

British Trotskyists issue call for working class action against pandemic

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party (UK)
27 May 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to take a terrible toll in Britain. Deaths from the virus and “excess deaths” in care homes and the wider community had produced a death toll of almost 60,000 by May 15, according to the Office for National Statistics. The *Financial Times* estimate is more than 63,000. Both of these figures are tens of thousands higher than the governments’ own figures of around 37,000. Thousands of new cases and hundreds of deaths are being registered every day.

Worldwide, the coronavirus has killed more than 350,000 people and is heading inexorably towards an infection rate of six million. Amid moves to end lockdown measures in every country, May 21 saw a 24-hour record of 107,000 new infections worldwide.

In Europe, tests have revealed nearly 2 million people have been infected while the number of deaths will soon reach 200,000. The World Health Organisation is already warning of an “immediate second peak” as governments end social-distancing and reopen the economy. The Americas, particularly the US, Brazil, and Mexico, have emerged as the new epicentre of the pandemic. Russia has the world’s second-fastest growing case count after the United States.

The coronavirus knows no national boundaries. The increase in infections in other parts of the world will inevitably affect Britain and Europe. Dr Andrea Ammon, director of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, said of a second wave of the pandemic and the ending of lockdown, “[T]he virus is around us, circulating much more than January and February... I don’t want to draw a doomsday picture, but I think we have to be realistic.”

Such warnings expose as lies the claim by the Johnson government that the worst of the pandemic is over. The danger of a rapid acceleration in the rate of infection is being increased by the premature and reckless “back to work” campaign.

On May 10, Johnson ended the “stay at home” policy and announced “phase one” of a return to work. Just two weeks later, he announced “phase two” would begin on June 1, with the resumption of outdoor markets and car showrooms, with all non-essential retail outlets and department stores reopening on June 15.

Millions are being driven back to their workplaces in dangerously unsafe conditions, joining a third of the UK workforce, including non-essential industries such as online retail warehouses and call centres, that have worked throughout the lockdown.

The Conservative government knows it is placing millions of lives at risk and could not care less. The Tories are set on reopening primary schools and even nurseries from June 1. Selective reopening of secondary schools will begin two weeks later. The Johnson government is flouting scientific advice, defying overwhelming opposition among parents and teachers, endangering teachers and pupils and creating vast new breeding grounds for the virus for the sole purpose of freeing parents to return to work.

During the lockdown, around 10 million workers were forced to use overcrowded public transport networks. Now, millions more will have to

do the same, with no provisions to ensure the safety of transport workers or commuters.

The government is pushing millions back into workplaces which it knows are unsafe and has refused to make safety protocols mandatory and enforceable. The Health and Safety Executive stopped doing workplace inspections in March and is instead encouraging companies to “self-police.”

The relentless propaganda from the government and the media is, moreover, creating an environment in which sections of the population are starting to ignore social distancing, with disastrous consequences in the weeks and months ahead. The government is discussing plans to resume “garden parties, picnics and barbecues” by the end of June.

Underlying this campaign is the return to the criminal policy of “herd immunity,” first publicly declared by the UK but now followed by governments throughout the world. This means, in practice, the abandonment of all efforts to stop the spread of the virus. By allowing the disease to spread without constraint, the ruling class is ensuring that tens or hundreds of thousands more people will die.

The demand for a “return to work” is driven by the need to restore the flow of corporate profits. Without a careful plan to implement a safe return to work, based on science and rigorously enforced, there will be an enormous increase in the rate of infection, resulting in serious illness and death.

The COVID-19 virus will spread rapidly through factories, warehouses, office buildings, shopping malls and all places where large numbers congregate. There is an immense danger that workers, unknowingly infected on the job and not showing symptoms, will transmit the disease to their families, loved ones and friends.

Those in essential services and others forced to work during the pandemic point to the price that will be paid. COVID-19 has claimed the lives of well over 300 National Health Service (NHS) and care-workers, 43 Transport for London workers including 33 bus drivers, along with postal workers and those employed in warehouse and meat processing. Gig economy workers, with zero protections, are among the worst hit—more than 76 taxi and Uber drivers have been killed by the virus.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) opposes the reckless back-to-work campaign and the reopening of schools and non-essential workplaces as the pandemic continues to spread. If infection, sickness and death are to be prevented, it is necessary to create a new form of workplace organisation that oversees and enforces safe working conditions.

Therefore, the SEP advises workers to form rank-and-file safety committees in every factory, office, and workplace. These committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, should formulate, implement, and oversee measures that are necessary to safeguard the health and lives of workers, their families, and the broader community.

There can be no “business as usual”! The pandemic exposes the urgent necessity for a complete restructuring of the processes of production, distribution and economic activity in general. The lives of working people

and their families must not be sacrificed in the interests of corporate profits and the private wealth of billionaire oligarchs.

In response to the chorus of demands from the Johnson government and the media for the “reopening of the economy,” the question should be asked: “Whose economy?” The economy of Jeff Bezos, James Dyson, Richard Branson and the richest 1 to 5 percent of the population? Or the economy of the working class, which produces all the wealth of society but lives from pay-day to pay-day—if they even have a job?

The response of the Johnson government to the pandemic

The dangerous situation confronting workers, the product of the class policy of herd immunity, is deliberately allowing the virus to run unchecked throughout the population, with no vaccine available and no proof that societal immunity will ever be achieved. Epidemiologists have warned for decades that a pandemic was not only possible, but inevitable. These warnings were ignored. Rather than investing in viral and bacterial research and building hospitals, the City of London demanded the dismantling and privatisation of large sections of the National Health Service (NHS).

Tens of billions of pounds have been slashed from the NHS. Over 200,000 frontline staff have left the NHS since 2010 leading to 100,000 vacancies. Over 15,000 beds have been eliminated, cutting capacity by over 5 million patients a year. There were only 3,700 adult critical care beds in England when the pandemic hit—one of the lowest per capita ratios in Europe. Last year, the Institute for Public Policy Research estimated that cuts to public health initiatives had led to 130,000 preventable deaths since 2012.

As the pandemic began its global spread in January and February, the focus of the Johnson government was not on protecting lives but protecting profits.

The UK had conducted major crisis modelling exercises into the impact of an influenza pandemic. In 2016, “Exercise Cygnus” found there was not enough personal protective equipment (PPE) for doctors and nurses and the NHS could “fall over” due to a shortage of ventilators and critical care beds. But with 100,000 cases recorded globally and the World Health Organization (WHO) warning of a potential pandemic, Johnson did nothing.

On March 3, Johnson outlined his “contain, delay and mitigate” plan, centred on a call to wash your hands regularly. Two days later, as the UK’s first death from coronavirus was announced, he told ITV’s *This Morning*, “One of the theories is, that perhaps you could take it on the chin, take it all in one go and allow the disease, as it were, to move through the population, without taking as many draconian measures.”

On March 12, the policy of herd immunity was officially declared by Johnson and his chief scientific advisers. “I must level with the British public: many more families are going to lose loved ones before their time,” Johnson declared. The government’s “reasonable worst-case scenario” of an 80 percent infection rate with just a 1 percent death rate meant 500,000 people would die.

Dominic Cummings, Johnson’s hated chief political adviser, blurted out the murderous content of the government’s policy during a private meeting with senior civil servants in late February, with his remarks summarised by one eyewitness as: “herd immunity, protect the economy, and if that means some pensioners die, too bad.”

Among the many crimes of the Tories was the directive from NHS England to clear thousands of people out of hospital beds and into care homes. As a result, at least 20,000 elderly people have died.

Only on March 20, faced with a massive public backlash and threats of

industrial action, did Johnson close schools. The government was finally forced to announce a lockdown on March 23.

The Johnson government is responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of people. Based on a study by Imperial College London and Oxford University, the *Sunday Times* modelled that government inaction saw real UK cases rise from 14,000 on March 3 to 200,000 on March 14, to 1.5 million on March 23. The *Times* reports that “no other large European country allowed infections to sky-rocket to such a high level before finally deciding to go into lockdown. Those 20 days of government delay are the single most important reason why the UK has the second highest number of deaths from the coronavirus in the world.”

From the standpoint of the ruling class, the most important action had already been taken by mid-March—the passing of £645 billion in quantitative easing (QE), £330 billion in business loans and a promise of an “unlimited lending capacity.” Globally, the pandemic has been used as an excuse to funnel vast tranches of social wealth into the coffers of the banks, corporations and the super-rich in a multi-trillion-dollar bailout that far exceeds the measures taken after the 2008-2009 financial crisis. “Project Birch” provides for further multi-billion government bailouts.

The vast debts built up by the bailout must now be repaid through the brutal exploitation of the working class.

That is why as soon as the lockdown was announced, the media was already insisting that the “cure cannot be worse than the disease” and that it was necessary to get the country “back to work.”

The promotion of the return to work is incessant. Every day brings reports of a “new hope” for a vaccine or a cure. However, the possibility of a viable vaccine, which scientists say would not be ready until sometime next year, is not an argument for a return to work. If a vaccine is developed, even more tragic will be the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives because of the back-to-work campaign.

Propaganda for a return has included the cherry-picking and misuse of scientific evidence, and the denigration of scientists who challenge the government’s pseudo-scientific herd immunity narrative. Last month, former chief scientific adviser to the government, Professor David King, warned that scientists were being pressured to defer to ministers: “quite simply the permission to speak in the public domain has been changed.”

Massive social distress is being used to force a return to work. The government’s furlough scheme, with the state paying 80 percent of the wage for those who qualify, will be wound down over the next five months. In order to disincentivise companies from participating, from September employers will have to pay 10 percent of furloughed workers wages, rising to 20 percent in October. Many low paid workers never received it. Fully 23 percent of households are using savings to cover living costs, 13 percent are struggling to pay bills and 11 percent suffer from food insecurity. When payments stop, there are estimates that up to 6.5 million jobs could be lost.

While the Johnson government is spearheading the campaign, the Labour Party and the trade unions have now forged an alliance with the Johnson government and employer groups to police the murderous return to work. Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer has pledged to work, “constructively with the government in the national interest.” The trade union leaders have been in constant discussion with the Tories since the pandemic began, including backing Sunak’s bailout. As the government’s back-to-work drive was being drawn up, Trades Union Congress General Secretary Frances O’Grady pledged, “We can be the architects, I think, of the next stage.”

The nature of the coronavirus

The interests of two classes stand in direct opposition to each other. The aim of corporate executives and managers, acting in the interests of major corporate investors, is to increase profit and extract the largest quantity of work in the shortest amount of time. For workers, it is a question of maintaining a safe environment that ensures their health and safety.

Rank-and-file safety committees must be organised to demand and implement measures to protect workers' lives. These measures must be based upon a scientific understanding of the nature of the disease.

The coronavirus is highly contagious and spreads through liquid droplets when people talk, breathe, cough or sneeze. People are infected when virus particles enter their mouths, noses or eyes, through direct transmission or after touching a surface where the particles have fallen.

Scientists have shown that the pathogen is also present in tiny airborne particles, known as aerosols, which can be suspended in the air for longer periods and travel much further than the recommended six feet of social distancing. The distance that the virus can travel is also affected by how loud someone is speaking.

Large factories where thousands of workers labour close to one another on an assembly line are particularly vulnerable to becoming vectors for the rapid spread of the disease. "The plant is an environment where it's loud and people have to shout at each other to be heard, there could be a lot of virus being transmitted through the air," Julia Heck, an epidemiologist and Adjunct Associate Professor and researcher at the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health, told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Studies show that an infected person can be contagious two or more days before showing any symptoms. Therefore, the measures being implemented in many workplaces, like daily temperature taking and handing out substandard facemasks, are inadequate. By the time someone has a high temperature, they could have spread the disease throughout the plant.

In meatpacking plants, it is widely suspected that the virus is spread through high-pressure air-conditioners that shoot airborne particles through an enclosed area.

In addition to the danger workers face when they congregate to enter and leave plants, or during meal and toilet breaks, workers on an assembly line, in a warehouse or in a retail business are handling the same tools and moving products. The virus can remain on surfaces for varied times: metal (five days), glass (up to five days), plastics (two-three days), stainless steel (two-three days), cardboard (24 hours) and aluminium (two-eight hours).

The tasks of rank-and-file safety committees

What will be the function of rank-and-file safety committees?

They will represent and fight for the safety of workers, in opposition to the demands of management and the profit principle. They will draw up detailed regulations and standards that must be monitored and enforced. Where conditions are violated, there must be a stoppage of work.

Core objectives of these committees should be:

1. Controlling work hours, social distancing, and line speeds. In every factory, business, office and workplace, rank-and-file safety committees, working in conjunction with a panel of trusted scientists and health experts, must determine working conditions, social distancing, production rates and schedules. Working hours and line speeds must be reduced to allow for sufficient rest, health care monitoring and regular deep cleaning.

2. Guaranteeing personal protective equipment. Each worker should be properly fitted with the *highest quality* facemasks (FFP1, FFP2, and

FFP3, according to conditions) as well as gloves, face shields and other necessary PPE. These must be changed regularly, to make sure they continue to provide maximum protection. Workers should also undergo training for donning and removing PPE.

3. Ensuring safe and comfortable working conditions. Of concern is not only the amount of protective equipment. To be safe, workers must be able to wear protective equipment for extended periods of time. All plants must have adequate air conditioning and ventilation, particularly with the beginning of summer, that is organised in such a way that it does not contribute to the spread of the virus.

4. Enforcing regular testing. All workers must have access to regular testing for the coronavirus. Production schedules must be organised to accommodate testing and contact tracing. If a worker tests positive, the facility must be closed for at least 48 hours for deep cleaning.

5. Demanding universal health care and guaranteed income. Any worker who tests positive must be isolated and provided immediate medical treatment, while his or her full income is guaranteed. All workers who encountered the infected workers must be quarantined and regularly tested, while receiving their full income. In addition, if anyone's family members report symptoms, the worker should be tested and isolated until cleared by a medical professional—with no loss of pay. This must include the millions of self-employed, those working in the gig economy and migrant workers who currently have no protection.

6. Ensuring the distribution of information. To preserve their safety, workers must have access to all information about infected workers so that appropriate measures can be taken, including halting production if necessary. Management at Amazon and other corporations have deliberately concealed information about co-workers testing positive and terminated workers who have exposed unsafe conditions.

7. Ensuring job security. No worker should be victimised for calling attention to unsafe working conditions or refusing to work. Any worker who has been fired for speaking out against unsafe conditions must be rehired with full back pay.

What will be the cost of implementing this programme? Who will pay for it?

The working class cannot be made to pay for ensuring its safety. The costs necessary to ensure safe working conditions, as well as to provide health care and full income for all workers, must be borne by the corporations and the capitalist ruling elite.

The maintenance of a safe working environment is an immensely complex task that can only be achieved through a scientific and rational plan, in active consultation with health care experts in every workplace.

No confidence can be placed in corporate management to secure workers' safety. Nor can workers rely on the trade unions. Only a minority of workers are unionised, and the unions function as little more than arms of corporate management.

Workers require their own organisations. In every factory, workplace, and office, workers should organise and elect trusted and respected workers who will represent them. They should utilise all available tools, including social media, to reach out to workers throughout their industry and in other sectors to coordinate their activities and share information.

A critical task of these committees is to organise workers internationally. In every country, there are a growing number of strikes and job actions by nurses, meatpacking, transport, auto and other workers demanding safe conditions.

The fight for socialism

The mobilisation of the resources of society against the pandemic requires scientific planning, which at every point comes into conflict with the pursuit of private profit and individual wealth.

The SEP insists that the fight against the pandemic is inseparably linked to a struggle of workers against the ruling class—the corporate and financial oligarchy—and its dictatorship over economic and political life. It is, therefore, a fight against capitalism and for socialism, the restructuring of society based on social need, not private profit.

This is by its very nature a global struggle. The pandemic is a world problem and can only be fought through the international collaboration of workers and all those committed to defending human life. In the fight against the pandemic, workers must reject all efforts to divide them along racial, ethnic, and national lines. In particular, the campaign by the US and British ruling class to blame China for the crisis and divert attention from its own criminal role must be opposed.

The pandemic has exposed the reality and bankruptcy of the capitalist system, which is a barrier to human progress and the very survival of the human species. The response of the ruling class to the pandemic will produce enormous social opposition and resistance.

A socialist political leadership in the working class must be built! This leadership is the Socialist Equality Party. The SEP is the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which publishes the *World Socialist Web Site*. We will provide all the assistance we can to workers who want to establish rank-and-file safety committees. We urge all workers to study our programme and make the decision to join the SEP.

Contact us for assistance in forming a rank-and-file committee.

Fill out the form below to be contacted by a representative of the SEP and to receive updates on the pandemic and the struggles of the working class. We also urge workers to send reports of conditions in your workplaces. All requests for anonymity will be honoured.

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To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact