Stop the UK's winter of death! For emergency action to save lives!

Socialist Equality Party (UK)
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The coronavirus pandemic in the UK is being allowed to run out of control. Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative government is pursuing a murderous policy which poses an imminent risk to tens of thousands of lives. It does so with the politically criminal collusion of the Labour Party and the trade unions.

Over 66,000 people have already been killed by COVID-19 in the UK, according to official figures. A more accurate total is the close to 80,000 fatalities recorded this year with COVID-19 mentioned on the death certificate. The driving of workers back into workplaces and students back into schools, colleges and universities has produced a catastrophe. Roughly 25,000 have died of COVID-19 since the first national lockdown was fully ended in May-July, again according to the government's headline figure. The UK's death rate per million people is 963, higher than the United States.

Worse is threatened. Infections, hospitalisations and deaths will soar over the course of December, January and February unless drastic action is taken immediately.

The minor impact of the November partial lockdown has been erased in the space of two weeks. The seven-day average of daily cases now stands at 23,093.

By December 14, there were more people in hospital with COVID-19 than at any time since April. The trajectories for every statistic point sharply upwards. At the current rate of increase, English hospitals will have more coronavirus patients than they did at the peak of the first devastating wave of the pandemic by New Year's Eve.

The real situation is more severe than the projections. Between December 23 and 27, the government is loosening restrictions to allow up to three households from anywhere in the country to mingle and stay under one roof. Such action would lead to an explosion of infections heading into the winter months and the period of greatest stress for the health service even in a normal year.

Scientists and professional medical organisations are raising the alarm. The *British Medical Journal* and *Health Service Journal* ran a joint editorial on Tuesday warning the government that "Christmas relaxation will overwhelm services" and calling on it to "reverse its rash decision to allow household mixing" which "will cost many lives".

In addition to those killed by COVID, the authors write, another surge of the virus "could wipe out almost all the reductions in waiting times for elective procedures achieved in the past 20 years… This will take years to recover from, at the cost of much suffering and loss of life."

Dr Claudia Paoloni, president of the Hospital Consultants and Specialists Association, has warned that the Christmas plans will see "patients dying needlessly and thousands of critical cases going untreated." Putting the situation in the sharpest terms, leading public health specialist Professor Gabriel Scally warned, "There is no point having a very merry Christmas and then burying friends and relations in January and February."

Johnson and the leaders of the devolved governments in Scotland and Northern Ireland have refused point-blank to alter their plans. Wales was alone in making even a token amendment, switching to "two households plus one person living alone". Their determination to proceed is proof that that not even deaths on a staggering scale will be met with measures that cut across the interests of the major corporations. The Northern Irish government's announcement of a six-week lockdown immediately after Christmas proves how they are all aware of the deadly consequences of the coming days.

Several effective vaccines are available and beginning to be deployed. Yet such is the ruling class' crazed thirst for profits that tens of thousands of people will be allowed to die before the vaccination programme comes into full effect. Even as the government goes through the pantomime of placing millions more people in the highest tier of restrictions, in acknowledgement of the rapid spread of the virus, the economy is kept open.

All non-essential production and retail has returned to business as usual. Every effort is made to suppress this information, but stories continue to emerge of outbreaks in factories and warehouses across the country. Christmas shoppers have been encouraged to pack the high streets like sardines, especially in London. To make up for lost time in the November lockdown, the government has allowed shops to stay open 24 hours a day in the run up to Christmas and January. Pubs and restaurants also remain open in large areas of the country.

So determined is the government to enforce this "new normal", in which hundreds of workers die needlessly every day, that the Department of Education threatened legal action against several London councils earlier this week to prevent schools closing early for Christmas. The councils' plans amounted to an additional three days of school closures in the face of what council leaders described as an "exponential growth" of infections.

The government's last-minute announcement of a staggered return to secondary schools in January is a cruel farce. The delay is supposed to provide time for schools to implement an unworkable mass-testing system for children, carried out by staff, which will serve as a pretext to remove the last vestiges of the quarantine and self-isolation system.

Johnson has been able to proceed with his homicidal agenda thanks above all to his partners in crime, the Labour Party and the trade unions. Following the path set by his predecessor Jeremy Corbyn, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer has been in lockstep with Johnson since the pandemic began, under the banner of "national unity". He

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has made it his mission to support the Tory government's insistence on keeping schools open. The trade unions' response to the virus was to enter talks with the government and then suppress any and all action by workers over the danger of COVID-19.

These forces are jointly responsible for the mass death inflicted on the population.

