

Johnson government extends ban on evictions as UK faces “avalanche” of homelessness

By Laura Tiernan
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A ban on housing evictions introduced at the start of the coronavirus lockdown in March will be extended for another month, the Johnson government announced yesterday.

The delay follows an outpouring of public opposition to eviction proceedings that were due to begin on Monday, with 290,000 renters at immediate risk of homelessness.

The government’s latest retreat—following a two-month extension of the moratorium in June—postpones by only a matter of weeks evictions on a scale unseen since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

As soon as the ban is lifted, anyone in rent arrears for eight weeks or more can be automatically evicted. Tenants can also be hit with Section 21 “no fault” evictions. Housing charities and tenants’ unions announced yesterday they would go ahead with planned protests, including today’s National Day of Action and protests on Monday by the London Renters Union.

More than 120,000 tenants in rent debt have already been issued an eviction notice, and a further 170,000 have been threatened with eviction, according to housing charity Shelter. Debt charity StepChange reports 590,000 tenants are in rent debt, for an average of £1,076 per household.

On Thursday, health professionals from bodies including the Royal College of Physicians, Royal College of General Practitioners, and the Faculty of Public Health, wrote to Robert Jenrick, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government warning of “a catastrophic wave of evictions and homelessness as we head towards autumn and winter.”

They explained that mass evictions risked fuelling a new wave of the virus: “People forced into overcrowded temporary or emergency accommodation by eviction are at greatly increased risk of being unable to isolate if needed, face greater challenges in following social distancing guidelines and may lack adequate access to

basic hygiene measures shown to reduce infection rates.

“As public health organisations, we are deeply concerned that failure to prevent an evictions and homelessness crisis could significantly contribute to an increase of COVID-19 infections.”

Opposition has exploded in online petitions and social media. A London Renters Union petition, “Protect renters during the coronavirus”, has gathered nearly 105,000 signatures. It calls for the suspension of rent payments during the pandemic, a ban on evictions, and for the UK’s estimated 216,000 empty homes to be used for those in need. Comments from signatories include:

- “I’m a self-employed contractor who rents privately. My industry has collapsed with all work evaporated with no horizon. We need to rent suspended in order to survive.” (Patrick T.)

- “I am a private rental tenant. It’s hard enough to pay extortionate rent in normal circumstances. I’m terrified it could lead to my family losing our home.” (Carly P.)

- “International Students are in critical problem. They don’t have enough money to pay rent and buy groceries. So government should do something.” (Akash R.)

- “Because I’m currently choosing between health and paying my rent, I can’t self-isolate as guided because I’ll fall behind on my rent.” (Samuel M.)

- “I am freelance and completely out of work, therefore unable to pay my rent.” (Kylie H.)

- “It is time to help those on lower incomes!” (Tanvir R.)

The pandemic is accelerating a social crisis long in the making, further exposing the unbridgeable divide between the working class and the super-rich. On June 30, *SCMP* magazine reported that London’s luxury property market had shown “relative immunity to the coronavirus.” Under the heading, “Forget Covid-19 and Brexit: London remains a magnet for the super-rich as the luxury property market booms,” Peta Tomlinson reported

that “prime central London” was “enjoying its best start to a year since 2017.”

This included £3.5 billion spent by the Qatari royal family on “transforming” a 13-acre site in Belgravia and £200 million-plus by Hong Kong billionaire Cheung Chung Kiu for a 45-room mansion in Knightsbridge, overlooking Hyde Park. Lockdown restrictions have posed no barrier, with many Ultra-High-Net-Worth individuals snapping up properties after a cursory inspection via Zoom.

In January, Shelter published survey results showing half of England’s 8.5 million renters were experiencing stress or anxiety due to sky-high rents, poor living conditions, and the threat of eviction. More than 2 million renters had been made physically ill as a result.

The pandemic has pushed millions more into extreme housing stress. A YouGov poll published July 30 showed that 450,000 parents in private rented accommodation fear they and their children will be made homeless because of the financial impact. It found 49,000 parents had sought help from food banks since the start of the pandemic, 429,000 had cut back on food to pay the rent, and 550,000 had taken on debt to cover rent payments. Government figures show that 73 percent of private renting families have no savings at all.

Responding to reports that the government will extend the evictions ban to September 20, Ghazal Haqani, an organiser with the London Renters Union, said, “This U-turn has been forced through by people power. But until there’s a permanent evictions ban and rent debt is forgiven, the government will just be kicking the can down the road.

“We’ve had a series of short-term extensions, and that’s caused enormous misery and stress for renters like me. Because so many of us are in arrears, we have been constantly worried for months that we are about to become totally defenceless against landlords who want to kick us out of our homes. It looks like that could happen all over again in September.

“Rents have been sky high for decades, the pandemic has cut our incomes and this recession has only just begun. Of course we’re in arrears, and of course we’re not going to be able to pay off our rent debt for a very long time.”

Shelter Chief Executive Polly Neate responded yesterday, “A bullet may have been dodged with this extension, but as soon as Parliament returns, it must give judges extra powers to stop renters being evicted because of ‘Covid-arrears.’” But no faith can be placed by

workers and young people in the government or opposition parties to protect renters from eviction.

On Friday, Labour MPs David Lammy, Thangam Debbonaire, and Karl Turner wrote to Jenrick over the eviction crisis. Their letter made clear that Labour has no genuine opposition to the Johnson government’s pro-market agenda. It contained no demand for an indefinite ban on evictions, no call for a suspension of rent for unemployed and furloughed workers, focussing instead on how ending the ban on evictions “risks unleashing a tsunami of cases which could overwhelm English County Courts.”

During a *Radio Times* interview Thursday, former Shadow Chancellor and key Corbyn ally John McDonnell praised party leader Sir Keir Starmer’s “constructive” response to the coronavirus pandemic, “He’s approached the government in a constructive way—and we’ve got to get through this crisis together.”

McDonnell’s open embrace of Starmer exposes the political collapse of the entire Corbyn project, with McDonnell stating, “Keir has made it clear he’s a socialist” and “we’re on the same page.”

The Socialist Equality Party calls for an indefinite ban on all evictions and a complete freeze on rent and mortgage payments during the coronavirus pandemic. Vacant housing, including the property of absentee landlords must be seized and placed under public ownership to house the homeless. The banks and corporations must be placed under social ownership and the obscene profits of the super-rich seized to build high-quality low-cost housing for all.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>