

Pandemic and the revolutionary Left (Ireland): The Covid Test

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“Covid has presented a challenge to the revolutionary left about how to respond. Here, I want to initiate a discussion about the different approaches taken by those who come from the tradition of the Committee for a Workers International (CWI). I focus on this tradition because it is the one that I and many members of RISE come from, and the one I am most familiar with. But I hope that this can be useful for all socialists, particularly considering the climate and biodiversity crises which are looming.”

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More than 15 months have passed since the first person died from Covid in China. Over three million more people have died. The pandemic has dominated global politics, exposing the capitalist barriers to effectively marshalling the resources necessary to save lives. Capitalist governments have overwhelmingly failed to tackle the crisis. At the time of writing, a new global record for cases is being set by India, with more than 300,000 cases daily. Much richer capitalist states have also seen a catastrophic loss of life.

A rationally planned socialist society would have seen the rapid rollout of publicly produced vaccines worldwide. Instead, in the [words](#) of the Executive Director of UNAIDS, *“big pharmaceutical companies are protecting their monopolies on technology and intellectual property and thus restricting production.”* The thousands of people who are still dying daily are victims of capitalism.

Covid has also presented a challenge to the revolutionary left about how to respond. Here, I want to initiate a discussion about the different approaches taken by those who come from the tradition of the Committee for a Workers International (CWI). I focus on this tradition because it is the one that I and many members of RISE come from, and the one I am most familiar with. But I hope that this can be useful for all socialists, particularly considering the climate and biodiversity crises which are looming.

When former members of the Socialist Party founded RISE in October 2019, we wrote that “time and experience will test our different perspectives and approach”. We didn’t anticipate such a dramatic test so quickly, but nonetheless, it provides an opportunity to draw up a balance sheet and analyse the different approaches.

In the interests of a clarifying discussion, I won’t hold back with my criticism of what I think is

wrong with the approach taken by the CWI and the International Socialist Alternative (ISA). In a nutshell, it is an approach which has been too content with abstract propaganda and has insufficiently tried to develop and popularise a transitional programme addressing the pandemic. But I also ask fellow socialists in the ISA and CWI to correct me where they think I misrepresent their arguments and invite them, and others, to respond to the arguments set out here.

Summarising the Differences

The essence of the differences of approach can be encapsulated in the attitude of each group on Zero Covid. This refers to a strategy to achieve zero community transmission of Covid cases (i.e. cases which cannot be traced). RISE, which now functions as a revolutionary Marxist [network](#) within People Before Profit (PBP), has from an early point in time embraced and championed Zero Covid (as did [PBP](#) prior to our joining) - while linking it to the need for a socialist programme.

We did that in a developed [article](#) on our website by Diana O'Dwyer, in a [piece](#) written for a popular news website and in multiple parliamentary and media interventions. As the chief political commentator (and an opponent of a Zero Covid strategy) for the *Irish Times* [acknowledged](#), our TD was "the Dáil's most consistent advocate of a zero-Covid strategy".

The measures we consistently put forward included:

- • Requisitioning private hospital capacity and building it into a public National Health Service;
- • Investing in a world-class 'Find Test Trace Isolate' Support system;
- • Protection of workers' incomes and homes through a Pandemic Unemployment Payment of at least €350 a week, full sick pay and childcare leave, a ban on evictions and writing off of rent and mortgage arrears;
- • Effective mandatory hotel quarantine and isolation of incoming travellers;
- The establishment of workers' committees in workplaces to ensure safe work practices and to determine when re-opening could be done based on public health advice;
- 'Covid taxes' on big business and wealthy individuals - as set out in a public [article](#).

We consistently linked the need for Zero Covid policies with measures which point beyond the logic of capitalism - for example the requisitioning of private hospitals and the establishment of workers' committees with control over work practices. We, along with our colleagues in PBP, also brought the idea of a 'People's Vaccine' front and centre - demanding that intellectual property rights on pharmaceutical products be [scrapped](#), with nationalisation of the pharmaceutical industry so that a vaccine could be produced publicly and distributed rapidly around the world.

Both the Committee for a Workers International (CWI) and the International Socialist Alternative

(ISA), while raising many similar individual demands, have avoided calling for Zero Covid. A useful written debate took place on this subject in Germany, with both [Sozialistische Alternative](#) (ISA) and [Solidarität](#) (CWI) writing informative pieces responding to an [appeal](#) for a Zero Covid strategy initiated by left-winger Winfried Wolf.

For the CWI, Sascha Staničić takes a sceptical approach to the idea of achieving Zero Covid in advance of mass vaccinations. He argues that instead the left “... *should focus on specific demands that, on the one hand, aim to effectively drive back the virus, including restoring the traceability of the chains of infection, and, on the other hand, the social and economic interests of the working class focus on the socially disadvantaged.*”

The ISA piece by Claus Ludwig adopts a slightly more sympathetic approach to the appeal, but argues that “...*more appropriate slogans than #ZeroCovid have emerged in recent months. The SAV has been calling to “lockdown capitalism” since autumn. In Cologne an anti-fascist alliance has the motto “Fight Corona. Protect people, not capitalism” called for a demonstration.*”

In contrast, if RISE was in Germany, I have little doubt that we would sign the appeal, seek to assist it to become a mass campaign, while also arguing that for it to be successful it would need to be married to socialist measures (many of which are laid out well in both the CWI and ISA articles). Indeed, even from outside Germany, we wrote an article for the campaign [newspaper](#).

In short, our approach to Zero Covid could be summed up as - “Yes we need Zero Covid. In order for it to be really successful, we need to go break with the logic of the capitalist system and implement socialist policies.” In contrast, the ISA and CWI both rejected the slogan and alternative strategy of Zero Covid and counterposed it to immediate demands to protect the interests of the working class in the pandemic (in the case of the CWI) and more abstract anti-capitalist slogans (in the case of the ISA).

RISE's method

In thinking about how to approach Covid, the war analogy which was widely drawn was useful to us in RISE. In a conceptual sense, the “war” against Covid has some similarities to a war of national liberation. This is not the equivalent of an inter-imperialist war where we simply oppose all of the war aims of the government. Both the ruling class and the working class do share a common interest in fighting Covid, but we are not all in the same boat.

The ‘war against Covid’ is severely hampered by the capitalist nature of society - the short-term profit interests of sections of business have repeatedly stood in the way of doing what the science demands to tackle it. Instead, in most countries, the government chose to “[live with Covid](#).” Therefore, socialists should position themselves as the best fighters against Covid, and demonstrate how the class interests of the capitalist class and their government stand in the way of waging an effective fight against Covid.

In Ireland, this hampering of the battle against Covid by short-term profit interests was encapsulated by the government’s decision to re-open restaurants and pubs in December, against the explicit advice of NPHET (the public health team). This decision, which was welcomed by Sinn Féin and Labour, was only loudly and repeatedly opposed at the time by PBP and RISE. The consequences of over two thousand deaths in January and February 2021, and four months of harsh lockdown, shifted public opinion dramatically towards Zero Covid. One result was that the opposition parties which had welcomed every wrong move of the government over the past year felt under pressure to say they now supported it!

This is not to claim that the demand for Zero Covid is an inherently anti-capitalist demand. Indeed, the Financial Times re-published a graph of 'Covid-19 lives versus livelihoods' which indicate a correlation between relatively harsh lockdown measures and economic growth. Martin Wolf [explained](#) that "countries that have sacrificed lives have tended to end up with high mortality and economic costs." This is because a short sharp attempt to eliminate Covid is less damaging for the economy as a whole than repeated lockdowns.

However, capitalism is not a rational system. Competition between different nation states and blocs of states, as well as between individual capitalists and groups of capitalists, means short-term interests usually predominate. There is no better illustration of this than the proven incapacity of the capitalist class to tackle the impending climate catastrophe. Despite the fact that there would be much-reduced profits to be made on a dead planet, the power of fossil capital and the competition between states has consistently blocked anything approaching what is necessary.

So while some capitalist countries, like New Zealand, Australia and Taiwan have adopted large elements of a Zero Covid approach, western capitalist governments largely followed 'rolling lockdown' strategies. Others adopted so-called herd immunity approaches, with disastrous results. The contrast in the mortality rates is striking. In New Zealand with a population of 5 million people, just 26 people have died. In the Republic of Ireland, with a similar population, almost 5,000 people have died. In Australia, with a population of over 25 million people, 910 people have died. In the UK, with a population of 66 million, over 127,000 people have died!

