As Boris Johnson's partial lockdown begins: The working class must intervene to prevent COVID-19 catastrophe

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Prime Minister Boris Johnson has been forced to impose a second one-month "lockdown" after his government was confirmed as a cabal of mass murderers.

For months, the working assumption in ruling circles has been that 85,000 more lives would be lost to COVID-19 this winter in a "reasonable worst-case scenario". New projections leaked Saturday showed this appalling toll to be an underestimate. The UK confronts a surge of COVID-19 infections and deaths far worse than the initial wave suffered in the spring.

This catastrophe has been prepared by the policies of the Conservative government and its co-conspirators in the Labour Party and the trade unions. It falls to the working class to take control of society out of the hands of these criminals and prevent a terrible loss of life.

While admitting to MPs on Monday that deaths this winter could be "twice as bad or more compared with the first wave", Johnson made clear that the British ruling class has no intention of seriously suppressing the virus. His announcement last Saturday of a month of new national restrictions was coupled with a defence of the government's record. Plumbing new depths of political cynicism, he explained away projections of multiple thousands of deaths a day and overflowing hospitals as proof of the need "to be humble in the face of nature."

The pandemic is not a natural disaster. Johnson is covering for his repugnant actions in encouraging the spread of the virus, but he speaks for the whole capitalist social order. More than 1.2 million people are dead because human life is considered expendable in the ruthless pursuit of profit. This fact is so explosive that its consequences must be passed off as the work of irresistible natural forces—in the style of Thomas Malthus's eighteenth-century assertion that hunger and disease are the inevitable fate of the "surplus" working class.

What is the real record of the past year? From the start, the Tories had no intention of combatting the virus. Their declared policy was one of "herd immunity", allowing the virus to rip through the population with the pseudo-scientific justification that this would eventually confer immunity to the population—after the death of hundreds of thousands. This murderous plan was only altered by Johnson out of fear of a wave of strikes against unsafe conditions which began to spread across Britain and Europe, and of the threat that popular revulsion at his response to the pandemic might turn into mass political opposition.

Together with similar shutdowns across Europe, the forced imposition of the March 23 lockdown saved millions of lives. But from May to June, Johnson returned to his original strategy, prematurely ending the lockdown and actively encouraging behaviours which spread the virus.

Millions were ordered back on public transport and to work, with no test, track and trace system to speak of and zero health and safety inspections conducted. Johnson reopened the hospitality, entertainment, and leisure industries, with the instruction, "I think people need to go out and enjoy themselves." Chancellor Rishi Sunak organised an "Eat Out to Help Out" subsidy scheme to encourage millions back into pubs and restaurants. Quarantines were scrapped to encourage holidays abroad, including to COVID hotspots France and Spain.

Schools and universities were fully reopened to millions of pupils, students and staff in September. Johnson and Education Secretary Gavin Williamson shot down any suggestion of online instruction.

A series of farcical restrictions were introduced—including "local lockdowns", the "rule of six", and a regional "Tier system" of regulations—whose main effect was to sow confusion and discredit the legitimacy of public health interventions.

The government's overwhelming priority has been to keep open the economy to ensure a continued flow of profits to the super rich. Deaths, concentrated among older layers of the population considered as an unproductive drain on state finances, are considered an economic bonus.

Once again, it is only the fear of mass opposition which has forced Johnson to enact new measures. The Tories have created the conditions where the spread of the virus threatens mass deaths and a collapse of the National Health Service, raising the prospect of a popular backlash. That is why the government has

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said protests are no longer exempt from lockdown restrictions, whether COVID compliant or not.

The new lockdown is significantly more limited than the first. All those who cannot work from home—except hospitality, entertainment, leisure, and non-essential retail employees—will be expected to work on-site. Schools, colleges and universities will remain open. These exemptions, leaving millions of people exposed to the virus, will severely reduce the effectiveness of the lockdown. Scientists suggest that the month of restrictions might only reduce infections by as little as 10 percent. The virus will therefore continue to spread exponentially.

Even this limited intervention is opposed by a substantial section of the Tory Party and its allies in Nigel Farage's Brexit Party—soon to be rechristened the anti-lockdown "Reform" party. Led by Sir Graham Brady, Chair of the backbench 1922 Committee, they are demanding an end to all pretences of controlling the virus.

Opposition to the government is growing, but it can only go forward by developing a new political programme and leadership.

The Labour Party and the trade unions stand exposed by this crisis as accomplices of the Johnson government. In the first days of the pandemic, the unions demobilised industrial struggles and workers' protests for safe conditions, pledging to collaborate with Johnson "in the national interest." They oversaw the unsafe reopening of workplaces and education settings, jettisoning all previously declared "tests" and "red lines". With anger mounting among their memberships, they are now doing everything possible to prevent strike action by supporting the latest measures or at best politely asking for an extension to partially cover education settings.

Labour embraced the Tory government from the start of the crisis, with first Jeremy Corbyn and then Sir Keir Starmer pledging only "constructive opposition"—a euphemism for collusion. Starmer—infamous for his insistence that schools should reopen, "no ifs, no buts"—made a pathetic attempt to cover his criminal record last month by issuing a belated endorsement of a two-week "circuit breaker" lockdown. He did so based entirely on arguments for minimising the disruption to UK businesses by an uncontrolled explosion of the virus. Labour supports Johnson's limited lockdown, including keeping schools open.

Corbyn and the "Labour left" are just as guilty. Corbyn even admitted in an August interview to having been told of the government's "herd immunity" plan ahead of time, while he was still leader of the Labour Party. Forewarned of this policy for mass death, he alerted nobody.

Since then he has never once opposed the reopening of the economy. He and his allies, John McDonnell, Dianne Abbott et al, are directing all their energies into getting Corbyn's suspension from Labour reversed. They are appealing to rank-and-file members not to quit the party witch-hunting them as anti-Semites and colluding with Johnson.

A political break with these organisations is a life and death question for the working class. Wildcat strikes of students and teachers have already broken out in Greece, Poland and France against the unsafe reopening of schools. The same sentiment exists in the UK, but workers and youth must become conscious of the fight they are engaged in.

The tremendous challenges posed by the pandemic cannot be addressed without a frontal assault on the capitalist profit system and the monopolisation of social wealth by the super-rich. This is an international struggle against a global pandemic and a global economic order. It demands an international movement of the working class across all artificial national borders, acting through its own independent organisations.

This is the programme fought for by the Socialist Equality Party (UK) and its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International.

On May 27, the SEP issued a statement calling for the formation of "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."

The statement explained, "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."

On September 25, the SEP in Britain, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Germany), the Parti de l'égalité socialiste (France) and Sosyalist E?itlik (Turkey) issued a joint call, "For a general strike to halt the resurgence of COVID-19 in Europe!" The task facing such a strike, the article explained, was a "struggle to seize the resources stolen by the ruling class in years of obscene bailouts, bring down the EU governments, overthrow the capitalist system, and replace the reactionary EU with the United Socialist States of Europe."

Tens of thousands of lives depend on this perspective being taken up and fought for by workers and youth, and on their taking the decision to join the SEP and build the ICFI as the new socialist leadership of the international working class.

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