

This is a report of the mass zoom call organised by The World Transformed on Tuesday 21st April entitled '**Coronavirus: Are the Conservatives getting away with it?**'. Over 500 people attended the call and the speakers were: Richard Seymour, Faiza Shaheen, Kim Jonson MP and Owen Jones.

Over the coming weeks we will be hosting weekly Zoom calls on Tuesday evenings which will facilitate input from all parts of the movement, so we can 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 to the Covid-19 crisis.

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Introduction

It is becoming increasingly clear that the Conservative government's response to Covid-19 is costing lives. A decade of Tory austerity has left our public services catastrophically weakened. Boris Johnson's government was extremely slow to implement physical distancing after initially appearing to favour a 'herd immunity' strategy that sought to infect the majority of the population.

They have failed to provide appropriate PPE to frontline workers and even now, 3 months since the first case of Covid-19 in the UK, there are still NHS staff treating patients without adequate protective clothing. This week Unite and Unison have said their members may refuse to work in such unsafe conditions and have demanded the government sort this out immediately.

The government's communications to the public have been shambolically confused. Statements by the Prime Minister have often been contradicted by the Prime Minister only days later.

The neoliberal model they've implemented over the last decade has left behind a social infrastructure woefully unprepared for this Pandemic. Private companies are demanding massive bailouts, millions are struggling to get by and thousands of people are dying. So why are the Conservatives polling at 55%?



Across Europe, virtually all governments have received a bounce in political support, with little link to how they have actually responded to the crisis. In times of crisis, people often rally behind their governments. Calls for 'national unity' and a 'war time spirit', have a seductive appeal that can be deployed by government to avoid accountability from the public. But is there more to it than that?

In the UK, political journalists have been criticised for uncritically repeating government spin and failing to ask Ministers troubling questions about their incoherent coronavirus strategy. Meanwhile, the Labour Party's new leadership under Keir Starmer has refrained from making significant criticisms of the Government, instead choosing to stress Labour's new 'constructive' opposition and focusing on asking them to produce an 'exit strategy.'

Tonight we're going to be asking:

- Is Johnson's Government being let off the hook for bad decisions that are costing lives, or is this the prelude to a changing of perceptions when the costs of Tory policies become more visible?
- What is behind the media's deference to the Government?
- What is Keir Starmer's strategy for holding the government to account?
- What arguments should the left be making to ensure the Conservatives and neoliberalism are discredited, rather than strengthened?

Speakers

Richard Seymour (Writer and author of books including 'The Twittering Machine' and 'Corbyn: The strange rebirth of radical politics' & Commissioning Editor of the Salvage journal)

- Important to say that no one will get away completely with this crisis. If the government was getting away with it we'd have hundreds of thousands of deaths as they pursued herd immunity strategy. If they were getting away with it, the lockdown wouldn't have come late- it wouldn't have happened at all. If they were getting away with it, non-essential businesses would still be open. Rishi Sunak wouldn't have implemented the biggest economic bailout in British history if they were getting away with it.
- If the government was getting away with it our active workforce would be 33 million, not the 7.1 million people identified as key workers by the IFS.
- World trade has slumped, the airline industries are crying out for help. The price of oil is now negative, so it's less than worthless. Newspapers are on the brink of sinking without trace. Capitalist states are being compelled to suspend capitalism, and that's not what any capitalist state wants.



- Globally, 82% of the workforce live in countries who have been affected by the lockdown- a disruption of the scale 'an anthropological event'- something beyond politics.
- With some exceptions, the overwhelming response has been to demand and defend the lockdown. Recent polling suggests most people are enjoying the fresh air, more free time and closer communities. Only 9% want to return to the status quo. This is a problem for the Tories and neoliberalism.
- We can't sentimentalise this, we've still seen people ignore distancing, put people at risk etc. However, public support for distancing remains solid.
- Boris Johnson officials in the press and government are quite emphatic on this point- they didn't want a lockdown, public pressure forced them into it. The narrative of events as chronologised in the Sunday times backs this account.
- Yes, the government's still getting away with a lot, they acted too late which has cost thousands of lives, have been scandalously indifferent to the safety of NHS workers, and have deliberately sketchy economic support, and the way it's designed to preserve current inequalities puts millions of workers at risk- disproportionately black, minority ethnic and migrant workers.
- The official sentimentality about key workers is the flipside of a kind of sociopathy, *they're not making sacrifices they are being sacrificed.*
- Nonetheless, with all that in mind, the fact that all of this is happening the way it has indicates that we shouldn't assume too readily the competence or the functionality of capital states. It would have been in the long term best interest of capital to have pandemic preparedness ready and to act swiftly. It would have also been to great political benefit to whoever was in power to do that. The New Zealand government is incredibly popular just for doing the basic things. Yet in the UK and in a number of other states, that support for those programmes has been slashed by austerity, displaced by national and racial obsessions.
- Our opposition is even more timid than the US Democrats, and our media more complicit than the Washington beltway media.
- Despite all that, they're not having their own way. Though right wing governments will be keen to return to life as normal is quickly as possible, which for George Osborne is austerity, that's not what central banks, the big investment banks and chief economists are saying. The organic intellectuals of capitalism, which really believe in austerity as the appropriate response to a crisis, are cautioning that renewed austerity might not be possible, it might even be economic suicide.
- This is both an opportunity and a danger for a well organised left. As Grace Blakely pointed out, there is a possibility for a new kind of state monopoly capitalism, with surveillance platforms playing a key role and finance integrated with a new relationship to the public sector.



- With oil prices negative and planes staying on the ground, and Governments demonstrating their ability to take on vast political projects that do something other than stimulate growth, there is a window of opportunity to transition to a post carbon economy.
- Microbes have always been political actors- as demonstrated in William H McNeill's book ['Plagues and Peoples'](#). As different as they are from human affairs, the effects of these microbes can be politically devastating.
- Epidemics such as repeated outbreaks, for example Cholera in the 19th century played a key role in terrifying the ruling classes and inciting revolt, and arguably played a role in killing off classical Liberalism.
- It's too soon to say what the total effect of COVID-19 will be. Any political tendency that doesn't act swiftly at this moment will be punished. Though our power to react is momentarily constrained, we need to be prepared to act when we can.

(Attendee question) Will the Tories be able to fulfil their promises to invest in redwall constituencies while dealing with the economic fallout of Coronavirus?

- Yes but not on the basis they had planned. They had planned to borrow within inherited austerian framework. They had just worked out a little bit of extra latitude for borrowing, because borrowing was incredibly cheap. Not sure whether that's still the case now. That's now out of the window.
- The question now is will they go back to attempting to reinforce austerity, which would be devastating, not just for the working class, but for capitalism itself.
- Most likely is they'll attempt to ram through major infrastructural development projects. It will break the bounds of the existing austerian consensus. We may be looking at a new kind of state with a productivist dimension- they'll try to ratchet up, in strict Marxist terms, the exploitation of labour. They'll try to make labour more productive, as that's been a big problem for British capital over the last few decades. We're talking about large scale interventions, much bigger than we've seen planned up until now.

(Attendee question) Do you think the opposition will be able to limit the emergency powers to 6 months?

- Yes, in part because of the Hayekian wing of Conservatism. There are people who think that the basis of all our ideas and freedom is commerce. For them, to shut down people's freedoms in any sustained way is a threat to capital.
- We shouldn't forget that the government already had some authoritarian projects in min. For example, Priti Patel (one of the most sinister people in the Home Office ever), wanted to criminalise parts of the left as extremists. This will probably still come, but it may be a bit disrupted now.



- We shouldn't be worried that they'll be trying to preserve lockdown, police powers to question people about where they're going etc.
- We should be worried about the possibility of it being retooled as a racial technology. A way of policing black and migrant communities in a way they haven't been able to for a while.
- In terms of public mood, it doesn't feel like we're in the middle of a wave of reaction. It feels like the wave of reaction that was washing over us has stopped momentarily. Cautiously hopeful we can get something good out of this. The fact they've had to, were forced to, release a number of refugees from detention centres is hopeful. The fact a number of states have had to let prisoners out of jail is hopeful.

(Attendee question) What will the effect of more moderate Labour leadership be on the Governments' Coronavirus strategy?

- Very little. Not optimistic about Keir Starmer's chances, not because of his politics, we all know and expect that. The problem is the decision to not come in and not take the political hit for opposing the government hard was short-termist, and reflects unwillingness to think ahead.
- All of the problems with the governments' strategy, the delayed testing, delayed lockdown, lack of PPE, all the workers put at risk and all the people slipping into poverty, Labour should be speaking for them. These people should be joining Labour and the Trade Unions. Yet the official leadership of the Labour movement is telling us to support the government. This is a huge loss of an opportunity window.
- One hopeful thing, though, is that although Starmer started out talking about exit strategy, which was an attempt to play 4D chess and prep the game for future debates, pressure from Labour members meant he backtracked a little, to say the real issue is testing, PPE, the lockdown, and talking about possibly holding the government to account.
- Starmer's weakness, and he is a weak leader, means that he's susceptible to pressure from the membership. The membership might want to think about that and organise along those lines.

Resources

- Subscribe to Richard's patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/richardseymourwtf>

Faiza Shaheen (director of CLASS think tank and Labour Party candidate in Chingford and Woodford Green at the 2019 General Election)



- It does feel like the government is being let off the hook when you watch daily conferences, the news etc. It makes you think about the mixed messages and daily hypocrisy and lies that the government shows in its day to day activity.
- Sense I get locally is that for those of us that didn't like the Tories anyway, we're still feeling the same. But with Brexit and patriotism, and now protecting Boris Johnson, a cult has formed in protecting him. There are huge Boris fans defending him on twitter etc. Seems to be a core group of people that won't change their minds on this.
- Tories are good at lying and spinning things their way.
- We're not good on the left at creating our own narratives. People have short term memories, they don't think about the last 5 years for the NHS and how that's shaping the trajectory of this crisis now. People are aggressive and defensive.
- Some core points we could be making about testing, equipment etc. doesn't seem to be cutting through to people that are already Tory voting.
- There are some areas that people are waking up e.g. how much nurses, carers are getting paid etc.
- Quite a few of those arguments have been made for a long time and were won by the Labour Party, we are seeing the Tories accepting some of those arguments.
- We need to think about how to push our narrative through, and not just limit policies to be around NHS staff and carers.

Why the media's deference?

- They know this government will be around for some time, and will be aggressive if spoken out against, therefore many are not willing to speak out against it.
- Many media outlets are closely involved with the party. We have seen more of a reluctance from the government to have conversations with Sky news, where they know this to be less the case and are more likely to be held to account.
- We can't rely on the media, and we know that.
- Don't know what Starmer's strategy is. Going for exit strategy doesn't make sense, though he has shifted a bit to focusing on PPE now.
- It's heartbreaking seeing NHS and frontline workers dying (often black and brown people) without adequate protection. Labour should be speaking out about this but they're not.
- Starmer might be changing tact because of pressure from members, so we should keep this up.
- CLASS is currently working on policy. There's no going back to the status quo after this.
- We need to reiterate two key points- that we're underprepared for this crisis because of a decade of cuts, and that workers are in a more vulnerable place now than they were in 2008.
- Driving our narrative needs to start where people's hearts are. People need to be persuaded- stories over stats. People's hearts are open to those.
- We can use this as a bridge to talk about hospitality staff too.



- Richard Branson- we need to push calls to ask why are we bailing out anyone that puts their money in tax havens?
- This is a moment to advance arguments we've been making for quite some time.
- We need to develop counter narratives from the left.
- We also need to make arguments about green investment. In the past, fiscal packages under recession can be very energy heavy. In financial crashes, green policy falls to the bottom of the list. Need to make the argument for green investment being a win-win in the financial measures that come immediately after this crisis during a financial crash.
- CLASS is working with TUs to plan what demands should be in the fiscal package.
- We can get carried away with arguments about policy and not thinking about what we're doing on the ground. People are setting up mutual aid groups- a lot of them are Labour people. What we do within our communities is really important to show that we're there for people. That's what grassroots organising is about.

(Attendee question) Since this crisis began, Tories have been defending years of austerity saying the measures put in place now are only possible because we cut the deficit. How can we counter this narrative?

- We're in more overall debt now than we were in 2010.
- People are starting to see that you can't run society on the cheap. Our position is worse now because of previous cuts, we need to hammer that home.
- Need to continue making the argument that investing creates good jobs, increases taxes, and therefore that helps our finances. Our focus on finances can't be from the perspective of cutting.
- There's a growing number of people that will be willing to listen to that argument going forward.

(Attendee question) Do you have any advice on politicising mutual aid when it's very depoliticised in most places?

- Once this is over, all the volunteers that signed up should have a get together in their communities. There is power in personal relationships and taking people on a journey that way. We need to talk about what's happening e.g. Whipps Cross redevelopment of local hospital. Bring people from those networks into other campaigns. It will take time, but we need to build the movement and bring people in based on issues they care about.

(Attendee question) How do we get involved in fighting the Tories?

- At grassroots level, do organising work, build the movement. Get to know where there are friendly faces. Find local campaigns and build on them.



- Find what's making people angry and coalesce around it.
- On a national level, the left is bad at coming together with a narrative. Tories are networking and coming prepared, they've all coalesced around a narrative. We need to use similar arguments and language so it'll stick in people's minds.
- We must organise, stick together and don't give up.
- Need to stick in the Labour party, be a loud voice there and stick together.

Resources

- CLASS think tank: <http://classonline.org.uk/>

Kim Johnson (Labour MP for Liverpool Riverside)

- This crisis has seen a disproportionate impact on black key workers.
- No confidence in the government to ask questions about why this is.
- It is to do with inequality and unconscious bias.
- We need to demand compensation for people that have died as result of lack of PPE and testing.
- We're not even getting stats on fatalities in care homes.
- People aren't being tested. Testing centres there are completely inaccessible, particularly for people that don't have a car.
- The Government is now playing the blame game. For example, talking about staff using PPE 'inappropriately', we know this not to be the case.
- The government has a history of blaming others e.g. migrants for the economic crisis.
- This government is getting away with it. Original plan was about 'herd immunity'. They knew what was to come and still sat on their hands before they did anything.
- People falling through cracks on economic provisions.
- This is likely to be a humanitarian problem. The government is failing to recognise the impact is falling on the most vulnerable.
- Labour leadership has been weak. We've acknowledged the government has made mistakes, but the advice is to respond constructively. How can we do that when people are dying? We need to hold them to account.
- Not about focusing on an exit strategy. Should be pushing for an economic and social contract.
- Currently the Labour party isn't fit for purpose. People are talking about leaving because they're so unhappy- particularly black people due to racism in the recent report.
- Need to think about how to campaign and organise efficiently. We need to gain trust back in members.
- As a member of Socialist Campaign Group, we need to push an anti-austerity agenda. We need to build and strengthen this group in local communities too & need stronger links with TUs.



- Founding member of the Socialist Campaign Group, Tony Benn, was criticised due to socialist agenda. He said 'we're not here to manage capitalism but to change society and its values'.
- Factions won't endear us to constituents and communities.

What can unions be doing to defend their workers who are put in harm's way?

- Unison is a member led union. It's only as strong as the members make it.
- Work in the north west has been good at holding employers to account. Supporting workers if they decide their health is at risk.

Do you have any message to members about why we should stay in the party?

- The powers that be that were involved and identified in the report wanted the party to die. We can't let that happen- they will have won if we do that.
- We need to stay and fight. We need socialism and an anti-austerity agenda.
- Ultimately we need to get rid of the Tories. We do have a hill to climb, but united we stand and divided we fall.

Resources

- Stay up to date with the Socialist Campaign Group: <https://socialistcampaigngroup.com/>

Owen Jones (journalist)

- Spaces like this play a pivotal role in the current crisis, and also with others like the climate crisis. We need to keep talking about our vision for the new society we are going to build.
- Yes, the Tories are being let off the hook. Most of the British media are the de facto campaigning wing of Tories- they're integrated in the party machine which leads to a complete lack of scrutiny. Much of our press sees its primary aim as advancing the Conservative party.
- Some people look at the polls and wonder how so many people can support a government which has so catastrophically dealt with the crisis, and that is responsible for thousands of preventable deaths.
- The reason for this is that we're still in a phase of mentality of 'rallying round the pilot as the plane crashes'. We shouldn't be too disheartened at this point.
- We're seeing a lot of WW2 comparisons being made. Some of which don't make sense, because we're not against a sentient enemy here.



- One comparison is that Chamberlain had 80% approval at the start of WW2. All the way through that year had 60%+, and then Churchill was presumed to win by a landslide, but actually Labour won a landslide afterwards.
- We are in the worst crisis since WW2, it's not a perfect analogy, but we can see from that how people rally behind the government in a time of crisis. The question is who's best placed to say, after the calamity, what sort of society we want to build.
- Need to be very clear about the catastrophic decisions made by the government, in it's pursuit of herd immunity which ignored leading experts, and failed to learn from the events in Wuhan and Northern Italy. Because of austerity PPE wasn't stockpiled, and because herd immunity was pursued the government didn't replenish those stocks. Our health and social care sectors have been fragmented, underfunded and privatised. The government wasted time because they wanted to put the economy and business first, over human life.
- Thousands have had to mourn in lockdown- this is a national disgrace and something we can't forget.
- We have to focus on those failures, and push the government to deal with issues like PPE and not relaxing lockdown prematurely.
- We also need to build a new social settlement. Another parallel from WW2 was that it focused attention on the injustices that defined society. The experience of state intervention then became very popular.
- In the current crisis, huge social injustices are being exposed and widened. The key workers we all applaud are underpaid, undervalued and badly treated. Our NHS has been undermined and the welfare state is inadequate.
- Attitudes to the welfare state have and will change.
- Huge social justices have been put centre stage. Even figures on right have had to concede to appreciate key workers.
- It will be a while until normality returns. When the dust has settled, the appetite will be bigger than ever for proposals from the left to create a society that cures injustice. The left needs to have a really bold proposal for the post Coronavirus society.
- Unity needs to be built within the Labour Party and with the Labour membership.
- Principally, we need to ensure the promises made during the leadership campaign, the 10 pledges on things like public ownership, taxing the rich and investment, are maintained and kept. We need to build that unity and make the case for more ambitious solutions given the gravity of the situation. Given many on the right will be calling for a return to austerity, there is no appetite in the UK for this. Many people who voted for the Tories won't support this either. We need to be ambitious despite terrible losses, and need a clear vision and narrative.
- What we need is to get people into good, properly paid work, so we can grow the economy and get more taxes in. We can't make the young, poor and disabled pay for this crisis. We need to make those booming at the top, even now, pay for this crisis.



