between state departments –

would be written off, was taken as proof that debt doesn't matter at all and has become purely political. One reason for this misjudgement is the illusion on the left that the national economy is somehow self-contained. There is enough historical evidence that, in the long term, debt inflation that is not covered by an increase in profitability leads to crashes or brutal adjustment programs in order to avoid them, e.g. during the Sterling crisis in the mid-1970s. If we look at the trade balance – the amount of goods that have to be imported and paid for depending on international exchange rates – the idea of 'sovereignty' due to having 'your own currency' smacks of Empire delusions.

In the long run, printing money or writing off debt will lead to a devaluation of the pound and rising import commodity prices, first of all food and manufactured goods. While this might not hit the UK as soon and hard as other countries, we can see the impact of the 'free money' illusion in countries like Lebanon, where increasing debts have translated into massive price hikes and impoverishment for the working class more immediately. It seems that an internationalist view isn't social democracy's strong point!

There is of course a political struggle and of course the government will try to 'make the working class pay for the crisis'. We can see that already when the Tory government announced in mid-June that it might break the 'triple lock' on pensions – the breaking of a real taboo – given the likelihood that state debt will increase from its current level of 80% to 100% as a result of the current crisis. The 'triple lock' means that pensions have to grow with either wages, inflation or at a minimum of 2.5% a year,

and it has consistently been the Tory's main 'grey' vote winner since it was introduced in 2010. In London, the Mayor agreed to cut free travel for children and increase the congestion charge by 30% in return for a £1.6 billion government bail-out. There is a political struggle, but the left slogan of 'who will pay for the crisis' is misleading. The working class hasn't got the money to pay for and counteract the lack in profitability. Neither would it be enough to 'tax the rich'. The crisis cannot be solved through redistribution, neither from top to bottom, nor the other way around. Much more fundamental changes in the actual social production process – the process of exploitation – would be needed.

The statist left has to make state measures seem omnipotent and thereby under-estimates the magnitude of the crisis of global capital. The Tory government seems to be more realistic, knowing that they will have to touch the holy cow of pensions. They are also now advising local government to step back from the main money-making machine of the recent decades: the real estate bubble. In June, the Treasury announced it was banning local authorities from buying up investment property, after a near £7 billion spending spree in the past three years – a 14-fold increase on the three years prior to that. Dozens of local councils are being investigated after using low-cost loans from the central government to buy investment properties for rental income as a way to shield themselves from deep cuts to their budgets. The central government fears that councils are too exposed, as a severe downturn in the real estate sector is likely. Liverpool was one of the first cities that asked the government to come to its rescue and back a £1.4 billion coronavirus economic recovery plan, to prevent a repeat of the hardship experienced during the 1980s.

In the coming months the question will be whether the state can find financial and political tools to enforce a return to 'social discipline' (the rule of the law of value) and to make sure that credit is again more closely linked to the expectation of (shorter-term) future profits, rather than turning into an eternal life line. So far, government and state money is helping to drag undisciplined tenants, poor mortgage payers, badly run corner shops, unprofitable businesses, bosses who refuse to invest and unviable banks through the crisis. The challenge for the state is to select the good from the bad apples and to re-enforce that 'hard work and investments are worth something', and that trust in the value of money as an equivalent to actual economic performance is reinstated. Otherwise, they run the risk of a chain reaction caused by defaulting private or commercial units.

The political class sees that 'redistribution' won't cut it and that the productive fabric – the process of exploitation – has to be changed. Here, again, we can see that the global form of capital imposes itself on national politics.

The workers' struggle and their representation

The media reports on a certain union 'comeback', but they base their claim not on an increase of union activity, but on a slight increase in union membership. The number of trade union members rose by 91,000 from 2018 to 6.44 million in 2019, the third consecutive year of increases following the fall to a low of 6.23 million in 2016. The proportion of employees who are union members also rose slightly to 23.5% in 2019, up from 23.4% a year earlier.

More importantly for the proclaimed 'comeback' was the influence that certain unions had over the Labour Party

candidate election. This is a general and more significant factor. The unions were addressed as partners when it came to managing the Covid-19 lockdown. The Trade Union Council (TUC) advised the government about the furlough system and the back-to-work process. In return for co-management, various unions called off planned collective actions or ballots during Covid-19, for example the CWU at Royal Mail, the RMT at London Underground and UNISON in Tower Hamlets. In the case of the CWU, management thanked the union for its considered approach by announcing 2,000 job cuts a month later.

The unions also have re-entered the public spotlight in regards to the coming wave of job cuts. Unfortunately, and systemically determined by the national character of trade unions, there has been little effort to engage in international coordination. For example, though Unite the Union cried about the plant closure at Honda in Swindon, they haven't announced any solidarity actions at Nissan Sunderland for the Nissan workers in Barcelona who are fighting against the closure there. We have written about the union meetings regarding redundancies at Heathrow already.[3]

Apart from a bunch of smaller trade union initiatives (UVW, IWGB) the main activity we have seen recently was within the education sector and fringes of Royal Mail. During the lockdown, over 10,000 teachers met in a Zoom meeting to debate the return to work, and friends reported that 2,000 people came forward to take over delegate roles. The actual process of re-opening schools was not actively opposed by the union, apart from a few

3. Angry Workers, 'Crisis in the Air - Where Are the Workers' Voices?', *Angry Workers of the World* (blog), 22 June 2020.

initiatives to petition local authorities. Casual teachers at Goldsmiths university took unofficial 'work-to-rule' steps in response to managements' refusal to extend their contracts in order to make use of the furloughing scheme. Due to the significant share of foreign students, universities in the UK are particularly hard hit by the global pandemic.

In the transport sector, some workers took independent action against a premature lowering of social distancing rules in the London Underground, but this remained an unofficial and minoritarian effort. London bus drivers put pressure on management to enforce that the bus front entry door remained shut during lockdown. In early June, Royal Mail postal workers at the Bridgewater depot went on wildcat strike against repressive management tactics against the union. Another more significant rank-and-file initiative was led by a group of construction workers and activists to 'shut down the sites' – the high number of Corona casualties in the construction sector are sad evidence of the importance of that campaign.

All in all, there were only a few open wildcat strikes during the lockdown. There has been some wildcat action amongst more skilled meat processing workers, but not to the extent as we have seen it in the USA – though we don't want to rely on the mainstream media when it comes to assessing workers' response to the crisis. We plan to carry out a series of interviews with workers about the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on conditions and potentials for collective struggle. As a network, we were in touch with and supported around 40 Pizza Hut workers who lost their job and wages after six branches closed down. The workers put (physical) pressure on their former boss and

after some pickets Pizza Hut UK, bosses paid most of the workers *some* of their missing wages, and some were later furloughed. Local mutual aid groups, normally more of a charity effort, offered to support the struggling workers. We were also in touch with two groups of Amazon drivers at different sites, who both reported an increase in the workload and said that a significant portion of the 200 drivers on their sites would be up for taking steps. Things are definitely brewing.

In the coming months we will see two conflicting tendencies creating an increasing tension around the question of the wage. On one hand, the low waged workers in the 'essential industries' will come out of the Covid-19 lockdown with perhaps more confidence, as they have experienced how dependent society is on their labour. On the other hand, the increase in unemployment will generally help the bosses to put further pressure on wages. As working-class communists, we have to understand the actual experiences and shifts of power in the workplace during the lockdown, and during the process of it being lifted.

The movement against racist police violence

There were several large protests in the UK from which the official left was largely absent. The marches, at least in London and Bristol, were dominated by young working-class people with home-made placards, who were also up for more than the usual marching. The tearing down of a statue of a slave trader became the centre of the culture war; Keir Starmer showed his statesman-like flexibility by both condemning the 'criminal' nature of the protestors' actions and kneeling down performatively for 'racial equality'.

Part 2 - The UK political class between a rock and a hard place - October 2020[4]

The crisis blow

Of all EU countries, the UK has been hit hardest by the Covid crisis, both economically and in terms of public health. The UK economy shrank by a fifth in the second quarter of 2020, falling into the deepest recession on record. Corporate investments recorded over the year up until September 2020 are down by over 30%. The slump is related to a longer trend: in the UK, productivity has stagnated since the 2008 financial crisis, and has since failed to recover. Since the second quarter of 2008, the UK's lack of growth contrasted with an average 9% expansion in labour productivity for the 36 member countries of the OECD.

In terms of the health crisis, the state showed that the links between the 'high command' and the various 'civil society' institutions of the state (local administration, health organisations, community structures) are brittle, and often communication and decisions are badly transmitted through various 'public / private' company forms, which has led to chaos. The industrial sector was not able to provide the necessary services and goods, such as testing or masks. This combination explains the high number of fatalities, which exceeded 42,000 in September 2020. It is an expression of the bankruptcy of a model of accumulation based on outsourcing and financialisation, and of the disintegration of the political class, which has been driven furthest in the UK over the last four decades, in particular under New Labour.[5]

4. The unabridged version of this report can be read here.
5. For more on the legacy of New Labour, see Perry Anderson, 'Ukania Perpetua?', *New Left Review* 125 (Sept/Oct 2020).

The government tries to counteract the free-fall by increasing deficit spending, meaning taking on debt in order to pay workers' wages and give cheap credits to companies. The government's £221.2 billion deficit in the first five months of 2020-21 was 11 times higher than the previous record over the same period in the financial year. Net borrowing jumped from 2.6% of GDP last year to 19% this year — the highest in peacetime. Since the Covid-19 crisis, in the UK, like in many other countries, the control of the supply of money has quietly passed from the central bank (Bank of England) to the government. The state is in the spotlight. This is a risky situation for the ruling class, both economically and politically.

There are immediate economic risks. Over the last two years the annual trade deficit of the UK increased, while the value of the Pound declined, resulting in imported goods (food items, mass consumer goods) becoming more expensive. Despite all the talk of the super-powers of 'sovereign currencies' like the Pound, a debt spiral can result in instability and decline in the value of the national currency. The Pound has recently been compared with the Mexican Peso in terms of its ups and downs. Another immediate risk is unforeseen chain reactions of defaulting smaller economic players who cannot service their debt. Even the state has little overview of how various corporations and institutions are intertwined economically, e.g. how local government is dependent on the price increases of the real estate sector, or how pension funds depend on the development on the share market. During the last months various weak links in the economic chain started to crack. A survey released on 8th April by the British Chambers of Commerce suggested that 57% of British businesses did

not have enough cash to survive beyond three months of lockdown, while 6% had run out of cash already. But this crunch does not only affect the 'private sector'. Local authorities announced an additional £2 billion funding shortfall, for instance, Croydon council said that due to their £11 billion debts and increasing costs due to Covid, they will have to make 175 council workers redundant. The pension funds for university and railway employees have declared a respective funding gap of over £15 billion. Debt levels are also rising for households. Citizens Advice estimate that over 6 million households have fallen behind on at least one household bill. At the same time, banks have increased overdraft charges on personal credit cards. There is a concrete economic risk that these chains may break and get out of control. This is why the state is forced to dish out money as long as they haven't figured out 'who is too big to fail', and who can go bust without much of a wider risk.

There is a deeper political risk too. Economic decisions which were previously mediated by seemingly 'impersonal' market forces are now seen as a result of political decisions, e.g. not to bail-out this or that company. The state as the representing and administrating body is subjected to increased scrutiny and political pressure from both the capitalist class and the working class. From Virgin Atlantic to the City of London, all capitalists try to force the state to compensate for losses. The state tries to avoid straight-forward bail-outs and primarily guarantees for loans taken through commercial banks, rather than directly through the state. These lending schemes have provided nearly £53 billion to over 1.2m companies. There is also pressure from below, e.g. workers questioning why the state-financed furlough system that compensated

them for wage losses during the lockdown is abandoned and replaced with a worse scheme in autumn 2020, while governments in other western countries continue 'paying their workers'. Again, the state tries to avoid getting into the spotlight by handing the furlough money to the employers, rather than directly to the workers.

In this sense, the main task of the state's crisis regime is to re-enforce economic discipline, which is difficult if the state is piling on debt and signalling that 'payments' can be postponed. The crisis regime has to force capitalists to restructure and increase the exploitation of their workers. The state can intervene in this process, for instance by an increase in taxation. The crisis forces the government to re-think the low taxation levels in the UK. Ironically, the Tories considered a raise in corporation tax, whereas Labour under Starmer warned that this might be a premature step. According to the IMF, UK government tax revenue was 37% of GDP. This is well below Canada on 40%, the Netherlands on 44% cent and Germany on 46%. The question of taxation is one area of political infighting within the ruling class. In other regards there is unity: in order to react to the holes in the pension funds, the retirement age has been increased to 66 years in 2020 and will increase further. The government also plans to go ahead with cuts to the basic social benefit Universal Credit in April 2021, which will affect up to 8 million people on the lowest income bracket. This will further widen the wage gap between the working class and the 'middle-income class', which the lockdown has already aggravated. While higher income people who were able to work from home might actually have saved money during the lockdown, those who were furloughed on 80% of their minimum wages

will have dropped deeper into debt. In order to manage the increased number of unemployed, the government announced to hire an additional 13,500 'job coaches' to get people 'back to work'.

The crisis regime also has to determine who should be rescued and who can be safely doomed to bankruptcy. For this purpose, the government set up 'Project Birch', a body that is supposed to determine the terms of state aid to the private sector, which could lead to the state taking over shares and management functions in aided companies. In the case of Tata Steel and the UK's biggest automobile manufacturer Land Rover / Jaguar - which employs more than 30,000 people in the UK and lost close to £1 billion between January and July - the state decided that instead of taking over shares of these companies through financial support future restructuring is best left to 'the private hand'. The state admits that its own financial powers are limited and accepts UK manufacturing's international dependency: in the end, a group of Chinese banks (who also finance Land Rover / Jaguar suppliers in China) lent the car manufacturer £560 million to keep 'Made in Britain' running. This is a good example of the other major structural constraint limiting the political scope of the UK state: continued international dependency alongside weakened status in the international state system, while having to defend the idea of 'sovereignty' during the current Brexit process.

The Brexit dilemma

We don't want to go too deeply into the ins and outs of the Brexit negotiations. The main contentious issues relate to the question of how much autonomy the UK state will have to intervene into 'its own' economy, e.g.

through subsidies. While these details are important, for us it is more interesting that the economic structure and international dependency of regional capitalism is more clearly revealed during the Brexit negotiations, along with the position of the UK in relation to the main global power blocks (the EU, US and China). Before we go through some concrete recent examples, we want to quickly summarise how the global competition between these main power-blocks and the economic dependency of the UK interact with each other.

The main trading partner of the UK is the EU, which poses the main problem for Brexit. In this sense, Brexit will create economic damage, whatever the deal. The most recent official estimates in 2018 reckoned the UK would miss out on 4.9% of future income over 15 years if it left the EU with a basic trade deal. Under a no-deal scenario, that would rise to 7.7% over the same period. In order to get the best deal possible, the UK needs the prospect of deepening trade relations and a favourable trade deal with other major economic powers, primarily the US and China. In previous trade talks, the US government signalled that there would be no good deal if the UK a) agrees to stay within the customs union with the EU – which would not allow the boosting of US exports and give easier investment access to the UK – and b) continues to deepen trade relations with China. The latter poses a significant problem, given the dependency on both finance and productive know-how from China, from 5G technology to nuclear power. During the final phase of UK-EU Brexit talks, the UK government was eager to settle at least one deal with a significant trading nation, in order to have a better hand in the negotiations with the EU. The trade deal with Japan in summer 2020 was

meant to play that role. The problem was that even in its relationship with Japan, the UK is on the 'receiving end', i.e. the UK is dependent on productive investments from Japan, rather than the other way around – see examples below. The UK negotiators would have to swallow a cut in import tariffs for Japanese cars from 10% – which is the current EU rate – to zero.

To sum it up: while trying to loosen the ties with the EU (Brexit) the UK is caught in the middle of the US – China trade and tech war. This increases the tension within the UK ruling class, where an US-axis opposes those who emphasise the need for closer collaboration with the EU and China. The UK government engages in pretty pathetic 'still-wanting-to-be-imperial'-diplomacy in order to signal submission to US interests,[6] e.g. by offering asylum to Hong Kong dissidents by coming 'back home'. This cannot lessen the economic tension between the US and the UK: the more significant question is if the UK government will drop the digital service tax (affecting major US corporations such as Google and Apple) and further open UK agriculture and the health sector to US interests. The following examples of the last few months can exemplify some of the material constraints and dependencies.

The textile industry

Over the summer Covid-19 cases sky-rocketed in Leicester, and the city was sent into lockdown. People started to ask for the reasons why, and only then heard about the new

6. Anderson elaborates on the decline of the UK: "In effect, slow and well-cushioned regression to drone status: 1914–18, loss of world leadership; 1947–62, loss of empire and in 1956 of international sovereignty; in the 1980s, conversion of the City into a service centre for overseas banks, dissolving recognizably national wealth into more diffuse global holdings; in the 1990s, demotion of regional status with the reunification of Germany; in the new century, of global status with the rise of China." 'Ukania Perpetua?', *New Left Review* 125 (Sept/Oct 2020).

local textile industry there. Leicester used to be a mill town, but most textile factories were closed down in the 1970s. In the industrial ruins, a new 'workshop economy' grew, framed by mafia-type relations, manufacturing garments for big fashion companies, such as Boohoo. Around 10,000 of these workers are supposed to have been paid around £3.50 an hour, less than half the minimum wage. Bad working and living conditions contributed to the increase in Covid cases. "I'd rather manufacture in Bangladesh than in Leicester, because they're far further advanced [in terms of labour protection]," said the chief executive of the retailer Esprit in an interview with the Financial Times. Boohoo, which receives one third of its supplies for its £5 billion worth garment business from inside the UK, announced that they will formalise the workshop economy and build a local garment factory with 250 workers. Even with global transport costs, and therefore imports likely to become more expensive, the competition with suppliers based in Asia will put a major pressure on wages and conditions.

Agriculture

The agricultural sector depends heavily on migrant labour and subsidies from the EU. These subsidies are at the centre of trade negotiations, both with the EU (which want to tie the UK to common standards) and the US (which want to lower subsidies and open the UK agricultural sector for US excess produce). Subsidies make up 61% of profit for the average English farm, while almost one-fifth of farms would be unable to meet production costs without subsidy payments. Based on 85,000 farms that claim EU-style payments in England, this amounts to 16,150 farms unable to make ends meet. If the state doesn't come to help, international capital

has to jump in. For example, the UK's £1 billion potato growing sector has been hit hard this year by extreme weather and the Covid pandemic. The main buyer is the Canadian company McCain, which buys around 15% of the UK's total annual crop. In order to stabilise the supply-chain, this year McCain was forced to advance £25 million to UK growers.

The education sector

Another major export good of the UK – others would call it soft imperialism – is higher education, which surpasses even arms exports with a revenue of over £20 billion. Over 480,000 foreign students enter UK universities and pay top dollar for it, in particular for education at prestigious-sounding institutions. Brexit is threatening this sector, as many international study programs are funded by EU schemes. The education sector has been further hammered by the Covid crisis hammered, as many international students chose not to take up their places at UK universities. University management is trying to counteract this massive loss of income by introducing new (online) teaching methods, and through the further casualisation of university work. There has been an upswing of struggles from university workers (for example at Goldsmith and Edinburgh university) and students – who have been called back into university in order to maintain the cash flow, just to be quarantined in dormitories when Covid cases have exploded. There have been rent strikes at several universities in response.

Migration

When it comes to (labour) migration, the British state shows its contradictory position. The university sector depends on migration in the form of foreign students.

The NHS depends on migrant nurses – and when the government wanted to introduce that 'foreign NHS staff' would have to pay for their health treatment they had to back paddle. One argument for Brexit was the 'end of free movement', to stop low skilled workers from Eastern Europe from 'flooding the UK'. During the Covid pandemic, it became more apparent that there is actually a *lack* of workers willing to do heavy work, such as agricultural labour. While speaking about 'independence' on the public-political stage, behind the scenes the government signs contracts with the government of Ukraine to allow seasonal workers to come to the UK, given the fact that not enough eastern European workers from EU countries take up these jobs. Back on the political platform, the government again shows its 'tough populist face'. The media reported in October that the government discussed detaining migrants in centres on remote islands in the south Atlantic, as well as proposals to build facilities in Moldova, Morocco and Papua New Guinea. Further ideas included holding them on oil rigs, or deterring them from crossing the Channel with wave machines and blockades.

Corona economy

The British state has major problems providing various necessary services and goods necessary to deal with the Covid crisis. Due to a lack of local manufacturing capacity, most personal protective equipment (PPE) items had to be imported from China – and many of these items turned out to be useless. In terms of pharmaceuticals, the UK and the EU are deeply intertwined, a problem that was already highlighted during discussions about a 'no deal' scenario ("will we get the insulin for our diabetes?"). In 2016, the UK exported £24.9 billion worth

of pharmaceutical products, of which 48% went to the EU. At the same time, the UK imported £24.8 billion worth of pharmaceutical products, of which 73% were from the EU.

Even more apparent is the British state's problem in organising the necessary administrative work to deal with the pandemic. Much of this work was outsourced: since March 2020, over 850 Corona-related contracts worth £10 billion were dished out to private companies. Both private and public sector companies had trouble coordinating their work: Public Health England lost track of 16,000 Corona cases because they used an outdated version of Microsoft Excel, the outsourcing giant Serco received a £108 million contract to organise contact tracing and decided to further outsource this work to 29 smaller companies, and a £252 million contract for the provision of PPE was given to a supplier with no experience of providing such equipment, which just happened to be owned by an adviser to the international trade secretary, Liz Truss.

Johnsonomics? Johnsonism?

'Johnsonism' or 'Johnsonomics' are terms generally used by the left to describe a mixture of elitist corruption, rentier capitalism and right-wing populism. Wasn't his main achievement as the Mayor of London to turn the city into a global money launderette? and isn't his current strategy to just scale this up to a national level à la 'Singapore on the Thames'? We think that the left's attempt to reduce the current government to lackeys of the 'rentier class' is more of an expression of their own identity crisis brought on by a general reading of the massive state

intervention during the Covid crisis as the trade-mark of 'leftist state policies'. This was further deepened when the Tories announced significant infrastructural investments and plans to increase corporation tax, and struggled on the international terrain to obtain a certain autonomy regarding the management of state subsidies. By focusing on the easy targets ('Cummings wants to sell out the NHS to Trump') they can ignore the fact that a Labour government would have to deal with the same structural constraints of crisis and global dependency, which would limit the prospects 'socialist reforms' severely.

Having said this, the Tories still are fundamentally the 'party of landlords'. The real estate sector is significant economically and as a social lobby. In the end, around 45% of the furlough wage payments will end up being spent on rent and mortgages. The government offered a 'mortgage holiday' to property owners, but no real equivalent to people who rent. Stamp duties that you have to pay to the state when you buy property have been cancelled till April 2021, which is supposed to incentivise real estate deals. Johnson proposed that banks should introduce 'low-deposit mortgages', which would make it easier to get in debt to buy a house.

The Tories know that they lack industrial and financial fire-power in the trade deal negotiations and try to compensate it by playing political poker, e.g. by tearing up the withdrawal agreement with their 'Internal Market Bill'. 'We break international law if necessary in order to get Brexit done' is virtue signalling for the local electorate.

Workers' struggle

The lockdown measures have revealed the material underbelly of society: the largely manual and low paid work in the essential sectors. Nurses, delivery drivers and agricultural workers were in the public spotlight, which has increased their confidence. We can see that this translated at least partially,(e.g. in the case of nurses or local refuse workers), into demands and even struggles for higher wages. At the same time, we can see that the rise in unemployment and the wider crisis regime, e.g. the cut in social benefits, will counteract the wage pressure from below.

Currently, the second wave of the Corona pandemic is in full swing. The first wave arrived in aeroplanes and affected primarily the metropolitan areas. The second wave travels by train and bus and hits primarily the poor industrial north, in particular Liverpool and Manchester. Local lockdowns imposed by the centre increase the tension between the local and national political class. These areas are at the same time shaken by the first wave of redundancies. We see the first mutterings of the political class against Johnson. There is a faction amongst the Tories who are picking up on the statement issued by 'scientists' that society should get back to normal and just protect the vulnerable. Let the poor and old die in favour of money making. But this attitude, half understood, gains a lot of support from a wide range of the population who see that the government has no plan, that there is no end in sight, and that if people can't work, they're fucked. Due to this combination – a badly managed health crisis with arbitrary lockdowns, a sharp economic slump and a badly prepared working class – right-wing tendencies might well profit.

We can see the problematic role of the established trade unions where we work. One comrade works at Heathrow airport[7] where British Airways used the crisis for a sudden attack, threatening to sack most of their workers (at a total of around 10,000 job cuts) and to re-hire half of them on worse conditions. There are various unions representing workers at the airport and they didn't coordinate a collective response, instead they started a 'BA betrays Britain' campaign, which has so far mainly targeted the government. Individual union branches signed contracts to worsen conditions, hoping that their departments would be spared, and effectively selling other departments down the river. The union ended up offering 'temporary wage cuts', but the company felt encouraged to demand that these wage cuts be permanent. We see a similar situation during the Tower Hamlets council workers strike against redundancies, where some comrades were involved.[8]

As working-class militants, we have to do two things. First, we have to question some of the 'doomsday scenarios' that the left likes to paint; these might work in the bosses' favour to blackmail workers into accepting worse conditions. So far, unemployment has increased only slightly, from 3.9% to around 4.5% – in the three months before August 114,000 people have been made redundant. This doesn't mean that things will not change once certain wage subsidies run out, as there are still many workers on the furlough scheme and/or away from work. We need to analyse the changing composition of unemployment. Secondly, we have to look at the actual changes in power-relations on the shop-floor during the

7. https://letsgetrooted.wordpress.com/2020/07/07/interview-series-workers-power-during-the-lockdown/
8. https://letsgetrooted.wordpress.com/2020/09/14/local-groups-heathrow/

lockdown and beyond. For that purpose, our collective started an interview series. We hope to summarise interviews with workers from dozens of sectors in a pamphlet with clear positions regarding the crisis, and with practical proposals how to counter-attack.[9]

For a deeper understanding of the current situation at work and to be able to support working class initiatives against the crisis attack we have to be organised. We are in touch with comrades in various towns who want to form local groups.[10] Get involved.

AngryWorkers / Let's get rooted
https://angryworkersworld.wordpress.com

9. https://letsgetrooted.wordpress.com/2020/07/02/tower-hamlets-council-workers-strike/
10. https://letsgetrooted.wordpress.com/contact-local-groups/

HOUSEHOLDS

Household

Wail Qasim

A note from April

At Chausseestraße 125 Berlin sits the Brecht-Weigel-Museum, former home to the acting-playwriting couple Helene Weigel and Bertolt Brecht. A touring visit focuses mostly on the upper apartment that served as Brecht's living and working quarters from 1953 until his death in 1956. Amidst the accumulation of books, useful oddities and useless trinkets the playwright's bedroom stands out for its austerity, being little more than a monastic cell decked with only an uncomfortable looking single bed. If on your tour you begin to wonder where there was room for Weigel you are disabused of your cohabiting assumptions as you move to the downstairs apartment and its verdant, well stocked kitchen. She moved to this apartment after Brecht's death, but she lived separately in an apartment on second floor when he was alive too. According to the tour guide it was Brecht's responsibility to send a note requesting admittance before he was allowed into Weigel's living space.

Weigel and Brecht had made a choice to live together and apart, to be partners in proximity and not a household as we would typically imagine one. Their house was not without order but the conditions of that order were a choice made between themselves, freely, though under the conditions of what it means to be a couple in bourgeois society. Breaking from the typical order in this way highlights something of the political at work in the household as an everyday unit in our society.

Under lockdown too we learn a great deal about the politics of households. The conditions of state mandated social distancing are that we pick a household and stick with it, let it be our only sanitary unit of contact and avoid the mingling of households at all costs to prevent the spread of Covid 19. This house is built not on love or trust or choosing to share a life together but the economics of living in our society. Mine is a house of six renters, five here at the moment and one living elsewhere for the lockdown. We pay rent to the same landlord, we're friends, we already had a pattern of what we want living together to look like and now we'll likely all get sick together if one of us gets sick. That decision is made knowing we have different levels of health, different abilities to make money to get through this period and little other choice. Would we be living through the lockdown this way if it hadn't already been chosen for us by the rental economy? Probably not.

What household was chosen for you? You might be the intergenerational family sharing a home between the most vulnerable and the most laboured with care work. You might live alone having previously spent much of your time between the houses of friends and lovers you can no longer touch. There will be those who are still living on the streets or in an unfamiliar and frightening hotel shared with everyone else who used to live on the street. Maybe you're in Durban where your shack has just been evicted by municipal security. You might even be the health worker who has had to leave the family home because your child is severely immunocompromised, but working and being a hero is still demanded of you.

The households we live in today are detritus from the houses we were made to build before the virus. When Jenny Harries counselled that the safest thing for budding

couples to do would be to 'test the strength of their relationship,' make a choice to live together locked down indefinitely or stay apart for the duration, you might have felt a bit queasy. The government has changed its mind, we are developing herd immunity no longer, now we are social distancing and self-isolating, but without mass testing. So you have to make a choice: are you a household or not? Revealed in that choice is just how viscerally political our houses are, that they fall in order from above with little room for choice from below.

These are capital's houses, not ours. Instead we have the only choice we ever could make – to live or die together. Those who come out of self isolation to provide mutual aid, to resist illegal evictions or as legitimate but unprotected key workers escape and go to work outside the sanitary household. They take up tasks like Antigone burying her brother Polynices outside Creon's city and its law. If it weren't for Antigone's disregard for the political order her brother would have rotted unjustly, without right burial and left a disgrace. How many will be left disgraced by politics as they die in this crisis? Someone has to offer them justice as a last rite.

In this Holy Week it is difficult for me not to think too of how, having entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to transform the order of that city, Christ is led out on Good Friday beyond the Roman walls to Golgotha for his execution on the cross. Government has always maintained the political city and the household in one hand and the political desert in which death is acceptable and unmourned in the other hand. Antigone and Christ both subverted this desert with their choice of justice. We can still choose justice for all those being sent to die in the desert too.

Next to Weigel and Brecht's apartments on Chausseestraße is the Dorotheenstadt Cemetery where the two are buried next to each other, along with Hegel, Herbert Marcuse, a memorial to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and many others. Having decided how they wanted to live together, Weigel and Brecht are now beside each other in death. For us at the moment it feels as though we cannot even bury the dead as we ought. It'll take a different politics to build our houses and cemeteries with any justice.

Hi, I'm a Sacrificial Lamb

Heather Bandenberg

The first time I admitted I had post-natal depression was about six months into lockdown. I told my best friend that I wasn't coping. She told me that I was a 'sacrificial lamb' of Covid.[1] This, oddly, made me feel better.

Behind closed doors, mothers are holding the show together. The term 'mother' in this context extends to anyone who, due to childcare, will read this at 10 o'clock at night, their clothes covered in bits of food, with some paid work still to accomplish.

To have a child is to sacrifice yourself. Your happiness, job, self-image, privacy, earnings, body, friends, hobbies, pristine collection of books, baths, expensive but cherished and strong-scented bath products; nice pants; under wired bras; nails, TV time; reading time; artistic pursuits; guilt-free alcohol; and essentially, the ability to feel anything other than sheer terror at all times for your child. But we are OK to make this sacrifice for our children.

Now though, against our wishes, we are expected to make even more sacrifices to keep the country running through Covid, with no support at all. We are the sacrifice to some greater cause. No plaque or martyrdom for us. We are the victims of the childcare crisis.

1. Alexandra Topping, 'UK Working Mothers Are "sacrificial lambs" in Coronavirus Childcare Crisis', *Guardian*, 24 July 2020.

What is the childcare crisis?

March's emergency budget did not have one sentence dedicated to this 'childcare crisis.'[2] Shockingly, Boris seven-kids-and-counting Johnson[3] doesn't, hasn't and probably never will take it as seriously as you, a human person, should.

Firstly, the crisis refers to the undervaluing of domestic labour – a societal attitude that money is a more valuable attribute than care.[4] Due to a century of nonsense and structural aggression 'women's work' like keeping the entire future population alive until they're 18 (and beyond) is considered easier than, for example, writing website content. So in this crisis, white collar earners being on a decreased salary is seen as more of a concern than a third of the population having their life force drained out because it's 'just childcare.'

Secondly, the crisis refers to the staggering cost of childcare in order for parents to work as well as have children. A day starts at £70, and that's in a nursery without a garden – essentially a boarding kennel for your kid – it's a quick leap to £100 a day if you want something more wholesome. On average the working mother loses 39% of their wages (before tax) to just have the privilege to work.[5] This is in addition to the gender pay gap, meaning that if you are the pusher-outer of the child, it's likely your income is smaller and your work seen as more

2. Felicity Hannah, 'Childcare Affects Hundreds of Thousands of People – Where Was It in the Budget?', *Independent*, 12 March 2020.
3. Sarah Young, 'Boris Johnson: How Many Children Does the Prime Minister Have?', *Independent*, 29 April 2020.
4. Abbie Winton and Debbie Howcroft, 'What COVID-19 Tells Us about the Value of Human Labour', *Policy@Manchester* (blog), April 2020.
5. Save the Children, 'Childcare Problems Cost Mums in England £3.4 Million in Lost Earnings Each Day', *Save the Children*.

disposable than a male counterpart. There's an unspoken expectation that you have nearby living relatives that can help out to offset this cost.[6] This is not the case for a lot of people.

Thirdly, there's the impact on mental health.[7] The hopelessness of never having enough time or money. Not to mention the gut clenching hideous feeling (a mix of dread, relief and quickly, guilt) of leaving your child with someone you don't know. You are now expected to be able to switch on your instincts when you pick the kids up, and have a job, and keep everything together. If you complain that maybe you're not coping, you'll get sage wisdom from the older generation like, "yeah, the first 18 years is hard." Which really means, "shut up, it's hard, I still haven't forgotten when you didn't get me a mother's day card seven years ago."

Essentially, childcare has not moved on as much as it should have done to accommodate working women on an equal standing with men. There is an intersectional element – low income households, single parents – those who *have* to work, are the ones that lose so much to childcare. There is, essentially, no choice except to pay a lot of money for a less than ideal solution.

Why has lockdown made the situation worse?

Now add Covid into that maelstrom.

The hard facts are shocking. 72% of mothers – including frontline NHS workers, who are mostly female – have had

6. Full Fact, 'Cohabiting Grandparents Cannot Bubble with a Couple and Their Grandchildren', *Full Fact*, 17 July 2020.
7. Sarah Young, 'Postnatal Depression Has Almost Tripled during Coronavirus Pandemic, Study Finds', *Independent*, 21 June 2020.

to cut their hours in order to take care of their kids.[8] It is not a coincidence that BAME people are dying at a more alarming rate, they are either front line in the crisis, or have taken the risk to provide childcare for their younger relatives to offset nursery fees (yes, they still exist in lockdown).[9]

Women are one and half more times likely to lose their job due to Covid.[10] Even those who have white or middle class privilege, those who work from home, are currently furloughed, or don't (need to) earn a wage. So the childcare crisis is affecting women most. There's the expectation, in most households, that mum does the childcare.[11] So even if you are a manager (or whatever title you've probably spent longer than a man earning) you are still the one doing most of the homework, the chores, the keeping everyone together. You are stuck at home doing 'menial domestic labour', you can't buy your way out of it. That is why the childcare crisis has got 'worse'– because it's no longer about extortionate nursery fees for a few years. Now it's affecting everyone, and it's about one person doing do a job designed for ten.

You have found yourself shipwrecked on the childcare crisis island and your baby has just shoved your phone into a yoghurt. You are expected to still find time to answer work emails to show your worth because you're living the freelance dream. You are now terrified to leave the house but also need to leave the house desperately.

8. Pregnant Then Screwed, 'The True Scale of the Crisis Facing Working Mums', *Pregnant Then Screwed*.
9. Save the Children, 'Childcare Problems Cost Mums in England £3.4 Million in Lost Earnings Each Day', *Save the Children*.
10. TUC, 'Forced out: The Cost of Getting Childcare Wrong', 4 June 2020.
11. Richard Adams, 'Women "put Careers on Hold" to Home School during UK Covid-19 Lockdown', *Guardian*, 30 July 2020.

This is my experience at least.

I'm a first-time parent. My son was four-months-old when March exploded. I've been so sleep deprived and engrossed in cleaning up shit that I've just assumed it's me that's failing, rather than society failing around me.

So much research has been done to say that the first year of a child's life is its most important.[12] We have maternity leave to ensure this. But if your maternity leave happens when you CAN'T LEAVE THE FUCKING HOUSE, things get a lot harder.

My only experience of that precious, life-changing time is in lockdown. I feel isolated on a whole different level. After spending two years hearing everyone tell me – cheerfully, mournfully, confidently, professionally – that nothing, *nothing,* can prepare you for having a baby, I can confirm this is correct. Unfortunately, the other most unasked for wisdom was "it takes a village to raise a child," or "just make friends with other parents" and of course, "just try and make sure to keep time for *you*." That's your prep. But six months in, none of this is possible: no one wants to weigh your baby; there are no grandparents outside of Zoom; you're not allowed to go on the swings. Because there's this deadly illness thing.

Don't panic.

Swings are just one more sacrifice I should be able to add to the list, or am I just a shit parent?

12. All 4 Kids, 'What COVID-19 Tells Us about the Value of Human Labour', *All 4 Kids* (blog), 25 September 2018.

How can we make this better?

The labour of care is seen as dull, boring, necessary – not worthy of glory and payment – and this is the crux of the problem. Everyone knows it. Everyone.[13]

The first thing we have to do is to make unpaid labour a top issue. Feminism has traditionally looked down on those who are 'just Mums' when we are actually doing a universally vital job with no breaks or perks. Feminists have said for years that if women have to do this labour, then it should be paid, or at least validated on a CV. But then feminism got all bogged down on other issues that are sexier, or affect childless people, like female nipples. As someone who has spent the last 11 months getting their nipples out to feed their child, I don't feel that this is a burning feminist issue. I think it is more of an issue that I spend five hours a day lying in the dark, in the vague hope my kid might go to sleep, and this is never spoken about, acknowledged, paid or applauded by anyone. Ask yourself, how much would you expect to be paid for this five-hour shift, to have no breaks, no line manager, doing front line work, with your nipples? The answer is a shit ton.

The second thing is to at least get some support on-the-go for working mothers. The least a workplace can do is give out childcare vouchers or after school clubs, or offer to the pay fines incurred when people work late and miss childcare pick-up (on average a pound a minute on top of your normal costs). Or remove 'return to work' clauses in maternity pay; even giving the option of job shares, which are used occasionally, but should become standard practice.

13. Laurie Penny, 'Women Have Always Worked From Home', *Wired*, 29 May 2020.

Thirdly, we need to re-assess how we advertise and educate would-be parents. The worst piece of advice, and also the most accurate, is that before you have your own child you have absolutely no idea how hard raising a child is. The same goes for pregnancy. The same for birth. It's like an open secret that all the systems that are supposed to help you raise your child – medicine, your partner, your family, schools – will ultimately fail. Rather than expecting parents to 'struggle through' we should be giving more space for parents, be they artists or writers, to articulate these challenges, rather than dismiss the subject matter as 'boring' or 'ineffable' or 'women's' issues', and therefore struck off the table immediately.

Finally, most importantly, we need to start caring more, even if we are not parents ourselves. If you have someone in your life who has a child – a friend, a relative – make contact, take the initiative and ask if they need a hand with anything. Turn up and do the washing up. Push the pram around the park so they can have a bath uninterrupted. This is far more worth the covid risk than going to the pub, trust me. Be that reliable, kind person who will listen and help, and maybe form an attachment with a small person and be their weird uncle/aunt/inspiration. Actively seeking the value of domestic labour, which is the priceless reward of a small, happy person.

The point I'm trying to make is that we all devalue childcare until we end up doing it ourselves. I definitely did. Raising a baby is hands-down the hardest job I've ever had. That's a given. So let's not allow this country to continue to be a place where women and carers and children get dismissed because they are not as 'useful' as others.

I don't want to be sacrificed for that cause.

Household Inquiry

Invert

Over the course of the last nine months, we've spoken to a range of people – some friends, family and comrades, some strangers – about how the pandemic has affected every element of their lives, starting with the households in which they live, and are currently confined. We asked open-ended questions and encouraged our participants to share with us whatever felt most important. Certain issues were common to all, others were more specific. We've grouped their responses in relation to themes that came up across the interviews, but have otherwise refrained from drawing connections between or analysing what they had to say. We felt it was important to let these accounts speak for themselves. This is by no means a fully representative account of how the pandemic has been felt across all households in the UK, but rather a snapshot of the problems faced and lives adapted over the last nine months. Names have been changed.

Social Reproduction and the Organisation of Care

Almost everyone we spoke to explained that the organisation of care within their households had been drastically affected by the lockdown. Sometimes this entailed the need to undertake care work usually organised by the state; sometimes it was new forms of care made necessary by the pandemic itself.

Grace – who is 21 and lives with an elderly grandparent – discusses the new caring responsibilities she has suddenly had to take on, and the impact this is having on her mental health. "Lockdown has been a struggle for me" she says,

> "as I've felt a lot of responsibility and pressure, we had to cancel the carers coming in the house, so now I have to shower and clean my gran which is emotionally super difficult for me… I feel since lockdown I have had to take a more crucial role in keeping everyone afloat clean and sane, helping out where I can however there isn't much organisation as we are taking each day as it comes and doing our best."

Another respondent, Adelle, worried that the lockdown has left her unable to provide the kinds of support for family members who don't live in her household that she would have done previously:

> "It's kind of ridiculous, we've become quite useless to my parents, who live [the other side of London]. We don't have a car, and I can't do a big weekly shop anymore, and ironically, my parents who are a lot older can organise that for me, and I feel more than helpless about that."

While Adelle is now left unable to provide material support for her parents, they have become unable to provide support with childcare for her two young children. Her oldest daughter says she misses her grandparents, and Adelle and her partner find it difficult to juggle work and childcare. She tells us that her support network has

shrunk "we, the immediate family, have become our own care network."

Many people who have been 'shielding' for the duration of the pandemic, have been finding aspects of day-to-day life a struggle without people being able to support them in their homes. Annie, who is 97, is unable to clean her house herself due to problems with her mobility and vision. She says "I haven't been able to have help in the house such as the cleaner and hairdresser," and this has been particularly difficult.

Annie and her husband George say that not being able to see their friends and family inside their home has had the most significant impact on them of any aspect of the lockdown. For Pearl, who is also in her nineties, and who lives alone, isolation from friends and family has had a significant toll on her mental and physical health. She tells us, "in first lock-down, towards its end, I was affected with certain physical symptoms which required medical intervention and subsequent CBT type therapy conducted with great difficulty by phone."

The organisation of care has also been a challenge for people living outside of a nuclear family, or who don't have to organise imminent needs such as elder or child care. Noa who lives with four close friends says:

> "I would describe our household as a queer chosen family. In the pandemic we've all worked really hard to support each other emotionally, and at times financially as some people haven't been able to work and haven't been entitled to furlough or anything, but it's been really hard because we've all been feeling

so shit for the whole time. It's difficult to have the energy to support others when you feel bad yourself, and we've all spent so much time together over the last months our moods definitely bounce off each other. Sometimes there's just a really sad vibe in the house. If one person is having a hard time it's easier for the rest of us to pull together to support them, but when we all are it feels like too much. We're doing our best, but it's not easy."

Meeting one another's emotional needs is rendered even harder when strangers are thrown together due to economic necessities. Maddy had to move house halfway through the lockdown, and spoke to us about the challenges of forging new living relationships with people she didn't previously know under lockdown conditions:

"I had to move out of my house after the first lockdown because my housemate had made me feel physically unsafe. I moved in with strangers, one of whom was a friend of a friend. I looked forward to feeling safe with them which I assumed I would do mainly because they were all women. I did feel protected from the particular way a large man can make a woman feel afraid but still I could sense bad vibes in the new house. I didn't know at the time but there had been an argument before I had moved in."

She explains that, even though she built good relationships with some of her new housemates, these relationships felt tense, complex and weighted because of the lockdown:

"I became close to one of the housemates very quickly, and then another one. The sudden intimacy

made me feel disorientated. I felt liked and that I liked them but it was all on very unsteady ground. Just one barbed remark from them would make me feel unmoored. Of course, it was heightened because I was not seeing my usual friends as much because of Covid restrictions.

Now, one of the women has moved out because of the same issues that they argued about before I arrived. The two I felt closest to have remained and us three have had quite a settled November lockdown which has made me happy."

Mutual Aid and the Organisation of Care Outside of the Household

In response to the need for people particularly vulnerable to the virus to 'shield', and for people who've come into contact with the virus to self-isolate, organised mutual aid groups have sprung up all over the UK. We asked to what extent our respondents had been involved in and/or been supported by both formal and informal care networks.

For Grace, whose household is shielding, support from friends and relatives has been invaluable. "They have picked up shopping for us we have our medicines delivered, there are people from all over pitching in to get us our shopping and things we need as we are not leaving our home" she says.

Annie and George have been mainly reliant on their two daughters, as well as a few neighbours who sometimes bring them shopping. They are not aware of any

organised mutual aid networks in their local area: a small town with an ageing population. Because they need help around the house and to be driven to regular hospital appointments, it is not possible for them to fully socially distance from their daughters, which can be a cause for concern, particularly because one of them is at fairly high risk of exposure to the virus because of her job. Pearl says she has received some support from an organisation set up the synagogue she attends, but mostly she has relied on family and friends.

Other people we spoke to have been involved in mutual aid projects themselves. Noa says:

> "me and a bunch of people I know were pretty active when the networks were first set up, but often found they were quite badly organised and didn't necessarily feel we had the capacity to change that. Also, there were lots of discussions about collaborating with the police and the council and stuff, which I felt really moved away from the grassroots community response I was interested in being a part of. I do actually feel a bit bad for not getting more involved, but I do do a lot of care and support of my friends and that already feels like a lot to be honest."

Adelle and her partner have "been trying to offer support to our friends and neighbours, doing small food shops and things for people," but her main focus has been trying to support the students she teaches at a university. "I'm very concerned about their health and wellbeing" she says, "I've been trying to keep in touch with all my students."

Chris, whose mother was in a care home before she sadly

died over the summer, describes how difficult it was for him and his sister to be separated from her at the end of her life, due to Covid restrictions:

> "My Mum was in a care home when the lockdown began last March. Until that time, my sister and I had regularly visited her, sometimes twice a week in total. Obviously, that immediately stopped with lockdown. Unfortunately, that meant we could not insist that my Mum did a little bit of exercise by walking with her and her Zimmer frame up and down the corridor. The staff were not prepared to take the risk and that was understandable. The effect of that was that she spent more of the day in bed because it was so difficult to move her. All the while, my sister and I could not see her. The government then decreed that you could see a relative in a care home, providing that strict rules were obeyed. These included the fact that it had to be the same person who visited the relative. Put simply, [my sister] and I would have had to agree which of us would visit. It was an utterly ridiculous choice for any family to make and totally illogical in my opinion.
>
> Luckily, our care home said one of us could visit each week as long as they were garden visits. She sat inside a room with the door open to the garden. A table separated us and I was dressed in PPE, gloves, etc. It was a very reasonable compromise.
>
> Unfortunately, Mum then passed away. We had not been able to hug or touch her for many months.
>
> I understand entirely the risk of passing the virus on

to other patients. As it happens, my Mum contracted COVID-19 and recovered, along with a number of other residents. However, surely some form of compromise should have been possible? We could never prove this but [my sister] and I are convinced that, in the absence of visits, Mum simply lost her will to live. Without any exercise, her health deteriorated rapidly. My Mum's care home was brilliant. I wish I could say the same about the government advisers who appeared to be totally out of touch."

Interpersonal Relationships Within the Household

Confinement to the household has obviously resulted in the intensification of relationships within it. Many people cited lack of space from other household members as a problem.

Jesse, 16 says:

"During lockdown my family spent most of our time together laughing and having loads of fun together. I did however find it quite challenging having to do my school work around them and since me and my two younger sisters worked downstairs in the dining room and away from our bedrooms, we all began to find each other's company quite annoying during the school day."

Likewise, Grace notes that there were tensions between her and her younger sister because being cooped up at home all day made her bored to the point of having "huge meltdowns that just makes everyone angry and argue." Noa and their housemates also struggle with lack of space and privacy:

> "We're over-occupying our house because it's the only way we can afford to pay rent in London. So we're already living on top of each other and there's not really enough communal space. Now we're all working from home we're all sick of being in our rooms all day and it makes us a bit grumpy with each other. Once the lockdown measures eased a bit in late summer and we were all away from the house a bit more our relationships definitely improved. On the other hand though, we've become a lot closer in some ways during the lockdown. We've become a little unit. At the beginning of lockdown when we were spending every waking moment at home if one housemate was away at a partner's or something it felt like we'd lost a limb. We put a lot of effort into doing nice things together."

Their household has also come up against difficult ethical questions around collective decision making and the implications of lockdown measures:

> "It feels like this is basically the only circumstance under which a group of five adults who all deeply love each other but aren't in romantic relationships with each other would need to have such involvement in each other's lives and decisions. It's brought about quite a lot of conflict around how to navigate collective decision making and reconcile individual needs, desires and fears with other, conflicting ones. Particularly because we all think the government's response has been so terrible and aren't comfortable simply 'following the rules.' It feels so shitty having to tell your friend you don't feel comfortable with them doing a fairly simple thing, or needing to bring

things that would normally be your own business to a house meeting."

Adelle and her eight-year-old daughter Billie say that the lockdown has enabled her to bond with her baby sister and become more involved in family life, away from the rigidity of the school schedule. Adelle says "it was hard at first [after having the baby], because I spent all this time at home with [her], but Billie had to go to school and by the time she got home it was the end of the day for [the baby], so I never could spend time with the two of them together, or them spending time with each other." This has, in a small way, disrupted traditional family hierarchies. Adelle speaks of her daughter as "the best support I could have asked for," while Billie explains her new role within the family which the school/work day would usually prohibit:

> "My dad calls me the Calmniator because whenever she's crying I'll come into the room and pick her up and she'll stop crying. There's something called her sunshine smile and it's because she's got such a lovely smile, and whenever she sees me she usually smiles, and I can speak her language basically, because I make the same noises she makes."

When asked about lockdown, Billie grins and says: "It's lovely, I get to spend more time with [the baby]."

Childcare and Home-schooling

Between March and September, schools and many childcare providers were closed. This placed a huge strain on parents and carers who still needed to work. Both the

adults and the children we spoke with felt there were some benefits to the closure of schools, amid myriad problems.

> Billie explains: "in lockdown there are no teachers shouting at you" and "it's more creative at home" while Lauren, also eight, tells us "I like being at home. There's no very hard maths. Most of the time maths is really hard, literally. Hard maths is the top of the hard bar. I don't do hard maths at home." And "at home I'm a teacher to myself. I've been teaching myself about dinosaurs." She also says she likes being at home because she has more choice over what she has for lunch. Clearly the lack of autonomy and strict discipline at school is a problem for these children, and they find that time away from school allows them to explore their own interests and desires. Adelle says that lockdown has made her realise that she has "essentially farmed [my] kids out to primary schools because I needed to work," and that in a society geared less around "the need to produce" she might well choose to structure her children's lives differently.

The secondary school students we spoke with also found aspects of school closures beneficial. Alix says:

> "when the pandemic struck, I was busy revising for my GCSEs. You can imagine my joy when Boris announced that schools were not open, and I didn't have to take my GCSEs. Exams are stressful for anyone, and personally, I put a lot of pressure on myself to attain high grades."

However, there are also some significant challenges that

come with the abrupt closure of schools. It prompted a massive childcare crisis overnight, and has left children without vital socialisation, and vulnerable families without support.

Alix found adjusting to self-learning extremely difficult, and found that she was expected to spend more time working to make up for the lack of support from her teachers:

> "During the lockdown period, when we were working from home, I found it very challenging not being able to have the normal support of the teachers and so found it very difficult not being able to ask questions immediately. As well as this I found that they seemed to set more work than they expected us to complete during normal school time so I was often working days from about 9:30 till about 6 with only one-hour break."

For younger students who are less able to work on their own, children with parents who are available to spend time teaching them are given a huge advantage. Lauren's older sister, who has been helping with home learning tells us that Lauren's school has been providing support including "a laptop with all of the safety blocks on it, packages of equipment and there are things that can be accessed online to help her learn." However, because everyone at home has work or other responsibilities and are unable to spend a full school day teaching Lauren, her sister worries she is falling behind.

School doesn't solve the disparity between children whose parents or carers have the time and resources to support

their education at home and those who do, however. In fact, a primary school teacher we spoke to said that he had seen significant positive changes within the small group of key workers' children he'd been teaching during the pandemic. These children were often the most disadvantaged in his class, and were really thriving in a small, intimate setting where their individual needs were being nurtured. He worried about what the impact of the rest of the class coming back might be for this group.

School closures pose challenges even in households where adults have time for home-schooling. Adelle recognises that her family are privileged; because she is currently on maternity leave, she has time to home-school her daughter Billie. She explains how difficult it is to educate her daughter without any experience or training:

> "I have to keep reminding myself that it's a completely different situation, so attention span is completely different and we need to be kind to one another. Sometimes I might get frustrated. I think parents hand over their children in a very willing way, and I'm part of that. I go "here you are, here's my child for 6 hours." I do really respect the teaching system a lot more, and getting just online learning and screen learning is not good enough, so I'm happy we're still getting some structure because in week 1 I was just trying to do things on my own, and you know, I'm just not a teacher. "

She says that home schooling is difficult for her daughter too: "Billie is really flagging, because getting her to sit at a computer for five hours is not good, so I try and think of other things, but yeah, it's hard."

The potential long-term effects of the pandemic on education were perhaps most instantly tangible for students coming to the end of their time at school. As people were unable to sit their exams, a grading system was brought in whereby teachers gave their students predicted grades, which were then moderated by an algorithm system commissioned by the Department for Education. When this year's A Level results came out, the algorithm had downgraded nearly all of the results. This disproportionately affected state schools, given that predicted grades at elite schools were already significantly higher on average. The government refused to accept that this had been a mistake, and it took weeks of protest from students and teachers before the DfE agreed to revert back to the grades the teachers had given. Megan, who was supposed to take her GCSEs this year, talks about how stressful this situation was for students in their last few years at school or college.

> "Throughout the summer I just pushed the idea of getting my results to the back of my mind and tried not to think about it. Of course, it's worrying. Teachers will know me and my capabilities, but there's always that small thought of what if I could have done better? Luckily, all my exam results allowed me to get into the college I wanted, and I think were a true reflection of the work I'd put in for them. There was one point, when students got their A Level results, much much lower than what they'd been predicted by teachers that terrified me. I felt robbed of a chance to prove myself. Really, I was just annoyed that my future could be jeopardised by a bunch of rich old men who haven't been to school in 20+ years and have already made the exams so incredibly difficult."

She also discusses the abrupt ending to her final year at secondary school as a bittersweet:

> "There is, admittedly parts of school I miss. My best friend, obviously being the highest, but just the atmosphere of year 11. We were all going through the same thing, we'd all known each other for so long and had so many good memories together, it's weird that that time was cut short. We also didn't have our Prom, which I wasn't really truly interested in, but it just seems like a rite of passage. So yeah, there's bits of school that I miss, but then there's A LOT that I don't, and am so glad to be free from."

Maintaining Relationships Outside of the Household

Everyone we spoke to wanted to talk about how isolating being confined to one household can be, and mentioned missing loved ones, and the difficulties of maintaining relationships of care when physically separated. Noa says:

> "my friends are really spread out all over the place. I feel instantly cut off from a lot of my support networks, and like I'm really struggling to be there for people I care about. It's hard to gauge how people are if you're just speaking on Zoom or on the phone or whatever. And also, the lack of physical contact sucks. A good friend who is having a particularly rough time came over and sat in the garden fairly early on in lockdown. She was really sad and clearly just really needed a hug, which I wasn't able to give her. In the end she just left because being here wasn't making her feel any better. It was really depressing. It's made me really appreciate the importance of

> touch and physical affection. I know people who live alone or with people who they aren't close with who haven't been touched in nearly a year!"

The children we spoke to found being separated from their friends particularly hard. Lauren – who's had to be especially cautious as she lives with an elderly relative – is struggling not being able to play with her niece (who is two years younger than her) and her best friend. She says "I don't go out very much. The only times is when I go and see [her niece] but I don't actually go in her house. I go by the front door and we stay away from each other. I miss her." Lauren often feels bored without being able to spend time with other children. When asked what she's been doing during lockdown she says "I've been watching TV, watching the rain, sitting on the couch, going on the Chromebook from school that I'm borrowing. Now and again I go upstairs and see mummy [who is working]." She also misses adult family members who she is close with. When asked what she wants to do once the virus has gone, she says:

> "I have a whole list of stuff in my head for after lockdown! Ok, it would literally take you all day for me to tell you all of them. Actually, no it wouldn't because I've forgot most the stuff, that's how much there was! Ok, I'll tell you my favourite ones. Going to the beach with [her aunt] and digging for fossils, and going to the beach with [her older brother] and going foraging with him."

Billie also misses her friends. She says: "it's not really fun not seeing them a lot because at the moment all we can do is be on the doorstep or on the phone. When there

isn't any lockdown anymore, I'm going to have a sleepover with [her two best friends]."

Pearl also struggled with losing contact with friends, citing having "had no contact with normal friends and acquaintances for social time together, only socialising has been by telephone or e-mail" as partly responsible for the decline of her mental and physical health during this period.

Since March, people from different households have only been able to socialise outdoors. Noa worries that this won't be possible as it gets colder:

> "I'm really not looking forward to the winter. Being able to hang out in parks and stuff with friends is really keeping me going, but once it's too cold to do that I think it'll be really depressing."

Lots of people talked about the difficulties of shifting their communication with loved ones onto online platforms such as Zoom. The older people we spoke to said they found navigating the technology difficult, the children found learning new communication styles challenging, and people of working age quickly tired of socialising via video chat, largely because they are expected to use these platforms all day at work.

Pearl calls the internet a "lifesaver" in this time of extreme isolation, but has struggled to get to grips with new technology such as Zoom. George says he has got "more used to the internet than in other times," and uses FaceTime to see his grandchildren and great grandson. Annie says "because of my eyesight, I can't use the internet

myself," so finds keeping in touch with friends and family difficult without the help of her husband.

Adelle explains that after the initial excitement of getting to grips with a new emoji keyboard and sending each other gifs, Billie and her friends struggled with online communication. She says: "What's been really difficult is that they're kids so you can't expect Zoom conversations to go the same as with adults. Sometimes they talk over each other and get upset… it's just a whole new way of communicating and it's a bit much for them really. Unfortunately, what this means is that you can't substitute real friendship which, you know, they really need at this age."

For Noa and their friends hanging out online became unsustainable quite quickly:

> "To begin with there was so much Zoom. It was nice because my friendship group is now pretty spread out, and it meant people who live in other cities or countries could come to the 'pub' with us and stuff. But it got tiring quickly and also a bit depressing. Just talking in a big group doesn't really work because of time lags and stuff, so the only real option is 'organised fun' which is never actually that fun and relies on somebody to put in the work of organising it."

This is also the case for Alix and her friends, but her response highlights how important these platforms were early on in the pandemic:

> "during the start of lockdown, where everyone was in a state of emergency, my friendship group were very good at hosting zoom calls. We did these weekly and chatted all night. We even hosted a quiz and tried to do a bake off (which I was robbed in and came last all 3 times). This kept me sane."

Feelings about the State's Response to the Pandemic

There was an overwhelming feeling of anger among our those we spoke to towards the government and their handling of the pandemic.

There is a consensus that the government, George says, "should have announced restrictions earlier – right at the start of the pandemic." The young people we spoke to were particularly critical of government policy around the pandemic. 16 year old Alix says:

> "At the start of the pandemic, we had warning signs from Italy and Spain, yet we were still late to go into lockdown. The complete U turn from the government, first pursuing herd immunity and not closing anything, then a sudden lockdown sprung on everyone. We then also have our stellar example, Boris Johnson shaking hands in his meetings, not following his own party's rules. Not to mention he was on holiday at the start of the COVID-19 panic. The Tories then announced that free school meal pupils would still receive lunches. Which, if this continued would've been a very good scheme, that would have helped the lower class (who this pandemic can affect the most). However, this ceased to exist when summer holidays started. This meant that children

were still going hungry. Understandably, FSM [Free School Meals] wouldn't have been handed out during the holidays, but maybe if the government funded schools more, they might've been able to carry this scheme forwards. And then, you can't not give an honourable mention to Dominic Cummings, and his poorly planned eyesight test. The chief special advisor, someone who makes the rules that we are all obliged to follow, doesn't even listen to his own advice. The changing of his story, and then being excused by Mr. Johnson didn't exactly look amazing for our government."

Jesse also feels that measures should have been implemented sooner:

> "I feel that they didn't take the virus as seriously as they should have and so this meant that their response was very delayed. I believe what they should have done was close our borders much sooner in order to prevent the virus from entering our country. Due to us being an island, this would have been a very sensible thing to do. I also felt that they began to relax lockdown too quickly which resulted in the cases now rising again."

All of the older people we spoke to felt concerned about younger people not following the rules, leading to the spread of cases. For Pearl, the government "should have come down more strictly on the certain element of the younger generation whose mantra was 'it won't happen to us' but had no thought for those to whom they spread the virus." George feels that official restrictions have "lacked sensible support from people," and Annie thinks

people have struggled to follow restrictions because the messaging hasn't been clear enough: "I think it has been clearer to see what is expected in Scotland [than in England]- and so their people have followed their rules properly.

According to Noa, though, placing the blame on individuals is a smokescreen:

> "Obviously we have a far higher infection rate and far higher mortality rate than in most other countries because the government just aren't taking it seriously. They couldn't care less if old and vulnerable people die, Johnson said it himself. And it makes total sense that they'd then blame people for not following the rules. It's so clear that it's being spread in workplaces, on commuter transport, in schools – all places that should be closed. You can't encourage people to go to pubs and restaurants in the 'Eat Out to Help Out' scheme and then say it's their fault when the virus starts spreading in pubs and restaurants. The government are blaming individuals for their own failures. It's so cynical."

Adelle – who works in a university – is concerned about the government's decision not to bail out the higher education sector, and worries for the implications of this on her and her co-workers. She says "it took me three years to get a permanent contract and we just got an email about furloughing and 'voluntary' redundancies, and now the government's not bailing the universities out it's gonna get quite grim. So many of my colleagues don't have contracts. So yeah, not good."

She is also very critical of the state's approach as a whole, particularly the emphasis placed on saving the economy above human life:

> "It's an absolute scandal that money can just be produced now when it couldn't be produced when we were in a massive period of austerity, so there's a side of me that's fuming about how, to save their skins, they'll do what they can now, the Tory party, but they couldn't possibly do it when they were inflicting cruel social policies. And then, of course, the people who are worst affected by coronavirus, they wouldn't maybe be in that situation now if it wasn't for those policies and cuts and all that having such a big impact on them. I'm understanding just how far I've come in my life to be in a secure space versus a lot of other BAME people and communities who are the worst affected, so it's just like, it grinds you down to think about how wrong the government has got it.

Long-Term Impacts of the Pandemic

We asked our respondents what they felt the long-term effects of lockdown and living through a pandemic might be.

Grace is particularly concerned about the long-term implications of isolation and fear of getting ill on people's mental health. She says:

> "I think it will affect my family as all of this time confined to one space is a lot, I have several mental health issues I am massively struggling with and

fighting to stay alive almost every day, the long term affects this pandemic is going to have on mental health and resources I don't feel are going to be available once we are out again I don't think match up. I have already lost a friend to suicide in this pandemic. It's going to be a world run by fear and anxiety and especially social anxiety, how do you spend months locked inside not socialising or leaving your front door just come back out after all that time and be able to go back to how things where before. Also, when the government decides the lockdown is over, does that really mean it is, is everyone going to come back outside again and hold hands or are there going to be people still stuck inside with paranoia and what if in the back of their mind. There are so many effects this is going to have on people in terms of human behaviour and unfortunately I don't believe people will learn from it and change things that can help prevent things like this in the future however, hopefully now when we ask people how they are doing, we actually care for their genuine response. I have learnt to remember what is actually important, never wait until it's the right time because the time is now and not to waste my time worrying about things I can't change and get out and do something about it."

Adelle is worried about the long-term impact of the pandemic on her children:

> "What's been pretty heartbreaking is I overheard a Zoom chat where, I think they heard information about death or what's been going on in the news, and I've limited that, but still it seeps in, and then

I heard Billie say, "well I'm writing my will already" and then I heard her friend say "well I'm not writing my will, I'm planning on living," and I just thought it was so heartbreaking to hear that there's this whole new vocabulary "self-isolating," "social distance" and I do worry about the short-term memory and the long-term memory and that we're not able to hug one another or touch one another or cough near one another and I think that that sort of, its completely different to how we grew up, and I don't know if we're looking at a year, two years, three years until we're vaccinated but I think it's extremely formative. I don't know what [her baby] will make of this period of her life because she's one of these children born into lockdown, you know, she hasn't really been around or socialised with other babies! I think we're very able to forget about thing in the long term, but I do worry about how the children will react depending on how their parents are because we often transfer anxieties onto our children, and Billie is not an anxious child, but is a sensitive one. At the moment I think they're okay, but I don't know, and if one child is not ok and brings that into the class, what kind of things will they chat about? Because even overhearing that chat about wills – I didn't even realise Billie knew about wills. And then it's sort of like, how do you process death on a mass scale? I don't think they have a sense of the scale of death, it's an abstract number even to me and yet it's affected everything, its affected our family. I really wonder, how do you re-learn how to have a carefree encounter without it being traumatic in some way after this?"

Annie and George's concerns are for society more broadly. Annie thinks the pandemic's aftermath will bring about

more "unemployment, homelessness and the breakup of more families." George is worried that the financial crisis the pandemic has precipitated will remove opportunities and "the chance of moving forward and improving the lives of many people."

While, understandably, most of the responses about long-term impact were negative. There was also a sense that perhaps this time has taught us some valuable lessons about collective care, and how we might better structure our lives. To end on a slightly optimistic note, here's Adelle again:

> "This pandemic and this time I've been able to spend with my family just shows me I've always been spoon-feeding productivity and capitalism into my system. It's not realistic, we just have to go slower. I wish employers would consider that, would consider more job-sharing, more options for people to work from home. And I think that will change, I think that we could be kinder on the transport system and they could stagger hours and think more about pay for all… I just genuinely hope we don't just go back to business as usual, if they do I think there's something not learnt, there's something really wrong about that approach."

Mutual Aid

Mental Health Self Care Mutual Aid Notes

Sophie Carapetian

MADNESS < DEPRESSION < MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES < LONELINESS < BOREDOM ARE REVOLUTIONARY REFLEXES BOUND TO THE CAPITALIST ORDER. SUFFER NO MORE! LEARN TO HARNESS AND FOCUS THESE MENTAL SPACES AND MODES OF LIVING, OPEN NEW HORIZONS FOR COMMUNIST LIFE.

1. DREAMING HELPS. IF YOU ARE UPSET, LOW, SCARED OR BORED – TAKE A NAP AND SLEEP ON IT. ENTERING DREAM LANDSCAPES WILL HELP YOU PROCESS YOUR PAINFUL THOUGHTS AND YOU WILL WAKE UP IN A DIFFERENT PLACE, HEAD-SPACE AND TIME. CAPITALISM STEALS YOUR FUCKING DREAMS.

