As we lurch into the predictable autumn second wave of Covid, it’s ever more clear that the Tories never really gave up on their first instinct, to do as little as possible to stop the virus. That was why they were so slow to introduce the national lockdown in March, when it’s now estimated that had they done so only a week earlier, they could have saved 20,000 lives.

RISING
It’s why we now have a patchwork of local restrictions, so confusing that many have given up on trying to follow what they are or are not allowed to do. And it’s why cases, hospitalisations and deaths are all rising.

It has been clear since the summer, with Eat Out to Help Out and rules on socialising that could be summarised as ‘don’t, unless there’s a till present’, that encouraging consumer spending is paramount for the government.

PROFIT
The disgraceful treatment of university students, encouraged to move into their halls so that the universities and landlords could collect the term’s rent, is another demonstration of this prioritisation of profit. Yet, with more than a third of employers planning redundancies and unemployment predicted to be nearly double the current rate by the middle of 2021, this doesn’t look like protecting ordinary people from the economic consequences of Covid.

The reality is that in the government’s view, Covid is now just a fact of life, and we all have to take individual responsibility for protecting ourselves from it. We’ve already seen how the rise in cases has been blamed on individual behaviour (aka young people having parties). Matt Hancock and Boris Johnson have both threatened a second national lockdown with the air of parents threatening misbehaving children with an early bedtime. The approach to Covid-secure workplaces is a continuation of this individualisation of the response to the virus.

FIGHTING
To be clear, there are many steps that employers can and should take to make their staff and others as safe as possible. Throughout the pandemic, workers have been fighting for adequate PPE, for better social distancing and hand washing facilities and for other protections.

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Resistance grows on the frontline

David McAllister

The coronavirus crisis is exposing the inequalities and injustice built into the system. From the reckless push to reopen education settings and workplaces while infection rates soar, to the ending of the furlough scheme and the thousands of workers facing redundancies, we have a government which is neither capable nor willing to do anything to protect workers if it disrupts the accumulation of profits.

However, there is a growing combative activity across different sectors of industry which suggests how a collective response can develop. The education unions, particularly the NEU and UCU, have demonstrated the crucial role that unions can play in expressing the anxieties felt by working people.

Staff in the universities across the country are pushing back against demands for face to face teaching and other dangerous practices. Local teachers unions, who got the schools closed in the first place back in April, are to demand much-needed safety measures in schools.

Several other workforces have taken the fight to their employers. Thousands of NHS workers have protested against their despicable exclusion from a pay rise. Debenhams staff have mobilised weekly paroxysms against mass redundancies outside stores in the UK and Ireland, and have had huge support.

Meanwhile, action by workers at British Airways has temporarily halted the use of fire and rehire tactics against 26,000 workers, and London Underground drivers in Aslef have voted overwhelmingly for industrial action to protect jobs and conditions. Resistance from workers has been driven by organising at grassroots level, often through rank and file initiatives. They have demonstrated that, when organised collectively, can be a hugely powerful force. The left needs to throw themselves into supporting these struggles, and attempt to draw them together into a mass movement which can challenge a government which prioritises wealth over health.

Below: NHS nurses demonstrate for a pay rise in London. Photo: Shabbir Lakha.e

A zero Covid strategy is possible

Continued from front page

There have been some notable victories, like the temporary middle door boarding and more permanent protection for the drivers’ cabs in London buses, which remain a demonstration of the power of workers’ organisation.

Workplaces

All of this is important, but doesn’t change the fact that the only truly Covid-secure workplace is one in which no one has Covid. There is no magic amount of hand sanitiser that will enable businesses, shops, schools, cinemas etc to go on operating safely if there is a chance that some people in them are carriers of the virus. This is why the idea that precautions against Covid can allow work and school to go on normally is so wrong-headed.

This doesn’t mean that we’re powerless against the virus. We know that a zero Covid strategy is possible, because countries like New Zealand have pursued it successfully. What it takes is what has been most lacking in the Tories’ woeful response to Covid: a test and trace system that establishes quickly if people have the virus and then tracks down all the people they might have infected and tests them too. You then need effective financial and social support for those who have to self-isolate, so that isolation doesn’t cost them money and they can still get the food, medicine etc they need.

Mess

Despite the almighty mess the Tories have made of test and trace, it doesn’t have to be all that complicated. It isn’t even as if local health authorities don’t have expertise in contact tracing for other contagious diseases. The problem lies in giving test and trace to private companies like Serco to run for profit.

We don’t have to accept that another wave of Covid deaths is inevitable, nor do we have to accept sleepwalking into a herd immunity strategy because of the test and trace shambles. Every step to deal with this virus has been forced on the government by public opinion and workers’ organisation.

The priority now has to be to agitate for a zero-Covid strategy. It’s the only way out of the deadly situation the Tories have got us into.
John Clarke with Kate O’Neil

The United States is edging towards a presidential election torn by deep crises and intensifying social conflicts.

Populism

Donald Trump ran for office in 2016 by cultivating a base of support among disaffected populations captivated by his racist right wing populism. In power, he has pursued a harshly xenophobic course while implementing brutal tax cuts for the rich, attacking supports for the poor, and gutting consumer and environmental protections. Trump hasn’t represented a fundamental break with what came before him, but he has gone about things in such a way as to fan the flames of racism to an unprecedented degree.

Failure

Now that the grim milestone of 200,000 Covid-19 deaths has been reached in the US, the failure of Trump to act decisively to prevent this tragedy is irrefutable. Meanwhile, his administration and the entire US establishment have been thrown into crisis by the scale and intensity of the Black Lives Matter resurgence. But this upsurge has also galvanised the most vicious elements of Trump’s base, and Trump has openly supported the vigilante street armies that have unleashed deadly violence on anti-racist activists.

If Joe Biden wins the election in November, it won’t be because of any great enthusiasm for his candidacy. He is favoured by the dominant section of the capitalist class and political establishment, who view Trump as too volatile. A Biden administration would seek to impose the burden of the economic crisis on working-class people and contain the struggle for racial justice.

Movements

Nonetheless, it would be absurd to suggest that the electoral outcome is irrelevant. A second Trump term would intensify his reactionary policy directions and embolden right wing street armies.

After 3 November, movements for social justice will confront different challenges based on the electoral result but, in either case, the need for growing working class resistance will be utterly vital.

Join The People’s Assembly

National Day of Action

Saturday 17 October

We Won’t Pay for the Crisis. We Demand

Extend the Furlough | Decent Wages for Unemployed
Proper Test & Track | No Evictions

Find a local event: www.thepeoplesassembly.org.uk
As Starmer turns right ...

A NEW LEFT. A NEW DIRECTION.

As the Labour leadership buries all memory of Corbynism, Chris Nineham writes that a strong extra-parliamentary left is essential

Keir Starmer’s Doncaster conference speech signalled that he is dragging Labour decisively to the right.

His stress on patriotism and security pointed to a sharp social and foreign policy shift. Commitment to opportunity signalled an embrace of aspiration over redistribution. Even for a right wing Labour speech, this was remarkably low on references to inequality or even fairness.

Embracing Tory arguments and attitudes will not to win votes from them. If people want a government that puts the free market, business and traditional values first, why vote for the imitation when they can have the real thing?

MOVEMENT

But adaptation is not just disastrous electorally, it damages and disorients the wider movement. And Starmer’s capitulation to Tory values is completely unnecessary. For years opinion polls have been showing big majorities for radical policies on tax, renationalisation, trade unions and foreign policy.

Johnson’s government is facing an unprecedented series of crises. The economy is tanking, coronavirus is surging again and a damaging no-deal Brexit looms. The NHS and a welfare system decimated by Tory cutbacks clearly can’t cope.

Anger at the handling of Covid is boosting discontent with austerity and inequality. There is widespread concern over levels of racism as well as the alarming threats of climate change.

U-TURNS

The government’s thirteen U-turns, from the closure of the schools in April to the scrapping of the exam algorithm in the summer, had nothing to do with Labour. They were forced on the government by protests and campaigning.

Now there are signs of a growing movement in workplaces pushing back against the mishandling of Covid and employers’ attacks on jobs and conditions.

Lecturers are campaigning against forced in-person teaching. Teachers and parents are pushing for proper safeguards in schools. Trade unionists in local councils, at British airways, at the Tate galleries and elsewhere, are fighting redundancies. Healthworkers are pushing for a proper pay rise.

STRUGGLES

With the active involvement of what is still a very big left, these struggles could coalesce into a powerful national movement.

We all know the left has a credibility problem amongst whole sections of the working class.

We can only overcome this by throwing ourselves into supporting and generalising these campaigns. Starmer’s Labour will be on the wrong side of many of these disputes. If the left remains in thrall to it will become irrelevant at best.

We need a concerted effort to sustain and link struggles against the government. We need to build solidarity with every strike, to argue at work for action over health and safety, and put the case that the job cuts can be resisted if we fight.

RESISTANCE

This will not happen automatically. It depends on our priorities and the kind of organisation we build. We need the most effective and dynamic possible extra-parliamentary left focussed on building resistance. We need radical socialist arguments and analysis and socialist organisation across the country. This is what Counterfire is trying to do.

We urge you to join us and help make it happen.

www.counterfire.org/join

Above: Sir Keir Starmer shares a stage with Jeremy Corbyn during the 2019 general election campaign.

Photo: Jeremy Corbyn/flickr.

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With thanks to David Cruenlle.