Johnson returns to Downing Street to map out end of COVID-19 lockdown

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Yesterday, Boris Johnson returned to Downing Street three weeks after being rushed into hospital suffering with COVID-19 and nearly dying in an intensive care unit.

The big business media spread the word as to what was wanted from Johnson's return. The *Daily Telegraph* headlined, "Johnson to ease the lockdown this week," as its editorial insisted, "the PM must lead us out of this impasse."

The *Daily Mail* headlined, "Boris bounces back to get Britain moving."

The *Times* led with a piece: "Ministers plan how to get Britain back to business." An op-ed by Max Hastings was crudest in setting down the message from business circles. "We need to toughen up for the pain ahead," wrote the aging reactionary. "We are slowly recognising realities about COVID-19. There will be no tidy, early ending: it will ebb and flow, with resurgences and possible heavier death counts, for months and perhaps years.

"Yet the chances that it will kill a healthy, youngish person are less than those of their being eaten by a great white shark… It is boring to bang on about the war [!], but hard not to do so, because it was the last period at which our leaders faced similar huge life-and-death decisions. Every course involved risk. Duty required ministers and commanders to choose the least bad from a range of unwelcome options, accepting the need to pay a price in lost lives in the greater interest of the nation."

Johnson began his day with a speech outside Downing Street to reassure the capitalist class that his government would move towards ending the lockdown in the weeks ahead. But he spoke to them directly to warn that the conditions for doing so openly did not yet exist.

Just two days after the UK reached the grim milestone of 20,000 deaths and headed toward becoming the second worst impacted country in the world, thanks to Johnson's belatedly modified "herd immunity" policy, he appealed for more time to change the political narrative and establish "facts on the ground" by allowing businesses to begin opening—without officially ending the lockdown.

"We are now beginning to turn the tide" and "making progress," he claimed, under conditions in which the *Financial Times* has calculated that the real number of "excess deaths" caused by COVID-19 was over 41,000 by April 21, and another estimate puts the real number at over 61,000.

He said there were "fewer hospital admissions, fewer COVID patients in ICU, and real signs now that we are passing through the peak… [W]e defied so many predictions, we did not run out of ventilators or ICU beds, we did not allow our NHS to collapse."

As Johnson spoke, *Nursing Notes* announced that "at least 134 health and social care workers are now believed to have died of COVID-19"—an increase of six on the previous day.

This yawning chasm between rhetoric and reality prompted Johnson to directly address "British business," rather than continue to feign concern for working people.

"To the shopkeepers, to the entrepreneurs, to the hospitality sector, to everyone on whom our economy depends, I understand your impatience. I share your anxiety. And I know that without our private sector, without the drive and commitment of the wealth creators of this country, there will be no economy to speak of. There will be no cash to pay for our public services, no way of funding our NHS."

Johnson shared the "urgency" to resume economic

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activity and making profit: “And yet we must also recognise the risk of a second spike, the risk of losing control of that virus and letting the reproduction rate go back over one. Because that would mean not only a new wave of death and disease, but also an economic disaster, and we would be forced once again to slam on the brakes across the whole country, and the whole economy, and reimpose restrictions in such a way as to do more and lasting damage.”

Johnson knows that the propaganda sheets of the ruling class have been ramping up the drumbeat for a mass return to work for weeks, in the full knowledge that this can end only in a second wave of the pandemic that will likely claim more lives than the first. But he was warning them of the political, rather than the economic, consequences, given the entrenched opposition to such a move in the working class.

Polls published by Sky News last week found that over half the population would not support key parts of society and the economy being reopened in the next few weeks. Some 51 percent wanted primary schools to stay shut, 53 percent wanted secondary schools to stay shut, 67 percent wanted to keep people working from home and 72 percent wanted to keep older people indoors.

But despite cautioning big business to “contain your impatience,” the government is allowing numerous companies to proceed with a phased return to work, led by building corporations and manufacturers, alongside high street names. This would continue, as the UK begins “gradually to refine the economic and social restrictions and one by one to fire up the engines of this vast UK economy.”

Over the weekend, it emerged that McDonalds was making plans to gradually reopen its 1,000-plus high street restaurants, while bakery chain Greggs announced Monday it will open 20 of its stores next week—with a further 700 of its over 2,000 branches to follow.

Speaking to the *Sunday Times*, Steve Morgan, the former CEO of housebuilder Redrow, who donated £1 million to Johnson’s general election campaign, said, “We’re actually in danger that the medicine—if you want to call the lockdown that—is more harmful than the cure.”

Implementing the desired agenda of a full return to work depends above all on the collusion of the Labour Party and the trade unions. The last part of Johnson’s speech was a paean to “national unity,” which will involve “reaching out to build the biggest possible consensus across business, across industry, across all parts of our United Kingdom, across party lines, bringing in opposition parties as far as we possibly can.”

The Labour Party has emerged as the most open and consistent advocate of a return to work, given the crisis facing the Tory government. In preparation for Johnson’s return, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer wrote him a letter Saturday stating that he would continue “to engage constructively with the government.”

Starmer’s major concern was that the Tories had not provided an “exit strategy” and the “UK government has fallen behind Wales and Scotland, which have both published details on this important matter.”

He concluded, “This [global pandemic] is a national crisis and therefore needs a national response. Will you therefore commit to publishing an exit strategy as soon as possible?”

Starmer called on Johnson to commit to “holding talks with teachers, trade unions, businesses, local authorities [which Labour controls in all the urban centres] and community leaders about how such a strategy can be implemented.”

Before the day was out, the *Guardian* reported, “Ministers have held a series of high-level meetings with trades unions and business leaders amid fears that millions of people will be too fearful to return to work as pressure intensifies on the government to publish a path out of the national lockdown.”

The unions will serve as the industrial police force to oversee a return to work across industry, with the newspaper reporting that union leaders were involved in “seven sector-by-sector meetings chaired by the business secretary, Alok Sharma, in recent days—after concerns arose in Whitehall that many employees may be reluctant to return to the workplace, even when the government gives the green light.”

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