

The Plebs News

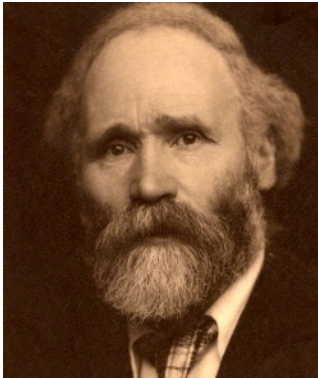


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April 2022

What would the other Keir say about the war? A recent reissue captures his desire not to see workers fight each other and false nationalism.



.... To fight

Not in red coats against our brother man

The pawns of Empire, or a despot's will

But in grey lines of Brotherhood

Against the flaunting evils of the world,

The Cruelty that fastens on men's lives,

The dread brutality that hedges earth.

Come, ye that listen, rise and gird your

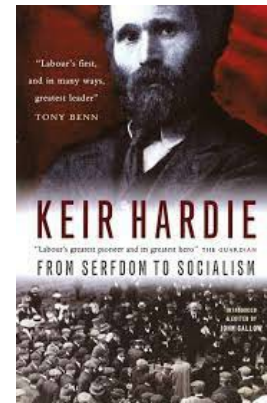
swords,

Win back the fields of England for the poor,

Give roses to your children's fading cheeks,

And to the hearts of women hope again,

Bring back content unto the lives of men.



Rain lashed against the boards of the empty summer house at Lochnorris: books and papers abandoned. The bereaved family, left suddenly with neither breadwinner nor savings, debated whether not to sell the possessions of the departed. Deprived of their quarry, the flag wavers, distributors of white feathers and jingoistic copy editors moved on to other targets. The toll of casualties in Flanders was running at more than 2000 dead and wounded per day, victories were hard to come by, and the chivalric notion of war, in defence of “gallant little Belgium”, had long been buried among the mud and wire. Yet “the roar and song of war maddened people” had- for the moment at least- drowned out the voice of the Socialist, the pacifist and the pioneer.

James Keir Hardie, the self conscious champion of so many unpopular causes, who had never flinched from the prospect of standing alone, had been felled by the murderous reality of the war and by the gulf that seperated the words from the deeds of so many of his comrades. High sounding resolutions passed by Europe's Socialists on the eve of the conflict gave way- in some cases almost overnight – to celebrations of nation and empire, and the rush to vote through the war credits that would set the munitions factories humming and propel the the troop trains towards the frontiers. Amid the ruins of an international Labour Movement that had appeared poised to carry all before it, Fenner Brockway thought – with good reason- that Hardie had been “killed by the War equally with any soldier on the Front.”

In Glasgow crowds of working women and men still jostled against damp chapel doors, anxious to pay their respects to their fallen leader. An old workman doffed his cap, a khaki clad soldier stood to attention. But the funeral somehow disappointed. It seemed unable to capture the essence and the significance of the man it had sought to honour. None of his political colleagues had felt equal to the task, and by default the oration was left to a sympathetic local clergyman- who chose to ignore Hardie as a trade unionist organiser, Socialist politician and opponenet of war. Instead, in death, he was defined by his youth activity as an Evangelical Union preacher , and as a colourful figure of local- as opposed to National and International - importance, a man who was significant for the moral, as opposed to the practical political force of his arguments. A homespun reformist rather than social revolutionary. **Turning away in disgust, John Bruce Glasier thought that they might as well have been burying the village grocer.**

Keir Hardie - From Serfdom to Socialism

On Being Asked to Write a Poem Against the War in Vietnam

by Hayden Carruth

Well I have and in fact

more than one and I'll

Tell you this too

I wrote one against

Algeria that nightmare

and another against

Korea and another

against the one

I was in

and I don't remember

how many against

the three

when I was a boy

Abyssinia Spain and Harlan County

and not one

breath was restored

to one

shattered throat

mans womans or childs

not one not

one

but death went on and on

never looking aside

except now and then

with a furtive half-smile

to make sure I was noticing.

Conscientious Objector Edna St. Vincent Millay

I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for Death.

I hear him leading his horse out of the stall; I hear the clatter on the barn-floor.

He is in haste; he has business in Cuba, business in the Balkans, many calls to make this morning.

But I will not hold the bridle while he clinches the girth.

And he may mount by himself: I will not give him a leg up.

Though he flick my shoulders with his whip, I will not tell him which way the fox ran.

With his hoof on my breast, I will not tell him where the black boy hides in the swamp.

I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for Death; I am not on his pay-roll.

I will not tell him the whereabouts of my friends nor of my enemies either.

Though he promise me much, I will not map him the route to any man's door.

Am I a spy in the land of the living, that I should deliver men to Death?

Brother, the password and the plans of our city are safe with me; never through me

Shall you be overcome.

Labour on the Streets Against the Cost of Living Crisis



Groups from the Labour Movement joined the Peoples Assembly demo on Sheffield's Moor against the cost of Living crisis. Groups included the Better Buses, Food Security, Climate Activists and Trade Unionists. Leaflets giving contacts for debt, housing, fuel poverty and other advice services were given out as well as food from the Food Hall. Many people were frightened at the new fuel tariffs and angered by the Governments lack of action.

Cost of Living Crisis: Time for Protest

By Shabbir Lakha

Rishi Sunak, announcing that people will face up to £700 more in energy bills from April, said we just need to 'adjust to higher prices'. Easy for one of the richest MPs in Parliament to say.

The scale of the rise in costs that working people are being expected to 'adjust' to is staggering. Comparing simple CPI inflation rates, it's claimed this is the highest rise in the cost of living since 1992. What this fails to account for is that we have been faced with a decade of stagnating wages, rising prices, and the gutting of the welfare system people could have relied on for some support.

According to ONS figures, the median wage in the UK in 2020 was 10% higher than in 2010, while the general cost of food and services covered in the CPI rate has gone up by 20% during the same period. Not included in this, among other things, are housing costs. During this period average house prices have gone up close to 50% and rents have gone up an estimated 35%.

What this means is that even before the sharply rising prices, the national insurance hike, or the doubling of energy bills, working people in the UK have faced a steady decline in purchasing power—and therefore living standards—since the Tories came to power.

The distribution is far from even. In her viral exposé which has forced even the ONS to accept its methods as unrepresentative of reality, Jack Monroe showed how prices relating to the poorest in society are substantially higher than those better off. A recent study by the New Economics Foundation concluded that the impact of the expected energy bills rise will hit the poorest families 7.5 times harder than the richest.

When you consider this, it's not hard to then understand why rough sleeping has at least doubled between 2010 and 2020—tripled in London in 2017/2018—and why the Trussell Trust reports a 2.5x increase in foodbank use in just the last five years.

Throughout the pandemic, the realities of the deeply entrenched class inequalities of our society have repeatedly come to the fore. From the impact of the actual virus on poorer people living in crowded housing to the amount people working from home were able to save compared to essential workers (who also make up some of the lowest paid workers), there have been numerous examples of how unequal our society is.

So when Molly-Mae Hague says ‘we all have the same 24 hours in a day’, or when Kirstie Allsopp believes anyone could buy a house if they just cancelled Netflix and drank less coffee, they are completely out of touch with reality. But when the millionaire Chancellor tells us to simply ‘adjust’ and the Bank of England Governor Andrew Bailey on his half-a-million-pound annual salary tells workers not to ask for higher wages, it can only be seen as an assault on working people by those making the decisions that are pricing them out of living—and something we have to resist.

Factually Wrong

Aside from the audacity, Bailey is simply wrong in asserting that higher wages are contributing to inflationary pressures. Rising prices are primarily being driven by supply-side issues, not demand. ONS figures show that while there has been increased retail demand since the end of the lockdowns, it is still only marginally higher compared to pre-pandemic levels and has been levelling out in recent months.

Meanwhile, food and energy supplies have been affected as a result of the pandemic and the effects of climate change, exacerbated by supply chain and distribution issues. The logistical challenges posed to production and international transport because of the pandemic, leaving containers of goods stranded on the wrong side of the world for example, along with a domestic shortage of HGV drivers and distribution workers, was compounded by neoliberal just-in-time supply chains which could not meet existing demand—let alone increased demand—with the smallest chink.

Sunak and Bailey’s misguided approach to rising costs means they’re setting policies which will not only do nothing to curb inflation, but will be detrimental to millions of people. The Bank of England has doubled interest rates from 0.25% to 0.5%. The classical economic thought behind this is that increasing the cost of borrowing will reduce demand which will slow down inflation.

Even if this had the desired effect, it would not solve the supply problems which are actually driving prices. What’s worse, however, is that food and energy are income inelastic—i.e., they are essential, and a reduction in disposable income won’t reduce demand for them, short of huge swathes of people dying from malnutrition and hypothermia. So all the interest rates rises will actually do is deepen household debt.

Actually, that’s not the only thing—they have the added bonus of increasing the returns on savings for the richest.

Protecting Profits

And where does the extra money that’s being spent go? A clue to answering this can be found in energy companies Shell and BP posting profit forecasts of almost £40 billion for 2021/2022. Both companies paid zero tax on North Sea oil and gas drilling in the last three years, and as if we weren’t in the middle of a climate emergency, Sunak is set to approve drilling licenses for six new oil fields. Meanwhile, in the same week as announcing the energy price hike and a week prior to voting in a real-terms cut to Universal Credit, Sunak announced a £4 billion reduction over five years in taxes for banks.

The upward redistribution of wealth being organised by the Tories couldn’t be clearer. Working people, and especially the poorest, are being made to pay what they don’t have to keep the rich profiting.

According to Oxfam, billionaires globally have increased their wealth by \$5 trillion since the pandemic began, with the collective wealth of the ten richest men doubling while over 160 million people were pushed into poverty. Elon Musk alone saw his net worth go up nearly 13 times, from around \$30 billion at the start of 2020 to \$277 billion at the start of 2022.

Early in the pandemic, when the government went on a spending spree to mitigate the impact on the economy, some economists including on the left were quick to announce the end of neoliberalism. We had returned to an era of big state spending, we were told, and that austerity was over.

They were very clearly wrong. Apart from the vast majority of the money spent on the furlough and other income support and on the NHS going directly into the hands of private companies and landlords, the plan was always to make us pay for it.

Fighting Back

Listening to the flood of phone calls that have filled radio stations in the last week describing the desperate situations people are in, it's clear that the cost of living crisis is already hitting hard and wide, and will only get worse.

We shouldn't accept this onslaught from the Tories. There is clearly a far better understanding of the class society we live in and widespread anger at the brazen robbery and corruption from our government.

This anger needs to be channeled into organised resistance. The People's Assembly protests around the country this Saturday will be an important part of that, and they should be a launchpad for further protests. We must demand the government caps energy bills and brings in a windfall tax on companies and individuals with super profits, raises Universal Credit and minimum wage, renationalises the energy companies, and invests in the infrastructure necessary to actually deal with the supply crisis driving up prices.

They also have to be linked to the industrial fightback that has been growing in the last year. All over the country, workers are taking a stand against fire and rehire and attacks on pay and pensions. This is a systemic issue, and workplace struggles must be part of the wider political struggle on the streets. The Tories are aiding unscrupulous bosses by pushing the cost of living crisis onto us to protect their profits, with their anti-trade union legislation which limits workers' ability to organise, and with their planned Police, Courts, Sentencing and Crime Bill which will give the police greater powers to stop protests and picket lines.

Last week, we commemorated the 50-year anniversary of the Battle of Saltley Gate, a pivotal moment in the 1972 miners' strike, when engineers and activists joined the miners and closed the gates. The struggle today is different for many reasons, but the key lesson to learn is the importance of solidarity, and how our united action can win.



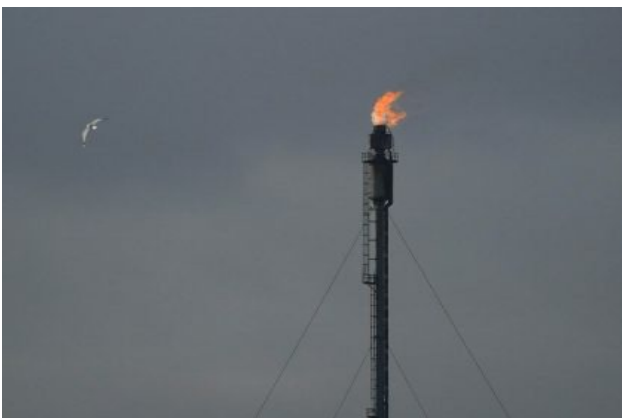
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Cost of Living Crisis: It's Now or Never for Unions

Workers face a stark decline in living standards amid rising bills and stagnant wa...

Cost of Living Crisis: It's Now or Never for Unions

Liam Young



The Cost of Living

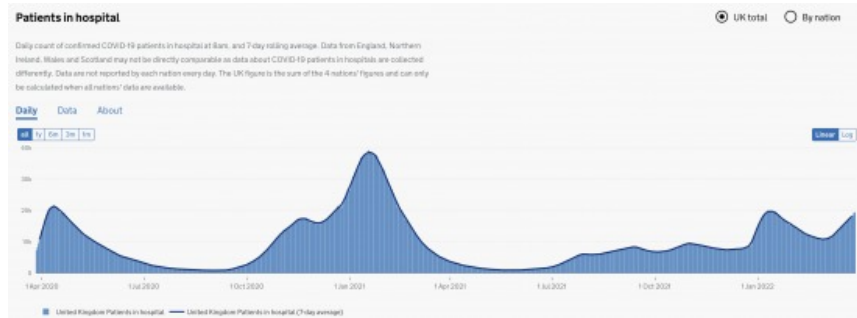
Ronan Burtenshaw

And the Covid Shambles Continues: End of testing and infections rise, published figures to end.

Covid is all about the politics of denial now, for which we will pay a very high price

Richard Murphy

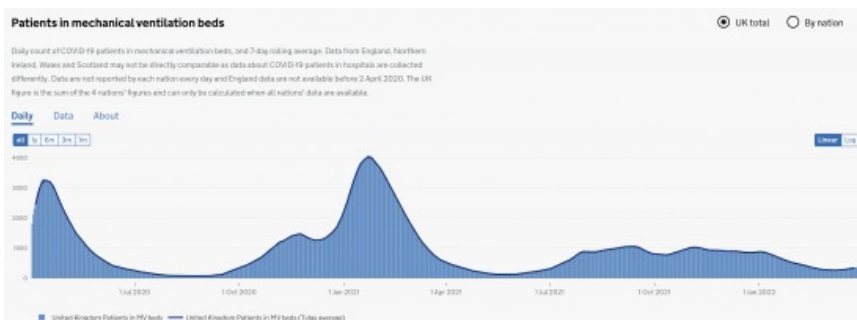
This is the latest data on the number of patients in the UK in hospital with Covid:



One in seven patients in hospital now have Covid

Interest in hospital capacity and, more specifically, the number of hospital beds has grown in recent years. This is, in part, due to mounting evidence that hospitals are struggling: bed-occupancy rates are above recommended levels, A&E performance remains challenged, and the waiting list for elective care is at the highest level since current recording began.

Thankfully fewer are needing ICU treatment:



But it is still the case that one in seven patients in a UK hospital today is being treated for Covid. And, as is obvious, that trend is upward, which makes this an exceptional period within the last two years of Covid history, because that trend has only happened twice before.

The number of deaths is also rising:



Coronavirus in the UK

Deaths within 28 days of positive test

165,187

Latest figure

213

new deaths

Three-month trend

Total confirmed cases

21,073,009

Latest figure

87,188

new cases

Three-month trend

This data is always lagged, of course. And what we now know is that Covid kills in many ways. All those mysterious heart attacks amongst people previously thought to be fit are not without a reason.

I will ignore data for now on long Covid. That really worries me.

At the same time as all this is happening the Westminster government is declaring Covid no longer a risk. Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are not so unwise, but are being dragged towards a reduction in safeguards. The claim being made is that Covid is 'over', having been 'beaten' and that we can now 'live with it' as it is now only endemic, and not a pandemic.

The evidence for all to see is that this is not true. I have known more people with Covid in the last few weeks than at any other time to date. Although I have not had it, my work has been disrupted by the illness of those who have had it. I hear the same story from many others,

And, tomorrow Covid testing ends. You will not be able to get free lateral flow tests. PCR testing facilities are being closed. Even medics are going to have difficulties ordering them, which is probably the first time that access to a necessary medical test that is potentially available and affordable will have been denied for political reasons.

And politics is at the heart of all of this. First there is the politics of the false narrative, that Covid has been beaten when that is not true. The political claim being made is glaringly obviously false, and yet is being actively pursued. The deliberate supply of misinformation is now government policy. It's as if we lived in a totalitarian state.

Second, there is the politics of indifference. This was best seen when hundreds of Tory MPs walked by those marking the anniversary of the wall that marked the loss of their loved ones in London this week whilst on their way to a party, and to a person (apparently) ignored those holding that vigil. There is an attitude that they just no longer care, and it stinks.

Then there is the politics of denial. Even if Covid is endemic (and one day it will be) that requires active management, as do other serious endemic diseases like TB and malaria. You do not just ignore them, as the government suggests we should Covid. There is instead an active management programme that is required. But that is not happening.

And in the face of all this the NHS is now facing real term cuts.

It is as if we have a government that thinks it can govern by false edict and that the world will deliver to its command. It won't. It will, in fact, do nothing like that. The denial will just make things worse.

Thirty five per cent of the population do, however, still think they will vote Conservative. Why?, has to be the response.

The sad fact is that some people are still willingly fooled by these idiots. The rest of us will pay a very high price for that.

The threat to the NHS

"That's the standard technique of privatization: defund, make sure things don't work, people get angry, you hand it over to private capital."

Noam Chomsky,

Public satisfaction with NHS sinks to lowest level since 1997-Just 36% of people content with the health service, survey finds

The NHS financial crisis is being used by healthcare insurers to try and sell their products - but what are the risks?

The Battles at Both End of the Gig Economy

Last month we looked at the historical context of the Saltley Gates picket during the 1972 miners strike and the importance of solidarity of other workers in dispute. Vulnerable workers are picked off by employers for poor pay, terms and conditions and exploitation. But history shows that those conditions inevitably spread to other jobs once considered safe and secure and the battles have to be re won all over again. We normally associate the term gig economy with certain sectors such as retail, hospitality, distribution and food processing but there is also a hidden movement of the practices widespread in those sectors spreading to jobs previously seen as “good jobs”. Below is an article on the spread of casualisation in university employment and how it affects those caught in the trap between supposedly respectability and poverty. Many students and young people fed the lie of “education, education, education” are finding out the dreams they expected to fulfill coming up hard against the marketisation of everything. George Orwell recorded similar feelings in the 19th century in books such *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying* and *Coming Up For Air*.

The University Casualisation Crisis Must End

By Teleola Cartwright



Protesters attend a demonstration over university staff labour disputes on 3 December 2021 in London, England. (Dan Kitwood /



Growing numbers of university staff face gig economy conditions with low pay and no security. Now they're striking – not just for their own conditions, but for the future of higher education.

Fourteen years ago, while I was studying law as an undergraduate, I worked at Sports Direct in order to make ends meet. It was precarious and thankless work, but I just about earned the minimum wage. Today, I am an associate lecturer at the University of Northampton, and my pay and job security hasn't gotten any better—if anything, the situation is worse.

Despite working in education for over a decade and having been at Northampton for four years, I am still employed on a zero hours contract, just as I was at that notorious sports retail giant.

There are many indignities and difficult things associated with being precariously employed like this, but perhaps worst of all is the denial of basic protections meaning that even life's greatest joys can be turned into further reminders of the miseries of casualisation.

The starkest example of this is that when I was pregnant and then gave birth to a baby boy last year, sporadic work continued to dominate my life. Why? My employment conditions mean that I have no contractual entitlement to paid maternity leave. In order to pay the bills, I had to return to work whilst my son was just 6 weeks old.

I am only offered work between the months of October and February, so I have to take as many hours as possible in this period in order to get by for the rest of the year. Having become a mother in August, then, I had no choice but to accept hours with just one week's notice.

Supposedly, I am paid to teach—something I love. But it is hard to sustain passion and enthusiasm for a vocation when your time is parceled up and your work life degraded by the whims of your employer.

When the time taken by all the extra-contractual tasks—meeting students, pastoral care, various forms of admin, and jumping through endless bureaucratic hoops—I am expected to perform is tallied up, my pay comes in significantly below the minimum wage. And finding out my timetable the week before, of course, makes it impossible to plan childcare and family life.

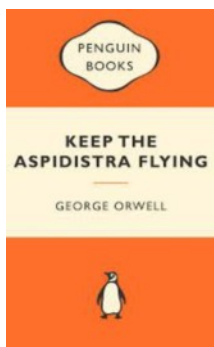
Precariously employed teaching academic staff are also denied any opportunities to advance to more secure roles with paid research time. Often, we don't even have access to professional development services from our employers, meaning career progression just isn't a possibility. Needless to say, all this takes a huge toll, mentally and physically.

Sadly, my experience is far from unique. On the contrary, it's ever-more emblematic of a sector in which low pay and precarity are increasingly the norm for hard-working staff, while managers continue to enjoy eye-watering salaries and splash tens of millions on vanity projects.

At the University of Northampton alone, 25 percent of all academic staff are, like me, on hourly paid and zero hours contracts, while the vice chancellor enjoys annual remuneration of £256,000. Across the sector, more than 100,000 staff are on some form of fixed term, precarious contract.

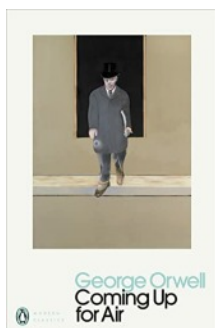
Universities are often depicted as privileged spaces, insulated from the pressures of wider society. And in some ways they are. But as I have sharply felt, the experience of workers who keep higher education running is often just as insecure and poorly paid as in sectors of the gig economy.

That's why, despite really struggling to afford it, I'm on strike. Standing on the picket lines in Northampton is part of the struggle for a future of secure, well-paid, and dignified work not only in universities, but across society.



Keep the Aspistras Flying. George Orwell. Victor Gollancz Ltd. 1936.

A book like Orwell's *Keep the Aspistras Flying* is topical in times of rising economic inequality. It is the story of what happens to working people when their dreams don't fit into the needs of the market. Although this means the book is a miserable read, it is equally thought-provoking and serves as a perfect reference point for those wondering how to relate to the money-god.



Coming Up for Air: George Orwell

George Bowling, forty-five, mortgaged, married with children, is an insurance salesman with an expanding waistline, a new set of false teeth - and a desperate desire to escape his dreary life. He fears modern times - since, in 1939, the Second World War is imminent - foreseeing food queues, soldiers, secret police and tyranny. So he decides to escape to the world of his childhood, to the village he remembers as a rural haven of peace and tranquillity. But his return journey to Lower Binfield may bring only a more complete disillusionment ...

French election polls: who is leading the race to be the next president of France?

Angelique Chrisafis and Seán Clarke

Emmanuel Macron and the far-right hopeful Marine Le Pen are among 12 candidates in the French presidential election. We look at the latest polling, and introduce some of the candidates

France will vote to elect a new president on April 10, and the final list of candidates consists of twelve competitors, chief among them the Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen. The current president, Emmanuel Macron, declared last month that he intends to run for a second term. His second-round opponent from 2017, the far-right Marine Le Pen, had already launched her campaign.

The socialist left Jean-Luc Mélenchon is currently polling in third place.

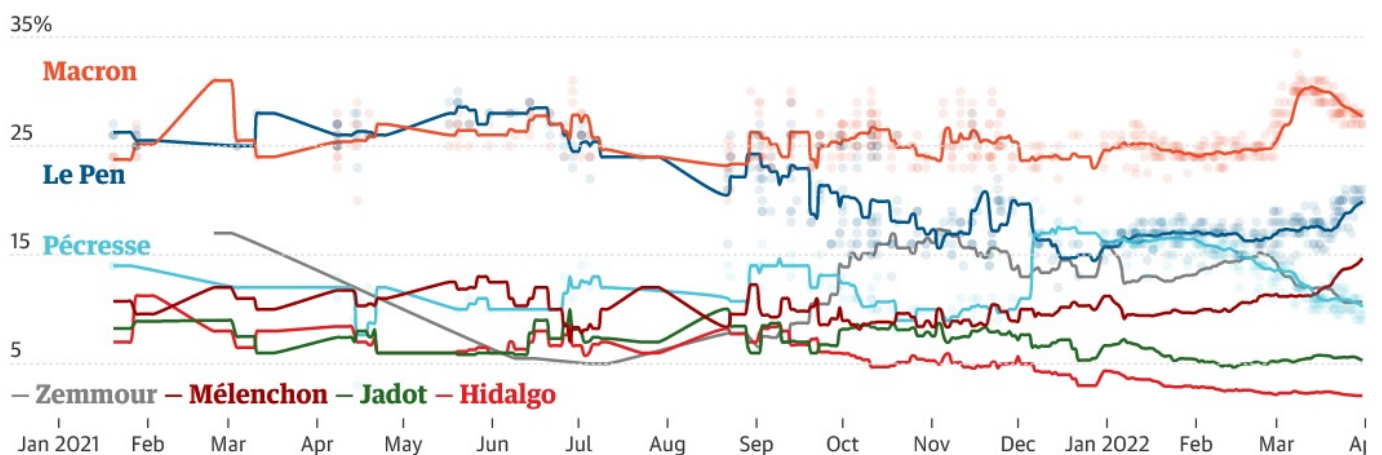
The right's Valérie Pécresse, standing for Les Républicains, is vying with the far-right former TV pundit, Eric Zemmour, for fourth place.

They are followed in the polls by the Green's Yannick Jadot, the Communist party's Fabien Roussel and the Socialist candidate and mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo.

Would-be candidates had until 4 March to present the 500 signatures of elected officials supporting their run, which the law requires. A first round is to be held on 10 April, and in the likely event that no candidate receives a majority of the votes, a second round runoff will be held two weeks later, featuring the two leading candidates from the first round.

Polls suggest that the run-off will probably put Macron up against Le Pen, in a re-run of the second round in 2017.

First-round polling, 7-day average





Emmanuel Macron

La République en Marche

Latest 7-day average (first-round preferences):

27.7%

France's current president shook up the country's political scene in 2017 when he ran without the backing of a major party and won. His hastily assembled, centrist République en Marche party went on to win that year's parliamentary elections too. Macron, a former economy minister under the Socialist president François Hollande, is seen by voters as having leaned towards the centre-right in office.

Le Pen has led a public relations drive to try to sanitise the image of the anti-immigration far-right National Front, which she took over from her father in 2011 and renamed the National Rally in 2018. The party's score in June's regional elections was lower than predicted after many of its traditional voters abstained. Le Pen, in her third bid to be president, is campaigning on the party's traditional line of curbing immigration and 'keeping France for the French', as well as the cost of living crisis



Marine Le Pen

Rassemblement National (National rally)

Latest 7-day average (first-round preferences):

19.9%

Mélenchon is a former Socialist who has stood for various leftwing groupings since leaving the party. He stood in the previous two presidential elections, winning more than 10% of the vote each time, and more than the Socialist candidate in 2017.



Jean-Luc Mélenchon

La France Insoumise (Unbowed France)

Latest 7-day average (first-round preferences):

14.7%

Pécresse was budget minister under Nicolas Sarkozy and is currently the president of the Ile-de-France region, which includes the French capital and surrounding area. She describes herself as 'two-thirds Angela Merkel and one-third Margaret Thatcher', and has focussed on crime, immigration and the economy. She is the choice of Les Républicains, having won their primary on December 4.



Valérie Pécresse

Les Républicains

Latest 7-day average (first-round preferences):

10.2%

Zemmour is a far-right TV pundit who has previously been convicted for inciting racial hatred and who promotes controversial views such as the 'great replacement' theory that Muslim immigrants will 'replace' the populations of European countries.



Eric Zemmour

Reconquête

Latest 7-day average (first-round preferences):

10.7%

Jadot is the Green candidate. In the presidential election in 2017, he stood down in favour of the Socialist Benoît Hamon.



Yannick Jadot

Ecologistes (Greens)

Latest 7-day average (first-round preferences):

5.3%



Anne Hidalgo

Socialists

Latest 7-day average (first-round preferences):

2.1%

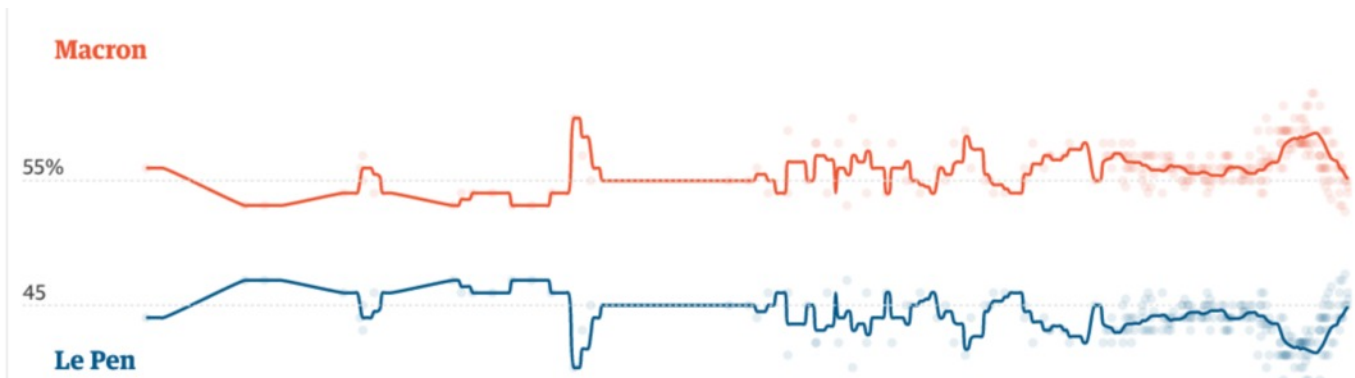
Hidalgo is the first female mayor of Paris and is in her second term. She is best known for her campaign to reduce the number of cars in the French capital. As presidential candidate for the Socialist party, she has highlighted her working-class, immigrant roots, promising to improve salaries, notably for teachers.

Also in contention

The slate includes 12 candidates, many of whom usually fail to poll more than 3% in surveys. They include Fabien Roussel of the Communist party, who in the last weeks of the campaign was polling more strongly than the Socialist candidate, Anne Hidalgo. Also running are Jean Lasalle of the Resistons! (Resist!) party and Nathalie Arthaud of Lutte Ouvrière (Workers' Struggle), a former Ford factory worker, Philippe Poutou, for the anti-capitalist Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste, and the eurosceptic Nicolas Dupont-Aignan.

What about the run-off?

France's polling organisations also ask respondents how they would vote in a hypothetical second round. For obvious reasons they concentrate on what currently seems the most likely scenario, a re-run of 2017's Macron-Le Pen vote.



Paul Wildish

For some four months of the year (pre-Covid) I have been used to living in a rural part of SW France, where its leftist heart still beats and posters of Melanchon often see out those of the opposition. Many of my French friends are of the that rural left described in this article. It's not difficult to see the parallels with the so called red wall towns of England's North, where votes have shifted to populist nationalist notions of the Right and substitute for real levelling up ambition. Here in Larnagol, things are not so bad as in England for there still is a substantial welfare state, despite neoliberal right wing austerity assaults on its integrity as a system. Nevertheless, my friends feel the same, that the once great majority party of the Left now led by the 'Brahmins' forever compromising with the neoliberal agenda, have betrayed them and failed to defend them. Look to Labour and you can see the same reality, a Shadow Chancellor who cannot answer a question put five times by a journalist as to whether she supports public sector workers going on strike for wage increases to meet the cost of living crisis created by the Tories. Who is it Labour wishes to defend? Is it more important to be well regarded by Andrew Marr or by a picket line of increasingly marginalised out sourced NHS workers? Labour's centre Left is barely distinguishable from any centre Right party and continues to expect its historic voting base to vote for it. Labour needs to decide whose side it is on, or it will see itself much like the once powerful French Socialist Party, a political has been.

‘We are at a turning point’: as election looms, what is left of the French left?

Kim Willsher

The Bourgogne-Franche Comté regional express train from Paris takes just 74 minutes to reach Joigny on the banks of the River Yonne in northern Burgundy. Here, the fringes of the capital’s commuter belt meet the countryside among the narrow streets of half-timbered houses and medieval churches, surrounded by fields and the Côte Saint-Jacques vineyards.

For decades, the largely agricultural area has been fertile ground for many shades of the French left – the Resistance and later the Socialist president François Mitterrand were rooted in Burgundy. Today it is where French socialism just about stops the slide of grassroots support to the far right

A decade ago, France’s centre-left Parti Socialiste (PS) was the driving power in French politics: it had a president, François Hollande; a majority in both houses of parliament, the Assemblée Nationale and the Sénat; and control of most of the country’s major local authorities.

Now, less than two weeks from the first round of the presidential election, with its candidate Anne Hidalgo, the mayor of Paris, trailing in the latest polls at 1.5% (lower than a sheep farmer called Jean Lassalle and the Communist party candidate Fabien Roussel), the mainstream left is in an electoral black hole leaving its voters facing what they call a casse-tête – a major headache.

Do they vote for a leftwing candidate on principle even if opinion polls suggest none stands the slightest chance of getting through to the second round (except perhaps Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a charismatic figure of the hard-left currently polling in third place but considered too radical by many)? Do they vote for Emmanuel Macron to hold off the far right’s Marine Le Pen? Or do they stay at home and not vote at all?

Sitting in his mayoral office overlooking the River Yonne in Joigny, Nicolas Soret is resigned to his party’s presidential defeat. “Like you, I can only observe that winning this election does not seem possible,” he says diplomatically and, as a Hidalgo supporter, with regret. Locally, Soret, a popular mayor, can be congratulated for pulling off a political feat that has proven impossible at a national level: in the last municipal and departmental elections, he united a range of leftwing candidates – including Greens and Communists – to see off the far right.

“We realised that if we didn’t join forces we could only lose,” Soret says. “So we got together and agreed on a local programme, based on local issues and local knowledge and that’s why it worked. I really don’t think it would be possible at national level, but on the ground the left is still here, the voters are still here and the elected officials are still here. We have shown there are leftwing voters out there. Sometimes you have to dig a bit deeper to find them, but they are there.”

Joigny has become the symbol of La France périphérique, a term used to evoke the territorial fracture between city and countryside whose populations have been left behind: excluded from jobs, public services, access to high speed internet and – as they are more reliant on cars – among the worst hit by the soaring cost of living.

It was one of the first places Hidalgo visited on launching her campaign, declaring it typical of an ailing, rural and semi-rural France full of people worried for their futures in a way those from the cities did not understand.

“The factories and businesses have closed and not been replaced, the public services have left, the centre of the town is deserted, youngsters no longer find work opportunities and their parents are worried,” she said afterwards.

Joviniens, as the town’s 9,500 inhabitants call themselves, have good reason to feel sidelined, having borne the brunt of the major administrative reorganisations of the past two decades. For 260 years it was a garrison town, but in 2010, François Fillon’s rightwing government sent the local regiment to Alsace in eastern

France and overnight it lost 410 military and army civilian personnel who injected an estimated 80% of their total €7.8m annual income into the local economy. Then the town also lost its magistrates and commercial courts, as well as the hospital's maternity and surgical units. Its treasury and tax offices and police commissariat were all downsized. In 2008 the Stypen factory, a subsidiary of Bic, making fountain pens for the country's schoolchildren, shut down, throwing 61 mostly middle-aged local women out of work. A 2011 Sénat report described Joigny as the "martyred town" of rightwing government policy.

"It was all done without any consultation with us," Soret says of the administrative changes. "It was imposed on us. We were the town that was hit on the head over and over again.

"Ten years ago we were on our knees and we're only now slowly getting back on our feet. But it has led to a certain fatalism among the population that has nourished the far-right vote."



According to the latest government statistics from 2019, about 29% of Joigny's population lives below the poverty line, well above the national average.

