Multi-millionaire Charlie Mullins brands UK workers “lazy” and “selfish”

By Julia Callaghan
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Charlie Mullins, founder and chairman of the UK’s largest plumbing firm, Pimlico Plumbers, has been given an open door to the media in recent weeks to give voice to the contempt of the ruling elite for the working class.

Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson et al. have been forced to make transparent efforts to project a “caring persona” and conceal their class prejudices to avoid a social explosion during the pandemic. Therefore, Mullins has become the go-to-guy for the right-wing media, a rent-a-gob, to say what they all really think—that workers are all “lazy”, “selfish” “scroungers”, who should get back to work ASAP.

As COVID-19 cases continue to resurge, the government’s back-to-work-at-any-cost campaign requires the ending of the jobs furlough scheme and all measures protecting workers, their families and their livelihoods. Mullins, “plumber to the stars” with a personal fortune of £70 million, is given centre stage to justify this policy—which will be fully completed by November—by insisting that “time’s up”, asserting that workers have been “taking advantage”, “sponging off the government”, and that anything in the way of “getting the economy going” should be scrapped.

The 67-year-old’s anger is heightened by the fact that plumbing is one of the few sectors to have experienced a spike in business during the COVID-19 crisis. In the first half of July, Pimlico Plumbers saw an increase of more than 10 percent on the same period last year. In one week in July it booked in more jobs than any other week in the company’s 40-year history.

For Mullins, the sun is shining, and he needs his workers to make his hay. But with some workers staying at home, above all, those with co-morbidities, heightening the threat posed by the virus or with aging relatives, he complains, “You’ve got less people in your company that can create revenue for you.”

For his openly right-wing views and crass style of expressing them, and for his ability to play the “self-made man” who knows about “hard graft”, Mullins has been afforded banner headlines, live interviews and even the opportunity to pen his own articles. He has made multiple appearances on Sky News, Channel 4 News, BBC Radio 4’s Today Programme, BBC 5 Live, TalkRADIO, BBC Sunday Morning, ITV’s This Morning, Good Morning Britain, and several BBC regional news stations. He has written personally in the Daily Mail and the i newspaper.

Of the furlough scheme he says, “We need to … stop this stupid culture of people thinking that they can sit at home and just be paid for it.” Those hesitant to go back to work while the pandemic still rages are “milking the system”. “The problem is,” he sneers, “most people’s workplace is too far from the beach for them.”

For Mullins, the fear of catching or passing on a virus that has taken almost three-quarters of a million lives worldwide and caused as yet unknown long-term damage to over 20 million is a sackable offence. In the Daily Mail, he wrote, “I’ve heard all the excuses—people are worried about catching Covid-19, or they’re afraid of infecting a vulnerable relative who is self-isolating. But to any employee who tells me that they don’t want to come back, who wants to string out the furlough … I’ve got one thing to say: we don’t want you back. So far I’ve already told 30 former staff: ‘Don’t bother coming in, ever.’”

Even those working from home don’t escape Mullin’s wrath. He says, “I don’t think they’re going to be motivated enough to say that they’re doing a proper day’s work.” They are “very selfish”, “sitting about in their pyjamas” and “couldn’t care less about nobody else or the economy.”
“You’re gonna create a culture,” he says. “It’s like the people on benefits. They’re never gonna wanna come off it.”

Mullins’ most recent on-air outing was to slam the proposal to give sick pay to workers forced to quarantine when returning from holiday in a country on which the government belatedly placed travel restrictions. “No way. They’re not sick,” says Mullins. “If we start paying people £100 a week to sit at home and do nothing we’re back to square one. The economy can’t afford it.”

This is a man who spends £300,000 on holidays every year talking about many for whom losing two weeks’ pay during quarantine has serious financial implications.

Not one of the media outlets has compared the meagre weekly statutory sick pay of £95.85, or even the £34 billion cost of the furlough scheme, which has preserved almost 10 million jobs, to the astronomical £350 billion handed over to UK corporations in March. The funnelling of this unprecedented sum of public money straight into the pockets of the corporate elite was conducted without even a parliamentary vote and has barely been mentioned since.

Mullins did not help his case by conducting his media interviews from one of his several million-euro villas in the Spanish resort of Marbella, filmed against sun-drenched backdrops including swaying palm trees and his swimming pool.

Workers, suffering the worst global health crisis in a century, and facing economic devastation under a system completely incapable of prioritising lives over profits, hit back on social media. Many wrote of the relentless media attention given to this obscene caricature of a man, asking, “How come Charlie Mullins gets so much airtime?”, “Why is Charlie Mullins on BBC news several times in a week?” and “It’s a Mullins monologue.”

Some pointed to the class issue that sits at the heart of the conflict. One worker tweeted, “An alarm bell is ringing out loud and clear: One rule for us; another rule for everyone else.” Another wrote that Mullins is “the worst type of capitalist, slagging off his employees, whilst he sits on his pile in Marbella. He’d run workhouses if allowed.”

Others wrote of the desperation the coronavirus crisis has brought into their own lives. One said, “Charlie Mullins is really getting my back up. My company has reopened and I’ve not been brought back when I want to. Furlough/lockdown has ruined everything for me. My mental health has suffered and my marriage has fallen apart and I’m still out of work.”

There are those who question how Mullins can be an authority on employment issues at all, referring to the seven-year legal battle he eventually lost in 2018 over the classification of his engineers as “self-employed”, in an attempt to reduce his costs and remove their basic employment rights. “Not sure I can agree with tax dodging Charlie Mullins who fought tooth and nail to avoid having to financially treat his employees as employees despite in every other way treated them as employees,” tweeted one.

Losing the high-profile case has not changed his business model and all Pimlico Plumbers engineers continue to be “self-employed.”

Mullins cites Margaret Thatcher as his business inspiration and forced his entire staff (the “self-employed” included) to wear black armbands when she died. He has donated tens of thousands of pounds to the Tories and was particularly close to his admirers, former Prime Minister David Cameron and former Chancellor George Osborne, who had him in “every four or five months.” In return for his generous donations to the Tory Party—and of course “services to the plumbing industry”—Mullins was awarded an Order of the British Empire in 2014. He intends to campaign to become mayor of London in 2021.

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