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Covid-19 in Britain: Pay the workers! Suspend rent and bill payments!

Shut the schools immediately. Socialised control of distribution and production

Wednesday 18 March 2020, by [Socialist Resistance \(Britain\)](#) (Date first published: 18 March 2020).

The Tories have known all along that something like this pandemic was coming writes Andy Stowe and coronavirus is starkly posing questions about austerity, profiteering, the control of production and distribution, housing, poverty and homelessness.

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"There is a high probability of a flu pandemic occurring, but it is impossible to predict when, or exactly what it would be like."

They even had a rough idea of how many people would be affected.

"...up to 50% of the UK population experiencing symptoms, potentially leading to between 20,000 and 750,000 fatalities and high levels of absence from work."

Those quotes come from the UK National Risk Register [[1](#)], a Cabinet Office assessment of the threats facing the British state and society. The ostensible purpose of the document is to allow the government to plan to mitigate the hazards it has identified. It's a thing that all governments do. What the Coronavirus pandemic demonstrates is that, for the British ruling class, the lives of its citizens are expendable.

Cameron, May and Johnson could have made sure that hospitals have a precautionary reserve of ventilators. They could have ensured that there was an abundance of intensive care beds. By now the Tories could have taken over the private hospitals and required their, mostly NHS trained staff, to be part of the emergency response. And radical as it sounds, they could have recruited enough doctors, nurses, medical technicians and other staff to have prevented the NHS being one major incident away from being overwhelmed.

Instead medical staff who are working directly with patients do not even have face masks and are being denied access to testing. As a consequence, many are being forced to self-isolate because they have minor colds. This too is a failure of Tory planning. It's a basic principle of epidemiology that large scale testing of affected populations and the isolation of infected people and those they've been in contact with is how you stop diseases spreading. The consequences for medical staff are

potentially fatal. The *Times* reports “Frontline hospital staff fear that doctors and nurses will die because of NHS guidance that they do not need to wear full protective equipment when caring for virus patients.” [2] The Tories will be responsible for those deaths.

No loss of earnings for working people

Knowing that there would be high levels of absence from work in an economy with a major part of the workforce living hand to mouth, they could also have had plans in place to ensure that casual workers and those in industries forced to shut down to prevent contagion or deprived of customers such as hospitality, entertainment, taxi drivers, hairdressers had enough to live on. Instead they are entitled to £94 a week [3]. The southern Irish government is giving all workers who’ve lost their incomes €203 for six weeks [4]. The British scheme doesn’t even cover workers who’ve been forced into a phony form of self-employment. And firms like DPD, a delivery company, is insisting that employees who self-isolate will still have to pay the costs of renting vans and equipment.

The main element of the £350 bailout package [5] that Rishi Sunak announced is a proposal to allow struggling firms to face a future of paying off debts for years to come. It’s a massive loans package, and while the three-month break in mortgage payments is to be welcomed the Tories are offering nothing to renters [6]. That may be because at least one third of their MPs are landlords.

Our demand has to be that the government underwrites wages so that no one is made jobless or goes without pay if their employer goes out of business, they are sick or self-employed. It was noticeable in his speech that Sunak referred to working with the unions, an unprecedented statement for a Tory finance minister in recent decades. The trap here is some form of social partnership in which workers are made to pay for a crisis not of their making. Denmark’s government is paying 75% of salaries. That should be the baseline for any union proposals.

Shut the schools immediately

The Johnson government’s reason for keeping schools open is that working parents will be deprived of the free childcare they provide. If 8.7 million children are at home their parents will not be able to go to work or will be less productive. In Tory logic it is better for all those children to travel to school, mix with each other, come into close contact with dozens of adults and spread the virus they’ve contracted at home or on the bus.

Schools in Italy have been closed for weeks. French, Spanish and southern Irish schools closed last week. Every school is now reporting multiple instances of staff self-isolating and those who are going into work feel like they are being treated as laboratory rats by the Tories. Labour has to back the education unions in calling for immediate school closures as a way of mitigating risk. In any case school union groups are taking action and there are reports of some voting to self-isolate as a way of forcing the Tories’ into action.

