Marching to keep Wales nuclear free

Sean Thompson reports

Campaigners from Welsh anti-nuclear groups will march the 44 miles from Trawsfynydd to the Eisteddfod at Boduan next month in support of a nuclear free Wales and against plans to site the new generation of Small Modular Reactors that are under development at the decommissioned nuclear plants at Trawsfynydd in Gwynedd and Wylfa in Ynys Mon (Anglesey).

The march will arrive at the Eisteddfod on August 6 and a rally will be held there.

The march to the Eisteddfod site will take four days and along the way participants will run stalls, distribute leaflets, and host film screenings as part of their protest against new nuclear projects being developed in the north of Wales.

March organiser Sam Bannon from CND Cymru said: "In collaboration with People Against Wylfa B (PAWB) and the Society for the Prevention of Everlasting Nuclear Destruction (CADNO), this action will demonstrate our opposition to the rehabilitation of this unsafe, costly, and antiquated form of energy production that distracts from the goal of zero net carbon emissions and contributes directly to the production of nuclear weapons.



"In CND Cymru, we recognise the need for a rapid and just transition away from fossil fuels. And so, in showing our opposition to SMR's, we are also advocating for a green new deal for Cymru. Harnessing the power of our abundant natural resources using truly sustainable means and investing in

energy storage technologies, would without any doubt be cheaper, quicker, and safer as well as creating considerably more employment for people in Wales."

The marchers have the support of Welsh Nuclear Free Local Authorities, who oppose both the proposals for Trawsfynydd and Wylfa and the Westminster government's plans to develop 24 gigawatts of nuclear power generating capacity in the UK by 2050.



Councillor Sue Lent from Cardiff, Chair of the NFLA Welsh Forum added: "Nuclear projects are notorious the world over for being delivered very late and way over budget. Bechtel and Westinghouse have been involved in the development of two new reactors at Vogtle in Georgia. Construction there started in 2009, yet only this year will both reactors come on stream, and the project is being delivered at a cost approaching US$30 billion (£23 billion), over double the original budget.

"Wales has wind and rivers, and a long coastline. Imagine what could done with £23 billion, if it were invested not only in a national programme to insulate every home in Wales to the highest standard to reduce fuel consumption and energy bills, but also in renewable energy technologies to generate and store clean sustainable electricity from wind turbines, micro hydro-electric schemes, and from wave and tidal power projects, drawing on the natural resources with which our nation is blessed?"

"Instead of nuclear, we want to see investment in Wylfa and Trawsfynydd so they can be transformed into sites of engineering excellence for the development and deployment of

renewable technologies and storage



“Wales can derive a lot more electricity far more quickly and at much less cost, without creating ugly new nuclear power plants that contaminate their environment, operate at risk, and leave a costly legacy of deadly radioactive waste in their wake. Let’s do this – let’s keep Wales nuclear free.”

Republished from Red Green Labour: https://redgreenlabour.org/2023/07/23/marching-to-keep-wales-nuclear-free/

Photographs from: https://www.stop-wylfa.org/

Cymru/Wales – “Strike: Our collective future depends on this movement”

Robat Idris writes on the Undod website about the importance of the current strike movement for Welsh/Cymraeg struggles and relates it to the history of the nation’s struggle.

Strike: Our collective future

depends on this movement

Introduction

> *“Public sector workers are not on strike because they want to break the system. They’re on strike because the system is broken.” – Mick Lynch, RMT leader, Aberdare, 21-01-2023*

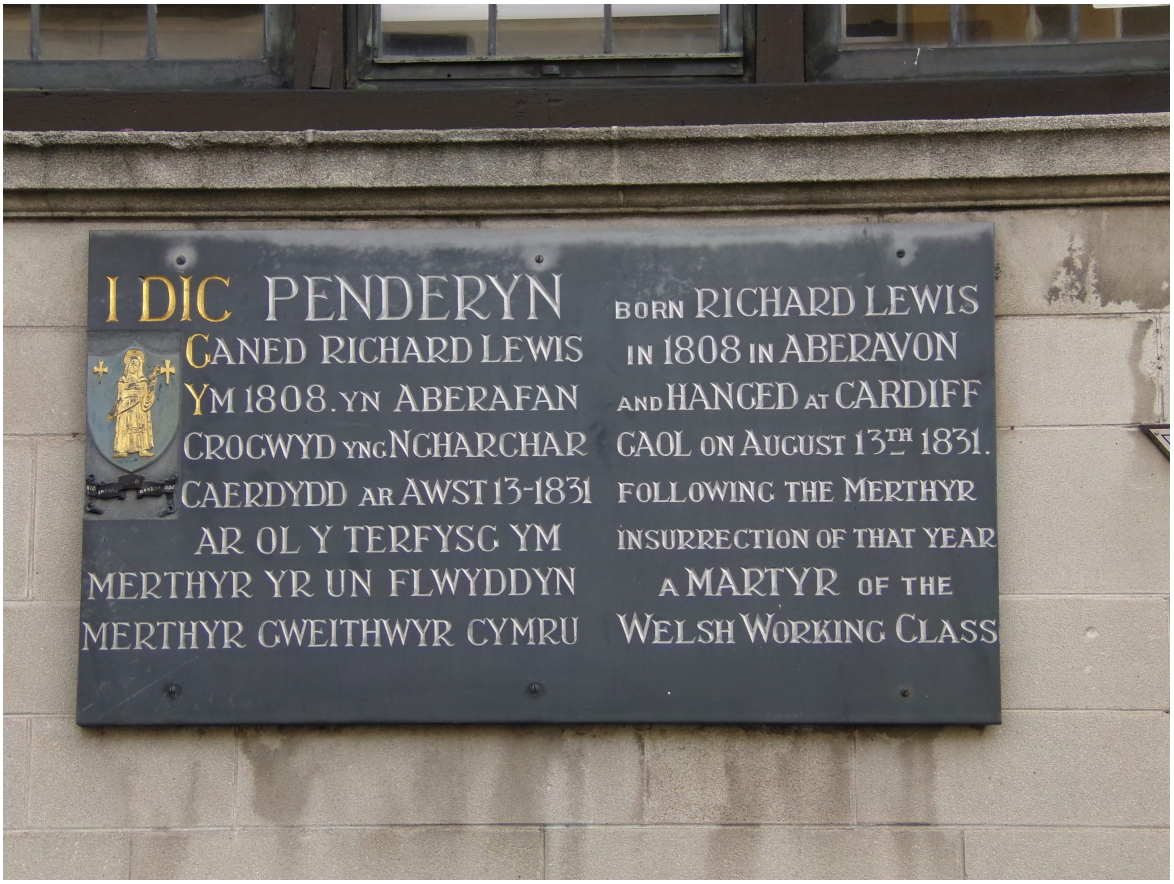
Sometimes, saying nothing and doing nothing tells a lot about who you are. It shows which side you’re on. It shows if you understand what a crisis is or whether you don’t. We live in such a time at the moment. That is why we must support those workers who are on strike. Because in the end, our collective future depends on what the outcome of this fateful battle will be. Do we want our people to live without the threats of poverty, cold, hunger and unemployment or undignified work being hanging over them constantly? Do we want to continue to suffer under the tyranny of capitalism owned by the few? Do we want to surrender our basic rights to strike and protest?

The current strikes are much more significant than just seeking more pay for specific workers. They are all fighting to benefit the wider society, and protect the services the public treasure. They are a cry that echoes from the hospitals and the schools and the railways and the mail vans and the colleges that proclaim quite clearly: “Enough is enough”. The strikers know very well that one in three children live in poverty in Wales, that the use of food banks is on the rise, and that fuel poverty is rampant. All this following over a decade of austerity, with more to come. The strikers know that wages do not keep up with inflation, especially in the public sector – this was not the case when such inflation was seen in the 80s of the 20th century.

Do we want to lose even the partial freedom we have? Such are the implications of Tory anti-strike legislation. Or do we

want to act according to the heroic traditions of workers of the past?

Historical background



Dic Penderyn plaque, Merthyr Tudful

Cymru saw the Red Flag raised for the first time in Merthyr in 1831, followed by the unjust execution of Dic Penderyn – and up to 24 people were killed during the fighting as well. “Cheese and bread” and “Down with the King” were some of the slogans of the rebellion.

In 1839 Cymru saw the Chartists fighting for rights, when around 20 people were killed by the authorities in Newport.

Cymru saw the longest strike ever, and one of the bitterest, when Bethesda quarrymen rose up against the brutal working conditions of the owner Lord Penrhyn, whose estate had profited enormously from slavery in Jamaica. The strikers would display posters in the windows of their houses with the

words *“Nid oes bradwr yn y tŷ hwn”* (“There is no traitor in this house”). The strike lasted from 1900 until 1903, and many had to move to the Valleys to work in the coal industry.

The coalfield, of course, has been the cradle of the workers’ strength, and where there was a continuous dispute between the coal masters and the peasants who lost their health and sometimes their lives in the mines. In 1910 Churchill sent the army to Tonypandy to quell the efforts of the miners to stand against the masters. Churchill’s name is still hated in the area. Closer to our time, came the great miners’ strike in 1984, which gave Thatcher the opportunity to defeat her main enemies – namely the miners – and change the political course of the United Kingdom in the direction of individualism, privatisation, and a squeeze on rights. A post-industrial desert was created in the South Valleys. Thatcher’s heirs are the current Westminster government, and what we see these days is a continuation of her ideological war.



Tonypandy

Today’s strikers

Who are in an industrial dispute today? Ambulance Workers, Nurses, Midwives, Physiotherapists, Royal Mail, Teachers,

Railways, Civil Servants, Academics, Buses. It is possible that others such as fire workers and junior doctors will also strike.

Striking is not something to undertake thoughtlessly. People have reached the end of their tether. Perhaps it is the wages that have not risen much for ten years, and therefore more and more people who work full time have fallen into the pit of poverty as inflation is rampant, which on the surface has triggered them to strike. But there is much more to it than this. Time and time again over the last few years, we heard about unbearable working conditions with targets being elevated above service. In different occupations, workers have suffered from mental and physical illness, until people are completely exhausted and have to leave their work. This is true for many occupations other than those who are on strike.

The fight against the employers is not just about protecting wages. All of these strikes are battling against fundamental changes to workers' rights, such as holidays and sick leave, and the much devalued terms offered to new staff.

At the same time we see that corporate profits and payments to corporate chiefs and directors of companies rise and rise to incredible levels.

National Health Service

Hooray! These workers were heroes during Covid! Deserving of being clapped in the street! But clapping doesn't buy a loaf or keep the house warm. It does not hide the mismanagement of the NHS which is tottering on the brink of failure. And it certainly hasn't done anything at all to convince us that the Government's aim in Westminster is not to privatise the NHS.

So the Government is trying to blame the failures of the NHS on the heroic and dedicated workers who are doing their best to look after us. The Government wants to pass anti-strike

legislation in order to maintain a “minimum level of service”. Of course they don’t reach the lowest level of service when there is no strike – the service was on its knees a long time ago. So the the nurses and the ambulance workers are scapegoats.The Government’s tough new law could mean that nurses are sacked. We cannot accept that – especially bearing in mind the scandals about friends of the Government getting contracts worth millions at the time of Covid, and providing equipment of an unacceptable standard, and without anyone being called to account.Do we want the Health Service to be privatised?In the context of Cymru, our Government says that it is grateful to the Health Service workers, but that it cannot pay the workers more without more financial support from the Westminster government. You decide if that is a sufficient reason. Incidentally, this is at the core of the contradiction which characterises Welsh Labour – on the one hand, it believes in the Union with England; but on the other hand it complains when there is not enough money or sufficient attention being given to Cymru. And undeniably, the Health Service is Labour’s main article of faith, yet it cannot protect it effectively.

Royal Mail

The service is 500 years old. Since its privatisation years ago, it has been under siege. “Competition” is one of the holy words of capitalism – and so the competition of the free market means that a multitude of companies deliver parcels to us. It appears that the van drivers of these companies suffer from poor working conditions, with targets that are almost impossible to achieve. No doubt this enables a cheaper service, but at what cost? Not only in human terms (attacking the working conditions and wages of Royal Mail workers, and taking advantage of workers from the other companies), but also the environmental cost – where one vehicle used to bring goods to us, now there can be several in day.

Teachers and Assistants

These are workers who had a very difficult time during Cofid, carrying responsibilities that were almost impossible at times. Combine this with an increase in their workload, lack of support and resources, discipline problems, an oppressive system of inspection, the fear of losing your job when a complaint is made about you, and it’s no wonder things have come to an end. We know that many leave the profession for these reasons.Do we really want a society where our children are taught by teachers who have fought, are looking forward to retirement or aspire to leave teaching for a different career?

Railways

Mick Lynch, the leader of the RMT, has become prominent in this troubled time. He led his union, and to all intents and purposes the labour movement in the absence of leadership from Starmer, the leader of the post-socialist Labour Party (although there are many good socialists amongst its ranks) who condemned one of his own shadow cabinet for daring to go on a picket line . Mick Lynch is certainly particularly effective in standing up for his own employees, and also in explaining the wider picture. Don’t be surprised if we see relentless attacks on him by the Government and the media. It is worth reading an article about his visit to Aberdare in Voice Wales, and watching a video of his speech there.The Government has clearly shown which side they are on, by ensuring that the companies that run the railways have not lost a single penny since the dispute began – and it has cost the country more than if the dispute would had been settled. This is an ideological battle.As in the case of other workers, the protection of service users and their safety is one of the main reasons for striking.Do we want an inferior rail service with the increased risk of accidents?

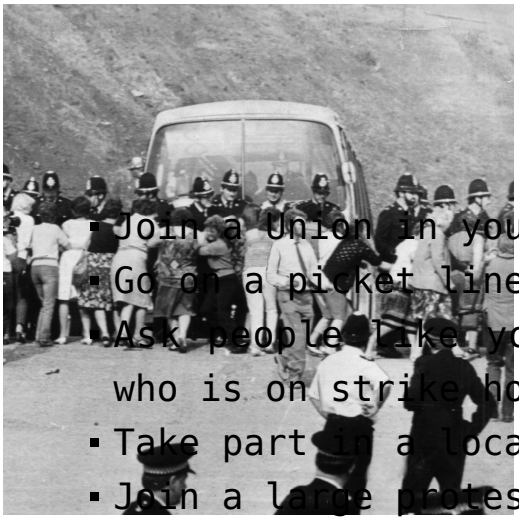
Academics

The world of colleges changed beyond all comprehension in a generation. Where there used to be students, today there are “customers” who want “value for money” for their fees. Learning institutions were turned into profit making factories by expanding the numbers of students beyond the ability of the job market to employ them in their respective fields. Lecturers and researchers were changed into machines to try to please administrators, and work contracts were downgraded to being insecure and short-term, as well as changing pensions for the worse. We have even heard of some lecturers sleeping on library floors.Do we want to continue to disrespect learning?

Oppression by Westminster

Squeezing the right to strike and intimidating the workers is the purpose of the Act which is currently going through the parliamentary process. The official name is the “Minimum Service Level Bill”, but unofficially it is known as the “Anti-Strike Bill”. According to the Government, they want to ensure a basic level of service in the public sector, by forcing people to work even if the union has won a vote to strike. If people strike in violation of the law, then they can face losing their job.This is a completely unreasonable threat, and shows a complete lack of understanding of things as they are. Because this is the truth – there is no basic level of service in the Health Service when there is no strike of this kind in the world. The troubles of the ambulance service, shortage of nursing staff and doctors, waiting lists, and lack of care in society all testify that the Government is guilty. And in Wales, our Government is dependent on Westminster for resources.This is a cynical attempt to portray the true heroes and essential workers of our society as selfish and unscrupulous people. The truth is that because the Health Service is on its knees the strikers are acting to

protect it, as well as for their own benefit.We can say exactly the same thing about the other public sector workers on strike.This law will be a blunt instrument in the hands of the rich. The intention is to keep the worker in his place, that is, to be obedient, quiet, and not complaining. The publicity machine will try to divide the strikers, try to turn the public against the strikers, and pave the way for even more privatization and relaxing of safety rules as well as returning the worker to insecurity, poverty and illness .Couple this act with the “Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act” or the Policing Act as it is called, and there is a real attempt to attack our most basic democratic rights. It is not impossible to imagine circumstances where both laws would be implemented at the same time.Is a General Strike the only way to get this obdurate Government to listen?



Support

We can show our support in many ways.

- Join a Union in your workplace.
- Go on a picket line.
- Ask people like your postman or nurse, or anyone else who is on strike how you can help.
- Take part in a local protest.
- Join a large protest if one is organised.
- Write to your Member of Parliament and Member of Parliament for Wales (maybe that’s asking too much!).
- Support the strikers on February 1st when several unions work together to strike on the same day.
- Continue to support throughout the strike period.

The Miners’ Strike 1984-85

Conclusion

Fundamental questions about the nature of work, sharing the reward for our labour, and the relationship between employer and employee are driving these strikes. Grimly ruthless capitalism is steamrollers it all, and an ideological agenda that is driven by a Government in the hands of a small group of right-wing extremists.

So the question must be asked – is a General Strike the way to force the Westminster Government to listen? The feasibility of such mass action will depend on the ability and willingness of all unions to work together. It would certainly be a big step to take. But what is the alternative? Watching the employers and the government divide the labour movement. The strikers surrendering little by little, union by union, so that individual disputes are separated from the others, weakening the strength of the whole enterprise? If that happens, it's not just the strikers who will lose out, but every section of society apart from the rich.

There are so many lessons to be learned by comparing the situation here now with the history of the growth of fascism in the past, that it is truly a scary time. That is why we cannot be silent, and not say or do anything.

The country is tired. The people are exhausted. Poverty and austerity are rampant. Let us begin, here and now, to restore dignity, to raise spirits, to fight for justice and to defeat the forces of greed and oppression.

If a General Strike is called then I would like to think that Undod members will support in whatever way is practical for each individual. Members of an organisation campaigning for a radical future for our country cannot avoid taking sides. This crisis is so serious that we cannot expect to win without fighting to the extreme. Justice is on the side of the workers!

“Trech Gwlad nac Arglwydd!”

(rough translation: “The people overcome the state!”).

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For more information about Undod and to support their struggle for a better Wales, visit: https://undod.cymru/en/

Imagining an Independent Wales

The Welsh/Cymraeg movement for independence from the UK state has been growing significantly across the country over recent years, *writes Mike Picken*.

A demonstration organised by Yes Cymru and All Under One Banner Cymru on 1st October in the capital of Cardiff/Caerdydd saw around 10,000 people march for independence/**Annibyniaeth**.

Speakers from across the independence movement addressed marchers about the failures of the Tory-led UK state, including many public figures from the cultural movement.

There has always been a strong movement in Wales for

independence, rooted in the Welsh language and cultural movement, but what has been significant in recent years has been the growth in discussion particularly among the left, about the importance of political independence and what type of state a future independent Wales needs to be. New left wing organisations such as the Welsh socialist organisations Undod, Labour for an Independent Wales and the Welsh Underground Movement (previously Valleys Underground) have emerged and are working alongside the left in Plaid Cymru.

It is particularly significant for those of us in Scotland that the Welsh Labour Party leadership have accepted that independence is a legitimate constitutional demand and that not only are supporters of Independence openly tolerated and even adopted as candidates by Welsh Labour, but that the question of independence should be examined by the new Constitutional Commission established with the support of Welsh Labour in Senedd Cymru. Not only that, Welsh Labour government in Senedd Cymru has a cooperation agreement with independence-supporting Plaid Cymru covering a range of topics but especially action on the climate crisis. This is the complete opposite of Scottish Labour, where supporters of Independence are hounded out, and despite Keir Starmer's claim of "No Deals with the SNP" disastrous agreements with the ball-wrecking Tories in several councils, including Edinburgh, have been made by Scottish Labour.

The topic of what sort of independent Wales is needed was discussed at a meeting on the eve of the 1 Oct demonstration, under the heading "***Imagining an Independent Wales***". This meeting was called by another newly formed organisation Melin Drafod – which means 'Think Tank" in the Welsh language – and is devoted to discussing ideas about progressive social change within an independent Wales. Among the speakers was former leader of the Plaid Cymru political party, Leanne Wood. This meeting and discussion was recorded and has now been published by Melin Drafod. The meeting like all meetings organised by

Welsh independence activists is bilingual, but for Scottish readers the comments of Leeanne Wood are entirely in England.

Video originally published here: [Imagining an Independent Wales – Melin Drafod]

You can read more about the position of marxists and Fourth International supporters on Welsh Independence in the following documents:

- The submission by Anti Capitalist Resistance, supported by ecosocialist.scot, to the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales
- ‘Disunited Kingdom’ an analysis by Terry Conway following the elections in Scotland, Wales and England in May 2021
- ‘Whispers of a Forgotten Nation’ by the late Ceri Evans, marxist writings by a leading Fourth International supporter about Wales, the national question and related issues



From land grabbing to the housing crisis: Nid yw Cymru ar werth ("Wales is Not for Sale!")

Real Wild Estates Company and the French mega-corporation L'Oreal Groupe, recently met to discuss plans to buy up land to rewild, *writes Alex Heffon on the Welsh socialist blog of Undod*. They are explicitly looking to profit from forms of landlordism such as the private housing market and holiday lets while benefiting from public subsidies for activities such as tree planting.

They also aim to profit from new carbon markets, whereby carbon sequestered in the form of trees, pastures and peatland, will be exchanged for carbon credits, so that heavy emitting companies may "offset" their carbon emissions. This is how countries like the UK will reach "net zero" despite the practice being called dangerous by a group of climate scientists. A form of greenwashing that will do nothing to halt catastrophic climate change – but will enable the status quo to continue a little longer.

The UK is aiming to make itself the global financial capital of "green growth", which in practice means the continuation of neocolonialism (the practice of continuing to economically exploit former colonies) whilst the Global North continues to evade its responsibility for causing climate change. As Tom Goldtooth, leader of the Indigenous Environmental Network put it at COP26 it's a "new form of colonialism".

"Natural capital" is the ideology that underpins this fantasy that says you can financially value so-called "natural assets". This is supposed to facilitate "payments for

ecosystem services" (PES) whereby you pay for good practice and financially punish bad practice. Over time their aim is to improve the financial valuation of nature, which is supposed to indicate an improving state of ecosystems. It is argued that pricing ecosystems will lead to more rational and efficient management of natural resources and halt their destruction.

It's easy to see why this appeals to the Tories. But the complexity of ecosystems, along with the myriad ecological demands of human and non-human life, makes a mockery of this simplistic concept that privileges profit above all else.

For example, you might pay a landowner in Wales to sequester carbon in the form of tree-planting (itself more complex than is oft-realised), and in the process offset food production to the other side of the world, contributing to deforestation and Indigenous land dispossession elsewhere. In theory, so long as that destruction and death is made up for financially elsewhere, then it's possible to attribute a net benefit. This is clearly absurd.

A form of "biodiversity offsetting" that allows financial markets and corporations ever more control in managing the planet's ecology in a process dubbed land grabbing or "green grabbing". This flawed model of natural capital however, is the very logic that underlies the upcoming Sustainable Farming Scheme in Wales. As Calvin Jones warned, "rural Wales is in trouble."

Further commodification and financialisation of ecosystems is no answer to ecological breakdown and climate chaos which is already driven by capital accumulation in the first place. This is why hedge-funds are looking to "invest" in land. It's an easy way to profit from asset appreciation, rentier income and looming carbon exchange payments and subsidies.

