

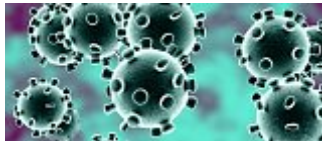
# Coronavirus, Britain: how should the left and labour movement respond?

Friday 6 March 2020, by [FINDLAY Mark](#) (Date first published: 5 March 2020).

**Over the few days there has been a significant escalation of cases of coronavirus cases in Britain with numbers currently at 90 - more than double the figures of 40 two days earlier, writes Mark Findlay. Cases have appeared in people who haven't [travelled](#) abroad and where no contact with a known carrier has so far been found. And it appears that some people may be more liable to pass on the virus than others; "[superspreaders](#)"**

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Few political issues are discussed without reference to the virus and its impacts. As Eric Toussaint points out [here](#), the spark that has lit the major stock market crises in the US, Shanghai, Tokyo and Europe is being used to divert attention from the much longer developing root causes.

This morning in Britain we have seen the final [collapse](#) of Flybe, Europe's largest regional airline with the company claiming Covid 19 is to blame. While the aviation industry has undoubtedly been hit by the spread of the virus, no one is taken in as they have been struggling for some time.

Trade unions have been raising concerns about the protection of workers who can't afford to isolate themselves. The government's concession on statutory sick pay (SSP) is welcome - but completely inadequate if you are already living on the breadline.

There is concern that the "gig economy", where a substantial part of the workforce has no access to sick pay, will result in people working while affected, which will increase the spread of the virus. The government's response is, incredibly, to [advise](#) those people to claim other benefits. This ignores the fact that many working poor are already doing so as well as the enormous problems with Universal Credit. The story of [hospital cleaners](#) in Hackney points the way to what all unions should be organising for.

The government professes to having a "battle plan" as announced by Tory Health Secretary Matt Hancock. With NHS cutbacks having reduced hospital capacity to a bare minimum, and long waiting times for emergency treatment, we can expect things to escalate rapidly. Plans include repressive measures such as isolating cities and restricting travel, but I think it's quite probable that the

disease will have become [widespread undetected](#), making such measures largely useless.

Even more worrying is the idea that Parliament could be suspended – even for months. Maybe Johnson got a taste of ruling by decree during prorogation in the autumn – and hasn't seemed to suffer for it at the electorate's hands! And given the pressure over Priti Patel it would be a convenient manoeuvre,

Given the cuts and staff shortages (further exacerbated by EU staff leaving because of Brexit), the NHS simply won't have the resources to cope with a large increase in patients. Non-urgent procedures were regularly being cancelled this winter in greater numbers than before long before this disease was heard of.

For the most ill patients [special facilities](#) will be needed. There are currently only 15 of these beds, and some are bound to be used for other conditions. In 2018-19 there were twice as many such beds! The article makes plain that the NHS will struggle if there are more than 28 patients needing them.

And if very large numbers of patients appear needing hospital care, can we imagine that a 1,000 bed hospital could be built in a week as in China? The government's plans already include trying to bring doctors out of retirement – despite the increase in mortality amongst those over 60 – as well as reliance on charities like the Red Cross or even the military.

Socialists should be calling for an end to cuts and privatisation in the NHS and an immediate plan to build emergency beds for people that need them. A big expansion of resources is needed to end the already-gross waiting times in A&E.

### **How did the virus arise**

The origins of Coronavirus are not certain, but may well have come from wild animals being traded in the city of Wuhan. Many scientists think it resembles a strain found in bats. Coronavirus is a large family of viruses and is so-called because of the crown-like projections members of the family show when viewed under electron microscopes. The present disease is now called COVID-19.

As is commonplace, conspiracy theories abound. This hasn't been helped by [right-wing US politicians](#) and others that have used it to increase [paranoia](#) about the Chinese state

Wherever it came from, it appeared in people in the large Chinese city of Wuhan at the end of 2019. After some uncertainty about its infectivity, it was soon found to spread rapidly to people and had similar symptoms to colds, but with much worse implications as there is little or no human immunity. In most people, however, the disease appears quite mild, but older people, those with heart/lung conditions or compromised immunity are badly affected.

The death rate is approximately 1%, which sounds small, but if it spreads to millions, the death toll could nevertheless be huge. A scrolling meter of statistics is [here](#); at the time of writing, 96777 people have been diagnosed, of whom 3,308 have died – this looks like 3.4%, but the likely figure of people who have contracted it will be much greater than 88%; hence the 1% expected rate.

Latest indications are that the spread of the disease has slowed in China, as has the death rate.

## **Chinese response**

As with regimes the world over, the initial response of the Chinese regime was complacency and repression of those who raised the alarm, such as Dr [Li Wenliang](#). Sadly, later Dr Li died of the very disease that he raised the alarm about. Widespread online commemoration followed, as well as protest at his treatment. True to form, the Chinese state shut down or removed protests as fast as it could.

The Chinese state, however, once the seriousness of the disease and its infectivity was proven, acted characteristically fast and with determination. The unique character of the Chinese State, a bureaucratic capitalist command economy, at one and the same time made the response bureaucratic and unresponsive to people's needs and demands, and allowed it to move with extraordinary speed to implement its responses. It has also responded by characteristically and ruthlessly suppressing dissent and criticism of that response.

