

# UK: Johnson government and Labour opposition mark lockdown anniversary with sickening pledge of “unity”

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Yesterday’s “National Day of Reflection” to mark one year since the first national lockdown was grotesque on every level.

A minute of silence was held at midday. Landmarks such as the London Eye, Trafalgar Square, Cardiff Castle and Belfast City Hall were lit up in yellow light at nightfall. The public were encouraged to stand on their doorsteps at 8.00pm with phones, candles and torches, to symbolise a “beacon of remembrance”.

Whatever the genuine sentiment in the population for a day of remembrance, this was a display of naked government hypocrisy to conceal political criminality. Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Health Secretary Matt Hancock publicly mourned the deaths of more than 147,000 people for which they bear primary responsibility.

Johnson was marking the anniversary of a lockdown which he delayed for weeks, at the cost of tens of thousands of lives. Warned on March 2, 2020 that the virus was spreading across the UK and that doing nothing would lead to hundreds of thousands of deaths, the government continued to pursue a herd immunity strategy. Johnson told the nation in a televised address on March 12, “I must level with you... many more families are going to lose loved ones before their time.”

Only the public exposure of the full scale of this homicidal agenda and a threatened rebellion in the working class as wildcat strikes spread from Italy, Spain and France to the UK forced Johnson to declare a national lockdown on March 23, by which point 100,000 people are estimated to have been contracting the virus every day. Had the country locked down just one week earlier, according to analysis by Imperial College London this December, 21,000 lives would have been saved in the first wave.

Later in the year, Johnson oversaw a breakneck reopening of schools and the economy, leading to a renewed surge of the virus. The government even refused to carry out a short two-week “circuit breaker” in September or October and

implemented a farcical one-month partial lockdown in November.

With the situation out of control, Johnson still did not declare a full lockdown until the New Year—once again, only under pressure from the working class—by which time one in 50 people in England were infected, according to the Office for National Statistics.

More than twice as many people died in the second wave as in the first.

The overall impact on human life has been monumental and fallen overwhelmingly on the poorest in society. According to a new analysis by the Health Foundation, 1.5 million years of life have been lost in the UK in the last year. On average, each person killed by COVID-19 lost 10.2 years of life. In the poorest 20 percent of areas in England, there were 35 percent more deaths and 45 percent more years of life lost than in the richest 20 percent.

One year into this disaster, what is called for is not a day of national unity, in which the murderers throw a consoling arm around their victims, but a political reckoning.

Of all the lessons to be learned from the pandemic, among the most vital is that the working class cannot take a single step in defence of its interests without making a decisive political break with the stranglehold of the Labour Party and the trade unions.

Labour has functioned throughout the crisis as a loyal partner of the government. First with Jeremy Corbyn and now with Sir Keir Starmer at the helm, its guiding principle has been to act “in the national interest”—i.e., in support of the Johnson government’s pro-business agenda. As the Tory party has rocked from crisis to crisis, Labour has played the key role in keeping this despised cabal of murderers and thieves in power.

Moreover, nothing the de-facto Tory-Labour coalition has done could have proceeded without the collusion of the trade unions which policed and suppressed every expression of opposition in the working class. Not a single official strike

was waged over the threat of COVID-19, despite numerous wildcat walkouts. In March and April, the unions signed-off on the handing of hundreds of billions of pounds to the corporations and the super-rich, then worked with the government to organise the return to work, with no guarantees of workers' safety. They have urged and organised compliance with every catastrophic twist and turn in the government's pandemic response.

Yesterday's anniversary provided an occasion for renewed calls for a public inquiry into the UK's handling of the pandemic, championed by the Labour Party. Any such state-orchestrated inquiry would be a sham.

Everyone knows from bitter experience that investigations set up by the government are a dead end. Labour's Shadow Cabinet Office minister Rachel Reeves had the nerve to say, "We can learn from the Chilcot and Hillsborough inquiries as to how this can be started in this parliament."

The Chilcot Inquiry into the Iraq War covered up a war crime costing up to a million lives. The Hillsborough inquiry took almost thirty years to find that 96 Liverpool supporters were "unlawfully killed"—for which no one has been brought to account. The most recent government whitewash is the ongoing inquiry into the Grenfell Tower fire, which has allowed corporations that should be in the dock to give evidence without fear of prosecution and in this way gain immunity from future legal action.

A public inquiry into the pandemic would fare no differently. The framework being established, to "learn the lessons" of "mistakes" and "missed opportunities", is designed to exonerate the government and its accomplices. What took place was not a series of unfortunate mistakes, but a conscious conspiracy against the working class, which was made to bear the deadly costs of keeping profits flowing for the major corporations.

Labour are backing calls for an inquiry to orchestrate a mutual amnesty, in which both parties can cover for their own criminal roles while nodding sagely about "lessons learned".

The party's calls for an inquiry are also framed as if the crisis has passed, when in fact the world is moving into a new, extremely dangerous phase of the pandemic. The seven-day average of daily new cases worldwide has increased by 37 percent since February 19. In Europe, the figure has increased by 50 percent since February 17, with vaccination programmes barely begun. The risk of new, vaccine resistant variants of the virus being allowed to develop is serious.

Even as he sheds crocodile tears for the victims of his crimes, Johnson is implementing measures he knows will lead to many more deaths, declaring that "we have started on our cautious road to easing restrictions once and for all".

Ending what he proclaims as the "final lockdown" is

accompanied by the admission, "Sadly, there is a third wave underway" of COVID-19 in Europe. "Experience has taught us that when a wave hits our friends, it washes up on our shores as well. I expect that we will feel those effects in due course."

With millions still unvaccinated and new and more dangerous variants circulating, this is how Johnson acknowledges, only to then dismiss, the warning from the government's scientific advisors that the UK is only "weeks away" from a similar resurgence of the pandemic.

For the working class, the anniversary of the first lockdown must be an occasion for a political realignment. Capitalism has proved itself a vicious system of social murder in pursuit of profits. The Labour Party and the trade unions are policemen for the Tory government, the banks and corporations. To defend workers' interests means building new organisations of struggle—rank-and-file action committees, independent of the unions—and the leadership of the Socialist Equality Party.

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As this article was being published, reports emerged of statements made by Johnson yesterday which tear to shreds the lie of national unity and collective sacrifice.

While striking a pose of humility and remorse in public, behind the scenes the Prime Minister was bullish about what really matters to him—being and getting filthy rich. Speaking to a meeting of backbench Tory MPs last night, on the same evening that the public were lighting candles to remember the dead, he said, "The reason we have the vaccine success is because of capitalism, because of greed my friends...It was giant corporations that wanted to give good returns to shareholders."

This was Johnson's real moment of reflection. After 147,000 deaths, the ruling class is patting itself on the back for a year of greed and profits.



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