It is the responsibility of the working class, organised on its own independent political programme, to put an end to the pandemic.

COVID-19 has overwhelmingly affected workers and their families—both in terms of infections and the economic fallout of the pandemic—while simultaneously proving their class role as the producers of all wealth and providers of all essential services in society. The Socialist Equality Party (UK) calls on them to take up the following demands:

First, all nonessential production must be shut down immediately.

Restrictions on personal contacts, while necessary, are thoroughly hypocritical under conditions in which workers are being forced into workplaces every day, most of which have little to no measures in place to protect their health.

Under the conditions of the pandemic, to send people into factories, warehouses, shops and offices is no different from forcing people to enter a burning building. Industries where work is essential to stopping the virus and maintaining the basic functioning of society must have the most stringent safety measures, overseen by the workers and health care professionals.

Second, all schools and universities must be closed to in-person learning.

Recent studies in countries as diverse as America, Austria and South Korea, published in respected journals like *Nature* and *Science*, have demonstrated that closing schools has a significant impact on the spread of coronavirus. The exponential rise of the virus throughout London confirms that education settings are the main vectors of transmission in the city. Rates of infection among 11 to 19-year-olds increased 75 percent last week.

Nationally, infection rates among secondary school pupils have increased more than fifty-fold since schools reopened in September, to 2.16 percent. The rate for primary school pupils is 1.2 percent, higher than any age group over 35 and comparable with the rate among 25 to 34- year-olds. Claims that schools are safe havens and that children cannot spread the virus, used to justify keeping schools open as holding pens so that parents were freed to work and shop, are in tatters.

Third, a shutdown can only be effective to the extent that workers are fully compensated, and schoolchildren and students are provided educational and emotional support.

The virus cannot be dealt with in a society so devastated by low-pay, unemployment and austerity that UNICEF has been forced to provide food-aid to UK children for the first time in its history. Over 800,000 people have dropped off payrolls this year and millions have been thrown into poverty and destitution. This after a decade in which "health was deteriorating, life expectancy stalling and health inequalities widening" because of devastating government cuts, according to a report by leading public health authority Professor Sir Michael Marmot.

These conditions are the whip used to force workers into unsafe conditions, for fear of their and their families' financial ruin.

All workers' jobs must be guaranteed. Those required to remain at home while non-essential production is closed must be provided with a liveable income. Facilities must be put in place to make possible high-quality remote instruction for schoolchildren and students. Billions must be provided to massively expand mental health and social care services and make them freely and widely available to the population.

The claim that there is no money to implement such measures is a lie. The Johnson government and the Bank of England have pumped hundreds of billions of pounds into the coffers of the corporations and the billionaires since the pandemic began. Data from Forbes shows Britain's billionaires with wealth tied to public shares increased their personal wealth by 20 percent between March 18—five days before the national lockdown—and June 11. Hundreds of thousands of people have been made unemployed and wages and hours slashed, yet every time a Richard Branson or a Tim Martin calls for a bailout, or the military calls for increased spending, a "magic money tree" sprouts.

Society has the resources to contain and eradicate the virus without a major loss of life. But they are monopolised by a super-rich ruling class, whose imperative throughout the pandemic has been to protect profits, not human life. Their social interests, which direct government policy, have turned a manageable public health threat into a worldwide slaughter.

The necessary emergency action to save lives requires the full industrial and political mobilisation of the working class. Multiplying strike ballots across the UK indicate the mass opposition that exists, but these struggles can only develop and be successful through a conscious political and organisations break with the stranglehold of the Labour Party and the trade unions. The task is to organise the working class as an independent force to impose shutdowns, prepare a nationwide general strike, and expropriate the fabulously wealthy oligarchy so that their stolen fortunes can be used to meet pressing social needs.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers to begin forming an interconnected network of workplace and neighbourhood committees, independent of the treacherous trade unions, to organise this political struggle.

Action committees in the UK must organise joint initiatives with workers across Europe, cutting across the toxic nationalism of the Brexit conflict. In a globalised world, there is no national solution to the pandemic. Only a combined offensive of the European and international working class can overcome the inevitable resistance of the transnational corporations and global finance.

At the heart of this offensive is the fight for socialism—the restructuring of social and economic life to meet social need, not private profit.

The Socialist Equality Party, together with our sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International, has been the sole political tendency to advance an independent programme for workers in the pandemic. That programme must now be made reality.

The coming weeks and months are critical. The action that workers take now can save tens of thousands of lives. We call on workers and young people to join our party and build a new international, socialist leadership the working class needs.

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