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Covid-19 pandemic in Britain

We are not all in the same boat

- IV Online magazine - 2020 - IV544 - May 2020 -

Publication date: Wednesday 20 May 2020

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This government has a death pact with a market system that kills.

We should start with the deaths. Sometimes on the left we can be a bit cold and analytical but the only response at the moment is utter anger. Thousands and thousands are dying needlessly. Dying on ventilators, apart from their family and friends, is a slow painful way to die. Everyone who dies leaves dozens or more of us grieving. More and more of us know people who have died. Already we are talking of the equivalent of 600 Grenfells (over 100 people died in a tower block due to defective building materials two years ago).

But just the other week at the daily government press conference the graph with the comparable number of deaths in Europe suddenly was no longer on show. Why? Last week Britain had already suffered more deaths than anywhere else except the USA and is on course to having the highest rate per 100,000 people. Previously the government was happy to compare our great British exceptionalism with those poor forsaken Italians, today apparently it is far too complicated to make such comparisons. Tory ministers are instructed not to mention the Germans.

Right at the beginning one of the main scientific advisors had suggested that a death toll of 20,000 would be a 'success'. Today we are at over 34,000 according to the narrowly defined government figures. The National Office of Statistics puts it at over 40 thousand and serious research bodies like the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine speak of 60,000. As the Financial Times, the paper of the 'intelligent' wing of the bourgeoisie had discovered, the only correct way to work out the death toll is to take the difference between the 5 year average death rate and the rate this year, thus giving you the excess deaths. It is difficult for a government to dispute the actual number of registered deaths.

Why has there been such a slaughter?

1. Clearly a major error was to adopt the theory of herd immunity. This idea was that once a certain percentage of the populations was infected, say 60%, there would be immunity for all and the more vulnerable could meanwhile be protected. Of course this is a convenient theory for all those who own and control the economy who wanted to minimise the loss of production. So the lockdown came at least three weeks too late. Italian friends of ours were scrambling to get their loved ones out of London as soon as they saw what was happening. They were seeing the massacre in Lombardy.
2. It followed logically that a massive system of testing with contact tracing was not a priority. The efforts already underway were officially abandoned in March and Britain even today is still playing catch up with its testing capacity.
3. Such decisions were bad enough but they have to be understood within a historical framework of a ten year long programme of austerity. Cuts in public spending and working people's wages were made to pay for the government money used to bail out the banks following the 2008 financial crash. This meant Britain had thousands less intensive beds available than Germany as well as less trained health personnel. Putting money into adequate stockpiles of personal protection equipment (PPE) or spare ventilators was seen as extravagance. We know many key workers have died through lack of PPE.
4. It is not just a question of accounting. Conservative policy (similar to Blair's too in many respects) was all about the

market and private being good and planning and public being bad. Key functions of the National Health Service (NHS) and the social care system were privatised and fat contracts given to big or small outsourcing private for profit companies. The local state's public health structures were also seen as a luxury. These are the very specialists who today would be vital in running a locally based test, track and contact operation.

5. Today the scandal of the dire state of the residential care system for older people or others with difficulties is being exposed. Up to 40% of deaths are probably taking place not in hospitals but in care homes. The residential care system which at one time was largely run by local authorities is now almost completely privatised or run by a multitude of charities. Central funding for paying the costs of a large minority of old people who cannot pay for their own care has been cut. The residential sector, despite being squeezed still makes good profits from the high fees it earns from the majority who usually have sold their homes to pay for care. No wonder there are quite large financial companies, even hedge funds, who invest in this sector.

6. A fatal error that has now emerged in the open was the official policy of releasing older patients with the disease from hospitals back into care homes thus sparking hundreds of hot spots of the virus. There is even an official statement made early on that there was 'no risk of an epidemic breaking out in the care homes'. The drive for maximum profit explains the zero hours contracts and minimum wage (£8.20 an hour) for staff working in these homes. It is policy for many of these homes to have floating agency workers who move in and out of homes as the need arises. This working practice resulted in multiple cross contaminations. The care home system is fragmented between thousands of owners and entities and is not articulated efficiently with either the local state or the NHS.

7. Planning for pandemics and maintaining structures for this was a low priority and clear evidence has emerged of various official bodies predicting problems if there were a virus outbreak. A committee called Cygnus wrote reports along those lines two years ago. It is almost as if the older conservative party ideology of a certain patrician public service ethos has been shattered as the party had adopted tough, neoliberal Brexit policy.

8. Today in the middle of this terrible crisis the government still prefers to hand out key operations to its friends in the big outsourcing and accounting companies like Deloitte, Capita or Serco. So they get the contract for the testing or digital applications. The Guardian (15.5.20) exposed how an American company responsible for stockpiling PPE material had performed so badly that the British Army had to step into rescue it.

Class, Race and Gender inequality in the Covid crisis.

The death notices are revealing the truth, we are not all in the same boat. If you are Black, Asian, disabled or a low paid worker you are four or five times more like to die than the rest of the population. The British press had done a reasonable job in telling the stories of those who have died. All the photos of the health workers quickly show that around a half are not white British but are either from a different heritage or are migrants from places like the Philippines. The latter, believe it or not, have to pay £600 a head for their families to use the very health services that they are keeping afloat. The migrants who the Brexit campaign specifically targeted to win the vote are precisely the key workers who are dying, caring and keeping services going. Yesterday in parliament the home secretary refused to change the rules in her new points-based visa system which means anyone earning less than £21,500 will not be let in – excluding many of the people these ministers are hypocritically clapping every Thursday at 8pm.

We are not all equal in the lockdown:

- working on the computer at home with some flexibility is less onerous than risking contagion on public

transport and at work;

- if you have a big house and garden it is less stressful than if you are a family in a small apartment;
- for women it is often a double or triple workload – working for a company on the PC, teaching the kids and cleaning the house and preparing meals;
- during lockdown domestic violence against women has doubled;
- not everybody is receiving 80% of their wages, you may be able to get your rent and £94 a week on the 'safety net' of universal credit but if you were working in the informal economy as a migrant it can be difficult to claim.

Some effects of the lockdown have been positive:

- We have seen an enormous network of mutual aid organised, sometimes down to street level, this is organised on social media and there is often an overlap with Labour or radical activists
- Everybody is talking about how the air is cleaner and nature is coming back and they are rediscovering quieter neighbourhoods by walking and cycling, people are growing flower and vegetables for the first time
- A recent survey showed that post-pandemic 60% wish that health and wellbeing take priority over economic growth, more and more pundits compare the period that is coming something like what happened post-45 with the need for big changes.
- It is much more difficult for the government to say there is no 'magic money tree' in the future. The conservative government is paying £14 billion a week to pay 80% of the salaries of 7.5 million workers. Money is being distributed quickly to the health sectors after years of cuts.

Whether such sentiments are translated in a general political shift to more progressive political attitudes is another matter.

It is all very contradictory

A peculiarly British phenomenon is the number of people involved in crazy activities to raise money, mainly for the NHS. For instance an army veteran who was 99 years old did a sponsored walk up and down his garden and ended up raising £35 million. Captain Tom became a national icon and promoted to Colonel on his 100th birthday. Such actions just as easily reinforce a general political narrative that the Johnson government is keen to embed – that of a plucky, post-Brexit Britain resolutely 'beating' the virus through its wonderful NHS and heroic sacrifice and grit. The spirit of Britain standing alone in 1940 against the Nazis is explicitly exalted. Until the arrival of Phase 2 last week such sentiments of rallying around a national effort, led by a Prime minister, who crossed the front line into hospital himself and survived, meant that the Conservatives were over fifteen percentage points ahead of Labour and Johnson had high personal ratings.

Political difficulties for this government and the bosses

The so-called Phase 2 or the beginning of the exit strategy started last Monday has highlighted the differences existing among ruling class sectors about the road to follow. A minority in government is pushing for a more vigorous return to full production. They are ideologically uneasy about such massive government spending going to working people directly. There is a business lobby that is very vocal in the sectors which are most at risk in a post Pandemic world such as aviation, cars, hospitality and tourism. It is pressurising the government to give it a lot of money with no strings attached. They want all restrictions to be over as quickly as possible. At the same time there is a debate on

how to pay back the huge government debt that is accumulating. A document revealed by the Treasury (ministry of the budget), which is traditionally more conservative, projects salary freezes and spending cuts in pensions and elsewhere. Obviously they want the rich and business to pay the absolute minimum and are wary of too much Keynesian government intervention in their economy.

Another massive problem for the British ruling class is the centrifugal forces of Scottish and Welsh national devolved governments. These governments which control their own health services and education have not aligned with Johnson on the measures adopted for Phase 2 – the shift from Stay at Home to Stay Alert or the plan to send some classes back to school. Brexit has already stimulated Scottish nationalism, the pandemic risks making it stronger.

However Johnson for the moment understands, perhaps his personal illness has meant he is less gung-ho, that a too rapid exit strategy risks a second spike and even more economic disruption. He is also conscious of polls that show people are wary of leaving lockdown. It is unlikely that Johnson will attack health spending. There has been too much applause and almost religious veneration for the NHS which would make such a line politically impossible. Interestingly whereas the NHS has always been Labour's strongest electoral advantage today the conservatives under Johnson have managed to neutralise it not just during the crisis but with its use in the Brexit campaign and the first measures the government took. At the same time Johnson has the advantage that at the moment the cost of issuing government bonds to cover the debt is remarkably low. There is also quantitative easing which essentially allows the Bank of England to print money. Leading economists are saying this is all quite possible. A whole series of right wing think tanks such as the Adam Smith Institute, the Institute of Economic Affairs and the Centre for Policy Studies, have advised against a renewal of austerity. Johnson is said to have banned his ministers from using the term.

So it is probable that he will pursue a more complex strategy that suddenly launching a massive neo-liberal attack on the working class. Of course we are talking in this immediate period – further down the road all bets are off. Where it is possible to get away with some cuts - possible loosening the special protection for Pensions (the triple lock) or new taxes on the self-employed – he will do so. But the idea of a new Brexit period of increased state investment in the economy and a national recovery programme, a type of rightist, nationalist populism is possible. A no-deal Brexit is another difficulty he has. In any case the scope Johnson has for success rests on three factors:

- a) How the government is seen to have managed Phase 2 and how far it is blamed for the scale of the crisis is still an open question. Opinion has become more negative with the way a shift to Phase 2 has been handled. The scandals of the care homes and the controversy over further opening of schools have not played well. Media coverage has been more critical. If the decline in deaths reverses Johnson could be in big trouble;
- b) The capacity of the Labour Party under the new, more moderate leader, Kier Starmer, to mobilise opinion around a clear political alternative;
- c) The response of the trade union movement and other active campaigns to the crisis.

Is Labour doing its job as official opposition?

Starmer is an elite lawyer and is praised for his forensic ability in debate. Certainly in a recent Prime Minister's questions session (every Wednesday in parliament) he demonstrated clinically how the government had officially declared on the 28th February that the epidemic would not affect the retirement homes. Johnson just waffled and flat out denied it despite documentary evidence. Even the right wing dominated media accepted that he had been

skewered.

However at the same time Starmer accepts the overall narrative set up by the Conservatives – ‘it is an unprecedented crisis and as an opposition we will be constructive and loyal in the middle of a national crisis, we will praise the good things and criticise constructively the bad’. The tone of his interventions is that of the courtroom, there is no anger or political rhetoric that denounces the clear responsibilities of the government in one of the worst crises Britain has faced. Just after Johnson’s big declaration on Phase 2 the 17 Labour MPs in the Corbynist Socialist Campaign group released a statement that defined the policy of Johnson as a declaration of class war against working people. Another example is illustrative. On a TV programme Anneliese Dodds, the shadow minister of the economy, explained correctly how the ten years of austerity had meant the crisis has been worse but she said she would not point the finger at George Osborne, the main architect of that austerity....who was sitting a couple of metres away.

It is very difficult for the 500,000 members of the Labour Party to put any pressure on the leadership or to put forward motions to the congress or higher structures of the party since everything has been shut down because of the epidemic. This is despite the fact that Parliament is operating using Zoom. There is a petition for online meetings to be official. The current leadership may prefer this situation. A recent survey said 61% Labour members thought Starmer was not critical enough of the government. On the left we have been holding online informal meetings.

In the last week with the government problems over Phase 2 and following that survey, Starmer and his team has become more critical but the tone is still the same. They do not even raise clearly the need for an official public enquiry when the crisis has eased.

Trade union responses

In the workplaces there have been few actions to defend health and safety. However given the partial return to work signalled by Phase 2 the Trades Union Congress (TUC) has been more active and has even obliged the government to consult it. Some concessions were won from the government about agreed guidelines for safe working. National consultations between Conservative governments and trade unions have been extremely rare for many years. The problem with the guidelines is that everything depends on the trade union organisation in each workplace. In the private sector the trades unions are very weak and the bosses in small workplaces can put a lot of pressure on working people to cut corners. More generally a big problem is for workers getting to work on transport where it is difficult to maintain social distancing. The railworkers union have threatened to take action to stop trains that they consider unsafe.

The other union that has been more organised is the teachers. Johnson wants 4 and 5 and 10 year old students to return to school on June 1st. The teachers unions united have laid down 5 tests for this to be possible. The government and their captive press have been putting a lot of pressure on teachers to cave in. Accusations of leftism and militancy have been levelled against the biggest union. Despite these attacks 7000 teachers have joined the union over the last week, a sign that many teachers will take action. A number of Labour led councils which have some control over education have said they will not open schools up further on June 1st. This has become one of the hottest political issues. The other night the National Education Union (NEU) organised a Zoom trade union meeting with 20,000 attending, which must be some sort of world record.

Starmer and his team have supported the tests set by the teachers but are careful not to be seen to defend any possible action of defiance come June 1st. They keep talking about finding a national consensus. Some Labour party grandees on the right of the party like Blair and ex-ministers Blunkett or Johnson have called for the teachers to go

in. One newspaper has called on Starmer to sort out the militant teachers and get them to concede.

What is to be done, what action programme for the crisis?

The crisis is so vast and deep that it is difficult both to develop a programme of demands that meets the needs of working people and to work out which particular issues will energise and mobilise people most. To some degree for a radical left that is a minority current we cannot on our own decide where the movement will go.

We need immediate demands around the exit strategy – health and safety at work, test, track and contact, campaign for international cooperation for a vaccine available without profit for everyone and job or salary guarantees with the winding down of the furloughing programme. At the same time we need a more ambitious programme of demands which has two legs:

- a) defending our jobs, wages, the health service, social care and public spending including the elimination of the profit making from the NHS and the residential care system;
- b) an ambitious green new deal which requires massive state investment that starts a shift in our whole model of production, consumption and energy use, all state money going to sectors in crisis such as the aviation industry to be conditional on this shift so no money without control.

International initiatives can also play a role since the pandemic does not recognise human frontiers. Some on the left have underestimated the ecological causes of the pandemic and instead focused on the economic dimensions or suggest no real ecological progress can be made without a socialist revolution. The pandemic will come again if there is not a fundamental change in the relationship between humanity and nature. A totally new way of producing and consuming food is vital if we are to prevent pathogens passing into the millions of chickens, pigs or cattle kept in the mega farms. A no growth strategy with new patterns of consumption and transport is now on the table. European wide campaigning for taxes on wealth or big corporations to pay for the green new deal as suggested by the comrades in Anticapitalistas in the Spanish state might be a good project. Similarly people here have already identified the likelihood of millions of young people being unemployed, including graduates.

There is an opening for the left because Labour has already got policy on the Green New Deal with its quite radical line of zero carbon emissions by 2030. The ex-leader Ed Miliband had kicked off the debate on how the Green New Deal needs to be related to the post Pandemic world. He has talked about an army of zero carbon workers made up of young people but also people in transition from other ecologically destructive sectors.

For us the idea of a much greater commons – free, public services that can regain the spaces taken over by capitalist commodity – is a key idea. We should eliminate all private profit companies from the NHS and the care home system and then work out ways to coordinate their services on a local level. This would also involve a revaluation of what we dub purple jobs, often carried about by women. Decent training and careers will make the care homes much more stimulating and dignified places for older people. There is also the debate about a universal basic income. Some people on the left see it as a trap because it could individualise the problem of access to basic services and make it more difficult to demand proper funding for them. Some disabled people have found that having their own budget does not give them more autonomy or resources if there is a negative effect on the provision of services, if they are privatised for example. Other people on the left think you could argue for such an income as well as defend the provision of more and better services. They would argue that a guaranteed income would mean workers could take action at work and have a back-up income to sustain a strike.

We are not all in the same boat

Another aspect of struggle that may come up more and more is that raised by Naomi Klein (see Long Read in Guardian, 19th May 20). She argues that there is a big threat from Big Tech – Google, Apple, Facebook, Twitter etc. – to take over government services on the basis of saving costs. For instance they start from the necessary increased screen time during the pandemic to argue this is the future. We can provide a huge chunk of education tailored to the individual using Artificial Intelligence. Governments might see a way of saving the cost of paying teachers. it could be extended to other sectors too – even into care homes with robots (already happening in Japan). Another great advantage for governments is that such an intervention comes with readymade monitoring and surveillance. China is already using such technology. We have already seen in Britain how the government has preferred to give big contracts to the corporations rather than to the NHS or the local authorities. It is a way of further privatisation. Instead we should argue for better, useful human jobs within the context of a four day week which would both be ecologically positive and assist people's capacity to get involved in political activity.

Finally there is another trap for the workers movement. It is possible that Johnson will play the card of the need for a great national recovery at the end of the pandemic. Already Frances O'Grady, leader of the TUC has floated the idea of some sort of national structure to accommodate this. While negotiations are one thing getting the movement tied in with some false national interest would be a mistake.

19 May 2020

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