

UK government ends lockdown: Feigned official outrage over beaches, raves, and football celebrations

By Laura Tiernan
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Images of mass gatherings at Bournemouth beach and other venues last week have been viewed by millions of people in Britain and around the world with genuine concern at the likely spread of COVID-19.

On Thursday, Bournemouth council declared a “major incident” after up to half a million people, many of them families, flocked to beaches on the Dorset coast on the hottest day of the year. This was followed by reports of raves and street parties in London, Manchester and elsewhere, and football celebrations in Liverpool.

Media handwringing and statements of concern from the government followed, led by Prime Minister Boris Johnson. People were “taking too many liberties with the guidance,” Johnson told reporters. They were “mingling too much, not observing social-distancing”.

Britain’s tabloids carried banner headlines, “GO HOME! Outrage as beaches are swamped” (*Daily Express*), “DON’T THROW IT ALL AWAY! Health Secretary’s plea as he threatens to close beaches after crowds pack the coast, risking new virus peak” (*Daily Mail*), “Dirty Gits! Were you raised by wolves?” (*Daily Star*).

Neither Johnson’s glib and deceitful comments, nor the filthy headlines of the press can conceal their role as the real authors of these dangerous scenes. This is what “ending the lockdown” looks like.

On June 23, Johnson delivered a speech to parliament, declaring, “Our long national hibernation is beginning to come to an end.” He announced the reopening of hotels, pubs, restaurants, cinemas, museums, hairdressers, outdoor gyms, playgrounds, theme parks, arcades, outdoor sport and recreation, to take effect on July 4, evoking cries of “Hear, hear!”

The reopening of pubs elicited a fulsome “Hallelujah!”, with Conservative MP for Dartford, Gareth Johnson,

proclaiming that by returning to pubs, drinkers would be doing “their patriotic best for Britain.”

Hours later, Johnson fronted what he said would be the last daily coronavirus press briefing, telling the media in upbeat tones, “I think people need to go out, I think people need to go out and enjoy themselves, and... rediscover things that they haven’t been able to do for a long time. I want to see bustle. I want to see activity.” He announced the halving of two-metre social distancing.

Without exception, the media refused to challenge Johnson’s claims that the pandemic was in retreat. They had eagerly trailed his speech, with the *Daily Express* promising “Green Light for Summer Breaks Within Days”, the *Daily Mail* “Summer’s back On!” and the *Mail on Sunday*, “UK Holidays from July 4.”

After Johnson’s speech, the headlines were equally emphatic: “Hallelujah!” (*Evening Standard*) and “Cheers Boris! Here’s to a Brighter Britain” (*Daily Express*).

Is it any wonder that large numbers of people—a minority of the population—took Johnson at his word?

Many sentiments coalesced to produce last week’s scenes at Bournemouth. Some, including families with children, doubtless sought relief from months of being inside. A period of prolonged rain was forecast to follow Thursday’s heat.

The situation in Liverpool was much the same. On Friday night, crowds of football fans gathered outside the Liver Building to celebrate Liverpool FC’s first Premier League (PL) win since 1990. Club and PL officials responded with appeals that fans stay at home, but the crowds were a product of their decision, promoted by the Johnson government, to resume “closed-door” matches over the objections of their own players.

The most important factor in the breakdown of social distancing measures is the absence of any countervailing

political force. While individual scientists have opposed the premature ending of the lockdown, their voices have been side-lined in the face of support from the media, the Labour Party, and trade unions, for the Johnson government's homicidal reopening of the economy.

On June 23, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer praised Johnson's plan, telling parliament, "the government is trying to do the right thing, and in that we will support them".

However, the images of Bournemouth and elsewhere provide only a partial picture of the situation. Despite serious hardship, more than 70 percent of the population believes the lockdown was imposed too late. Johnson's net approval rating is -7, dropping from +38 in mid-April. Fully 55 percent of those polled in mid-June disapproved of his government's handling of the pandemic, but less than one-fifth thought Labour would have done a better job.

Anger is building against the entire political establishment, fuelled by a social crisis of immense proportions. Up to 7.7 million adults have cut back or missed meals since the pandemic began, and 3.7 million have used food banks, according to government figures. Unemployment has reached nearly 3 million, with a further one million jobs threatened in the next three months as the government ends furlough payments.

As tensions among young people spilled over on the streets of Manchester and London last week, police and crime commissioner for the West Midlands, David Jamieson, told the *Guardian* that the summer holidays were a "ticking time bomb."

He cautioned, "We are not going to be able to arrest our way out of this unrest... There is a real sense that there is calamity on its way, especially when the furlough scheme comes to an end, and you've got lots of young, low-paid workers whose jobs have disappeared"

More than 9 million workers are currently on furlough, receiving 80 percent of their income.

Labour's only function is to demobilise mass opposition to the government's herd immunity policy, working with the unions to force millions back into unsafe workplaces and schools. Moreover, the "Corbyn phenomenon" has collapsed. The former party leader has issued no statement opposing the Johnson government's end to the lockdown, merely offering a lame tweet, "People's health must come before profit".

Great dangers are posed to the working class. The number of people testing positive for COVID-19 worldwide has exceeded 10 million, with half-a-million

deaths. On Friday, 186 more people died from COVID-19 in the UK, taking the official (deliberately understated) death toll to 43,414. Scientists warned that if UK deaths continue at the current rate, 30,000 more people will be dead by next March. But this rate will soon be eclipsed due to Johnson's criminal policies.

Last week, former Chief Scientific Advisor Professor David King described the COVID-19 pandemic as "[T]he most disastrous handling of any serious challenge to a government for 100 years."

Johnson's reckless actions, like those of Trump, Bolsonaro, Merkel and Macron, are the outcome of capitalism, a system which subordinates all concerns—including workers' right to live—to the profit dictates of a parasitic financial oligarchy.

The ruthless calculations behind the frantic drive to reopen the economy were spelled out last week in the pages of the *Telegraph*, in an article titled, "There are 185 billion reasons why no politician should consider a lockdown again."

Focusing on a report co-authored by former Morgan Stanley Chief Economist and Bank of England rate-setter David Miles, "Living with COVID-19: balancing costs against benefits in the face of the virus", Lynch denounced the "mass ranks of Twitter trolls" who "howled... about the individual tragedies of lives lost." Based on a "cost-benefit analysis" with a unit cost of £30,000 per human life, Lynch concludes that a second lockdown cannot be justified, even if it were to save 500,000 lives.

A further catastrophic loss of life in the UK and around the world can only be avoided if the response to the pandemic is taken out of the hands of the ruling class. On June 23, the International Committee of the Fourth International issued a statement, "For international working-class action against the COVID-19 pandemic!" We urge workers and young people to read and circulate this statement and to join and build the Socialist Equality Party to lead the fightback against the capitalist class and its parties in a struggle for socialism.

To contact the WSWWS and the
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