- As terrible as this situation is, it could well be a mild taste of what will happen with the climate emergency, which is an existential threat to human existence. This shows how society and everything we take for granted can rapidly collapse- that could be permanent if we don't deal with the climate emergency. Need to take drastic action to mitigate that.
- There is more need now for an ambitious, courageous vision about how society can be than there was before. We can't have any backsliding on this, so we need to build the broadest coalition we can to do that.
- We need to use spaces like this to talk and discuss those ideas, and then go out into our communities to make the case.
- We can't let Tories rewrite their disastrous mistakes, or redefine the terms of debate. We need to be clear now about what they did catastrophically wrong, and we must be united and ambitious in holding them to account.

Should we talk about how Labour rebuilt the country after WW2? Should we cash in on that blitz spirit?

- Even during war there was a public debate that led to Chamberlain being replaced as prime minister because of disastrous mishandling. We need to be aware of that when drawing our comparisons.
- There was a sense that because Churchill was a wartime leader, that the victory meant he presumably would win a landslide. But people wanted to know what was next, not go back. They had made a huge sacrifice, and seen huge injustices, and they needed answers for them. That should be Labour's approach again.
- We should adopt the same spirit of Clement Attlee who we should remember was a mild mannered, moderate Labour leader, replacing the radical left wing leader Lansbury- maybe history is repeating itself?!
- Despite this, Labour realised they had to pursue a radical agenda at that moment. The only way to win that election was to satisfy the yearning of the population who had made many sacrifices, and saw the poverty and injustice that had been hidden beforehand.
- Beveridge, who laid the foundations of the welfare state, wasn't a socialist, he was a liberal, but he said in revolutionary times we must provide revolutionary answers. That's true today.
- If Labour doesn't offer a radical vision, there's a danger that the right will abandon neoliberalism in favour of nativist racism and authoritarianism. If we end up with Labour, at a time of huge public appetite, not offering those radical ideas, then the right may feel that they can use elements of our policy programme and ideas for their own agenda.
- In the aftermath of this, the issue will come up again: who pays? It's not going to be the same people paying all over again.
- When we've won the war, let's build a new peace. And that means not going back to where we were before.



After the Sunday Times criticism of the government's handling of the crisis, is Murdoch gunning for someone else as prime minister?

- No, he won't back the Labour Party. We know Blair did a Faustian pact with the Murdoch empire, but there's no way that's politically possible now.
- People are suggesting he's now backing Gove.
- You finally get a newspaper holding the government to account for self evident failures, and it wasn't even the main news story of the day.
- It might be the case that Murdoch is calculating that there will be such a devastating political cost, that Johnson will have to be replaced by another Tory leader. We saw that with Theresa May, and it did work last time.
- If you're really hoping the media are going to consistently scrutinise and help hold this government to account, you're going to be disappointed.
- That's up to the Labour movement, not the media. We must hope the Labour leadership understand that and take that message forward.
- What the Sunday Times has shown is that we can't be too nervous about criticizing the government. We need to be very clear that thousands of people have died, unnecessarily, because of government policy.
- With Keir Starmer, we need to hold him to account on his leadership, but not fall into the trap of gloating when he is criticised by the mainstream media like the Labour right did to Corbyn.

Resources

- Support TWT: <https://theworldtransformed.org/support/>
- Join TWT's mailing list: bit.ly/TWTjoin
- TWT's guide to running political education online: https://cloud-cube-eu.s3.amazonaws.com/pupuh35gi0f8/public/documents/How_to_run_your_meetings_online_1.pdf
- Momentum's mutual aid map: <https://volunteercoronavirus.com/>

