

UK: TUC and Labour attempt damage control after Tories push murderous “back to work” strategy

By Chris Marsden
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The UK’s Conservative government has distributed seven documents with employers’ groups and the trade unions setting out its plans to exit the COVID-19 lockdown.

Boris Johnson has not allowed his own near-death experience with the virus to divert him from a “back to work” strategy that will endanger the lives of millions. True to his government’s Thatcherite pedigree, there is not a single policy that legally enforces businesses to protect their workforce. Everything is voluntary and everything is clearly inadequate.

The draft plans are to be finalised ahead of Johnson delivering his supposedly “comprehensive plan” on Sunday for a full return to work. The seven documents reportedly use phrases such as “employers should consider” when discussing social distancing, handwashing and other basic measures in workplaces and whether to end practices such as “hot desking” and introduce staggered shifts. Nothing has been revealed about how the population is supposed to travel to work via mass public transport systems while maintaining social distancing.

Defence Secretary Ben Wallace has made clear that the advice surrounding workplace social distancing is entirely voluntary and that where distancing of two metres is deemed impossible, it is up to the employer whether they substitute shielding, other forms of personal protective equipment (PPE)—or even merely limits on the time spent in close proximity. “You could be closer than two metres but not for long,” he said.

The proposals are politically explosive, given that the UK has overtaken Italy for the most deaths from COVID-19 in Europe. They were made known, moreover, as every opinion poll has cited continued and overwhelming public opposition—over 70 percent—to the type of reopening of the economy that the Tories plan to implement within days and weeks. They could backfire badly, creating the conditions for an explosion of new cases of COVID-19 and, more dangerous still for business—provoking social and political opposition in the working class.

For these reasons, British Chambers of Commerce President, Baroness Ruby McGregor-Smith, sent an open letter to Johnson stating that she wanted to see “the planning and communication of a carefully phased approach to lifting lockdown,” including mass testing and contact tracing, clear decisions and guidance on what PPE is needed in workplaces. Josh Hardie, deputy director of the Confederation of British Industry stated that “Restart must put

health first, or it will risk sending the economy backwards.”

The same concerns have prompted a public display of limited and loyal opposition from the Trades Union Congress, union leaders and Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer.

TUC General Secretary Frances O’Grady complained that the government’s guidance places no actual requirements on employers. Appealing to “those employers who want to act responsibly,” she said the proposals offered “an open goal for rogue employers...”

In the *Guardian*, O’Grady wrote, “The TUC proposes a new approach, one that supports good employers to get it right...”. She called for mandatory risk assessments “done in agreement with recognised unions in the workplace. Union health and safety reps are experts who have special legal rights to investigate workplace hazards.”

Her final call was for the government’s job retention scheme to be made “more flexible to support a phased return to work... Like everyone else, unions want everyone to get back to work and start rebuilding Britain.”

Similar criticisms were made by Prospect union General Secretary Mike Clancy, who stressed, “We all want to get back to work,” while warning of a “spike in cases and another full-scale lockdown”. John Phillips, acting General Secretary of the GMB union, proclaimed, “We desperately need to get the economy going and nobody is keener than GMB to get people back to work...”.

Starmer echoed the union’s pitch for a back to work strategy that would better serve the needs of business. On *BBC Breakfast*, Starmer stressed that he was “not setting up a rival camp here... We want to support the government to get this right and that is why we need a national consensus on what happens next.”

A return to work should be based on “seven principles”, he urged, including a “national safety standard” for businesses and schools, an “ambitious target” for contact tracing and a national plan to ensure supply chains for PPE for key workers.

The attempt by Labour and the trade unions to feign concern for the working class is laughable, given that they have functioned in a de facto national unity government with the Tories throughout the coronavirus pandemic.

Starmer’s appeals for national consensus are belated, given that the trade unions entered into extensive talks with the Tory

government and employers in March, while suppressing all opposition by workers over the failure to provide PPE and other safety measures.

The TUC supported the government's £350 billion bailout for the corporations, with O'Grady, who sits on the Bank of England's court of directors, hailing Chancellor Rishi Sunak's "real leadership" and saying how she was "glad he's listened to the unions."

The Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union (RMT) joined the government's Rail Industry Coronavirus Joint Forum with the aim of ensuring "close co-operation and collaboration between the trade unions and employers."

The Communication Workers Union representing Royal Mail workers not only called off a threatened national strike, but offered its members up as an "additional emergency service" without even demanding the most basic PPE.

O'Grady then published an open letter in the *Times* proposing "a big generous offer to government: bring us into the room, give us an equal voice, listen to our ideas and make sure working people are not left behind. In return we will roll up our sleeves and get stuck into the job of rebuilding our country so that it works for everyone. Just as we did after the Second World War."

The government responded by organising seven "sector-by-sector meetings" chaired by business secretary Alok Sharma with trade union and business leaders. The meetings were prompted, according to the *Guardian*, "after concerns arose in Whitehall that many employees may be reluctant to return to the workplace, even when the government gives the green light."

Out of these meetings, the TUC drafted a document proposing "A trade union approach... on how to manage the mass return to work." That document declared that the TUC "does not take a position on the science of how to manage a pandemic, or the speed or nature of any return to work," before stressing that "It is invidious to argue about the relative priority of public health or economic growth: both are important to the wellbeing of working people."

The TUC called for the Johnson government to build on "its initial efforts to bring together unions, employers and government" by "establishing tripartite bodies", urging a "public information campaign" to proclaim it safe to return to work. The TUC mooted a government-sponsored role for "the UK's 100,000 trade union health and safety reps" in certifying workplaces as safe—not only in unionised workplaces but "where there are no existing union reps and unions are not recognised," in a "roving role... in order to ensure compliance."

One reason the trade unions made their minor criticisms this week is because the Johnson government's ignoring their various suggestions was a blow to their plans to secure a corporatist governmental role.

The *Times* commented on March 29 that the trade unions, which "used to be on the naughty step," had now been put "front of the house." To illustrate the shift, the newspaper cited the role of Jeremy Corbyn's leading trade union backer and supposed "left", Len McCluskey of UNITE.

"Ever since the days of Margaret Thatcher, trade unions have been seen as the enemy within," said McCluskey, whose union

represents 1.2 million people, ranging from steelworkers to British Airways cabin crew. 'But I've never had any difficulty differentiating the political arena from what we need to do together in the industrial arena.'

McCluskey has not abandoned his ambitions to work with the Tories. This week he refused to comment on the leaking of Johnson's criminal proposals because UNITE was still in talks with the government. He wrote to UNITE members, "We recognise that the task before the government is an enormous one and that the right calls have to be made to avoid further death and ill health and to avert a deep recession. We are therefore committed to contributing fully to the back to work discussions, ensuring that ministers and employers hear your voice at the table."

The Labour Party and the trade unions are naked political instruments of big business. Having suppressed opposition to the Tories for decades, they now want nothing less than a formal alliance against the working class to police a murderous drive for a return to work.

Workers are faced with the immediate task of breaking with the trade unions, forming rank-and-file committees and above all their own party to wage an independent struggle against the pandemic and all attempts to impose the crisis of the profit system on them and their families.

The Socialist Equality Party insists there must be no return to work under unsafe conditions. This means not only the provision of protective equipment, but maintaining the closure of schools, all non-essential production and guaranteeing a full income for furloughed workers and job retention.

A massive programme of investment in health and social care must begin now, alongside a proper system of testing and contact tracing and extensive research into a vaccine for COVID-19. The money for this must be provided by taxing the super-rich and taking social ownership and control of the major banks and corporations.

Against all calls to defend the "national interest", British workers must unite with their brothers and sisters internationally against their exploiters and in defence of the collective interests of the world working class through the struggle for a planned socialist economy based on production for social need, not corporate profit.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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