Fundamentally, RISE's approach was informed by an understanding that when faced with such a global crisis, it is not good enough to say that this crisis is a product of the rift between humanity and nature (which it [is](#)), and to defend the interests of the working class in relation to measures taken by capitalists and their governments (which we also have to do). In addition, if we want to actually raise class consciousness amongst large sections of workers, we must also seek to popularise a socialist programme that's capable of tackling this crisis. Indeed it is precisely during major crises that people begin to question the system and consider alternatives.

We also need to be mindful of the growing threat of the far right. Here in Ireland, the rolling lockdowns, [which were the longest and harshest in the EU](#), also opened up space for the far right and fascist groups to propagate their ideas. As the only group willing to risk public health, these groups have grown during Covid as they fed off people's anger at the government's mishandling of Covid. To push back against these ideas gaining a foothold it's necessary that socialists clearly stand for an alternative strategy.

This was the approach of Lenin when faced with a threatening famine in Russia in 1917. This was a famine caused by the sabotage of the capitalists and the inaction of the Provisional Government. However, Lenin did not content himself with placing responsibility for the crisis on the government and the capitalist system they defended. Instead, in ["The Impending Catastrophe and How To Combat It"](#), he outlined the measures necessary to deal with the famine and to end the war and the need for a revolutionary government to implement them.

ISA and CWI in Ireland

The Socialist Party (ISA) in Ireland have done good work in the pandemic - from consistently [fighting](#) for the interests of Debenhams workers, to [highlighting](#) the 'shadow pandemic' of the increase of gender-based violence. However, on *the central question* for the working class - how to fight Covid - they shied away from putting forward a socialist programme to tackle it.

One consequence of this was their members putting forward multiple and contradictory positions on

how to fight Covid. While the public expression of differences is welcome, it pointed to a lack of clarity and cohesion. It also contributed to a dangerous situation where one elected representative repeatedly used their platform to encourage people to take Ivermectin as a 'treatment' for Covid against the advice of the [World Health Organization](#) and [European Medicines Agency](#), including advising people to buy and take drugs designed for animals.

In the context of the surging case numbers in January 2021, they put forward three [demands](#):

- 1) "Mass testing, tracing and isolating"
- 2) "a free, universal public health service"
- 3) "socialist change"

This evaded the key question of measures (including lockdown and quarantine) to reduce case numbers to levels where testing, tracing and isolating could be effective.

Militant Left (CWI) took a similar approach, making explicit their opposition to the Zero Covid strategy, [writing](#):

"Another indication of their shift towards radical Left/reformist politics is PBP and Paul Murphy's strong support for the 'Zero Covid' strategy. While making some demands with which Militant Left agree with, the 'Zero Covid' campaign fails to pose the way to tackle the pandemic crisis in clear and consistent class terms, by proposing that the organised working class take the lead in ensuring workplace and community health care and safety."

Unfortunately, this doesn't engage with the actual position put forward by RISE in articles, speeches and media appearances which *did* put class demands to the fore. However, it does illustrate that they consider support for 'Zero Covid' is indicative of reformism.

Mandatory Hotel Quarantine

While the Socialist Party in Ireland hasn't published a critique of Zero Covid in general, they have come out strongly against a crucial component of that strategy, mandatory hotel quarantine (MHQ). This measure is a crucial component of a Zero Covid strategy because it's aimed at preventing new variants and cases infecting people here. It has widespread [support](#) precisely because people understand that their efforts at social distancing and their sacrifices made during lockdown will all be for nought if the virus is continually reseeded by people travelling into the state.

RISE, People Before Profit and the Socialist Party all voted against the government's MHQ legislation. However, we did so for different reasons. RISE opposed it as political theatre by a government under pressure from the public to introduce MHQ, but unwilling to do anything to damage relations with powerful countries like the US or Germany. The effect of this theatre was racist because it meant that the countries affected were overwhelmingly in Africa or Latin America.

We argued that it would be ineffective and opposed the outsourcing of the quarantine facilities to private operators. We called for "oversight from human rights groups, civil liberties groups and trade unionists to make sure that any powers are not abused." Since its introduction, we have called for it to be extended to all incoming travelers, as the public health advice suggests while calling for private hotels to be requisitioned for quarantine use, to be run as public healthcare facilities under the control of health workers and trade unionists.

