Twenty fined for Downing Street lockdown parties as Johnson throws party near COVID bereaved protest

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30 March 2022

On Tuesday, the Metropolitan Police issued 20 fines to people in and around the Conservative government who attended one of 12 parties held in Whitehall in breach of national pandemic laws.

No names have been released, but Prime Minister Boris Johnson claims he is not among them. Johnson was one of 100 people sent questionnaires by the Met in February as part of its investigations into "partygate". Photos have emerged of him present at gatherings with colleagues and one of the scrutinised events took place in his flat. His spokesperson insists the prime minister will admit he has received a fine if he does.

This is still a possibility. The first 20 penalty notices are understood to have been issued to the people against whom there is an open and shut case, and who are therefore unlikely to challenge the fine. The Met states that investigations are still ongoing.

Justice Secretary Dominic Raab was sent to the morning news shows to defend Johnson yesterday. He claimed the prime minister had not deliberately misled parliament about the gatherings, but had told the truth "to the best of his ability" and "in good faith updated parliament on what he knows".

During Prime Minister's Questions that afternoon, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer said there had been "widespread criminality" in Downing Street and called on Johnson to resign, "The ministerial code says that ministers who knowingly mislead the House should resign. Why's he still here?"

This was as pro forma and muted a call for Johnson's resignation as he could manage, coming in Starmer's fourth of five questions. The majority focussed on the economic situation, with Starmer attacking Johnson and Chancellor Rishi Sunak by asking if they still thought they were "tax-cutting Conservatives". The last thing Starmer wants to do is mount a serious challenge against Johnson, which might destabilise the Tory government at a critical time for British imperialism.

As Johnson pointed out in reply, not long ago Starmer "was saying I shouldn't resign." Earlier this month, the Labour leader declared, "[W]hen it comes to standing up to Russian aggression, and standing in support of Ukraine, it's very important in the United Kingdom and in our politics that we show the world that we're united and, therefore, whatever the challenges and frustrations and criticism I have of the Prime Minister, and I've got many on this issue, there is unity, and it's very important that we demonstrate that unity."

He as good as withdrew his earlier call for Johnson to step down, stating, "Look, at the moment the prime minister is obviously concentrating on the job in hand and we stand united as the United Kingdom on that issue."

This followed weeks in which the Labour Party based its campaign against Johnson on appeals to Tory MPs to "do the right thing" and remove him by sending letters of no confidence to the Conservative's backbench 1922 Committee and forcing a leadership challenge.

This has evaporated now Johnson is leading Britain's wartime, "living with the virus" offensive. But it served the purpose of handing the reins of the Johnson premiership crisis to the Tory right, who promised to back the prime minister only if he rapidly implemented their agenda. In the first instance, this meant ending all public health measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. Johnson has carried out this policy in full, scrapping the legal requirement to self-isolate from February 24, with free universal testing to end tomorrow.

However, the full implications of Labour's ceding the initiative to the Tory hardliners have been made clear in the war over Ukraine. Johnson has fulfilled the role

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demanded of him by his backbenchers in operating as the most bellicose ally of the US and bloodcurdling anti-Russian provocateur on the world stage.

He was true to form in parliament yesterday, saying the UK needed to "make sure that there is no backsliding on sanctions by any of our friends and partners around the world."

Johnson continued, "In fact we need now to ratchet up the economic pressure on Vladimir Putin, and it is certainly inconceivable that any sanctions could be taken off simply because there is a ceasefire."

Labour's extreme reluctance to challenge Johnson even for the sake of party-political point scoring flows, on the one hand, from its refusal to jeopardise this warmongering agenda and, on the other, from its shared nervousness at the state of social relations in the UK.

The first set of 20 fines for flagrant lockdown breaches by government officials were issued on the same day as COVID-19 bereaved families gathered in the capital. They marked the one-year anniversary of the National Covid Memorial Wall, set up independently of the government and maintained in the face of its barely concealed hostility, with a silent procession to Downing Street. Participants carried banners listing the more than 180,000 dead and photos of their loved ones.

Later that evening, many protested outside a glitzy private dinner at the Park Plaza hotel hosted by Johnson for his Tory MPs, just seconds' walk from the memorial wall. They shouted, "shame on you" and "off to another party are we?" as senior backbenchers and cabinet members arrived. Large numbers of police were deployed, and Johnson entered by a different entrance.

One protestor, Kathryn de Prudhoe, whose father Tony Clay died with COVID in April 2020, spoke for millions when she told the Press Association, "His 'living with COVID' plan is reckless and failing but his desire to save his own skin means he's willing to let more people become seriously ill and die."

Stating that Johnson "simply must resign," she added, "His reputation on the national and global stage is already in tatters, and now COVID cases and hospitalisations are once again rising rapidly he has no authority to ask anyone to do the right things to get the situation back under control."

Safiah Ngah, whose father Zahari, died with COVID in February 2021, said, "There's just very little respect for real people in this country from the people that have the power."

Widespread popular anger over the government's murderous herd immunity agenda during the pandemic now combines with an opposition to the NATO war drive against Russia that currently finds no organised expression thanks to the warmongering of the Labour Party, the trade unions and a venal media. This has created such a volatile political atmosphere that the Tories depend on Starmer et al for their political survival.

Addressing the three fundamental issues confronting millions of people—the war, the cost-of-living crisis and the pandemic—depends on a political mobilisation of the working class independent of these rotten organisations.

In a February 4 statement on the "partygate" scandal, the Socialist Equality Party (UK) warned, "The conditions exist for the emergence of a mass struggle by the working class against the Tory government, the corporations and the super-rich. But this can only be realised by workers breaking free of the political stranglehold imposed by the Labour Party and trade unions, which are working to prevent an explosion of the class struggle, thereby ensuring the Tories' crisis is resolved safely within Westminster and in the interests of the capitalist class."

The SEP explained, "The fight of the working class against the Johnson government will raise ever more urgently the necessity of a political mass movement, independent of and opposed to both the Tories and Labour, and against the capitalist system and its state."

As the pandemic enters yet another upswing, households face the worst fall in living standards on record, and the world teeters on the brink of a third world war, this perspective and its conclusion become all the more urgent: "The working class is entering into decisive battles and requires a new leadership, the Socialist Equality Party."

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