Architect of Sweden's coronavirus policy advocated keeping schools open to reach "herd immunity" more quickly

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Emails sent by Sweden's chief epidemiologist Anders Tegnell in March confirm that the country's authorities consciously pursued a homicidal policy of "herd immunity" from the outset of the pandemic, and that they chose to keep schools open specifically to accelerate the spread of coronavirus. The messages, obtained through a freedom of information request by a freelance journalist, are not only a damning indictment of the criminal response to COVID-19 by Swedish authorities, but of the ruling elite across Europe and North America, which is now embracing precisely the same approach.

The release of Tegnell's emails is particularly timely, given that opposition is building among hundreds of thousands of teachers, students and parents in the United States and Europe to the murderous reopening of schools. Politicians have justified this course with lies about children being less prone to infection and less likely to spread the virus to other people. Yet what Tegnell's correspondence reveals is that health authorities knew early on that schools would act as super-spreading centers. Rather than try to prevent such a disastrous development, Tegnell positively celebrated it as a way to ensure the coronavirus spread as quickly as possible.

Swedish authorities rejected the imposition of a lockdown as the virus emerged in March, allowed all businesses to remain open, and kept all primary and lower secondary school students in class throughout the pandemic. The result was a catastrophically high death rate that was among the highest in the world per head of population. With just over 10 million inhabitants, Sweden has recorded to date over 5,800 deaths and more than 85,400 cases. By comparison, neighbouring Finland, which implemented a stricter lockdown, has recorded just 334 deaths to date. Even allowing for the fact that Sweden has approximately double the population of Finland, Sweden has still recorded a death rate more than nine times higher than Finland.

In perhaps the most explosive email, written to his Finnish counterpart Mika Salminen on 13 March, Tegnell tries to persuade Sweden's neighbour to adopt its policy on schools. "One point might speak for keeping schools open in order to reach herd immunity more quickly," wrote Tegnell on March 14 to Salminen. After Salminen responded by stating that Finnish authorities rejected this idea because children would spread the virus, Tegnell answered, "True, but probably mostly to each other because of the extremely age-stratified contact structure we have."

At his daily press briefings, Tegnell always denied that his policy goal was to reach "herd immunity" by letting the virus spread unchecked. The leaked emails confirm that this was a lie, aimed at preventing the public backlash that the open declaration of such an inhumane policy would have triggered.

Support for "herd immunity" was not only the position advocated by Tegnell, but significant sections of the public health policy establishment with whom he was in contact. Tegnell closely consulted on Sweden's coronavirus response with his predecessor Johan Giesecke, who served as state epidemiologist from 1995 to 2005. Giesecke wrote in an email to a Swedish insurance company in March, "I believe the virus is going to sweep like a storm over Sweden and infect basically everyone in one or two months. I believe that thousands are already infected in Sweden… it will all come to an end when so many have been infected and become therefore immune that the virus has nowhere else to go (so-called herd immunity?)."

In a subsequent email to Tegnell, Giesecke complained that upper secondary schools and universities had been closed. "I think we should relax the closures of upper secondary schools and universities after Easter. They play no epidemiological role and it would be a signal of change for the better," he wrote. Ultimately, this policy was implemented in June.

Tegnell's decision to leave the schools open was accompanied by a disastrous approach to testing. Swedish authorities initially refused to test all asymptomatic people, and failed to test large numbers of critical frontline workers, especially in elderly care. This made it virtually impossible to trace coronavirus outbreaks quickly enough in these facilities, which became killing fields as low-paid, precariously employed workers forced to work at multiple locations to make ends meet carried the virus with them.

To ensure that the health care system did not totally collapse

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under the crush of COVID-19 patients, authorities in Stockholm ensured that care was effectively denied to people aged over 80. Reports abounded of elderly residents being left to die in care homes without being offered a hospital transfer. (See: Failure to halt COVID-19 spread leads to mass deaths in Swedish elder care homes.)

If governments of all political stripes across Europe and North America get their way, these horrific conditions will be replicated on a far greater scale over the weeks and months ahead.

There can be no doubt that similarly chilling discussions as those engaged in by Tegnell, which produced policy decisions that condemned thousands of people to an early grave, have taken place within the ruling class of virtually every country. From British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's casual declaration in March that it would be best to simply "take it on the chin, take it all in one go and allow the disease, as it were, to move through the population," to German Chancellor Angela Merkel's bland assertion in March that 60 to 70 percent of the population would inevitably get infected, and President Trump's abandonment of any effort to contain the pandemic in the United States, European and North American ruling elites have all embraced the "herd immunity" strategy pioneered by Tegnell in Sweden.

Governments in Europe and the US only reluctantly implemented lockdown measures in late March, principally due to mounting pressure from their populations. This was expressed most clearly by wildcat work stoppages in auto plants across North America, and strikes by auto and manufacturing workers in Europe. Serious scientific studies have demonstrated that these lockdowns, after effectively being imposed on the ruling elite by working class opposition, saved millions of lives. One study from Imperial College London estimated that 3.1 million lives were saved in 11 European countries.

However, as soon as the governments looted state treasuries to transfer trillions of dollars and euros into the coffers of the major corporations and banks to ensure they could continue accumulating vast quantities of wealth, a catastrophic policy of prematurely reopening the economy was imposed. As a result, the pandemic is currently spreading at a record pace globally, with the death toll rapidly approaching 800,000.

In the three weeks since schools began opening in the United States during the week of July 27, at least 2,500 teachers, students, and other education workers have been infected by the virus. Outbreaks have been recorded in schools across the country, with only six states yet to register an outbreak.

In Germany, state governments are displaying utter contempt for the lives of teachers and students as they push ahead with the full reopening of schools even as new infections reach their highest level since April. Over 50 infections have been reported from schools in just one state, Hamburg, in the two weeks since schools reopened. In neighbouring Schleswig-Holstein, the state government rejected almost all of the 2,000 applications from teachers with preexisting medical conditions to be allowed to work from home. All state governments have abandoned any effort to implement social distancing.

No country is even attempting to provide adequate testing and contact tracing to teachers and students, even though any objective examination of the dangerous conditions they confront in dilapidated school buildings on a daily basis would have to conclude that they are all at an increased risk of getting infected.

While there is no shortage of chaos and incompetence displayed by governments in every country with their homicidal back-to-school drive, a definite policy is being very consciously pursued, i.e., "herd immunity" by infection. Like Tegnell and his colleagues, governments in virtually every country calculate that letting the virus rip through the population like a "storm" is the most effective way to protect the interests of big business and the financial elite. Returning children to school is seen as essential so that parents can be forced back to work to produce profits for shareholders and the super-rich. And should teachers, students and parents die from the virus, especially those with preexisting health conditions, the ruling elite sees this as a positive good because it will facilitate the slashing of spending on health care provision.

A new stage in the COVID-19 catastrophe can only be prevented through the conscious political intervention of the working class to stop the reckless back-to-school drive. This requires above all the construction of independent rank-and-file action committees in every school, university and neighbourhood to prepare a general strike to halt the reopening of schools and demand a vast increase in funding for public education to ensure children and young people can receive a decent education during the pandemic. A critical part of this struggle must be the holding to account of government officials, like Tegnell, who have exploited their medical credentials and positions within the capitalist state apparatus to pursue a homicidal policy that threatens the lives of millions of working people internationally.

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