

‘Tsunami’ of industrial action to hit oil and gas operators as 1400 offshore workers set to strike – from Unite the Union

From [Unite the Union](#):

Dozens of platforms in UKCS set to be brought to a ‘standstill’ with BP, Shell and Total hit

Unite the union announced today (Monday 20 March) that major oil and gas operators in the UK Continental Shelf (UKCS) face a ‘tsunami’ of industrial unrest within weeks as around 1400 offshore workers across five companies demand a better deal on jobs, pay and conditions.

Unite, whose members will take action at companies enjoying record-busting profits, predicts that platforms and offshore installations will be brought to a ‘standstill’ due to the specialised roles its members undertake.

The action will hit major oil and gas operators including BP, CNRI, EnQuest, Harbour, Ithaca, Shell and Total.

Unite general secretary Sharon Graham said: “Oil and gas companies have been given free rein to enjoy massive windfall profits in the North Sea; drilling concessions are effectively licences to print money.

“1400 offshore workers are now set to take strike action against these employers who are raking it but refusing to give them a fair share of the pie. This will create a tsunami of industrial unrest in the offshore sector.

“Unite will support these members every step of the way in their fight for better jobs, pay and conditions.”

The prospective action includes electrical, production and mechanical technicians in addition to deck crew, scaffolders crane operators, pipefitters, platers, and riggers working for Bilfinger UK Limited, Stork construction, Petrofac Facilities Management, the Wood Group UK Limited and Sparrows Offshore Services.

John Boland, Unite industrial officer, added: “Unite has received unprecedented support in favour of industrial action in the UK Continental Shelf. It is the biggest mandate we have received in a generation in the offshore sector. There is no doubt that this is directly linked to oil and gas companies reaping record profits while the workforce gets scraps from the table.

“Unite’s members are angry at the corporate greed being shown by offshore operators and contractors. Now these major global companies are set to face the consequences as dozens of offshore platforms will be brought to a standstill in a matter of weeks.”

Details of the disputes

Around 700 offshore workers at Bilfinger UK Limited are set to down tools after Unite members voted in favour of taking industrial action as part of a pay dispute. Bilfinger workers are demanding an increase above the base rate of pay set in the Energy Services Agreement (ESA) for 2022.

Meanwhile, 350 Stork construction workers are set to take strike action after Unite members also supported industrial action in a dispute over working rotas and rates of pay.

Unite members employed by Petrofac Facilities Management Limited on the FPF1 platform also voted in favour of strike action. Around 50 workers are involved in the dispute over

holiday entitlements. Offshore workers can be asked to work at any time for no additional payment. The operator, Ithaca Energy, has a 'clawback' policy of 14 days, double the industry norm of 7 days.

Unite members employed by theWood Group UK Limited on TAQA platforms similarly voted to take strike action. Around 80 members are involved in the dispute which is focused on a 10 per cent cut made to salaries in 2015 worth around £7,000 a year.

The mandates for industrial action follow the recent announcement by Unite that around 200 Sparrows Offshore Services workers will take strike action across more than 20 oil and gas platforms in disputes over pay. Strike action is set to hit various platforms from 29 March and until 7 June in a series of 24, 48 and 72-hour stoppages. This action will hit a number of major operators including BP, Shell, Apache and Harbour Energy.

A further two industrial action ballots are due this week at Petrofac BP involving around 80 workers (21 March), and at Worley Services UK Limited on Harbour Energy platforms involving around 50 workers (24 March) in disputes over pay. The pending ballot results could bring the final total to around 1500 offshore workers taking industrial action.

Unite [recently blasted](#) the UK Government's inaction on taxing oil firms as BP posted the biggest profits in its history as it doubled to £23 billion in 2022. BP's bonanza profits come after Shell reports earnings of £32 billion, bringing the combined total profits of the top two energy companies in Britain to a record £55 billion.

ENDS

Notes to Editors:

Ballot results in full

1. *Bilfinger – Yes to strike action – 97%*
2. *Stork – Yes to strike action – 98%*
3. *Petrofac Facilities Management Limited – Yes to strike action – 100%*
4. *Wood Group UK Limited – Yes to strike action – 93%*

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The political economy of the cost of living crisis in the UK: What is to be done?

Özlem Onaran writes on the UK cost of living crisis.

Soaring prices of energy, food, other essentials and rent in 2022, caused by multiple supply chain disruptions after Brexit and the pandemic, followed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, brought an intensive cost of living crisis, exacerbated by inequalities in class, race, gender, as well as the care and ecological crises.

While the squeeze in wages is not new, the current scale of cost of living crisis is the deepest in a generation. The Bank of England expects inflation to come down to 3.9% by the fourth quarter of 2023, but the cost of living crisis will continue for many working class households.

Inflation (CPI) in January 2023 fell to 10.1% from its peak of

11.1% in October 2022. Core inflation (excluding food, energy, alcohol, and tobacco prices) declined to 5.8% as of January 2023. However, inflation coming gradually down does not mean prices are falling; they are merely increasing at a slower pace and they will remain high, deepening the cost of living crisis for the many, whose nominal wages have not been increasing at the same pace as inflation. Meanwhile, the inflation in the prices of food and housing and household services – including water and energy bills and rent – are still substantially higher at 16.8% and 26.7%, respectively. Consequently, the inflation experienced by the poorest 10% of households is 11.7% as opposed to 8.8% for the richest 10% ([Resolution Foundation, 2023](#)).

In the UK inflation as of January 2023 is higher than that in the US (6.4%) and the euro-zone (8.5%) and coming down at a slower pace. The UK is forecast to have a poorer performance than the rest of the G7 with a recession in 2023 and at the end of 2022 it is the only G7 economy which has still not returned back to pre-pandemic levels of economic activity.

Particular vulnerabilities due to years of austerity implemented by the 2010-15 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, historically low investment in both physical and social infrastructure, a highly financialized economy, high debt levels of households and small businesses and Brexit hurting both investment and international trade with the EU – the most important trade partner – caught the country unprepared to deal with the pandemic and the cost of living crisis. Yet, fiscal and monetary policy responses are still centred around austerity and increasing interest rates to fight inflation, with repeated warnings against wage-price spirals by government ministers and the Bank of England governor alike.

A historical context of rising inequality

The squeeze in wages is not new. The cost of living crisis of 2022 comes on top of decades of fall in the share of wages in national income due to the deterioration in the bargaining power of workers as a result in changes in trade union legislation, labour market deregulation, structural change, neoliberal globalisation, and financialization, along with historically undervalued wages of key workers in the care sector and public services.

The wage share reached its peak in 1975 at 69.5%. The years of austerity after the Great Recession, followed by the pandemic and now the cost of living crisis brought it down to 63.7% by 2022 -about 6% lower than its peak ([AMECO](#)). Meanwhile, the rising top 1% share in income since 1980 grew from 6.8% to 12.7% as of 2021 (World Inequality Database): the fall in the wage share of the bottom 99% is even more dramatic.

Wealth inequality has also been increasing. During the pandemic, the wealth of UK billionaires grew by 22%, and the share of top 1% in net household wealth increased further to 21.3% in 2021 from 21.1 in 2019 ([World Inequality Database](#)).

The fall in union density and collective bargaining coverage are the most remarkable factors explaining the decline in the wage share and the rise in wealth inequality, and the effects of other factors such as globalisation has to be interpreted in that context. Union density fell from 52.2% at its peak in 1980 to 23.1% as of 2021. The fall in collective bargaining coverage is even more dramatical from 85.0% at its peak in 1975 to 26.0% as of 2021.

Since the Great Recession, real wage rates have been falling. The years of austerity in its aftermath deepened the squeeze in wages and the recovery since 2014 has been slow and incomplete, with real wages still lower than their 2007 level in 2019, and the cost of living crisis reversing any

improvements since 2014. As of 2022 compared to 2007, real wages in construction and manufacturing are 9.9% and 3.7% lower, respectively; in the public sector wages are 5.4% lower in real terms compared to 2010. The only sector where real wages are still substantially higher in December 2022 compared to 2007 is finance and business services, with a real increase of 5.9%.

The effects of the crisis and real pay cuts are also gendered. Women are at the frontline of the cost of living crisis, doing still more than 60% of domestic unpaid care work , including budgeting, shopping, cooking, caring, providing for the children, elderly and the household, sewing and mending. These activities increase during cost of living crises to compensate for the loss in real income of households, and this is not due to their own choosing; it is not a hobby but a stressful daily survival struggle when women need to make difficult choices between eating and heating.

Women also constitute a larger proportion of the most vulnerable on the lower end of the wage scale and those with precarious contracts. They make up the majority of workers in the public sector, such as health, social care, education and childcare, who have suffered from pay freezes and dismal increases since 2010. This situation has changed little after the pandemic, despite their being clapped as key workers by policymakers.

Households headed by women and single mothers are more likely to struggle with debt and soaring utility bills. Women also carried the brunt of the rise in the increased care needs after the pandemic with the rise in long-term illness against the backdrop of overstretched healthcare and social care services, due to years of cuts in the National Health Service and social care. The result was that many women had to leave paid work against their will.

Against the background of these facts, it is difficult to see

evidence for the Bank of England governor's warnings of the risk of a wage-price spiral . The big difference to the 1970s is the fall in the bargaining power of labour, as indicated by the fall in trade union density and collective bargaining coverage as well as labour market deregulation that brought a rise in zero-hours contracts and dodgy self-employment.

It is yet to be seen whether the biggest strike wave of the past three decades will be able to stop the real cuts in wages. Nearly 2.5 million working days were lost to industrial action in 2022 Two million of these days of strikes were in the private sector – the highest in three decades. Taking the public and private sector strikes together, the record in 2022 is still much lower than the historical highs of late 1970s, but the severity of the cost of living crisis and the discontent among public sector workers led to 2023 starting with a historical escalation of public sector strikes in rail, education, and civil service.

Causes of the current waves of inflation

The first wave of inflation in 2021-22 was due to the increase in critical imported input costs due to the supply chain disruptions after the pandemic and later due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Brexit added further dimensions to the supply chain disruptions in the UK. Apart from these transitional aspects, longer term problems related to climate change disasters inflated food prices too. All these factors led to soaring prices of energy, fertilizer, animal feed, food, some industrial metals (nickel, copper), neon gas (input for semiconductors). The immediate effects were worsened by commodity price speculation.

Against these exceptional and transitional factors, mainstream economists still try to point at expansionary fiscal and monetary policies during the pandemic. To date there has been little evidence of a wage-price spiral in the UK and policymakers so far have paid very little attention to firms'

price setting behaviour, which has driven a second wave of inflation due to increasing profit margins in the UK, as well as the US and the EU. Firms have not only passed on the rising costs of inputs to their output prices but have increased their mark-up rates.

In the UK, some companies increased their profit margins by up to about 60% points in the fourth quarter of 2021 or first quarter of 2022 compared to the 2017-19 average ([Jung and Hayes 2022](#)). Overall, about half of the companies could either preserve or increase their profit margins during 2021-2022's first quarter. This suggests they increase wages without causing higher inflation if profit margins decrease in some industries or firms.

There is a striking variation across firms in the UK with about half experiencing a decline in their profit margins. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are not able to pass high input or wage or borrowing costs to their customers who are themselves cutting back non-essential spending as their real incomes fall. Company insolvencies and the number of listed companies issuing profit warnings have been increasing since the third quarter of 2022.

The fiscal and monetary policy response in the UK

The monetary policy response by the Bank of England, following the conventional wisdom of mainstream central banking, failed to address the root causes of inflation, which was driven by increasing imported input costs and mark-ups rather than demand or a wage-price spiral. On the contrary, focusing narrowly on the wage-inflation expectation spiral, in an interview in February 2022, its governor Andrew Bailey said that while it would be “painful” for workers to accept that prices would rise faster than their wages, some “moderation of wage rises” was needed to prevent inflation becoming

entrenched. He continued to warn of apocalyptic prices and implied that workers must pay for the crisis by moderating their wage demands.

