

UK: Johnson opens the economy and guarantees fresh COVID-19 outbreak

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All Britain's non-essential shops reopened yesterday, as Boris Johnson's government continued its reckless ending of the lockdown. Over a third of small businesses that closed during the pandemic, more than 266,000, had already reopened by the weekend in anticipation.

This is a criminal adventure in service to the financial and corporate elite that will cost thousands of lives. Millions of workers are being forced to travel on public transport and into workplaces without even the most elementary safety provisions being enforced. The UK is still well within the first wave of its coronavirus epidemic, which continues to infect thousands. The lowering of the death toll is entirely due to a lockdown that is now being ended.

The final stage of a wholesale return to work—including pubs, clubs, restaurants, nail bars and beauty salons, possibly as early as July—proceeds under the cover of a largely bogus debate over social distancing.

Business leaders, especially in catering and hospitality, have repeatedly called for the minimum safe distance between people to prevent infection to be reduced from two metres to one. They have seized on research commissioned by the World Health Organisation (WHO) suggesting that the change would have only a marginal effect on the risk of transmission. This research, however, has been strongly criticised by leading statisticians. The government has put the rule under review, with Chancellor Rishi Sunak insisting ministers and not scientists will decide.

The review is a cosmetic exercise. The decision has already been made by bosses in the hospitality sector—in discussion with backbench Conservative MPs—who are threatening mass firings if the recommended distance is not reduced. It is an open

secret in business circles that the government's formal safety recommendations are for show and that its real position is for a complete abandonment of public health procedures.

Face masks are now finally mandated to be worn on public transport, but nowhere else—outside of medical settings. Social distancing in shops and workplaces is being left up to owners and employers to arrange “where possible.” Deliberately complacent and confusing government messages have encouraged large gatherings of people to take place.

The only real block to the spread of the virus, given the lack of any genuine measures of containment such as testing and tracing, was the national lockdown the government was forced to implement on March 23 due to overwhelming popular hostility towards its murderous policy of “herd immunity.”

Across 11 European countries, these lockdowns are estimated to have saved over 3 million lives. The UK's failure to implement the policy for just one week after the catastrophic implications of “herd immunity” had been publicly revealed cost around 20,000 lives, according to former government scientific advisor Professor Neil Ferguson. The premature ending of the lockdown will cost untold thousands more.

To disguise this fact, the corporate media have launched a propaganda offensive summoning Britons to do their patriotic duty and visit the high street. Yesterday's headlines included the *Daily Express*'s “Boris: Time to Spend for Our Country,” the *Mirror*'s and the *Daily Mail*'s “Shop for Britain” and the *i*'s, “High streets sparking back to life.”

This takes place as scientists warn that easing the lockdown under current conditions is almost certain to lead to a resurgence in cases of coronavirus, endangering more lives and throwing away the

sacrifices made by workers and their families over three months.

Earlier this month, a group of more than 100 scientists, many working in infectious disease biology and immunology, wrote an open letter to the government, saying, “There is a very high probability that relaxation of lockdown, coupled with a potential breakdown in public trust, will bring us back into a situation where the outbreak is once again out of control.”

They argued that levels of community transmission were still too high and needed to fall further and that “effective test, track and trace capacity” needed to be implemented before any relaxation could be considered.

On Sunday, Hans Kluge, the World Health Organisation’s director for Europe, said the UK was still in a “very active phase of the pandemic.” He cautioned that England should not leave lockdown until the government has a “robust track-and-trace system in place.” The UK’s Test and Trace system’s chief operating officer, Tony Prestedge, has admitted the scheme will not be fully operational until September or October.

Last week, the Independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies noted that Health Secretary Matt Hancock vastly over-reported the percentage of contacts of infected people found by the Test and Trace system. Hancock claimed 85 percent had been found, but this related only to the contacts of the 5,407 coronavirus cases identified by the government between May 28 and June 3. Data from the Office for National Statistics suggests there were really 23,000 new cases in this period, meaning contacts were only found for 25 percent of newly infected people.

These concerns find no political expression because the Labour Party and the trade unions are co-conspirators with the bloodstained Johnson government—the most right-wing in modern British history.

The Labour Party has been silent on the dangers of the policies being implemented, keeping its promise to work “constructively” and “in the national interest” with the Conservatives. Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer has focussed his criticisms on the government’s failure to get more children back in schools, which will serve as holding pens while parents are sent back to work.

The trade unions have been engaged in backroom discussions with the government from the first days of the coronavirus crisis. They have kept workers on the job by making all safety concerns a matter of individual responsibility, telling their members not to work if they feel unsafe. They have encouraged workers to place their faith in risk assessments on a workplace-by-workplace basis, knowing full well that the Health and Safety Executive is not carrying out the appropriate inspections.

The only opposition to Johnson’s government that exists is the as yet unorganised opposition of the working class, which finds reflection in the refusal of millions of parents to send their children back to school, in the recent protests sparked by George Floyd’s murder in the United States, and in wildcat strikes and protests across the country. If the criminal policies of the Johnson government are to be resisted and defeated, then this opposition must take up a political perspective that advances the working class’s own independent interests.

The Socialist Equality Party reiterates the call it published on May 27, as part of a world programme developed by the International Committee of the Fourth International, “Build rank-and-file factory and workplace committees to prevent transmission of the COVID-19 virus and save lives!”

We call on workers to form safety committees in their workplaces to ensure work only takes place under genuinely safe conditions, monitored by the workers themselves, advised by scientific and public health experts. These bodies must be independent of the trade unions and reach out to other workers internationally in a fight against the deadly policies of capitalist governments and for a socialist reorganisation of society.



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