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Covid-19 pandemic in Britain

# Johnson government forced to U turn on NHS and schools

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**At the regular Prime Minister's questions (PMQs) two days ago (20 May) Labour Party Leader Keir Starmer asked the question that had already been raging on social media for some time. Why is the British Government making non-EU migrants working and dying in the front line in the National Health Service pay a special surcharge of Â£400 (increasing to Â£624 in October) for the right of themselves and their families to use the NHS?**

As Starmer said to Johnson, you clap enthusiastically on Thursday during the weekly celebration of the care workers then you send them a bill. For a family of four in a low paid health job this is several thousand pounds. The Prime Minister replied by repeating this key Brexit promise that the 'national' health service had to be paid for and if these people did not pay then it would cost the 'British taxpayer' Â£900 billion. Of course this was a complete exaggeration, experts have calculated from between Â£35 to Â£90 billion. Like Trump, lies fly from his mouth as he waffles.

One day later the money can be found elsewhere and the decision was reversed. Johnson sent out designated scapegoat, health minister, Matt Hancock to announce the volte-face. The change was nothing to do with Johnson 'reflecting' but all about a threatened revolt inside his own party with Tory MPs intimating that they would vote with Labour on this amendment. Online opinion did play a role with the story of the Syrian refugee who had gone to work as a cleaner in the front line. His appeal went viral, already forcing U turn on bereavement leave, granting indefinite leave to remain in Britain to relatives of migrant NHS workers who die in the pandemic. [1]

So it is a victory but one that does not extend to all non-EU key workers who do not work in the NHS or social care but are cleaners, taxi drivers or other key workers keeping society together. The Labour leadership have not extended a call for the whole surcharge to be abolished for all non-EU migrants, who pay the same taxes as everybody else.

Just the day before we saw the first U turn when the 'definite' date of opening up primary schools to 4 and 5 and 10 year olds became a lot less definite and was open to further consultation.

The role of the teachers' trade unions, particularly the National Education Union (NEU) which includes some left leaders, was decisive. The NEU ran a model online campaign, reaching out to parents, local councils (which still have governance of most primary schools) and medical/scientific specialists. It regularly consulted its workplace representatives and entire membership. Last week it organised the first 20,000 strong online union mass meeting. Every day on the mass media it led the news agenda. Teachers dragged the Starmer leadership into taking a firmer line although the latter continually couched its opposition in terms of achieving consensus and agreement.

Starmer was careful not to make any call that would clearly back the NEU and teachers taking action against the government, local education authorities or their headteachers on June 1st. In the end nearly 70 local education authorities indicated their reluctance to open schools up further on that date. Even a few local authorities led by the government political party joined in the scepticism. The battle is continuing as the government is releasing today some further 'scientific' evidence justifying the re-opening. It is hoping that it can start a drift back by some schools that could weaken the national opposition.

Both U turns show that the government, which won a strong 80 seat majority in the 'Get Brexit Done' election last December, is vulnerable to organised opposition. Although it is still well ahead of Labour in terms of electoral voting intentions the approval ratings for Boris Johnson have slumped and those for Keir Starmer have risen.

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Nevertheless the Labour leader persists in a very lawyerly way to itemise the 'mistakes' of the government over the Covid crisis but always in an almost well-intentioned way so they can come to a new national consensus. The climbdown over schools opening was not even taken up by Starmer in the PMQs. He never explains how all these mistakes are connected to an neo-liberal, anti-state, anti-planning and British exceptionalist framework. A framework amounting to class war which of course as a good Fabian Starmer completely rejects. [2]

Developing active opposition that goes beyond Starmer's approach is not easy since everything has to be online, the Labour Party is shutdown as a decision-making organ at local and regional level and now the September national conference has been cancelled. Normally the rank and file membership have a clear voice at that meeting. Nevertheless pushing Johnson back is a morale boost for the left and progressive opinion.

22 May 2020

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[1] See *The Independent* video (20 May) "[Hospital cleaner sends Boris Johnson powerful message](#)" and *The Guardian* video (21 May) "[Syrian porter thanks public after NHS migrant surcharge U-turn](#)".

[2] The Fabian society set up by George Bernard Shaw and Beatrice and Sidney Webb in the mid 20th century advocated managerial reformism.