Marcel Reynaud, the owner of Couleurs Leroux, which has supplied high-quality pigments and oil paints to artists – including Salvador Dalí – for 112 years, says he hears a lot of local talk about supporting Le Pen's far-right Rassemblement National (RN).

"In the routier [truckers'] cafes it's all about how they will be voting RN because they feel their social protections, their pay, their hours, their conditions have got worse and worse. It's very odd, because these are traditional leftwing voters. It seems they no longer believe in the sincerity of the PS or, more importantly, it's ability to improve their lives.

"These people voting RN are not 'fascists'; they are voting RN because they don't feel the PS have protected them or improved their situation."

Reynaud, 61, frets about homelessness, poverty, social justice, inequality and the undervaluing of essential workers such as nurses and teachers. He supports the idea of a universal minimum revenue – the Socialist candidate's key pledge in 2017 – but says he is not sure who he will vote for this time around. He is not alone.

With the presidential campaign so far hijacked by the far right and its obsession with the three "i"s – Islam, Immigration and Integration – moderate leftwing voters feel politically orphaned and there could be worse to come. If Hidalgo fails to reach 5% in the first round, her campaign expenses will not be reimbursed by the state, leaving the PS in a financial crisis just before the legislative elections in June.

Political analysts say the left in France, like elsewhere in Europe, has suffered from a tectonic shift to the right driven by populism. For the mainstream left – sometimes called the "government left" – the spiral began during Hollande's 2012-17 single term in office, when he was accused of damaging the party's credentials with a neoliberal agenda. After the 2017 presidential race, when the PS candidate failed to make the second round – a disaster also suffered by the centre-right Les Républicains – it was clear the mainstream left had lost the working-class vote to the far right, the radical vote to Mélenchon and the moderate left either to Macron's new centrist party or the Greens.

Thomas Guénolé, a leftwing political scientist, argues Mélenchon made a "monumental error" after it was clear the PS vote had scattered. "He should have adapted his discourse, gathered everyone on the left around him and rebuilt leftwing unity behind him. Instead, he radicalised it and lost the moderate left.

"In 2017, everyone was asking Mélenchon to do this and he sent them packing in no uncertain terms."

Manon Aubry, 32, the co-chair of The Left in the European parliament where she is an MEP, and campaigner for Mélenchon's La France Insoumise, believes the PS is at the end of its political life and it is time for the French left to regroup around a new more radical vision. That Mélenchon is slowly rising in the latest polls suggests some voters agree.

“For people of my generation the PS has nothing to say or offer. We are in a turning point for the left in France. This doesn't mean socialist ideas are dead but they have to be reborn in a new political force,” Aubry told the Guardian.

“Our message for this election is we have to eliminate the extreme right in the first round, then we can have a proper debate about two completely opposite visions for society, that of Emmanuel Macron and that of Jean-Luc Mélenchon.”

Back in Joigny, Reynaud, like many others, is still mulling over who to vote for in the first round. “Maybe Mélenchon,” he says. “Maybe the Greens.

“To me it's not a question of right or left, it's about addressing the issues that concern people, namely poverty and the future of the planet. How can we be living in a country with people who have such wealth, while there are those on the streets with no homes over their head, nothing to eat ... that's what I want someone to answer.”

This article is from the 2017 but still relevant.

Opinion | Why My Father Votes for Le Pen

The New York Times



A rally for Marine Le Pen in Marseille, France. Her candidacy appeals to voters who feel abandoned by the political left. Credit...Paul Durand/European Pressphoto Agency

PARIS — Last month, the face of Marine Le Pen appeared on my computer screen. The headline under the picture read, “Marine Le Pen in Round 2.” The leader of France's far-right National Front, she had advanced to a runoff vote in the presidential election. I immediately thought of my father, a hundred miles away.

I imagined him bursting with joy in front of the TV — the same joy he felt in 2002 when Jean-Marie Le Pen, Marine Le Pen's father and the previous leader of the National Front, also made it to the second round. I remembered my father shouting, “We're going to win!” with tears in his eyes.

I grew up in Hallencourt, a tiny village in Northern France where, until the 1980s, nearly everyone worked for the same factory. By the time I was born, in the 1990s, after several waves of layoffs, most of the people around me were out of work and had to survive as best they could on welfare. My father left school at 14, as did his father before him. He worked for 10 years at the factory. He never got a chance to be laid off: One day at work, a storage container fell on him and crushed his back, leaving him bedridden, on morphine for the pain.

I knew the feeling of being hungry before I knew how to read. From the time I was 5 my father would order me to go down the street and knock on the door of one of my aunts to ask if she could spare some pasta or

bread for our table. I was sent because he knew it was easier to pity a child than an adult. Every year the amount of his workers' compensation decreased. I have four siblings, and in the end, my father couldn't feed a family of seven. My mother didn't work; my father said a woman's place was in the home.

At 18, thanks to a series of lucky breaks and miracles, I became a student of philosophy in Paris, at a school considered one of the most prestigious in France. I was the first in my family to attend college. So far from the world where I'd grown up, living in a little studio on the Place de la République, I decided to write a novel about where I came from.

I wanted to bear witness to the poverty and exclusion that were part of our everyday experience. I was struck and troubled that the life I knew all those years never appeared in books, in newspapers or on TV. Every time I heard someone talk about "France," on the news or even in the street, I knew they weren't talking about the people I'd grown up with.

Two years later, I finished the book and sent it to a big Paris publisher. Less than two weeks later, he sent a reply: He couldn't publish my manuscript because the poverty I wrote about hadn't existed in more than a century; no one would believe the story I had to tell. I read that email several times, choked with rage and despair.

In the 2000s, when I was growing up, every member of my family voted for Mr. Le Pen. My father went into the polling station with my older brothers to make sure they really were voting for the National Front. The mayor and his staff members didn't say anything when they saw my father doing this. In our village, with its population of only a few hundred, everyone had attended the same school. Everyone saw everyone else at the bakery in the morning or in the cafe at night. No one wanted to pick a fight with my father.

