

UK: Johnson's ditching of workplace COVID mitigation measures relies on Labour Party and trade unions

Tony Robson
20 July 2021

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's July 19 "Freedom Day" ditching of all compulsory mitigation measures to contain the pandemic has provoked widespread opposition. The popular revulsion underlines the fact that this criminal enterprise is wholly dependent on the collusion of the Labour Party and trade unions.

"Freedom Day" meant freedom for the employers to end the mandatory wearing of face coverings on public transport and in shops, restaurants and other public spaces, along with the end of social distancing and, in many cases, the responsibility to self-isolate for ten days if having been in prolonged close contact with someone infected with COVID-19.

Johnson has declared that people must be "reconciled with more deaths" and hospitalisations. He feels able to do so only because he calculates that popular opposition can be policed and neutered by his de facto allies, Labour and the Trades Union Congress (TUC).

Only popular defiance against removing masks as a baseline measures to prevent transmission mitigated the full catastrophic consequences of the ditching of the legal mandate, in operation since last Summer on transport and in shops. For workers on buses, rail, tram and taxi services and in shops these "public spaces" are their workplaces and their safety is being eviscerated overnight.

Labour has been forced into a limited feint of opposition over face coverings, amid the popular anger that has developed despite the party's efforts to suppress oppositional sentiment in the name of "national unity".

Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan's extending the mask mandate across Transport for London services has been followed by similar measures enacted by elected Labour Mayors in other major cities. The Mayor of Manchester Andy Burnham announced that he would

retain the mandatory wearing of face masks on the city's Metro tram system after stressing that he did not want to send conflicting messages to those of the government. Five other Labour Metro Mayors have also extended the mandate over a patchwork of transport systems they exert control over. North of Tyne Mayor Jamie Driscoll mandated face coverings on the Metro tram system, but in the case of the Mayors of West and South Yorkshire their writ extends no further than bus stations.

Even these truncated measures are subsumed within the support by the Labour Party and trade unions for the broader removal of containment measures, including the ending of the one metre rule on social distancing and the enforced return to work under conditions in which the pandemic is now running out of control, with daily infections in the UK at the highest rate in the world.

The Johnson government has been condemned in the strongest terms by medical experts and scientists, with its actions decried as "criminal", "unethical and dangerous" and as a return to herd immunity with only 48% of the population unvaccinated.

In contrast, TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady emphasised that the main concern of the union bureaucracy was that the naked disregard for safety was undermining employers' and unions' ability to get workers back into the factories and offices under the most hazardous circumstances.

"We all want working life to get back to business as usual," she stressed. "But as restrictions are lifted and increasing numbers return to their workplaces, it is crucial that we get workplace safety right, and give workers and members of the public confidence. This is how get the country up and running again—not hobbled by rising infections and enforced self-isolation taking workers out of workplaces."

O’Grady’s central criticism is that the “unions and employers” have not been consulted over the plans, undermining the tripartite relationship with the government established from the start of the pandemic. Her reference to getting “workplace safety right” is a travesty, as this corporatist partnership has ensured one of the highest death tolls per capita in the world.

The TUC’s stated position on the pandemic from the beginning has been to leave the science and economy to the government, which Johnson has taken full advantage of based on his recognition that the trade unions fear an eruption of working-class struggle far more than the consequences of his own homicidal policies to ensure the further extraction of profit.

The trade unions in sectors where workers are endangered immediately by the ending of face coverings have left their members completely defenceless against the criminal actions of the government.

One in five workers in retail and hospitality are already self-isolating due to the spike in infections. This has been met by employers calling on the government to bring forward its scrapping of self-isolation for those under 18 or who have been double vaccinated who come into contact with a positive case—a step which can only serve to spread the virus.

Helen Dickinson, chief executive of the British Retail Consortium, bemoaned the number of shopworkers having to self-isolate and demanded the restrictions be lifted, denouncing the need to “needlessly quarantine.” The employers have been emboldened by the pitiful excuse for an opposition offered by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW). The union described the governments ending of mandatory face coverings as “vague and not enough to keep workers safe.”

In transport, Unite and the Rail, Maritime and Transport workers union (RMT) have praised the actions of the London Mayor and ruled out any organised action to save lives and protect workers from chronic illness.

A letter issued by Mick Lynch, the General Secretary of the RMT, on July 16 over the lifting of all COVID-19 restrictions on transport cited the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 on procedures “in the event of serious and imminent danger.” He insisted that “It is for individuals to make their own decisions as to whether there are ‘circumstances of danger’ which they ‘reasonably believe’ to be ‘serious’ and ‘imminent’ to justify leaving the workplace or (while any danger persists) refusing to return or taking appropriate

steps to protect themselves.”

The RMT advises its membership that employers should have these procedures in place, effectively throwing them to the wolves!

The same message, that workers are on their own, has been received by bus drivers from Unite, informing them that they can take action *as individuals* over safety concerns under Section 44 and 100 of the Employment Rights Act.

If it is down to the individual then what is the point of a trade union in the first place? The term “trade union” is in fact a misnomer to describe organisations that are completely wedded to the corporations and the state and whose primary function is to suppress any collective and organised resistance by the working class.

As with every other action against COVID-19, the fight to extend the mandate over face coverings cannot be entrusted to the ruling elite and its faithful retainers in the Labour Party and pro-company unions.

Workers must draw the central lesson of the past year and a half, that any fight to contain the pandemic is impossible without a fight against capitalism and its deadly calculus of profits over lives. The interests of the overwhelming majority of society, the working class, are made subordinate to the parasitic and criminal actions of the super-rich, which has emerged over the course of the last year and a half even wealthier than it was before.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) is assisting workers in establishing a global network of rank-and-file safety committees which, working closely with scientific and medical professionals, must shut down unnecessary and unsafe workplaces and ensure the strictest safety measures in necessary production and distribution.

These committees will lead the fight for full pay for workers required to stay at home, fully funded and effective test-and-trace systems, ventilation and other essential workplace safety measures, and a swift and equitable rollout of vaccines, all to be paid for out of the obscene wealth of the multi-millionaire and billionaire oligarchy.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact