Sunday Telegraph reports on Exercise Cygnus

UK government source speaks of “blood on our hands” over coronavirus due to NHS cuts

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On Friday, the *World Socialist Web Site* reported on the implications of the UK government refusing to act on the extensive prior knowledge they had of catastrophic National Health Service (NHS) failings during a flu pandemic.

The *Sunday Telegraph* has now run a full-page article in which government sources admit that its austerity measures and cuts to the NHS have resulted in preventable deaths.

In 2016, Theresa May’s Conservative government and health authorities held “Exercise Cygnus,” a three-day training exercise intended to determine readiness for a novel respiratory influenza pandemic. It was aimed to test coordination between hospitals, health authorities—those tasked with tracking the disease—and central government. To this day, the results of the report have never been made public. However, the British government’s then-chief medical officer, Professor Sally Davies, told a health conference, World Innovation in Health, that it “killed a lot of people.”

The *Telegraph* reports, “Ministers from across government were seated, ashen-faced, in the Cabinet Office briefing room” when epidemiologists from Imperial College London detailed the scale of the epidemic enveloping Britain. “But it was not the pandemic itself that was causing those gathered in Whitehall to blanch but the nation’s woeful preparation. The peak of the epidemic had not yet arrived, but local resilience forums, hospitals and mortuaries across the country were already being overwhelmed.

“There was not enough personal protective equipment (PPE) for the nation’s doctors and nurses. The NHS was about to ‘fall over’ due to a shortage of ventilators and critical care beds. Mortuaries were overflowing, and it had become terrifyingly evident that the government’s emergency messaging was not getting traction with the public.”

This painted the scene when Exercise Cygnus was run in October 2016, but, “The modelling for the outbreak was prepared by the same team that is tracking the all-too-real Covid-19 pandemic now.”

The *Telegraph*, as the de facto house organ of the Conservative Party, was able to solicit comments from “senior former government sources” over Cygnus.

“A senior former government source with direct involvement in the exercise said the findings were deemed ‘too terrifying’ to be revealed. Others involved cited ‘national security’ concerns. ‘There has been a reluctance to put Cygnus out in the public domain because frankly it would terrify people,’ said the former senior government source yesterday.”

The source added, “It’s right to say that the NHS was stretched beyond breaking point [by Cygnus]. People might say we have blood on our hands, but the fact is that it’s always easier to manage the last outbreak than the one coming down the track. Hindsight is a beautiful thing.”

This has nothing to do with “hindsight.” The likely impact of present pandemics was well known, with the *Telegraph* admitting, “The only significant difference between the drill and the pandemic we now face is that Cygnus was assumed to be the H2N2 influenza virus, while COVID-19 is a coronavirus.”

The article makes clear that the NHS was unable to deal with the outbreak of a pandemic because of the savage and relentless austerity programme designed to make the working class pay for the trillion pound

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bailout of the banks organised by the Labour government in 2008 and continued by Tory-led governments ever since.

The brutal assault on the social right to health care was made clear in official circles by Cygnus, including a chronic lack of the basic resources to fight a pandemic—ventilators, Intensive Care Unit beds and personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff.

The *Telegraph* writes that Cygnus revealed "significant gaps in the NHS's 'surge capacity' … These gaps, which included a shortage of ICU beds and PPE, came at a time of austerity. Jeremy Hunt, the then health secretary, and Sir Simon Stevens, chief executive of NHS England, were cutting NHS bed numbers at the time rather than adding capacity. Dame Sally Davies, then chief medical officer, faced similar financial constraints."

Not only was nothing done in the face of the impending catastrophe Cygnus revealed, but austerity was stepped up. As the *Telegraph* comments, "Projected shortages of PPE and ICU beds were not filled with bulk purchase because of cash constraints…"

A "senior former government source" declares, "Throwing money at the problem was not necessarily the solution. The NHS eats up money. It's a bottomless pit … We were in a time of austerity and it wasn't easy."

The year before Exercise Cygnus, the Tories' general election manifesto outlined plans to strip the NHS of a further £22 billion in "efficiency savings." Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt spent most of 2016—the year Cygnus was carried out—ensuring there was no backdown in the face of the national strike by 50,000 junior doctors opposing the imposition of an inferior contract. By the end of 2016, 13,000 beds had been cuts from the NHS in just six years, cutting capacity by 5 million patients a year.

The newspaper cites an "academic directly involved in Cygnus and the current pandemic," who comments, "These exercises are supposed to prepare government for something like this—but it appears they were aware of the problem but didn't do much about it. … All the flexibility has been pared away so it's difficult to react quickly. Nothing is ready to go."

Concrete examples of the absence of any preparation were cited by the *New Statesman* magazine March 16. It noted that the government's three main plans for dealing with a pandemic, "Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Strategy," "Health and Social Care Influenza Pandemic Preparedness and Response" and "Pandemic Influenza Response Plan" "were tested and failed, yet these documents were not rewritten or revised."

It points out, "They share a glaring shortcoming: not one of them mentions ventilators…" Nearly a decade after the first of these documents was written in 2011, "The government does not have a stockpile of ventilators, as the documents made clear and [Health Secretary Mike] Hancock has confirmed."

All three of the plans refer to "stockpiles," but only of antivirals, antibiotics and PPE for NHS staff.

It is clear that the Johnson government was prepared to allow tens of millions of people to be infected by COVID-19, resulting in many deaths, via its declared policy of achieving "herd immunity." This was only prevented—with the government forced to introduce social distancing and a lockdown to prevent the spread of the virus—due to the interventions of concerned scientists and widespread public revulsion.

The *New Statesman* notes that the Tories expected "between 60 and 80 percent of the population to contract coronavirus, or between 40 and 53 million people."

The 2018 Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling, SPI-M, predicted that 4 percent of cases would require hospitalisation and that a quarter of those hospitalised would need a ventilator—at least 1 percent of all cases, or 400,000 to 530,000 people. That would therefore range from requiring 60,000 ventilators per week to more than 100,000. Yet due to NHS cuts, the UK at that point had just 5,000 ventilators.

That government mouthpieces speak of people concluding that the ruling elite has "blood on its hands" has enormous significance. The pandemic is revealing the class divisions in society as never before, along with the murderous implications of the ruling elite's money-mad agenda of self-enrichment.

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