

This is a report of the 3rd mass zoom call organised by The World Transformed and Momentum on Tuesday 31st March entitled 'Coronavirus: Are We Really All in this Together?' Around 580 people attended the call. The call was hosted by Shelly Asquith and James McAsh and the speakers were: Christine Berry, Dan Dobson, Victoria Jordan, Sam Oladeinde, and John McDonnell. Over the coming days and weeks we will be looking at how we can continue these discussions and make the best use of online spaces which facilitate input from all parts of the movement, and work together to put pressure not just on the Government and employers, but on left wing political leaders, the Labour Party and trade unions to shape their response.

Here is a recording of the call:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMNDktzpys0&feature=youtu.be>

To be kept informed about future zoom calls and all other TWT activities please join our mailing list: [bit.ly/TWTjoin](https://bit.ly/TWTjoin)

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## Introduction

Covid-19 has exposed the deep inequalities of wealth and power in our society. The economic shutdown has reduced the incomes of millions of workers making it difficult for many to cover their living costs. Millions more in key sectors are forced to continue to go into work as normal, in many cases without protective clothing and often for low wages. The wealthier you are, the easier it is to self isolate, obtain a test for Covid 19 and to weather the economic storm the crisis has produced. The pandemic has made it clear that the lack of rights and economic security for workers puts everybody at greater risk.

While the government has caved to demands for the state to cover wages, we're still seeing underpaid and underprotected workers asked to put their health at risk by big corporations. On the surface, these measures have been offered to protect the population at large, but are they primarily designed to keep the system going?



At a time when the nation is being asked to “pull together”, it is vital that working class people ensure their interests are not sacrificed to protect the wealth of the privileged few. A week into the lockdown, we’ll be hearing about current workplace struggles, what trade unions should be demanding next and more generally, how has the Coronavirus crisis exposed the contradictions inherent to capitalism?

## **Current Context**

After widespread criticism over the lack of government support for the self employed, the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, announced 80% of wages will be covered - up to £2,500 a month - would be covered by the government for 3 months.

They have faced criticism though, as a number of workers have been excluded from the support, including those who became self employed more recently; and those who don’t make the majority of their income from self-employment. These workers will be forced to claim universal credit - at a rate the Health Secretary Matt Hancock has himself admitted is not enough to live on.

On Thursday evening the ‘clap for our NHS’ brought millions of people across the country to their windows, doorways and gardens to show their appreciation for health service and social care workers. Meanwhile, the government has faced renewed criticism from these workers who are still not being provided with adequate personal protective equipment.

The Editor of The Lancet medical journal, Richard Horton, was damning in his criticism of the British government on Question Time. Just moments after the clap for carers, he pointed out the hypocrisy of our government applauding doctors and nurses whilst sending them into battle without the armour they need, calling it a “national scandal” that was “preventable”.



[A study published this week by the Autonomy think tank](#) has found that low paid women in particular are at higher risk of exposure to coronavirus. This is because we are more likely to be in jobs that involve working closely with the public and vulnerable people: in jobs such as social care, nursing and pharmacy.

Their research has found that of 3.2 million workers in the highest risk roles, about 2 and a half million are women. And of course, many of these jobs pay a poverty wage. We'll be posting the report in the chat for you to look at.

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## Speakers

### Christine Berry (Researcher and Academic)

*How can we make sense of the government's response to this crisis; who has been supported and who hasn't; and what does the government's response tell us about their priorities?*

- The crisis is exposing the guts of our economy in a way the 2008 economic crash didn't. It's a crisis of the real economy. We are seeing who the key workers are.
- In 2008 we thought it was the end for free market capitalism. Therefore we cannot underestimate the ability of the system to stabilise itself.
- The Government scheme for underwriting wages is a major intervention but we need to be asking to what end are these measures being taken, who is benefiting from them and who will pay for them? They are designed fundamentally to prop up the system
- Capital will benefit and labour will pay, even with the wage support scheme.
- Government interventions are mainly protecting rentier capital. E.g. Govt support for homeowners through mortgage holidays. But the loans provided by Govt will still accrue interest for banks, they are simply deferred.
- Renters are not being protected despite house owners getting mortgage holidays. The rent holidays being proposed are just a deferral of rent (even if the landlords pass costs on), renters will be required to pay.
- Why is it the case that the only group who is not being asked to make sacrifice is those who own capital?



- The same thing applies to loans for small business, which will need to be paid back. Meanwhile the IFS and some Tory MPs are saying that increases in minimum wages should be deferred.
- Government might impose austerity afterwards.
- Yes we should push for the support to be broadened, e.g. a minimum income guarantee. But fundamentally we need to talk about sharing the burden, e.g. emergency wealth tax, rent freezes, because clearly we are not in this together.

**See Christine's article for Verso on this topic:**

<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4613-the-covid-19-pandemic-will-change-everything-for-better-or-worse>

## **Dan Dobson (Construction Sector Worker and Trade Unionist)**

*Dan could you tell us what the situation is for workers in your sector, the impact of the government's emergency measures, and tell us a bit about what you've been doing and what you've been demanding.*

- I'm a bogus self employed electrician and a trade unionist.
- I am part of a rank and file construction workers group.
- The construction industry is run by cowboys and crooks at the best of times. There are 3 million workers in the sector, over 50% are registered as self-employed, mainly bogusly self-employed people, who in reality are employed but are denied proper employment protection. This allows bosses to rule by fear.
- Workers being told to stay at home, and being told to go to work. There are contradictions between the UK Government and Scotland governments.
- Some projects are genuinely essential. But clearly many aren't e.g. the building of luxury flats.
- Workers are being required to travel on public transport which increases risk - but workers don't have a choice. They have to go to work or go unpaid.
- 'Wealth Before Health' is the mantra in the construction industry.
- Practising social distancing on building sites is practically impossible. I haven't come across a site where they have issued facemasks. So the basic PPE just isn't there.
- If you raise the question on the work site about these issues you are likely to be sacked.
- An electrician tweeted out their concerns and they got sacked immediately. Now they are required to sign onto universal credit.
- There are too many loopholes, too many left behind by the government measures.
- Most workers move between PAYE/bogusly self-employed. So we fall between the gaps. Many of us are scrambling to get Universal Credit.
- So that's why we started the #stopthesites campaign. We have been trending, have got some national news. The campaign built up since last Sunday. We are calling for the



complete closure of all non-critical construction sites, and the introduction of a UBI to ensure no worker is left behind.

- Targeting all tiers of government, the construction companies, and the clients. Clients do have the power so they will be a key target. Please contact your local council or councillors to ask them to cancel non essential work. If you see a construction site in fall swing, put it on twitter #stopthesites. This tactic is proving successful. Dozens of sites have been closed.
- The whole structure needs to be looked at. Once we get through this we need commissions set up. We need to look at employment statuses, closing off loopholes so workers are not used and abused.

**See Dan's article for Tribune on this topic:**

<https://tribunemag.co.uk/2020/03/coronavirus-crisis-exposes-construction-industrys-bogus-self-employment>

## **Victoria Jordan (Wetherspoons Worker, BFAWU union)**

*Victoria, could you please tell us about how the Wetherspoons bosses responded to the crisis and what your union has been doing to ensure that workers are paid and protected.*

- I have worked at Wetherspoons for 5 years.
- We were told the pub would close without any warning. We were told to wait for a video from Tim Martin. In the video he just told us to look for other jobs. In spite of the government scheme.
- They said the company was not willing to tell us we would get paid until they had reviewed the government scheme, i.e. until the end of April.
- When me and my girlfriend were told this we had no idea what to do. I had joined the union in 2018. I grew up working class, so I always had a mistrust towards the company.
- In 2018 we went on strike for the first time. When we saw the video from Tim Martin everyone was really angry, workers and staff. So we created a union group chat, put out a letter on twitter
- Wetherspoons were proposing no pay until the end of April. And secondly that we would only get paid the 80% guaranteed by the Government. 40,000 would have been left on hundred of pounds until the end of April.
- We spend over half our wage on rent, and would have been forced into debt. 80% pay is not enough when we already get poverty pay. The government scheme assumes companies will do the right thing which they don't.
- We put up our own statements online, they really blew up. The petition got signed by over 14k people, sent to Tim Martin. It got discussed in Parliament. The letter was the final push.



- We got the win for the guarantee of getting the pay. But we haven't got the remaining 20% pay yet.
- In 2018 a lot of workers gave the company the benefit of the doubt. But this crisis has put that into doubt. We are getting much more widespread support.
- We are going to start our campaign to get 100% pay (the remaining 20%). Please spread the message on social media. Labour makes the world go round.
- A lot of people were quite sceptical about joining the union now, but this has really shown people that they need a union. So we have had a big influx of people.

## **Sam Oladeinde (Actor, Equity Union)**

*Sam, can you tell us about the unique position of performers and stage management and Equity members generally, and what your union has been doing to protect their interests?*

- Equity is the theatre's union, union for actors, stage workers, etc.
- The Government has announced the job retention scheme for PAYE and now the one for self-employed workers. These have both been welcomed. But most people don't know which scheme applies to them.
- Theatre contracts are hybrid, so it's confusing, you don't know which scheme applies. Our position is that our workers should be considered under the job retention scheme. There is an administration to administer it. We need clarification from the Government.
- The Government needs to clarify and expand who it's entitled to.
- Our average age of members is 27. Many of them are totally unhelped by that scheme. Scheme not helping people working overseas.
- Disabled members confused as to how it affects their other welfare payments.
- And many people have other jobs in other sectors, so that affects whether they will be eligible for help. There is not enough clarity. And where there is clarity it's just not fair.
- Equity has benefitted from a solid membership. We have over 75% membership in the West End so that gives us a lot of power.
- Equity has been negotiating with producers (SALT). Originally all theatres were closed immediately, there was a risk of all workers being sacked without pay. Equity worked to ensure people got paid in the interim. We managed to agree a minimum payment for its members. The idea of a glamorous West End life just is not true. Many of our members are really vulnerable.
- We have found common ground with our producers, we all want to keep our industry alive. We have taken a collaborative approach, this has given our union a bigger punch. We have been using the voices of our producers to convince the government as well.
- It is a terrifying time, this time really shows that the underpaid people are who really keep society going.
- I would implore everyone to support Equity's campaign on Twitter.



- It's important that we cover all bases. I have spoken to our membership. We are trying to make sure pressure stays on the Government, but also that the producers who do have the funds available use those funds to support the workers who have kept their industry alive. There is talk of pooling of resources among producers to provide support, I can only hope. That is what is happening in the USA.
- Even though we have a small union we attract a lot of attention.

## **John McDonnell (MP and Shadow Chancellor)**

*Can you tell us a bit about what the Labour Party has proposed in response to the crisis, how the labour movement should respond more broadly, and how the left should approach the coming months and years as the impact of this global pandemic continues to be felt and with a new leadership of the Labour Party?*

- The speakers so far have been really impressive. Christine's book really set out the type of policies we want to see implemented one day. Dan's campaigning in construction is essential. Victoria's Wetherspoons campaign has given us inspiration. I have been working with Equity and BECTU on the campaign, it has been so emotional.
- We need a proper assessment of the impact of the Coronavirus - medical and economic. From my team we pressed Govt, CBI, BoE, OBR to get an assessment of what would hit us. For each Govt dept to bring an assessment of its resilience.
- Government - for decades has had processes where agencies make their contingency plans.
- Matt Wrack (FBU) called me to ask about them. The main risk they had been asked to prepare for was a flu pandemic. Matt was saying that this has exposed the lack of planning. So we asked each agency to assess their vulnerabilities, resource needs.
- We knew the NHS was ill prepared.
- Social care - 120,000 vacancies in social care. Largely privatised now, it was already in crisis. 1m not getting the care they needed. 87 people per day dying without getting the care they needed.
- We asked for an immediate plan to support workers who would go off sick, sign off for caring responsibilities or just couldn't go to work.
- We also raised the need for international coordination to tackle the Coronavirus outbreak. In 2008 Gordon Brown coordinated an international coordinated response. Coronavirus also needs an international response, from international institutions, to try and learn the lessons. We put that forward 5 weeks ago. No response.
- The Chancellor put forward a budget with much fanfare. It was inadequate. Then we went back to them.
- There was a bizarre theory of herd immunity. And the experts were saying you get herd immunity through vaccination not through people getting it. Check out the article on



Buzzfeed. That's why they didn't develop the testing like in other countries according to WHO advice.

- The government didn't invest in testing, now it is struggling due to lack of equipment. That's reflected in the lack of PPE.
- We then went back to them, we went through arguing for different schemes.
- The first scheme they came up with was a scheme to protect businesses. There was nothing to protect workers. We pointed out the loan guarantees wouldn't work, they wouldn't be backed up, people wouldn't take them
- Banks have been increasing overdraft charges.
- I said to Sunak there had to be a wage support scheme. We demanded 100% payment of wages in total (70-90% paid by govt), with sick pay at real living wages, increases in job support, employment support and carers' support allowance. Sick pay - no one can live off that. The increase they announced today was laughable.
- We went back to them over lack of support for self-employed people.
- The Govt scheme is a voluntary scheme so many companies aren't taking it up. Many companies are laying people off rather than taking up the scheme. Those people are falling back on universal credit, and there is still a 5 week wait.
- Remember this is a government who laid off workers in HMRC so it's become practically impossible to implement their own scheme (for the govt).
- The scheme doesn't cover people on part-time work. So companies can reduce people's hours and then not qualify.
- Self-employment scheme - many people just don't qualify at all, people are having to turn up. And in creative industries, many people aren't covered either.
- Foster parents aren't covered either.
- We have published a report today summarising all this. Summarises all the gaps.
- We are asking for the job retention scheme to be more flexible. There must be enforcement by govt against companies who force people to work in non-essential work. Policy and living standards authority should be visiting and inspecting sites. I don't understand how a lot of the companies operating are deemed as essential services.
- They should consider NEF's demand for a minimum earning guarantee, which could be a step towards UBI.
- Mortgage holiday is just deferral of renters, people will be piling up debt, and will eventually be evicted. We are saying rents should be covered in this period.
- They should look at suspending utility bills as well.
- I've been talking to Rishi Sunak and Treasury officials.
- All the mechanisms being brought in are to protect employers and companies. Workers have been an afterthought. There has to be acceptance that our social security net has been so damaged.
- Final point - we need to think about our plans for the future. Others are thinking about plans. Many right-wing think tanks will be looking at another decade of austerity to pay for the debts run up in this crisis. It won't be the rich or the bankers who will pay, it will be working people. IFS were trying to prevent a rise in minimum wages. They will be trying to ensure wage restraints, retain attacks on civil liberties, there will be attacks on union



rights. We need to expose what is happening on the ground at the moment. We need to expose and campaign.

- We need to think about the nature of the society we want afterwards. If we have to pay over a period of time, what about a debt jubilee or a wealth tax. The only way we can come out of this is through solidarity. No more austerity.
- In the WW2, socialist and progressive writers were planning for what society they wanted afterwards. Some of that was dreams but you know what, some of those dreams were implemented.
- We must demand that everybody has sufficient income to survive this period, linked to caring support. A lot of people have no income at all right now. And it must be linked to public sector support.
- New leader of the Labour Party - we must create a climate of opinion about the nature of the society we want as a leader, so any new leader has to participate in those debates, and so those ideas become common sense. I think we have shifted a lot on since 2015.
- I find it ironic that the Tory government has nearly implemented policies like nationalising the railways and free Broadband.
- I am reading like mad at the moment. Reading EP Thompson's The Making of the Working Class.

#### **Petitions:**

[The London Renters union petition calling for rent payments to be suspended.](#)

[UCU Anti-Casualisation Committee petition calling on employers to guarantee 2 year contracts, giving security to workers during the crisis.](#)

[A new website with links to petitions to sign, donations to give, and actions to take to help during C-19.](#)

#### **Links and Resources:**

- Jobs at risk index, a new Autonomy study on over 270 occupations: which workers are most at risk of COVID-19 exposure? Interactive charts to explore: <https://autonomy.work/portfolio/jari/>
- A new website with links to petitions to sign, donations to give, and actions to take to help during C-19: <https://whatcanwedo.world/>
- The CDC 'Centers for Disease Control and Prevention' (USA) provides a lot of different C-19 information and advice: <https://www.cdc.gov/> Including how to disinfect your home, what products you can use etc



○ Worldometer, tracking the numbers globally: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/> a little bit about who they are <https://www.worldometers.info/about/>

○ Some ways to get down time collectively and at home:

<https://www.facebook.com/StuckAtHomeFun/>

Plus the National Theatre is streaming plays for free: <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/>

○

The Virtual Social Centre, providing links to health sources, mutual aid, struggles in social security and the workplace and a daily briefing:

<https://virtualseocialcentre.org.uk/social-security/>

The Coronavirus Tech Handbook, on everything C-19 related, and you can add your own links:

<https://coronavirustechhandbook.com/home>

Momentum Councillor Network Demands:

<https://peoplesmomentum.com/transforming-labour/momentums-councillor-network-and-coronavirus/>

TWT step-by-step guide for supporting people to run political education and organising meetings online

<https://theworldtransformed.org/resourcehub/sessions/21ba27cf-4814-4711-a0f6-c5e3feb21c4b>

