

UK: “Operation Yellowhammer” details savage austerity and confirms plans for state repression post-Brexit

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On Wednesday evening, Boris Johnson’s government was forced to release its forecast for a no-deal Brexit, codenamed “Operation Yellowhammer.” The six-page document affirms the social and economic catastrophe threatened by a no-deal Brexit and underscores the danger of authoritarian rule in the UK.

While the government insists that the scenarios outlined in Yellowhammer represent “reasonable worst case assumptions,” a widely shared version of the document from the same day uses the phrase “base scenario.”

The release of the document disproves the government’s claims, made last summer when the *Times* first leaked details of Yellowhammer, that the forecast was an outdated hangover from Theresa May’s time as Conservative prime minister. The document is dated 10 days after Johnson became prime minister, confirming that Yellowhammer presents the expected outcome of a no-deal Brexit.

The initial problem identified is the hold-up of freight transport at the Channel Tunnel and Britain’s ports. The flow rate of HGVs could drop to 40-60 percent of its current levels for three months following Brexit, with lorries stuck for up to two-and-a-half days, before “improving” to 50-70 percent.

Some level of continued disruption is expected to last “significantly longer.” The breakdown of supply chains will “have an impact on the supply of medicines and medical supplies,” which, due to their short shelf life, are “particularly vulnerable.” The reduced supply of veterinary medicines will “reduce our ability to prevent and control [animal] disease outbreaks, with potentially detrimental impacts for... the environment, and wider food safety/availabilities and zoonotic diseases which can directly impact human health.”

The British Medical Association has described these

points as “alarming,” saying they confirm its warnings about the threat of medical supply shortages in the case of a no-deal break with the EU.

As for food supplies, a no-deal Brexit will “reduce availability and choice of products and will increase price.” The document adds, “There is a risk that panic buying will cause or exacerbate” these problems.

Helen Dickinson of the British Retail Consortium commented, “Fresh food availability will decrease, consumer choice will decrease, and prices will rise.”

A no-deal Brexit threatens to “disrupt fuel supply in London and the South East” and “customer behaviour could lead to local shortages in other parts of the country.” In addition, “Significant electricity price increases” are expected, “with associated wider economic and political impacts.” An “increase in inflation following EU exit would significantly impact adult social care providers ... and may lead to provider failure.”

In one of the most telling passages, the document concludes that these effects will hit “vulnerable,” “low income” groups hardest, leading to a “rise in public disorder and community tensions.”

All of this is to say nothing of the impact of the government’s own economic plans for post-Brexit Britain. These include substantial tax cuts for the wealthy and the corporations, the removal of many labour protections, deeper social spending cuts, and the setting up of “free ports” to enable the hyper exploitation of large sections of the workforce. These measures add up to the wholesale destruction of living standards for a large majority of the population.

A no-deal scenario is also expected to immediately create flashpoints for international tensions. Confusion and conflict over fishing rights between UK and EU fishermen are thought “likely” to produce “violent

disputes or blockading of ports.”

The document describes the government’s promise not to establish a hard border between Northern Ireland and the rest of Ireland as “unsustainable due to significant economic, legal and biosecurity risks and no effective unilateral mitigations to address this will be available.”

A legal case is ongoing against the government, challenging the legality of a no-deal Brexit on the grounds that it would violate the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 promises to protect. The argument was rejected by the Belfast High Court on Thursday, with the judge saying that the main aspects of the case “were inherently and unmistakably political,” but will be appealed. Raymond McCord, a campaigner for victims of the Northern Ireland Troubles who brought the case, says he plans to take it to the Supreme Court.

The situation outlined in Operation Yellowhammer is one in which democratic forms of rule cannot be maintained. While the media has noted the document’s reference to the “significant amounts of police resources” required to deal with protests, next to nothing has been said about the wider plans for repression known to be in motion.

It is understood that 50,000 regular and reserve troops will be made ready “in case of civil unrest, to assist at Britain’s airports and to ensure fuel and medical supplies.” They will be backed up by 10,000 riot police, ready to be deployed in 24 hours, and 1,000 extra police from Britain sent to reinforce the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

Discussions have been held amongst senior civil servants about the use of powers normally reserved “to deal with national emergencies such as acts of war and terrorism,” including the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, introduced by the Labour government of Tony Blair. These powers include, according to the *Sunday Times*, “Curfews, bans on travel, confiscation of property and, most drastic, the deployment of the armed forces to quell rioting.” Ministers “can also amend any act of parliament, except the Human Rights Act, for a maximum of 21 days.”

One paragraph in the document, numbered 15, has been redacted. Only members of the Privy Council—who swear an oath to keep matters discussed in the Council secret—will be allowed to read the text.

The government claims to have censored the paragraph “on the grounds of commercial sensitivity.” The *Times* leak in August revealed that this paragraph dealt with

threats to the UK fuel industry and the political ramifications. It read: “Facing EU tariffs makes petrol exports to the EU uncompetitive. Industry had plans to mitigate the impact on refinery margins and profitability but UK Government policy to set petrol import tariffs at 0 percent inadvertently undermines these plans. This leads to significant financial losses and announcement of two refinery closures (and transition to import terminals) and direct job losses (about 2,000).”

“Resulting strike action at refineries would lead to disruptions to fuel availability for 1-2 weeks in the regions directly supplied by the refineries.”

Given that this information is already in the public sphere, it is very likely that the government is trying to hide an updated, far worse, assessment. Significantly, the censored paragraph is the only point in the document to reference the threat of strikes.

The government has admitted the likelihood of “protests and counter-protests,” presumably relating to Leave and Remain supporters, and even “protests and direct action with road blockages” in Northern Ireland over border issues and their economic consequences. But it cannot acknowledge the prospect of industrial action, which would involve far more than 2,000 refinery workers.

For the last three years, the ruling class has been able to exclude the working class from intervening independently in the Brexit crisis thanks to the role played by the trade unions and Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. The number of workers involved in disputes in 2018 (39,000) was the second lowest since 1893. The lowest number since 1893 was in 2017, which saw just 33,000 workers involved in industrial action.

Meanwhile, the Labour Party and union bureaucrats have sought to tie the workers to one or the other of the equally reactionary factions—pro-EU or pro-Brexit—of the ruling elite.

The development of major strikes in the course or aftermath of Brexit threatens to bring the working class back into the political equation, where it can begin to assert its own interests. It is against this potential movement that the immense forces of repression built up through Operation Yellowhammer will be deployed.



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