

## **‘A People’s HQ for Covid-19’: For a united labour movement response to the Covid-19 crisis**

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### **1. Introduction**

At its best, the British labour movement has seen itself, not as a narrow sectional interest, nor as an alternative vehicle for the management of the capitalist social and economic order when the Conservative Party fails to get elected, but as a means of providing organisation, leadership and ultimately government in the interests of the overwhelming majority of British society. The current crisis calls more than ever – and urgently – for the labour movement to honour its best traditions and rise to the occasion, to lead a popular rejection of a government that has failed in its most basic responsibilities to the British public, and to act now to shape the social and economic reconstruction which will inevitably take place as the crisis develops. The stakes could hardly be higher and the costs of failure to act with conviction will likely be punitive. In this light, and in the apparent absence of proposals from elsewhere, we have drafted an outline perspective and proposal which we share with whoever may be interested. We do so without any claim to special expertise or insight, and with a clear understanding that much would need to be done collectively to develop and implement the proposal. We hope that others may take this proposal, improve it and help to make it real. We will do everything in our power to help.

### **2. Summary of the proposal: A People’s HQ for Covid-19**

In the interests of the overwhelming majority of our society, the UK labour movement urgently needs to: a) clearly establish its own independent voice on the national stage as a united opposition to the Conservative government’s mishandling of the ongoing Covid crisis, and b) show its capacity to assume effective leadership of the crisis as it progresses, based on its own strategic vision of a society and an economy funded and organized ‘for the many, not the few’.

To the catastrophic failures and dangers posed by the government's continuing mishandling, the movement must counterpose its own narrative and its own capacity for active leadership for the public good in order to save lives now, protect public health and the NHS going forward, and secure the future living standards and rights of working people against the evident possibility of a renewed agenda of austerity and privatisation.

Labour movement organizations should join together as a nation-wide force – perhaps as a *People's HQ for Covid-19* – firstly to highlight the Tory government's profound failure to fulfil the basic responsibilities of government, and secondly to progressively establish the popular foundations for a longer term social and economic reconstruction based on principles of equality and social justice.

A *People's HQ* might as it develops assume a variety of functions, depending on available and appropriate needs and capacities within different geographical areas and social sectors, and in relation to key tasks at particular stages in the wider mobilisation of individuals and organizations. Core functions would likely include:

- A united popular oppositional voice to the current governance of the crisis, which simultaneously projects a credible and more desirable alternative for both the present and the future;
- Linked to the above, a media hub for information, critical analysis and challenge (with daily briefings);
- A related centre for support and coordination of popular mobilisation;
- An emergent and strengthening platform for alternative strategy and leadership as the crisis progresses and as scenarios for post-crisis reconstruction emerge.

### **3. Rationale: a united labour movement should take leadership**

The labour and trade union movement nationally has been painfully slow to respond to the current crisis. The Labour opposition, though resting on a 500,000 strong membership pledged to a socialist programme, has so far been reluctant – or unable – to mount any fundamental challenge to the governance of the crisis and has largely failed to hold the

government to account. The trade unions have engaged in information sharing and vital local solidarity action in support of frontline health care workers and other groups of workers who have been very badly treated by employers. They have identified failings in testing and supply of PPE as well as the dire economic situation of many working families and have called on the government to do more to help on these and some other aspects. However vital, such demands fall short of exposing the government's overwhelming failures and their inability to rise to the challenge of the present and the future.

Furthermore, the limited approach of the labour movement to date leaves the power over life and death in the hands of ministers already arguably criminally responsible for the loss of many thousands of lives. These ministers are in fact ideologically opposed to the public sector infrastructure on which the health of the population now more than ever depends, and are in many cases implicated in the wilful destruction of the wider public sector capacity needed to plan for and respond strategically to an emergency of this kind.

To accusations of 'politicising the crisis', the labour movement should reply that the pandemic is already highly politicised, and in a heavily one-sided way. It is currently being managed by a reckless Tory government who represent the narrow and selfish interests of a small minority of society, and who have already *transparently and catastrophically failed in the primary responsibility of any government – namely protecting the public and in this case also the frontline NHS workers*. This is a government whose daily briefings have been self-justifying propaganda with little scope for meaningful challenge.

The labour movement should wholeheartedly pledge *full support for all useful practical measures to protect and save lives, while demanding that more is done to protect NHS and other care workers, and also to ensure that all vital needs of everyone in society are met*. But it should at the same time strongly condemn the actions of those who through ideological predilection, irresponsibility and neglect have worsened the crisis, undermined the NHS and deliberately, and unnecessarily, heightened the population's exposure to the virus. In the interests of the overwhelming majority of our society, these people, individually and collectively, cannot be trusted *to lead us safely through the crisis and into the post-crisis reconstruction*.

*The question is not whether the crisis and reconstruction are or should be political, but whose politics and whose interests will be to the fore. The labour movement needs to project itself as a competent and credible leadership for the present and the future in the interests of the overwhelming majority in our society.*

#### **4. Context: lessons of the 2008 global capitalist meltdown**

The Covid-19 pandemic has dramatically heightened the exposure of the general failure of contemporary capitalist society to ensure common well being. It has shone even more light on the debilitating impact of neo-liberal public management, privatisation and austerity on the public sector, on health care infrastructure and on wider living conditions. It has also heightened recognition of the stark inequality and indeed inhumanity of Tory-led Britain. Moreover, the fact that a decade of terrible austerity was a political and ideological choice, not an economic necessity, and that the resources are in fact there to meet all of our needs (including those of the homeless), is now clearer than ever. What only at last December's General Election was branded as 'impossibilism' now seems like a failure of ambition when seen against what has in fact been possible by way of state intervention and support.

And yet, while this recognition is very important, it cannot of itself bring about the change that is urgently needed in our society. It will not automatically lead to a 'decent' – or even liveable – future for very many in our society. The changes required need to be argued, organised and fought for in a highly concerted way *now*.

There are important lessons to be drawn from the 2008 banking crisis. It too brought stark exposure and recognition of the inadequacies of capitalism, including frank admission of responsibility for economic failure by right wing commentators. But, instead of the then widely anticipated new era of hope and social democracy, the aftermath brought heartless policies of immiseration and impoverishment (including widespread destitution), of austerity, anti-trade union laws and a frightening resurgence of militarism and reactionary nationalism. The *sweeping nationalisations of banks and financial institutions* to stave off global economic collapse were exploited in the service of the already rich as capitalist

governments made working people pay the costs of the reckless irresponsibility of financial institutions.

In the UK, such austerity was achieved politically by a successful narrative *blaming the global economic crisis on Labour and the unions for public sector spending programmes* as well as on benefit claimants, including the sick and disabled. A crucial factor in this was *the failure of the Labour Party and wider labour movement to seriously attempt to control the narrative, to refuse the cuts agenda and to confidently set out its own independent strategic vision and leadership for an alternative future.*

We are now faced with an even deeper and more obvious global crisis of capitalist society. Once again, the inhumanity of the system is starkly exposed. Again, supposedly intractable social problems (e.g. homelessness) can be solved at the click of a mouse, unlimited funds instantly conjured for ‘unaffordable’ public sector programmes and investment.

But instead of taking the lead at this defining moment, the labour movement seems to be playing a waiting game – deferring actual political challenge for a future public enquiry or hoping that power will drop into Starmer’s lap once the crisis is over. This is most likely a dangerous miscalculation: if the Tories emerge without too much damage from the Covid crisis (as we write they remain 17% ahead of Labour in the polls), quite possibly under new leadership, ordinary working people will again be expected to pay the price of temporary state largesse. No-one should underestimate the scope for an alternative Tory narrative to be spun. It is not unimaginable that the NHS will itself be blamed for having failed to respond to the crisis sufficiently well, notwithstanding the heroism of its staff. The whole NHS model, it might be argued, needs to be revised, or even rejected, with lessons to be learned from the private sector. Such spinning of ‘blame’ is by now a familiar aspect of neo-liberal responses to crises – and we must anticipate that we will see attempts at the same as the situation develops.

*Anticipating such scenarios, it becomes very clear that how the labour movement acts to assert its leadership of the crisis now, and over the coming days and weeks, will be decisive in setting the agenda for the future direction of society as a whole for a generation to come.*

## 5. Concrete analysis of the Covid crisis and the role of a united labour movement

The pandemic has ignited a war over public health and social equality which the labour movement can fight simultaneously on three interconnected fronts:

- a) The failure to prepare in the early part of 2020 for the arrival of the virus, the late adoption of social distancing and lockdown measures, and the continuing failure to get the basic apparatus and organisation for safety and virus control in place.
- b) The presentation of viable scenarios for stabilisation and ultimate exit from the current lockdown, which will, if they are to be successful, require high levels of government competence, widespread popular mobilisation and strong trust in government and its communication.
- c) Visions and plans for social and economic reconstruction and a longer-term settlement which serves the needs and interests of the overwhelming majority of the people of the UK, rather than bringing an intensification of already familiar and deeply unjust policies of austerity, tax cuts for the wealthy, privatisation and deepening inequality – all linked to reactionary nationalism and climate change denial .

What the labour movement can achieve in a) will be crucial for any influence it will have in positively shaping the progress and outcomes of b) and c). As indicated above, the stakes could hardly be higher – and if the opportunity is not taken now, it may be a long time before a comparable opportunity to mobilise meaningfully for the kind of future the labour movement surely wants to see presents itself again.

### *a) Preparation and present measures*

Here the main lines of the narrative that needs now to be mobilised more concertedly by the labour movement are already apparent. Prior to the crisis, the NHS was subject to resource starvation, cuts and privatisation over a decade of austerity (with key aspects of privatisation carrying over also from the New Labour days). Present Tory ministers and advisors have worked closely for years as members or supporters of highly predatory, privateering right wing think tanks (Taxpayers Alliance, Institute of Economic Affairs, etc.)

and have identified business interests in the dismantling of the public sector – seen as ‘low hanging fruit’, ripe for predation.

