

UK: Johnson government uses coronavirus crisis to seize dictatorial powers

Robert Stevens
20 March 2020

The Johnson government will rush through the Emergency Coronavirus Bill by next Monday. It provides for police state measures that are a grave threat to the democratic rights of the working class.

The ruling elite in Britain has utilised the enormous danger to public health posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which they did nothing to combat for weeks, to implement a raft of measures they have long planned to impose.

The 321-page bill was only made public yesterday. But in just a few days, with no public discussion, it will hand ministers virtually unlimited powers for up to two years, under the pretext of fighting the coronavirus. Some clauses also give ministers the power to repeatedly alter the expiry date of any measure enacted under the bill, to last another six months at a time, “if it is prudent to do so.”

There is to be no parliamentary scrutiny of the Bill, as the opposition parties agreed that it can be passed without a vote on the basis that to have hundreds of MPs in the House of Commons chamber would be too dangerous in relation to the spreading of coronavirus!

Earlier this week, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn met Johnson for talks behind closed doors. For four and a half years, Corbyn propped up a Conservative government so crisis-ridden that two prime ministers, David Cameron and Theresa May, were forced to resign. He is responsible for Johnson coming to power as head of the most right-wing government since the war. Shortly to be replaced as party leader, Corbyn’s final act of treachery is allowing Johnson to secure authoritarian powers for himself.

The Bill was a long time in the making. Some of its main provisions were contained in The Health Protection (Coronavirus) Regulations 2020 bill passed on February 10. This enabled “further restrictions and requirements to be imposed on certain persons for the purpose of reducing or removing the risk of persons infecting or contaminating others,” “enables restrictions and requirements to be imposed in relation to groups of persons,” and “powers for [police] constables to detain persons” suspected of having coronavirus.

All this is contained in the Emergency Coronavirus Bill.

- The Bill enables the government to restrict or prohibit events and gatherings in England and Wales during the pandemic in any place, vehicle, train, vessel or aircraft, any movable structure and any offshore installation and, where necessary, to close premises. It provides a temporary power to close educational establishments or childcare providers, extended to cover Scotland and Northern Ireland, where there is no equivalent legislation.

- The Secretary of State is authorised “to give a direction to a person responsible for the management of an airport, seaport or an international rail terminal in the UK requiring them to suspend such operations “if Border Force staff shortages result in a real and significant threat to the UK’s border security.”

- Due process is effectively terminated with the bill stating, “The efficiency and timeliness of court and tribunal hearings will suffer during a COVID-19 outbreak. Restrictions on travel will make it difficult for parties to attend court and without action a significant number of hearings and trials are likely to be adjourned.” It allows courts and other authorities to detain for a longer period people considered a national security threat.

- Police forces are handed the powers to arrest and isolate anyone suspecting of being able to spread COVID-19.

- Deaths on a massive scale are envisaged, with a section of the Bill titled “Powers in relation to bodies” giving “local authorities the necessary powers to direct those in the death management system to ensure excess deaths caused by COVID-19 do not overwhelm the system.” This week, a huge temporary mortuary was erected next to Westminster

morgue in central London just a mile from Parliament.

- Under conditions in which around a third of people in hospitals are going to be turfed out of their beds to free them up for coronavirus victims, the bill relieves the National Health Service of the obligation to provide care and treatment plans for people leaving hospital. The bill allows paperwork and administrative requirements to be slashed in order that doctors can discharge patients more quickly.

- The assault on basic democratic norms was prefigured on March 13 when Johnson—with the backing of Labour—postponed local elections due to take place in May for 118 English councils, the London Assembly and seven English regional mayors, until May 2021. There can be no doubt this move was also decided on well in advance and sets a precedent. Clause 58 “provides a power for the Secretary of State or Minister for the Cabinet Office to postpone, by regulations, other relevant elections and referendums (not covered in clause 57) that cannot currently be anticipated.”

The prohibition of events and gatherings will cover all forms of public political protest. With hundreds of thousands already laid off and predictions of 5 million unemployed, food shortages and a collapse of health and social care, social and political unrest is to be policed by troops on the streets.

This week it was announced that 20,000 military personnel have been placed on standby—10,000 military personnel regularly assigned to operations among civilians, such as in floods, plus a further 10,000 troops. The mobilisation of the armed forces has also been in advanced preparation and was a central component of the Tories’ post-Brexit planning strategy known as “Operation Yellowhammer.” Yellowhammer predicted a “rise in public disorder and community tensions.”

Extraordinary measures have been enacted to ready the thousands of troops. Defence Minister Ben Wallace said Wednesday, “From me downwards the entirety of the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces are dedicated to getting the nation through this global pandemic.”

Troops have been freed up by the cancellation of training exercises overseas, including in Kenya and Canada. Other British soldiers on overseas operations have had leave cancelled. Around 200 British soldiers involved in training the Iraqi army have been recalled.

What has been dubbed the “COVID Support Force” will be under the control of the Standing Joint Command HQ of the British Army in Aldershot, Hampshire. Aldershot is a

“military town” known as the “home of the British Army,” with at least 11 regiments based in the area.

Despite Wallace’s attempts to conceal the purpose of the soldiers, they are “expected to play a role in enabling police to secure the streets in the event of a lockdown, which could be triggered in London,” stated the *Financial Times*. The newspaper’s George Parker wrote, “Supermarkets would be guarded by police, while pharmacies would be among the few other shops to remain open.”

The *Guardian* enthused, “While the government has been reluctant to highlight such a bleak prospect, the armed forces need to be prepared for the threat of a breakdown in civil order given that troops have been deployed in other countries to enforce lockdowns and prevent looting of shops.”

On the same day the Bill was published, the pro-Tory *Daily Telegraph* editorialised, “At this time of crisis, constant carping at official policy does not help. ... We crave strong, implacable leadership.”

Such language speaks to an acute political crisis in which the bourgeoisie are moving to defend their interests by dictatorial means. This imminent political danger can only be opposed by the political mobilisation of the working class based on the fight for a socialist programme and a workers’ government, in unity with workers who face the same attacks globally.

Workers in Britain have only to look across the channel to France where riot police and soldiers, who have spent the last year brutally cracking down on Yellow Vest protesters, are now—utilising the coronavirus pandemic—carrying out vicious assaults on workers and youth on a daily basis.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact