

UK: Johnson's ending of COVID restrictions backed by Labour Party and trade unions

Robert Stevens
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The announcement ending all COVID restrictions is the most nakedly criminal action carried out by the Conservative government since the beginning of the pandemic.

On Wednesday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson made clear his intention to pursue an unadorned “herd immunity” agenda, with the removal of the remaining six Plan B measures in place, including mask wearing in schools and guidance to work from home ended yesterday.

In just one week's time, the use of COVID passes for entertainment venues will end as will the requirement to wear a mask in public spaces. Also going on January 26 are all restrictions on care home visits.

On March 24, compulsory self-isolation after testing positive for COVID-19 will end, with Johnson declaring, “Indeed, were the data to allow, I would like to seek a vote in this House to bring that date forward.”

The ruling class is no longer prepared to even record the spread of COVID-19, let alone combat it. The government's policy is rather to make sure everyone becomes infected, which is literally what is meant by the phrase, “learning to live with the virus.”

The Labour Party has done the seemingly impossible, making Tory propaganda more grotesque, by advancing as its own new slogan, starting to “live well” with COVID.

Britain already has the fourth highest number of infections in the world, with only the US, India and Brazil, all with far larger populations, recording more. Over 15 million people in Britain have been infected over the last two years (over 20 percent of the population). Now this mass infection is being celebrated and positively embraced.

This was summed up by the BBC's Health correspondent Nick Triggle, a consistent advocate for herd immunity, who wrote Wednesday that “England—and the rest of the UK, for that matter—is one of best protected nations when you combine the immunity built up by vaccination and previous infection.”

Only a couple of MPs self-designated as being on the “left” in the Labour Party, Richard Burgon and Rachel Maskell, even bothered to speak in the debate after Johnson.

Only a single Labour MP, Ian Lavery, even mentioned the number who have died of COVID in Britain, more than 150,000 according to the official measure and over 176,000 in reality.

In reference to the threats to Johnson's leadership of the Tory Party, Burgon, the chair of the Corbynite rump the Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs, said, “The rush to remove the requirement for masks, including on public transport, will cause people to fall ill and die unnecessarily. Is this not all about saving the Prime Minister's political skin, not protecting public health? What a moral failure and what a bad way to go.”

With Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer having already solidarised with Johnson in declaring, “The Labour party does not want to see restrictions in place any longer than necessary,” Johnson replied to Burgon, “I notice that the honourable gentleman is at variance with his Front Bench on that point, and not for the first time.”

Maskell, a former national official of the Unite union who served in four positions in Jeremy Corbyn's shadow cabinet between 2016 and 2020, noted that “1,000 people have died over the past week; 438 just yesterday”, but could only offer the feeble, “Now is not the time for complacency”.

Corbyn himself was once more absent without leave in the debate and has since said nothing about lifting all restrictions. This is of a piece with his most recent interventions in the pandemic backing the Tory hard-right opposition to mandatory NHS vaccination and passes to prove vaccination status.

Prior to Johnson's Wednesday announcement, the Zero Covid campaign in the UK, led by Labour “left” Diane Abbott, of which Corbyn is a nominal but wholly inactive member, issued a statement opposing the government's “reckless” move but offered no alternative other than appeals to the Tories for a few mitigations. “Far from relaxing the regulations, the Government should be doing more to manage the pandemic and protect people, especially those whose livelihoods and health have been affected.” Among their minimal demands were that “Public buildings,

schools and workplaces should be helped to check and improve their ventilation systems, for example with CO2 monitors and air-filtration systems.”

The Zero Covid campaign has always insisted that it doesn't require anyone it works with to actually believe in the eradication of COVID. Now it no longer makes any pretence that it advocates anything but a herd immunity lite agenda. Rather than even calling for Johnson himself to go, let alone urging a struggle against the Tories, Zero Covid UK pleads with him to oppose the hard-right anti-lockdown faction in the Covid Recovery Group.

“Boris Johnson should not be appeasing his libertarian back-benchers by relaxing these regulations,” they declare. “His duty is to the people of this country... He and his government should be doing all they can to save lives. They should not be burying their heads in the sand.”

The trade unions have worked with Labour throughout the pandemic in a de facto coalition with the government in suppressing all opposition in the working class and ensuring that unsafe workplaces and schools have been kept open.

Trades Union Congress (TUC) leader Frances O'Grady complained only that the ending of restrictions “is rushed & half-baked”, while declaring that it was “Important in next few weeks employers properly consult with staff & unions about return to the office.”

With thousands of teachers and children already infected with COVID and forced to self-isolate, the National Education Union (NEU) made no call for schools to be closed. Yet again they bemoaned that in rushing through the end of restrictions, the government was laying the basis for more “education disruption”.

Neither the NEU nor the other education unions had a word to say about the 135 schoolchildren who have tragically died from COVID.

Many workers are drawing lessons from the criminal role of Labour and the union bureaucracy. Lisa Diaz is a parent of two from Wigan, England, who has led a campaign in opposition to the opening of unsafe schools. Lisa posted the *World Socialist Web Site* article, “Johnson ends mask-wearing in English schools”, which met responses including:

- “Why are the unions not protecting the education sector, just why?”

- “I'm not sure why I'm still paying NEUnion fees. I have never felt so unsupported in my occupation. All I see from them is silly questionnaires on pay, which they have failed to make any movement on in 10 years. #schoolsarenotsafe.”

- “Where is [education union] NASUWT? I swear I've heard nothing from them.”

- “I'm completely perplexed the way Labour & the unions have responded during the pandemic. The response from

right wing moronic govt hasn't been a surprise, but very few speaking up on other side. Incredible.”

- “Astonishing—the education unions are supporting [government education secretary Nadhim] Zahawi killing not only children, but teachers too”.

Two members of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (UK) spoke out in opposition to the government's herd immunity agenda.

Helen Clarke explained, “I'm working part-time in primary schools where COVID is rife”. Children and staff are off sick “every week” and others are in school with family members self-isolating at home. Her teenage children “have been learning from home since Christmas” since “the prevalence is so high in the UK at the moment that there is always at least one infected person in any classroom... The only thing standing between them and infection is their mask (which they're often asked to remove!) and their vaccination.”

Health Secretary Sajid Javid's statement ending public health measures was “completely surreal. Cases are at the highest level they've ever been and deaths are at their highest level since last February, during the deadly second wave.” She concluded, “My children and I are being denied the right to live, work and go to school in safety without the threat of infection with a dangerous virus.”

Ben Roch said, “Living with the virus' really means the working class 'living' with repeated assaults on their immune systems, and with damage to multiple organs... If workers survive the first infection, there will still be dozens to come, each one with the potential to cause Long COVID. When Sajid Javid says COVID is here 'forever', this means a Groundhog Day loop in which the virus mutates to evade the vaccine, leading to booster jabs waning ever more quickly.”



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