

No voice for the working class in Johnson lockdown fines crisis

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Over 360,000 people have signed a petition calling for Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Chancellor Rishi Sunak to resign, after being fined by the police for breaching pandemic lockdown restrictions, to attend a birthday party for Johnson.

The petition was started by South Wales nurse Matthew Tovey, who last March launched another calling for NHS workers to receive a 15 percent pay rise which received over 820,000 signatures. In the description for the current petition, Tovey writes, “At the same time that No. 10 were partying in the Downing Street gardens, I was working 12 hour shifts in the NHS—in full PPE—in the corridors of hospitals that had started to resemble battlefields.”

He continues, “While members of this Government were partying and drinking, we were at the coalface, saving people’s lives. It was a horrible time. We weren’t thinking about partying. We were just missing our families. It was so stressful and there was nothing we could do to make things better.”

Millions of workers feel the same way. The pathetic fines symbolise the disregard shown by the government for the lives of the nearly 200,000 people killed by the virus, the more than 1.5 million suffering Long COVID and countless more who had their lives upended by the pandemic. Johnson’s contempt for the rules reflected the ruling class’s bitter disappointment that it had been forced, belatedly, to enact any public health measures at all by fear of the wave of social anger that would follow a collapse of the health service.

Yet the explosion of popular opposition shown by the petition finds no expression in parliament, to the point that most of the Conservative party currently feels it can still rally around Johnson. The sole letter of no confidence submitted so far is from the political nobody Nigel Mills. But even he acknowledged, “There’s almost zero chance that a motion of confidence in the House of Commons

would be lost... So I think he will carry on for now.”

There has also been one resignation—of justice minister Lord Wolfson, saying he had “no option” given his “ministerial and professional obligations”. Momentum could of course build, given reports of more fines in the offing, with Johnson implicated in several more gatherings meaning that he is by no means personally out of the woods.

The calculations being made behind the scenes were revealed by the Tory guru and founder of *Conservative Home* Tim Montgomerie, who told BBC Scotland, “Sooner rather than later, I think the prime minister will have to go, just to clear up the Conservative party’s chances at the next election.”

Telegraph columnist Allison Pearson commented even more softly, “On balance, he [Johnson] is probably too much of a liability to lead the Conservatives into the next election but, for now, we need time to find his replacement. Given a chance to redeem himself, Boris might surprise us.”

The fact that the prime minister and his chancellor have been fined for breaking the law and the discussion in their party is not on how to avert the fall of the government but how to win the next election is remarkable.

Even if Johnson were to have a change of heart and go, or if the Tory party suddenly decided on his removal, what is being prepared is a redoubling of Johnson’s right-wing policies under new management.

Johnson’s touted favoured successor for the last two years has been Sunak, the multi-hundred-millionaire embodiment of the financial oligarchy. But he has suffered a severe setback after his own lockdown fine, which followed on the back of a damaging scandal over his wife’s tax avoidance and his widely denounced Spring Statement. In pole position now is Foreign Secretary Liz Truss, with Defence Secretary Ben Wallace and Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee Tom

Tugendhat jostling behind.

Truss, lovingly christened the “the human hand grenade” by colleagues, had the job of provocatively blowing up UK-Russian relations in the run up to the Ukraine war. Her warmongering interventions after the Russian invasion include encouraging British citizens to travel to fight for Ukraine. She is considered a Thatcherite free marketer ardent enough to put Johnson to shame.

Wallace, a former captain in the Scots Guards, has risen from relative obscurity on the back of his role as arms dealer for the Ukrainian regime, overseeing the supply of vast amounts of British weaponry. A recent poll for *Conservative Home* had him far and away the most approved-of cabinet member by Tory voters, with a net +85.5% rating.

Tugendhat, a lieutenant colonel in the Intelligence Corps of the Territorial Army who served in Afghanistan, came to prominence last year with a lament for British imperialism’s failed occupation of that country, treated to a standing ovation in Parliament. He responded to the Russian invasion by calling on Johnson to look “close to home at those who enable, who propagate the propaganda that is being used by Putin... and to update the Treason Act so that we can identify them and call them what they are: traitors.”

As *Telegraph* columnist Nick Timothy summarised, arguing for Johnson’s resignation, “under any other Tory leader, British policy in Ukraine would continue unchanged.”

The Tories have so much breathing room to pursue their agenda thanks to the extraordinarily right-wing political climate created by the media and the opposition parties, Labour above all.

Johnson and Sunak’s actions have been criticised in the liberal press primarily for undermining the British state amid NATO’s anti-Russia war drive. Martin Kettle, the *Guardian*’s associate editor, gave the standard line yesterday, “you could argue that a war is a good time to ditch a failing prime minister, not a bad one.” He went on to praise Johnson for “doing many good things in support of Ukraine and in helping to isolate Russia,” but cautioned, “a large part of Johnson’s war is a pantomime version performed by a pantomime prime minister.”

While many columns highlight Johnson’s disrespect towards those who suffered in the pandemic, none mention the conscious, murderous policy of mass infection his government pursued. No one has quoted his infamous outburst, “No more fucking lockdowns, let the bodies pile high in their thousands!”

The most important feature of the “partygate” crisis has been its exposure of the Labour Party’s complete collapse as a political force in any significant way distinguishable from the Tories.

Labour has proved so incapable of mounting a serious challenge to Johnson’s government that its die-hard supporter John Rentoul, a columnist for the *Independent*, began an editorial yesterday, “Perhaps [Labour leader Sir] Keir Starmer is playing a complicated game by attacking our law-breaking prime minister so feebly he remains in office.” The party has “failed to maximise” Johnson’s embarrassment, he writes.

Labour cannot “maximise” the Tories’ difficulties because to do so would require fundamental differences in policy that do not exist. If the fondest hopes of the *Independent*, the *Guardian* et al were fulfilled, the Tory party fell from power and Johnson were replaced by Starmer, who would notice the change?

Starmer leads a party at one with the Tories on NATO’s proxy war in Ukraine and the “living with COVID strategy”, and whose response to the biggest cost-of-living crisis in decades is to propose a series of one-off measures saving households £200 on their energy bill. Starmer is organising a witch-hunt of Labour members with even the loosest claim to an association with left-wing, anti-war politics and is fighting the upcoming local elections on a law-and-order platform ripped from the handbook of Tony Blair.

This right-wing, militarist party is incapable of becoming a vessel for popular opposition to the Johnson government. It exists to throttle that sentiment in the working class.

In its response to the “partygate” scandal, the Socialist Equality Party published a statement in February, “The working class must mobilise to bring down the Johnson government!” Events since then have lent new force to this perspective, confirming that such a mobilisation means not only militant struggle, organised independently of trade unions that are as complicit with the Johnson government as Labour, but the development of a new political party of the working class.



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