

The International Fight against Covid and the the ZeroCovid campaign

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Fred Leplat explores the international response to the pandemic. Please do join our friends at the ZeroCovid campaign on Saturday 13 February 2021 for an afternoon talk on the ecology and economics of the pandemic, registration can be found [here](#).

At the end of January Britain passed the gruesome official milestone of over 100,000 deaths, and possibly 120,000 [\[1\]](#). Most governments across Europe have been following a similar strategy to that in Britain. Initially hoping for the best, that “herd immunity” would work, then repeatedly imposing and lifting lockdowns and allowing workplaces to open. This strategy has failed and the death rate is soaring.

This is in stark contrast to other countries such as Australia, Vietnam [\[2\]](#), New Zealand, or Taiwan which right from the start imposed strict lockdowns, travel restrictions, and efficient test and trace. Australia has 909 deaths for a population of 25.6 million.

Johnson admitted on Wednesday 28 January that his Tory Westminster UK government has to bear responsibility for this catastrophe, with excess deaths at their highest since World War Two [\[3\]](#). But he refuses to discuss why the Westminster UK government has failed and therefore to learn anything from this.

As Professor Steve Reicher said: “It is like a football team manager at the bottom of the table saying we don’t need to change our style of play.” Johnson claims, “we did everything we could”. But health and care workers and all those who have been infected by the virus know full well the multiple reasons for his government’s failure [\[4\]](#) - including locking down too late, a useless privatised test & trace system, not to mention letting off Cummings after his Durham safari.

The complacent response rather than tackling the virus early and decisively, whether it is through cowardice or lack of imagination, has encouraged a small but vocal minority of virus deniers and anti-lockdown protesters in Britain [\[5\]](#) and elsewhere in Europe [\[6\]](#). But despite this, support and respect for the lockdown are at very high levels: 80% support the lockdown in Britain [\[7\]](#).

As we enter the second year of the pandemic, public opinion is shifting. The idea of herd immunity is discredited, repeated lockdowns are exasperating and new variants are alarming. There is less and less support for government strategies whether in Britain or elsewhere. An international alliance of campaigns [\[8\]](#) is now pushing out the message that there is an alternative strategy, and that it is not sufficient to simply criticising governments for not doing enough.

The ZeroCovid campaign in Britain [\[9\]](#) is successfully spreading the message that we do not want to just contain the virus, but instead, we must suppress and eliminate it. Zero Covid is doing nothing more than supporting the message put out by the scientists of Independent SAGE [\[10\]](#). While welcoming vaccines provided by the NHS, a real strategy must also include closing unsafe and non-

essential workplaces with full pay for all, support for self-isolation including financial and practical help, and a proper local test and trace run by the public sector.

In Germany, an appeal for Zero Covid [11] in early January collected over 85,000 signatures in a week. That campaign is now inundated with calls for interviews as none of the mainstream political parties or trade-unions have put forward an alternative strategy to that of the government. Another campaign Wellenbrecher Jetzt [12] is also pushing for stronger measures to contain the virus.

In the US, Trump's chaotic and irrational response has encouraged the far-right and neo-fascists demand for "freedom" not to wear masks and given oxygen to virus-deniers. Biden's election will make a difference as he says he wants to stop the virus but without stopping the economy. A new campaign, Covid Zero [13], is pushing for an elimination of Covid-19 and moving toward a new and better normal.

In Ireland, the Independent Scientific Advisory Group (ISAG) [14] has been calling since last summer for an elimination strategy for the island of Ireland. With three governments (Dublin, Stormont, and Westminster) over the island, there has been a chaotic response, leading to the highest rise in the world of infections after allowing social gatherings over Christmas. An elimination strategy for the entire island is urgent. ISAG is now gaining the support of opposition parties and is launching a new campaign We Can Be Zero [15].

The Financial Times [16] confirms what ZeroCovid has been saying all along: the variants are arising in countries like the UK, US, South Africa, and Brazil that failed to suppress transmission in the first wave. The vaccine is no silver bullet, and allowing the virus to circulate freely risks undermining the efficacy of the vaccines. We needed a Zero Covid strategy last March and we still need a Zero Covid strategy now.

A common feature of the Zero Covid campaigns is denouncing the neoliberal policies for the pandemic which prioritizes activities that suit capitalism: keeping the economy going with unsafe workplaces open, maintaining cuts in healthcare, and failing to tax the superprofits of the tech companies or the wealth of billionaires. All this at a time when there is insufficient financial support for workers laid off and poverty-level benefits are still in line for being cut. It is those already most deprived and at-risk who suffer: women, Black people, youth, and Disabled people.

A wealth tax is urgent to rebuild public health systems and beat poverty. But we must also guard against the deepening of authoritarian measures used to enforce the lockdown. The German Zero Covid appeal [17] concludes that "Democracy without health protection is nothing but cynical absurdity, health protection without democracy leads to an authoritarian state, it is by unifying the two that we will achieve a united strategy ZeroCovid". This absolutely right.

Alongside measures to eliminate the pandemic, we need to encourage social control, democratic transparency, and popular participation. This will involve giving confidence to workers to use health & safety legislation to withdraw from unsafe workplaces as the National Education Union [18] has done. But local and national governments should also be taking the initiative on this as too many workers are forced to go into work because of poverty and precarious employment conditions.

The Covid pandemic has been greatly facilitated by agribusiness, industrial food production, megacities, and deforestation which allows pathogens to easily jump species. Stopping the ecological destruction of the planet is urgent if we are to prevent other such pandemics from erupting. When Covid has been suppressed there can be no return to normal.

Fred Leplat

P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 11 February 2021:

<https://www.anticapitalistresistance.org/post/the-international-fight-against-covid>

- Fred Leplat is a supporter of Anti*Capitalist Resistance, Socialist Resistance, and the ZeroCovid campaign.

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/26/ons-figures-show-uk-passed-100000-covid-deaths-by-7-january>

[2] ESSF (article 56582), [Covid-19: Vietnam's Pandemic](#).

[3] <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-55631693>

[4] ESSF (article 56917), [Covid-19 \(Britain\): Here are five ways the government could have avoided 100,000 Covid deaths](#).

[5] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/27/hospital-incursions-by-covid-deniers-putting-lives-at-risk-say-leaders>

[6] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/25/dutch-leaders-condemn-criminal-clashes-at-anti-lockdown-protests>

[7] <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/lockdown-coronavirus-poll-survey-covid-b1782520.html>

[8] <https://zerocovidalliance.org/>

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

[10] <https://www.independentsage.org/>

[11] <https://zero-covid.org/language/en/>

[12] <https://wellenbrecher.jetzt/>

[13] <https://zerocovid.us/>

[14] <https://www.isagcovid19.org/>

[15] <https://www.wecanbezero.com/>

[16] <https://www.ft.com/content/17c44c96-39f2-4ada-badd-d65815b0a521?shareType=nongift&fb>

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[17] <https://zero-covid.org/language/en/>

[18] <https://neu.org.uk/>