

Johnson pledges “New Deal” for UK as he prepares savage attack on workers

By Chris Marsden
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Only the wilfully naïve could possibly believe that Boris Johnson is about to deliver a “New Deal” to “Build! Build! Build!” Britain in what he falsely claims is the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. But that is the snake oil the prime minister of a government of arch-Thatcherites tried to sell to an incredulous public this week.

His speech was a political lesson in the utter indifference of Britain’s ruling elite to the suffering they have inflicted on millions of people during the pandemic, and proof of their preparations to do far worse in the weeks and months ahead.

Johnson at times appeared enraptured by what he assumed was his own soaring rhetoric, but which came over as rambling nonsense papering over transparent lies. He began his keynote speech in Dudley by acknowledging, “It may seem a bit premature to make a speech now about Britain after COVID, when that deceptively nasty disease is still rampant in other countries, when global case numbers are growing fast and when many in this country are nervous—rightly—about more outbreaks...”

But this was not about to stop him from doing so, as he insisted, “we cannot continue simply to be prisoners of this crisis.”

Johnson admitted in passing that “there are plenty of things that people say and will say that we got wrong, and we owe that discussion and that honesty to the tens of thousands who have died before their time, to the families who have lost loved ones.” But, he stressed, “I also know that some things went right—and emphatically right.”

He listed as proof the Nightingale field hospitals, built out of fear that the National Health Service (NHS) would collapse due to the impact of Tory cuts, trials of the drug dexamethasone—Britain’s sole medical success story—and the jobs furlough scheme. This latter example was made all the more cynical by the fact that he said later that

furloughing “cannot go on forever” and that “jobs that many people had in January are not coming back—or at least not in that form.”

Now it was no longer the coronavirus that was the priority, but the “vertiginous drop in GDP.” Rescuing the economy through his murderous back to work drive was the task at hand, with the world facing a greater economic crisis than the 2008 crash.

In answer, Johnson proclaimed his “New Deal” as a “mission to unite and to level up,” that would “serve notice that we will not be responding to this crisis with what people called austerity.” This all amounted to infrastructure spending pledges of just £5 billion, most of which was money already pledged. The most significant pledges included:

- “£1.5 billion this year for hospital maintenance,” when thanks to years of underfunding there is a £6.5 billion maintenance backlog in the NHS. An investment “Project Speed” will deliver 40 “new” hospitals already promised, but this includes the “refurbishment” of existing hospitals. Johnson refused to promise a pay rise for health care workers.

- £1 billion to fund 50 projects in a 10-year school rebuilding programme. But any work will only begin in September 2021. This, too, had already been allocated.

- Other infrastructure pledges included £100 million for 29 road network projects, including such world-shaking projects as “boosting the quality of the A15,” making the key route network in Liverpool “more resilient,” maintenance work on a viaduct in Coventry and a road in York, and replacing “poor-quality footways” in Sheffield.

- Johnson also promised £96 million for the Towns Fund spending projects, which was already pledged from an existing £3.6 billion urban infrastructure project, and £12 billion for “affordable homes” over eight years, also already pledged. He said he would “scythe through red tape and get things done” by doing away with planning

laws, including allowing all commercial premises to be reclassified as residential property. The last “bonfire of red tape” pledged by the Tories ended in the horrific loss of 72 lives in Grenfell Tower.

Union bureaucrats, Labourites, and liberal commentators lined up to denounce Johnson’s attempt to claim the mantle of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the US President who responded to the Great Depression precipitated by the 1929 Wall Street Crash with his “New Deal” to stimulate the US economy through infrastructure projects. Their task was not difficult.

Trades Union Congress General Secretary Frances O’Grady could point out, “The £5 billion of spending he announced today was reheated, and his spending commitments are worth just 0.2% of GDP.” Roosevelt’s New Deal involved annual spending increases of between 5 and 7 percent of US GDP, which cumulatively raised federal government debt from 16 to 44 percent of GDP in a decade.

Equally unfavourable comparisons can be made to Roosevelt’s construction projects such as completing the Hoover Dam, the Grand Coulee Dam, and the Lincoln Tunnel. Johnson’s total spending bill would not even cover the cost of filling Britain’s potholes.

But neither O’Grady nor anyone else is proposing much more than Johnson. Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer was reduced to making a call for the partial retention of the jobs furlough scheme for workers in hospitality and retail.

Roosevelt was intent on defending the capitalist system at a time of an acute crisis that was not only economic, but political. The Wall Street crash and the Great Depression aroused widespread anti-capitalist sentiment in the working class towards financial speculators and industrial magnates alike. Fear of social unrest, the political growth of socialist sentiment, and the threat of revolution prompted him to speak in 1936 of “the old enemies of peace: business and financial monopoly, speculation, reckless banking, class antagonism, sectionalism, war profiteering.” And to boast, “Never before in all our history have these forces been so united against one candidate as they stand today. They are unanimous in their hate for me—and I welcome their hatred.”

These fears of social and political conflict meant the US ruling class, in the world’s most powerful capitalist nation and with enormous economic reserves and industrial capacity, was prepared to tolerate Roosevelt’s concerted effort to placate social tensions. In contrast,

Johnson is prime minister of a declining imperialist power, dominated politically, economically, and socially by a global financial oligarchy whose sole concern is that the flood of wealth into its coffers continues.

Even setting aside Johnson’s lies, Chancellor Rishi Sunak has promised a total increase in capital spending of just £100 billion over five years. Britain’s GDP is approximately £2.2 trillion. The real response of the Johnson government to the pandemic has, rather, been to hand over hundreds of billions to the major corporations, banks, and hedge funds, and to make available £750 billion in quantitative easing.

There are those within the Tory Party, MPs recently elected in former Labour strongholds in 2019, who are urging Johnson to express sympathy for the millions impacted by the pandemic. But even as he spoke of a government “that puts its arms around people,” Johnson insisted, “And yes of course we clap for our NHS, but under this government we also applaud those who make our NHS possible. Our innovators, our wealth creators, our capitalists and financiers.”

Johnson translated the essential social relations on which his government is based into the reassurance, “When I say level up, I don’t mean attacking our great companies.” He even felt obliged to make the most superfluous denial: “My friends, I am not a communist.”

The economic catastrophe now unfolding will see no change of heart by Johnson, any more than it will prompt the Labour Party or the unions to end their collusion with the Tories and the employers. It will see unrelenting class warfare waged by the ruling class and its parties. The working class must prepare its answer by building action committees in every workplace and neighbourhood, to maintain safety during the escalating pandemic and to oppose every attack levelled against jobs, wages, and essential services in a struggle for socialism.

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