

Bereaved families denounce Boris Johnson as he testifies at UK COVID Inquiry

Our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to bereaved family members outside the COVID-19 Inquiry at Dorland House in Paddington, London on Wednesday.

Families gathered to protest on the day former Prime Minister Boris Johnson, whose policies led to over 233,000 deaths in Britain, was beginning two days of testimony.

Johnson went in the back door of Dorland House at 7am to evade the bereaved family members' protest. He has refused to meet with representatives of the Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice, a group of over 6,000 people.

Photos of lost loved ones were hung up around the length of the building and as a billboard on a van. Alongside pictures of his victims was a photo of Johnson and the words, "Let the bodies pile high." Another billboard said, alongside the total number of COVID deaths, "The Bodies Did Pile High".

One banner highlighted the National Covid Memorial Wall across the river from Parliament, on which is painted a heart for every life lost. The banner recorded the latest known death toll of 233,225. A banner hung next to it featured the words of Dominic Cummings, former chief adviser to Johnson, who revealed of Johnson that, at the height of the pandemic, "Enraged, he made his comment directed at me, in his study, 'No more fucking lockdowns, let the bodies pile high in their thousands'". It also featured the witness statement of Lord Udney-Lister, the former Downing Street Chief of Staff, who confirmed, "I recall the PM saying in September 2020 that he would rather 'let the bodies pile high' than impose another lockdown."

One family member held a banner reading, "Boris Johnson killed my Husband".

When Johnson at the beginning of his questioning issued a pro-forma apology for the mass deaths and

suffering his policies had caused, a group of family members held up a sign stating, "We do not accept your apology Mr Johnson". For this they were told to leave the building by COVID Inquiry chairperson Baroness Hallet.

Outside, the group held up their banner and another reading, "The dead can't hear your apologies".

Lucia, from Greater Manchester said, "Boris Johnson is here today and this is a big day for us, following the deaths of my parents in 2021. My father died on 25th of January and my mother died 12 days later, sixth of February 2021."

Showing WSWs reporters the photos of her parents on her placard, Lucia said, "This is evidence of the elderly being piled high. This was the last time we saw our parents alive.... My father was 79 and my mother was 76.

"There was no big plan for pandemic which is what we're finding out... It was more sinister than perhaps it has been portrayed as the reality of what we lived through.

"My parents had been isolating and following the rules. We had been leaving the shopping to the doorstep, doing everything that Boris Johnson and his team have told us. They were petrified... My parents died a week before they were due to have their vaccine...

"I think they [those responsible] should be prosecuted, [and] not only Johnson."

Peter from the Wimbledon area of London carried a placard showing a photo of Johnson and his statement that Covid was "nature's way of dealing with old people". Under this were the words "Criminally Negligent".

Peter said, "Johnson is the absolute epitome of everything that went wrong with COVID. He was the

man in charge. The buck has to stop with him. Obviously, they've all been in there trying to cover their own backs. He will do the same today, I'm quite sure. He will deny responsibility, but in my view, he should end up locked up basically. There must be justice.

"Some of the things that he is supposed to have said are cringeworthy. That anybody could actually say that, that it's 'nature's way of dealing with people', 'Let the bodies pile up'. Things like that shows absolute callous disregard for human life...

"There really needs to be justice done over this issue and I'm sure a way can be found, if the will is there. And I think there is a will in the British population to see this, I was going to say buffoon, but that's just an act he puts on, to see this callous individual locked away."

"It was a pandemic, it was always going to claim lives, but not nearly so many needed to be claimed. I remember at the time despairing that the government weren't acting, and not stopping flights coming in. Looking at the evidence on masks and looking at countries that had experienced pandemics before...

"I have a Long COVID issue with my right eye. I had a mini-stroke in my eye while I had COVID. At the time the experts didn't really link that to COVID but now they are saying that, yes, it's one of those Long COVID issues where tiny blood vessels get affected in various parts of the body. So, it's a hideous disease and much, much more should have been done to protect the population."

Lena brought a placard of her partner of 14 years, Pat, a National Health Service worker of 20 years' standing who caught COVID and died. She said of Johnson, "It's absolutely disgusting. He should be hanging his head low. It was all about 'Get Brexit Done'."

Looking at Pat's photo she said, "Twenty years' service, that's loyal, and he died doing his job. I'm so angry about it... We're here to get some justice."

Asked about the move by Inquiry head Baroness Hallet to ask bereaved family members to leave the room after they held up their placard refusing Johnson's phoney apology, Lena replied, "The families are supposed to be at the head of this Inquiry and that their comments will be taken in. They've just been marginalised again. Not sitting down or holding up

posters like I'm doing now and they're told to leave.

"It's a very poor way of dealing with the bereaved families."

Michael Rosen is a children's author, poet, presenter, columnist, broadcaster and political activist. Rosen, who has written 140 books, served as Children's Laureate from 2007 to 2009. In 2023 he won the PEN Pinter Prize, awarded by English PEN, for his "fearless" body of work. Rosen was hospitalised due to COVID and almost died.

He told the WWS, "I had COVID in March 2020. When I caught it, I was in intensive care for about 47/48 days, and in hospital for about three months. And Johnson, you've got to remember that was at the beginning of February 2020, he laid out his philosophy. He said he was against market segregation in the face of the coronavirus.

"What does that mean? What he's saying there is that he was against a public health policy as a way of dealing with the virus, or flip it over, he was against damaging the market, in other words, capitalism.

"So that was his philosophy and then it's emerged from the notes from [Chief Scientific Officer] Patrick Vallance in his diary that Johnson also had an attitude to old people—that's me, people over 70—that we've had a 'good innings'...

"This means that somehow or other it's OK for old people to die... That it's been predetermined somewhere in the cosmos, I don't know by whom, that we have reached our time...

"For me, it sounds like a mixture of sort of mediaeval laissez faire going on, alongside his attitude that he didn't want the market damaged. So, you've got a strange, weird marriage of Malthus, who thought that the population was too big, and Calvin, who said that it's pre-determined whether we were good enough to be saved or not. It's an horrific philosophy that emerged from a man who was in charge and was supposed to be protecting us."



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