When the crisis began to unfold, the UK government, despite early warnings and clear WHO guidance, *made no significant preparations at all for the protection of public health!* Though, with sufficient advance planning, there was substantial scope for a variety of responses which would have made a real difference, Johnson and his advisors chose to rubbish the WHO and do nothing, initially planning to allow the virus to spread unhindered ‘through the population’, thereby igniting uncontrolled community transmission. The government’s current position is in fact a variant of this – with transmission now only being slowed by control measures.

Talk of ‘herd immunity’ has been misleading: such a strategy, absent a vaccine, requires preventive isolation of the elderly and more vulnerable: the government *made no plans and took no practical measures for that*, as the present wave of fatalities in care homes tragically shows. When a belated, half hearted and inconsistent lockdown was declared by the government (after the governments of countries like Rwanda and Uganda had already acted), it was an obvious admission of prior failure and already too late to save many thousands of lives.

Due to the failure to prepare, frontline doctors, nurses and health care workers have not been – and in many cases are still not being – provided with sufficient equipment, quantitatively or qualitatively, to protect themselves and prevent transmission of the virus through the health service itself, and indeed to their own families (thus the need for many of them to stay separately in alternative accommodation).

Similarly, testing – an essential component of the WHO approach without which lockdown is ultimately ineffective – was not planned for, was said not to be needed and is still, now that its importance has been belatedly recognised, at pathetically low levels. In the Faroe Islands, with a population of just 52,000, it has proved possible to test, as we write, over an eighth of the population, due to local action to adapt facilities and procedures for testing the

health of farmed salmon for the purposes of Covid-19 testing. Yet with all the resources of the UK, such basic initiatives were not even imagined, it seems.

The labour movement must therefore clearly and unapologetically project its own independent narrative along these lines: *the Conservative government failed in its elementary duty to protect the public and the NHS and its basic legitimacy to continue with the governance of the crisis must be properly challenged.*

*b) Exit from lockdown*

Exit from lockdown is fraught with deadly risks for the whole population and serious threats, beyond the obvious health risks of a renewed wave of infections, to a) livelihoods and standards of living, b) labour movement influence and solidarity going forward.

Based on one estimate of 20,000 deaths from 1 million people infected, the prospect of an infected population of 66 million is more than shocking. In China, early and effective lockdown combined with systematic testing resulted in virtual suppression of the virus (not 'herd immunity'), with lockdown restrictions then being carefully relaxed. Failure to prepare on the part of the UK government has ruled this approach out. The unnecessary delay in imposing effective social distancing measures has necessitated a prolonged lockdown which then brings the danger of ill thought out and premature exit attempts, with further and perhaps deeper harmful consequences for jobs, living standards and wellbeing grow as time goes on.

Furthermore, the impoverishment of many ordinary people through unemployment or small business collapse puts them at the mercy (as in the US) of government or right-wing demagogues urging rebellion against public sector institutions responsible for lockdown compliance.

The labour movement therefore needs to make its own voice heard on the timing and manner of implementation of any exit strategy and act as a focus for unity, solidarity and material support as economic activity resumes. As indicated above, any successful strategy will require high levels of competence, popular mobilisation and trust in government and its



communication – and none of those elements are realistically likely with the current government itself at the helm.

*c) . Economic reconstruction*

The enormous financial power and resources that the government has made instantly available to support a pause in economic life clearly demonstrate the viability of alternative and ultimately non-capitalist economic planning, and with that the possibility of better lives for all. But as in 2008, such state largesse will almost inevitably come at a huge cost to ordinary people *unless the labour movement can show leadership and at least substantially influence, if not control, the narrative and shape the needed vision of the future*. Through bankruptcy, de facto insolvency and indebtedness key sectors of the economy can be held to ransom by government for regressive state intervention and social engineering on a mass scale.

And we should not imagine for a second that the current government and its advisors will hesitate to use every lever at their disposal to remake British society along the lines advocated by the Institute of Economic Affairs, the Taxpayers' Alliance and their ilk.

Economic reconstruction is in fact now inevitable – the only question is about *whose interests that economic reconstruction will serve*. That is yet to be determined. But *every day that the labour movement fails to engage seriously and proportionately is likely to increase the probability that it will be determined in the interests of a tiny minority*, and that we will see renewed and deepening austerity, privatisation, inequality, homelessness, climate change denial and reactionary nationalism.

The labour movement must therefore challenge the governance of the crisis. It must effectively project its narrative of profound government failure and simultaneously organise as a united force to show its capacity to contribute effective leadership of the crisis as it progresses, based on its own strategic economic vision of a society constructed, funded and organized 'for the many, not the few'.

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