

# Britain: Capitalist decay and the Tories' temporary victory

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Workers and cops face off during the 1984-1985 miners' strike.

Behind Boris Johnson's victory in the recent British elections are decades of capitalist decay. It's hollowed out the British economy even more than it has done to the United States.

The ruling class in both countries is richer than ever. It's the working class that's suffered from austerity. Homelessness in Britain has soared while the queen and all the other royal parasites live in palaces.

Between 1971 and 2016, [5.2 million manufacturing jobs](#) in Britain were destroyed. Factory employment fell by two-thirds.

That's like what happened in New York state, which lost about a million manufacturing jobs from 1976 to 2019, a 70 percent drop, judging by the "1978 U.S. Statistical Abstract" and the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#).

The wholesale demolition of industry in Britain went hand-in-hand with a [50 percent drop in union membership](#). While in 1979, more than 12 million British workers were in unions, the number [fell to 6.23 million](#) in 2018.

Earlier periods of capitalism tended to concentrate workers, making it easier to organize our class. By getting rid of millions of jobs in factories, mines and other large workplaces, capitalist decay scatters the working class and helps destroy unions.

Workers in smaller nonunion companies or working by themselves as private contractors are often more susceptible to capitalist propaganda.

Just as in the U.S., British workers were not so much defeated on the battlefield as they had their union fortresses stolen from them.

## **Thatcher and Reagan**

A key turning point was the 1979 election victory of the Conservative Party, the Tories, which made Margaret Thatcher prime minister. A year later Ronald Reagan was elected U.S. president.

Both of these racist union busters supported the apartheid regime then existing in South Africa. Reagan broke the strike of the air traffic controllers belonging to the PATCO union in 1981.

Two long strikes were broken in Britain under Thatcher. These defeats were felt by workers around the world.

Coal miners in Britain and the U.S. were backbones of the labor movement. It was the United Mine Workers in the U.S. that built the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the 1930s.

The strike of the National Union of Mineworkers in 1974 drove Tory Prime Minister Edward Heath out of office. British capitalists were humiliated by this example of working-class power.

A decade later, they had their revenge by breaking the yearlong miners' strike against pit closures in 1984-1985. They were able to do so by the availability of oil from the North Sea.

Massive police brutality was used against the striking miners. So was an all out media assault against the miners' leader, Arthur Scargill.

A similar slimy campaign used against Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn helped elect the Tories in 2019. While Rupert Murdoch owns the Trump-loving New York Post and Fox News, he has even more of a media presence in Britain.

It was Murdoch who broke British printing unions, whose origins date back to the late 18th century. The media mogul built a new plant in the east London district of

Wapping and fired the former printers. Police arrested 1,500 picketers in the 1986-1987 strike.

Inspired by Murdoch's victory, the owners of the New York Daily News tried to break the unions in 1990 but failed.

The Tories' popularity had [fallen to 23 percent](#) in December 1981. A big reason was that one out of eight British workers was jobless by January 1982. The unemployment rate [reached 16 percent](#) in parts of Scotland.

Thatcher survived by waging war against Argentina in 1982 over the Malvinas Islands. The subsequent war fever pumped up by the media led to a Tory victory in 1983 and later helped to smash the miners and printers.

Reagan's popularity [slid to only 35 percent](#) in early 1983. His answer was to invade the Black Caribbean island of Grenada.

Trump supporters are now thinking that a war against Iran will re-elect the racist pig.

## **The Industrial Revolution**

The Industrial Revolution was born in Britain 250 years ago. The inventions of the spinning jenny and spinning frame, as well as improvements to the carding engine between 1764 and 1775, revolutionized the production of cotton textiles, the first great machine industry.

One result was the starving to death of many hand weavers in Bengal, who were renowned for their cotton goods. Loot poured in from South Asia where the British East India Company made huge profits from famines. By 1914, the British Empire—which started by invading Ireland—was exploiting a quarter of humanity.

Britain became the workshop of the world and its products ruled the world market. British inventions included the slide rest for lathe, that along with the micrometer allowed for interchangeable parts. The first railroads were built in Britain, while Henry Bessemer's inventions were the basis of the steel industry.

Much of the initial capital for these industries came from the African Holocaust. Liverpool became the world's biggest port for slavers. Bristol, where Rolls Royce jet engines are now made, was also a leading port for kidnappers of Africans.

A big market for Birmingham's ironmongers was making shackles for enslaved Africans. As Eric Williams pointed out in "Capitalism and Slavery," James Watt's first steam engine was financed by slave masters. The Tate art galleries in London came from a fortune built on slave-grown sugar.

U.S. capitalism was even more based on African slavery. Cotton accounted for half of U.S. exports in 1860. Wall Street grew up as the banking house for Southern slave masters. While today New York City has municipal green markets, Wall Street once had a municipal slave market.

### **'The great unwashed'**

What did poor and working people in Britain get from the Industrial Revolution? Their real wages fell by half. Even the average height of workers declined.

The rich called workers "the great unwashed." Six-year-old boys and girls worked in coal mines. Karl Marx described in "Capital" how two-and-a-half-year-old infants helped make lace.

But these children weren't thrown to the sharks like enslaved Africans were in the Atlantic Ocean's Middle Passage.

Employees making cotton textiles—then Britain's largest export— worked 12-hour

and 14-hour days in what the poet Byron called “satanic mills.” Frederick Engels, Karl Marx’s co-worker, heard factory owners in Manchester joke about how workers had their fingers cut off by unshielded machinery.

A million people were allowed to starve to death in Ireland in the 1840s with approval of The Economist magazine. A century later, there was an even greater famine in British-occupied Bengal, where—like Ireland earlier—food was being exported from the country. Tory Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s response to these millions of deaths was to ask, “How come Gandhi is still alive?”

British workers fought back against the factory owners. Unions were formed. A 10-hour work day and ultimately an 8-hour work day were won.

The first organized working-class movement was called the Chartists. They fought for a People’s Charter demanding voting rights and other democratic demands.

Two of the favorite Chartist leaders were the Irish-born James Brontë O’Brien and Feargus O’Connor. Another Chartist leader was a Black man, William Cuffay, who was deported to Australia.

British workers prevented their ruling class from recognizing the slave-owning confederacy during the U.S. Civil War. Karl Marx, the founder of scientific socialism — that is, communism — helped lead this struggle.

A half-century later, the working class stopped British intervention against the Bolshevik Revolution.

## **Falling behind**

While Britain pioneered the Industrial Revolution, it later fell behind the U.S. and Germany. On the eve of World War I, Britain was still the [third largest producer of steel](#).

By 1967, British steel production had slowly increased to 24.3 million metric tons. But it fell to just 7.3 million tons in 2018, smaller than what was produced in 1913 and [less than one-half of 1 percent](#) of world production. British motor vehicle production [decreased by 31 percent](#) from 1972 to 2018.

Large sections of the capitalist class gave up on manufacturing because there wasn't enough profit in it. The Economist magazine sneers at much of it as "metal bashing." That's how U.S. slave masters contemptuously viewed northern factory owners in the 1850s.

Industrial giants with billions in assets, like Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI) and the British General Electric Company (GEC), were thrown to the wayside.

Scottish workers were among those most hurt by deindustrialization. While in 1914, a fifth of all ocean-going ships had been [built on the Clyde](#) in Scotland, there are now only two shipyards left with 2,400 workers.

## **Banking, Big Oil and Brexit**

Even in the 19th century, British capitalists were investing much of their profits abroad. Karl Marx wrote in "Capital" that "a great deal of capital, which appears today in the United States without any certificate of birth, was yesterday, in England, the capitalised blood of children."

Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, described in "Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism" how British capital was invested in railroads around the world. A huge source of profit was the gold and diamond mines in South Africa.

British industry was starved of investment because the export of capital became much more profitable than the export of goods. Profits poured in not just from British colonies but also from Argentina.

The British economy revolves around London banks. Two of the members of Big Oil — BP and Royal Dutch Shell — are headquartered there.

British foreign investments reached [1.4 trillion pounds in 2018](#), equal to around \$1.8 trillion, about two-thirds of the country's gross domestic product. That's a higher percentage than the [\\$6 trillion of U.S. foreign investments](#) are as compared to the total U.S. economy.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his fellow Tories are claiming that Britain's withdrawal from the European Union—Brexit—will lead to an economic renaissance. What's guaranteed are more cutbacks, particularly in the National Health Service. Johnson is just a servile echo chamber for Trump.

Despite the nonstop hate campaign attacking Jeremy Corbyn, with the media painting him as a communist, over 10 million people voted for the Labour Party. The British working class, now with millions of Black and Asian workers, will fight. Coats off for struggle!

