UK Labour Party and trade unions prop up dysfunctional Tory government

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The UK government is in a state of deepening crisis as it attempts to enforce a back-to-work agenda on behalf of big business.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's speech Sunday evening, supposedly laying out a "roadmap" for the UK to exit the lockdown imposed to curb the spread of COVID-19, produced anger and confusion across the country.

Millions of people in jobs where working from home is not possible were given 12 hours' notice of their being "actively encouraged" to return to work the next day. And they were told to do so without crowding public transport or the road network by driving, cycling or walking to work where possible. No mention at all was made of face masks.

The government's ditching of its stay-at-home advice was so abrupt and out of step with the continued spread and rising death toll from the coronavirus that it found itself fending off criticisms from the Scottish government, Welsh and Northern Irish assemblies and several employers' associations.

Events became surreal yesterday morning when, in a Radio 4 interview, First Secretary of State and Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab "clarified" that when Johnson said in his speech that those who cannot work from home should return to work "tomorrow" (Monday), he of course meant Wednesday. This was said as workers were crowding onto tubes, trains, and buses to begin their commute.

The incoherence of the government's messaging is not the result of a lack of policy, but the fact that it cannot honestly admit to an unalloyed return to its previous policy of "herd immunity"—letting the virus rampage unchecked in the population. The ruling class want to follow President Donald Trump's example in returning to profit-making as fast as possible but face such overwhelming popular opposition that they must dress up their agenda as a public health campaign.

But there is no putting lipstick on this pig of a policy. Comments on social media declared that the new advice "Stay Alert, Control the Virus, Save Lives" ought to read "Back to Work, Herd Immunity, Save Capitalism," or "Back to Work, Catch the Virus, Save the Billionaires."

Under these conditions, the government could not remain in power for a week if not for the slavish support lent to it by the Labour Party and the trade unions.

Given an opportunity by the BBC to reply to Johnson's Sunday speech in a national broadcast yesterday evening, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer pushed himself only as far as criticising the government's lack of "clarity and reassurance."

However, he began by reminding people that he had "promised a new type of opposition," which would "always put the national interests first" and had "the courage to support the government when that's the right thing to do."

Faced with a government which intends to restart the production of wealth for a tiny elite by endangering the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, Starmer said, "Today I repeat that message … Whether we voted for this government or not, at this moment of national crisis, we all rely on the government to get this right. That's why we've called for a national consensus."

To make sure people understood that no opposition whatsoever will come from the Labour Party, he reiterated at the end of his statement that he and his shadow cabinet "remain committed to working constructively with the government in the national interest."

Few will react with anything other than disgust. The official coronavirus death toll stands above 30,000 and is in reality well over 50,000. Yet Starmer and his party respond by imploring workers to follow their example and sit at the feet of the Tory party.

By far the most significant role in demobilising the

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working class is being played by the trade unions. Labour is in terminal decline, following the shipwreck of Jeremy Corbyn's fraudulent claim to be carrying out a socialist transformation of the party, with ever smaller numbers clinging to the vestigial remains of the "Labour left." It therefore falls to the Trades Union Congress (TUC) to police the class struggles which the return to work threatens to unleash.

Their efforts began from the moment the lockdown was implemented, when the TUC entered discussions with a Johnson government set on a homicidal policy of herd immunity. Mimicking Corbyn's infamous Brexit discussions with Theresa May's government, the TUC's negotiations with the Tories and business representatives were designed to prevent any independent political intervention of the working class in a developing crisis of rule.

While the unions sought a corporatist governmental role monitoring the implementation of minimal safety measures in the workplace, the Tories had their approval to hand hundreds of billions of pounds to the corporations and then to implement their actual plan of a truly Thatcherite, "free market," laissez-faire end to the lockdown.

Johnson's televised address to the nation necessitated a few pro-forma criticisms but produced no change in the unions' collaborationist policy.

TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady summed up the bureaucracy's position by saying, "Unions want to support a safe return to work so we can start rebuilding Britain. Government must provide clear direction to workers and business by introducing tough new rules on workplace safety. That's the only way to build public confidence in their plans and get the economy moving."

Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey stated, "We are very concerned that at the very point we need to build clarity and confidence, doing everything possible to avert a second spike, that this next phase is unfolding in a jumbled, confusing manner."

National Education Union joint General Secretary Dr Mary Bousted said, "We urge the government to follow the example of the Welsh and Scottish governments who have made the decision not to re-open schools at this time. Now is the time for government to listen and do the right thing."

These statements are political chloroform. The government is not failing to provide direction on how to protect workers; it has no intention of doing so! Workers are not confronted with the question of how best to refine this viciously reactionary government's plans, but of how to remove it from power and implement a rational public health plan and allocation of society's resources.

The unions deliberately leave everything in the government and the employers' court. As far as their members' safety is concerned, they wash their hands of any responsibility by telling individual workers and workplaces to make a judgement about whether they are safe and trust the union to have their back if they exercise their legal right to refuse to work. This is as good as an order not to strike. Workers know from long and painful experience that having the union behind you just makes it harder to see the knife.

Communication Workers Union (CWU) members in Royal Mail, Unite members driving London buses and Royal College of Nursing (RCN) members on COVID-19 wards in hospitals up and down the country can testify to the sincerity of the unions' concerns for workers' wellbeing. These rotten organisations have not protected key workers during the lockdown and they will not protect the wider workforce now the government is set on ending it.

No defence of the working class is possible without the building of a new socialist leadership to take on the Tory government and the employers.

Workers at every factory, depot, warehouse, school, office, shop and hospital must form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to guarantee safety and oppose all efforts to impose speed-ups, wage cuts and job losses in the name of "national sacrifice." The Socialist Equality Party urges all workers and young people to take up the fight for a workers' government to implement planned production for social need by seizing the assets of the major banks and corporations and confiscating the ill-gotten gains of the super-rich.

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