

Covid crisis: NHS***The government's criminal failure to "protect"***

Stay at home, protect the NHS, save lives: says the government. They repeat it. It's spelled out on emergency yellow tape on the press conference lecterns. And yes, rather than "use" the NHS, the public is instructed to "protect" it, by *not* using it. What else, given its fragile state before Covid-19? And now, 10 days before the predicted peak in infections and despite instant new hospitals, it's under unbearable pressure.

Knowing this, and having shunned EU pandemic provisions, Johnson's strategy from day one was to try to postpone the predicted surge in critical cases, hoping that would help the NHS to cope. Of course, there were several possible ways to do this. He could have imposed an immediate strict lockdown (closing schools, public events, social venues, stopping non-essential work, etc.), put testing in place and provided proper protection *including masks* for all essential workers, especially in

health and social care. In other words, the lesson of China's Wuhan, where everyone was in enforced lockdown for 8 weeks and the economy put on hold. Or South Korea, where mass testing/isolation prevented deaths. It would have meant substantial public expenditure and above all organisation, but nothing beyond the means of the 5th richest country in the world.

This wasn't done. During the first six weeks of the outbreak, Johnson refused to impose preventive social measures, afraid for his government's image and fearful of the effect on the economy. He defended his approach as "listening to the science". But that "science" was the notorious "herd immunity" which advisor Patrick Vallance put forward on 9 March. The death toll then was still only 5. Backing him up against a lockdown, the equally patronising and contemptuous Chief Medical Officer, Chris Whitty, claimed that *"The risk is that if we go too early*

people will understandably get fatigued and we won't be able to sustain it over time": as if we are a bunch of children who would not understand what is at stake.

This policy was criminal. The experience from Italy proved that it was already late in the day, but certainly not "too early" to at least stop all mass gatherings and close schools. The World Health Organisation declared a pandemic on the 11 March. But that weekend, carriers of the virus in Britain were freely mixing in public, at football matches and of course along with 250,000 punters, at the Cheltenham Festival. Johnson only instituted a lockdown (still not total, nor enforced) 8 weeks after the first diagnosed case, on 23 March. Four days later he and his health secretary both tested positive for Covid-19 providing the public with proof that their strategy was based not on science, but dangerous, negligent contempt. □

• Crippled first by cuts and then by Covid-19

Before this crisis hit, the NHS had long been on its knees. There were 45,000 nurse and doctor vacancies, and A&E waiting times were the worst ever this winter. So the government had no choice but to find these missing staff somewhere.

First, 15,000 retired doctors received a letter informing them that they would be re-registered unless they opted out. 3,000 have already opted out, but more probably will, rather than go back to work under such conditions.

At the same time, 50,000 ex-nurses

who left in the past 3 years were contacted, with 7,500 agreeing to be re-registered. On top of that, 18,000 final-year nursing and medical students in England are also being asked to work in hospitals to expand the workforce. Student nurses in the final 6 months of their course will be treated as qualified nurses, merely with "protected learning time" provided!

While the NHS scrambles for staff, it also scrambles for beds. All non-urgent surgery has begun winding down, to end by 15 April, in order to free up to 30,000 beds. This means more patients will be

sent home from hospitals to be looked after in the social care sector, which was already seriously short of staff! And on 23 March, Barking, Havering and Redbridge NHS trust became the first in the country to cancel all but the "most urgent" cancer operations and treatments.

The NHS as such has, therefore, more or less ceased to exist. All available resources are now increasingly directed towards dealing with Covid-19, which shows just how far it had been run down over the past decade of cuts and underfunding.

• Counting the deaths, in advance

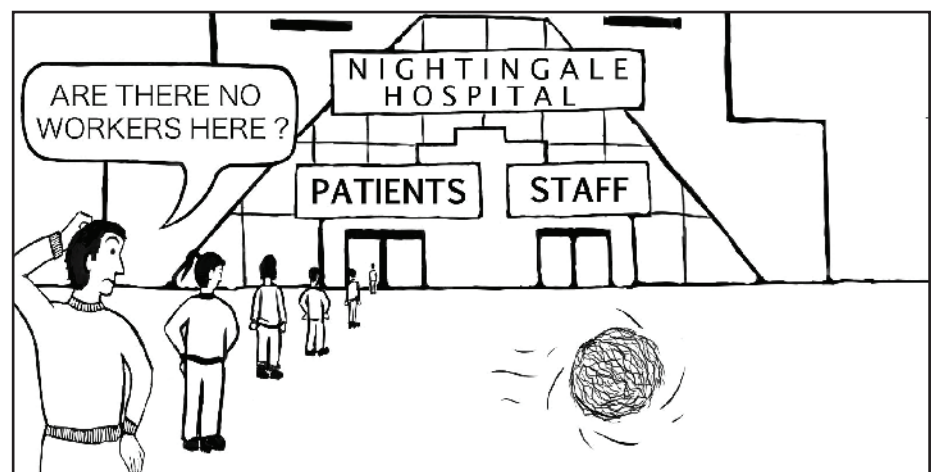
With the number of current Covid-19 infections fast approaching 40,000, the government set up 5 temporary "Nightingale Hospitals" in London, Birmingham, Manchester, Bristol and Harrogate. But only the hospital inside London's ExCel centre, with 4,000 beds including 500 for critical care is, at the time of writing, receiving patients.

And where will the qualified staff come from?? The ExCel Nightingale alone needs 16,000 - at a time when the government is struggling to find enough hands for existing hospitals, and not just because of the large number who have become infected at work!

In fact, while the new hospitals have made the headlines, the government has been getting Local Resilience Forums to take charge of erecting gigantic temporary mortuaries. In east London, a modular morgue the size of 2 football pitches

has gone up on Manor Flats, with another at Low Hall Depot in Leyton. There are others in Westminster and Ruislip. And a hanger at Birmingham's airport has

been converted, with the capacity to hold 1,500 bodies. Hospitals without staff and huge instant morgues in tents? This does not bode well.



• **NHS: cracking at the seams**

Already by March 20th, 3 weeks before the predicted "peak" in infection, London hospitals were declaring critical incidents. Intensive care units at Northwick Park Hospital in Harrow, north-west London, Lewisham University Hospital and Greenwich's Queen Elizabeth, hit capacity and had to transfer patients elsewhere. Epsom and St Helier, North Middlesex and Hillingdon were also full. Over-stretched staff were pushed beyond their limits: a Lewisham consultant admitted his team was making reluctant choices over which patient to put on a ventilator. And on the

4th April Watford General all but ran out of oxygen.

This isn't the picture projected by daily government briefings. The health minister, who failed to social-distance as per his own advice and caught the virus, has now recovered and is back telling press/public that the NHS is coping well and millions of masks etc., are going out to it every day. But the reality is that staff are having to re-use respirator masks and still wait for essential protective gear. By 4 April, 7 had already died of the virus and anything between 8% and 15% are currently sick or

self-isolating.

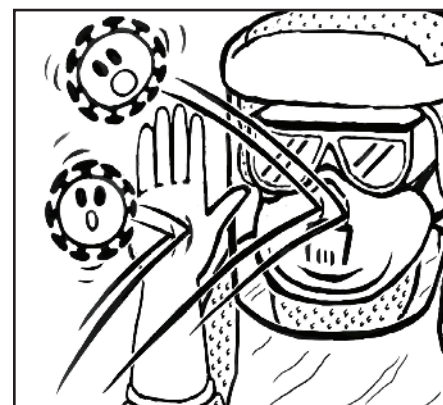
This epidemic would have been the last straw for the NHS, were it not for its workers' resilience. On the eve of the outbreak, Britain had the fewest intensive care beds out of all OECD countries: just 4,000 (Germany had 16,000). Now, with all other procedures/treatments cancelled, new temporary ICU beds have been created to bring the number up by another (potential) 12,000. Whether that will be enough remains to be seen. Italy ran out, having started with 8,000 and so far, Britain is tracking identically along Italy's path on the "curve".

• **In the frontline without the gear!**

Incapable of answering the widespread shortage of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in the NHS, the government simply watered down the World Health Organisation PPE recommendations. Instead of a full gown, it said NHS workers could wear a simple pinafore apron. Apparently eye protection was necessary only "if there is a risk of splashing". The result, of course, is a high level of infections: 6% of all NHS workers and anything between 15 and 25% of doctors are off work because of Covid-19.

So how is it that Britain has such a dangerous shortage of protective gear?

Five years ago, when an independent advisory committee recommended stockpiling PPE, and in particular eye protection visors, it was rejected by the then Department of Health on the grounds that: "these recommendations would substantially increase the cost of the PPE component of the pandemic stockpile four- to six-fold, with a very low likelihood of cost-benefit based on standard thresholds". Yes, the government's consciously-made cuts on the grounds of cost, are one of the main causes of today's criminal shortage of PPE across the country!



• **A policy to spread the virus**

The shortage of face masks meant that the London Ambulance Service had to ask paramedics to use only one mask for two, while nurses in hospitals have had to use paper masks. And then, in mid-March, GPs were sent batches of face masks with a 2016 expiry date hidden by a "2021" sticker. Of course, the government hastily claimed that samples of out-of-date masks had been

tested to extend their shelf-life - but since not all of these masks could be tested, there is no guarantee that they were all effective!

Not only have NHS staff been deprived of the most basic protective gear, the public has also been misled into thinking masks were useless to them. Yet it is well known that masks not only protect the user from being

infected, but they also prevent an infected person from passing the virus on to others. But official guidelines advising people to wear masks in public are only (slowly) emerging! In fact shortages of masks among NHS staff and delays in providing correct advice to the public mean that the virus is likely to have spread much more widely.

• **Incompetent and cost-saving testing**

By 1st April, the government was again claiming testing would be "ramped up", straight away, particularly for NHS workers. The aim being 100,000 tests per day by the end of the month. But by 4 April only 8,000 tests per day were being carried out. And mainly on those seriously ill in hospital. At the time of writing, only 2,000 NHS staff out of 1.2 million(!) had been tested, in total, since the beginning of the outbreak! And this, after the government promised in mid-March to "roll out priority testing" for healthcare workers!

Arch-Brexititeer, Michael Gove blamed "a lack of chemicals needed for the tests" and indeed this is true. Because essential chemicals needed are mostly produced in the EU! And Britain has to join the back of the queue to get them, having decided not to play its full part in the EU's

pandemic response.

But to carry out the tests, there's plenty of capacity: hundreds of labs in universities; thousands of PCR machines. London's Francis Crick Institute just offered its equipment, and its research teams could be mobilised to help. What's more, since Britain claims to be 4th in the world for biotechnology research, why aren't the facilities of this multi-billion "British biotech", or companies like GlaxoSmithKline and AstraZeneca requisitioned?? Much of the needed resources are already there!

• **Dubious antibody-test claims!**

In late March Health Secretary Matt Hancock bragged about up to 17.5m "antibody tests" on order. Boris Johnson had described these as a "game changer"-claiming they could be used "to find out whether [NHS workers on sick leave] have been infected and are safe to go back to

work".

