UK: Johnson's criminal "back-to-work" drive depends on the trade unions

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Millions of British workers are being driven back to work in dangerously unsafe conditions. Behind Prime Minister Boris Johnson's hokum of "caution", a "phased return" and meeting "five criteria" is the reality of a reckless and premature reopening of the economy that will cost thousands of lives.

With the government furlough scheme only covering 7 million workers, many have now been told to return to their workplaces. Many more will follow within weeks. Those returning will join half the UK workforce that has worked throughout the seven-week lockdown. A survey by the consultancy Healthy Return of 100 employers with 52,000 workers found that 30 to 80 percent of employees will be called back to the workplace in the coming weeks. Sixty percent of employers intend to bring in more than half their workforce and nearly a third more than 70 percent.

The Conservative government knows it is placing millions at risk and could not care less. It is seeking to reopen primary schools on June 1, despite massive opposition among parents and teachers and reports of outbreaks of COVID-19 in 70 French schools immediately on their reopening. All that matters for the government is that schools can be used as a holding pen for children so their parents can return to work.

So dangerous is travelling on public transport that the government has been forced to issue advice that it should be avoided "wherever possible." But the situation in workplaces is just as dangerous. Nothing of significance has been put in place regarding personal protective equipment, sanitary measures and social distancing and nothing will be done to change this.

Last Monday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson told parliament, "The Health and Safety Executive [HSE] will be enforcing" companies' compliance with safety guidelines, "and we will have spot inspections to make sure that businesses are keeping their employees safe."

He was lying.[i] On Sunday, the newspaper the HSE has not carried out any inspections of workplaces since March and has not set a date for when they will resume. A spokesperson explained, "In line with government guidance to cease all but essential work that cannot be done outside of the home, minimising contact between individuals, HSE has paused all proactive inspections at this time to reduce any risk posed to our own staff and to members of the public."

HSE says it is encouraging companies to "self-police", a blank check for corporations to do nothing.

The HSE has been gutted by the Conservatives, with the number of inspectors cut by a third since 2010, so that inspections have fallen year on year as part of the Tory "bonfire of the regulations." The net result of all such Tory cuts has been the needless death of tens of thousands, including frontline workers during the pandemic, and with a particularly grisly toll being taken on the elderly and the infirm.

Yesterday, the Office for National Statistics reported that "excess deaths" based on the time of year—considered by many to be the best indication of the actual impact of the pandemic—reached almost 55,000 in early May. The *Financial Times* estimates it closer to 62,000.

This will be dwarfed by a second wave of the pandemic. An editorial in this week's *British Medical Journal* warned that without an effective strategy for case finding, testing, contact tracing, and isolation, the relaxation of social distancing would "trigger further epidemic spikes with prospects of a vaccine or treatment still distant."

There is growing opposition to the Johnson government that presently finds no organised expression. It would be unable to implement its back-to-work plans were it not for the role played by the trade unions, as partners to the employers and the government in their criminal conspiracy against the working class.

Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer never tires of

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issuing appeals to the Tories for "consensus" on exiting the lockdown. This has left his party so politically exposed that a slew of Labour councils have been forced to break ranks and declare their refusal to cooperate with Tory plans to reopen schools by June 1. Read the small print and many are simply calling for a slight delay.

However, it is the trade unions that are playing the key role in suppressing opposition in the working class, making occasional noises of protest but never once organising industrial action or other forms of resistance. The overarching aim of the union bureaucracy is to convince the employers that they can organise the return to work in return for Johnson including them as partners in a new form of corporatist government.

The trade unions will not only impose unsafe working conditions, they will police massive job losses and brutal speed-ups, as the full scale of the economic crisis of British and world capitalism becomes clear.

Yesterday saw reports that joblessness claims rose by nearly 70 percent in April. An additional 856,000 people received Universal Credit and jobseeker's allowance, lifting the claimant count to nearly 2.1 million—the largest monthly rise since comparable records began in 1971, and since February 1947 based on different administrative data.

Unemployment will continue to climb. Confirming the imminence of the worst global depression since the 1930s, dwarfing 2008, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions has reported that 28 percent of Europeans have lost their jobs permanently or temporarily since the crisis. Almost 50 percent say their working hours have decreased and 15 percent believe they are likely to lose their jobs within the next three months.

In the face of this disaster, the entire trade union bureaucracy is straining every sinew to align themselves with the employers. Writing for *LabourList*, the Unite union's Assistant General Secretary Steve Turner declared, "Trade unions have also been at the virtual table in daily discussions with ministers and employers," before adding, "But we are not putting our feet up."

Turner appealed directly to Chancellor Rishi Sunak: "No time should be wasted in getting back round the table—unions, ministers and employers," stressing that the UK has "become a country that now sees what can be done when government opens up to unions and steps up to its role as an interventionist, strategic partner in the economy… We have the ideas. We know what can be done."

In opposition to the corporations and banks, the Tories, Labour, and the corrupt pro-business unions, the Socialist Equality Party urges workers to organise themselves independently in defence of their health, the safety of their loved ones and their jobs and livelihoods.

Individual resistance must give way to a collective programme of class struggle. This means organising rank-and-file committees in every neighbourhood and workplace to ensure safe working conditions and the safety of the entire population.

The reopening of schools and non-essential workplaces must be opposed until they are made safe. Continued and full income must be provided to all affected workers until the pandemic is contained.

Essential workers in health care, food production, transport and distribution must be guaranteed protective gear, universal testing and a safe working environment overseen by their own safety committees, working in conjunction with public health care experts. All those being driven back to work deserve nothing less.

Job losses and speed-ups demanded in the name of "national sacrifice" must be opposed. Instead, a massive programme of investment in health and social care and in the economy must begin now, paid for by taking the major banks and corporations into social ownership and heavily taxing the obscene wealth of the super-rich.

Workers in the UK must set out to unify their struggles with their brothers and sisters all over the world, based on an international and socialist perspective for planned production for the needs of the vast majority, not corporate profit and the enrichment of the financial oligarchy.

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