A vote for the National Front was of course a vote tinged with racism and homophobia. My father looked forward to the time when we would "throw out the Arabs and the Jews." He liked to say that gay people deserved the death penalty — looking sternly at me, who already in primary school was attracted to other boys on the playground.

And yet what those elections really meant for my father was a chance to fight his sense of invisibility. My father understood, long before I did, that in the minds of the bourgeoisie — people like the publisher who would turn down my book a few years later — our existence didn't count and wasn't real.

My father had felt abandoned by the political left since the 1980s, when it began adopting the language and thinking of the free market. Across Europe, left-wing parties no longer spoke of social class, injustice and poverty, of suffering, pain and exhaustion. They talked about modernization, growth and harmony in diversity, about communication, social dialogue and calming tensions.

My father understood that this technocratic vocabulary was meant to shut up workers and spread neoliberalism. The left wasn't fighting for the working class, against the laws of the marketplace; it was trying to manage the lives of the working class from within those laws. The unions had undergone the same transformation: My grandfather was a union man. My father was not.

When he was watching TV and a socialist or a union representative appeared on the screen, my father would complain, "Whatever — left, right, now, they're all the same." That "whatever" distilled all of his disappointment in those who, in his mind, should have been standing up for him but weren't.

By contrast, the National Front railed against poor working conditions and unemployment, laying all the blame on immigration or the European Union. In the absence of any attempt by the left to discuss his suffering, my father latched on to the false explanations offered by the far right. Unlike the ruling class, he didn't have the privilege of voting for a political program. Voting, for him, was a desperate attempt to exist in the eyes of others.

I don't know for sure how he voted last month, in the first round of the presidential election, and I don't know for sure how he will vote on Sunday, in the runoff. He and I almost never speak. Our lives have grown too far apart, and whenever we try to talk on the phone, we are reduced to silence by the pain of having

become strangers to each other. Usually we hang up after a minute or two, embarrassed that neither of us can think of anything to say.

But even if I can't ask him directly, I'm confident he is still voting for the National Front. In his village, Marine Le Pen came out way ahead in the first round of the election.

Today, writers, journalists and liberals bear the weight of responsibility for the future. To persuade my family not to vote for Marine Le Pen, it's not enough to show that she is racist and dangerous: Everyone knows that already. It's not enough to fight against hate or against her. We have to fight for the powerless, for a language that gives a place to the most invisible people — people like my father.

Édouard Louis is the author of the novel "The End of Eddy." This essay was translated by Lorin Stein from the French.

People & Profit - France 24

Inflation and the French election: How serious is the cost of living crisis?

Inflation in France is set to surpass 4 percent in March, according to the latest estimates from the national statistics institute Insee. The pace of price rises has already hit the highest level since 2008. The rising cost of living has become a central issue in the French presidential election campaign, with promises from candidates to cut taxes and raise wages to tackle it.

In the first of a series of special programmes looking at the economic issues in the campaign:

- Kate Moody examines the powers the French president has to tackle price rises.
- Economist Emmanuel Jessua from Rexecode puts the recent spike in prices in context of previous peaks in inflation, and discusses proposals from candidates to raise wages for French workers.
- Plus, Yinka Oyetade reports on how a shortage of skilled workers is adding to headaches for French businesses already facing skyrocketing energy bills.



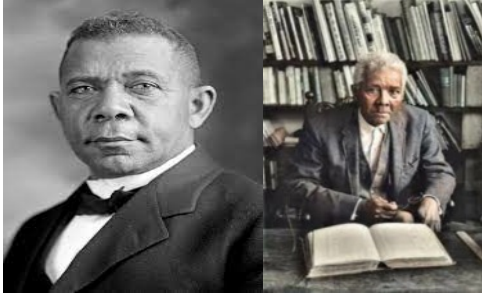
Media to Watch and Learn



Who Tells Our Story? - Ten episodes on historians

Richard Cohen examines the storytellers of the past, how they worked and how their writings still influence our ideas about history. Who were the historians who changed the way history is written? How did their biases affect their accounts? Is there such a thing as objective history?

The three episodes below are of interest to those of study the histories of class, feminism and colour.



Booker T. Washington & CLR James

Episode 6 -Who tells our story? Black historians from the earliest chroniclers of the Black experience in the 19th century like George Washington Williams, to Carter G Woodson who founded Black History month, Booker T Washington, a former slave, who founded a college for Blacks in Alabama, and 20th century historians like CLR James, and John Henry Clarke, who criticised the way Black history had been taught, and Black women historians making their voices heard.



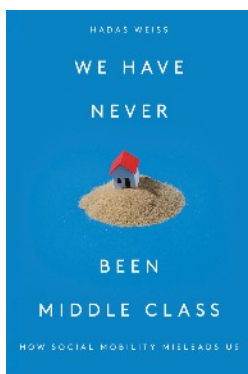
Eric Hobsbawm and Raphael Samuel

Episode 7-The Red historians, from Karl Marx who suffered from boils and was always broke but loved visiting Margate to see the Punch and Judy shows, and wrote The Communist Manifesto and Das Kapital, with his friend Engels, to Leon Trotsky whose finest books were written in exile. The Communist Party Historians Group in London in the late 1940s – Raphael Samuel, Christopher Hill and EP Thompson, all writing about the working classes – to the most famous of them all, Eric Hobsbawm.



Anna Komene & Veronica Wedgewood

Episode 8-Her story – female historians from Chinese Ban Zhao in 45 AD, the Byzantine scholar Anna Kommene from Constantinople, to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in the 18th century who went with her husband to Turkey and said that previous travel literature had been written by boys and was superficial. Mary Wollstonecraft and Madame de Stael both pioneered a new female approach to history, to Cecil Woodham Smith and Veronica Wedgewood – the latter wearing mens' clothing as she tramped around battlefield sites - and female winners of the Pulitzer Prize.



We Have Never Been Middle Class -How Social Mobility Misleads Us

by Hadas Weiss

Tidings of a shrinking middle class in one part of the world and its expansion in another absorb our attention, but seldom do we question the category itself. We Have Never Been Middle Class proposes that the middle class is an ideology. Tracing this ideology up to the age of financialisation, it exposes the fallacy in the belief that we can all ascend or descend as a result of our aspirational and precautionary investments in property and education.