

The end of the UK lockdown and the way forward for the working class

Statement by the Socialist Equality Party (Britain)

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Prime Minister Boris Johnson is ending what he insists must be the “last lockdown”, knowing it will cost thousands more lives. He admitted last Monday that ending lockdown would mean “more infections, more hospitalisations... more deaths”.

The government has ditched reducing the reproduction number (*R* number) of the virus as a condition for reopening, meaning COVID-19 will be allowed to spread throughout the population.

“More deaths” is portrayed by the mass media as the unavoidable price for a return to “normality” and “freedom”. This is lying propaganda. The government is committing murder on a mass scale.

The pursuit of “herd immunity” by allowing the virus to spread unchecked has always been its policy. Johnson’s statement to the nation of March 12 last year insisted that “many more families are going to lose loved ones before their time.” His chief adviser Dominic Cummings said privately that the government’s strategy was “herd immunity, protect the economy, and if that means some pensioners die, too bad.”

More than 135,000 people have already been killed by COVID-19 as a result. The only reason this death toll is not higher still is because a feared eruption of opposition in the working class forced the ruling class to make retreats.

The first lockdown last March followed an outbreak of strikes in Italy, then the centre of the pandemic in Europe, that spread to Spain, France and the UK. The government was desperate to avert mass protests that would cut across its drive to implement a multi-hundred-billion-pound programme of government handouts to big business and the super-rich, justified as being in the “national interest”. The scale of the intervention was unprecedented—£350 billion in business loans from the government and £645 billion in quantitative easing from the Bank of England, since increased to a staggering £895 billion.

With the bailout achieved, the government moved as swiftly as possible to force the population back to schools and workplaces to restart the flow of profits, even though its limited lockdown was proving effective in curbing the spread of the virus. This led inevitably to a disastrous re-eruption of infections and a second wave of disease that killed more people than the first.

The continued threat of a social explosion, prompted by a wave of hospitalisations and the collapse of the healthcare system, forced Johnson to implement two additional lockdowns in November and January. These were more limited even than the first, with large sections of the population forced to come into

work. New daily cases have only just been brought below 10,000—for the first time in five months.

Johnson’s insistence that this must be the “last lockdown” is a declaration of a political war on the working class. All schools and colleges will be reopened at once to their more than ten million pupils, students and education workers on March 8. Neither mask wearing nor coronavirus testing will be compulsory. The government’s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies warns that this action alone will increase the national *R* rate by 10-50 percent. By June 21, all restrictions will be lifted.

The scrapping of public health measures is being justified by citing the UK’s vaccination programme. This is another fraud. The present fall in infections is almost entirely the result of the lockdown and not vaccination. Its removal will lead to a deadly surge in cases before the vaccination programme has been completed and taken full effect.

According to the Imperial College COVID-19 Response Team, a “gradual” lifting of public health restrictions would result in a staggering 58,200 additional COVID-19 deaths between February 12 this year and June 30, 2022 based on a reopening agenda that is far more cautious than that planned by the government.

Immunisation is a vital step towards ending the pandemic. But without a scientific strategy for implementing and maintaining public health measures until the population is effectively protected, more people will die unnecessarily. More dangerous and vaccine-resistant variants of the virus will also be allowed to develop. The “Kent variant” has already become dominant in the UK and cases of the South African and now Brazilian variants have been detected.

Far from a return to “normal”, the sacrifice of workers’ lives to the pandemic takes place under conditions of a ruthless effort to claw back from the working class the billions handed to the corporations. Workers will also be made to bear the burden of a mounting trade war between Britain, the European powers, the US and China, which threatens to break out into catastrophic military conflicts.

The result will be millions thrown out of work, slashed wages and social services, and workplaces turned into hellholes.

Unemployment is officially at 5.1 percent and the Bank of England and Office for Budget Responsibility are forecasting an increase of 7-8 percent once the jobs furlough scheme is wound down. “Fire and rehire” schemes are being used to push through wage cuts of up to 25 percent and more gruelling work schedules.

Polling by the Trades Union Congress in January found that 9 percent of workers in Britain have already been faced with having to re-apply for their jobs on worse terms and conditions or be sacked. Rates of poverty, destitution, debt, rent arrears and foodbank usage are rising sharply.

The same class war offensive is underway in every country. The “vaccine wars” over which country will be supplied first are the most grotesque expression of the fierce competition among national ruling classes to undercut their rivals at the expense of their workers. These conflicts were graphically on display with the completion of Brexit at the height of Europe’s second wave. Amid a global public health disaster, rows between the UK and the European powers saw lorries piled up at the Port of Dover and the Northern Ireland Protocol threatened just weeks after the deal was signed.

This fundamental lesson must be drawn from the year in which the pandemic has raged: The ruling class will pursue its interests ruthlessly no matter what the cost in human lives and suffering.

Johnson and his counterparts internationally are impervious to scientific argument, let alone moral appeal. They are responding to the threat they fear from below by doubling down on their murderous agenda, strengthening the state apparatus, restricting freedom of speech, and encouraging the growth of far-right movements. The fascistic layers mobilised by Donald Trump in the invasion of the Capitol Building, Marine Le Pen’s National Rally in France, and the Alternative for Germany (AfD) all advance an anti-lockdown/anti-vaccination agenda, mobilising sections of the middle class and small business owners facing ruin at the hands of Europe’s governments against the working class.

Defeating the pandemic is not primarily a medical question. It must be fought politically. The only social force which can impose the necessary measures to curb the pandemic, defeat the onslaught on jobs, wages and conditions and halt the descent into trade and military conflict is the international working class.

Workers’ resistance is growing internationally, involving Italian public sector workers, wildcat strikes by French teachers against in-person teaching, industrial action against plant closures in Spain, the action of educators in Chicago, US, and Sao Paulo, Brazil, and ongoing strikes against British Gas and Manchester and London bus companies. But this must be given conscious organisational and political direction.

The Labour Party and trade unions have been revealed as bitter enemies of the working class. The trade unions have functioned throughout the pandemic as a police force for the government and corporations. After signing-off on Chancellor Rishi Sunak’s bailouts of big business, the Trades Union Congress provided the government with a document on “A trade union approach... on how to manage the mass return to work.” Since then, the unions have suppressed any action against the threat to workers’ lives posed by COVID-19.

Labour, initially under Jeremy Corbyn and then Sir Keir Starmer, has acted as a de facto coalition partner with the Tories in its drive to reopen schools and workplaces. Corbyn was told of the government’s herd immunity strategy in private discussions and kept silent. Starmer dedicated himself to “constructive opposition”, a policy best summed up by his insistence, in the

Daily Mail, that schools should be opened “no ifs, no buts”.

The pandemic has acted as a trigger event, bringing into sharp focus for millions of people around the world the bankruptcy of the entire social and economic order and all its political defenders. New organisations of class struggle and a new socialist leadership must be built.

For workers to defend their lives and livelihoods, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees in every workplace, networked across Britain and internationally, and independent of the trade unions. These committees must reject all calls to sacrifice in the “national interest” and fight uncompromisingly for the needs of the working class.

Their first task must be to secure a full lockdown of non-essential production and the implementation of strict safety protocols in genuinely essential sectors, until the rollout of the vaccine is complete, and a rigorous test and trace system implemented. All workers forced to stay at home and small businesses required to close must receive full income support, with all jobs safeguarded.

Against the claim that there is no money for these measures, rank-and-file committees must advance a programme for the expropriation of big business and the financial oligarchs. The fortunes of the super-rich pandemic profiteers and assets of the major corporations must be seized, to be managed democratically by the working class to meet social need, not private profit.

A global pandemic requires a globally coordinated solution. The efforts of the ruling class to pit worker against worker as they seek control of the world’s markets and resources must be countered by the socialist unification of the working class. This demands the fight for a European-wide general strike and the taking of political power by the working class in a United Socialist States of Europe. Joining and building the Socialist Equality Party will provide the leadership to carry forward this life and death struggle.



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