Travel restrictions, closures of workplaces were quickly imposed, and new hospitals were built from scratch with [incredible speed](#), within a few days in some cases. Initial reports were that the hospitals appeared underused, but given the likely spread of the disease, it seems a sensible response.

## **Racism within China and elsewhere**

Racism first spread within China itself, with people from (and even within) Wuhan and the surrounding Hubei province subjected to [blockades and abuse](#).

Worldwide, Chinese people and those of East Asian appearance have been subjected to boycotts and ostracism. One of the worst examples was a man in the Sydney Chinese district who was allowed to die of a heart attack by passers-by. Racism is evident in the [US](#) and has also been widespread in [Britain](#) with people of East Asian appearance or wearing facemasks targeted.

In spite of the repression, there has been discontent within China, which the state has been suppressing. In Hong Kong, while the virus has ended the street protests which were beginning to ebb anyway, there is widespread [anger](#) both at the regime's inadequate response and the whipping up of antimainlander racism with demands they should not be allowed to enter Hong Kong.

## **International spread and impact**

The disease has quickly become evident in other countries. Korea has over 6088 with 40 deaths. Italy has over 3000 with over 100 deaths. In Iran, the official figures are over 3500 having it, and 107 dead, but the toll is widely believed to be much higher. There is fear that it has spread into the prison system there, which is likely to provoke a faster spread still.

Other countries are reporting many fewer, but that is likely to change rapidly, as new cases are appearing with no apparent route of transmission.

A particular problem has been the response of some countries in holding people in quarantine in large numbers in unsuitable places, such as the "Diamond Princess" cruise ship in Japan, which has resulted in a large number of cases as the close quarters allowed rapid spread of the disease. The authorities in Tenerife have likely caused a similar problem by confining around 800 tourists to a

hotel.

Cases in the US total 160, with eleven deaths at the moment, but the concern must be that the US health system with its high costs will discourage people from seeking medical help (even testing for COVID-19 is expensive, although the US authorities appear to be stepping up testing,

Disinclination to seek medical help may make spread of the disease more rapid, with sufferers not be detected in the first place. This could then pose a global threat as stopping travel to and through the US would be difficult.

The Trump administration's response has not only been slow and complacent, but putting vice-president Mike Pence in charge is deeply concerning. Pence is notoriously [anti-scientific](#), once having stated that "smoking doesn't kill"! Alexandra Ocasio Cortez has [satisfactorily demolished](#) the regime's response and that of its apologist Ted Cruz.

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International travel and tourism have rapidly been affected; not helped by the "Diamond Princess" and Tenerife hotel horror stories. Airlines have cut back on services and in many cases stopped serving Chinese cities and other places badly affected completely.

Supermarkets are already being stripped of certain products, with reports of empty shelves. As I have discovered, it's pretty nearly impossible to buy alcohol hand cleaners. Even though they are regarded as largely ineffective, medical facemasks have also disappeared from the shelves. If the disease spreads further, supplies of basic foods and other essentials.

Factory closures in China, the "workshop of the world", are expected to affect the global economy rapidly. As just one example, the camera manufacturer [Canon](#) is expected to close five plants temporarily because of lack of parts. China's [rapid growth](#) is "highly leveraged"; i.e. financed by large debts, and any slowdown could have a rapid and drastic effect. In my view, this weakness is partly what drives the Chinese regime's twin desires to isolate and slow the spread of the virus and to suppress dissent.



The left and labour movement have a responsibility to take sensible precautions to limit contagion as much as we can. This means taking sensible precautions as individuals – regular hand washing with soap or high level alcohol gel – not opening doors with your hands where possible or wiping the handles afterwards, using tissues and disposing of them properly afterwards. It also means finding ways to allow those who might be most vulnerable to the virus not to become socially or politically isolated.

We haven't yet seen the state in Britain moving to cancel left political events – though that could happen if things escalate. But we should note the measured response of Italian feminists when the ban on mass demonstrations affected their International Women's Day preparations.

**Mark Findlay**, 5 March 2020



### ***Useful articles***

An interesting article on the response of the Chinese state: <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/1845224/coronavirus-response-reveals-chinas-fatal-weakness>

In French <http://europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article52106>

World Health Organisation  
<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/events-as-they-happen>

NHS advice <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/> (I think the NHS advice is complacent, to say the least!)

US citizens and visitors likely to have to pay large sums for treatment:  
<https://qz.com/1810869/covid-19-quarantine-leads-to-surprise-medical-bills-for-us-family/>

US; problems in developing testing kits  
<https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2020/2/28/21155917/preparing-for-coronavirus-in-the-us-cdc-diagnostic-testing>

US / CDC advice <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/share-facts.html>

Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coronavirus\\_disease\\_2019](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coronavirus_disease_2019)

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**P.S.**

Socialist Resistance. Posted on 5<sup>th</sup> March 2020:

<https://socialistresistance.org/coronavirus-how-should-the-left-and-labour-movement-respond/19441>