

UK: Johnson's “phased” return to work puts millions of workers at immediate risk

Chris Marsden
11 May 2020

Prime Minister Boris Johnson wants the entire British economy to be reopened by July and for millions to return to work from today.

Whereas Johnson declared last night in a nationally televised address, “This is not the time to end the lockdown,” he went a long way towards proposing just that. It is a plan that can only mean a massive spike in cases of COVID-19 and tens of thousands of deaths.

Promising to adhere to the government’s “five tests”—including protecting the National Health Service, sustained falls in the death rate and the rate of infection—Johnson set out a five-stage system that would supposedly allow a “safe return” to work based on making sure the reproduction rate of the disease did not rise above one, monitored by a new Joint Biosecurity Centre.

He then declared that the UK had left level five and was “now in a position to begin to move in steps to Level Three.”

Johnson outlined the “first step” in his government’s back-to-work plan, “We now need to stress that anyone who can’t work from home, for instance those in construction or manufacturing, should be actively encouraged to go to work.”

Step Two, “at the earliest by June 1,” will mean “the phased reopening of shops and to get primary pupils back into schools, in stages.”

Step Three, “at the earliest by July,” will see the reopening of the “hospitality industry and other public places.”

Conservative Party leader Johnson had the gall to declare, “we will be driven not by mere hope or economic necessity,” but by “the science, the data and public health.” But in outlining his criminal policy, he is ignoring the data, traducing science and proving that he is

wholly indifferent to public health.

Official statistics over the weekend confirmed that the UK is the epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe, second only to the US internationally and beating the US on the death rate for the disease. Ending the lockdown will lead to an accelerated outbreak and many more deaths.

The *Sunday Times* revealed warnings sent to the government’s SAGE advisory committee early last week by researchers from the London School of Tropical Hygiene, Imperial College London and other centres that any relaxing of the lockdown would lead to 100,000-plus deaths.

The scientific advisers told the government that the real rate of new COVID-19 infections was already 18,000 a day when the government’s target rate is 4,000 a day. Different lockdown exit policies were modelled, a scientific adviser told the Times: “The source said more than one model had put the death toll in six figures in some scenarios.”

Johnson nevertheless tried to portray his six-week plan as “cautious,” and which would be rowed back on if there was any sharp increase in coronavirus cases. He was forced to do so because of the massive opposition in the working class to ending the lockdown.

An opinion poll in the *Sun on Sunday* found 90 percent did not want Johnson to begin easing the lockdown, with only 4 percent in favour of starting a phased return to work. “The overwhelming majority are more afraid of a second wave of COVID-19 infections than an economic crash that could cost them their jobs,” the newspaper noted, even though 80 percent “are worried that the lockdown will wreck the economy if it drags on for much longer, with dire consequences for their own livelihoods.” More than a third hope Johnson will maintain the lockdown until the virus is eradicated and only one in 50 believe restrictions have been in place for too long.

The Tories and the media were incensed that their campaign to prepare a return to work had failed. The *Sun on Sunday* editorialised that Johnson “must not underplay the uncomfortable truth: It is time people grit their teeth and get the economy going again.” Ex-Tory leader Iain Duncan Smith complained bitterly that, thanks to the jobs furlough scheme, workers have “been feather-bedded by the Chancellor and it seems to have generated a feeling that it can go on for ever and it’s risk-free.”

Johnson was tasked with giving big business as much of what it wanted as possible without provoking a social and political explosion.

The *Sunday Times* reported that the plan he announced last night was in fact “less aggressive” than “many” Tories had been calling for, with a cabinet member stating, “Ministers say there is a ‘very, very strong JFDI (just f***** do it) attitude’” to getting key sectors of the economy up and running. But the differences between his plan and that favoured by big business are measured only in days and weeks. The result will be the same.

Beginning today, with just 12 hours-notice, millions have been instructed to return to work! Many of those who do so will be expected to walk the streets and ride on public transport the government admits can only take 10 percent of its normal passenger-load safely. They will go into workplaces without any personal protective equipment (PPE) or any possibility of maintaining social distancing.

Weeks later, many children will return to schools that will be massive incubators of the disease. Meanwhile, people will be told that they can exercise freely, stay out all day if they like, visit parks, go to garden centres, etc., so that the media can then point to their behaviour and say, “See? The lazy won’t work, but they will play!”

Finally, those in work will face the demand for wage cuts and speed-ups to rescue “the economy,” by which is meant corporate profits. Millions more will find that “getting the economy going” does not include a job for them.

Amid the worsening crisis facing the working class, every effort of the Labour Party and the trade unions is dedicated to smothering opposition and pushing through the back-to-work agenda.

The trade unions are still trying to persuade the government to accept their advice on limited compulsory safety measures at work, a “flexible” wage guarantee and further subventions to corporations in order to shift public sentiment behind ending the lockdown.

The leaders of Unison, Unite, the GMB and Usdaw

spearheaded a Trades Union Congress letter published in the *Observer* telling Johnson they cannot recommend a return to work for their 3 million members without implementing compulsory risk assessments in workplaces and sanctions on “rogue employers.” The “big four” nevertheless stress, “The trade union movement wants to be able to recommend the government’s back-to-work plans.”

“A plan to guide the UK economy safely out of lockdown,” drafted by Shadow Chancellor Anneliese Dodds and published in the *Financial Times* pledges that Labour “stands ready to work constructively with the government.” But, “This will require engaging with the broadest set of actors from across the economy. I call on the chancellor to work with me, with business, trade unions, local authorities and others to get our national economic recovery right.”

The drive to return to work under unsafe conditions must be rejected. The demand must go out for a guaranteed income for all furloughed workers and job retention, to oppose schools and non-essential workplaces being reopened.

Workers now being forced to return to their jobs must demand full PPE, social-distancing and other safety measures. But this means breaking with the trade unions and forming rank-and-file committees to wage an independent struggle—not only against the pandemic but all attempts to impose the crisis of the profit system on the backs of the working class.

It means breaking with Labour and building a genuinely socialist leadership. The Socialist Equality Party urges the workers and young people to begin the necessary struggle for a workers’ government and a planned socialist economy based on production for social need, not corporate profit.

A massive programme of investment in health and social care must begin now, alongside a proper system of testing and contact tracing and extensive research into a vaccine for COVID-19. To pay for this the major banks and corporations must be taken into social ownership and the obscene wealth of the super-rich taxed.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact