

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6483>



Britain and Covid-19

Self-isolation and class consciousness

- IV Online magazine - 2020 - IV542 - March 2020 -

Publication date: Tuesday 31 March 2020

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

The British Conservative Party (usually referred to as the Tories) have had considerable success in their decades long project of smashing up working class organisations and atomizing working class communities. Unions are not illegal but the barriers against taking industrial action keep getting bigger. Strikes are rare. The cash in hand, informal, insecure economy employs millions of workers who are difficult to organize, even for those few unions which try.

Corbyn's period of leadership of the Labour Party sometimes offered a glimpse of what a lively, mobilized mass party could do by drawing hundreds of thousands of people into political activity. Yet the very end of the Corbyn era is exactly when the British working class is revealing that it still retains its capacity to self-organize outside the structures of any of the big parties or trade unions. [1]

More than that – the Tory finance minister Rishi Sunak pushed through a package of measures The Times newspaper described as “a state intervention that goes beyond Jeremy Corbyn’s wildest dreams”. [2] It includes a guarantee that the state will pay 80% of the wages up to £2500 of any worker forced to stay at home. He later introduced a similar measure for the self-employed. From the party which made food banks and deep poverty for millions of people a hallmark of its time in government this is a staggering transformation. Sunak is stealing much of Corbynism’s programme to respond to the crisis.

As it became apparent that the British government would have to take measures to control the spread of the pandemic similar to what has been happening in Spain, Italy and France, groups of people, often previously unknown to each other, started pulling together networks at the level of boroughs, individual streets and housing estates.

Generally speaking, the people involved barely knew each other. Some were already involved in the Labour Party or community groups, but an influx of new volunteers made the difference.

A spontaneous movement

Facebook, WhatsApp and Zoom are the tools this spontaneous movement uses. People volunteer to queue to get shopping for a person they don't know and whom they might only see very briefly as they drop off the food and newspaper. Some volunteer to walk the dog of a stranger who is housebound due to a medical condition. Others offer to phone a person living alone so that they can have some human contact.

The British state has failed at a national and a local level to do anything like this. Local councils used to deliver hot meals to the elderly and housebound. Relentless cuts imposed by the Tories which these councils barely resisted put an end to that years ago. Intimate care at home for the elderly has been outsourced to private companies which are notorious for hyper-exploiting low paid women and migrant workers. Mental health services for children and adults have been pared to the bone, and when the pandemic has ended hundreds of horror stories will emerge of how families coped with a mentally ill relative who was confined inside the home for weeks.

Volunteers in these micro-local support groups know that they are filling in for some of the state's deficiencies. But what makes them do it as a socialist instinct for collective action and solidarity, including even to an extent those who are doing through a religious community.

Self-isolation and class consciousness

In those Zoom meetings and WhatsApp groups many thousands of people are learning that they know how to organize and that they can do it independently. Every day they are seeing that the essential people in society are the working class filling the supermarket shelves, cleaning the hospitals and looking after the elderly. And these workers too will come out of this experience with a sense that they are more important to the world than the bankers and capitalists.

Boris Johnson is likely to be the prime minister remembered for failing to adequately prepare for a pandemic of which his government was given plenty of notice. His time in office will be defined by the thousands of families who were not able to be with dying relatives or attend their funerals. He is enjoying good poll ratings at the moment, but as the tally of the dead increases and a reckoning is made in the coming months, he will be seen to be the architect of the disaster in Britain.

Covid 19 is teaching hundreds of millions of people across the planet that the working class is the truly indispensable class. More than that, it is obliging them to learn how to organise to survive and resist. And it's not an ephemeral moment. All the signs are that months of isolation and pandemic lie ahead and people's frustrations with the state's failure will build into a fury. This could be the rebirth of a new, militant class consciousness. Keir Starmer, the incoming Labour leader, will do well to remember that. [3]

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.

[1] Jeremy Corbyn announced his resignation as leader of the Labour Party following the December 2019 general election. The election process – first nominations by MPs, affiliated trades union and constituency parties then voting by one member one vote – has been taking place since January and the result will be announced on 4 April.

[2] *The Times* 22 March 2020 [“The coronavirus economy: even in wartime, nobody dared to do what Rishi Sunak has”](#).

[3] Keir Starmer is Labour MP for Holborn and St Pancras constituency in central London and currently Shadow Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, to which he was appointed by Corbyn in 2016. He is widely expected to win the leadership election.