In contrast, the Socialist Party opposed the implementation of any form of MHQ. In the Dail, Mick

Barry TD described it as a “form of detention without trial, with people being kept in solitary confinement for a period of two weeks.” They [argued](#) against mandatory quarantine “in hotels commissioned from the private sector or state-run institutions,” opposing any form of mandatory quarantine, other than at home.

In an [article](#) by Finghín Kelly, they argue that:

“Much of the media, many of the opposition parties, and even some on the left have gone as far as arguing that all people arriving in the country should be forced to quarantine in state-provided facilities that would be policed and monitored.... It would be foolish to trust the capitalist state with such a power, or to implement such a system in a proportionate way that respects people’s rights and well-being.”

It seems the core reason for the Socialist Party opposing MHQ is to avoid giving more repressive powers to the capitalist state. This is a very good starting point, as the capitalist state will inevitably use its repressive powers against workers and the socialist movement, but it does not exhaust the question. Relying on that principle alone has led at least one [group](#) to an anti-lockdown position of joining the capitalists in calling for a full reopening of the economy.

In truth, as the Socialist Party has recognised in practice, it is more complicated than that. The dangers of additional repressive powers for the state must be weighed up against the dangers of not protecting oppressed or vulnerable groups, or in the case of MHQ, working-class people as a whole.

A good example of this was the No Contact Order [Bill](#) introduced by the Socialist Party in 2019 which would support victims of abuse by allowing them to get ‘no-contact orders’ against their abuser, and which could result in up to 12 months in prison for violating one. Another more recent example was the call for the introduction of ‘transport police’ in Ireland which would also be an extension of the state’s repressive apparatus. This was on a [podcast](#) to mark International Women’s Day and in the context of the #Reclaimthesestreets protests in Britain over the murder of Sarah Everard, which a police officer was arrested and charged for. This underscores the real problem with calling for more police and the challenge to socialists in coming up with demands that don’t endanger workers nor strengthen the capitalist’s hand against us.

In the same article and speeches which oppose MHQ, the Socialist Party calls for a ban on all non-essential travel. But, who will enforce that? Who will decide what is essential and what is not? Presumably a capitalist state with increased repressive powers. Given the slow rollout of the vaccine across much of the world because of the control of the pharmaceutical companies, opting for a ban on all non-essential as an alternative to MHQ in practice would amount to an extended travel ban on people from Africa, Latin America and Asia.

Their alternative to hotel quarantine is extensive *home* quarantine. According to their own logic, this would amount to house arrest without trial for everyone in the home and begs the question: why is home quarantine acceptable, but hotel quarantine not?

We agree that giving the state more repressive powers, particularly in relation to policing Covid restrictions, banning all gatherings for example, during lockdown is dangerous. RISE has repeatedly opposed any restrictions on the right to protest. When the original Coronavirus legislation went through in the Dail, we made a speech [online](#) which struck a warning note about the potential use of it against workers. These fears were vindicated by the fact that the legislation has been used to threaten and arrest striking Debenhams workers and their supporters.

It is correct to consistently warn about the nature of the capitalist state and seek to dispel any

illusions that it will act in favour of the majority. However, it must be married to a concrete analysis. In the case of the pandemic, the truth is that “at home” quarantine is significantly less effective than quarantine in a designated facility.

“At home” quarantine is the approach that was adopted by the Irish government before they came under pressure to introduce some form of MHQ. It was widely seen as a complete failure. With 10,000 incoming travelers a week, without invasive measures like electronic tracking, it would be largely impossible to guarantee that those meant to be quarantining were genuinely doing so. This is especially the case given that the existence of Covid deniers who deliberately flout health regulations.

A major reason hotel quarantine is effective is because the person quarantining is not only confined to the hotel, they also should be effectively supported by the staff. All food, drink, and other needs are brought to the person so the need to leave is removed. The same cannot be guaranteed in a home where other people potentially live and would need to interact with the person quarantining.

When, under pressure from the public, MHQ was extended to a whole number of European countries and the US, it was representatives of the capitalist class who were the most strident opponents. IBEC (the business representative organisation) [wrote](#) to the government to argue that it would send a message that Ireland is “closed for business”. The US Chamber of Commerce [called](#) on the government to recognise the “particular importance of key global decision-makers”!

