

Boris Johnson, social murder and the struggle against the Labour and trade union bureaucracy

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The following report was delivered by Chris Marsden to the 2021 International May Day Online Rally held by the World Socialist Web Site and the International Committee of the Fourth International on May 1. Marsden is the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Britain.

The call by the International Committee of the Fourth International for an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees will resonate in every country. What our statement says accurately reflects the life experiences of the world working class.

Firstly, on the deadly cost of the pandemic, the murderous indifference of the ruling elite, how the capitalist class is using the crisis to rob us, ramp up exploitation and destroy lives and livelihoods.

Secondly, regarding its insistence that the social democratic parties and trade unions confront workers as an enemy force, as agents of the financial oligarchy and the corporations, which must now be broken with.

Britain's despised Prime Minister Boris Johnson is reeling after factional infighting in his government of cutthroats led to revelations that on October 30 last year, during a fight over whether to implement a partial four-week second lockdown, he blurted out, "No more f***ing lockdowns, let the bodies pile high in their thousands!"

This statement is the modern equivalent of Marie Antoinette's apocryphal response when told the peasants were starving for want of bread, "Let them eat cake!" But Johnson actually said this, and more.

Earlier in September, he insisted he would rather let coronavirus "rip" than implement a second lockdown, expressing his regret over agreeing to the first lockdown, and likening himself to the "real hero" of

the film *Jaws*, the mayor of Amity, who orders the beaches to stay open despite a great white shark eating people.

Millions of workers are disgusted, but few are shocked. The Tory government's preferred policy was always "herd immunity." Now, after being forced off course by fear of mass opposition, that "let rip" policy is being implemented, and the bodies will indeed "pile high in their thousands."

The fight against the pandemic is a political struggle against these architects of social murder, who have racked up a more realistic death toll of 150,000 and rising. It is a fight against the corporations they serve.

That offensive cannot be waged without confronting not only the Johnson government but also those who seek to prevent it—the Labour Party and the trade unions.

For more than a year, in the name of "national unity," Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer has acted as a de facto coalition partner of Johnson—his "constructive critic." But Starmer is leader only thanks to the refusal of his predecessor Jeremy Corbyn to honour the mandate given by millions of workers and young people to deal decisively with his party's right wing.

In turn, Corbyn and Starmer, as well as Johnson himself, have depended on the trade union bureaucracy to suppress the class struggle.

The Trades Union Congress and its affiliated unions represent a vast apparatus dedicated to this task, staffed by a privileged caste that has presided over close to four decades of virtually uninterrupted betrayals and defeats.

In the year to March 2020, Britain's unions had assets close to £2.3 billion. The average pay of the best-

paid 29 union leaders was £153,935. Frances O’Grady, general secretary of the TUC, received £166,461, Tim Roache, GMB general secretary received £160,000. Mick Cash, of the Rail, Maritime, and Transport Workers, with a mere 81,370 members, £159,944. They are all in the top 3 percent of earners.

Strike activity in the UK hovers at historic lows, with generally less than 100 strikes a year, involving less than 40,000 workers. Last year the bureaucracy stopped virtually all strike activity during the pandemic.

It is because the trade unions mount no defence of the working class that the vast bulk of Britain’s 32 million workers are not in the trade unions, in the land of trade unions.

For example, Britain’s largest union, Unite, has 1.4 million members. Last year it organised 245 ballots on some form of industrial action, but only 25 ended in either a strike or, more often, action far short of a strike.

And what happens when workers fight back? This year has seen a spate of strikes, forced through against efforts of containment by the unions, by workers facing savage wage cuts and speed-ups, imposed through fire-and-rehire schemes. Many have already been sold out.

In January, British Gas workers in the GMB began strike action that spanned 43 days against a fire and rehire contract. Their determined stand was betrayed. Most were forced to accept the new contract, including a 15 percent pay cut, and hundreds were sacked for refusing.

The pseudo-left groups are loyal only to the union bureaucracy. Even when the GMB recommended signing the new contract, the Socialist Party said that this was done out of concern for the workers, “to protect themselves from dismissal”! For its part, the Socialist Workers Party insisted this month that workers must still vote for Labour because “It retains some withered connections with working class organisations through its links with the trade union leaders.”

The stranglehold of the trade unions exacts a cruel price. To give just one example, the wealthiest 100 people in the UK have as much money as the poorest 18 million people, and the UK has the fifth most billionaires in the world. In contrast, poverty now affects a staggering three million children, up by over half a million in the last six years. In 649 neighbourhoods across the country, at least half of

children are estimated to be living below the breadline.

This cannot go on. “Nothing is as powerful as an idea whose time has come.” Victor Hugo declared that such an idea can conquer all the armies in the world.

The ICFI bases itself on this understanding. But we also understand that ideas must be fought for and given conscious and organised expression. The working class faces a ruling class that wields state power and is thwarted at every turn by a malignant bureaucratic apparatus.

That is why workers need to build a global network of rank-and-file committees and why the best of them, the most far-sighted and courageous, must dedicate themselves to building the world party of socialist revolution—the ICFI.



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