According to its own projections, the current actions of the Bank – relying on increasing interest rates to control inflation – is expected to lead to a recession of -0.5% in 2023 and -0.25% in 2024 and growth is expected to remain well below pre-pandemic rates.

The political economy of this could not be clearer, particularly after the long squeeze in wages since the Great Recession. Currently, the profit share of the employers and the wealth of the top 1% are increasing, while workers' share in national income is being squeezed by the spike in the cost of food, utility bills and rent. The current policies of the Bank of England of increasing the interest rate does not tackle the rise in imported input costs or rise in mark-ups at the root of today's inflation and pretends that it is demand-driven. A recession is seen as an unavoidable outcome to make sure that the bargaining power of labour remains muted and the wage-price spiral does not escalate. This ultimately means that workers will pay for this crisis in the form of real wage cuts.

In this spirit, the Bank puts a lot of emphasis in its monetary policy reports on the tightness of the labour market, low unemployment, high economic inactivity and worker shortages in justifying its rate-setting decisions after ten successive increases in the interest rate within 18 months until February 2023, bringing it to 4%. While the unemployment rate in the last quarter of 2022 at 3.7% is still lower than pre-pandemic levels, it has started to increase. Crucially, total hours worked have decreased compared with the previous three-month period and remain below pre-pandemic levels.

The economic inactivity rate of 21.4% is still higher than before the pandemic, mainly due to health conditions, unpaid

care responsibilities particularly among women, or unacceptable working conditions: the Great Resignation. But recently economic inactivity has started to decrease, putting pressure on unemployment.

This rather narrow mainstream analysis misses the broader range of policy tools beyond interest rates that could address the root cause of economic inactivity and labour shortages. The latter would require investing in the care economy – in both health and social care as well as childcare- and a radical reversal of the new migration policies in the post-Brexit UK. Some migrant workers from the EU returned home during the lockdowns and have never returned, which adds to labour shortages -an outcome partly related to the migration policies after Brexit.

In September 2022, the new Conservative government announced a new revised budget. The main changes included an increase in planned borrowing due to regressive tax cuts for high-income groups, informed by supply side and trickle-down economics.

Markets' reaction to the mini-budget was clear that this will not stimulate the economy, and a blind trust in simplistic low tax supply-side economics will not solve stagflation or long-standing problems in the UK.

This shift in fiscal policy stance coincided with the opposite stance in monetary policy, teaching a perfect lesson on the consequences of a lack of coordination between monetary and fiscal policy. The September 2022 “mini-budget” led to an increase in government borrowing, coinciding with an announcement of quantitative tightening (QT) by the Bank of England. The day before the mini-budget, the Bank committed to actively selling off government debt by shrinking its quantitative easing gilt portfolio by £80bn over the next year, including, in contrast to other central banks, outright sales of bonds before they matured. This meant both the Bank and the government were selling huge quantities of government

debt in the markets. The detrimental lack of coordination between fiscal and monetary policy institutions triggered a financial crisis in parts of the pensions sector, which no policymaker had foreseen.

Eventually, the Bank had to pause QT and buy large quantities of gilts to prevent a financial crisis in the pension funds. The new government's "mini-budget" was abandoned in three weeks, and a third party leader and Prime Minister was appointed by the Conservative Party.

The "mini-budget" is now replaced by a return to austerity policies by the Conservative government. Austerity, including real cuts to public sector wages of nurses, teachers, and civil servants, and a reduction in public debt/GDP are said to be essential to prevent inflation and to plug a "fiscal hole."

This second age of austerity, following the big wave of cuts by the 2010-15 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government following the Great Recession, will not only be detrimental in a country with already weak social and physical infrastructure. It will be self-defeating on its own terms, as it will lead to further negative effects on national income, thereby leading to a fall in tax revenues, despite some increase in the tax rates. Even the ultimate impact on public debt sustainability is ambiguous.

The new Conservative government has drawn the wrong lessons from the collapse of the previous Conservative Prime Minister Truss's "mini budget". The Financial Times reports that even asset managers say that austerity isn't going to solve many of the UK's problems.

The resistance to increases in public sector pay in health, education, and the civil service after decades of below-inflation pay rises, along with the discourse that the best way to fight the cost of living crisis is to halve inflation, demonstrates the class bias in these policies. Nurses',

teachers,' or civil servants' pay rises would not directly feed into a wage-price spiral, as they do not lead to a rise in the input costs of private companies.

In fact, insisting on further real pay cuts in the public sector is a political decision based on the government's class position on the distribution of income. One note about the hypocrisy of this position is also relevant here: public sector workers have suffered more than a decade-long real pay loss following the austerity wave during the 2010-15 Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government. Most of them worked under very difficult and risky conditions during the pandemic and were praised as the "key workers" by policymakers and the public alike.

Increases in interest rates, cuts in public spending and the recession will deepen the crisis for indebted working class households as well as indebted firms at the bottom of the distribution of profit margins. The crisis for indebted households and firms is yet to unravel even when inflation starts to decline in the second half of 2023. The use of interest rates as the tool to fight a surge in inflation fuelled by imported input costs turns a transitional problem into permanent distributional scars for indebted households and companies.

The increase in interest rates has led to higher mortgage and other debt payments by households, who have already been struggling to make ends meet due to real wage cuts and rising food prices and utility bills. More than 750,000 households are at risk of defaulting on their mortgage payments in the next two years according to the Financial Conduct Authority, because their mortgage costs will be more than 30% of their income. About 200,000 households had already fallen behind on their home loans by mid-2022.

The increase in the interest rates, fall in mortgages and slowdown in activity is feeding a fall in house prices.

