

Britain: Relaxing the Lockdown? We'll need workers' control

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Boris Johnson is due to announce the relaxation of the Covid-19 lockdown on Sunday. The Times reports ministers are worried there is a danger workers will become addicted to it. Likely they include Dominic Raab and Priti Patel, who in 2012 called British workers 'the worst idlers in the world' and claimed, 'too many people in Britain prefer a lie-in to hard work'. So now it is back to work after what they see as some sort of national holiday.

Yet at the end of April all serious experts were reporting that the government's famous five tests had not all been met: NHS coping; sustained fall in daily death rate; rate of infection level below one; adequate tests, tracing and PPE; avoiding a second peak. With deaths breaking the 30,000 barrier, Britain has become No1 in Europe and No2 in the world for COVID-19 mortality. To replace the 'stay at home' message with 'go to work' carries precisely the danger of a second peak.

Meanwhile the Bank of England has warned that the UK economy is heading towards its deepest recession on record. It says the economy is on course to shrink by 14% in 2020, 'dramatically reducing jobs and incomes in the UK' even if lockdown is substantially relaxed in June. With interest rates at a record low of 0.1% the Bank's quantitative easing is approaching its limits, though two of its nine members voted to increase this from £100bn to £300bn.

The UK economy is now in its first recession for a decade, GDP shrinking by 3% in the first quarter of 2020, with a never before seen 25% slump predicted for the three months to June. No wonder Johnson is under heavy pressure from the Tory press as the voice of the employers, desperate to get the wheels of exploitation turning and profits rolling in once again. His chancellor Rishi Sunak is planning to end the furlough scheme by July to force these 3.2 million 'idlers' back to their jobs - if, that is, those jobs are still there. More than 1.5 million people have applied for the main unemployment benefit Universal Credit.

In the 'get back to work no matter the cost in human lives' message they have the support of their backbenchers and doubtless Johnson's sinister adviser Dominic Cummings. These were the very people who 'with Trump-like bravado' delayed imposing serious quarantine measures and even floated the eugenicist nonsense of letting the virus spread unchecked to create 'herd immunity'. This was all without the slightest evidence on the effectiveness or duration of acquired immunity to this virus.

They naturally have had the full-throated support of the billionaire press for this reactionary profits-above-everything doctrine. Indeed the Express, the Mail and the Sun headlines have all been shouting for a lifting of the lockdown for weeks. With news of the relaxing of the restrictions their joy was unbounded: 'First Steps to Freedom!' (Express), 'Hurrah Freedom Beckons!' (Mail), 'Happy Monday!' (Sun), and bringing up the rear, 'Magic Monday!' (Star).

Shoot the messenger

It was largely thanks to Professor Neil Ferguson of Imperial College School of Public Health and his modelling team's forecast of 500,000 deaths on 16 March, that the government was forced to abandon its herd immunity strategy, but as a result Ferguson instantly became an online hate figure for the libertarian right.

So the intrepid journalists of the Telegraph came to the rescue and now they have his scalp on their belt. Forced to resign, not because of any scientific error but because an article in the Tory 'quality' paper on 5 May exposed him as having had 'at least two' 'illegal trysts' with his 'married lover' who, to make matters worse, is also a 'left-wing campaigner'. In fact Ferguson should have been given a medal not witch-hunted by the reptile press.

This incident throws an instructive light on the phalanx of reactionary forces guarding and guiding this government in the interest of profit. It shows too the appalling weakness of the labour movement, with no mass media of its own and a new leader expressing support for Johnson and his ministers for their handling of the coronavirus crisis or claiming that sharper criticism would not be 'in the national interest'. The febleness of Keir Starmer 'approved by the Tory media' is spreading unease, if not indignation in Labour's ranks.

Appalling Record

This government has an appalling record of dealing with the new virus. Firstly the lateness in imposing serious quarantine measures, 20-23 March, when the virus had already reached Britain at the end of January. During this period the government's chief scientific advisor Patrick Vallance revealed they were working on the basis of achieving herd immunity, i.e. when 60% of the population had been infected and hundreds of thousands died. The shock of revealing this and the intervention of Professor Ferguson put a stop to this reactionary nonsense.

Second was the discovery of a chronic lack of ventilators for the intensive care units, the actual lack of PPE in hospitals and total absence of it in care homes, leading to a heavy loss of life. This list should be enough for anyone to express no confidence in this government. And now, with the UK overtaking Italy as the country with the highest number of deaths in Europe, the government's failures are clear to all except to the leader of the Labour Party, who has something more important to concern himself, lapping up the praise of the Tory and Liberal media for his responsibility and patriotism for not criticising Johnson.

Dr Claudia Paoloni, president of the Hospital Consultants and Specialists Association, said Britain's number one position on Covid-19 deaths 'puts into question whether the government's tactics at the start of the pandemic were sufficiently fast, and especially whether the lockdown should have happened earlier and whether we should have been better prepared with increased capacity for viral testing and contact tracing from the start. Both have proven inadequate.'

Controlling the Return

Meanwhile the TUC, under pressure from individual unions and their members, has been more critical, attacking the chronic lack of PPE and testing from the outset. Now having seen a draft of the government's plans for a 'return to work' its general secretary Frances O'Grady said it cannot back them in their 'current form' because there are 'huge gaps' over protective kit and testing. She stated, 'The problem is the government is asking us to trust to employer discretion, use words like 'consider social distancing', 'consider having hand sanitizer or soap available', and frankly that's just not good

enough.? You said it!

The TUC has produced its own ?Proposals on Ensuring A Safe Return to Work? demanding that government and employers agree with the TUC and the individual unions? plans for the use of public transport, return to schools, nurseries, workplaces, with agreed levels of protection, testing and tracing and risk assessments.

In fact the TUC should go further than just criticising the government and employers? plans or calling for legally enforceable curbs on the latter. It should veto them or rather it should encourage union activists to veto their implementation and draw up their own list of essential conditions for working and then impose them with the threat of industrial action if need be. Union members, first of all in the health service, plus professional bodies of doctors, university researchers, etc. should draw up an alternative plan of action.

Likewise it should oppose any abandonment or reduction of payments for those not working at usual levels and the inevitable closures and mass redundancies, such as have already been threatened at Caterpillar, Rolls Royce, Virgin Atlantic and British Airways. In addition the rank and file unions like the Independent Workers? Union of Great Britain (IWGB) or the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) that have started to organise the ?self-employed?, those on zero hours and the growing number of delivery workers, can perform a vital task for these workers whose suffering during the pandemic has been largely ignored by the media.

But it is the affected workforces that must take their fate into their own hands, i.e. take action, including strikes and workplace occupations, to stop the bosses walking away with the fruits of their labour and that of previous generations. We need to organise at the community level as well as the workplace. Labour councils should be helping and coordinating with the mutual aid bodies that have sprung up in response to the crisis to create a body to take effective control. Not just of a return to work, but to organise a fightback against the massive increase in unemployment which will accompany it.

The local and workplace union branches, trade councils, the Labour left and other socialists should lay the foundations of a council of action. Such bodies will be immensely useful when the scale of the economic crisis becomes clear ? which will be by the autumn at the latest.

When the ?return to work? gets underway the TUC and its member unions, vitally at the workplace level (shops stewards or workplace reps), need to establish control over workplaces and jobs, both those that remained in operation throughout and those factories, offices and building sites returning to work. The same goes for the transport workers for whom packed trains buses will represent a severe danger.

What we need is workers? control of the equipment used, of safe working practices, of the testing and tracing available to minimise the dangers of transmission. The action by posties in the CWU, refusing an imposed order from management to do six days work in five and forcing Royal Mail to climb down shows we have the strength if we are willing to use it.

From lockdown to lockout?

In addition there is the looming danger of mass unemployment with the phasing out of furloughing and employers announcing huge cuts in their workforces due to their lost markets and reduced profits. This too will demand fighting for workers? control over ?management?s right to manage?. It will include a refusal to go back under unsafe conditions or a refusal to accept redundancies or shorter hours as the price of starting work. If anyone is left out then all must stay out. Trade unions need to start recruiting all those workers who face these threats and who do not have the self-protection of union organisation.

A major political battle will face the working class too because this government will certainly present the enormous Coronavirus bill to us. They will demand a return of austerity ? just as Osborne and Campbell did in 2010 ? to pay off the huge amount of borrowing Sunak has undertaken. Instead Labour and the unions should demand the big shareholders, the CEOs, the hedge fund billionaires foot the bill. A Coronavirus super-tax, enough to foot the whole pandemic bill and start the restoration of the public services: that would be a modest start.

Starting from the enormous praise heaped on the health workers and the vital service they provide, we need to show how previous cuts made their job more dangerous and difficult. We need to show how Brexit and an end to free movement will take rights from many of these vital workers, including those who have been risking their lives in the care homes.

The union movement and the Labour Party need to be put on a war footing. We need to reassert the right to demonstrate and hold meetings, with appropriate precautions of course. But if people can work together safely then they can take action together to defend their jobs and safety. Workers threatened with redundancies, like the 12,000 workers at British Airways or the 3,150 at Virgin Atlantic, must demand nationalisation without compensation to the owners.

Labour should be fighting

The Labour Party should not only be exposing the inadequacy of the government's response to the pandemic, but do all they can in parliament to stop the ending of the furlough payments to workers still unable to return to work. They should make it clear Labour will oppose any return to austerity to pay off the huge state debts. It should reject ?rescue packages? for billionaires like Richard Branson. If they can't run their companies they should be taken over by the state and run under workers' control.

Labour must respond by renewing the pledges it made to the electorate in the 2017 and 2019 elections. To the carnage in the care homes, its frontbenchers and Mayors should boldly advocate its manifesto pledge of a national care system for the elderly and infirm equivalent to and linked with the NHS. To the broken NHS, it should respond by demanding the Tories annul all PFI contracts and cancel all hospital trust debts, bringing the whole system in-house. To the growing line of unemployed, it should call for the four-day week with no loss of pay and state intervention not to prop up failed billionaires, but to kick-start the Green Industrial Revolution.

But Labour is not just the PLP ? it is a party of over half a million members and the trade unions of over six million. It is high time activists in both wings of the labour movement combine these and other issues and struggles into an action programme to fend off the inevitable Tory attacks and a looming global economic catastrophe worse than that of 2008. So severe are the challenges and so radical the measures demanded to meet them that we need to link them to the goal of a socialist economy and a classless society.

The Coronavirus crisis (and future pandemics that are all but inevitable in a globalised economy), the looming environmental catastrophe, the spread of right wing populist movements and anti-migrant racism generated by Brexit all point to the need for the left, stunned by Corbyn's defeat, to regroup ? quickly. We need to turn from the little world of Westminster to the battlefield of the class struggle. In short, don't mourn, organise.