

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson praises capitalism and “greed” for “vaccine success”

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On Tuesday evening, Prime Minister Boris Johnson told a private Zoom meeting of backbench Tory MPs in the 1922 Committee, “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. It was driven by big pharma.”

The comments recall a speech Johnson made last June when he said, “Of course we clap for our NHS. But under this government we also applaud those who make our NHS possible: our innovators, our wealth creators, our capitalists and financiers.” In the aftermath of the 2008-9 financial crash, Johnson defined himself as the chief political opponent of “banker bashing” and champion of the City of London.

This time, Johnson was more nervous about the political impact of his obscene remarks reaching the ears of the public. He is reported to have said afterwards, “Actually I regret saying it”, repeating several times “Forget I said that” and asking those present to “remove that comment from your collective memory.”

After his remarks were leaked to *The Sun* newspaper, probably by an MP who saw no need for political caution, a coordinated effort was launched by Downing Street to insist that Johnson was joking and that his words had been “distorted”.

Johnson, who is usually entirely unconcerned with the words coming out of his mouth, is right to be worried. Media commentators have focussed almost exclusively on the danger that Johnson’s comments inflame tensions with the European Union (EU) over the supply of AstraZeneca vaccine doses by bragging of the successful rollout in the UK. More likely is that Johnson belatedly remembered he is sitting on a powder keg. He made his remarks on the evening of the government’s hypocritical “national day of reflection”, one year after the first lockdown was implemented, and after more than 147,000 people have lost their lives to the COVID-19 virus in the UK.

This catastrophe has exposed capitalism as a dysfunctional, murderous social order to millions. Johnson

was clearly worried that gloating about how “greed is good” after so many have lost so much would provoke widespread anger and did not want to open a debate on the “glories” of capitalism and the free market that would prompt a deeper questioning of social and political realities.

The truth is that capitalism’s division of the world into competing nation states and stultification of social production by private ownership and the profit motive is responsible for the suffering that has overtaken the world in the last year. The pandemic got out of control because governments internationally refused to implement the necessary measures of containment that would cut across the drive for profit and national competitive advantage. They used the pandemic as an excuse for funnelling trillions of dollars into the coffers of the major corporations and the super-rich, before being forced reluctantly into limited lockdowns by growing resistance in the working class.

Employers’ determination to keep down costs blocked the implementation of workplace safety measures and the payment of wages for those who needed to self-isolate.

The surge of infections which followed overwhelmed health services gutted by decades of cuts and privatisation.

Parasitic private companies, frequently run by close friends of the Tory party, ran away with billions in government contracts to provide test and tracing services and protective equipment. Advisers were paid up to £7,000 a day for their role in the national test and trace programme that failed in every conceivable way. Consultants from Deloitte were on £2,360 a day. Serco made £400 million for its COVID-related services.

Capitalism’s role in the development and distribution of vaccines has been no less damaging.

The BBC reported in December, “Initially firms didn’t rush in to fund vaccine projects. Creating vaccines, especially in the teeth of an acute health emergency, hasn’t proved very profitable in the past.” A spur had to be given by public funding, with billions of tax revenues poured into vaccine development programmes. Much of the science which underpins the vaccines was also conducted with

public funding.

Once vaccines were developed, their international rollout was cut across by rival national interests. The UK and the EU have carried on a despicable scramble to secure vaccine supplies for their own populations. Europe is now well into a third wave of the disease with less than 14 percent of the population having received their first dose.

Things are even worse on the world stage. The pricing of the vaccines, the failure to increase production to meet the global demand and the appalling state of infrastructure in many countries thanks to global inequality and war mean that most people in the world will be waiting years to receive a jab.

Wealthy and middle-income countries account for 90 percent of the vaccines delivered so far. Johnson's "big pharma" heroes have refused to waive patents or share technology and research with potential manufacturers in lower-income countries.

The day before Johnson praised this "greed" as the motor of human progress, World Health Organisation director-general Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus described the monopolisation of vaccine stocks by rich countries as a "catastrophic moral failure".

"We have the means to avert this failure but it's shocking how little has been done to avert it," he told a press conference. "The gap between the number of vaccines administered in rich countries and the number of vaccines administered through COVAX is growing every single day and becoming more grotesque every day."

Not only is this a "moral outrage", said Ghebreyesus, but also "economically and epidemiologically self-defeating."

"As long as the virus continues to circulate everywhere—anywhere—people will continue to die. Trade and travel will continue to be disrupted and the economic recovery will be further delayed."

Johnson's claim of "success" amounts to a boast that the UK is beating its rivals in the EU and elsewhere in measures that in the end produce a disaster for everyone. In addition, moves to scrap public health restrictions and reopen economies all over the world are undermining even the limited vaccination programmes that are underway. Infections are being allowed to surge once again, which will lead to countless more deaths and could lead to new variants of the virus which evade the vaccines already administered.

Johnson would also have been worried about his remarks drawing attention to the fact that the pandemic, by contrast, has done wonders for the capitalists. Fuelled by unprecedented government handouts, the world's billionaires have seen their fortunes soar by \$3.9 trillion, even as millions of lives, hundreds of millions of jobs and trillions of dollars of wages were lost.

It should be recalled here that assistant and leading business and economics columnist Jeremy Warner wrote at the start of the pandemic, "From an entirely disinterested economic perspective, the COVID-19 might even prove mildly beneficial in the long-term by disproportionately culling elderly dependents."

According to actuarial firm XPS, this grisly prediction is being borne out. They estimated a £25-60 billion saving for defined benefit pension schemes thanks to the direct and indirect effects of the pandemic taking an average of seven months off the projected life expectancy of 65-year-olds.

The pandemic crisis has prepared the way for a massive corporate onslaught on workers' jobs, wages and conditions. More and more companies are carrying out brutal "fire and rehire" restructurings, in pursuit of the "good returns for shareholders" hailed by the prime minister.

Johnson's comments sum up the response of the ruling elite to the pandemic. All in all, as they see it, nothing all that bad has happened in the last year. The profits continue to roll in and, for those at the apex of the existing social order, things have never been better. All this cost was the lives of working people, above all the old and the infirm who are viewed as an intolerable drain of profits in any case.

This is an utterly psychopathic social class which has lost any right to rule. Capitalism is at war with society and must be overthrown. In its place, workers internationally must establish a socialist system of planned production to meet human need not private profit.



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