UK coronavirus plan underscores gutting of health and social care

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On Tuesday, Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson outlined his government's plan for the coronavirus COVID-19 outbreak.

He confirmed that the ruling elite in Britain, as internationally, are responding based on defending the interests of the tiny layer of financial parasites, who dominate society at the expense of the working class.

Flanked by the government's Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Advisor, Johnson outlined a four-pronged plan: containing the virus, delaying its spread, researching its origins, and mitigating its impact.

He said in relation to this collection of ill-defined aims, "The plan does not set out what the government will do, but the steps the government will take on the basis of scientific advice."

The only concrete advice offered by Johnson to the UK population was to "wash your hands with soap and hot water for the length of time it takes to sing Happy Birthday twice."

After he spoke, it was announced that the number of people infected in Britain had risen to 51 from 39 at the start of the day. By the following afternoon, the total reached 87—more than doubling in 24 hours. This could be a vast underestimation, as just 16,659 people have been tested in Britain.

At this stage, the coronavirus has not officially reached epidemic levels and with the required resources available it could be eradicated. But Johnson is playing down the threat of the virus to extraordinary levels. According to the government, what is being confronted is nothing much worse than the annual bout of winter flu.

While the government has admitted in a worse-case scenario that 80 percent of the population in the UK could be infected with the virus—over 50 million people—its plan states, "The majority of people with COVID-19 have recovered without the need for any specific treatment, as is the case for the common cold or seasonal flu. We expect that the vast majority of cases will best be managed at home, again as with seasonal colds and flu."

These claims are bogus. Coronavirus has a much higher death rate than flu—between 10 and 24 times depending on age.

The government admits that were 80 percent of Britain's population to be infected, up to 500,000 could die, with up to two million people requiring hospital treatment. According to researchers, between five and 40 coronavirus cases in 1,000 will result in death, with a best estimate of nine in 1,000 (about one percent). This week, Health Secretary Matt Hancock said the government's "very best assessment" was that the mortality rate was "2 percent or, likely, lower."

The death rate is still subject to much debate, with World Health Organization's Director General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, declaring Tuesday that "globally, about 3.4% of reported Covid-19 cases have died."

What is clear from the global death toll is that the older people are, the more likely they are to die—with those in the 60-69, 70-79 and 80+ age brackets most at risk. Those with serious health conditions, including cardio-vascular disease, diabetes, respiratory disease and hypertension, also have a higher death rate.

There is nothing in Johnson's plan to provide any extra resources to treat the elderly, or anyone with the virus. His speech was full of his usual stupid bluster, including the statement, "Our country remains extremely well prepared, as it has been since the outbreak began in Wuhan several months ago."

He added cynically, "Let's not forget, we already have a fantastic NHS [National Health Service], fantastic testing systems and fantastic surveillance of the spread of disease."

There is no "fantastic" NHS or fantastic anything in Britain. What has been exposed by the coronavirus crisis is that the basic social infrastructure in all the major capitalist countries has been eviscerated after decades of looting at the hands of the ruling elite.

Tens of billions of pounds have been slashed from the NHS budget in "efficiency savings" and vast swathes of service provision privatised. Such have been the cuts to public health and social care by successive Labour and Tory governments that the NHS is now longer able to even cope with the annual outbreak of winter flu.

The NHS has no provision for the required life and death services for the millions of people who could be infected with the virus. Over 15,000 beds have been slashed from the NHS in the last decade.

The *Guardian* reported last week that there are just 15

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available beds for adults in England to treat the most severe cases of respiratory failure. The beds for providing adult extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO) treatment are available at just five centres across England.

The NHS will "struggle to cope if there are more than 28 patients who need them if the number of coronavirus cases rises," the *Guardian* reported. It cited an NHS report from 2017, warning that if there are no more ECMO beds available in the UK "within the designated and surge capacity," more beds would have to be secured from other countries, including Sweden.

There are only around 3,700 adult critical care beds in England, and these already run at a dangerous occupancy rate of over 80 percent, leaving just 670 such beds free. Overall, a massively dangerous occupancy level of 94 percent of beds was recorded throughout the NHS last week.

Part of the government's plan is for all NHS Accident and Emergency units to set up an isolation pod, where those suspecting of contracting the virus can "isolate" themselves. One of these, at Lincoln County Hospital, consists of a 3m x 5m tent next to the kitchen bins. No electricity, heating, or running water or toilet is provided—just a chair and a telephone with a note that people call the NHS 111 helpline if they suspect they have coronavirus.

Many elderly people rely on social care, but this is no longer provided by the NHS. Since 2014, local authorities have been forced to provide the care and charge enormous sums to do so. This must often be paid for by elderly people themselves and involves them handing over their life savings or selling their homes. Anyone with savings of over £23,250, or who owns their own home is not entitled to the cost of care from a local council.

The destruction of NHS provision and social care has already had a terrible human death toll. In 2017, a team of researchers at University College London concluded that the "squeeze on public finances since 2010 is linked to nearly 120,000 excess deaths in England with the over 60s and care home residents bearing the brunt."

Last year, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) think tank reported that a reversal of public health initiatives has led to 130,000 preventable deaths since 2012.

NHS frontline staffing has been slashed, with 200,000 departing since 2010, culminating in over 100,000 staff vacancies.

Forced to recognise the devastating impact of their own policies, the government's plan states that "if transmission of the virus becomes established in the population" then "Staff rostering changes may be necessary, including calling leavers and retirees back to duty."

Under conditions of a mass outbreak of the virus, the logic behind bringing back retired NHS workers—among the age group most at risk from contagion—to treat coronavirus cases defies comprehension.

Millions and even tens of millions of workers face being unable to work under conditions of a mass infection of the population. The government admits that "up to one-fifth of employees [over 6 million workers] may be absent from work during peak weeks," yet proposes virtually nothing in relief.

After days of prevaricating, yesterday Johnson allowed that workers who are forced to "self-isolate" at home will get statutory sick pay (SSP)—paid by employers for up to 28 weeks—from the first day off work, not the fourth as per usual. This would provide workers with only an additional £40. SSP is set at the rock bottom level of just £94.25 a week (£13.46 a day).

Millions will receive nothing in SSP as they do not earn the £118 a week to enable them to qualify. Asked Wednesday during Prime Minister's Questions how these two million workers, many in the gig economy working on zero hours contracts, would survive during a mass outbreak of the virus, Johnson replied, "Others will be entitled to help through existing systems such as Universal Credit."

Access to Universal Credit requires a five-week delay and compulsory attendance at job centres.

The government is also offering nothing extra to small businesses, who may be forced to go under due to subdued demand and workforce absences.

But when it comes to propping up the big business and the stock market, Britain committed Tuesday, as one of the G7 nations, to use whatever "fiscal measures" to "support the economy" are required and "to use all appropriate policy tools to achieve strong, sustainable growth and safeguard against downside risks."

The ruling class will do nothing that impinges on its own money mad, sociopathic self-interest and will do whatever it takes to defend itself from the working class.

Johnson's authoritarian government has already developed plans, under "Operation Yellowhammer" to roll out police state measures to confront mass social discontent post-Brexit. It intends to use the coronavirus crisis to test out this agenda.

Its plan states that the military could be enlisted to "provide support to civil authorities." Moreover, "the police and fire and rescue services, will enact business continuity plans to ensure they are able to maintain a level of service that fulfils their critical functions. For example, with a significant loss of officers and staff, the police would concentrate on responding to serious crimes and maintaining public order…"

Other moves being considered are "population distancing strategies" including "reducing the number of large-scale gatherings," and giving Border Force police extra powers.

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