But not only are these tests unavailable to date, but they can't change the outcome of "the game"! These tests can't prove conclusively that NHS workers who've been self-isolating can go back to work safely. Besides, they can give false results - even up to 30% of the PCR tests can be wrong! Antibody tests only reveal whether someone has developed some immunity against the virus, but not at which point they are in the course of their response: so a positive test for antibodies doesn't always mean someone is no longer infectious.

In other words, antibody tests should be used in combination with a PCR test for the virus itself. In the meantime, let's hope that NHS workers on sick leave complete their full quarantine - to be sure they're no longer contagious, instead of being pushed back to work by results of tests which are open to misinterpretation.

Covid emergency

Emergency powers against individuals, but companies are safe!

The Coronavirus Act introduces emergency powers to fight the Covid-19 epidemic. But why for 2 years? Didn't Johnson say the epidemic would be gone in 12 weeks? But that's not the only bizarre feature of this Act.

For instance, it gives a police officer who "has reasonable grounds to suspect that a person... is potentially infectious", the powers to force this person to get tested, including by arresting them. Of course, since police aren't health workers, they're supposed to "consult a public health officer", but only "to the extent that it is practicable" - a recipe for abuse? Bizarrely, immigration officers have been granted identical powers! One can only wonder what would serve as "reasonable grounds" for these officers' suspicions? Looking "foreign"?



But the Act does not mention the possibility of non-essential workplaces being fined or closed down, for needlessly exposing their workers to infection by continuing to operate. This has been noted by the bosses, judging from the number of construction sites which have carried on working - and, in

some cases, are still working. How many more workers have picked up this virus because their bosses made exceptions for themselves and went on crowding them together? The working class will have to bring these bosses and their government to account for this and the sooner the better. □

• Open for non-essential business

Just what is "essential" business? Though Wetherspoon's, Waterstones' and Sports Direct's claims to be essential were quickly quashed, the government allowed construction projects to continue, essential or not. HS2 work in London was suspended by the contractors, but it carried on in Warwickshire, where cutting down woodland before birds start nesting there, is apparently essential! Regional and national media reported work continuing on numerous city centre projects

in the Midlands, Hull and Liverpool and luxury flats in Maidenhead.

Construction workers complaining that two-metre social distancing is impossible when using narrow walkways or in their canteens, were told to "use common sense". Wouldn't common sense say, close the site? So far the government has not even compelled employers to tell workers if their workmates are off sick reporting Covid-19 symptoms!

"Essential" shops are post offices,

banks and those selling food, medicines, household necessities and fuel. Mostly, two-metre distancing is now established. But what about distribution depots for online ordering? Amazon workers in New York City are on strike against the risks they are exposed to, while delivery workers in the gig economy over here are still working, at high exposure for their peanuts pay. But what choice do they have, not being covered by either sick pay or Sunak's furlough money?

• Exposing workers to needless risk

Obviously, it's not just NHS workers who need protective equipment (PPE). Many other workers are essential and must have masks and measures put in place to reduce their risk of infection. And given that's the case, and since Britain's Covid crisis has come later than in other countries, it was possible for the bosses of essential industries/workplaces to know beforehand, and prepare themselves to put all the necessary protection in place,

before the risk level shot up. But unsurprisingly, given that such things cost money, mostly, they didn't.

So all over the country workers have had to stage walkouts or threaten them, to demand proper safety measures, many of them unreported in the name of "national unity"... But the protests continue, from care workers, to postal delivery workers, to food production workers, to bin-men.

• ... and even refusing refuse-workers

In mid-March it was chicken processing workers from two plants in Northern Ireland's County Armagh who had to walk out to force bosses to implement social distancing, and deep-clean work stations vacated by workmates who had symptoms of Covid-19.

At least this work could be considered essential. But working at an Asos fashion warehouse in South Yorkshire, is hardly in the same category. Nevertheless, workers weren't furloughed. They

are expected to come to work, crowd into cramped areas to clock in and have lunch, not given enough hand sanitiser, no masks at all, and proper social distancing wasn't implemented either. GMB union officials intervened on workers' behalf, against bosses who lied that they were doing everything to protect the safety of workers! But this is a picture replicated throughout the country in retail warehouses.

Binmen and women are however

essential. But here is just one example of the negligence of councils: in Medway, Kent, refuse workers had to threaten a strike after the council's own company, Medway Norse, refused to supply proper PPE. Workers are squashed 4 into the front seat of a truck! They say social distancing is impossible - and yes it is, unless councils change the way they collect the rubbish, providing additional vehicles to carry the workers behind the truck!

• **No more death traps!**

The situation in public transport at the beginning of the lockdown exposed the reckless and random approach of the government. Health workers complained of overcrowded trains, especially on London Underground, adding travel to the high risk they are exposed to at work. The overuse was exacerbated by Underground and bus services being cut to Sunday levels, meaning only half as many trains/buses at peak times. But what about the exposure to risk

of the transport workers themselves? By 6 April, 10 London transport workers were reported to have died of the virus.

The London congestion charge and charges for hospital workers to park at work may have been suspended, but not everyone has a car. Only after a day of lockdown did the Transport Police put 500 officers on duty to check for non-essential passengers on trains.

But why couldn't essential workers be

provided with dedicated transport to and from work, linking the major hospitals to the main commuters' hubs at certain times of the day, among other things? That would allow the closure of public transport for non-essential use and reduce the exposure of both transport and other key workers. But nobody seems to have thought of it, even after the virus had been given another couple of days of bogus lockdown, to spread freely on crowded trains and buses.

• **Why there were empty shelves**

On 19 March, in response to the increase in demand for supermarket food, the government relaxed competition laws. Supermarkets are now able to share distribution networks, including pooling staff, and discuss their respective stock levels. A few days later, 3 food policy experts wrote to the government, saying that for them, the problem wasn't "panic buying". In fact, the average household only spent an extra £62.92 at supermarkets during March - even if £2bn more was spent as whole, compared to last year.

The problem is the distribution network. Thirty years ago, supermarkets held almost 2 weeks of stock, now they hold stock lasting barely more than a day and-a-half. This "just-in-time" model is used in order to save the cost of warehousing. But in this situation, food cannot get to shelves fast enough.

Yet, while the supermarkets' separate



distribution networks were failing, collectively, they still managed to do very well, despite (or because) of the shortages. The fact is that food security has been undermined by the past decades of frantic profiteering. But suspending

competition laws won't change that. Only the end of the competition for profits in the food industry and distribution, combined with central planning of production, can guarantee food reaching our tables when we need it.

———— **Bailing out the railway sharks**

Thanks to the pandemic, by mid-March, passenger use of trains had already fallen by 70%. Train operating companies (TOCs), had cut timetables by half and total ticket sales were down by two thirds. Bankruptcy loomed.

So on 23 March, the government jumped in to help "save" rail transport for the "nation", i.e., bail out the companies! It suspended their franchise agreements for a minimum of 6 months, converting them into "Emergency Measures Agreements".

• **The Airline industry wants its own bailout**

Rishi Sunak's bailout schemes aren't good enough for Richard Branson, who's currently lobbying the government for a £7.5 billion special bailout for the whole airline industry. But, in fact, what Branson has in mind above all, is his own Virgin Atlantic, which is one of the least solid among the big airlines.

Branson's campaign is backed by Airbus, which provides Virgin Atlantic's Airbus 330, Rolls-Royce, which maintains its aircraft engines,

So now the government will bear all their costs and on top, will pay the TOCs a fee to manage their own franchises! If they don't wish to (or fail to comply in some way), the franchise will be taken over by the Department for Transport's Operator of Last Resort - or, as Transport Secretary Grant Shapps called it, "renationalised"(!). But in his book that just means allowing the privateers to wash their hands of their liabilities, which would then be taken over by the government, i.e.,

and Heathrow, which was expecting Virgin to expand its fleet. In the meantime, Branson said he will inject £200 million into Virgin Group. But that hasn't stopped Virgin Atlantic from putting most of its workers on 8 weeks' unpaid leave, and forcing redundancies and year-long sabbaticals onto 8,500 employees.

So after leaving their workers with nothing, these companies expect the government to bail them out on public funds? But how about

Bosses bail-out

the taxpayer!

Shapps claims that this will cost much less to taxpayers than the cost of a franchise default. Maybe so, but why should taxpayers pay anything at all? What about asking TOC shareholders to pay instead? Or better still, throw them all out and take over the railways for good, without a penny for these private sharks. So that we can have a *really* publicly-owned national railway, fit for - and run by - workers and passengers alike.

forcing them to bail themselves out, using their own cash and/or getting their shareholders to fork out some of the fat dividends they've received over the years? Easyjet paid £171m worth of dividends this year, while Virgin Atlantic hoards £489m in cash. There's plenty of money to go around in the industry. Forcing them to pay up could have been a good use for Johnson's 2-year emergency powers. But, of course, that's the last thing they were meant for!

Bounty for the capitalists

Their "War on Covid-19" is part of their war against the working class

In the "War on Covid-19" we're supposed to be "all in it together", "as one Nation". But, of course, we're not. And this is what the economic measures against the Covid-19 crisis are proving, once again.

First, there are measures designed to impress the top spheres of the City - especially the hundreds of billions of fresh cash that the Bank of England said it would inject into the coffers of the biggest companies. But we saw the same kind of measures at work after the 2008 banking crisis, when the hundreds of billions of fresh cash injected into the banking system went on to feed a massive wave of speculation. This only allowed the richest to get even richer, while the working class was getting poorer! That part, is entirely - and explicitly - designed to benefit big business.

Then, there are measures aimed at the Tory party's electoral base - small and medium businesses, better-off self-employed professionals, etc... Everything is done to convince

them that they are at the top of the government's agenda, even though it's glaringly not true. For instance, they'll soon find out that Sunak's loan package is primarily designed to protect the banks, while they will be going to the wall! So, these measures are also for *big* business first.

Finally, there is the set of measures which are ostensibly designed to "help" the working class majority - including the less well-off self-employed and the poorest layers of the population. Well, the point about these measures is that they will not - and are not meant to - protect the huge casualised section of the working class, let alone the poorest and most vulnerable, because most of them will get nothing at all and will have to survive on Universal Credit, if they can! As to the much trumpeted "furlough allowance", its real objective is not to help workers, but to justify the fact that the government will be paying the wage bills of their employers, who

are the only real beneficiaries of this largesse, while workers' futures remain suspended in mid-air, without any guarantee. So, it's another big win for companies - especially for the largest!

So, no, this "War on Covid-19" is not "class neutral" - it is heavily biased to benefit the thin top layer of the capitalist class, which controls most of the economy. And yet it is this same top layer together with the companies it owns, which also controls most of the wealth. Forcing companies and rich shareholders to collectively provide as much of their accumulated profits as required, to face up to this crisis, would be the only way to ensure that all workers, whatever their status, get paid a full decent wage until it's over. But this would be different class choice - one that only the international working class taking the control of its fate out of the hands of the profiteers, would have the will and the means to make. □

• Big business bailout schemes

As the Covid-19 pandemic went from bad to worse, the government was quick to demonstrate its determination to bail out British capital. Sunak's "doing whatever it takes" and the Bank of England are intended to make sure of that.

So it was to great fanfare that Sunak announced on the 17 March the government's £330 billion package - as he said, 15% of Britain's GDP. Its most important element, however, the Covid Corporate Financing Facility (CCFF), is administered by the Bank of England: the BoE will provide unlimited loans at a record low interest rate, for a maximum of 12 months, "financed" by printing fresh pound notes. Only Britain's biggest companies will be entitled to these loans. As to their combined value, on paper, this

has been set at £200 billion. But since the loans are unlimited, if the situation gets ugly, this figure could easily reach stratospheric levels.

In the short term, the magnitude of this coronavirus bailout still seems a lot smaller than the £1 trillion of the big bank bailout of 2008-10. However, this may be misleading, due to a major difference between the two.

Indeed, a decade ago, the banking bailout was the response to a crisis which had already happened: some big banks were bust and many more were threatening to follow suit. By contrast, today, there is no economic crisis to speak of - not yet. A major economic crisis has been in the making for a long time, long before the Covid-19 pandemic and the

odds are that the economic impact of the pandemic will act as an accelerator and cause this looming economic crisis to break out with a vengeance. However, in this chaotic capitalist system, absolutely no-one can predict the scale and brutality of this coming crisis, nor the forms it will take.

The truth is that the government is groping in the dark. In anticipation of a crisis of which it knows nothing, it is symbolically offering a bailout to British capital, as a sort of demonstration of intent. But the real scale of this bailout will only be revealed when the real economic crisis breaks out. And the odds are, that it will be a lot worse than anything Sunak dares to admit today and, therefore, a lot costlier for the working class!

• Sunak favours big sharks over small sharks

It turns out that the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme (CBILS) supposedly designed by Sunak for small businesses isn't so useful to them after all. Sunak pledged 12-month interest-free loans of up to £5 million, for businesses with a turnover of up to £45 million. But those that applied for the loans were asked by the big accredited banks to provide financial guarantees using their personal

assets (i.e. alternative sources of income, properties etc.). Moreover, banks tried to redirect applicants towards higher-interest rate loans instead of the state interest-free scheme. Which leads one to wonder why the CBLIS was created in the first place. It seems the government underestimated the greed of the big banks, despite Sunak coming straight out of their world!

By the 2nd of April, more than two

weeks after Sunak had announced the scheme, out of 130,000 enquiries the helpline, 983, firms had been lent a pathetic total of £90 million. The whole situation was so ridiculous that the Treasury has been forced to review its loan package. By comparison, in the meantime, big companies had already managed to get £1.9 billions-worth of liquidity from the Bank of England's CCFF scheme!

Poverty for the workers

• Bailout for the self-employed?

After having announced its scheme for the self-employed on 11 March, it took two weeks for the government to release any details: they were to receive 80% of their average monthly earnings (calculated over the past 3 years), up to £2,500 a month, for a maximum of three months payable as a lump sum starting at the beginning of June!

Of course, the "self-employed" includes a wide variety of workers, from low-paid employees forced onto bogus self-employed contracts, but also better-off individuals for whom it's a matter of

"tax efficiency". Given the vague details released by the government, it is still not clear who this will really benefit.

There were just over 5m officially categorised as self-employed by the end of 2019, with 921,000 in the construction industry, making up the single biggest section. On average, the self-employed earned almost 25% less than waged workers doing the same work: 1.25m were paid below the minimum wage hourly rate, while 2.5m earned less than £820 a month.

The better-off minority of the self-employed will not be entitled to the

scheme. Those who happen to use self-employment to top up an employee job, won't get anything at all, according to Sunak's latest conditions. But what will the remaining 3.8m (Sunak's figure) be left with? They are mostly low-paid workers and they will get an even smaller "bailout". And since they won't get it before, at least, the beginning of June, this so-called "bailout" will leave many workers no choice but to apply for Universal Credit (at around £100/week for the over 25s!) - for which they'll have to wait 5 weeks, anyway.

• CJRS: nothing compels retention

On the 20th of March, chancellor Rishi Sunak announced the "Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme", which will be in place until the end of May. It is a voluntary scheme which allows companies to claim back wages paid to workers who are laid off due to the coronavirus crisis. They need to provide the government with

a list of workers on their payroll on or before the 28th of February and who are on temporary leave ("furlough"). These companies must then pay at least 80% of the furloughed workers' basic wages (up to £2,500 per month per worker) which the government will refund to them later. In other words, the government is

offering to help bear the cost of the crisis to businesses. The official line is that this will ensure that companies can retain the workers they need to restart, but it is no surprise that the scheme contains no provisions written into it, to prevent the bosses from sacking workers, before, during or after joining it!

• Growing unemployment crisis

Since the beginning of the lockdown, companies have sacked thousands of workers. So in a matter of weeks, unemployment has sky-rocketed. On 2 April, the Department for Work and Pensions registered almost 1m applications for Universal Credit. But tens of thousands of sacked workers were still waiting in the queue on "overwhelmed" Job Centre phone lines.

So much for Sunak's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) in order "to retain jobs". Of course, Sunak wouldn't dream of forcing companies to keep ALL workers on the payroll, on pain of losing government help. So, many of them are making some, if not all of their workers

redundant rather than furloughing them.

Worst off, are around 1m zero-hours contract workers, who were among the first to be sacked. Even permanent full-timers, like staff at Travelodge and Britannia Hotels were sacked - evicted with 2 hour's notice! Conditions written into the CJRS aggravate the situation: workers must have been on a company payroll since 28 February in order to receive furlough pay.

After the pandemic, to make up for their losses, it's more than likely that companies will employ casuals rather than take back workers on proper contracts. And Sunak's measures will have prepared the way for them to do that.



• Bosses opportunism amidst the pandemic

Among companies sacking workers in the wake of the pandemic, are well-known retail, food, hospitality and entertainment chains. Eat, with 90 outlets, and owned by Pret, is closing permanently, threatening hundreds of jobs. Then there's the collapse of Carluccio's restaurants and "rent-to-own" Brighthouse which together employ 4,500 workers. Carluccio's even told workers they'd only receive 50% of their wages for their last month

worked!

The long list of companies choosing to file bankruptcy or shutting stores at this moment includes Laura Ashley (2,700 jobs threatened), Frankie and Benny, Chiquito, CarPhone Warehouse and even Ikea. Companies like Cineworld, also obliged to close their doors due to lockdown, are refusing to take back the workers they'd sacked before the CJRS was announced. Michelin's Dundee tyre

plant, due to shut down in June, announced an earlier closure, declaring its 850 workers redundant. Cairn Energy in the North Sea has cut its oil platform workforce from 11,500 to 7,000 within the space of 2 weeks.

Not all workers are taking this lying down: 162 agency workers working for logistics contractor DHL at Jaguar Land Rover Halewood have announced that they'll strike against redundancies. And they are right!

• EU banking dividends and bonuses scrapped... for now!

By now, the rich countries' central banks have all announced huge bailouts designed to inject massive amounts of fresh cash, over time, into the coffers of the biggest banks and companies - just as they did after the 2008 banking crisis.

The Bank of England and the EU's Central Bank (ECB) made their announcements on 19 March. But a week later, the ECB issued a compulsory order to all EU banks to "not pay dividends for

the financial years 2019 and 2020 until at least 1 October 2020".

Britain was slower. Here, banks don't get ordered around: they receive "advice" from regulators, which they can choose to implement, or to ignore. In this case, however, they all chose to follow the advice- but not because they felt uncomfortable about making shareholders richer, just as banks were about to benefit from a state

bailout! In fact, the regulators had not even mentioned this point. Their main argument was that cancelling these payments would add £30bn to the banks' cash in difficult times.

This was a language bankers could understand. But, of course, their objectives won't change: passing on the benefit of the state bailout to their shareholders!

King's Cross railway station (London)**They mask the dangers, not the workers**

Rightly or wrongly, the government instructed that trains should run during the Covid-19 epidemic. So we'd have expected the companies operating out of King's Cross to institute urgent protection for both workers and passengers. But no such luck. In fact it's a huge, ongoing struggle to get managers to agree to even the most rudimentary measures.

There's been a lack of hand sanitiser and gloves. Station staff were reduced at one point to getting gloves from cleaners! As for masks, at first we were told we didn't need them, even though most of us have to have face-to-face contact with

passengers and with each other. Those of us who brought our own were told we couldn't wear them. It was "bad" for the company image! Eventually, a few masks were supplied but these were and are wholly inadequate. We were told to practice "social distancing"! But is it possible for guards on-board, information point (CIP) workers, wheelchair assistants, gate-line, or cleaners, to keep 2m apart?

LNER only belatedly shut down the on-train catering service and even more belatedly the CIP, and furloughed staff. But it still keeps gates manned, when under



these circumstances, it'd be common sense to leave them open and unmanned!

Yes, at time when trains average just 5-15 people travelling at rush-hour, how can they justify exposing so many of us to possible infection?

• Atalian Servest: profits before lives

It took until the end of March, 8 weeks after the outbreak of the coronavirus, for Atalian Servest finally to start issuing a few masks to cleaners. They hid behind the excuse that "even the NHS lacks masks". Network Rail, which runs the station, dared to suggest that we shouldn't wear them "as it might make passengers panic"!

But even now, masks aren't mandatory. And we're running out of them. Worse, managers keep telling us to "social distance 2 metres apart", but they bring 20 of us in on a shift, with no choice but to crowd into small messrooms and changing rooms.

Of course, social distancing could easily be put in place: more space for us to change

and sit down in could be made available. The station is all but deserted, after all. And they could allow the 1st shift to leave earlier, so that it doesn't meet the 2nd one... Yet after we did just that, ourselves, we faced "investigation"! Yes, this company only knows how to do the wrong thing. But at a time like this, they're risking our lives.

• 2 metres apart?

Now we're told to stay 2 metres apart at all times... at work?! And how can you do that on a train? The total width of an Azuma (wider than the Mark 4) is 2.7m... Only the drivers can comply - inside their isolated cab - but not the guard. And if you can't have a guard onboard (unless he/she is in full protective gear, overall,

visor, mask and gloves!), then it's not safe to run the train... [Workers' Platform King's X 25/3/20]

• Close public transport

In fact, we don't understand why public transport isn't shut down. Tube, rail and bus stations, and bus-stops are places where the infection could spread. And it's the poorest of the 'key workers' who're

exposed as they/we have no cars and can't afford taxis.

Not only should all the gates be open but travel should now be free. And if Wuhan, with 11.08 million inhabitants (almost 3 million more than London), can close public transport and hire drivers for key workers, why can't the government here organise safe, free, transport for them?? [Workers' Platform King's X 25/3/20]

Mount Pleasant mail centre (London)**RM bosses help spread the virus**

On the 24th of March, well into the Covid-19 crisis, RM bosses came up with a number of "safety measures" to be implemented in our workplaces. One being the famous 2-metre social distancing! But this is impossible to implement in most offices due to the layout. And the "one person, one van" rule, which was always an issue for us, since it was unsafe to have a lone driver, has been turned into a safety virtue, in the name of social distancing! Except that since vans won't have a deep-clean between shifts, nothing stops the virus passing from one shift to the next! As to basic hand sanitisers and gloves, let alone masks, RM hasn't even bothered to

provide adequate supplies.

RM's disregard for our health and that of the public was shown again when, in their Covid-19 update of the 30th of March, they reassured customers that non-essential packets and letters would keep being delivered everywhere they could. They even justified delivering useless Door-to-Door advertisements because businesses "want to send it, many consumers want to receive it"! Never mind the fact that having the 140,000 of us crammed into the Processing Centres/Delivery Offices and going door to door,, 6-days a week, is exactly what it takes to



spread a virus!

There is a growing number of work-mates, like those at the Paisley DO, who have taken the matter into their own hands and have walked out collectively, until decent safety measures were adopted. And this is indeed the only way we can impose on RM the measures that would keep us, and those around us, safe!

• No truce!

So the union leaders put aside the strike (despite the 94.5% yes vote; 63.4% turnout) - this time, in the "national interest"... Yet RM continues to behave carelessly towards us and the general public. Italian workers had to go on general strike (as recently as 2 weeks ago, well into the worst part of their epidemic) to force

companies (like Fiat-Milan!) to be responsible and/or shut down. Striking now against RM would be the only effective way to shock it and the government into respecting our/the public's interests! [Workers' Fight bulletin Mount Pleasant 25/3/20]

• The fight goes on!

BTW on top of it all bosses have been using the situation to introduce their cuts!

Yes, the boss here wants to go ahead with his planned VRs! At a time when casuals are brought in to cover for the lack of hands, he had the cheek to tell union reps that 35 VRs are needed. Of course some of us need to leave this mad house, but new recruits and part-time-made-full-time must replace them! [Workers' Fight bulletin Mount Pleasant 25/3/20]

Ford Dagenham Engine Plant**Dagenham making NHS ventilators?**

We were surprised by two things after management belatedly declared a month's lay-off on the 20 March, in response to the pandemic. Of course they had to do it anyway, because parts from a locked-down Europe had dried up.

The first surprise was that the initial deal offered, that we "pay" for the lay-off with service days and holidays, was to be replaced by the government Job Retention Scheme, paying 80% of our wages. And that Ford would top this up

to 100%! So we wouldn't lose our holidays after all, and we wouldn't be on an official "lay-off", but furlough, and therefore we couldn't be called upon to come to work. That was good news.

The second surprise was the offer to return to the plant as key workers, suitably socially distanced and on shift pay with weekend overtime(!) in order to make ventilator components for the Oxfordshire company Penlon. At first we didn't believe it. But after all, why not? It might help save lives. And at the very



least, it provides proof that it's perfectly possible to adapt the plant to make socially useful goods, instead of polluting, diesel engines. Which means that if we willed it, there could even be a future for production here in Dagenham! □

• Non-essential work...?

After the corona-closure, mates were called in to finish off the engine score from the previous Friday! Never mind this went against government guidelines! Yes, when asked last Wed in the Commons if companies could be fined for asking workers to do non-essential work, the now Covid-infected UnHealthy Secretary Matt Hancock said yes, they could...

PS: So does maintenance work in here qualify as "essential" - and if so, why? [Workers' Fight bulletin Ford Dagenham 1/4/20]

• Our safety first!

50 from Transport Ops have been asked to come back to work. Jetty mates are to bring in ambulances/mortuary vehicles (!?). Truck fleet is meant to help with Tesco food distribution!? So, will we get "key worker" status? PPE? And when sharing trucks, will they be deep-cleaned after each change of drivers? Questions need answering. We'll not put our health, our workmates health, and therefore, the health of others, at risk! [Workers' Fight bulletin Ford Dagenham 1/4/20]

• They've also taken public money!

As for us cleaners and Lineside workers, we're now also to be part of the Job Retention Scheme - but it took Hamton/LLL a whole week before they told us, leaving us worried sick about how we were going to make ends meet on SSP and Universal Credit (and some of us will still need it!).

And 80% is still going to help us starve. [Workers' Fight bulletin Ford Dagenham 1/4/20]

BMW Mini centre (Cowley, Oxford)**For the company, workers' health comes cheap**

It wasn't until 18 March that BMW announced that the plant would be shutting down in two days time, for 4 weeks. Before that point, nothing had been done to protect workers. Some of us had been sick and isolating at least a week before BMW's announcement of closure, and all the company had to say was, wash your hands more and stay 2m apart - as if either of those are possible on an assembly line! Indeed, the shutdown was finally announced after BMW decided that there was a lack of parts, and a probable lack of demand - nothing to do with the health of the workforce. In fact, the company still expect maintenance and other workers to continue coming to work, for the whole

of the shutdown, to carry out "essential work"! More essential than protecting our health?

And while the majority of us are now at home, BMW didn't care that many would have to go unpaid: as a result of extended shutdowns over the past two years, many workers were already at the limits of their Working Time Accounts (where time off for shutdowns has to be worked as compulsory overtime at a later date), and so couldn't "borrow" any more paid hours from the company.

Eventually, having checked that it was entitled to the 80% furlough scheme, BMW announced that we'd be covered - but not all of us, because this scheme



only applies to permanent and contract workers. Nothing has been said about agency workers, who are the majority!

Needless to say, BMW refused to complement the government's 80% to full pay for those who were entitled. However, as a petty cherry on their shutdown cake, they said they would pay another 10% - which will be added to Working Time Accounts! Every little helps... their profits! □

• No to pandemic overtime!

Why should we have to pay AGAIN for this shutdown? How dare managers (and especially in the middle of this viral pandemic) tell us we have to "borrow" yet more hours - as much as 75! - from Working Time Account (WTA), and work them off on yet more Saturday compulsory overtime? We just can't and won't.

• BMW must pay

Yup. And how can they consider it acceptable for us to go 2 weeks unpaid - which is what these 75 hours of WTA amount to!? And by the way, what if the shutdown is even longer?

Abolishing the WTA system is something which is long overdue. When we return to this plant after the pandemic is over, we're going to have a very big score to settle with these blood-suckers.

• Leaving us to starve

And just what are Gi, R&H, G&P, MITIE agency workers meant to do? We're sent home unpaid for 4 weeks and maybe more, if the shutdown's extended, which nobody can know for sure.

And all this thanks to this bogus self-employed status and other loopholes which mega-rich BMW uses to super-exploit us! So it seems we're disqualified from the 80% Job Retention Scheme. Something needs doing

asap! Universal Credit isn't a viable option! Are we meant to starve to death, if C-19 doesn't get us first? [Workers Fight bulletin Oxford Mini 1/4/20]

• Canning viruses?

You have to wonder what BMW managers were thinking when they organised briefings on the government "health guidance"? We were "invited", in groups of 50 or 60, to pack like sardines into tiny rooms - to be told we had to practice social distancing! We decided not to help Covid-19 reproduce any further, and refused to even go in! [Workers Fight bulletin Oxford Mini 1/4/20]

International

Most large-scale scientific research projects have long involved dozens of countries, working together, behind the scenes, to share their scientific knowledge, technical expertise, production facilities and the high-cost of these projects. It's only when, after years of collective work, these projects yield some spectacular results, that British politicians acknowledge their existence and hail Britain's "outstanding contribution".

But it is only by sharing results that science can really progress. This has always been recognised in medicine and biology. Since viruses do not care about immigration controls, researchers and practitioners have collaborated and shared experience across borders. In particular, following the pandemics of the past two decades. Report after report was published in the attempt to work out how governments should prepare themselves for future pandemics. But politicians were not interested. In the

Not "the battle of Britain", but a battle for mankind

name of vicious cost-cutting policies, they allowed stocks of vital equipment and medicines to melt away, while they were running down their countries' health systems.

Today, characters like Gove are trying to revive a campaign of poisonous nationalist finger-pointing, to divert attention from their own criminal negligence. So now we have "the Battle of Britain against the virus". As if this should or could be a national war - when this invisible pandemic is international and requires a collective response beyond borders!

But where there is a Gove, there is Brexit-creep and anti-Chinese racism. So Gove justified Johnson's decision to pull out of the EU's "Early Warning and Response System" - which is designed to anticipate public health threats, like pandemics - on the grounds that Britain was an "independent nation" (but how many more unnecessary deaths will it take for Gove to consider that Britain is

"independent" enough?). Then, there was Gove implying on the Andrew Marr programme that Britain's lagging behind in preparedness for Covid-19 was China's fault: "some of the reporting from China was not clear about the scale, the nature, the infectiousness of this." Really? When China provided the full genetic code of the virus as early as 11 January and British labs were thus able to develop a test and start testing immediately! And would have been testing everybody, had the resources been given to them, instead of hundreds of billions being thrown at big business!

So, yes, if there is a lesson that can already be learnt from the Covid-19 pandemic, it is that mankind will only have a future, if it gets rid of everything that stands in the way of pooling together all available scientific knowledge and medical skills - in particular these obsolete national borders and nationalist flag-waving that the likes of Gove are so keen to use to cover their own backs. □

Letter from India

Modi's Covid policies - lethal for the working class!

Predictably, Modi's priority in his response to the pandemic has been to protect capitalist profits, while ignoring the needs of the poor. So, the government has rolled out a package of cheap loans for businesses, a moratorium on loan repayments for three months and tax exemptions. But for the working class, the consequences of his response have been disastrous.

After Modi declared a lockdown, including the closure of the whole of the national railway, on 24 March, factories and construction sites shut. Having lost their only source of income, many workers in the industrial suburbs of Delhi could no longer afford to pay rent or buy food. Hundreds of thousands originating from rural areas, left to return to their villages to try and live off the land. Since railway stations and bus depots were closed, an estimated 600,000 of these workers walked to their villages, sometimes hundreds of miles away - a journey which has cost at least fifty workers their lives. After this became a media scandal, and workers in several cities demonstrated to demand transport, the authorities provided a few buses - resulting in thousands of workers crowding into bus stations, thereby creating perfect conditions for the virus to spread! Meanwhile, the police was beating workers with their sticks, either to force them to turn around or to stuff them into the inadequate number of buses available. As to the government, it claimed that workers had been "unnecessarily panicked" (!) and would now receive "psycho-social counselling"!



Despite the lockdown, the government declared that the logistics, mining and steel sectors were ... "essential" - and allowed thousands to congregate in these workplaces! Some mines even threatened their workers with the sack if they failed to turn up for work. Companies used the opportunity to squeeze as much as possible out of their workforces: they cut jobs, while slashing up to 70% of the remaining workers' wages and downgrading their terms and conditions.

To cover up its mismanagement of the situation, the regime is now trying to turn the epidemic into a communal issue. With the help of the media, they have been pointing the finger of blame on a meeting organised by a Muslim sect in Delhi - on the grounds that

a number of its participants were infected by the virus. As if this could possibly be the only channel through which the virus entered the country! They are now organising and publicising a "manhunt" to find all the participants in this meeting - who are now scattered all over India. Several news channels and far-right Hindu groups have been peddling the idea that this was all part of a "Corona Jihad" conspiracy against India! This campaign has caused such anger against the government and mistrust for its officials in Muslim neighbourhoods, that there have been cases of residents attacking health workers who were carrying out Covid-19 tests. It's not just the virus than needs eradicating, but communalism!

In addition to this paper, we publish bulletins in several large workplaces in the South East, a journal, "Class Struggle" and a series of pamphlets on topical issues. If you wish to know more, contact Workers' Fight by e-mail, at contact@w-fight.org, or by postal mail at:

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