

“This government has decided that disabled people are better off dead”

UK disability campaigners speak out on coronavirus pandemic

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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to disability rights campaigners last weekend about the impact of coronavirus pandemic and the Johnson government’s “herd immunity” policy on the lives of disabled people.

Simone Aspis is the director of disability charity Changing Perspectives and helped initiate legal action last month against the National Health Service (NHS), Care Quality Commission, NHS Digital, UK Statistics Authority and Health Secretary Matt Hancock over their failure to publish figures on the number of COVID-19 deaths among people with a mental disability or autism.

“It’s appalling just how much the COVID-19 pandemic is being used to undermine

disabled people’s rights,” Simone told the WSWs.

“Rather than just saying that they’re ‘shielding’ people, the government should have been targeting support at those who most needed it, whether that’s social care, or making sure they had the digital tools they need to keep in contact. That support should have been provided.

“We locked down too late, and now we are opening up again with a much higher transmission rate than other countries... But from what I can see, other countries haven’t just said that entire groups of people are not allowed out of their front door at all, a policy which I totally disagree with.

“It’s quite clear what the government have done with their proposals for herd immunity. You can see where it’s going. There’s definitely a eugenics programme kicking around: ‘So what if we lose a few million people?’ Lock them away, shield them away, and let everyone else gain herd immunity. There is clearly an agenda behind this idea of just taking the most vulnerable and at risk out of society.”

Asked about the impact of medical guidance documents like the “COVID-19 Decision Support Tool” that deny or deprioritise people for intensive care treatment on the basis of their disability, Simone said: “The health care policy that the government has been issuing is clearly discriminating against disabled people.

“You have the rapid-response COVID-19 guidance which sets out that if you have a certain health condition, or if you get a fatigue [frailty] score above five—which basically means you need some support with day-to-day tasks like dressing, getting around, or even having assistance with financial matters—then you will be denied access to life-saving treatment like ventilators.

“Then on top of that, we’ve had GP surgeries putting ‘Do Not

Resuscitate’ notices on the medical notes of people with learning difficulties. You have care homes and hospitals told that disabled people shouldn’t be admitted to hospital. And then once a hospital has dealt with them, if they’re lucky to survive, they are put back in a care home where the infection is likely to run riot because of the close proximity of the residents.

“And then there is also the COVID-19 Act. The only group of people who have been explicitly told to forfeit their rights is disabled people. No longer do disabled people have the right to community care under the Care Act; no longer do disabled people have the right to access special education needs provision and support within a mainstream school setting.

“It will be easier for disabled people to be detained under the Mental Health Act. Disabled people are clearly at the forefront of having their rights taken away as a result of the pandemic ... Then after the pandemic, this legislation can go on for years. Are we just setting a new normal? Are we now setting a lower standard and threshold for what the state will provide for disabled people, in education, in health and in the social care system? You’ll get the bare minimum—if you’re lucky.

“I am involved in a legal case around the publication of data on the deaths of people with learning disabilities and autism. Why are they not publishing proper data on the number of disabled people dying from COVID-19? What is this government hiding? I suspect what this data will highlight is how much your life is at risk if you live in a care home or an institution, or if you’re staying in a psychiatric hospital.”

Simone told the WSWs that government attempts to justify the lack of care and support for disabled people on the pretext of insufficient funds were a pack of lies.

“Everybody is talking about having to bring back austerity. I don’t relate to austerity. Austerity is about not having enough money, but clearly this government can make money out of thin air through quantitative easing. We have the resources, it’s just a question of where the existing money is being placed and where the new money is going. But it’s no longer just an issue of austerity. This is something even more insidious.

“This government have decided that they are going down a eugenics path; we are increasingly at risk of disabled people being killed by the economic system, being killed by this government—there’s just no other way of saying it. This government have decided that disabled people are better off dead... [It] is doing absolutely nothing other than

entrench these [social-Darwinist] views—that some people are just not worth being part of society and the economy. I wait for the revolution!

“I think [the government’s response to the crisis] is ideologically driven. I also think it’s about suppressing activism, suppressing anger at increasing inequality: the inequality between disabled and non-disabled people, the increasing inequality there is between black people and certain other groups in society ... Increasingly the government’s response has been to weaken people’s right to protest.

