UK: Johnson grants £350 billion COVID-19 handout to business and nothing for the working class

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Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Chancellor Rishi Sunak used yesterday's coronavirus press update to mount an unprecedented financial handout for UK corporations.

Sunak announced £330 billion in loans to be made available at "attractive" rates and said he would "go further if required," promising an "unlimited lending capacity." This is equivalent to 15 percent of the UK's annual GDP. A further £20 billion was pledged in the form of tax breaks, cash grants and compensation to firms that have to pay statutory sick pay.

Providing whatever funds are deemed necessary directly to businesses would, Sunak said, be enshrined in law through an upcoming coronavirus bill! "We have never, in peacetime, faced an economic fight like this one," he declared. "We must act like any wartime government and do whatever it takes to support our economy."

Unlimited support for business stands in grotesque contrast to the contempt and neglect of working people forced to bear the brunt of the crisis. Asked directly about "staff costs," Sunak made no commitment to guaranteeing workers' jobs and wages, or compelling companies to do so. Instead the trade unions are to be enlisted to police an "employment support" scheme, which will enforce the decisions as to who remains in a job and who is sacked as firms shed staff by the thousands.

On Monday, Johnson held a conference call with business leaders asking them to divert some production capacity to producing essential medical ventilators. One business leader told the press that he said the project could be known as "Operation Last Gasp."

Corporations are already lining up to demand taxpayers' cash to preserve their profits. Virgin Atlantic's parent company, IAG, demanded on Sunday that the UK government commit to a £7.5 billion bailout of the country's aviation industry. Sunak said yesterday that he was working on a specific package of support for airports and airlines. Virgin Atlantic, owned by multi-billionaire Sir Richard Branson, hailed this "unprecedented level of support" even as it demanded its workforce agree to take eight weeks "unpaid leave" while offering all its 10,000 employees "voluntary redundancy."

With the financial spigots opened to the CEOs and shareholders of major companies, their employees are left to fend for themselves in the face of a mounting public health crisis.

Sunak's pledges were made amid another leap in the UK's coronavirus statistics. The death toll has climbed to 71, while the number of confirmed cases has reached 1,950. Lack of testing means that the real number of infected is likely to be at least 35 times higher. Yesterday the UK's chief scientific adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance, was already stating that the real number of infected was in the region of 55,000.

His admission is a devastating indictment of a government which, until Monday, was simply telling those who had a cough or fever to stay at home and self-isolate for a week. Its sharp policy reversal that evening—involving new directives for household quarantining and social distancing—was forced by the leaking of an internal document from Public Health England predicting hundreds of thousands of deaths, and the findings of Imperial College London's COVID-19 Response Team.

The team's research paper estimates that the UK government's original coronavirus strategy of "mitigation" would cost over a quarter of a million lives (260,000). Plans to simply mitigate the spread of the virus through case and household isolation, and the shielding of over-70s, would see the peak of the epidemic exceed the supply of critical care beds eight times over.

The report concludes that "epidemic suppression is the only viable strategy at the current time," including "population-wide social distancing combined with home isolation of cases and school and university closure" as a "minimum policy." Since any return to normality without a

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vaccine or substantially immunised population would lead to a rapid, if delayed, increase in infections, these measures "will have to be in place until a vaccine is found, or herd immunity is very gradually arrived at."

Given the length of time involved, the report suggests monitoring hospital admissions for COVID-19 patients as a trigger for "switching on and off population-wide social distancing and school closure," while maintaining policies for household home isolation indefinitely. It estimates that social distancing measures would have to be enforced for two-thirds of the next two years. Neil Fergusson, the head of the Imperial College research team, said, "We might be living in a very different world for a year or more."

Depending on how strictly these measures are implemented, the report estimates the total number of coronavirus deaths over the next two years could be kept between 8,700 and 100,000 people. Its authors acknowledge that they do not account for indirect deaths caused by increased pressures on the health services or by the social restrictions themselves.

The importance of early action for the necessary policy of epidemic suppression was stressed: "For suppression, early action is important, and interventions need to be in place well before healthcare capacity is overwhelmed. … there is a 2-to 3-week lag between interventions being introduced and the impact being seen in hospitalised case numbers … this means acting before COVID-19 admissions to ICUs [intensive care units] exceed 200 per week."

Though the specific numbers are new, the World Health Organisation (WHO) and countless scientific and medical experts have been making exactly this point for weeks. The Johnson government wasted around two months of preparation time pursuing a policy of "herd immunity" which prioritised the profits of the corporations over human life based on a "desired" outcome that 60 percent of the UK population get infected. Even now, the government is refusing to fully implement the recommended policies.

Self and household isolation measures, home working and restriction on non-essential travel or on visits to pubs and theatres all remain purely advisory. Those who cannot work from home are still forced to travel into work with no preparations made for their protection. Anyone who needs to self-isolate for a prolonged period must rely on derisory statutory sick pay of £94.25 a week and those in the gig economy, more than 1 million workers, are forced to work regardless of their health or be left penniless.

Despite the Imperial College report's statement that "school and university closure is predicted to be more effective in achieving suppression" than restrictions like household quarantining, and the closure of schools across the rest of Europe, no such steps have been taken in the UK. In a monumentally cynical gesture, Health Secretary Gavin Williamson told schools that legally required Ofsted inspections will be halted to "remove unnecessary burdens" on school staff.

Government inaction is meeting increasingly vocal opposition in the working class. A petition launched on March 6 demanding the government "Close Schools/Colleges down for an appropriate amount of time amidst COVID19," had secured more than 670,000 signatures by yesterday evening. Students and staff are expected to stage a mass walkout on Friday, using the hashtag #Covid19walkout. One young person wrote on Twitter: "My Mum is a teacher in her 60s, coming home to my Dad in his 70s. As much as Boris finds them disposable, they're the only family I've got and they deserve a damn sight more than being written off to balance his books."

Aware of the political dangers posed by such mounting social anger, an article in the *Financial Times* by Europe Editor Tony Barber warned, "It is in the nature of cataclysmic events, such as the pandemic, to accelerate and refashion historical developments that would have happened anyway.

"The first world war intensified turmoil in Russia, leading to the revolutions of 1917, and drove forward the emergence of the US as the 20th century's leading global power.

"The second world war marked the definitive end of European supremacy in international affairs and the planet's transformation into an arena of US-Soviet rivalry.

"The pandemic and its economic fallout, unless brought under a measure of control, is sure to have similar large-scale consequences."

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