Mortgage approvals have fallen to their lowest level since January 2009. The Office of Budget Responsibility (2022) forecast that house prices will fall by 9% between January 2023 and the third quarter of 2024. While a correction in house prices might be welcome, this happening in a recessionary climate rather than due to a rise in housing investment, is expected to lead a further deterioration in business as well as consumer expectations and investment. There is also an increase in sales by buy-to-let landlords who cannot cover mortgage payments, which then intensifies the crisis in the rental market.

For companies, on top of supply chain pressures, rising input costs, high energy prices and rents, higher interest rates increase the pressure, particularly on already indebted companies. The total number of company insolvencies in 2022 reached 22,123, the highest since 2009 and a 57.4% increase compared to 2021. Companies in construction, retail and hospitality sectors have seen higher numbers of insolvencies. There are concerns that more companies will fail when the government's energy support package is scaled back in April 2023. Personal insolvencies also reached the highest numbers for three years in 2022.

What are the economic policy alternatives?

In the short-run, two sets of urgent measures are required:

i) First, we need policies to urgently reverse the squeeze on wages and low incomes. The policy tools to achieve this include increasing the minimum wage to £15 per hour in the UK; increasing public sector pay above inflation; tying benefits to the increase in inflation; and rebuilding the trade unions' power for collective bargaining agreements to ensure adequate pay rise in the whole economy. Mindful of the risk that these measures may increase company insolvencies, in particular at

the bottom of the distribution of SMEs, a reactivation of fiscal support for short-time work to avoid transitional shocks is essential.

ii) Second, the extreme nature of the cost of living crisis requires price controls, in particular on energy prices, rents and essential food items. The New Economics Foundation (2022) proposed a package for guaranteeing basic energy needs for households, while avoiding subsidising fossil fuel consumption above a certain threshold. In the international context, France acted early in November-December 2021, directly limiting electricity price increases to 4%, and froze domestic gas prices, with energy subsidies to businesses and households. It enjoyed the lowest inflation in the eurozone with 7.0% as of January 2023. The measures, which included discounts at the pump and cuts to electricity taxes, cost the government just over €34bn in 2022.

Another major component of essential spending for low-income households which increased substantially is rent. The Conservative Government in the UK limited the increase in the social (housing) rents to 7% in November 2022 for the next year, but a genuine policy of rent controls requires controls in the private housing market too. Both in the context of energy prices and rents, these policies need to be accompanied by a ban on disconnections or compulsory instalment of pre-paid meters for utilities and a ban on evictions. The latter was implemented during the pandemic.

A third category where price controls could help is essential food items. France with a competitive supermarket sector had lower food inflation because of limits on the rise in profit margins in the retail sector. In the UK where competition has not sufficed to limit food price inflation, some coordination to curb the rise in mark-up rates or subsidies could go a long way to avoiding the worst poverty effects of the cost of living crisis.

Overall, anti-trust scrutiny and windfall taxes targeting the increase in mark-up rates as well as banning speculation in commodity markets are other short-run policy tools to tackle the rise in inflation.

In the medium run (1-5 years during the first term of a new government), the multiple crises require a paradigm shift towards a needs-based approach to macroeconomic policy, addressing the deficits in the care and green economy and avoiding competition between urgent social and ecological requirements.

Addressing the cost of living and energy crises, as well as reversing the ecological crisis requires a massive and urgent mobilization of substantial amounts of public investment in the green economy, that is, renewable energy, public transport, housing, energy efficiency, sustainable organic plant-based agriculture, forestry, recycling, and repair.

The long-standing deficits in the care economy are no less urgent, and are now behind the labour shortages, and public provision of high quality universal free basic services in social care, health, childcare, and education is key to tackling both the care deficit and inequalities by creating decent care jobs while providing much-needed services. The scale and the urgency of the spending needs to address both deficits in the green and care economy; and the public good character of these services requires a large public spending programme, which cannot be substituted by private investment based on the profit motive. There has never been a better moment to make the case for creating permanent public sector jobs with decent wages to build a caring and sustainable society based on a green, purple, red new deal.

How to fund a green, purple, red new

deal?

The social and ecological needs, and the urgency of an effective response to the multiple crises of inequalities, care and climate change requires the use of all tools of policy.

Public spending even without any increases in tax rates, is partially self-financing, thanks to the strong multiplier effects. However, an increase in economic activity and thereby tax revenues without a change in tax rates will finance only half of the public spending needed in the UK.

Public borrowing to fund the deficit can be justified given the effects on productivity and sustainability, or the expected damage to the ecology, society, and economy, if investment needs are not delivered on time.

Monetary policy should accommodate fiscal policy for public investment in the care and the green economy. The Bank of England's mandate should include a dual target of full/high employment and an inflation target high enough to be consistent with this. There is a major problem with the current mandate of the Bank targeting narrowly the inflation rate at a level as low as possible, which only helps the rentier who make profits by speculation and lending.

National and regional investment banks working in cooperation with the government and central bank are also crucial for funding largescale public infrastructure projects.

However, eventually the large scale of spending needs requires also an increase in the degree of progressivity of taxation of both income and wealth. A progressive scheme of wealth taxation, aiming especially at the top 1% of the wealthiest households, rather than a limited one-off windfall tax targeting only one sector or increasing tax rates merely on dividends and capital gains, is particularly important after

the Great Recession, QE and the pandemic which has increased wealth inequality.

Wealth is more unequally distributed than income in aggregate and in terms of gender gaps. Progressive taxation of wealth is essential to prevent excessive wealth concentration. Wealth taxation also helps to control wealth-demand-driven inflation. Progressive wealth taxes and the consequent decline in wealth inequality are good for private investment, taming speculation, financialisation, market concentration and barriers to entry.

A progressive scheme starting with a high threshold targeting the top 1% wealthiest households, has the advantage that only a small number of households would be valued and is easier to monitor.

The coordination of fiscal and monetary policies with labour market policies eases the funding pressures as higher wages lead to higher tax revenues. Strong, well-coordinated trade unions, equal pay legislation, increased job security, permanent contracts, higher minimum wages, and improved and equitable parental leave are good for an equality-led sustainable development. Labour market regulation for a shorter working week can also promote a rise in gender equality in paid and unpaid work and income, while facilitating a green transition and higher productivity.

At this crucial juncture of food, energy and ecological crises, international policy coordination is vital, especially for the emerging economies. Firstly, the effects of public spending are stronger and negative effects on the current account balance are moderated, if policies are implemented simultaneously in all the countries. Secondly, cancellation or restructuring of parts of the debt of low and middle income countries needs to be part of the international agenda. Thirdly, transfer of technology to support mass not-for-profit global production of key public goods, from vaccines and

medication to solar panels, turbines, or batteries for storing renewable energy, is the only way to tackle global crises such as the pandemic or climate change.

Finally, these multiple crisis open a space to rethink not just the role of fiscal policy but also of public ownership in the care and green economy and finance, with national coordination in combination with collective, municipal, and cooperative ownership and democratic participatory planned decision making.

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Image: Liz Truss and Kwasi Kwarteng, authors of the “mini-budget” in September 2023, c/o



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<https://labourhub.org.uk/2023/03/07/the-political-economy-of-the-cost-of-living-crisis-in-the-uk-what-is-to-be-done/> Also republished at [International Viewpoint](#) and [Anti Capitalist Resistance](#)

French Pensions: “Victory is possible against Macron, his reform and his 49.3!”

Statement by the [New Anticapitalist Party \(Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste NPA\)](#) of France on Macron’s pension reforms.

The use of the 49.3 by the government is a democratic scandal. [1] It shows the weakness of the government’s social base and of its authoritarian approach. Under the pressure of the movement, despite an agreement with the LR (Republicans: mainstream conservatives) leadership, their members of parliament did not dare vote for the reform. It reinforces the illegitimacy of the government and pushes the mainstream left and union leaderships with positions in the institutions to continue the mobilisation, notably the CFDT. [2] It shows the particularly undemocratic character of the institutions of the Fifth Republic, which allow a minority government to pass a reform. In a way, what has happened is good news for the movement.



The actions that took place throughout the country on Thursday night testify to the anger at the democratic scandal, the repression that has been unleashed, not only against the

demonstrations but also against specifically targeted union activists, such as those in the energy sector, and the hardening of the government's position. Macron and his reform have little support, and the first post-49.3 opinion poll indicates the massive rejection of his draconian action and the depth of the protest, which is not weakening. With the continuation of the mobilisation, it is likely that the government will step up the repression. This will require solidarity and a united response equal to the challenge.

However, nothing is won. The motions of censure will be rejected, and the balance of forces remains uncertain. The movement must take a step forward to win; we can no longer be satisfied with renewable, rolling strikes. The 23rd of March date set for the next national mobilisation announced by the inter-union coordination is too far away. [3] We have to use it to build strikes where there are none by building on the strength of the mobilised sectors. But we need to accelerate the pace so as not to demoralise people and not to leave the most advanced sections of the labour movement isolated.

For us, a victory depends on the combination of different factors:

- Strengthening the rolling strikes, in particular in the public services and state enterprises. In the private sector, it is necessary to broaden the mobilisation to slow down production and put pressure on the employers and their political representatives. Renewable strikes have greatly contributed to destabilising the government. We have to do everything to enlarge them; to make this struggle a daily mobilisation, the movement has to be in the news every day.

What we are aiming for is a general strike.

- Continuing the mass demonstrations which show the depth of the movement and its legitimacy. We call for mobilisations everywhere that directly target political power, as the Yellow Vest movement did. The movement must aim to blockade the country. We need a national demonstration in Paris to politically and massively challenge Macron's reforms and government.
- Responding to the ongoing democratic scandal The government and Macron must go, but we must prevent the far right from ambushing us and gaining the main benefit. It is a question of imposing a policy that starts with the needs of workers, youth, and pensioners and relies on their mobilisations to impose it. We need a government that is as faithful to the interests of workers as Macron's is to those of the employers. It is the responsibility of all the organisations of the trade union, political, and social movements on the left to discuss all these points. We will work to help set up such meetings as soon as possible.

Beyond that, and more than ever, a political alternative around a project of breaking with capitalist policies is necessary—a rupture for an ecosocialist society.

A victory is possible against Macron and his reforms. We must give ourselves all the means necessary to achieve it.

NPA Executive Committee

16 March 2023

Montreuil

FOOTNOTES

[1] Paragraph 3 of Article 49 of the French constitution allows the prime minister, “after deliberation by the Council of Ministers,” to force a bill through the Assemblée Nationale

with no vote. The only alternative to prevent the bill from passing is then to overthrow the government. When the prime minister triggers this procedure, MPs have the option of tabling a motion of no confidence within 24 hours. Le Monde.

[2] The CFDT is the largest French trade union confederation by number of members (875,000) but historically less radical than the CP-dominated CGT to which it comes second in voting results for representative bodies.

[3] The inter-union coordination is composed of eight trade-union confederations/federations (CGT, CFDT, FO, CFTC, CFE-CGC, UNSA, Solidaires and FSU) and four youth organisations l'Union nationale des étudiants de France (Unef), l'Union nationale lycéenne (UNL), le Syndicat général des lycéens (SGL), and the Fédération indépendante et démocratique lycéenne (FIDL).

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Main photo credit: Photothèque Rouge /Martin Noda/Hans Lucas

Our Power: Offshore workers demands for a just energy

transition

An important new report from [Friends of the Earth Scotland](#).

Over the past two years, we've come together with offshore workers to build demands for a just energy transition. These workers developed 10 demands covering training and skills, pay, job creation, investment and public ownership.

We surveyed over 1000 additional offshore workers and over 90% agreed with these demands. This plan is comprehensive in scope, transformative in scale and deliverable now.

Below you will find a series of resources setting out the demands and the paths we can take to turn them into reality.

We need a rapid transition away from oil and gas that protects workers, communities and the climate. But the government has no plan to phase out oil and gas production in the North Sea.

Oil and gas workers are ready to lead a just transition away from oil and gas, but they are caught in a trap of exploitation and fear created by oil and gas companies. Working conditions are plummeting, just as profits, prices and temperatures are soaring.

The UK and Scottish Governments must listen to workers to make this transition work for all of us. These demands lay out a comprehensive plan, which includes:

Removing barriers that make it harder for oil and gas workers to move into the renewable industry.

Ensuring safety, job security and fair pay across the energy industry.

Sharing the benefits of our energy system fairly, with public investment in energy companies and communities.

Workers have told us what they need for a just transition,

now we need to work with them to make it happen.

Hear from workers



Our Power: Offshore workers' demands for a just energy transition

The [‘Our Power’ report](#) is a blueprint for a just transition in the UK North Sea.

Reproduced from [Friends of the Earth Scotland](#) with thanks to [Red Green Labour](#).

Scottish Government Energy Strategy – what's wrong with it and what we need to change

The public consultation on the Scottish Government's [Draft Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan](#) ends on **Tuesday 9 May 2023**, writes *Iain Bruce*.

That means responding to it will be one of the first big tasks for the new leader of the SNP and Scotland's new First Minister.

The deeply disappointing [consultation document](#) was published on 10 January after a year or more's delay. It fails to build on the recent positive steps taken by Nicola Sturgeon towards opposing any more oil and gas extraction from the North Sea – after she came out against Shell's proposed Cambo oilfield following the mass protests in Glasgow at COP26 in November 2021.

The [consultation document](#) reiterates, at great length, the SNP Government's obsession with false 'techno-fixes' to the climate crisis, in particular hydrogen and carbon capture and storage. It ignores the pressure from environmental organisations and some offshore oil workers and their unions, for a just transition to renewable energy that is led by the communities and workers most affected. And it is partly at odds with the positive steps taken by Sturgeon herself and the outgoing SNP administration, through their [initiatives on 'Loss and Damage'](#), to recognise that a just transition must be just for the global south too.

In the coming weeks we need to build maximum pressure on the government to change the most negative aspects of this draft strategy.

The interview below with Mary Church of [Friends of the Earth Scotland](#), for the [Rising Clyde Climate Justice show on Independence Live](#), gives a lot of [important context and background](#) for such a campaign.

However, it is also important, for the climate justice movement in Scotland and for the radical forces in the independence movement, to understand and challenge the deeper contradiction that underpins this energy strategy, as it does almost all the Scottish government's economic policy. This is its attempt to combine progressive, humane and necessary steps on a number of environmental and social issues, with an inability or refusal to question the underlying systemic factors which hinder such action, and makes it necessary in the first place – in other words its unwillingness to challenge the priorities of the free market.

Link to Video:

Also on Facebook:

[Rising Clyde Episode 10: Scotland's Energy Strategy- leading the way or sitting on the fence? | We talk to Mary Church of Friends of the Earth Scotland, about the Scottish government's new Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan – where it needs to... | By Independence Live | Facebook](#)

7 March, 2023 (YouTube link added 10 March 2023)

International Women's Day – “Women's Rights, Human Rights”

Editorial for International Women's Day from USA magazine [Against the Current](#), journal of [Solidarity US](#), “a socialist, feminist, anti-racist organization”

Women's Rights, Human Rights

Afghanistan, Iran, Poland, El Salvador and Nicaragua. Texas, Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi...

These are among the countries and states where ruling authorities take it upon themselves – in a variety of ways along a broad repressive spectrum – to curtail, suppress or outright nullify women's rights if not their basic personhood. The ways and means of these attacks of course vary widely.

They range from legal and official discrimination, to gendered violence perpetrated with impunity, to rape as a weapon as in Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the Ethiopian state's war in Tigray, and more. What's common to each and every case is that degrading women's rights – along with those of queer and non-binary people – is central to reactionary forces' assaults on all human rights.

As for the United States itself, where the battles over abortion and gender are inextricably part of the swirling unresolved political crisis and potential Constitutional meltdown, we'll also look briefly here at some too little-

covered facts of how U.S. policies impact the rights and lives of women outside this country's borders.

In Iran, the regime is in open warfare against the population. The response to the murder of Mahsa (Jina) Amini has become an uprising against the entire apparatus of the "Islamic Republic." Dictating what women choose to wear is basic to the drive for complete social control of what everyone, especially youth, are allowed to do or dream.

"Women. Life. Freedom!" is a women-led revolution that now engages the struggles of Iran's youth, Kurdish people and strategic sectors of the working class.

Will it triumph? Right now there's no way to know. What we can say, even though the murderous brutality of the Iranian theocracy and Revolutionary Guards knows no limits, is that Iran will not return to society's former half-voluntary compliance with the dictatorship.

In Afghanistan, the most vicious elements of the Taliban – who exercise decisive veto power over the regime – seek to nullify the very personhood of women. Deprived of access to university and even high school education, barred from employment in public service or by international aid organizations, they are left dependent or destitute. Among the results this winter are threatened deaths by starvation or freezing of hundreds of thousands of Afghans whom assistance can no longer reach.

This heartbreak and disaster are fairly well-covered in mainstream media. What's too easily forgotten, so all the more important to recall here, is that "liberation" of Afghan women served as a pretext for the U.S. and allied invasion following the 9/11 2001 attacks – after imperialist

interventions and rivalries from the 1980s on had already brought Afghanistan to the edge of catastrophe.

The delusion of liberating women – or anyone else – in Afghanistan from above and from outside played no small part in the development of the present tragedy.

In Ukraine, not only are rape as well as mass murders of civilians committed by Russian invading forces. Vladimir Putin himself calls Moscow's war a defence of "traditional values" against such perversions as queer rights and the mythical "dozens of genders" supposedly recognised in the West. Putin's ultra-reactionary ravings are the natural accompaniment to the denial of Ukraine's right to exist, with the genocidal implications of that doctrine. The invaders' rape and massacre perpetrated against the people of Ukraine feed back into the savage escalation of the already intense repression of LGBT people within Russia.

Closer to Home

If the examples of Iran, Afghanistan and Russian atrocities in Ukraine are the most immediately visible cases of the extinction of women's rights and the consequences, there are plenty of instances closer to our own situation. The point is not to identify the "worst" case – as such comparisons are essentially meaningless – but to examine some common features.

Take Poland, in the heart of Europe: Extreme restrictions on abortion access have been imposed by the right wing "Law and Justice" party in alliance with the Catholic church. These measures are accompanied – not coincidentally – by severe weakening of the power of the judiciary to limit anti-democratic legislative extremism. That's also occurred in Hungary's self-declared "illiberal democracy" and is now well underway in the Israeli state.

Two-thirds of Polish citizens support abortion rights – very similar to the percentage in the United States. Women-led protests have taken to the streets in large numbers in Warsaw and other cities and towns, but so far failed to overturn the government's measures.

The full toll in women's deaths and permanent injuries remains unknown. Since 2021 at least two women in publicised cases, Anieszka T. and Izabela Sajbor, died after abortion care was denied even though the fetuses were either unviable or already dead.

In Ireland, popular revulsion over the 2012 death of Savita Halappanavar, who was denied a medically essential abortion until it was too late, led to striking the anti-abortion provision from the country's Constitution.

In Israel, tens of thousands are taking to the streets weekly against the ultra-racist governing coalition's move to strip the powers of the Supreme Court. Women's and queer rights are relatively well-entrenched in Israel – for Jewish citizens – and less likely to be immediately on the chopping block.

The first casualties in this case are the already-vanishing shreds of court protection for Palestinians in the occupied territories, and the (limited) civil rights of Arab citizens including their parties' ability to run in Israeli elections (which the Supreme Court has reinstated by overruling bans imposed by parliamentary decrees). There are elements in the "religious Zionism" bloc, however, for whom gender and especially queer rights are blasphemy and ultimate targets for extinction under the "Jewish state."

Central America is a particularly gruesome arena in the women's health battleground. The new government of president Xiaomara Castro in Honduras promised to loosen the country's deadly abortion ban, but hasn't yet succeeded. The situations in Nicaragua and El Salvador are grim: When left wing

governments were in power (the Sandinistas in 1980s Nicaragua, the FMLN party elected in El Salvador in the '90s after the civil war), they failed to take anti-abortion laws off the books.

Nicaragua today is ruled by the right wing presidentialist dictatorship of Daniel Ortega (see [“Repression Continues to Grow in Nicaragua” by William I. Robinson, ATC 222](#)) and El Salvador by the reactionary government of Nayib Bukele. Women in El Salvador who suffer miscarriages are subject to prosecution and up to 30-year prison terms, provoking widespread outrage. Not coincidentally, under this repressive regime, water protectors are also being prosecuted (see page 2 of this issue).

The Not-“100% American” Scene

In our own partially democratic country called the United States of America, a woman's right to control her own body is constrained legally by the state she lives in, practically by her county of residence – where abortion care may be unavailable even if legal – and financially by her capacity to travel if she needs to gain access beyond state lines.

The long, instructive and often heroic struggle for abortion rights and expanded other essential rights and services – against racist sterilization abuse, for adequate paid parental leave and free quality childcare, for birth control and sex education – is discussed by [Dianne Feeley in this issue of Against the Current](#). Much of that feminist liberation agenda remains unfulfilled, of course, especially in the era of neoliberal “free market” dogma, falling real wages and stagnant living standards, and capital's assault on labour rights and unions.

Following the Supreme Court Dobbs ruling, the right wing aims to hurl women back to the age when unwanted pregnancy, or a pregnancy with complications, meant terror. Where they

control state governments, attempts to criminalise medical (pharmaceutical) abortion, out-of-state travel for abortion access, even contraception, are on their agenda – along with ever more vicious assaults on trans youth, banning books and education on Black history and U.S. racism, and other malicious mischief.

What often gets less attention than it deserves is the international impact of the United States' reproductive rights battleground. "A half-century-old U.S. law is stripping women of rights they are legally entitled to in their home countries," writes Anu Kumar ("Why is America Preventing Legal Abortions in Ethiopia?" *The New York Times*, 10/23/22)

The reason is a particularly vicious 1973 post-Roe backlash legislation known as the (Senator Jesse) Helms Amendment, appropriately carrying the name of its sponsor, one of the most racist as well as misogynist politicians in our recent history. It prohibits U.S. foreign aid funding for "abortions as a method of family planning."

Under a restrictive interpretation that goes beyond even the language of the amendment, Kumar explains, the law "instead incorrectly has been applied as an outright ban on all abortions." It has also been interpreted to mean that clinics receiving U.S. funding cannot even mention abortion. And even though only U.S. funding is directly affected, in many poor and rural regions "the complication of securing other funding that could be used for abortions is too difficult, which means the entire health facility simply does not offer abortions at all."

The heavy hand of these restrictions is felt all the more strongly because U.S. funding of family planning overseas amounts to 40-50% of the global total. In Ethiopia, Anu Kumar reports, her organization IPAS (Partners for Reproductive Justice) states that "the United States funded about 30

percent of total family planning foreign aid in Ethiopia from 2018 to 2020, but that funding is spread among more than 45 percent of health facilities in the country.”

Such is the case for example at the Shekebedo Health Centre in southwestern Ethiopia, a country where abortion is legal. The Centre’s partial funding by the U.S. Agency for International Development “has stopped the clinic from offering abortions to Ethiopian women.”

The global harm is enormous, says Kumar: “In countries that accept U.S. family planning aid and where abortion is legal under some circumstances, more than 19 million unsafe abortions occur annually – more than half of the global total” (emphasis added) – resulting in complications including deadly ones like sepsis that claim some 16,000 women’s and girls’ lives annually.

The alternation of U.S. presidential administrations, with Republicans applying more restrictive and Democrats more liberal directives, makes it even more difficult to implement coherent policies.

This is blood on the hands of the U.S. Congress, the grotesquely mislabelled “pro-life” movement, and the executive branch, including president Biden, who at least “could issue federal guidelines to clarify that Helms permits U.S. funds for abortion care in cases of rape, incest and life endangerment” and “ensure that clinics in countries where abortion is legal understand that U.S. rules allow them to offer abortion information and counselling.”

To see what difference a sane and decent policy could produce, consider the case of Benin, an African nation where the number of botched abortions declined after access to abortions was broadened (Elia Peltier, *The New York Times*, 11/13/22).

While most countries in Africa restrict or ban abortion –

South Africa, Mozambique, Cape Verde and Tunisia being among the exceptions – the tide there is slowly turning toward abortion rights, despite fears that the overturn of Roe in the United States may hold it back.

It's important to say here that the very real authoritarian menace globally and in the United States, with all the murderous attacks on women's lives, LGBTQ people and (especially in dozens of U.S. state legislatures) transgender young people, is only one side of the picture. Victories are being won, whether large (as in Ireland, Mexico, etc.) or more modest as in U.S. state ballot referenda.

Most important of all is that everywhere, the fight is on – women along with queer and trans people will not quietly accept oppressors' and cynical politicians' denial of their humanity, dignity, agency and rights. The movements are decisive: When the targets of oppression stand up for themselves, they attract allies and solidarity, and their struggles cannot be pushed back into isolation, silence and shame – as so many generations of women have suffered undergoing forced birth or deadly illegal abortions.

The lesson everywhere is that women's rights, gender and trans rights, queer rights are human rights. They rise or fall together. In a world of rising authoritarian rule and right wing menace, "Women. Life. Freedom!" means all of us.

Source: Editorial March-April 2023, ATC 223
<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc223/womens-rights-human-rights/>

International Women's Day inspirational reading: "Dangerous Liaisons: The marriages and divorces of Marxism and Feminism"

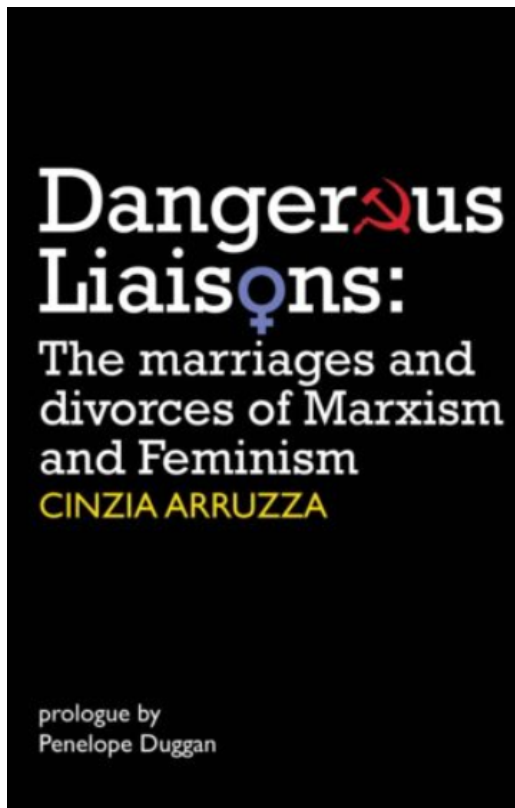
For International Women's Day 2023, our friends at [Resistance Books](#) are promoting a book to inspire you – **Cinzia Arruza's "Dangerous Liaisons: The Marriages and Divorces of Marxism and Feminism"**.

An accessible introduction to the relationship between the workers' movement and the women's movement. The first part is historical, the second is theoretical. Historical examples range from the mid-19th century to the 1970s and include events, debates, and key personalities from China, Russia, the USA, France, Italy, Spain, and Britain. It shows time and again, the controversial, often difficult relationship between feminism and Marxism.

The theoretical questions discussed include the origins of women's oppression, domestic labour, dual systems theory, performativity, and differentialism. Women's oppression is a structural element of the division of labour and one of the direct factors through which capitalism not only reinforces its ideological dominance but also organises the exploitation and reproduction of labour. The integration of patriarchal relations and capitalism has led to their radical transformation—in the family, in terms of women's place in production, in sexual relations, and with respect to sexual

identity.

[Purchase a copy here >>](#)



Marxism needs to probe complex processes: ongoing transformations and crises, a global context creating an increasingly feminised workforce, and changing relations between men and women. It is a mistake to submerge gender into class or to believe that freedom from exploitation automatically brings about women's liberation and the ending of sexual roles. It is equally wrong to think the class question can be removed and gender made the main enemy. The author believes passionately in the need to combine gender and class politics.

Dangerous Liaisons: The marriages and divorces of Marxism and

Feminism – Reviews

“Although Cinzia Arruzza calls her aim “modest,” her book is anything but. She provides a masterful survey of the vexed relations between feminism and socialism over the course of more than two centuries. The result is not only a lucid overview but also a penetrating intervention into current debates. Perfectly timed to enlighten new generations of activists and theorists, Arruzza’s book offers the best short introduction to a question that is as relevant as ever today: How, in the wake of a capitalist crisis of global dimensions, can struggles against male domination be made to synergize with struggles against neoliberalism?”

NANCY FRASER, PROF. NEW SCHOOL, NEW YORK

“Dangerous Liaisons offers an acute, critical and refreshingly open analysis of feminist theories and, best of all, links the development of theory to the historical and contemporary political issues facing women activists. A perfect book for students but also for anyone seeking to learn more about the ongoing dialogue between Marxism(s) and feminism(s). Arruzza’s presentation of complicated theoretical debates is fair, accessible, and lively; her wide-ranging historical account hits the highlights (and lows) of feminist engagements with the revolutionary left across Europe and in the US.”

JOHANNA BRENNER, PROF. EMERITUS, PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY

“a well written book and ideal for anyone interested in the political and theoretical history of the relationship between feminism and Marxism.”

MARX AND PHILOSOPHY REVIEW OF BOOKS