‘Carbon Rush’ in Wales

Mark Redfern, of Voice.Wales, has uncovered how Foresight Group, an investment fund, has specifically set up Foresight Forestry Company PLC with the sole aim of profiting from this new carbon rush. They are looking to float on the London Stock Exchange for an initial offering of £200 million and are behind some of the recent land buyouts across Powys. There’s clearly money to be made for a small handful, but of what value will that be to rural Welsh communities and Wales as a whole?

There’s nothing to stop these companies from establishing conifer plantations that are of little ecological value, and the carbon credits they’ll accumulate will likely be used to offset fossil fuel emissions. So local communities, the wider ecology and the climate all lose, whilst private investment funds win. And what’s to stop them “asset stripping” these newly acquired ecosystems once they’ve served their purpose of capital accumulation and carbon offsetting?

Land in Wales is relatively cheaper than other parts of the UK, making it ripe for such profiteering. This is land that would’ve once been part of a small farm, but as farming becomes increasingly less viable, due to the capitalist food economy that pits farmers across the globe against each other in a race to the bottom, it becomes ever more difficult for small farms to survive. Land is either bought up by bigger farms, consolidating land, in order to compete in commodity production, or is now increasingly bought up by investment funds looking to extract financial value, all greenwashed in the vocabulary of ecosystem services. These groups, like Real Wild Estates Group, will espouse the lingo of community regeneration but in reality they will bring little of the sort.

Empower local people in ecological restoration

There is a need for ecological restoration across Wales, that few deny, but it must be led by, and for, Welsh communities. Land needs further democratisation, not further concentration that benefits capitalists and elites fortunate to be born into family dynasties that extend back to the Normans. These new public school-educated white knights, cloaked in Barbour, tweed and Le Chameau wellingtons, will not rescue our communities, even if the idea of being "rescued" itself wasn't misplaced and condescending enough.

True ecological restoration requires decommodification of food, land and labour. It requires us to direct human effort towards what urgently needs doing in the face of ecological and climate breakdown. The desire and knowledge is already there, but it's exceptionally hard to direct that energy to the tasks required when most people have to work hard enough as it is to maintain a living.

Project Skyline, in the Valleys, is one such attempt to reimagine land use in post-industrial regions, in a manner that re-empowers local people in the project of ecological restoration. Surely this is better than another Amazon warehouse or a faceless, pin-striped suit in London managing Welsh affairs yet again. Instead of being sold off to the highest bidder, in an independent Wales, land could be bought up by our own central bank and used to expand the county farm estate. Community land trusts, funded by low-cost, long-term loans provide another option, as does the new concept of "Public-Common Partnerships". But Wales can't do this without increased fiscal powers and it can't do this if it stays in thrall to capital. As Laurie Macfarlane points out, Scotland is also seeing a new round of land grabbing in the form of the "green lairds" – but Scotland does at least have the option of community land buyouts, unlike Wales. As it stands,

the Welsh Government will be actively subsidising these hedge-funds, through Glastir payments, to the tune of millions of pounds of taxpayer money. Money that instead could be used to expand the county farm estate –instead of running it down and selling it off.

All across Wales communities are under attack from the profit-driven, capitalist housing and land market. From decades of gentrification that is driving up rent and living costs for Cardiff's working class, to rural homes being bought as second houses or holiday lets, to the land being acquired by hedge-funds. It's something that unites everyone, except those that profit. All of this works to drive up the cost of living, drives people away from their home towns, villages and neighbourhoods, and turns Wales into the extensive leisure grounds of the wealthy.

We can see the detrimental effects this has on the Welsh language with the tragic closure of Ysgol Abersoch. As an act of triage to prevent further damage Welsh Government needs to, for example; enact rent controls, prevent buying of homes for holiday lets and second homes and regulate AirBnB, as Mabli Siriol called for at the recent Nid Yw Cymru Ar Werth rally in Caerdydd. They must also prevent so-called investors buying land and instead instigate land reform, as Robat Idris proposed last year. The new Plaid-Labour agreement hints that some of these demands might be met, though time will tell.

How long for Welsh Government action?

How long must we wait for Welsh Government to take action? In her article for Undod Angharad Tomos succinctly highlights that this damage is decades old. In some coastal parts of Pembrokeshire, 40% of houses are holiday homes, and in Abersoch, Gwynedd, it's 46%. Welsh Government recently

published a report looking into new policies to solve the second homes crisis but most importantly we need actions now before it's too late. Perhaps one stumbling block to Welsh Government taking effective action is the fact that 28% of MS' are landlords themselves? The wellbeing of future generations depends on it, and they require us to channel the spirit of Rebecca. Inspiration can be taken from the continued resistance shown by the Save the Northern Meadows campaign.

As Cian Ireland put it in his speech earlier this year, for the Nid Yw Cymru Ar Werth rally at Tryweryn:

> *"Instead of facing drowning by water, we face being drowned by a flood of wealthy buyers who can outcompete local people on the private market, which prioritises wealth before the needs of our people. This is an attack from the capitalist housing market on our communities."*

This article was originally published on the blog of Undod, the Welsh socialist organisation and is reproduced here with the kind permission of Undod. The original can be found here in English: https://undod.cymru/en/2022/02/04/cipio-tir-argyfwng-tai/ and here in the Welsh Language: O gipio tir i'r argyfwng tai: Nid yw Cymru ar werth – undod

'Undod' (Welsh for union or struggle) is a democratic, socialist republican, green and anti-hierarchical organisation set up to ensure radical independence for Wales Readers in Scotland and elsewhere can support Undod and sign up for mailings on

its website – https://undod.cymru/. All material is bi-lingual.



A Year In The Life of the Welsh Underground Network

One of the exciting developments in Welsh politics during 2021 was the creation of the Welsh Underground Network – a group of Marxist activists committed to independence for Wales and with an orientation towards community politics. Below we republish their review of the year written by secretary of the WUN, Joseph Jones who visited Glasgow and met with members of the Radical Independence Campaign and ecosocialist.scot in

November during COP26.

As we have finally reached 2022, now's the time to reflect on the promises we made to ourselves this time 12 months ago, and what we've achieved in this long, and for many, difficult year.

At the risk of sounding like a Christmas advert – it's genuinely been a year like no other.

For the Organization I've been lucky enough to Chair for over two years – the Welsh Underground Network, it's been a year of amazing growth, of challenges, of triumphs, and of forging links – between ourselves, and the communities we operate in.

I thought I'd write this as a way to sum up the year we've had, to recollect, and to help us plot where we intend to go in 2022.

1: Becoming the WUN

The biggest thing to happen to us in 2021 has undoubtedly been the birth of the WUN itself.

In April 2021, we were thrilled to announce the launch of Wrexham Underground – our Chapter in North Wales. For the near two years previous, we had been solely Valleys Underground, but had dreams of expansion.

With Wrexham's dramatic launch – starting with a beautiful banner display across a busy motorway – we launched a National Organization, and have since had applications from across Wales.

In the last fortnight, we are thrilled to close off the year with the launch of our Swansea Chapter – bringing the total number of active chapters to three.

We've also managed to increase the number of working groups

within the WUN itself. With the establishment of a Women's Working Group, a Trans Working Group, and a POC Working Group, we are attempting to ensure the voices of everyone are not only included, but amplified, to ensure a Socialist Welsh Republic for all, not just some.

2: Events, events, events.

Despite the many, many, many limitations of the year, the WUN has been able to organize a variety of events and actions.

Starting off in 2019, our goal was to be active, be seen, and to do good work in the community. We've faced quite a few bumps along the way, but I'm immensely proud of the work our Members have done this year.

A point of pride has been our free food events.

From Wrexham City Center, to the Gurnos Shops in Merthyr, Blackwood, Swansea, Lansbury Park, and the Fernhill Estate, our Members have been active across Wales – providing hot food, hygiene products, and basic supplies to those who need them.



Members of our Wrexham Chapter conducting a free-food event.

We've also been active in community clearups, helping work on the derelict Fernhill Allotments, helping renovate the Cefn Fforest Miner's Institute, and continuing our work with the Foundation for Jewish Heritage on the Merthyr Synagogue.



Members of our Valleys Chapter active in the Cefn Fforest Miner's Institute.

Members have also conducted a number of online events this year too. From our regular RedReads bookclub, to live-streamed panels, to film screenings for charity, we have attempted to find new ways of reaching people due to the strains of Covid.

Members of the WUN have also been present at a variety of demonstrations in Wales this year.

The disgusting, yet unsurprising horror in America regarding Racism has fuelled a cry across the world for basic justice.

In Wales, we have so much to do.

Our Members were in attendance at a variety of BLM protests, and have since made strong links with BLM's active campaigns across Wales.

Members have also participated in action regarding Kill the Bill demonstrations, building links with other activists in our fight against the encroaching erosion of our liberties by an increasingly authoritarian right-wing state.

In a momentous occasion for us, we also held our first WUN Congress in Aberystwyth, where members from across Wales came together to socialise, create a Constitution, sort out internal affairs, and plan for the upcoming year.



Members at our first-ever WUN Congress in Aberystwyth.

3: Building links

As already mentioned, the WUN have increased our attempts to build links with other activists this year, making connections with groups and organizations not just in Wales, not just within the UK, but across the World.

Our Valleys Chapter were thrilled to host the Zapatistas this summer, giving a Radical History tour of Merthyr Tydfil to the delegation of Revolutionaries.

Some of our Members have also built links with Internationalist groups, such as Palestine Action. In late November, members were 'allegedly' involved in an [action conducted by PA](#) in Wrexham against a Drone manufacturer.



…alleged Members of the WUN at the Palestine Action Occupation of Solvay Drone Materials Factory.

I myself was lucky enough to boost links on behalf of the WUN with the Radical Independence Campaign in Scotland this Autumn, [speaking at their COP26 Summit Event](#) on Revolutionary Nationalism.

4: The Walk



Yours truly, having just finished the WUN Long March (three months after starting…)

Speaking for myself, the year was marked largely by the WUN Long March. From August until November, roughly 70-odd days, I walked and wild-camped the entirety of the UK – Land's End to John O'Groats.

It was a hard slog, I won't lie. I had heatstroke, fell down a cliff, ruined two tents, and travelled through a variety of rough weather.

The result though was almost £2,000 raised for the WUN's community projects. I was pleased along the way to meet up with Socialist activists, and build bridges with Groups and Organizations on behalf of the WUN.

Conclusion

2021 for the WUN was a monumental year, perhaps the best year of our existence. We've had challenges, of course, but what our Members have achieved has been phenomenal.

I would like to thank everyone on behalf of the WUN for your support, your patronage, and your aid in making 2021 a year like no other.

In 2022, let's make this the year of action, of physical aid, and of new horizons.

We wish you all the very best for the coming new year, and hope you find what you're looking for.

Joseph Jones, Chair of the WUN. First published at https://welshundergroundnetwork.com/2021/12/31/2021-the-year-in-review/

The Labour-Plaid deal is the faintest outline of a Wales beyond neoliberalism

"On the surface, the deal announced this week between the two parties represents a real break with the status quo" *writes Sam Coates in an article on the website blog of* ***Undod****, the non-party Welsh socialist organisation supporting*

independence.

“Bringing in rent controls, caps on second homes and new state-owned companies would mean a dramatic break with the idea that the ‘market knows best’, and that direct government action to protect people and communities is needed.

While Welsh Labour has traded on the mirage of ‘clear red water’, the reality has been a government that talks radical and acts slowly. The recently published *The Welsh Way* (with numerous contributions from Undod members) has finally laid bare the myth of Wales being more progressive than the rest of the UK.

Free lunches for all primary school children is a deserved victory for the alliance of civil society campaigners that have worked so hard. But any socialist government should never have let food poverty grow on its watch in the first place. It will cost something to implement, but fundamentally it doesn’t challenge any powerful interests in Welsh society.

That’s why the plans on second and holiday homes seem most significant. This is where the agreement does the most to challenge the rule of the market, but in most other areas the commitments are vague and could easily be left to gather dust in Cardiff Bay – like so many past promises.

Plans to cap the number of second homes, and using the planning system to stop the spread is the first real commitment to say that people and communities matter more than private profit. That makes it an even greater victory for Cymdeithas yr Iaith and other friends, and communities that have tirelessly fought for their very existence.

On a smaller scale, the very mention of rent controls, while currently weak, is a testament to groups like ACORN that have sprung up during the pandemic to organise working people. Plans for a community food strategy are encouraging and will hopefully lead to public procurement of locally produced food.

Every school and hospital in Wales should be serving local produce.

As family farms are bought up for corporate carbon offsetting, the absence of land reform is disappointing. As Robat Idris outlines for Undod, this is essential to ensure Wales meets its climate change obligations whilst strengthening rural communities.

For everyone who wants a Wales that puts people before profit, this deal is the very start of that struggle, not the end. It represents the faintest outline of a Wales beyond neoliberalism that we must fight together to bring into full view. While only independence can create a Wales where our people not only survive, but thrive, this is a step to make full use of the powers our government already has.

Contrast this Labour-Plaid agreement, with the neoliberal announcement made by Keir Starmer this week. It's clear that there is desire in Wales for something better, and that the union won't offer that.

Powerful interests like the landlord lobby will do everything they can to stop this shift in our political direction, so it's up to us to pile the pressure on politicians. We must say 'go further' 'do it now, not after yet another investigation' and not give them the benefit of the doubt that has allowed so much inaction from Cardiff Bay over the past two decades.

We will work with whoever wants to take advantage of this new opening. And we'll demand the radical action needed to realise the vision of this deal – join Undod today to be part of it."

Republished from Undod – https://undod.cymru/en/2021/11/23/y-fargen-rhwng-llafur-a-plaid-ywr-amlinelliad-gwelwaf-o-gymru-y-tu-hwnt-i-neoryddfrydiaeth/

In Welsh. Original: https://undod.cymru/cy/2021/11/23/y-fargen-rhwng-llafur-a-plaid-ywr-amlinelliad-gwelwaf-o-gymru-y-tu-hwnt-i-neoryddfrydiaeth/#respond

Y fargen rhwng Llafur a Plaid yw'r amlinelliad gwelwaf o Gymru y tu hwnt i neoryddfrydiaeth

Ar yr wyneb, mae'r fargen a gyhoeddwyd yr wythnos hon rhwng y ddwy blaid yn cynrychioli toriad go iawn gyda pethau fel y mae nhw. Byddai dod â rheolaethau rhent, capiau ar ail gartrefi a sefydlu cwmnïau newydd sy'n eiddo i'r wladwriaeth yn golygu toriad dramatig gyda'r syniad mai'r 'farchnad sy'n gwybod orau', a bod angen gweithredu uniongyrchol gan y llywodraeth i amddiffyn pobl a chymunedau.

Tra bod Llafur Cymru wedi manteisio ar y rhith o 'ddŵr coch clir', y realiti fu llywodraeth sy'n siarad yn radical ond yn gweithredu'n araf. Mae *The Welsh Way* a gyhoeddwyd yn ddiweddar (gyda nifer o gyfraniadau gan aelodau Undod) wedi dangos yn derfynol mai myth yw fod Cymru yn fwy blaengar na gweddill y Deyrnas Gyfunol.

Mae cinio am ddim i bob plentyn ysgol gynradd yn fuddugoliaeth haeddiannol i gynghrair o ymgyrchwyr cymdeithas sifil sydd wedi gweithio mor galed. Ond ni ddylai unrhyw lywodraeth sosialaidd erioed fod wedi gadael i dlodi bwyd gynyddu dan ei goruchwyliaeth yn y lle cyntaf. Bydd yn costio i'w weithredu, ond yn y bôn nid yw'n herio unrhyw fuddiannau pwerus yng nghymdeithas Cymru.

Dyna pam mae'r cynlluniau ar gyfer ail gartrefi a chartrefi gwyliau yn ymddangos yn hynod o arwyddocaol. Dyma lle mae'r cytundeb yn gwneud y mwyaf i herio rheol y farchnad, ond yn y rhan fwyaf o feysydd eraill mae'r ymrwymiadau'n amwys a byddai'n hawdd eu gadael i gasglu llwch ym Mae Caerdydd – fel cymaint o addewidion yn y gorffennol.

Cynlluniau i roi cap ar nifer yr ail gartrefi, a defnyddio'r system gynllunio i atal eu lledaeniad yw'r gwir ymrwymiad cyntaf i ddatgan bod pobl a chymunedau o bwys mwy nag elw preifat. Mae hynny'n ei gwneud yn fuddugoliaeth hyd yn oed yn fwy i Gymdeithas yr Iaith a chyfeillion eraill, a chymunedau sydd wedi ymladd yn ddiflino am eu bodolaeth.

Ar raddfa lai, mae hyd yn oed sôn am reolaethau rhent, er eu bod yn wan ar hyn o bryd, yn dyst i grwpiau fel ACORN sydd wedi codi yn ystod y pandemig i drefnu gweithiwyr. Mae cynlluniau ar gyfer strategaeth bwyd cymunedol yn galonogol a gobeithio y byddant yn arwain at gaffael cyhoeddus o fwyd a gynhyrchir yn lleol. Dylai pob ysgol ac ysbyty yng Nghymru fod yn gweini cynnyrch lleol.

Wrth i ffermydd teuluol gael eu prynu ar gyfer gwrthbwyso carbon corfforaethol, mae'r diffyg sôn am ddiwygio tir yn siomedig. Fel y mae Robat Idris wedi amlinellu mewn erthygl ar gyfer Undod, mae hyn yn hanfodol i sicrhau bod Cymru yn cyflawni ei rhwymedigaethau newid yn yr hinsawdd tra'n cryfhau cymunedau gwledig.

I bawb sydd eisiau Cymru sy'n rhoi pobl o flaen elw, dim ond dechrau'r frwydr yw'r fargen hon, nid y diwedd. Mae'n cynrychioli'r amlinelliad gwelwaf o Gymru y tu hwnt i neoryddfrydiaeth y mae'n rhaid i ni ei ymladd gyda'n gilydd er mwyn ei sylweddoli yn llawn. Er mai dim ond annibyniaeth all greu Cymru lle mae ein pobl nid yn unig yn goroesi, ond yn ffynnu, mae hwn yn gam i wneud defnydd llawn o'r pwerau sydd gan ein llywodraeth eisoes.

Cyferbynnwch y cytundeb Llafur-Plaid hwn, gyda'r cyhoeddiad neoryddfrydol a wnaed gan Keir Starmer yr wythnos hon. Mae'n amlwg bod awydd yng Nghymru am rywbeth gwell, ac nad yw'r undeb yn cynnig hynny.

Bydd buddiannau pwerus fel undeb y landlordiaid yn gwneud popeth o fewn eu gallu i atal y newid hwn i'n cyfeiriad gwleidyddol, felly mae pentyrru'r pwysau ar wleidyddion i fyny i ni. Rhaid inni ddweud 'ewch ymhellach' 'gwnewch hynny nawr, nid ar ôl ymchwiliad arall eto' a pheidio â rhoi budd yr amheuaeth iddynt sydd wedi caniatáu cymaint o ddiffyg gweithredu o Fae Caerdydd dros y ddau ddegawd diwethaf.

Byddwn yn gweithio gyda phwy bynnag sydd am fanteisio ar yr agoriad newydd hwn. A byddwn yn mynnu y gweithredu radical sydd ei angen i wireddu gweledigaeth y fargen hon – ymunwch ag Undod heddiw i fod yn rhan ohoni.

A Long March for Wales

One of the positive developments in British politics over the last few years has been the rising support for Welsh Independence which according to polls now stands at a record high among the general population. This has also led to a rise in organisations supporting Welsh Independence, including Yes Cymru (a broad based mass campaign for independence), Undod (which means 'Solidarity' and is a new bilingual broad socialist organisation), and the Welsh Underground Network (previously Valleys Underground and explicitly a Marxist organisation). Contacts between Scottish and Welsh activists are growing and in this interview with a Welsh Underground Network activist, Paul Inglis of ecosocialist.scot discusses the new politics of Wales. [This article was previously published on the Bella Caledonia website and is republished with their kind permission.]

A Long March for Wales

It was a drab Autumn evening when my friend Joe picked up the phone for our interview. As we spoke he was sitting in a tent near Gloucester, enduring the rain and wind with a good portion of his clothes soaked, but happy to chat politics with a fellow socialist for a while. The weather would have been a nightmare if this were just a weekend camping trip, but by this point Joe was quite used to this sort of thing – he had been on the road since August. His route: An 876-mile trek from Lands' End in Cornwall to John o' Groats here in Scotland – a long camping trip indeed, and one scarcely improved by typical British rain! And the reason for the journey? A rather unusual one, because Joe's goal isn't to raise money for charity, but for the activities of a Welsh Marxist organisation.

The name of this group, for which Joe is exerting his limbs and braving the elements, is the Welsh Underground Network (WUN). They are relatively new on the political scene in Wales, having formed just before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The WUN, as previously mentioned, is a Marxist organisation, with the ultimate aim of an independent Welsh socialist republic. But in order to achieve this, they take a different tack from your usual paper-selling, protest-chasing leftie group. The WUN firmly believe that you cannot have lofty political ideals without building an actual power base in communities, without putting in work on the ground to make your neighbourhood, village or town a more united and better place to live in. Joe summed up this ethos for me in a couple of sentences: “You have to start from home, and you actually have to start. Online activism is good to a degree, but real change comes from getting things done and interacting with people.”

“Serving the People”

To this end, the WUN’s political work consciously takes a form that might be familiar to those who know of the Black Panther Party of the 1960’s and their strategy of building power in communities by “serving the people”. The Network’s activity so far has involved things like local litter pickups, free food events in towns like Merthyr Tydfil, Wrexham, Blackwood, Mountain Ash and Caerphilly, clearing out the Fernhill allotments for restored community use, and helping the Foundation for Jewish Heritage clear out and tidy the site of Merthyr Synagogue, the oldest synagogue in Wales, so that it can be renovated. Joe explained that the WUN do not believe in more “official” forms of political organising like canvassing and doorknocking for elections. They think that socialists must have a more active and meaningful presence in everyday working class life, not just coming round every few years with a yarn about policies and then disappearing until next time. That kind of presence, politics that has deep roots in

neighbourhood and class, did once exist in Wales, as Joe pointed out: The old miners' unions had their own libraries, hospitals, clubs and concert halls, and were a focal point in Welsh working class life. As is well known, that intertwining of politics and the everyday has been severely eroded since the 1980's, but Joe and his comrades look to rebuild it- They feel that only by doing this can the working class actually have the strength and energy to take an active, fighting part in the battle for both independence and socialism. Of course, the pandemic has hindered the ability of the WUN to do more than they already have, but they are excited to expand their community programmes even further now that the prospects are opening up for more public political work. Starting from Merthyr Tydfil, the WUN has recently set up a new branch in Wrexham, and are looking to gain more across Wales in the next few months, building towards a national organisation.

It's for this "serve the people" work that Joe, chairman of the WUN, is walking across the island of Britain to raise money. Referred to by the WUN as the "Long March", a nod to the Chinese Red Army's epic year-long march across China that is only slightly tongue-in-cheek, Joe's trek aims to supply the basis for more free food events, more litter-picks, and all the equipment needed for these. He was explicit that the money from this fundraiser will not be going towards leaflets or banners- It is for helping people directly, not for propagandising. The reason the fundraiser has taken on the specific form of a walk underlines the WUN's emphasis on socialists getting out and actually doing things. Joe was eager to dispel the stereotype of "socialists, particularly in the West, being permanently online activists doing nothing but spending all day arguing with each other over semantics while the world burns." Robust physical activity is certainly one way to fight the cliché of the "three-times-a-week book club and nothing else" leftie. In addition, Joe was enthusiastic about the potential of a journey like this for communicating the WUN's ideas and for making links with activists throughout

England and Scotland: “It gives us a chance to talk to people across the UK and say that, while we are for national independence, we are still internationalists and want to communicate that solidarity.”

Now, while this particular Long March might not be as high-stakes as the original, it has nevertheless been beset by an enemy even more determined than the Kuomintang: British weather. This has been Joe’s main challenge so far. From heatstroke-inducing late Summer sun in Cornwall to all the leaks and soaked clothes that rain brings, Joe has been experiencing nature’s climatic variety first hand, and soon he will be meeting with the chill of Scotland in late Autumn and early Winter. These obstacles however, and the random aches and bruises of nomadic life, are being borne by Joe with courage and good humour, an example of the sort of socialist fighting spirit that is often parodied and mythologised, but which is inspiring to see in genuine motion. Of course, the path isn’t just filled with struggle. Joe has also found great kindness in the areas he has walked, with free meals and places to stay being offered him again and again.

Socialist Ideals

Moving from the immediate topic of the march, I asked Joe about his own socialist ideals. It’s the case that the Panther-style organising discussed earlier isn’t the only way in which the WUN calls on the legacy of the 60’s. Indeed, the group takes up the language and the ideas of the old black revolutionaries in talking of the WUN’s own “ten-point programme” for an independent Wales based on working class unity and socialist principles. At the heart of the beliefs of the Panthers and the WUN is a demand for self-determination in its broadest sense. With that in mind, I wanted to know why Joe, as a socialist, believes in Welsh independence.

For Joe, as for many of us, James Connolly’s famous remarks on Irish independence are a guiding light, so it was no surprise

that he began by referencing them. They bear quoting in full:

“If you remove the English Army tomorrow and hoist the green flag over Dublin Castle, unless you set about the organization of the Socialist Republic your efforts will be in vain. England will still rule you. She would rule you through her capitalists, through her landlords, through her financiers, through the whole array of commercial and individualist institutions she has planted in this country and watered with the tears of our mothers and the blood of our martyrs.”

Those lines underpin the classic contention of socialists involved in independence movements the world over, past and present, who have argued that there can be no real change unless there is socialist change. Nevertheless, Connolly *did* still fight for Irish independence, and the WUN and their counterparts here in Scotland do the same. For Joe, it’s a point familiar to us Scots that leads him to support independence – the barrier the British state poses to progressive change in Wales. The democratic deficit that is so often the meat of political issues here also exists in Wales, in a similarly potent form. Joe pointed to the limited remit of the Senedd, and the fact that Welsh institutions are largely run from Westminster. He also spoke about how Wales has voted for social democratic government for over a century, as long as Labour has been in existence, and how it has only really had an impact in a national election twice. I’m sure that disappointing feeling, of not getting what your country actually votes for, will resonate with readers here in Scotland.

Community Power

On the other hand, Joe doesn’t have any illusions that Welsh-run institutions would *necessarily* be more progressive than English-run ones. Given his quoting of Connolly, it would be a surprise if he did. It’s just that, with the current direction of English politics, he doesn’t see a path for socialism in

Wales that can be followed while the British state still has a grip over the political life of the country. His scepticism about a progressive future for Wales within the United Kingdom is especially pertinent given the recent crushing failure of Corbynism and the return to British statist reformism it signified. It's a scepticism that is sure to be shared by many across these islands as the gulfs between the distinct political worlds of the home nations widen more with every passing month.

As our call drew to a close, I wanted to know what Joe would say to anyone reading this article who would like to set up their own community-power type organisation. Joe was immediately enthusiastic: "Absolutely do it! Don't think that you need a million people to start it. You don't." He continued, explaining that when the WUN started out it was just him for the first couple of weeks, doing a litter-pick in the local area and posting about it on the group's social media. From there, with people seeing the posts and asking to join, the group was able to expand its work and further grow in size. In Joe's opinion, people tend to overestimate the effort that goes into starting an organisation, when in actual fact the real struggle comes with *maintaining* an organisation. "If you want to start it, go out and do something, and even if you fail it is okay because you can pick yourself up and start again." For him, consistency and dedication are the important things, even if they take a while to bear fruit.

I finished by asking Joe how readers in Scotland could show support. Given our shared fight for self-determination and the fact that at time of writing it won't be long before he enters the country, I was excited to bring news of Joe's march to a Scottish audience. Naturally, he pointed to the WUN's fundraiser as a key way of lending a hand, emphasising that even the smallest amounts would go a long way towards helping the group's work in neighbourhoods across Wales. In addition to this, Joe once again expressed his desire to make links

with activists in Scotland, asking that any interested readers reach out and get in contact with him and the WUN via their social media. If you can keep him supplied, give him a place to stay, or just want a chat with a comrade from Wales, give him a shout! Beyond all that, Joe simply wants more people to do what the WUN are doing. If they can encourage more people to get organised and have a go in their own communities, it'll be a victory for the working class.

You can donate to the WUN crowdfunder at: https://www.gofundme.com/f/wun-walks-britain?utm_source=customer&utm_medium=copy_link_all&utm_campaign=p_cp%20share-sheet&fbclid=IwAR0NBfXKyR2ZeytW7jvsSO1lVtvR0Y_hWWlKBbTiiwBDpIor_h-6KOT3s_Y

Get in contact with Joe and keep up to date with the Long March at: https://twitter.com/cawsabara

And get in contact with the Welsh Underground Network at:

https://twitter.com/WelshUGN

https://www.facebook.com/WelshUGN

https://welshundergroundnetwork.com/



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Footnote: ecosocialist.scot stands in the tradition of the Fourth International in Britain which for a long time been one of the few left wing British organisations consistently supporting both Scottish and Welsh independence. You can read about our position on ***Scottish Independence*** *here: https://www.ecosocialist.scot/?page_id=52, and in order to learn more about the marxist position on Welsh Nationalism and nationalism in general, we would particularly recommend a compendium of writings called* ***'Whispers of a Forgotten Nation'*** *by* ***Ceri Evans****, which can be found here: https://valleysunderground.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/whispers_of_a_forgotten_nation_-_the_wri-2.pdf Ceri Evans was a Welsh writer and academic, a longstanding member of the Fourth International, who sadly died in 2002.*

Wales since the election

Wales is the one country within the United Kingdom where there has been a Labour administration over recent years. To many people's surprise, including their own, Labour not only won

the Senedd election in May but gained a seat overall. Geoff Ryan looks at some of what has been going on since then.

The Labour administration has had to deal with a number of issues, in particular climate change and the environment, housing; free school meals; the continuing Corona virus pandemic and of course the relationship between Wales and the United Kingdom have been high on their agenda

Climate Change and the Environment

One of the first acts of the new government was to introduce a new Ministry for Climate Change which has responsibility for transport, housing, planning, regeneration, energy and environment. The main function of the Ministry is to '*ensure that all Welsh Government policy on new infrastructure projects, energy schemes, and planning decisions can meet environmental targets and be justified in the context of Wales' current and future climate challenges*'. Julie James, the Minister and Lee Waters, her deputy, are generally thought to be on the left of the party and close allies of First Minister Mark Drakeford.[3]

One of the first acts of the new ministry was to put a complete halt to all new road building. This was opposed by the Tories, many of whom still dream of getting the go-ahead for the M4 relief road near Newport despite Senedd majority against. At least one Labour MP, Mark Tami who represents Alyn and Deeside, has complained about the fact that the 'red route' linking the A55 to the A494 and A550 as been put on ice. And Cardiff Council is using £300,000 of its 'clean air fund' to make Castle Street wider for traffic while reducing the pavements – hardly an environmentally friendly step.[4]

Of course there are a few instances when new roads may have to be built. In fact the government quickly reversed its freezing of the Llandeilo bypass in Carmarthenshire, a road that has

been planned for years and has become more necessary because of the number of HGVs passing through which have started to have a serious impact on the structural safety of some buildings as well as posing a threat to pedestrians in this small, picturesque town which attracts significant numbers of tourists.

The ban on road building has been followed up with proposals to introduce 20 mph speed limits in all built up areas, including villages. There are also proposals to ban all parking on pavements. While these proposals have been largely welcomed there has also been opposition. While the 20 mph limit is anathema to the Top Gear brigade who think they have a right to drive as fast as they see fit, the proposals on parking have often been criticised by local residents because many towns do not have wide enough roads to allow for parking close to one's house.

But, in fact, there is a link between issues of speed and parking on pavements. For example, where I live, on a busy main road, some drivers frequently exceed the 30 mph limit. Because the road is narrow, despite being a main route, car owners often park partly on the pavement to avoid their car being damaged by the boy racers. Slowing down the traffic would mean there would not be the necessity to park on the pavements.

And of course there are far too many cars on the road. The problem in many areas is the lack of reliable public transport, especially in the evenings. Where I live it is impossible to go to Ammanford (about 8 miles away), never mind Swansea (15-16 miles) after about 18.30 other than by taxi or car. Given the enormous cost and scarcity of taxis, it is not surprising that many people rely on their own private transport. This problem is currently being taken up by the Labour Party in the Amman Valley with the intention of building a broad based campaign for regular and cheap public transport, preferably using electric vehicles.

The Welsh government is trying to develop an approach that recognises the linked nature of many issues. In my village, for example, there are proposals for a housing estate off my road and a hotel, holiday accommodation and a diving school further down the road at a former coal mine. While these projects may be beneficial for the village, they have potentially negative aspects such as considerably increasing the amount of traffic as well as creating problems for the already overburdened local school if significant numbers of children move to the new estate. Consequently plans for the estate and the diving school complex are on hold until all these issues can be resolved satisfactorily. No doubt this has been repeated throughout Wales.

Labour has also promised a national forest for Wales, stretching the length and breadth of the country. The aim is to plant 86 million trees in 9 years. This is very much a personal project for Mark Drakeford but is generally popular. Tory MP for Aberconwy Robin Millar has criticised the scheme for taking away farm land, mainly because he doesn't understand, or pretends to not understand, the difference between reforestation (which is what is proposed) and afforestation i.e. the establishment if a forest where there has not previously been tree cover.

Swansea council has announced free buses for 4 days per week while it looks likely that the Swansea Bay metro may go ahead, with plans to link up much of west and south west Wales by public transport. Both these initiatives show there is considerable enthusiasm for environmental friendly projects. There are also plans to use 'Homes As Power Stations' in Neath Port Talbot and spreading to much of South West Wales.[5]

And, somewhat unusually for Welsh Labour, on 30 June the government supported the Plaid Cymru motion calling on the Senedd to declare a nature emergency as well as calling for legally binding biodiversity targets. This makes the Senedd

one of the first Parliaments on the world to declare such an emergency. The holding of COP 26 in Glasgow later this year didn't appear to have much impact on the Welsh Tories, 13 of whom voted against the motion.

Housing

Wales has a serious housing problem. According to Nation.Cymru (29 July 2021) 25,701 homes worth £4 billion pounds sit vacant across Wales.; partly because of second homes and holiday homes that are occupied for only a small part of the year. Though Janet Finch-Saunders, Tory spokesperson on housing, tried to dismiss the impact of second homes: perhaps she is influenced by the 7 residential and 4 retail properties she owns, as well as the trusteeship of a further 2 residential properties in Llandudno.

In addition, Wales has some of the oldest and least efficient housing in Western Europe, which impacts on climate change. According to Sophie Howe, Future Generations Commissioners for Wales a £15 billion retrofit plan would create 26,500 jobs by 2030 and would reduce fuel poverty. She recognises that there is a link between the climate emergency and fuel poverty. [6]

On Saturday 10 July, hundreds of protesters turned out at the Tryweryn dam to call for action from the Labour government to stop local people being priced out of the housing market by second home owners and to protect the Welsh language. Tryweryn is a potent symbol of Welsh resistance since the artificial lake there was created by the drowning of the Welsh speaking village of Capel Celyn against the wishes of the overwhelming majority of the population. The rally was addressed by, among others, Mabon ap Gwynfor the Plaid Cymru MS for the Dwyfor-Meirionnydd constituency in which Treweryn is to be found and Cian Ireland, former Labour candidate for the seat and a member of Labour For An Independent Wales.

Welsh language campaign Cymdeithas yr Iaith was involved in

the protest, not least because one of the effects of second homes is to weaken the position of the Welsh language as villages are taken over by relatively wealthy incomers from England. To get some idea of the scale of second homes it was revealed in the week before the protest that almost half of all houses sold in the constituency in the previous 12 month were second homes.

And Norton Finance is encouraging investment in buy-to-let properties in Wales' national parks, particularly the Brecon Beacons, while the Telegraph encouraged its readers to invest in the 'staycation boom' by snapping up a holiday home in Wales. Property clearly outranks the preservation of Welsh culture and language for them.

The Welsh government has published a plan for dealing with the second home crisis but this has been called 'weak' by Plaid Cymru and Cymdeithas yr Iaith. Mark Drakeford has also said he will explore the possibility of a 'tourist tax'. This, not surprisingly, attracted the hostility of the Tories. Yet the idea is not totally farfetched: certainly it's not unusual to pay a local tax, collected as part of a hotel bill, in a number of other European countries.

Wales and the UK

After the election Mark Drakeford published *Reforming Our Union* [7](a follow up to a previous version originally published a few years ago and also *We The People*[8] largely identified with Mick Antoniw, a left wing member of the government and now Counsel General and Minister for the Constitution. Drakeford and Antoniw are both in favour of maintaining the UK though, as Mark Drakeford recognises in his foreword, this is becoming increasingly harder to argue. But they certainly want significant changes, though stopping short of independence.

In fact, the Tories have made it harder and harder for Drakeford to hold back demands for independence and indeed at times they behave as if they want to break up the UK. The ridiculous attempt to prevent journalists referring to the 4 nations and insisting there is only one *British* nation (at a time when England, Scotland and Wales all had their own teams playing in the Euros), the demand that the union flag (aka the butcher's apron) be flown higher than the Saltire or Red Dragon on all government buildings, the demand that children in Welsh and Scottish schools sing the dire *We Are Britain* anthem on 'One Britain, One Nation Day' (totally ignored in Welsh schools, schools in Scotland were already on holiday) has now been upstaged by the plan to install a 100 foot union flag on the UK Government's tax office in Cardiff. Tory MP Darren Millar welcomed this display of imperial rule and demanded the Welsh government took action against Yes Cymru for a proliferation of stickers.

All of this comes against a backdrop of increasing hostility to Wales and the Welsh language among sections of English people. Most recently Carol Decker, singer with T'Pau, who was born in Shrewsbury and lives on the English-Welsh border, claimed that a supermarket in a photo she was shown couldn't be in the UK because some of the signs were in a 'foreign' language. They were: Welsh, a language Ms Decker must have come across many times given where she grew up and continues to live.

Guardian writer Rhiannon Lucy Coslett was recently abused online after she wrote an article *Wales eerily beautiful slate quarries are getting the recognition they deserve* after the North Wales slate quarries were awarded World Heritage Status. The editor of the *Spectator* joked about the Welsh language after Labour deputy leader Angela Rayner accidentally typed nonsense in a tweet. TV newsreader Huw Edwards was told to take off his mask by a fellow passenger on the London underground because they objected to the red dragon flag of

Wale on said mask. English newspapers complained about the ‘bias’ of Gaby Logan and her team when reporting on Wales’ matches in the Euros (unlike the totally neutral English media!) And the list goes on.

Perhaps worst of all in its attitude to the Welsh language was an article written by a Belfast based sociologist Dr. James Dingley for the Unionist supporting *The News Letter* in which he compared the Welsh language movement to the Nazis.[9]

Even the relatively mild proposal from the Welsh government that public servants should be able to speak a few Welsh phrases (not at a level where they could compete at an Eisteddfod, just a few simple phrases to answer the telephone, greet someone) was met with considerable hostility from the Tories for whom Wales is essentially an English colony. I can’t speak Welsh but I think I could meet the requirements set out by the government.

A Crisis in Yes Cymru

Unfortunately this is all taking place against a serious crisis in Yes Cymru, the campaign for Welsh independence[10].

Exactly what has been happening is unclear. One of the complaints is the lack of minutes. There have been a number of resignations from the recently elected Central Committee and Sion Jobbins, one of the founders of the organisation, has stepped down as National Secretary. Some members of the CC have been suspended. Allegations of harassment and bullying have been made. Most of the allegations and complaints about different issues are very vague, don’t give names etc so it is difficult to work out exactly what is going on.

However, it is quite likely there has been an orchestrated campaign by right-wing currents against the largely left-wing leadership elected at the last AGM. The right didn’t put much effort into the election and are now attempting to oust the

left. Apart from the allegations of bullying etc the opponents of the left are insisting that Yes.Cymru must be an organisation solely committed to achieving independence. I don't think there are any currents inside Yes.Cymru which disagree with this; the real problem for them is that the left (Labour For An Independent Wales, Undod) have gained places in the leadership which sections of the membership seem to believe makes it impossible for Yes.Cymru to remain a broad based campaign.

But seriously, anyone who believes that *members* of the thoroughly unionist Conservative and Unionist Party (the clue's in the name) or the equally pro-unionist Liberal Democrats are going to join and work with Yes.Cymru to break-up the union to which they are thoroughly committed is living in a fantasy land. It may be possible to attract a few Tory or Lib Dem voters but there is zero chance of winning the parties to support for Welsh independence. Realistically only Plaid Cymru and sections of the Labour Party, along with the Greens and far-left, are going to seriously champion independence for Wales.

There may be another AGM later this year and the remaining members of the current CC will remain in place until then though many members are unhappy with even that proposal and want an EGM as soon as possible and the current CC to step down. And the remaining members of the Central Committee are not helping themselves by a failure to recognise there may be some justification for the complaints, dismissing the views of local branches far too readily.

The destruction of Yes Cymru would be a major defeat for all those committed to independence. Both sides need to row back immediately from a potentially damaging split.

Free School Meals

While the Labour government's record on the environment has

much to commend it they have completely failed on the issue of free school meals. This was a major issue before, during and since the Senedd elections. Wales had, and continues to have, the worst provision of free school meals of any of the nations of the UK. The Bevan Foundation, the Child Poverty Action Group Wales have both been active in calling for an extension of the provision, as has Labour MP Beth Winter. But much of the lead has been taken by People's Assembly Wales (PAW), in conjunction with the others. There finally appears to be some movement by the government with letters being exchanged between Vicky Howells MS, Chair of the Senedd Labour Group and Len Arthur of PAW and Pasty Thomas-Turner of Unite Community Wales.[11] This is at least a step forward since previously the Labour Group has tended to ignore criticism of its policy on providing free school meals and has voted down resolutions in the Senedd from Plaid to expand the provision with the entire Labour Group, including the supposed left-wingers, voting as one.

Coronavirus

From Saturday August 7, most restrictions in Wales have come to an end, several days earlier than in England despite Boris Johnson's boastful 'Freedom Day'. For virtually the first time Keir Starmer has spoken out in support of the Labour government in Wales. He has usually been silent or supported Johnson and ignored Mark Drakeford.

While there have been some anti-restrictions, anti-vax protests in Wales they have generally been on a much smaller scale that in England, though the most recent saw a few hundred people outside Drakeford's home.

This is very much an aberration. The Welsh Labour government has generally been credited with running a more efficient (and more humane) Covid campaign than their English counterparts. Wales, despite a slow start, has now vaccinated more people

than any UK nation and, indeed, has one of the best records in the world.

Despite the trolls, particularly on WalesOnline, and the protests outside his house, Drakeford has a much higher satisfaction level than Johnson. Of course this is partially because he is the First Minister in Wales and therefore attracts support from people in Wales whereas Johnson is identified much more with the UK or, especially, England. But it is also because at least some of the praise for the Welsh government's handling of the crisis is justified.

Nevertheless we should not ignore some unpleasant facts. WalesOnline may be seen as a cheerleader for the Welsh government, especially by Unionist and anti-Labour trolls who constantly spread vitriol in the comments section, but it has posed some difficult questions for the Welsh government. The refusal of the Welsh government to agree to a Wales specific enquiry into the handling of the pandemic is particularly problematic – but was reiterated on August 6 by the new Health Minister Eluned Morgan.[12]

On its refusal to hold an enquiry into its handling of the Covid pandemic and its unwillingness to increase the numbers entitled to free school meals the Welsh government certainly should be held to account. Unfortunately we don't appear to have an equivalent figure to Marcus Rashford so that puts the onus on the left in Wales to work together to support the government when they deserve our support and to fight them whenever necessary. Left Unity in Wales has recently issued a letter in which they appeal for the Welsh left to create an ecosocialist, radical independence current. This would certainly be a step forward and one Anti*Capitalist Resistance welcomes.

Source: AntiCapitalist Resistance

[1] Mark Drakeford formed a Labour led administration in Wales in 2018 when he took over as First Minister from Carwyn Jones.

[2] The unicameral chamber that runs devolved matters in Wales has been the Sennedd (Parliament) since May 2020 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Senedd for more details of the history and of devolved powers

[3] For a good analysis of the setting up of the Ministry and Labour's actions in the first few week after the election see this article by Sean Thompson on Red Green Labour.

[4] By far the most disruptive and stupid of Welsh MPs is Chris Bryant who defended the suspension of Dawn Butler and complained that the new Peruvian government wasn't centrist enough and got involved in a spat with an academic who knows a lot more about Peru than Bryant. He has been accused of having a hostile attitude to the Welsh language, while encouraging young people to learn a second language. Presumably Bryant would prefer those young people to learn Castillian, which he speaks fluently, to Welsh. The sooner the working class of the Rhondda can replace him the better.

[5] https://www.southwalesguardian.co.uk/news/19474735.thousands-homes-south-west-wales-become-power-stations/?ref=rss&IYA-mail=6d6eabaf-a701-4b57-aa60-ee39a5436952

[6] https://nation.cymru/news/15bn-plan-to-retrofit-existing-homes-in-wales-could-eradicate-fuel-poverty-says-future-generations-commissioner/

[7] https://gov.wales/reforming-our-union-shared-governance-in-the-uk-2nd-edition

[8] https://labourlist.org/2021/01/constitutional-reform-is-key-

labour-needs-an-agenda-for-a-radical-federal-uk/

[9] https://nation.cymru/opinion/knowing-a-few-welsh-words-really-isnt-too-much-to-ask-for-a-job-with-the-government/; https://nation.cymru/news/huw-edwards-told-to-take-off-covid-mask-because-it-had-a-welsh-dragon-on-it/; https://nation.cymru/news/belfast-based-academic-compared-welsh-language-movement-to-nazis/

[10] See my earlier article here; https://anticapitalistresistance.org/why-is-welsh-independence-suddenly-being-taken-seriously/

[11] https://docs.google.com/document/d/1rlsYpJPa1WKH9XIBez0RqZH79p3HeJ29LLNYbCZJV-o/edit?usp=sharing; https://pawalescymru.blogspot.com/2021/06/our-post-senedd-election-free-school.html;

[12] https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/politics/welsh-government-coronavirus-covid-mistakes-21107573?utm_source=wales_online_newsletter&utm_campaign=politics_newsletter2&utm_medium=email; https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/eluned-morgan-interview-health-minister-21241975?utm_source=wales_online_newsletter&utm_campaign=politics_newsletter2&utm_medium=email

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Wales's new Climate Change Ministry bodes well for the future – possibly

Red-Green Labour's Sean Thompson gives a cautious welcome to Welsh Labour's plans.