“It is just about keeping the economy going, keeping global capitalism going. Everything is geared towards making sure that the capitalist system can continue after this. I very much hoped that we would come out as a kinder society, but from what I can see, the money is just being used to continue business as usual. I can still only live in hope that in a couple of years’ time we can get the Tories out, but sadly I’m not convinced that Labour under Keir Starmer would be any different. The truth is that all governments can find the money when they want it.

“What the lockdown has shown is the difference between the haves and have-nots ... And unfortunately, the divide is going to become much more acute.”

The WWS also spoke to Alison Turner whose father-in-law Errol Graham starved to death in his high-rise flat in June 2018 after the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) cut him from disability income support payments.

Alison, who is herself disabled and whose daughter has autism, has campaigned for justice for her father-in-law and for the rights of all disabled people and those with mental health conditions.

Alison told the WWS that DNAR notices and COVID-19 medical guidance documents are “targeting extremely vulnerable people.”

She explained, “These documents are clearly a violation of article two and five of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and potentially also in violation of common law ... Article five refers to torture and inhumane and degrading behaviour, and they have tortured disabled people. They’ve tortured them for years; they’ve degraded them for years. The pandemic is exposing years and years of mistreatment. And the mental torture that disabled people have had to suffer since the beginning of March is going to have lasting effects on them.”

Asked whether disabled people had equal access to health care during the pandemic, Alison said: “Absolutely not. They’re being taken advantage of. It’s almost crossing the boundaries of criminal. The government is no better than a fraudster targeting an elderly person for money, because they’re using a person’s disability or illness against them to get what they want. They are preying on people who don’t understand or people who are extremely vulnerable.

“But this guidance has not just been plucked out of thin air; this is something that has been going on prior to this pandemic ... What they’re suggesting is that someone with autism would have a suppressed immune system and would suffer some sort of adverse effect from this virus. But having autism, like my daughter, doesn’t make her more likely to die. Having learning difficulties is not something the virus attacks.

“Everything in this pandemic has targeted disabled people. The government has been careless, reckless even. But that’s nothing new. The government has always been careless and reckless when it comes to disabled people. All they care about is the economy, that’s what this has proven. They’re more concerned about the economy, and financial gains, than people’s health. And those who are going to be most affected by that decision are disabled people.

“I’m tired of this government thinking they can take people’s rights away. They’ve done it for long enough. They did it with Errol. But they certainly will not do it with my own child.

“People with vulnerabilities and illnesses are being forced into isolation, being shoved out of hospitals and back into care homes. Disabled people are being pressured to sign DNARs ‘for the greater good,’ or to ‘save the NHS.’

“Philip Alston’s comments [condemning the UK government’s herd immunity policy as ‘social Darwinism’] echo what came out in his report a couple of years back. It was an eye-opener of the treatment of vulnerable people. And nothing’s changed. The government called him a liar, but when you look at the situation now, where was he lying? Their skeletons weren’t out of the closet when he made that report, but all secrets have to come out eventually. And that is what is happening to the government now. They’re falling to pieces.”

Asked about the impact of the coronavirus on the working class throughout the world, who are being forced back to work under unsafe conditions, Alison responded: “It’s slavery in a different form. Workers are paid awful money, and their wages aren’t worth the job they’re doing. When the working class is holding all the cards, that’s when you see the best in a country, that’s when you see equality. And the working class are in a position to do so [take control of society]. Look how easily the government would crash and burn without the working class!

“Boris Johnson told workers that they must go back to work because the economy is suffering, but if the working class just turned around and said, ‘I don’t think so,’ there would be absolutely nothing the government could do about it. What are you going to do? Sack them all? The working class are the people who hold the power.

“Eventually the ruling class will run out of plasters. I think they know that. They are scared of what could come from this virus, as it is exposing things in more ways than one. The government is playing a dangerous game by treating the working class like crap. They’re trying to keep them under control, trying to brainwash them—all to make sure they don’t realise they’re the ones who hold the power. But I don’t think the government is going to get away with it.

“The government pretend that they work for the working class, but they don’t— they only rule for themselves.”



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