Socialised control of distribution and production

At first the obsession with stockpiling toilet paper was funny. Now, a couple of weeks into the crisis there is an air of barely suppressed panic as people search for soap, pasta, paracetamol and tissues. Shops are selling hand gel that normally costs £1.50 for £6.99. Online retailers are charging extortionate prices for baby wipes and nappies. Frailer people are finding themselves elbowed out of

the way in supermarkets. And foodbanks, depended on by increasing numbers of people in Britain [7], are under threat of closure as donations plummet. Again, this is a risk the state has been fully aware of for decades. MI5, the British secret police, work on the principle that Britain is “four meals away from anarchy” [8].

The *Times* says the spooks predict:

“It is likely that the people affected would immediately buy up all the food available. As supplies ran out, the public might try to break through cordons or start competing violently for available food.”

At a moment when borders are slamming shut all across Europe and the world a country like Britain, which imports about 50% of its food, faces the risk of both food shortages and a Darwinian method of distribution. Unionised supermarket workers can begin to offer a working class solution by teaming up with the community support organisations which are now springing up to make sure that no one goes hungry and that there is a fair distribution of foods and other essentials on the basis of need rather than muscles or money.

Socialise housing

It’s impossible to voluntarily self-isolate if you are sleeping on the street. It’s impossible to pay your rent if the restaurant you’ve been working in has closed down. The state must requisition hotels for the homeless for the duration of the pandemic. There they can be fed, kept warm and offered medical assistance. The Cummings wing of the Tory party sees this virus as part of the solution to the homelessness and social care crises. There is no other rationale to their eugenicist “herd immunity” proposal [9] than a desire to see lots of sick, old, mentally ill and homeless people die.

Government must declare an immediate freeze on rent, mortgage, loan and utility bill payments for everyone who has lost all or a large portion of their income. Second homes which lie empty or are rented out on sites like Air BnB should be taken over by local councils so that families living in squalid emergency accommodation can be housed in dry, well-heated homes.

A radical opportunity

If John McDonnell and Jeremy Corbyn were in government today millions of working people would feel secure that they aren’t facing an immediate future of deep poverty, food insecurity and unemployment. Even journalists like Robert Peston who spent years thwarting that prospect, always referring to “Boris” and “Corbyn” [10], are now making the case for something resembling a socialist response to the situation.

“Community organising” is one of the platitudes frequently offered when someone is bereft of political ideas. It is hard to do and often very dull. This time it is different. We are seeing it pop up on a micro level in estates, tower blocks and streets as people pull together to help their neighbours. This rebirth of the power of solidarity and cooperation is the negation of Toryism. Millions of people are rapidly learning that only socialist answers will work in a situation like this. The incoming Labour leadership will do well to remember that.

Socialist Resistance

P.S.

- Socialist Resistance. Posted on 18th March 2020:
<https://socialistresistance.org/pay-the-workers-suspend-rent-and-bill-payments/19557>

Footnotes

- [1] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/644968/UK_National_Risk_Register_2017.pdf
- [2] <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/coronavirus-nhs-doctors-fear-they-will-die-for-lack-of-safety-equipment-mdmkbzq99>
- [3] <https://www.gov.uk/statutory-sick-pay>
- [4] <https://www.irishmirror.ie/news/irish-news/unemployment-payment-claim-coronavirus-jobseekers-21700083>
- [5] <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/coronavirus-business-rates-scrapped-and-mortgage-holidays-in-chancellors-handout-7t8dwhp37>
- [6] https://www.reddit.com/r/ukpolitics/comments/9k8i2s/percentage_of_each_partys_mps_that_are_landlords/
- [7] <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-48037122>
- [8] <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/britain-four-meals-away-from-anarchy-fc9kfgc0w92>
- [9] <https://eand.co/why-britains-coronavirus-strategy-is-literally-one-of-the-most-insane-things-in-modern-history-45c755f1db2d>
- [10] <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/boris-must-borrow-from-corbyn-s-playbook-to-prevent-a-coronavirus-crash>