In May's Welsh Senedd elections, Labour equalled its best result since the Welsh Assembly was established in 1999, winning 30 of the Senedd's 60 seats. Labour's manifesto had contained a number of modest, but welcome pledges, including the banning of most single use plastics, the creation of a new national forest stretching the length of the country from North to South and a moratorium on planning permission for large incineration facilities. During the election campaign, the First Minister, Mark Drakeford had repeatedly declared that if re-elected, he would *'embed our response to the climate and nature emergency in everything we do'*.

Such fine words are to be expected during election campaigns, but all too frequently disappointingly little is done to put them into practice. However, within a week Drakeford announced a major reorganisation of his administration, creating a powerful new Ministry for Climate Change, which has responsibility for transport, housing, planning, regeneration, energy and environment. The Minister and Deputy Minister are, respectively, Julie James and Lee Waters, both on the left of

the party, and their key role is stated as being to *'ensure all Welsh Government policy on new infrastructure projects, energy schemes, and planning decisions can meet environmental targets and be justified in the context of Wales' current and future climate challenges'*. In an early indication of how the new ministry may combine policy areas with the climate crisis in mind, Drakeford announced a commitment to build 20,000 new social homes for rent that will be built to zero-carbon standards, piloting the use of new design and production methods and making use of the underused resource of Welsh timber, currently largely used for pulp.

On 15 June, the administration's Programme for Government was published, laying out its delivery plan for the next 5 years. Lee Waters has been quite open about his view that the Ministry for Climate Change's plans are extremely modest in the light of the scale and urgency of the climate crisis, nonetheless they mark a significant step forward both in ambition and recognising the need for a properly integrated programme. In addition to the policies already mentioned, the 2021-26 action plan includes the following main commitments:

- Legislating to abolish the use of more commonly littered single use plastics.
- Introducing a Clean Air Act for Wales, consistent with WHO guidance.
- Maintaining the policy of opposing the extraction of fossil fuels in Wales.
- Supporting the Wales TUC proposals for union members to become Green Reps, with the same rights as H&S Reps, in the workplace.
- Aiming for a 30% target for working remotely.
- Implementing a new 10-year Wales Infrastructure Investment Plan for a zero-carbon economy.
- Reviving the Swansea Tidal Lagoon project as part of a wider'Tidal Lagoon Challenge' and supporting initiatives that can make Wales a centre of emerging tide and wave

technologies.

- Expanding renewable energy generation by public bodies and community groups in Wales by over 100MW by 2026, as well as supporting other community-led initiatives, such as cooperative housing and community land trusts.
- Lifting the ban on local authorities setting up new municipal bus companies, expanding flexible demand-responsive travel across Wales, making 20mph the default speed limit in residential areas throughout Wales and hitting a target of at least 45% of journeys by sustainable modes by 2040.
- Delivering good quality jobs and training through the housing retrofit programme, using local supply chains.

There is much else in the Programme to applaud; strengthening the protections for ancient woodlands, funding additional flood protection for more than 45,000 homes and delivering nature-based flood management in all major river catchments, to expand wetland and woodland habitats, creating a new system of farm support and developing a Wales Community Food Strategy, as well as a commitment to *'explore options for workers to take an ownership stake in our national transport assets'*. However, as ever, words are cheap. Some of the commitments are not entirely in the Welsh Government's gift, others will, at the very least, be at the very boundaries of the government's powers – or even beyond them.

For example, the commitment to work towards 30% of office based workers working remotely makes a lot of sense in terms of both encouraging more employment in the valleys of south east Wales or the isolated rural communities of mid and north Wales, as well as helping to reduce the congestion in the major urban areas (pre-Covid, Cardiff had to deal with an influx of over 80,000 commuter vehicles a day, while the antiquated rail services were unbearably overcrowded). However, while the government is proposing a number of sensible measures, such as developing new remote working hubs

in former mining communities, they are going to be dependent not only on co-operation – and probably co-funding – with cash strapped local councils, but also on the co-operation of employers. Wales has the largest proportion of its workforce in the public sector of any part of Britain, so getting the active support of local authorities, the NHS and the Higher Education sector is going to be key to the success of the policy.

Supporting, the Wales TUC proposals for Green Reps in the workplace is laudable, however it is beyond the Welsh Government's devolved powers to enforce it. It will require the government, as part of its Social Partnership policy, to include this reform in the package of fair employment measures it will be seeking to 'persuade' employers to accept through the leverage of its (along with the NHS and Higher Education) public procurement muscle.

A number of important measures, such as ensuring that Wales gets its fair share of the *Shared Prosperity Fund* and the so-called *Levelling Up Fund* from Whitehall and getting a fair share of vital rail infrastructure and R&D investment for Wales, rely on the the Tories being prepared to spread largesse to the ungrateful Welsh in the manner of Lady Bountiful – an eventuality it would be unwise to hold one's breath waiting for. And relaunching the Swansea Tidal Lagoon (as it were) would almost certainly require the Treasury (motto: 'Out of my cold dead hand…') to relax its grip on the Welsh Government's borrowing limits.

The Tories have always been hostile to the direction that even its current very limited devolved powers have taken Wales, and the performance of the Welsh Government and NHS during the Covid crisis in contrast to the fiasco in England has clearly intensified that hostility. The Westminster Government has already demonstrated that it intends to use the funds meant to replace those from the EU that were devolved to the Welsh Government, that have been so important to the poorest parts

of Wales, itself, with (up to now) no consultation with the Welsh Government. Johnson has even threatened that the Westminster Government might seek to impose the environmentally disastrous M4 Extension project, rejected eighteen months ago by the Welsh Government, on Wales as though it was a colony of England (luckily, this idea is about as workable as Johnson's other wheezes, like the Scotland-Ireland bridge). But in these circumstances, the Welsh Government's hope that, for example, the under-funded Health and Safety Executive might be devolved to Wales is probably a pipe dream.

Even where the Welsh Government has both the powers and the funding to implement its programme there remains the question of whether it will, in practice, do so. Its record of delivery is patchy. For example, for some years the Welsh Government has – rhetorically at least – had a progressive policy of increasing tree cover in Wales. Since January 2008, under the 'Plant!' scheme, a tree has been planted for very child born in Wales (and since 2014, another has been planted in Mbale, Uganda) and the government has had a target of planting 2,000 hectares of new woodland each year. However, since 2013 new woodland has averaged less than 1,000 hectares a year and in 2019/20 just 80 hectares were planted, though the Climate Change Commission estimates that tree planting in Wales needs to be moving towards 5,000 hectares a year if we are to achieve 24% woodland cover by 2050. Given that the idea of a National Forest is Mark Drakeford's personal vision, one can only hope that the government gets its act together in the most dramatic fashion over the next couple of years.

Another example: the Welsh Government has been committed to a desperately needed green housing retrofit programme for some years. 32% of homes in Wales were built before 1919, we have some of the oldest and least thermally efficient homes in Europe, and there are currently over 250,000 households living in fuel poverty.

But while the Welsh Government has implemented a number of worthwhile initiatives to address these issues, including its Warm Homes Programme, the Welsh Housing Quality Standard and most recently the Optimised Retrofit Programme, these initiatives have largely involved social housing, not privately let or owner occupied homes, though both of those latter sectors are on average in poorer condition. A major programme is needed to retrofit all existing homes in Wales to at least an EPC 'B' rating within the next ten years that would not only tackle both greenhouse gas emissions and fuel poverty, but would create thousands of new, well paid, unionised jobs (10,000 FTE jobs a year over 15 years, according to the Institute of Welsh Affairs).

However, as with many of the commitments in the Programme for Government, no targets or timescales for the housing retrofit programme have been published, just statements of good intentions, although given the speed at which the programme has been put together and published since the election in May, that is not entirely surprising. It is vital, though, that those statements of intent are transformed into practical action over the coming months.

Despite the Welsh Government's less than stellar environmental performance record, the relative modesty of the environmental goals in its new Programme for Government and the increasingly problematic issue of its limited legislative and financial powers under the current devolution settlement, there are reasons to be optimistic. The creation of a new Ministry explicitly concerned with the climate crisis that is responsible for most of the key areas where radical change is needed – including transport, housing, environment and energy – is potentially extraordinarily important. The fact that Drakeford has put this Ministry in the charge of two of his key supporters – both firmly on the left of the party when the majority of Labour MSs (Senedd Members) are on the right – is a hopeful sign that radical action that challenges the status

quo may start to creep onto the political agenda.

And evidence that that hope is not totally unfounded was provided on 21 June when Lee Waters announced that all new road building programmes in Wales have been frozen with immediate effect in order to be subject to an independent review. In his announcement, Waters said: *'I don't think people realise the amount we have to do. Since 1990 we have reduced emissions by 32% and by the end of the decade we have to more than double that and it's up again by 2040. We really do have to ramp up what we have been doing. In 10 years, we need to achieve more than the last 30 and in those years we have done the relatively easy things, there is no low hanging fruit. If we're going to hit this target we're going to have to do things differently.'*

When asked what he would say to people who face regular traffic jams on the roads where schemes have been halted, he said: *'If we do nothing, we are facing catastrophic consequences for our communities. A lot of this is going to be uncomfortable change and it's not going to be easy and I am not pretending there's simple answers. There will be tensions and will be contradictions, we need to make it easier for people to do things that help us tackle climate change…For most people, the reality is that using public transport is not easy and isn't attractive and we need to change that to make it easier. We can't do that if we're spending all our money on road building. We have reached the point where we have to confront the fact we can't keep doing what we have always done'.*

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Why is Welsh independence suddenly being taken seriously?

There has been a remarkable rise in support for a movement advocating independence for Wales, writes Geoff Ryan

At the beginning of 2020, just before the start of the pandemic, membership of **YesCymru** stood at about 2,000. In November, *writes Geoff Ryan*, I received my membership card: Number 15,706. Membership has further increased to about 20,000 today. That is a remarkable rise in support for a movement advocating independence for Wales. Especially since it was only formed in 2016. Moreover for more than a year it has not been able to follow up on the increasingly bigger demonstrations held in Caernarfon, Cardiff and Merthyr.[i]

Polls also show a big increase in support for independence with up to 40 percent of those expressing a view saying they would vote for independence if a referendum were to be held tomorrow. In some polls a majority of Labour voters have supported independence. Young people in particular are inclined towards independence. 16 and 17 year olds are able to vote in the Senedd elections on Thursday 6 May but at the moment it is unclear to what extent this will impact on the election result.

Labour Party supporters such as Michael Sheen[ii] and Charlotte Church have come out in favour of independence. Charlotte Church's support for independence is on the front page of the first edition of **YesCymru's** free paper which has been distributed to households throughout Wales. Former Wales and Everton goalkeeper Neville Southall and sports journalist Eddie Butler are prominent supporters of independence for Wales.

At least some of the mainstream press are taking the possibility of Wexit, as Sky News dubbed it[iii], seriously. This is also being taken up outside Britain. For example both the **Irish Times** and **South China Morning Post** have featured articles on Welsh independence.[iv]

So why has support for independence suddenly mushroomed?

The first thing to note is that, contrary to the arguments of the capitalist media and sections of the Labour Party, support for some form of independence has always existed in Wales. Just before and after the First World War the South Wales Miners Federation supported a Welsh Parliament. They were joined by all the major Welsh Labour organisations.

Unfortunately the workers movement failed to put itself at the head of the fight for a Welsh Parliament, leaving it to the Liberals, so gradually the Welsh Labour movement became more 'British' in outlook the more it came to be dominated by the British Labour Party.[v] As a result devolution was rejected in a 1979 referendum and there was barely a majority for devolution when another referendum was held in 1997.

There have also been major struggles around the language question, particularly from the 1960s onwards. Despite significant victories there are still ongoing issues around the status of the Welsh language. Jacob Rees Mogg's recent description of Welsh as 'a foreign language' incensed many people in Wales. Not least because it showed an appalling ignorance on the part of this staunch British patriot of the connection between Welsh and the indigenous language of the original Britons. English, Mr Rees Mogg, with its Latin, Norman French, Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian heritages is the non-native language.