Instead of opposing hotel quarantine as the SP did, RISE was correct to fight for the MHQ the public health experts called for - while emphasising that it should be done as part of the public health service, instead of being outsourced and done at huge cost to those quarantining, and under the control of workers.

One critique we raised with members of the Socialist Party during the internal debates in the CWI was what we described a “drift in programmatic method towards a de facto minimum-maximum approach.” In other words, instead of seeking to put forward a transitional programme capable of connecting the current pressing issues of large sections of workers to the need for revolutionary socialist change, there was a certain tendency to simply put forward basic demands on the one hand, with abstract calls for socialism on the other.

Unfortunately, this appears to be the case not just for the Socialist Party in Ireland, but is a feature of both the CWI and ISA responses to Covid generally. One of the strengths of the tradition we come from is the understanding that one of the key tasks of socialists is to consciously seek to build the bridge that Trotsky referred to in the ‘Transitional Programme’ between the urgent crises facing people today and the need for overturning the capitalist system. To me, applying this today means championing a Zero Covid strategy, while linking it to the need for revolutionary socialist change.

Climate Catastrophe

None of that is to claim that RISE and our co-thinkers internationally in [Reform and Revolution](#) and [Lernen im Kampf](#) hold the secret key of a transitional programme that enables us to unlock any issue. But it is to make the case that the method of connecting the crises and struggles of today with the need for socialist change, of offering an alternative strategy to deal with the crises working-class people face is a vital one.

This is particularly important in light of the climate and biodiversity crises which in the long run will put the Covid crisis in the shade. The struggle to avoid climate catastrophe and to halt biodiversity loss is literally a life and death struggle for billions of people worldwide. To succeed, the global

working class together with small farmers and indigenous peoples will need to struggle to overturn the capitalist system and replace it with a democratically planned socialist society. That requires an eco-socialist programme which connects the struggle to radically transform people's lives for the better with the struggle to rapidly reduce emissions and develop a more sustainable interaction with nature. Considering what little time we have left to avert catastrophe, socialists must find ways to cut across the jobs and income vs. environment divide and push back against the eco-austerity environmentalism of the Greens.

Despite the efforts of many within the CWI over decades, it has failed to adequately recognise the centrality of the climate crisis. This continues today and is underscored by their [criticism](#) of RISE for making eco-socialism "one of its central slogans and goals", arguing "to continually highlight use of the formulation can only serve to confuse matters."

RISE's championing of the term eco-socialism is a strength, not a weakness. Instead of confusion, it brings clarity about how seriously socialists take this issue and underlines the need for a fundamental break with the capitalist system. A common understanding of the significance of the climate crisis and the need for a socialist answer outlined, for example, in the co-written [pamphlet](#) by Jess Spear (RISE) and John Molyneux (SWN & PBP) on 'What is eco-socialism' was an important reason RISE decided to join People Before Profit as a network. This is seen in the new primary slogan of PBP - 'fighting for workers and eco-socialism'.

The approach of the Socialist Party (ISA) on climate mirrors their approach on Zero Covid. They correctly [lambast](#) the failures of the government's approach on climate. They [place](#) the blame for the climate crisis at the feet of the capitalist class. They make a strong [case](#) for international socialist change as the alternative to climate catastrophe. But where they fall down is developing an eco-socialist programme which connects the needs of the climate and working-class people with that revolutionary change.

RISE has worked on proposals for an eco-socialist Green New Deal to do just that - producing both developed [articles](#) and popular material for mass distribution. The same method which informs our approach to Zero Covid has informed our attitude to tackling the climate crisis. Undoubtedly, our programmes and our approach are not perfect. We will learn from thoughtful critiques from others. Above all, we will learn from participation in the major movements which are likely to break out in the aftermath of the pandemic.

To follow Lenin, catastrophe is threatening the world - in the form of biodiversity loss, climate change and future pandemics. *"Everybody says this. Everybody admits it. Everybody has decided it is so. Yet nothing is being done."* Marxists have a responsibility not just to make general arguments for socialist change, but to seek to develop a programme and strategy that can actually inspire big sections of working-class people into action to fight for that change.

Paul Murphy

P.S.

• Rise. 26 April 2021:

https://www.letusrise.ie/featured-articles/the-covid-test?fbclid=IwAR33dMWLyPnhO0Alfug_P7Om_MaooUZjKGg8SpTqgm-rSsLU5RZYlvQG18