

# Britain: Covid is a Class Issue

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**Roy Wilkes reviews the continuing Tory pandemic chaos and puts the case for Zero Covid.**

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«Boris» Johnson's announcement two days ago [19 December 2020] that his promise to allow households to mix over Christmas is now to be broken typifies the chaotic lurches in policy we have seen from the UK Government throughout this pandemic. Families planning long-awaited reunions have now had hopes dashed, with many facing the prospect of a lonely and miserable Christmas. All this could have been avoided if we had acted sooner to suppress transmission.

As recently as last week, Johnson was responding to demands for a rethink from scientists and opposition MPs with the assertion that to ban such mixing would be 'inhuman'. The real inhumanity is of course Johnson's failure to control this virus from the outset, and his callous acceptance of a death toll fast approaching six figures.

Johnson's excuse for this latest U-turn is that a new strain of the virus has ripped through London and the South East. It is a shallow excuse indeed. Even without a new strain, everyone could see where the exponential growth in transmission was headed. The die was cast with Johnson's refusal to introduce a circuit breaker around October half-term, in defiance of the expert advice of scientists and educators, and his insistence on keeping schools open throughout the November 'lockdown'. The direct consequence of Johnson's incompetent attempt to prioritise the economy over human lives is thousands more avoidable deaths and more business failures, lost livelihoods, and an insecure future for millions.

Putting all our eggs in the basket of a vaccine is a dangerous game to play with a virus that is mutating so frequently, especially when higher infection rates inevitably lead to more mutations. Indeed, to give the vaccines a fighting chance of success we must suppress transmission now. Every day that passes confirms that the only way out of this nightmare is a serious elimination strategy. We need a comprehensive Zero Covid strategy now.

## Rising death toll

The latest figures for Covid tell a bleak story of a rapidly unfolding catastrophe. The Office for National Statistics estimates today that during the week ending 12 December (i.e. the first week after the England lockdown ended), the number of people infected with coronavirus in England rose from 481,000 to 567,300, in Wales from 25,600 to 33,400, in the North of Ireland from 7,800 to

8,500, and in Scotland from 43,300 to 52,500. Rates of hospitalisation and death will, after a few weeks delay, track this rise at a frightening rate. And winter is only just beginning.

The response of the UK government throughout this crisis has been consistently dreadful. In early March they were openly advocating the eugenicist herd-immunity strategy. When they were confronted with the harsh reality of a projected death toll running into millions and an NHS overwhelmed beyond the point of collapse, they got cold feet and introduced a lockdown, but not before allowing the virus to get dangerously out of control.

The lockdown continued for far longer than necessary because of its incompleteness: non-essential workplaces were allowed to stay open, including sweatshops in Leicester, which kept the coronavirus in circulation. Even despite that, we could have eliminated transmission in the summer if we had developed a decent test-and-trace system combined with effective public-health screening at the ports of entry. Instead, the government threw tens of billions of pounds at private-sector corporations like SERCO to deliver what can only be described as world-beating incompetence. The devolved governments in Scotland and Wales tried to implement a more effective viral elimination strategy, but without financial support from the UK government, they were unable to fund the scale of furlough payments that would have been needed.

### **What the Tories would not do**

In the summer, Independent SAGE published a groundbreaking report that set out the steps that would be needed to eliminate viral transmission. Their Zero Covid strategy advocated a number of simple but effective measures: close all schools and non-essential workplaces until transmission is low enough for test-and-trace to maintain exponential decay in infection rates; build a locally based public-sector system of Find, Test, Trace, Isolate, and Support.

Independent SAGE emphasises that the 'support' aspect is crucial. If low-paid workers are not given adequate financial and social support, they will simply be unable to self isolate. We saw the effect of not offering that support during the mass testing in Liverpool, where in some of the more deprived communities less than 10% of people took the test because they were afraid of getting a positive result and having to stay off work.

The third element of a Zero Covid strategy is to keep the virus out of the country by introducing an effective system of public-health screening at all ports of entry, with quarantine where necessary. The state goes to considerable lengths to 'control its borders' when it comes to migrants, but those same borders are completely porous to dangerous pathogens. Those priorities are completely wrong: human migrants do not hurt us, viruses do.

The National Audit Office has outlined 'major shortcomings' in test turnaround times, numbers of contacts reached, and unused testing capacity. The system has not achieved standards set out by SAGE, including the need to reach 80% of close contacts of those testing positive. Even as recently as 4 November it had only reached 66%. On average, the testing programme reached only 68% of its target capacity of 500,000 tests per day. The deployment of contact tracers has also been ineffective and inefficient. As Jonathon Ashworth, Labour's Shadow Health Secretary pointed out: 'The £22bn test and trace now have a budget larger than policing and fire service combined, but it has failed to trace sufficient numbers of contacts and ensure those who are contacted are able to isolate.'

The only people who have benefited from the Johnson government's approach to test-and-trace are the shareholders and directors of Serco and other private-sector beneficiaries of this failed system.

## **What the Tories should have done**

Countries that have successfully eliminated the virus have taken the opposite approach, with local contact tracers who know their local areas recruited by local public-sector health authorities.

'We have a very strong system: 63 provincial Centres for Disease Control (CDCs), more than 700 district level CDCs, and more than 11,000 commune health centres. All of them contribute to contact tracing,' said Doctor Pham of the Vietnam National Institute of Hygiene and Epidemiology. A confirmed Covid patient in Vietnam has to give health authorities an exhaustive list of all people he or she has met in the past 14 days. Announcements are placed in newspapers and aired on television and radio to inform the public of where the patient has been, and when, and people who were there at the same time are urged to get tested. Vietnam's contact tracing is so meticulous it tracks down not only the contacts of an infected patient but the contacts of those contacts as well. Direct contacts are quarantined in health centres, and indirect contacts are supported to self-isolate at home.

Instead of listening to the advice of the scientists in the summer, however, Johnson and Sunak gave Covid a helping hand with the Eat Out to Help Out scheme, and with the decision to send students back to schools and universities in September. It was hardly surprising that infection rates started to climb.

You might think that having witnessed exponential growth in the Spring, we would have been a bit better prepared in the Autumn. Not a bit of it. We were assured that although infection rates were rising, the death rate remained low because this time around it was mostly young people getting infected. But of course, back here in the real world, and as surely as night follows day, hospitalisation and death rates faithfully followed the growth in infection rates a few weeks later. It was clear to everyone, including the Johnson government, that we were hurtling towards catastrophe.

## **The second wave**

Pressure was mounting, from the teaching unions and even, eventually, from the front bench of Her Majesty's loyal opposition, for a 'circuit breaker' around half term to bring community transmission back under control. Rishi Sunak was having none of it, insisting that instead, we should keep capital circulating while learning to live with the virus. So instead of taking the necessary measures to suppress transmission, we were instead given the 'rule of six' and the 'three-tier' system (five in Scotland.)

The second wave of the virus hit the deprived communities of the North first and hardest. Despite assurances that the priority was to prevent the NHS from being overwhelmed, the NHS was nevertheless ... overwhelmed. Patients needing ICU treatment in Manchester hospitals were denied it because of a lack of beds. Hospital staff, already exhausted by over nine months of the pandemic, were often reduced to tears. Wales and Scotland introduced their own lockdown measures to try and stem the growth, while the Johnson government callously and stubbornly held the line.

When it once again became clear that we were heading for a more horrific death toll, which no amount of statistical massaging would be able to hide, Johnson was eventually forced to bring in an all-England lockdown, ironically just as the Wales lockdown was ending. Schools, however, were to remain open, despite mounting evidence that secondary schools, in particular, were fast becoming the main source of transmission.

The NEU patiently explained that schools would need to be included in the lockdown for it to be effective and that coming out of lockdown there would need to be a rota system to keep classrooms safe. But their pleas fell on deaf ears. With schools open, the second lockdown barely dented transmission rates, and as soon as it was lifted exponential growth resumed. Johnson's thinly disguised attempt to curry popularity by allowing a five-day window over Christmas has backfired, with intense pressure from scientists for another U-turn, and with most members of the public understanding full well the risk that Christmas household mixing would entail.

The Johnson government's approach of 'learning to live with the virus' has cost the state far more than an elimination strategy would have done and is one of the worst outcomes even when compared to the other G7 rich countries, none of which have pursued a Zero Covid strategy. The UK has suffered a 60% higher death toll than the G7 average, while the cost to the state has been 80% higher and the decline in output 90% greater. The UK government deficit is projected to be a colossal £380bn for 2020, £280bn of which is directly related to pandemic expenditure (with the remainder indirectly related, through lost tax revenue and higher benefits.) By way of comparison, it would have cost only £40bn to pay 20 million workers £400 a week each to stay at home for five weeks.

### **A privatised pandemic**

So why have they opted for such a huge growth in state debt when it would have cost considerably less to eliminate the virus? (And still would, by the way. Eliminating the virus now would add less to the 2021 deficit than not doing so.) Why? Is it simply incompetence? I don't think so.

While government strategy makes no sense from the perspective of public finance, it makes perfectly good sense from the perspective of capital. What we are seeing is an unprecedentedly huge transfer of wealth from the state coffers (or more accurately, from state-created debt) into private corporations. Alongside that we are watching as 'creative destruction' winnows out small and inefficient capital and leaves the field clear for the big players. And, as the FT describes it, 'UK jobs could disappear as Covid puts automation on steroids.'

The billionaires are enjoying a good crisis, gaining \$10.2tn in wealth during the first half of this year alone; Musk trousered \$76bn of that and Bezos \$74bn. And of course, they will not be expected to pay off the debts that have arisen. We will. Sunak is already talking up austerity, quietly for now of course, but no less surely. Starmer is reassuring the bourgeoisie that now is not the time for a wealth tax. And we can be sure that the Johnson mob will be left with 'no alternative' than to allow US pharmaceutical and health-insurance corporations full market access to our severely depleted and exhausted NHS as part of a post-Brexit trade deal with the US.

Covid exposes all the contradictions of capital in this period of its structural crisis. We are seeing the confluence of an ecological crisis, arising from the expansion of the rule of capital into every corner of the planet, including the most remote wilderness, and an economic crisis arising from the very same cause, the over-accumulation of capital. We are seeing the inadequacy of the isolated individualism of bourgeois ideology - enthusiastically promoted by the anti-mask-anti-lockdown alliance of the far-right and the libertarian conspiracists as 'individual freedom' - as a response to a viral pandemic.

We are witnessing the total irrationality of imperial domination and competitiveness in dealing with a global health crisis - and in particular the absurdity of 'intellectual property rights' in relation to vaccine production and distribution. We are seeing clearly the impact on human life and health of obeying the imperative of the uninterrupted circulation of capital. And we see how every solution

aimed at bolstering capital accumulation not only fails to resolve these contradictions but actively intensifies and accelerates them by deepening the structural crisis of the system.

Covid is not the first pandemic to be unleashed on us by capital in its period of decay. Nor will it be the last. And it will probably not be the most deadly. The sooner we learn the lessons of this pandemic, the better prepared we will be for the next one. And the most important lesson of all is that Covid is a class issue and that the primary response to it must be one of class struggle.

Workers are beginning to move into action over Covid-unsafe workplaces. The EIS in Scotland is balloting education workers, as are the UCU at some universities in England, PCS at the Department for Business, Energy, and Industry, and Unite at First West Yorkshire Bus company. All these struggles must be fully supported.

One of the best ways to raise the confidence of workers to take action for Covid safety is to build the Zero Covid campaign as a movement of praxis, in which action is as important as words, and practice is as important as theory. The next opportunity to do that will be on the 16 January Day of Action, which is focused on workplace safety. Everyone reading this article should promote and build the outdoor protest actions happening up and down the country, and the online rally for those who are unable to protest outdoors. See the zerocovid campaign for details [1].

**Roy Wilkes**

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**P.S.**

- Anticapitalist Resistance. 21 December 2020:  
<https://www.anticapitalistresistance.org/post/covid-is-a-class-issue>
  - Roy Wilkes is a socialist activist in the North-West and a leading member of Zero Covid: the campaign to beat the pandemic Home - Zero Covid
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**Footnotes**

[1] <https://zerocovid.uk/>