

UK Health and Safety Executive provides cover for Johnson government's back-to-work drive

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The attempt to present the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) as a guarantor of workplace safety against COVID-19 is a joint conspiracy between the UK government and the trade unions.

Boris Johnson's Conservative government claims that the initial stages of the lifting of the official lockdown announced on May 10 were phased and managed. This lie was refuted by its own conduct. However, in his nationally televised address made that day, the prime minister informed all workers who could not work from home that they should report for work.

The next day, Johnson stated before the Houses of Parliament, "The Health and Safety Executive [HSE] will be enforcing" compliance with safety guidelines, "and we will have spot inspections to make sure that businesses are keeping their employees safe."

This claim was exposed as false within a week. The *i* newspaper reported that 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."

The implications are staggering. The state body in charge of enforcing workplace safety was effectively stood down in the event of a national emergency—as the pandemic continued to spike.

Numerous breaches by major companies in non-essential industries were reported in the national media, as workers protested the risk to their lives for corporate profit. Yet the HSE has effectively admitted that it was not safe for its own personnel to ensure lawful protection measures.

This travesty was prepared by previous measures to defund the HSE, reduce its autonomy and rein in inspections—especially by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition 2010–2015. Unannounced inspections by the HSE were ended in swathes of industry and services including health and social care, transport, and postal services on the pretext that they constituted a lower risk. These are the areas in which the failure to ensure social distancing and provide adequate PPE has led to the deaths of hundreds of workers among the 66,000 who have died nationally during the pandemic.

The evisceration of workplace safety was the product of Prime Minister David Cameron's declared "age of austerity" in the wake of the global financial crash in 2008, with the burden for the bailout of the banks placed entirely on the working class.

In early 2012, the coalition announced its intention to cut existing health and safety regulations by half. In a speech delivered in January, Cameron declared, "I will kill off safety culture." His government was "waging war against the excessive health and safety culture that has become an albatross around the neck of British businesses."

Many regulations had already gone, including those concerning fire safety and the construction of buildings. In 2017, the deaths of 72 people in the Grenfell fire were the horrific result of the indifference to lives by the corporate and political oligarchy.

The media was at one with the "war on red tape" and barely mentions the well-documented fact that deaths from the virus have been disproportionately higher among workers.

The Johnson government pledged an insulting £14 million to the HSE to deal with the pandemic. This goes nowhere near even restoring the cuts to the HSE's

budget, from £239 million in 2009 to £129 million for 2019-20.

The bluster and empty criticism by the trade unions is intended solely to forestall any independent mobilisation of the working class against the premature return to work, as Britain remains the epicentre of the pandemic in Europe.

The position of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) was summed up in a document produced in May calling for the government to collaborate more closely with the unions “to manage the mass return to work.” It stated that the TUC “does not take a position on the science of how to manage a pandemic, or the speed or nature of any return to work.”

On May 24, two weeks after the forced return to work in non-essential services, Unite, the UK’s largest union, made a belated call for government to restore funding to the HSE and to reinstate onsite inspections.

In her letter to the business secretary and the work and pensions secretary, published in the *Guardian*, Unite General Secretary Gail Cartmail wrote, “I am sure you will agree that in order to protect workers in these sectors where inspections are currently barred and also to help boost public confidence as the return to work continues, both measures should be immediately rescinded.”

What motivates such appeals is not a desire to protect workers, but to justify the continued collaboration of the trade unions with the Johnson government’s homicidal return to work programme.

The unions are telling workers to put their faith in a policy of risk assessments on a workplace by workplace basis, knowing full well that the enforcement agency for ensuring compliance, the HSE, has been reduced to making phone calls to employers.

The situation on the ground was described candidly by Prospect General Secretary Mike Clancy. On May 22 he stated, “Last week the government said that HSE would be conducting spot checks on businesses before they reopen for business [Risks 947]. It seems that it neglected to check if HSE would actually be able to visit businesses while keeping its own workers safe. Prospect members in HSE, who have been working throughout this crisis, have indicated that initially the majority of spot checks will be done via telephone rather than visits which raises questions as to their effectiveness.”

Clancy indicated that the government’s additional funding for the HSE would be largely spent on call centres and would have no impact on the number of qualified inspectors.

A predictable pattern of denial by employers for workplace COVID-19 infections has already emerged. The most notorious is the death of rail worker Belly Mujinga, who was allegedly spat on by a commuter claiming to have the virus. She had been forced to work on London Victoria’s station concourse despite having an underlying respiratory condition and being denied PPE.

The UK’s largest on-line fashion retailer, ASOS, has refused to take responsibility for infected workers who have been kept on the job during the pandemic despite performing a non-essential service. Cranswick plc, a FTSE 250 listed company, has been in denial over the death of three workers at one of its meat processing factories. At ASOS and Cranswick, the local regulatory services run by the same Labour Party-run authority—who are the enforcing authority over health and safety—failed to conduct a temporary closure and deep clean.

HSE chief executive Sarah Albon warned employers who failed to comply with social distancing and act on improvement notices that they face prosecution. However, the HSE, by its own admission, has not issued a single enforcement notice or action to close. The *Mirror* reported May 12 that despite being aware of 71 workers deaths and 3,000 reported cases of occupation-related COVID-19, Albon told MPs on the Work and Pensions Committee, “We have not closed any business for any reason, whether it’s a death or any other reason.”

These developments underscore the call made by the Socialist Equality Party for the establishment of rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace to protect workers from the spread of the virus. These committees will not defer to the government, its state bodies or the employers. Workers must assume the power of veto over all demands based upon profit and productivity that impact on their safety and that of their families and the wider community.



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