The current discussion about whether of not Snowdon should

only be called by its Welsh name Yr Wyddfa is also having an impact on attitudes in Wales; particularly after the ridiculing of Welsh on a recent edition of **Have I Got News For You**. Bizarrely support for the use of Yr Wyddfa has come from the Tory supporting Telegraph.[vi] There are also campaigns for the country to only be referred to as Cymru rather than its English name.

The Wales football team reaching the semi-finals of the 2016 UEFA championship (England lost to Iceland in the last 16) and Gareth Thomas winning the Tour de France in 2018 certainly increased a sense of Welsh identity and pride. The much improved form of the Wales rugby union team, winning the 6 Nations Championship after a disastrous 2020, has also strengthened Welsh national feelings.

But all these issues have reinforced a move that was already underway towards greater support for independence in Wales. They did not create it. What then are the major reasons for the rise in support for independence?

Basically there are 4 main reasons for the growth of the independence movement in Wales:

1. Brexit
2. Covid
3. Westminster interference
4. Scottish independence

1) Brexit

Unlike Scotland a majority of voters in Wales supported Brexit. Indeed, without that Welsh support Brexit would have been clearly revealed as the little Englander project it was. In fact if Wales had also voted to remain the break-up of the UK would probably have accelerated. Consider if a government in Westminster had tried to go ahead with Brexit against the wishes of three of the four constituent parts of the United

Kingdom. It is the effect of Brexit on Wales, and Welsh farmers in particular, that has led to a change in views, with probably a majority now wishing they had voted remain. Many farmers have accused the Westminster government of a 'Brexit betrayal' after the farming sector's 2020 budget was slashed by £95 million, despite the Tories having promised a year earlier to maintain agricultural development funding. Also the hostility of farmers has also increased because they have not received much of the money they were promised. In fact the Tories' response is to centrally control all funding, by-passing the Welsh Labour government. This hostility to the devolved administration has undoubtedly increased support for a weakening of ties with England.

2) Covid 19

The Welsh Labour government has not performed massively better than the Johnson government in terms of reducing deaths from Covid. Nevertheless in every poll Welsh First Minister Mark Drakeford is credited with performing much better than Johnson. Indeed Johnson is seen negatively in every poll in Wales. What the pandemic has revealed to much wider layers of Welsh society is that the devolved government has far greater powers than most people thought and that it can use them independently of Westminster. By taking control of dealing with the pandemic the Labour government in Wales has been able to demonstrate the benefits of devolved government (even within the limits currently in place). This is the main reason why Boris Johnson regretted allowing the devolved governments to take responsibility for the Covid crisis. At the same time he refuses to talk to the government in Cardiff.

And the Labour government has been able to take alternative roads to the Westminster government. **Find, Test, Track, Trace, Isolate** in Wales has been carried out by the public sector, unlike in England where vast sums have been handed over to Serco to run a frankly useless system. The Welsh government

has been more inclined to act on the advice of scientists and take measures to reduce, or try to reduce, the spread of the virus. Unlike the government in Westminster, which refused to stop people living in areas with high levels of Covid travelling to Wales.

Certainly the Welsh government can be criticized for its slowness in reacting at the start of the pandemic, its tardiness in making the wearing of masks compulsory in shops and on public transport, its ending the autumn fire-break too quickly and several other mistakes. But the Labour government's failings are certainly far less than those of the Tories in Westminster and, despite the trolls on **WalesOnline** the majority of people are inclined to support Drakeford's measures. But most importantly in increasing willingness to consider independence is the fact that the Welsh government was able to take measures and was the vehicle for communicating with the people of Wales.

3) Westminster Interference

Interference from Westminster predates Johnson becoming PM. It was Theresa May's government that refused to support the Swansea bay barrage scheme on the grounds of cost. At one and the same time this showed how dependent Wales was on Westminster and how little the Tory government cared about the people of Wales or the environment. Under Johnson that has become even more apparent. Although the Welsh government rejected the proposed M4 relief road on environmental grounds (as well as cost) Johnson has declared it must go ahead.

In the early days of the pandemic **BBC Wales** news reported, on at least 2 different occasions, that care homes in North Wales had had PPE taken from them and diverted to hospitals in England. Although Johnson denies this it is almost certainly true. In any case many people did believe the stories which reinforced a belief that Wales would always be subject to England unless it took measures to free itself.

As mentioned above in the section on Brexit the Johnson government has tried to seize control of the distribution of funds from the devolved administration and to bring in the Internal Market Act to undermine the ability of the devolved governments to resist Westminster diktats. The Crime, Sentencing, Police and Courts Bill will be imposed on Wales – not that South Wales Police need much encouragement to break up protests. Furthermore Wales representation at Westminster will be cut from 40 to 32 MPs.

In addition Johnson has instructed all public authorities to fly the Union Jack (known throughout much of the world as the Butcher's Apron) on their buildings. He has understood that a complete ban on flying the Saltire or the Red Dragon would spell disaster for his government but his diktat that they must be flown below the union flag is an unambiguous call for Unionism to be made the dominant legal position in Scotland and Wales. Devolution is to be forever subordinate. As can be imagined this did not go down well in Wales or Scotland.

4) Scottish Independence

The continued growth in support for parties in Scotland advocating independence has also had an impact in Wales. On one level there has been increasing contact and cooperation between Socialist Republican forces in Wales and Scotland. Contact and cooperation is continuing not solely around issues of independence but also around, for example, COP 26 in Glasgow. But on a more general level there is a growing feeling in Wales that if Scotland does break from the United Kingdom then Wales would have to follow suit if it does not want to be merely an appendage of England. This is far from a unique situation. Although the relative sizes of the parties involved are reversed, Wales following Scotland out of the UK is almost as inevitable as Croatia following Slovenia out of the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia – though hopefully without the dreadful consequences.

Johnson’s disparaging comments about Scottish devolution on a visit to Scotland and his regret that the Welsh government has powers over lockdown and coronavirus[vii] have also strengthened anti-unionist views. Not surprisingly Tory interference in Welsh decision making has increased support for independence. Or, at the very least, has fundamentally challenged the existing constitutional set-up whereby the United Kingdom is totally dominated by England.

Federal Responses

Mark Drakeford is undoubtedly a unionist. Yet he has begun to question the current arrangements. His speech to the (virtual) Welsh Labour Party Spring Conference called unambiguously for ‘Home Rule’.[viii] Mick Antoniw, a left Labour Member of the Senedd, has written a pamphlet in which he argues for a new federal arrangement in which England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are equal partners.[ix] However, leaving aside the rather important issue of Irish reunification, Antoniw’s proposals are essentially a rehash of Gordon Brown’s Devo-max which was used to undermine the pro-independence vote in Scotland and, as a result, have seen support for independence soar. Antoniw also hopes that Keir Starmer will take up the cause of federalism. Given Starmer’s current inclination to wrap himself in the Union Jack even more than Johnson this is a forlorn hope.

The increase in support for independence in Wales has also led to calls for a separate Welsh Labour Party, again led by Mick Antoniw.[x] Earlier this year saw the formation of Labour For An Independent Wales (L4IW) which has 3 candidates on the Labour slates for the upcoming Senedd elections. Only 1 of them is a constituency candidate, the other 2 are on the regional lists and none of them have much hope of being elected but it is still an important achievement given that the sole supporter of an independent Scotland was removed from the Labour slate for the Scottish Parliament.

The moves within sections of Welsh Labour are inadequate but they clearly reflect a questioning among Labour Party members and supporters of the current constitutional setup in which England is able to totally dominate the other nations. Socialists can work with the advocates of federalism while at the same time criticizing the limits of the proposals and arguing for the need to go beyond federalism and create a Welsh Socialist Republic.

Socialist Republicanism

Outside the Labour Party a number of organisations have developed over the last year in support of a Welsh Socialist Republic: in particular **Undod** (Unity) and **Valleys Underground**. Undod has about 650 members spread throughout Wales. It is in favour of a Welsh Socialist Republic (as is L4IW and Valleys Underground) and is trying to construct an open, democratic organisation in which people from different political traditions and viewpoints can discuss and work together. It has a strong ecosocialist dimension and **Merched Undod** (Undod Women) are ensuring that it also emphasises feminism.

Valleys Underground describe themselves as explicitly Marxist. They originate from the South Wales Valleys, hence the name, but have now built a branch in Wrexham, North Wales. Like Undod and L4IW they argue for a Welsh Socialist Republic and are involved in practical ecosocialist activities such as cleaning up waste ground. There is a certain overlap in membership between Undod, Valleys Underground and, to a lesser extent, L4IW. All 3 organisations participate in YesCymru.

There are 2 important websites giving largely pro-independence views: Voice.Wales (not to be confused with Voice of Wales, a far right site) and Nation.Cymru. Both print articles primarily in English though some of the comments are in Welsh. In addition Undod and Valleys Underground also provide good reporting on events in Wales from a socialist republican

viewpoint.

There has also been a growth in websites dealing with all aspects of Welsh life, including history, natural history, ecological issues and cultural matters – mostly bilingual sites.

And in addition, of course, there is Plaid Cymru which has taken a much more pro-independence position over the last year or so. However, the polls suggest that the growth in support for independence has not necessarily led to an increase in support for Plaid.

Opposition to Independence

However, despite the unprecedented growth in support for independence in Wales there has also been increasing vocal opposition. The Abolish The Assembly Party is standing in the Senedd elections on Thursday 6 May – though the fact the Welsh Assembly became the Senedd Cymru/Welsh Parliament over a year ago doesn't appear to have impinged much on their political awareness. Despite their desire to abolish the 'Assembly' their candidates have indicated they would take up positions as MSs and take the not insignificant salaries. According to the polls Abolish could win between 0 and 7 seats from the regional lists. UKIP, which had 7 AMs at the last election before splitting several times, are unlikely to win more than 1 seat. Their leaflet in support of Neil Hamilton is thoroughly racist, anti-Black Lives Matter, anti-immigrants adnd anti-foreigners. It also calls for the scrapping of the Senedd. Perhaps surprisingly Reform UK, successor to the Brexit Party, is not overtly opposed to devolution and does not call for abolishing the Senedd. But like Abolish and UKIP their leaflets are all only in English.

Guardian columnist Simon Jenkins recently claimed that the biggest handicap to an independent Wales is hostility to 'newcomers'.[xi] He has clearly never read the YesCymru

constitution, adopted in January 2020:

“2. YesCymru is a campaigning organisation with the aim of gaining independence for Wales in order to improve the way the country is governed. YesCymru believes that Wales would be better running its own affairs, as part of a wider European and international family.

YesCymru believes in an inclusive citizenship, which embraces the fact that all who choose to make Wales their home – regardless of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation – are full citizens of the new Wales.”

Certainly the Constitution could be improved to show an understanding of the social model of disability, but otherwise this is not only a constitution socialists can support but one which we can advocate for every area of society. It puts the movement for Welsh independence in the forefront of the fight for civil and human rights for everyone.

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[i] On the rise of Yes Cymru see WalesOnline, 8 Nov 2020.

[ii] See the fascinating interview with Michael Sheen by Owen Jones. Available on You Tube.

[iii] Sky News 16 September 2019

[iv] Irish Times, April 23 2021; South China Morning Post, 29 January 2021

[v] See Gareth Miles and Robert Griffiths; *Socialism For The Welsh People*; 1979. Interestingly Griffiths, current General Secretary of the CPB, calls for a Welsh Socialist Republic at the end of the pamphlet – not something advocated today by the CPB even though support for such a demand is much higher than in 1979.

vi] Nation.Cymru, 29 April 2021

[vii] WalesOnline 23 Mar 2021

[viii] WalesOnline, 26 Feb 2021

[ix] See Constitutional reform is key: Labour needs an agenda for a radical federal UK in LabourList, 14 Jan 2021.

[x] Nation.Cymru, 22 Feb 2021

[xi] Nation.Cymru, 01 May 2021

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