

UK government in crisis over back-to-work drive

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Boris Johnson's government is deeply split over how quickly it can shift from a policy of containing the COVID-19 pandemic, which has so far cost over 16,500 lives in Britain, to a full-scale return to work.

Big business and the banks, having fleeced the working class of at least £135 billion on a government bailout, is clamouring to restart the extraction of profit from the working class. Currently, a 35 percent drop in gross domestic product is anticipated if the lockdown lasts until June. Clawing this back from the working class is now British capitalism's primary objective.

The difficulty the Conservative government faces is the overwhelming opposition to such a move by the working class. *Politico* reported that a government source stated, "There is a Fleet Street desire for us to lay out exit strategies, but it is not where the public are. The public are seeing death numbers and thinking we've got to do everything we can to stop the spread of the virus."

Having openly declared a policy of "herd immunity" and then been belatedly forced to impose a lockdown due to widespread public anger, Johnson and his ministers are weakened and deeply discredited. This has been made worse by their inability to reverse the impact of their earlier policy—exemplified by the absence of testing, an inability to provide even medical staff with personal protective equipment (PPE) and leaving the old and infirm to die in care homes along with thousands more who never see a hospital before succumbing to the disease.

This has led to the grotesque spectacle of Johnson himself, his special adviser Dominic Cummings and Health Secretary Matt Hancock, all with blood on their hands, urging their fellow criminals, including Cabinet Office Minister Michael Gove, Chancellor Rishi Sunak and Cabinet Secretary Sir Mark Sedwill, to put the brakes on plans to end the lockdown within weeks.

Johnson is also concerned that too early a reduction in

restrictions would cause a second peak in COVID-19 cases, which, because of the exponential nature of the virus transmission, could "do the most damage to health and the most damage to the economy."

The dispute is framed for public consumption on the R-number—the reproduction rate of the virus—with Gove and Sunak wanting to contemplate lifting restrictions as soon as the R number falls below 1, meaning the number of total infections falling. Gove told the cabinet, "I've come to the view that we need to run this hot."

These divisions are being played out in the pro-Tory media. Last weekend's *Sunday Times* article, "38 DAYS when Britain sleepwalked into carnage" by the Insight team, exposed Johnson and his government's extraordinary complacency and incompetence.

On January 24, Hancock at the first emergency Cobra (Cabinet Office Briefing Room A) meeting described the threat from coronavirus to public health as "low." This was despite a *Lancet* editorial that day warning of a pandemic comparable to the 1918 Spanish flu. The meeting lasted only an hour. Boris Johnson was not even present, choosing instead to attend a Chinese New Year event.

Over the next five weeks, Johnson missed four further Cobra meetings. His spokesman claimed Britain was "well prepared for any new diseases." An unnamed senior adviser told Insight, "Boris didn't chair any meetings. He liked his country breaks. He didn't work weekends."

Rather than being "well prepared," Britain was badly equipped for a pandemic. Stockpiles of personal protective equipment (PPE) had dwindled and expired. Key worker training had been neglected. Repeated warnings of mass casualties were ignored. The *Sunday Times's* source reported members of the pandemic advisory group would joke "'Haha let's hope we don't get a pandemic,' because there wasn't a single area of practice that was being nurtured for us to meet basic

requirements for [a] pandemic, never mind do it well.”

Even when the scale of the looming disaster began to dawn on the government, almost nothing was done. The source continued “Almost every plan we had was not activated in February.” No testing was done in February, no PPE were ordered, indeed some existing stocks were exported.

A health department “insider” concluded, “We were doomed by our incompetence, our hubris and our austerity.”

The result of this policy is now being played out. This weekend saw reports of hospitals on the brink of exhausting their supplies of PPE and of oxygen. Last Friday, Public Health England changed its advice to medical staff, suggesting that full-length gowns offering a high level of safety from infection could be replaced with “disposable plastic aprons.” Alternatively, hospitals should ration supplies of “fluid-repellent gowns” to the most “aerosol-generating procedures and surgery.” Some 84 tonnes of gowns were reported to be either en route, held up, or due to arrive from Turkey.

Currently, the government admits to around 50 deaths of National Health Service (NHS) staff. *Nursing Notes* has logged double that figure when careworkers are included.

The Tory-supporting *Daily Telegraph* highlighted the government and health authorities’ failure to respond to Exercise Cygnus in 2016, which warned of catastrophic NHS failings in the event of a respiratory flu-type pandemic and 750,000 deaths.

With the government in deep crisis, new Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer has stepped forwards as a potential saviour. Backed by the public service trade unions, Starmer has already repaid the confidence placed in him by big business as a reliable replacement for Jeremy Corbyn. Writing to then-acting Prime Minister Dominic Raab last week, Starmer confirmed “the Labour Party’s intention to work constructively with the government on managing this crisis and helping to protect people’s lives and livelihoods.”

Starmer outlined his central concern. “Overcoming this crisis requires taking the British public with you. Millions of people have...exceeded government assumptions about their willingness to make sacrifices and stay at home.”

Starmer stopped short of openly proposing a government of national unity but has operated as if this was already in place ever since. Starmer has requested the government set out its criteria for ending the lockdown as soon as possible, including outlining which sectors of the

economy will be started first. He made a vague reference to the need for increased testing but made no mention of any figure beyond the government’s own hopelessly inadequate figure of 25,000 daily by mid-April.

Since then, Starmer has formed a political alliance with leading hard-right Tories such as former Brexit Secretary David Davis and former party leader Ian Duncan Smith in championing a “back-to-work” strategy. Working together in intimate discussions with leading business figures, Duncan Smith told the *Times* we need to “accept and admit we are coming out of lockdown.” The British people, he continued, “need to know that the sun is rising at some point, in an economic sense.”

Starmer was backed yesterday by former Labour Prime Minister and unindicted war criminal Tony Blair, whose Institute for Global Change proposed various “trial and error” models between re-opening as much of the economy as possible and a death rate deemed politically manageable.

The document, “A sustainable exit strategy: managing uncertainty minimising harm,” outlined a “contingent exit plan” that varied between a “hard lockdown” if daily deaths were over 500, a “soft lockdown” if deaths were between 100 and 500, and a “soft open” if deaths were less than 100. Blair wants top business figures from across industry to be bought directly into government to bring their “collective firepower” to bear on determining government policy.

It is a measure of the desperation within ruling circles and their disconnect from popular sentiment that they would entertain the belief that Starmer, Blair and business leaders acting as coronavirus “Tsars” could secure popular support for a policy that will cost so many lives—not just in the inevitable “second wave” spoken of by Johnson, but successive waves of the pandemic. Rather, the conditions are rapidly emerging for an explosion of the class struggle against any government formation that tries to impose the dictates of the corporations and banks.



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