2. WATER IS SOOTHING. IF YOU CAN TAKE A LONG BATH OR SHOWER OR SWIM AND LET GO OF YOUR FEARS. WASH OFF ALL THE SHITE THAT CAPITALISM HAS THROWN AT YOU THEN WATCH IT DRAIN AWAY.

3. TALK TO YOUR FRIENDS, FAMILY AND COMRADES (EVEN IF THEY ARE DRIVING YOU UP

THE WALL, OR ARE PART OF YOUR PROBLEMS). MENTAL TRAUMA AND SUFFERING THOUGH PRIMARILY EXPERIENCED INDIVIDUALLY (AND PATHOLOGISED AS SUCH BY PSYCHIATRY) ARE SOCIAL, AND ARE THE RESULT OF A CAPITALIST ECONOMIC SYSTEM THAT IS CONTINGENT ON THE PERPETUATION OF MASS IMMISERATION. DIVE INTO YOUR PAIN, CONFRONT IT. COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR LOVED ONES EVEN IF THEY ARE PISSING YOU OFF.

4. WORK AS LITTLE AS POSSIBLE. WE ALL NEED MONEY TO LIVE AS THINGS STAND. IF YOU ARE STRUGGLING WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES YOU ARE LEGALLY ENTITLED TO RECEIVE FINANCIAL SUPPORT FROM THE STINKING STATE. THERE IS MORE THAN ENOUGH MONEY TO GO ROUND. IF YOU HAVE BEEN RECENTLY SACKED YOU CAN CLAIM WELFARE. THERE IS NO SHAME IN CLAIMING WELFARE – ANYONE WHO SAYS THERE IS SHOULD FUCK RIGHT OFF AND SHUT UP. CRIME AND THEFT ARE ALSO GOOD OPTIONS AS IS ASKING OR DEMANDING THAT PEOPLE SHARE RESOURCES. ALL THE BETTER EN MASSE. BREAKING THE LAW IS GREAT FOR YOUR MENTAL WELL BEING. IF YOU DON'T FEEL LIKE WORK STOP IMMEDIATELY AND DON'T FEEL GUILTY AT ALL – LOOK AT ALL YOUR OPTIONS THROUGH A PLEASURE PRISM. FUCK WORK TO ETERNITY.

5. DRUGS. THERE ARE MANY TYPES OF DRUGS TO HELP DEAL WITH CHALLENGING HEAD SPACES AND SOCIAL CONSTRAINTS. DRUGS ARE COMPOUNDS OF CHEMICALS. SOME COMPOUNDS

ARE LEGAL AND ADVOCATED BY THE PSYCHIATRIC INDUSTRY. THEY MAY HELP BUT READ UP WELL BEFORE YOU ACCEPT A COURSE OF MEDICATION AND TRY NOT TO BE PALMED OFF WITH CHEAP AND NASTY PHARMACEUTICALS AS THESE WILL REALLY FUCK YOU UP. OTHER COMPOUNDS OF CHEMICALS ARE CLASSIFIED AS ILLEGAL. THEY MAY ALSO HELP YOU COPE WITH DIFFICULT MOODS AND REACTIONS INDUCED BY THE CAPITALIST ORDER. EXPERIMENT CAREFULLY, CHOOSE HIGH GRADE DRUGS FOR SAFETY AND BE CAREFUL WITH DOSING. TAKE DRUGS WITH OTHERS, IT'S FUN. (DO IT VIA THE INTERNET IF YOU NEED TO.) DRUGS ARE SOCIAL OR SHOULD BE. IGNORE ALL DRUG MORALISTS THEY ARE WRONG, LIBERAL, AND BORING.

6. ARE YOU HOME MORE THAN USUAL AND ISOLATED WITH CABIN FEVER? STAY AS SOCIAL AS YOU CAN BE. PHONE YOUR FRIENDS AND COMRADES EVEN IF YOU DON'T FEEL LIKE IT. ORGANISE MEETINGS TO DISCUSS TOGETHER HOW TO RESPOND, COLLECTIVELY, TO THE CRISIS. COME UP WITH DEMANDS AND PLANS WITH YOUR COMRADES. PHONE YOUR PALS AND CHAT SHIT. SHARE STUFF STAY SOCIAL TALK THINGS THROUGH AS MANY TIMES AS YOU NEED TO. DO THE STUFF YOU HAVE BEEN PUTTING OFF FOR YEARS LIKE CLEANING EVERYTHING IN YOUR HOME (IF YOU HAVE ONE), SORTING OUT YOUR HARD DRIVE, WRITING TO FAMILY MEMBERS AND OLD FRIENDS OR TELLING PEOPLE THEY ARE CUNTS. WHATEVER IT TAKES KEEP MOVING AND DON'T DWELL ON YOUR FOUR WALLS. SCALE

RIGHT OUT OF NORMAL LIFE AND TIME – LOOK AT YOUR LIFE FROM AFAR THEN MAKE LOADS OF CHANGES OR TWEAKS. DON'T BE SCARED BY RUPTURES. JOIN GROUPS, UNIONS AND STAY SOCIAL.

7. DO YOU NOW HAVE WAY TOO MUCH TIME ON YOUR HANDS? ONLY ONE THING TO DO. LET GO OF TIME. JUST LET IT GO AND STOP BEATING YOURSELF WITH MINUTES, HOURS AND WEEKS. IGNORE THE NAGGING GUILT OF PRODUCTIVITY. SIGN ON. SIGN OFF. SMASH ALL CLOCKS. THEN INSTEAD OF ALLOWING INCREMENTS OF MEASURE TO REGULATE WHAT YOU DO, JUST DO WHAT YOU FEEL LIKE. TRY MAKING ART, WRITING, READING, THINKING WITHOUT CONSTRAINT, MAKE DEMANDS, SING THE INTERNATIONALE. BUILD REVOLUTIONARY ORGANISATIONS AND MAKE THE CHANGES WE ALL NEED TO THE SOCIAL ORDER.

8. DANCING, WANKING AND SHAGGING ARE FREE AND MAKE YOU FEEL GOOD. DON'T FORGET!

9. IF YOU CAN'T SLEEP EAT LOTS OF STARCHY FOODS LIKE BREAD, PASTA AND RICE. WHITE SUGAR IS FUCKING EVIL, AVOID IT IF POSSIBLE. TRY OTHER SWEETENERS. CHOCOLATE IS A GREAT FORM OF MEDICATION. CHILLI GETS YOU HIGH. NEVER WORRY ABOUT YOUR WEIGHT OR THE FORM YOUR BODY HAS TAKEN. IGNORE BODY FASCISTS, NEVER LET THEM GET TO YOU AND LAUGH AT THEIR GROSS SELF-MADE PRISONS, THEIR OBSCENE ADVERTS AND ROTTEN HOLLOW

DREAMS. TOGETHER WE WILL SMASH THE COMMODITY.

10. SOLIDARITY IS NOT AN ABSTRACT CONCEPT. IT IS SOMETHING THAT WE ALL MUST PRACTICE AND SOMETHING THAT WE ALL MUST COLLECTIVELY STRUGGLE FOR EVERY DAMN DAY. IT SHOULD INFORM ALL THAT WE DO, AND ALL THAT WE DREAM OF AND HOW WE RELATE TO EACH OTHER. TRY BEING KIND INSTEAD OF COMPETITIVE. TRY MUTUAL AID INSTEAD OF HOARDING. SOLIDARITY WILL END CAPITALISM IF IT BECOMES COLLECTIVE PRAXIS. COMMUNISM WILL ONLY BE FORMED THROUGH COLLECTIVE SOLIDARITY WHICH WILL IMPROVE EVERYONE'S MENTAL HEATH.

11. NEVER FORGET IT'S SICK TO BE SICK. WEAPONISE YOUR ILLNESS AND LISTEN TO ITS DEMANDS. TAKE PRIDE IN WHAT IS LABELLED AS DEFORMITY AND KNOW THE REVOLUTIONARY POTENTIAL IN ALL THAT IS DISABLED. CAPITALISM IS THE ILLNESS COMMUNISM IS THE CURE.

Community Building Through the Squatted Night Shelter Project

Elizabeth Vasileva
and Sam Garrett

Over Christmas 2019, a cluster of people drawn from the Brighton NFA community (no fixed abode) and more securely housed activists opened a squat to act as an emergency night shelter. The ethos behind the project was to provide an anti-state, non-hierarchical response to insecure housing and at the same time counteract and highlight the effects of diminishing council provision for homelessness services, especially during cold weather. As an alternative model for solidarity-based mutual support, the original aim was to create a network of squats in commercial buildings to cater for different subsets of the NFA community including a queer-fem squat, a space for young people and a squat to be used as a multi-purpose day centre. We hoped to serve as a bridge between the city's homeless and the wider community, housing NFA people without judgement or policing. Realising this goal was intensely difficult and hampered by evictions, state intervention, internal disputes and negative dynamics. Here we set out some of the issues we encountered with this kind of extremely complex organising and discuss how the pandemic further complicated the process in various ways.

We joined the project a month in, at a point when levels of capacity and engagement were relatively high. There were about thirty people involved in the project including

at least seven or eight regular residents (people using the squat as their primary residence). Non-resident members of the collective took turns doing shifts to support the squat and its occupants. This included DIY, cooking, cleaning, scouting, signposting to homelessness and mental health services, advocacy, emotional support and sourcing things like clothing and bedding, all of which buoyed the material and emotional health of the project as well as preserving important connections to the social world outside. Despite significant trials and always seeming to push to the very limits of people's capacity, the project floated on a wave of camaraderie, optimism and ambition which has kept it going, in various forms, through to today. By late February 2020, the project occupied a large shop building owned by a notable millionaire philanthropist. This enabled some more strategic aspects of the project to be developed. The beginnings of a pop-up social centre were sketched out, with donations of furniture and supplies, a bookshop, clothing station, hot drinks and a separate area for residents away from the more public spaces. Though we weren't able to keep this space, it has since been transformed into a homelessness hub by another local group.

Due to the 24-hour operation of the project, our personal experience (and, we suspect, a common experience) was of a contradictory kind of fragmentation – our sense of belonging to the project somehow had to marry with the fact that we didn't actually have much physical crossover with many of the people involved, and other commitments kept us away from many of the meetings where a more collective sense of identity and purpose was forged. In fact, questions of belonging and ownership seem to have been complicated in many ways from the

very beginning and quickly became tangled in the class-composition of the group and its inclusion/exclusion dynamics. This was also strongly linked to experiences of racism, misogyny, transmisogyny, queer-phobia, ableism and violence among residents, visitors and volunteers alike, something further complicated by the shifting membership of the collective. The residents, though fairly consistent by the time we joined, had been in a state of flux since Christmas, as had the 'crew.'

Problems also arose from the differences in political approach, with many earnest supporters viewing the project through prisms of liberalism and charity which tended to come into conflict with the principles of self-organisation and horizontality held by the majority, ourselves included. Whilst our experience at the project was one of collective negotiation and learning around these dynamics, many other people seemed to disengage from the project after attempts to get involved were not appreciated as expected. Of the many ways in which these perspectives surfaced, paternalistic attitudes towards drug use and 'crime,' habits of conversation, the intrusion of institutional frameworks such as 'duty of care,' and conflict over who should be in charge of 'directing' the project stand out as having roots in a more liberal mindset and a related attachment to class privilege. In fact, some people's narrative of the project is of as a space in which the experiences of people with less privilege were regularly devalued, at the same time as oppressive practices went unnoticed and uncontested. This paradigm frustrated what was otherwise a remarkable alliance of people with no fixed abode, activists, squatters and volunteers drawn from outside the radical milieu. It is worth focusing on this point since it took a long time for these issues to

come under proper scrutiny and for awareness of them to be widespread.

Over the first month of our involvement, the project came to have a stronger focus on its male residents, with control of the space often strongly gendered. Extremes of emotion and stress reactions were common, as was exclusion backed up by aggression or the threat of violence. Some of this was in the context of external pressure, such as the invasion of the building by right-wingers one evening, but some was from residents who were considered core members of the project and who continued to occupy a prominent role in the collective despite behaviour which was widely acknowledged as unsafe and unacceptable. It seems significant in this context that a long-standing objective of the collective – establishing a queer feminist squat – was never realised and that many people from the LGBTQIA+ community found their enthusiasm turned to disengagement as misogyny, queerphobia, racism and ableism began to surface in the space and increasingly went unchallenged. For many members, this signalled the project's passage from political squat, where developing the reach and dynamics of the project had been a strong priority, to residential squat, in which the needs and voices of the residents began to direct the actions of the collective. In turn, the centre of power gradually shifted from the group to the people who considered the squat their home.

The lack of collective challenge to oppressive behaviours seems a relatively common occurrence in radical spaces: when unacceptable behaviour happens, it is ignored or interpreted as innocuous, despite people feeling themselves to be vigilant in looking for it. Alongside the oppressive structures of society at large running through

the veins of the project, there was a phenomenological (and structural) effect which contributed to this situation. Our mental impressions of the project were so influenced by the snapshots we got when present at the building that it became very difficult for the more 'casual' members to get a holistic picture of the project. This meant that the norms that established themselves were often ones which took advantage of this *mechanical* and unconscious production of habits and boundaries. When we joined, certain 'undesirable' dynamics were already the norm – such as public consumption of alcohol – and as newcomers it was all too easy to go along with these, at least to begin with. It became clear that it was only the presence of certain, more outspoken members that kept these behaviours under control. The project had to contend with the mixture of activist sensibility (for example, fervent attention to structural oppression) and the diverse homeless community, many of whom were new to concepts like intersectionality and wary of the way activists tended to operate. To an extent it was necessary to embrace this difference of perspective in order to be able to function effectively – for example, the tussle between purism and pragmatism over things like misogyny could plausibly result in the exclusion of those most in need of support. For our part, when we joined it wasn't clear for a long time what ground 'should' be given to accommodate the negative habits and attitudes of members, especially since our first few weeks were spent mostly doing late or night shifts when the space was more dominated by drinking, heteronormative masculinity and machoism. For this particular community, the boundaries and edges were always in a process of becoming fuzzy, since holding a strong line was dependent on it being held for most of the time by most people, and for those people to be aware

of and open to the nuances of the behaviours. These 'perspective dynamics' operated along a continuum, with full-time or near full-time residents who attended meetings at one end, part-time crew or residents who sometimes attended meetings in the middle, and volunteers who came and did a few shifts and had less working knowledge of the ins and outs of the project at the other end. Those with more or less intensive engagement with the project throughout its different 'phases' mark off moments of normative strength and weakness as well as points of narrative coherence, demonstrating a structural problem – namely, that it was not possible to have 24-hour consistency even though at times it seemed necessary. In this case, one of the most significant divides emerged between those that were in fact doing this – putting days on end into occupying the space – and those who didn't or couldn't.

Coronavirus

When the Covid-19 lockdown was announced, the UK government also announced new civil procedure rules (CPR PD 51Z) which suspended hearings for re-possession of buildings. This suggested there wouldn't be any court proceedings for squatting, and by extension, no evictions of squats – very welcome news. We had just gone through a series of evictions in short succession and being able to ride out the lockdown unimpeded was just what the project needed to regroup after an intense and fractious few weeks.

In practice, the new CPR meant that police and private security teamed up to evict several squats, including those that we tried to hold, bypassing the courts entirely.

Changes in UK law in 2012 had already restricted squatting to commercial properties and seen a marked reduction in the average longevity of occupation. After three illegal and violent evictions within the span of two weeks, it was clear that the emotional and physical capacity of the collective had diminished to the point where we couldn't continue to support a squat. Social distancing meant that many members were unable to visit or hold a building and as meetings began to move online the collective was split in its access to them, something we discussed in terms of a 'digital divide' which operated along class lines. Around the same time, the UK government announced plans to allocate extra funding for local councils to house rough sleepers during the pandemic. In Brighton, the council's response to the crisis was to repurpose a few of Brighton's big seafront hotels to house the city's street homeless population. The council's pre-pandemic (January 2020) estimate of 83 rough sleepers in the city[1] has translated into over four hundred in emergency housing from April onwards. The lockdown hit homeless services very hard and we were left scrambling to try and fill the gap as best we could. Attempts to set up emergency NFA supply points through the mutual aid networks were slow to get off the ground, as was a campaign for a public water tap to be reopened. The city's homeless population, already more likely to be suffering serious health conditions, seemed at great risk, but one we were ill-equipped to help with beyond providing supplies.

This left us with a predicament. On one hand, we did not want to work with state institutions or split the collective up by giving up squats and promoting temporary state

1. Brighton and Hove City Council, 'How We Help Rough Sleepers in the City', *BHCC*, 2020.

accommodation. One of the reasons we started the project in the first place was because we fundamentally disagreed with the ways the state provides services and support for people with no fixed abode. On the other hand, we had no other options to safely shelter people during the pandemic. Squatting seemed unviable, hotels and AirBnB were closed, and the only way of housing some of our residents during the crisis seemed to be accepting the state provided temporary accommodation. State-provided supported housing in the UK comes with a huge amount of disciplinary architecture, demonstrations of 'progress,' and a discourse of deserving your temporary home or your keywork – the rule is usually 'become a functional member of society or accept your fate in a dark doorway.' For some people, this system works. For a lot of other people, it is a catastrophe. Part of our purpose was to demonstrate what else might be possible and effective.

Finding oneself faced with an expectation to engage with state services isn't a new dilemma for activist groups. For us, the challenge wasn't so much about ideological rejection of the state (though this was strongly present), but about clinging onto the connections that had sustained us up to this point. The pandemic caught us at a point where burnout had been accelerating and the focus of the project had swung quite heavily towards crisis management. Once the lockdown started, the collective saw a lot of energy drain from it. We were left with no building and only a small group of people willing to risk contact with others in order to keep support going. The positive impact our community had had on the residents was rendered all the more obvious through its absence, replaced by isolating, rule-bound hostels and pressure to engage with recovery or move-on on the council's terms.

This left many of our friends in a worse mental state than we'd seen them for months and a simmering urgency we couldn't realise – we all agreed, for example, that we needed to "get Brian back in a squat 'cause he's not doing well without it." However, members still expressed a desire to keep trying things and planning for the next stage of the project and we have emerged into the late Summer with rebounding energy and the desire to reflect and learn for what we do next.

Ethics

Having just given this account of the problems faced by the collective before and during Covid-19, it might be surprising to discover that the project has actually been incredibly successful, at least in the eyes of most members. Despite all the internal issues we were dealing with when lockdown was announced, we emerged with energy to support each other and it was only when that became impossible in a physical manner that what we were doing really transformed. It is difficult to identify the reasons why the project developed the way it did, or even on what grounds we think it is 'successful' considering we haven't held a squat for over six months now, this being the primary goal of the collective. Indeed, if we are evaluating through an historical idealist or anarchist ideological perspective, our inability to offer housing outside of state provision would be a sign that we have failed. However, since this doesn't seem to be the feeling, we propose a different evaluative framework which focuses on community and building up relationships and networks. The sustainable ethics of Rosi Braidotti, we feel, offer the tools for understanding both the transformation of the collective and the conditions which have enabled its continuation.

One of the core concepts for sustainable ethics is that of *capacity*, an idea that here treads a path from Spinoza through Deleuze and Guattari. Groups, individuals, worlds, systems – these can all be understood in terms of the capacities of elements to affect and be affected by others, constituted by their connections and disjunctions. It is probably not a coincidence that we used this term regularly to indicate one's ability to be involved at a given moment, not just in terms of the time we had to dedicate, but mental and physical energy, which itself was influenced by factors external to the project as well as the relationships inside the collective. The idea seems to have an intuitive power – we know very well the experience of our collective capacity growing and diminishing in our organising groups. Moreover, we also intuit this is not simply a result of adding or subtracting numbers of people to a group. Capacity is affected by structure, by energy and by the types of connections that exist inside and outside a group (or *assemblage*). With the appearance of Covid-19 and the lockdown, it was clear that both the bigger social-political assemblages we were part of, and the smaller one, were changing in ways we couldn't predict. This pushed the project towards a 'natural' end as the collective was in turn pushed to its limits.

For Braidotti, reaching the limits is not necessarily a negative thing. Indeed, it opens up the possibility of transformation and growth. She conceptualises sustainable ethics as those that push us towards the structural limits of our capacity – becoming what we can become in our current configuration and then going further. Sustainability is reached in a momentary state of equilibrium and co-existence with the world, disrupted by the building up of tension through intensities. One can

imagine building a structure and adding new scaffolding platforms in order to continue building upwards. Such ethics are deeply embedded in the material world, but also operate on the idea that existence is a process and not a fixed state of 'being' – what we *are* is in a constant state of flux, and involves many things that are not directly part of 'us.' Recognising this was a vital part of the development of the collective over the first months of lockdown and in the months to come. In effect, we transformed and adapted to the situation around us, preserving the relationships and mutual care which we had built. As humans, Braidotti suggests, we share the capacity to "feel empathy for, develop affinity with and hence enter in relation with other forces, entities, beings, waves of intensity."[2] Mutual trust in the squat collective is grounded in this consistent experience of one another, our limits and our becomings as entities that are not entirely human. One member said to me, "I now know how every one of you responds to an emergency." However, this trust inheres in something more than the individual. We know what we can fairly expect from one another and what our devotion to the project, and the current state of the project itself, allows us to be able to do and we can track this as it grows and develops – the experience itself denies the idea that trust is placed in an essentialised 'person' rather than a moving process. It is being able to see and follow this moving target that makes all the difference. It is quite clear that these capacities shifted dramatically with the introduction of the pandemic into our project assemblage and the conditions for this trust and predictability changed too.

2. Rosi Braidotti, 'The Ethics of Becoming Imperceptible', in *Deleuze and Philosophy*, ed. Constantin Boundas (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p.141.

Karen Houle articulates a similar kind of openness as the "habitual opening oneself up to affect,"[3] to what one might become. In the project, we built deep empathy and solidarity between groups and individuals who would otherwise rarely encounter one another. We had lots of interactions in which we became *visible* to each other. People who have been dehumanised and seen as problems to be dealt with were able to forge connections in ways that are frequently denied to them. Meeting each other, sparing someone a night or two in the cold, making everyone a cup of tea, all small actions that meant we could reframe the ways we interacted and saw each other. In Houle's words, we were opening up to new connections and increasing our capacity to affect and be affected by each other. The project was constantly challenging people, both physically, with moving, organising and redesigning spaces, but also mentally and emotionally, continuously demanding its participants push boundaries and rethink their roles and the shape of the collective. But we remember moments of equilibrium too, when people sat down together and music and laughter took over in the space, when we worked like a well-oiled machine under pressure and when people unhesitatingly put their bodies and lives on the line to physically defend the people they loved. This is the measure of the success of the project – it transformed people into a community in such a meaningful way that, even if just in glimpses, the importance of housing gave way to the importance of togetherness.

As Shukaitis argues, the collective increase in our capacities to affect and be affected by the world means that personal relationships and caring can become a

3. Karen Houle, *Responsibility, Complexity, Abortion: Toward a New Image of Ethical Thought* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014). p. 112.

significant, if not primary, aspect of anarchist politics.[4] Caring, and the feeling of interconnectedness that solidarity brings forth, is a productive relationship insofar as it is an *act,* it has to be done. It is, therefore, both active and responsive. The location of the project within the everyday lives of its participants meant that it could not function as an aesthetic-political project, either symbolically or for cool anarchist cred. It took people out of their depth and redefined the ways activists create relationships in political spaces by pushing the limits of what is possible to foster *authentic* (for want of a better word) relationships. Thomas Nail articulates this type of solidarity as an affiliation where "political bodies adopt each other's struggles as their own."[5] They do not fight together out of charity or altruism, nor notions of duty or shared goals, but out of a mutual understanding of their interconnectedness. We should be careful not to cast 'understanding' here as passive, in contrast to an active 'doing something about it.' In the framework presented, there is no distinction between what something *is* and what it *does.* Understanding is not just something that happens in your head – it involves a material transformation of the world and your relationship to it.[6] The capacity we had built was not a transitory ability to act, or simply some ideas, but a set of productive relations which structured what was possible in a more general way – once the restrictions of lockdown were eased we were thrust back into this field of possibility and discovered it had in a way remained in place all along.

4. Stevphen Shukaitis, 'Nobody Knows What an Insurgent Body Can Do: Questions for Affective Resistance', in *Anarchism & Sexuality: Ethics, Relationships and Power*, ed. Richard Cleminson and Jamie Heckert (London: Routledge, 2011), p.61-2.
5. Thomas Nail, Returning to Revolution: Deleuze, Guattari and Zapatismo (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p.153.
6. G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* p. 9.

inquiries

Education Workers' Inquiry

The education sector has been a prime site of conflict since the outbreak of Covid-19, subsequent national lockdown and shift to a tiered system of restrictions. As government guidelines and workplace responses have evolved over the past year, we wanted to gauge a sense of how workers across the education sector experienced changes to their working lives, and how these changes have unfolded unevenly over different education levels and employment statuses in the UK. Even prior to the coronavirus pandemic, the education system was facing a slew of crises including the academisation[1] of schools, funding shortages across the sector, and the intense marketisation of higher education. The full scope of the pandemic's impact will remain to be determined; this document merely attempts to archive this moment of the crisis from within, collating the perspectives of low-paid teaching assistants in a Midlands primary school, a Further Education (FE) lecturer at a school in the North of England, and precarious teaching staff from two UK universities in the South-East.

Primary school TAs

We begin with the reflections of two teaching assistants at a state primary school in the West Midlands, written

1. Conversion to "academy" status whereby "under-performing" schools are removed from the control of their local authority and handed over to private interests.

in early June. Their responses were written before the reopening of schools for the few weeks prior to the 2020 summer holidays, a decision that confounded school staff and the general public alike. The below responses were written in anticipation of the final four weeks before the summer break. A more recent update from the respondents confirm that those weeks saw around 30 children in attendance per year group, for four days a week, each week, and that as expected, it became impossible to observe any kind of genuine social distancing. The school in question has now reopened fully, as of this September.

Interview #1

What did your employment situation look like before the pandemic?

I had a permanent contract. During the lockdown, at one point I had a meeting to discuss my job role. This caused a lot of stress as in the event of losing my job I would find it difficult to find a new one. Part of the stress caused me to become severely depressed and I ended up in hospital for a couple of days. The school has since been more supportive.

Before the UK went into official lockdown, did you think your employer took necessary measures to keep you and your students safe?

In terms of infection yes.

How has your work situation changed due to lockdown?

[During the lockdown] I had been supporting the school online. I only went into school twice. There hasn't been

enough support from senior leadership, even when I've asked.

What do you feel the impacts of this change in teaching has been for your students? What measures have the institution taken to mitigate this?

A lot of the children have struggled with not having contact with certain members of staff. The safeguarding team have been checking in with those most vulnerable. More support will be needed when schools reopen properly.

How do you think your institution will respond to the likely loss of income due to the pandemic? Are you/colleagues organising to demand a better response?

I can see there being more responsibility given to remaining staff and possibly less staff members in general.

What do you feel the impacts of this change in teaching has been for your students? What measures have the institution taken to mitigate this?

I hope so. I don't see there being a swift process. The school may have certain year groups in certain days to try and keep social distancing regulations. This has been an extremely stressful time for all involved. I'm hoping we can find a way to get back to our children and support them fully.

Interview #2

What did your employment situation look like before the pandemic?

Employed part-time. Secure (worked at the school for 18 years) as a teaching assistant. I was not involved in any of the plans to change. At first it was just a few key workers' children coming in each day for which there was a rota of two adults each day. I went in once a month, which soon changed to two days a week. I was in on the first day the school reopened and emailed my Head at the end of the day to say that I didn't feel safe in school. Nobody (including adults) were socially distancing. This was addressed by the Head, and an email was sent out to all staff saying that everybody needed to stick to the 2-metre rule which has since been adhered to.

Before the UK went into official lockdown, did you think your employer took necessary measures to keep you and your students safe?

Advice from the government seemed to be very patchy so it was difficult for the Head/senior management to make decisions and therefore pass on any information. There were no changes made at school until the government announced official lockdown. At this point, we just had key workers' children in.

How has your work situation changed due to lockdown?

I am on a rota, and only worked three days across two months at one point. Teaching assistants have been given a list of training courses to work through. I was paid fully during lockdown. I am not working online. I do not have any extra care responsibility but am aware that my partner is in the vulnerable age bracket. I have made it clear at school that I will be sticking to the 2-metre rule and if necessary, wear a mask when we are in a room with ten children, even though the advice

is to not use PPE, and children outside do not have to distance. This is difficult because 5-year-olds want physical contact, so I'm not sure how this will work.

What do you feel the impacts of this change in teaching has been for your students? What measures have the institution taken to mitigate this?

The key workers' children have adapted very well to the situation, but they are literally being childminded at the moment. Our returning students are five and six years old. They will potentially be in an unfamiliar classroom with two unfamiliar adults with tables spaced out, with ten children per classroom. They will have a tray with items that only they are allowed to use, e.g. crayons, whiteboard etc. Indoors they are supposed to distance. I think the government have chosen the age group that will find this the *most* difficult, if not impossible to do! I think this will have a detrimental impact on their wellbeing and early school life.

How do you think the 'transition' back to the workplace will happen? Do you think the safety of staff and students will be prioritised?

The transition is already underway. We will soon have four classes of between eight and ten children with two adults who are not allowed to go into each other's "bubble." I feel that my safety is ultimately down to me to take charge of. There are safety measures in place but I feel that the age of the children coming back make the rules virtually impossible to stick to. I think the head/SLT (Senior Learning Team) are doing their best.

FE Teacher at a School in the North of England

The following response comes from one of the more secure employment situations in this pool of inquiries but speaks to a markedly hands-off managerial approach to student and staff wellbeing, made possible by the general defunding and academisation of the sector.

Interview #3

What did your employment situation look like before the pandemic?

Very secure.

Before the UK went into official lockdown, did you think your employer took necessary measures to keep you and your students safe?

No. The response was slow and at no point did I ever feel particularly supported or like anything was being done specifically or quickly to help us or the students (apart from just closing everything down).

How has your work situation changed due to lockdown?

No teaching online, just gave students booklets to complete over summer. No support – no emotional or wellbeing support or checks – not even an email to ask how we are doing, if we have died or anything of that sort – quite disgusting to be honest with you. If anything has pushed me further away from teaching towards getting a job in media and doing my Masters – it's been the lack of any support.

What do you feel the impacts of this change in teaching has been for your students? What measures have the institution taken to mitigate this?

No measures taken aside from teachers ringing students to do a welfare check (ironically considering our superiors never checked on us). But other than that, I don't know what measures have been in place aside from being able to put work on to an online system for kids to access.

How do you think your institution will respond to the likely loss of income due to the pandemic? Are you/colleagues organising to demand a better response?

Hopefully they'll give me forced redundancy. But not sure on that front – I haven't had a loss of income personally but I feel for supply teachers and those without guaranteed contracts.

How do you think the 'transition' back to the workplace will happen? Do you think the safety of staff and students will be prioritised?

Probably not. I'll probably have a panic attack in week one then won't return. Safety, well-being and the humanistic side of life has never been the strong point of my school I'm afraid. I was even told I won't be allowed to wear a mask in September because of the guidelines – try and stop me!

Precarious teaching staff at Brighton University

At the time of publication, both the respondents to this inquiry and the larger group of casualised staff they

came from, are now unemployed. As expected, their contracts ran out, despite launching a formal grievance procedure with the university which ultimately went unrecognised. No new teaching opportunities have been offered this academic year in the departments in question; the workloads of permanent staff have instead been expanded to pick up the extra teaching resulting from postgraduate teacher layoffs. Responses across two different departments tell a similar story of the university's neglect for its staff and students, and the insistence that casualised workers should be grateful for the opportunity to teach, rather than being recognised as a valued part of the workforce.

Interview #4

What did your employment situation look like before the pandemic?

I was laid off, or rather my fixed term contract wasn't renewed. This was partly due to conflicts with HR and management originating from my attempt for my contractual situation to be recognised as permanent. I am part of UCU but their case workers deemed the case a bit too risky as the department closed ranks. I also organise with Brighton Education Workers, loosely associated to Brighton Solidarity Federation. My employer was equally shit to them, showing loads of performative concern but never taking any measures.

Before the UK went into official lockdown, did you think your employer took necessary measures to keep you and your students safe?

It took a lot of pressure from UCU for them to react.

The uni remained open until the very end, but as I was sacked, I haven't followed it very closely.

How has your work situation changed due to lockdown?

To put it mildly, it has been a financial catastrophe. My teaching contract ended. I was doing some technical work as freelance but that's not happening anymore until October. I had to move back with my parents which, after 12 years living by myself, it is a bit shit. We get along but I miss friends – it feels like being trapped in some temporal dystopia where my agency has been taken away from me.

What do you feel the impacts of this change in teaching has been for your students?

I can't really comment much about this. Although as a PhD student the loss of community and the shattering of any sense of routine has had an important impact.

How do you think your institution will respond to the likely loss of income due to the pandemic?

It is likely that schools [departments] will be forced to merge, recruiting will be put on hold and research funding will be reduced.

How do you think the 'transition' back to the workplace will happen? Do you think the safety of staff and students will be prioritised?

Frankly I do not know but I definitely do not trust the university to care about either the safety or wellbeing of staff and students.

Interview #5

What did your employment situation look like before the pandemic?

Before the pandemic, I had been enrolled on a temporary fractional contract for a month or two, was a member of UCU and had struck with them for the 14 days of industrial action called earlier in the year. This was my first teaching post at a higher education institution, and I had yet to really be involved in any organising efforts, beyond broadly supporting my local UCU branch's pickets and going to a handful of events. The UCU strikes in late 2019/early 2020 included an end to casualisation as one of the "four fights," over which it was negotiating with UCEA, the association that represents our employers. At this point, there was little in the way of specificity in terms of opposing casualisation beyond ending zero-hours contracts, and there was some concern among my colleagues that anything the employers *could* offer us would be intentionally vague and difficult to actually enforce on an institutional level. My employer has always liked to project the idea that it is particularly progressive on issues such as casualisation and equality, by virtue of the fact that it tends to offer fractional contracts instead of zero-hours ones, and because it considers such temporary contracts to be in the interests of most of its casualised staff, who they imagine are mostly in the position of providing maternity cover, or simply seeking "work experience" alongside their PhDs. I suppose they like to consider the hours they offer to be an act of generosity rather than actual work that we undertake.

Before the UK went into official lockdown, did you think your employer took necessary measures to keep you and your students safe?

As the UK went into lockdown, my institution dragged its feet, initially announcing that while it wanted to prioritise the health and safety of its students and staff, it would not be prepared to close (this was rationalised as a necessary step to continue providing students with pastoral support during a time of crisis). As universities slowly began to close like dominoes around the country, on March 15th, my institution budged a little, announcing that it was preparing to move to online teaching, and would be using the following week as a "transition" period, while remaining open for all teaching. This was met with widespread refusal from lecturers (upon the advice of our union) to go into work, which our employers were generally forced to accept. The closing down of face-to-face activities was in a real sense led by the workforce and student body through the simple refusal to come in. It was not the priority of my employer, even at the point when other universities were rapidly closing.

How has your work situation changed due to lockdown?

All of my teaching shifted to online delivery and I was assured that I would be able to retain the same hours and pay even if I wasn't able to actually complete the work. No real training or support was given for this transition – we were really just thrown into the deep end and told to work things out for ourselves. As confusion and stress spread among our students, I had to spend a lot more time responding to their emails and providing pastoral

support that most definitely exceeded my rather hazily defined contracted hours. This was complicated by the fact that my home situation is really not appropriate for either teaching, or trying to soothe my students' anxieties via Teams or Zoom. I live in a small and cramped flat with a partner and two housemates, all of whom are trying to also do their own work: four people sharing three rooms, where quiet and privacy is often not a possibility.

What do you feel the impacts of this change in teaching has been for your students? What measures have the institution taken to mitigate this?

My students have struggled enormously with the move to online teaching. All of them are dealing with their own situations being made more complicated by the coronavirus crisis. Some have caring responsibilities, some have lost work, some have precarious living situations. Many of our students are from low-income backgrounds and simply do not have the technological equipment to attend classes. Most of the time, our classes have been poorly attended, and on occasion not a single person has shown up. I don't blame my students a bit for non-attendance. I think measures should have been taken to ensure everybody could pass the year without having to worry about essays and seminar attendance, but it took a long time for my institution to make decisions about assessment measures, causing stress and confusion for the students. In the end it was decided that seminar performance would no longer be graded, and that students could have the option of being graded via a combination of the seminars they had attended before lockdown, one optional essay

submission, or a 200-word response to a set of seminar questions. This was implemented quite late in the year, though, and the rules were frequently re-drafted, causing even more confusion.

How do you think your institution will respond to the likely loss of income due to the pandemic? How do you think the 'transition' back to the workplace will happen? Do you think the safety of staff and students will be prioritised?

We are already living through my institution's ham-fisted response to the loss of income. As with many other universities, casual contracts are now approaching their end, and the university has repeatedly refused appeals to extend them, despite a large group of us taking out a formal grievance. We anticipate that the university will force permanent colleagues to absorb our workload, which will be absolutely disastrous for our supervisors who are already overworked. A group of colleagues have just started a campaign, with the support of our local UCU branch, to get permanent colleagues to refuse to take on this work and to fight our corner. But precarious staff have long been overlooked in our local UCU branch, and I expect that no substantial solidarity actions will be taken by more secure members of staff, beyond the odd petition signature.

At the moment, the university's plan is to adopt a "blended" model for transitioning back to in-person learning in the 2020 Autumn term. They plan to continue delivering big lectures online through lecture capture, and to resume seminar teaching in person. It is anticipated that most resources will be devoted to first-year in-person teaching, to attract a high intake of students and secure the university's income from fees,

while second and third years are likely to be palmed off with ropey online teaching because they're already committed to their courses. Our university struggles to attract students at the best of times, being a post-92 uni[2] with poor rankings, and sharing a city with a much more prestigious institution. No doubt much of the strategy around transitioning back to normal will be geared towards attracting new students, which will no doubt require more work and more staff, not less! But we know where the cuts will fall already.

Precarious teaching staff at universities in London

The following and final two inquiries come from dynamic, uneven situations in London universities. From the early stages of the pandemic, workers at Goldsmiths led the charge against casualisation, organising a wildcat marking boycott and producing some particularly sharp analysis on the relationship between universities and casualised staff.[3] The boycott has since come to an end after leveraging some successes, as detailed further on the Precarious @ Gold blog.[4]

Interview #6

What did your employment situation look like before the pandemic?

Prior to the pandemic, my employment situation was quite precarious. Goldsmiths' Associate Lecturers are

2. Typically British universities are categorised as pre- and post-92 institutions, the latter referring to former polytechnics which were considered distinct from universities and tended to deliver a higher proportion of vocational programmes, and the former referring to an older class of more highly esteemed, research-intensive institutions.
3. Precarious @ Gold, '#livedexperience', *Precarious @ Gold* (blog), 26 June 2020.
4. Precarious @ Gold, 'Goldsmiths UCU Votes for Dispute with College and Marking Boycott Comes to an End', *Precarious @ Gold* (blog), 2 July 2020.

hourly paid, and in my department, this pay is spread over seven months, which means that every year there are about five months with no pay. Usually, we get extra money for marking essays and exams, and for invigilating exams, but this is far from being enough to cover five months with no pay, which means that we often need to find extra work just for the summer. Our contracts are renewed every year but often at the last minute, meaning that we often do not know how many hours we will be given before the very start of the year. Furthermore, we only know that we will have a new contract on an informal basis, thanks to the convenors of the modules we are working on. We tried to organise for things to change and this at different levels of the university.

1. At the departmental level, we tried to organise among PhD students to make the recruitment process more transparent (as it was at that point only done on an interpersonal basis). We demanded that the vacancies for seminar teaching to be circulated among the PhD candidates of the department. This was only partly successful. We were asked to upload our profile online with a CV and our area of expertise. The course convenors used this as a pool out of which to choose people to teach on their courses. Consequently, the vacancies were not officially announced and the recruitment happened again on a interpersonal basis.

2. At the college level, the precarious teaching staff of several departments started to meet on regular basis about two years ago. We started to compare our contracts and realised that these were strikingly different depending on the department. For instance, some applied a multiplier on office hours but not others. Some allocated paid

hours for training or to attend lectures, and some didn't. Contracts did not have the same end dates. Our first demand was for all contracts to be harmonised between departments. Two representatives (who also became UCU reps for precarious workers) organised workshops with the Business Managers of the different department (and it became clear that a lot of them had no idea what the rules set by the university were when it comes to Associate Lecturers contracts). So it was an attempt at awareness building – reminding our line-managers that they had obligations. Our second demand was for our "assimilation agreement" (the agreement signed about seven years ago between the university and ALs reps) to be reviewed, as it was supposed to be every two years (which was never done). Part of this was to re-evaluate our pay, especially for marking. This demand still hasn't been met. Generally, our aim was to become aware among ourselves of our rights as precarious workers. We for instance realised that the university had responsibilities towards us as soon as we had worked more than two years for them (e.g. we are then entitled redundancy payment if our contracts isn't renewed). After four years, we were entitled to become permanent – which most of us ignored. If working more than 150 hours, we were entitled to become fractional, etc. Thanks to this collective knowledge, we have been able to spot the "mistakes" that regularly appear on our contracts. For instance, four office hours were missing from my contract at the beginning of the year. I also helped a new colleague to claim 20 missing hours for attending lectures. Although none of our demands were met, I feel it has been extremely positive to start organising as a collective in the last two years. We built links and solidarities with other precarious workers groups at Goldsmiths (e.g. during the campaigns to

bring the cleaners and the security guards in-house) and student groups (especially GARA – Goldsmiths anti-racist action). It certainly helped to organise quickly when the pandemic began as most of the communication channels between ALs, but also ALs and students, had already been built. Although the Union provided some organisational help, it was mostly a network of precarious workers self-organising

Before the UK went into official lockdown, did you think your employer took necessary measures to keep you and your students safe?

Yes and no. For a long time the college did not take any extra measures. But pressure from students and staffs started to build up and the college decided to close campus two weeks prior the official lockdown.

How has your work situation changed due to lockdown?

After the college closed, all teaching was moved online with two weeks of term remaining. As nothing had been thought in advance, all staff (including hourly paid) were asked to reflect on how to provide online teaching, which software to use, GDPR, etc. Later, this became a source of dispute between hourly paid staff and the college and we asked to be paid for the extra work we provided without pay. We had to train ourselves on which platforms and software to use and how to interact with students; no support was provided. We have lost all hours of invigilation but otherwise I have been given all the hours I had been contracted for. Regarding teaching online, it went okay but I found it nervously draining. I had problems with internet connection and, as I explain below, it was a hard period for some of my students. Also,

my living conditions are not ideal for online teaching: I live in one room with my partner with no adequate desk, so I had to teach sat on the floor, which caused back and neck problems.

What do you feel the impacts of this change in teaching has been for your students? What measures have the institution taken to mitigate this?

I have the impression online teaching was challenging, and at times very upsetting, for some of my students. I lost contact with at least half of them, for diverse reasons. Some could not access the online course for technical reasons. Their appliances didn't support the software or their internet connection wasn't good enough which means they couldn't connect, or were unable to speak or hear us. Some had to share computers between several members of the household. Some could not attend for personal reasons, because they had duty of care or because they were placed in quarantine camps when returning in their home countries. I tried my best to mitigate for this as much as I could. I sent all materials and everything that had been covered in seminars to all students, but I am not sure this was enough. The institution is supposed to have lent some computers to students in need (not sure how well advertised this was...). All submission dates for essays were postponed (with 1 to 1.5 extra months granted to the students). All exams were moved online (for my course, students were given 24 hours to complete what should have been a two-hour exam). The rules and procedures for mitigating circumstances were simplified (so that student did not have to get a letter from GPs in the middle of the pandemic – they could self-declare). I am sure the admin staff of the departments did their

best to find solutions in the short term but they had to heavily rely on precarious teaching staff as the first point of contact with students.

How do you think your institution will respond to the likely loss of income due to the pandemic? Are you/colleagues organising to demand a better response?

No clear plans for the transition have been announced at the moment. At the moment it seems that the Autumn term might happen online in priority (at least for lectures). If seminars are to be given in person, it will be in reduced seminar groups, but Goldsmiths might struggle to find the space on campus. To attract students paying enormous fees, the university is communicating on prioritising their security. Conversely, they haven't shown great concern for the wellbeing of the cleaning staff who still had to come on campus during the lockdown. They haven't shown great concern either concerning their duty of care towards their precarious staff.

Interview #7

What did your employment situation look like before the pandemic?

I worked at a couple of universities as a Visiting Lecturer or Teaching Associate. These were all single semester teaching contracts for individual modules with no guarantee of further employment. I was involved in anti-casualisation work through the UCU and outside it. Casual staff in my department were fairly well organised and took on local issues like being expected to start work without contracts, the expansion of expected work hours beyond contractual agreements, etc. We were also

trying to work with the university to convince them to consolidate their casual positions into a number of full time teaching jobs. There was some controversy about whether this represented too much of a compromise (the new posts would in all likelihood be teaching only positions with no paid research time), but it did seem like some progress was being made and the proposals were slowly being passed on up the management hierarchy.

Before the UK went into official lockdown, did you think your employer took necessary measures to keep you and your students safe?

At one university, my Head of School made the decision to suspend all in-person teaching and on-site work about a week before the rest of the university shut down. She received a supportive message from her line manager saying it was the right decision, which was a relief to her but also quite insulting because it was a decision he could have implemented himself at any time. At another university, I had to get in touch and tell them that I wasn't going to come onto campus. At first, they tried to find cover for my lessons until eventually they had to admit that in-person teaching wasn't appropriate. I had a genuine anxiety that this would be seen as opportunist and lazy and would jeopardise any future work there. At both places, it felt like the institutional decisions for student and staff safety were made by low-level staff and then accepted by the university, but that meant all the risk was pushed down.

How has your work situation changed due to lockdown?

I was already at a point in the term where I'd delivered all the content and we were switching to self-directed work

by the students, so ending in-person teaching wasn't too problematic, and I've only done a small amount of online stuff. I've had no meaningful support for any of this, and, like most people, my home is not a suitable place to work from. I had an agreement for some paid word assisting on assessments later in the semester at another institution and that work has all been lost. I also lost all the other casual work I do outside of the education sector.

What do you feel the impacts of this change in teaching has been for your students? What measures have the institution taken to mitigate this?

I struggled most with reformulating the assessment; what was originally meant to be a live group performance has become individual videos. While we were making this transition and abandoning the hope of traditional assessment, I was instructed to set the students some tasks preparing for the old assessment for no other reason than to keep them busy for a week and give the illusion that we knew what we were doing and were confident that things would be back to normal (though privately we all knew that assessment would never take place). So, at a time when students were coming to terms with the severity of the global pandemic and were making difficult choices about whether to return to their parents' homes in anticipation of travel restrictions, we were tasking them with pointless busywork. Since then, I've had limited contact with them; some have evidently not kept in touch with the institution or engaged with their studies, and I can't say I blame them. I don't know why we're putting them through the rigmarole of assessment; it has no pedagogic worth and judging by the panicked emails I receive it's clearly adding stress and anxiety.

How do you think your institution will respond to the likely loss of income due to the pandemic? Are you/colleagues organising to demand a better response?

The institution recently unveiled a strategic plan for the next 10 years. This included, among other things, a pivot to more online teaching and a 'streamlining' of available modules. Coronavirus has provided the opportunity for it to accelerate these plans. We have already had indications that professional services/admin staff will be required to 'moderate' online teaching. This looks like adding to their already heavy workload by asking them to take on tasks that would ordinarily be expected from teaching staff. Switching to online delivery means even more of the basic administration of teaching can be moved from academic staff to comparatively less well paid admin staff. This enables the university to reduce its employment of casual staff.

How do you think the 'transition' back to the workplace will happen? Do you think the safety of staff and students will be prioritised?

The university is adamant that some in person teaching will resume in September, but privately no one believes that this will be anything more than a few token lectures, if that. Staff have been instructed to prepare for both online and in person teaching, effectively doubling their workload for no other reason than to maintain the illusion being offered to prospective students that they might have something approaching a normal university experience.

Prison Conditions in the Pandemic

It's hard to think of an environment more conducive to the spread of a highly infectious virus than a prison. Prisons in England and Wales[1] are filled far beyond their capacities. Incarcerated people in England and Wales and globally have to fight to access inadequate healthcare on prison medical wings. Treatment, even for the most serious of conditions, is often denied or delayed. The prison population in England and Wales is rapidly ageing; around 16% are over 50, and according to a study by Age UK, around 600 UK prisoners are over 70. Prison is an environment which damages the health of those contained inside it. Lack of access to exercise, sunlight, nourishing food and healthcare creates new health conditions and compounds 'underlying' ones arising from the heavy proletarianisation of the populations from which the majority of those who find themselves in prison come. Moreover, the criminalisation of drug use and supply which funnels vulnerable people into prison also curtails the ability to practice harm reduction when inside, leading to more serious health conditions on top of the dangers of unsafe drug use. If they were living 'on the out', many currently incarcerated people would have received instructions from the NHS to 'shield' for the duration of the pandemic. Instead, they are confined to conditions in which even social distancing is an impossibility.

1. Scotland and Northern Ireland operate separate prison systems. This piece focuses mainly on English and Welsh prisons, which are operated more directly by the UK government's Ministry of Justice.

As we saw the Covid-19 pandemic advancing, abolitionist groups such as Community Action on Prison Expansion, the Prisoner Solidarity Network (PSN), Abolitionist Futures, Anarchist Black Cross, Bent Bars and Blue Bag Life called on the government to release prisoners, arguing that not doing so would be tantamount to a death sentence for many. These calls were not heeded, as Sarah Jane Baker laments in her reflections below on organising to free prisoners during the pandemic.

After the first Covid-19 prison outbreak in HMP Peterborough in March, which claimed the life of Brian Moore, aged just 48, Justice Secretary Robert Buckland announced that 4,000 'low risk' prisoners would be released (just 4.5% of the total prison population in England and Wales). However, by the end of June only around 1,000 prisoners had actually been released early, and many of these only on temporary release. Meanwhile, new prisoners are being received into custody every day.

As in the UK in general, Covid-19 testing has been erratic and sparse within the prison system. The Ministry of Justice have been unwilling to publish accurate figures of Covid-19 related deaths in prison, and prison conditions already cause early death, often via respiratory diseases, so it is difficult to get an accurate picture of exactly how many people incarcerated in England and Wales have died from the coronavirus so far. There are currently still just under 80,000 people incarcerated in England and Wales, all of whom are highly exposed to contracting the virus due to overcrowding.

In their attempts to minimise the spread of Covid-19, UK prisons have been operating a skeleton system.

Incarcerated members of the PSN have reported 23-24 hour lockups as the norm, and that in some prisons the kitchens have been shut down, with prisoners being denied access to hot food, and given one meagre packed lunch a day, being told they should eat just half their sandwich at lunchtime and save the rest for dinner. Inside members have sent out photocopied documents given to them by prison staff recommending that prisoners sharing cells should sleep top and tail with their cellmates (rather than facing the same direction) while sleeping, to limit the spread of infection. Obviously, this is absurd. Other members said they had been told to wipe the phones clean with a sock (without any disinfectant) after using them. Prisoners are being denied access to showers, with the justification given that being out of their cells poses potential risk of contagion. This makes crucial hygiene practices impossible to adhere to.

Abolitionist and reform groups demanded prisoners be given access to face masks, gloves and anti-bacterial soap or gel, but many prisons are not providing this. Instead, these necessities are only available at inflated prices at the canteen. This means that only the most financially privileged of prisoners can access necessary personal protective equipment. And prisoners who are put on a 'basic' regime as a punishment for behavior infractions are seriously limited in the amount of money they are allowed to spend at the canteen, even if they would otherwise have access to money. The PSN launched an emergency fund which has raised almost £20,000 to help prisoners purchase necessary hygiene items and contact their loved ones, but this barely scratches the surface.

In late March, visitation was stopped in all English and

Welsh prisons. At the time of writing, the majority of prisons are still not accepting visitors. This makes prisoners yet more isolated and estranged from their families at a time when many are concerned about vulnerable or isolated loved ones and would wish to be in more contact than normal. This has a particularly disastrous impact on children in prison, people in immigration prisons or incarcerated in psychiatric institutions, prisoners who are parents or carers for people outside prison, prisoners who are particularly vulnerable and reliant on support from the outside, or prisoners with no access to money as phone calls out of prison are prohibitively expensive.

Without face-to-face interaction with loved ones, and with reduced phone time due to 24-hour lockup, prisoners' mental health has been devastated. On 28th May *The Guardian* reported that there had been on average six suicide attempts per day in UK prisons since lockdown was imposed on 23rd March.

Early on in the lockdown, currently incarcerated PSN member Christian Barabutu, who was suffering with Covid-19 like symptoms, wrote of the conditions in his prison:

> "I'm currently confined to my cell for 7 days, no phone calls or showers as I recover from Corona symptoms. Things are not great, there's no consistency with anything going on. I've seen on the news claims of all prisoners being given so-called handheld phones. That is a lie, inmates in here are struggling to get phone calls, and if you're isolated due to symptoms or, as they say, you've been in the vicinity of someone with symptoms, then you're isolated and confined to

your cell for 7 to 14 days with no shower or phone call. Exercise is becoming a rare thing, and comes by once in a blue moon, like Christmas."

Coronavirus kills prisoners too

Sarah Jane Baker is a former prisoner who has been actively campaigning for prison abolition and transgender prisoners' rights with the Prisoner Solidarity Network (PSN) and the Trans Prisoner Alliance since her release. Throughout the pandemic, she has been demanding the release of prisoners. Here, she reflects on her concerns for those still inside during the pandemic:

> It would appear that our government does not currently have any viable plan in place to offer an amnesty to all prisoners considered to 'present a low risk to the public.' Although prison abolitionists (like me) demand the release of all prisoners, no government would make so bold a step.
>
> Other countries across the globe were releasing 'low risk' prisoners weeks ago to try to halt the spread of the COVID-19 virus within their prisons. Prisons have always been a fertile breeding ground for any airborne viruses that any prisoner or member of staff could bring in. It is surprising that so many countries considered to be 'third world' countries by organisations such as Liberty and Amnesty International began releasing prisoners from the start of the pandemic, yet our current Conservative government seems to place little value on the lives of prisoners.
>
> As an ex-prisoner who served 30 years in 20 prisons,

and as a prison abolitionist, I am concerned about the way the Ministry of Justice has allowed prisoner's lives to continue to be placed at risk within an already overpopulated prison system. At a time when our prisons are full to twice capacity and with a third of prison officers leaving their jobs to become immigration officers in detention centres or Border Force, many prisoners in our jails are forced to share their cells with any prisoner that arrives at the prison. Not only is social distancing impossible to enforce on prison landings and cramped prison cells but many prisoners will be terrified and afraid that they may die in prison.

Anyone with any experience of prison knows how prison landings are places where rumours, gossip and suspicion spread like wildfire! With most of Britain's prisons being on permanent lock down, and prisoners not having access to visits or even phone calls, information will generally trickle down to the inmates. With a third of prisoners having a diagnosed mental illness or personality disorder, I can imagine that incidents of self-harm are on the increase across the prison estate.

Any disruption to a prison's routine is unwelcome to both staff and inmates. Prisoners' canteen orders are being delayed, opportunities to use prison showers are restricted as are opportunities to use the prison's pay-phones. Prison officers are well aware that their safety is better guaranteed if the prison environment is stable and prisoners rather ironically crave order with everything happening at a pre-planned time.

Before Covid-19, the government showed no evidence of having any consideration for the welfare of prisoners and their families. Indeed, the current right wing government has always employed a rhetoric that demonised the 'other', whether they be prisoners or not. It does concern me that once this crisis is over, they will be even less money available to keep our country running, let alone improve an antiquated prison system that is no more than an expensive way of making people worse.

With a damning record that speaks for itself, the Ministry of Justice has conceded on many occasions that of every 100 prisoners released from custody, 80 will be back in prison within 18 months, often for a crime that invites a sentence even more severe than their previous sentence. Yet there is always the forgotten prison population, those who are not considered a danger to anyone. Often serving very short sentences, they too could be the next victims of a pandemic that could have been managed within the prison environment by releasing them. How is the British prison system coping at the moment? A number of prison officers from five London prisons have told me in the last week of how their prisons are poorly equipped with Personal Protective Equipment for prison staff or prisoners, and there are not enough cleaning materials or basic hygiene products for prisoners. With people still being sent to prison every day, it is only a matter of time before more outbreaks occur.

It would be too easy to take pot-shots at the prison system for the way it has allowed prisoners to be

treated with neglect during this current pandemic. At first glance, it could appear that the basic human rights of prisoners are being ignored or held in contempt by our government. However, anyone with any experience of the British prison system will be aware that the Ministry of Injustice has a chequered history of refusing to ensure that the human rights of those in our prisons are enshrined in law. Indeed, even before the Covid-19 pandemic, although numerous prisoners had cause to take their cases to the European Court of Human Rights, any European court ruling would usually be rejected vigorously by our government.

I, rather naively, hoped that our government would take this opportunity to demonstrate to the world how humanity was always at the forefront of government policy. Unfortunately, we as a nation must take responsibility for our government's action and, in many cases, lack of action.

Our government could, at the stroke of a pen, release approximately twenty-thousand 'low risk' prisoners. The only thing that could be preventing the government from making this gesture of humanity is that is it may lose them right wing votes in the next general election! For those prisoners currently being held in private prisons and immigration centres, with the private companies dependent on 'bodies' to make more profits for their shareholders, I hold little hope for amnesty.

Release into lockdown

John Bowden was released from prison in late April,

after serving 40 years. Here, he describes the lockdown conditions he experienced in prison, and the extreme challenges faced by people recently released from long jail terms. In his interview with *Invert*, he discusses how the pandemic and ensuing lockdown have compounded barriers to access, as well as posed challenges for organising with other ex-prisoners on these issues. It is worth noting that, due to bail hostels being closed or not accepting new referrals, hundreds of prisoners who are due for release or who have had their parole applications approved have had their release dates indefinitely postponed.

Invert: Hi John, thank you so much for speaking with us! I'm so happy you're out and can't wait to hear about how it feels to be finally free, particularly under such apocalyptic conditions! But first of all, I'd be really interested to hear about your last month or so in prison during the first part of the lockdown.

John: The jail that I was in was called Warren Hill, a category C prison, with a so-called progressive regime, so the regime comparatively was very liberal and relaxed in terms of freedom of movement but just before my release they began to screw it down due to Covid-19. It's now in complete lockdown, everybody locked within their cells. It felt very much like at a point in the 1980s when I was in prison and there was the AIDS virus and there was so much official ignorance about it that if a prisoner was received into the prison diagnosed with AIDS he'd be placed into solitary confinement, the other prisoners couldn't go near him and the staff would dress up like bloody space-men just to feed him through his door. So the same thing happened when this current virus was

said to be entered into the prison system, it went into total lockdown, everyone stuck in their cells 24 hours a day. Sometimes three to a cell. I mean, they talk about social distancing, it certainly doesn't apply to prisons. So they just weren't prepared for it.

Invert: Sending HIV positive people to prison in the late 80s when the prognosis was so grim is unimaginably cruel! Interesting that you were inside for both of these pandemics and have drawn parallels between the two. How did it feel to be released after 40 years inside?

John: Leaving prison was like passing from the darkness into the light, you're emerging from a very subterranean place, it's like passing from one world into another.

Invert: And was your release put forward or impacted in any way by the pandemic?

John: I should have been released very early in the morning, they normally release people at 7 o clock, but they said that because [of the pandemic] all the hostels are closed, but they found one of only two still open, so they released me a very late in the afternoon, a week later than I was due to be.

Invert: How was it to re-enter the world and find it in total lockdown?

John: Funnily enough there are two ways I looked at this, because I'd spent so much time inside I thought the hustle and bustle of the real world would be overwhelming, but being released into an urban environment in lockdown made my transition a degree easier, I suppose. But it was a strange, overwhelming experience to finally leave after

all that time. It was a surreal experience. For a long time I'd come to terms with the idea that I'd die in prison, that I'd never see the outside world again, although it's a world that's changed from recognition from when I was arrested [aged 26].

Invert: That's a really interesting way of seeing it. I guess the lockdown and people's lives slowing down must make re-adjusting easier in some ways. Can you talk a bit about your situation post-release?

John: Yes, well I'm formally free, I was released on parole about 6 weeks ago. However, the agreement with the parole board was that after my release I would have to go into approved accommodation, but contrary to the normal procedure of three months in this accommodation, the parole board and prison service have said I have to spend at least one year here. My belief is that at a parole hearing two years ago, the first time all the professionals were present, the board were in a bit of a spin because they just didn't want to release me, but didn't have any real grounds to keep me, so they made sure the bail hostel would agree to have me for at least one year. Then my parole got knocked back for two years. It's a bizarre situation here, to have one foot outside and one foot in prison. I'm under curfew. I believe that I am still in a carceral situation here. And it's a very hazardous environment right now because, much like in prison, we can't leave even if it's not safe. There have been two cases of the coronavirus here and the poor guys have just been locked in their rooms. It's a very hazardous environment.

Invert: That sounds like a nightmare, I'm sorry you're being forced to live in these conditions. Would you mind

telling us a bit more about what the processes are for people released after long sentences, and also whether these processes have been affected by the lockdown?

John: Yeah, so hostels like this generally are designed for prisoners who've been in open prisons before release, so have received advice before release around accessing benefits and things. These hostels are just here to hold people. But I'd been in a closed prison prior to release, so these hostel staff had no clue how to support someone like me, so for the first few weeks I had no support at all. My partner was actually the one who started my application for Universal Credit. So there was no real support at all from the probation service, but its changed slightly because I've demanded it, but for the first few weeks there was no support whatsoever, none. I couldn't visit job centres [they are closed due to the pandemic] so I had to do all my applications online, but I don't know how to use a computer. And of course the benefit system is overloaded anyway because of the virus. I had no ID or anything when I came out, which has been a massive barrier, I couldn't register with a doctor, make benefit claims, lots of stuff. Fortunately with the assistance of some friends I've got some ID.

I think the important thing about long term prisoners' integration back into the community, the de-incarceration of people is a process, but there needs to be a support system in place to assist this process. The problem is, the emphasis of the probation service has changed drastically over the last 10-15 years. It used to be very much a client-centred organisation, focused on providing the necessary assistance, the emphasis now is public protection. Its merged with the prison system as one 'public protection'

body, so it's not so fundamentally focused on positively re-entering people into society, but rather monitoring and controlling us once we are released. It's very difficult for long term prisoners, which is why there's such a high rate of recall, particularly among lifers.

Invert: And presumably there's not much support from the state to help people get back on their feet after a long sentence?

John: In terms of support services for released prisoners, it is virtually non-existent. If you want to know why there's such a high rate of so-called recidivism, it's because there is no support out there for so-called long term prisoners being released back into the community. However, there is a small number of people I've got to know, most of them political activists, and it's been really, really nice, they've supported me so much.

Invert: I'm glad you've managed to find that support network. I'm interested in what can be done to support or campaign for people who've recently experienced incarceration and are facing the very deliberately erected barriers to accessing benefits, housing etc.

John: Well it a bit funny you asked that actually. See, in the hostel we're on curfew times which means you can only leave at certain times during the day. They were pretty liberal about it, but then they decided to introduce this new rule saying because of the virus you can only leave the hostel for one hour a day. And you know, because of the location of it, to access [the local area] for shopping, you would need much more than an hour to get it done, and of course to reform relationships with family and friends living in other parts of London. Now, on the day

they decided this new rule, some people who were out that day were actually sent texts by the management saying you must return to the hostel. It was pointed out to people that if they breach this rule, they would be in breach of their license conditions and would be subject to recall [to prison]. So we requested a meeting with them, which initially they refused to do because we couldn't congregate in a room to have the meeting. So I said "well then let's have it on the yard," so we all went on the yard, one of them came out, we kept our social distancing, and we put the position to them. The compromise then reached was that providing we leave the hostel and we tell them where we're going, and how long we were likely to be then there may be some degree of discretion shown. But there was also a lot of anger prevailing at the time because of this. But we managed to organise it, and put our position to them in a very rational, diplomatic way and I don't want to use the term capitulate, but they backed off and we came to an agreement.

So, now the next issue is this question of rent. We're charged a £170 a month what they call 'maintenance fee' which is coming out of the £300 we get each month on the benefit system. Or lots of people don't even have yet. So as far as I look at it, this is rent! Now, we're being held here against our wills, I have to stay for at least one year, and I think whichever way you look at it it's not legal to make people pay rent when they are being held against their will and didn't choose to be there, and don't have the option to bugger off somewhere else. That needs to be looked at I think, so we've also formed a resident's representative committee. At the moment we can't have residents meetings because of this corona thing, because of social distancing. But they have agreed that we can

form a representative council. We're getting a structure together with a representative group, so yeah, who knows how it'll all turn out but I'm feeling reasonably hopeful.

But to answer your question, I don't know, I think it's important people who don't have records or aren't on probation or on license or any of that nonsense get involved in these struggles cos we have to keep our noses clean to a certain extent. There are all sorts of ways to put pressure where it hurts to make them rethink the way they treat people who might not seem it but are actually very in need, so taking those opportunities when you can. I think that's the most important thing.

"Pressing the reset button": abolitionist struggles in the light of Covid-19

A few weeks after the interview, John remarked "the current total lockdown in jails will probably be enforced permanently." This is certainly what is being advocated by the Prison Officer's Association (POA), the union for screws. Historically, the POA have always been extremely strong, with a membership of almost all of those working in prisons. They have a huge amount of bargaining power, and often dictate policy decisions on prisons.

In an article in *Gatelodge*, the POA's magazine, national chair Mike Fairhurst wrote that the lockdown measures had led to a "controlled, well ordered, less violent and more stable prison estate." To this end, he called the pandemic "an opportunity to press the reset button," allowing the Ministry of Justice and prison management an opportunity to push through tighter controls and increased punitiveness in prisons. It seems that the new powers granted to prison officers are not something they

are willing to give up, and that the potential longevity of these measures or their adoption as the 'new normal' is evident to prisoners. A currently incarcerated PSN member wrote,

"This virus is here to stay and it seems the prison is lapping it up. It has given them control and they do not want to lose it so it seems lock up is the future of the prison service, less drugs, less trouble and compliant prisoners."

Abolitionists face new struggles in the face of tightening controls on prison life. How do we resist these new impositions without our fight becoming reformist? How can we frame our push against the POA's attempts to weaponise the pandemic as a step in the struggle for abolition rather than as an attempt to get back to the already dire state of things before the pandemic hit? What can we do to ensure that currently incarcerated people are centred in these struggles, at a time when the ability to organise inside and communicate with those outside prison is even more restricted than usual?

This summer's unprecedented uprisings in the US and elsewhere have insisted upon the urgent need for the total abolition of the carceral state. These responses to the racist violence of the carceral state inspire us and give us strength.

For various reasons – not least that all of us were trying to readjust to life in lockdown, impeding our ability to act fast – attempts to force the Ministry of Justice to release prisoners at the start of the pandemic were unsuccessful. Now, we need to refocus our efforts on thwarting the permanent implementation of more restrictive regimes

across prisons in England and Wales. We must not only struggle for the amelioration of conditions for prisoners, but also to disrupt and disempower the POA and prison regimes, to force through a situation where prisoners are not rendered "less trouble and compliant," but are, instead, in a position to more effectively resist.

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