



COVID, CRISIS,
FIGHT-BACK

**Statement to the International
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**COVID, CAPITALIST CRISIS AND
THE FIGHT-BACK BY THE
WORKING CLASS MOVEMENT**

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*This year's meeting of the world's 80
Communist and Workers Parties was
postponed as a result of the pandemic. Party
statements prepared for the meeting are
being published meantime.*

By late 2019, before COVID-19 had appeared on the horizon, the economies of the wealthiest imperialist countries, Britain included, were hurtling towards a new and serious slump, a further manifestation of the continuing irresolvable systemic crisis of capitalism in the aftermath of the 2008 crash. Now we face the pandemic. Its impact in Britain has been gravely worsened by the systemic cuts to Britain's welfare state and by a government determined to regulate the crisis on the terms set by big business.

Pre-pandemic, millions of working class people in many parts of the world, were being lined up, as always, to pay the heaviest of prices for an economic depression they bore no responsibility for creating – through massive job losses and, for those in work, huge pay cuts, sharp deterioration in conditions and continuing enforced dependence for increasing numbers on low-paid, insecure work. These plans are now, under the cover of COVID, being ruthlessly enacted. In Britain, the Office for National Statistics anticipates that 7.5% of the workforce will be unemployed by the end of the year, up from 4.5% in July. State provision of health and social care systems, education,

utilities, sanitation, and other crucial public support services, already life-threateningly inadequate, will take a further hit, while privatisation of everything seen as potentially profitable will continue apace.

The new economic crisis compounds historic issues. From 2010, a decade of EU-instigated austerity, driven by a ruthless Conservative government and their Liberal Democratic Party backers devastated public services and fundamentally undermined democracy by putting whole swathes of decision-making out of the control of working people and their communities into the hands of the private sector. Large parts of health and social care provision and most schools were removed in this way. Other services, the least potentially profitable, were kept in the public sector but run down to dysfunctional levels. Still others were abolished altogether.

At the same time, major areas of decision-making were further embedded in the very undemocratic, pro-big business machinery of the EU, whose treaties, strictures and regulations stood squarely in the path of any Westminster-initiated changes allowing Britain to invest in its own industry, create real jobs, end austerity and legislate to meet the needs of working people and their families. The democratic deficit, although well hidden by the mass media, became increasingly obvious and, according to reliable polls, the main reason why the people of Britain voted for Brexit in the June 2016 referendum was to restore sovereignty.

In Britain before COVID, people had been getting poorer, including a quarter of all children, four million, being raised in poverty by early 2020, and a million and a half pensioners without enough to live on,

choosing between heating and eating, according to trade unions and the National Pensioners' Convention. Wages had fallen so low that many working families were commonly dependent on benefits to supplement their income, including poorly paid employees of the government department that administers the payments of benefits they had to claim. Public sector workers had suffered pay cuts in real terms in each of the past ten years. The unemployed could scarcely live on the punitively low level of support available through the notorious universal credit system, and many workers could not afford to stay off work when ill, given the low level of statutory sick pay. Thousands of families were living with food scarcity and cases of malnutrition were steadily rising, with several million affected and thousands using foodbanks. Suicides were increasing, especially among young men, and homelessness people were dying on the streets.

Throughout the last decade, Britain's foreign policy has been equally inhumane. Firmly positioned as the number one ally of US imperialism, and nurturing this "special relationship" at every opportunity - economically, politically and militarily - Britain has been ruthlessly pursuing an aggressive strategy of intervention and war across the world, supporting some of the most reactionary governments, tooling up its own "defence" with state-of-the-art killing technology, enhancing its string of military bases across the globe and securing the most lucrative of arms trade contracts. From 2015, Britain has given £1 billion to aid the people of Yemen but, during the same period, sold £6.5 billion of weaponry to Saudi Arabia with which to bomb them. The government sheds crocodile tears for people suffering and dying in the pandemic but spends vast sums with its military

industrial complexes, including the £205 billion for the renewal of the country's Trident nuclear defence and a £65 million contract, signed in July 2020, with Airbus, to enhance its capacity for cyber warfare. This money must be for welfare not warfare.

By the middle of the decade, the opposition of broad sections of working people to austerity measures, and government conducted almost exclusively in favour of a tiny elite, started to reach worrying levels so far as the ruling class was concerned. Within the Labour Party from 2015, a strong bid was made to defeat the right wing and centre ground in its ranks and bring the Party to power under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, on a socialist-leaning, rather than social democratic manifesto propounding the use of Britain's resources, including public funds, to invest in a more equitable future which provided for the full spectrum of people's needs (*For the Many, not the Few*). This attracted hundreds of thousands to take out Labour Party membership - including many young people and others who had little or no previous involvement with organised politics - with millions more supportive of a shift to government in favour of working people.

The ruling class, using every instrument of state power at its disposal, has put concerted effort into ensuring that a left-led Labour government would never come to power. They did so by sowing division amongst Labour supporters on every issue, including scuppering any possibility, at least in the short to medium term, of securing a people-orientated Brexit from the EU. Their efforts came to fruition in the December 2019 general election when the Conservative Party defeated Labour under Corbyn's leadership to gain a huge 80-seat majority

in parliament. This, for the present, saw off the Labour socialist left as potential challengers for control or even strong influence at Westminster and precipitated a Labour leadership election, bringing right-leaning reformist barrister, Keir Starmer, to head up the parliamentary 'opposition'. As 2020 dawned, the ruling class felt that it could again sleep safely; they have not been disappointed.

The arrival of COVID-19 found a public health service unable, because of privatisation and cuts, to cope with its pre-pandemic load. Services had been reduced, waiting lists were dangerously lengthy and even appointments at doctors' surgeries hard to get. The winter overload on hospitals created annual crises and 2019-20 was no exception. On the eve of the pandemic, there were 40,000 nursing staff vacancies in Britain.

The pandemic immediately shone a light on the desperate state of the health service, care system and public infrastructure after a decade of austerity and cuts, and the ever-widening gap between the poor and the wealthy. The government on behalf of the ruling class, has done everything to protect the interests of the monopolies and big business throughout the crisis and seemingly abandoned whole sections of the working class to the virus and to poverty and deprivation. It insisted that some seven million 'essential' workers - in health and care, teaching, food distribution and retail, public transport, waste disposal and emergency services - continued to do their jobs and that schools opened to look after their children while they did so. They were not provided with the protective clothing and equipment they needed and went to workplaces day after day exposed and scared. These same essential workers are collectively amongst the worst paid in

Britain. Many fell ill and too many have lost their lives.

Older people were locked down in care homes as the virus ran unchecked. Many died struggling to breathe, separated from their families, in pain and fear. Across the country black people have disproportionately lost their lives, predominantly due to a range of socio-economic factors and concentration in employment sectors and at levels most at risk; this is in turn the result of a history of racial discrimination and economic super-exploitation of black workers, as highlighted by the Black Lives Matter protests during the summer.

At the time of writing, a second catastrophic wave of the virus is building in Britain with almost 20,000 new cases a day and the figure for daily deaths continuing to rise. The total death toll is now 41, 988 and Britain, with a population of 65 million, has one of the worst COVID-19 death rates per 100,000 people in the world at the same time as it ranks as one of the richest countries.

All this was not inevitable, and the working class will hold the British ruling class to account. To protect the economy, the government was slow to move to lockdown in March 2020 and it again put the economy, rather than people's safety, to the fore in lifting the restrictive measures, urging people back to unsafe workplaces, even when they could safely work at home; opening shops, bars and restaurants: sending a million students back to universities and generally encouraging people to go out and spend, spend and spend. The results have already been fatal, and the worst is yet to come.

The chaotic competition of private firms and consequent lack of planning and organisation, together with the

unquenchable quest for profits of all private enterprises from small businesses to monopolies, such as the giant pharmaceutical companies, have destroyed the potential of diminishing risk, alleviating suffering, finding a vaccine urgently and meeting other desperate needs of the people. What can be achieved is phenomenal. We have seen how, in record time, mega-hospitals with state-of-the-art equipment and facilities can be built, how quickly production lines can be switched to turn out life-saving equipment and how scientific and medical research can be speeded up and harnessed to combat the pandemic. Working people have the skills, knowledge, and expertise to make undreamed of advances, but capitalism has been unwilling bear the cost.

Refusal on the government's part to pay for what is desperately needed has shocked many, given that the national debt has risen above £2.2 trillion and the annual deficit above £60 billion. It has rushed to save businesses and the economy but flatly refused to borrow to do the things that are needed most. These include a vast expansion of the network of coronavirus test centres and laboratories for analysis: the move back from a "COVID-only" to full hospital service as soon as possible; conversion of vacant buildings in order to run health and education safely with social distancing in place; the running of more buses and trains to reduce the risk of infection for people using public transport and provision of support services for those in difficulty and danger during lockdown, such as vulnerable and isolated elderly people and women imprisoned in their homes with violent abusers. People are being thrown suddenly into worklessness and poverty. Income support can and should be provided for all who need it,

together with a secure home, free from fear of eviction.

Boris Johnson's government has shown itself at best incapable and, at worst, criminally unwilling to deal with the crisis, even though a pandemic was long anticipated and national and local plans, developed, tried, and tested. It has attempted to deny any responsibility for its multiple failures, while at the same time shifting blame onto workers and their families, criminalising individuals, and encouraging people to spy on and report their neighbours for infringing regulations. At the same time, government ministers have broken pandemic laws with impunity.

The ruling class's mass media has used the pandemic to divide and weaken the working class by scapegoating various groups – young people (who party and go home to infect and kill their grandparents), black people and old people (who catch the virus in greater numbers and drain health service resources), relatives (who for lack of alternatives breach regulations to visit and care for loved ones) and even the unclean (who don't wash their hands often or well enough and touch their faces with contaminated fingers). Everyone is accused and becomes a butt of anger, except those on whose shoulders blame must rest.

The ruling class in Britain hopes that COVID-19 has finally got the labour movement and all working people off its back, driving home the defeat of socialists in the parliamentary Labour Party, dampening the upsurge in progressive thinking that has characterised recent years and preventing regular mass mobilisations and demonstrations, now banned, from coalescing into an organised extra-parliamentary, anti-big business

alliance. The virus and its aftermath will provide the bourgeoisie with the perfect excuse for the coming financial catastrophe, and masking what would soon have become obvious to all, that capitalism is in the throes of systemic failure which it cannot remedy. The pandemic did hasten, broaden, and deepen the oncoming economic crisis, but it did not cause it. Every effort will be made to hide this from the people.

The Party's immediate demands are for all possible resourcing to be applied to limiting the spread of the pandemic (especially by identifying those with the virus and tracing their contacts) and developing a vaccine. All workplaces must be safe, whatever the cost, and everyone must have enough to live on, including food and shelter. Jobs must also be preserved and the multitude of companies using the pandemic as an excuse to reduce the labour force according to pre-pandemic plans must be exposed. A major feature of standing against the ruling class will be building from grass roots up, a strong trade union and labour movement, including the organised unemployed, together with mass campaigns for peace, equality, and justice. We must also be vigilant against the abuse of powers the executive has accorded itself during the pandemic and which can potentially be extended indefinitely and used against a militant working class.

The Communist Party of Britain has used events in its Centenary year to expose the ruling class's role in dangerously mis-managing the pandemic and failing to spend on people's health, safety, and livelihoods. More