

The “Zero-Covid” campaign by Britain’s pseudo-left: a political cover for Labour and the TUC’s back-to-work drive

Julie Hyland
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After months of inactivity on the gravest world health crisis for a century, Britain’s pseudo-left have begun a campaign for “Zero-Covid”.

The November 14 launch meeting was organised by the People’s Assembly, a front for a collection of Labourites and pseudo-left groups whose *raison d’être* is to block an independent, socialist movement of the working class against capitalism.

To this end it has appropriated the Zero-Covid strategy proposed by Independent SAGE (convened as an alternative scientific advisory panel to the Johnson government’s official body), aimed at the effective elimination of the virus from the UK. The People’s Assembly calls for the closure of all non-essential workplaces, schools, colleges and universities, with full compensation to all those unable to work, and significant investment in essential workplaces to ensure they are safe.

These policies, which are the essential first steps in containing the pandemic and protecting public health, have been largely ignored ever since. And not only by the Tory government which, having bailed out the super-rich and corporations to the tune of billions, is forcing workers to make the “choice” between sacrificing their health or their economic well-being—in service to the profits of the corporations and the wealth of the ruling class. The Labour Party also opposes a Zero-Covid strategy.

Jeremy Corbyn admitted in August that, while Labour leader, he knew the Tory government’s policy was for “herd immunity” and was being promoted by eugenicists in senior government positions. He warned no one. His successor Sir Keir Starmer has had to change nothing fundamentally in Labour’s prioritising

of profits over health, epitomised by his insistence that schools and universities must remain open, “no ifs, no buts.”

As for the Trades Union Congress (TUC), it has used the pandemic to strengthen its corporatist relations with government and business by keeping unsafe workplaces open. Its indifference toward its members is underscored by the fact that its “Covid-19 Coronavirus Guidance for Unions”, has not been updated since April 16.

Likewise, the pseudo-left internationally has either promoted the policy of “herd immunity”, or, as in the UK, confined themselves to lame criticisms of the Johnson government, tailored so as not to conflict with Labour and the TUC. Where they have influence as unions reps and on national executive committees—especially in education, health and transport where the virus is rampant—they have not organised a single protest or walk-out.

As a result, the so-called second wave of the pandemic is proving even more deadly than the first. Almost 60 million internationally have now been infected, and more than 1.4 million killed. COVID-19 is rampant in the major capitalist countries, with one person dying every 17 seconds in Europe, and approximately one every 20 seconds in the US.

Precise figures and details in the UK are deliberately made hard to find but, in the last fortnight alone, a grandmother in Scotland, Jeanette McEwan, died from COVID-19 after an outbreak at the Lightbody cake factory in Hamilton where she worked. Recent outbreaks have also occurred at Cranswick Country Foods plant in Norfolk, where 256 workers tested positive; Moy Park meat plant in Lincolnshire, which

has recorded 50 cases; Haribo confectionary in West Yorkshire, 30 cases; and at the Kepak meat processing factory in Cornwall.

Educational institutions are major vectors for transmission. Last week, 124 outbreak clusters (which can encompass anywhere between immediate contacts of an infected person to an entire bubble or year group) were reported in English secondary schools, making a total of 822 reported clusters. Some 732 clusters have been reported in primary schools.

This homicidal policy of allowing the pandemic to spread, and the financial catastrophe it has created for workers, is fuelling massive social discontent, which threatens not only the Tory government but its allies in the Labour and trade union bureaucracy and the profit system more fundamentally.

That is why the Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs around Corbyn finally, in August, announced its support for Zero-Covid. Its statement was careful to make clear that the measures proposed were in the best interests of capital. "...we agree with employers' organisations and trade unions that the government must extend its support for businesses and workers", it wrote, reassuring those employers that "Reducing the virus to minimal levels is not in contradiction to economic recovery. It is the precondition for economic recovery."

Covering for Starmer's alliance with Johnson, SCG secretary Richard Burgon claimed that "Labour's frontbench has pointed out the flaws" in government policy. But "if we don't manage to get the virus under control, we'll just continue to flit from one crisis to another. People won't be able to get on with their lives. Businesses won't be able to plan. Yet more lives will be unnecessarily lost." In that order.

But the SCG cannot even convince its own party to adopt a Zero-Covid policy, let alone the Johnson government. The SCG is the faithful cheerleader for a right-wing bourgeois party whose suspension and now silencing of Corbyn confirms that it is viciously opposed to any policy that contradicts, even at the cost of millions of lives, the rapacious appetites of the oligarchy.

Likewise, the People's Assembly campaign is wholly oriented to motions in trade union and constituency Labour Party branches, by which it claims it is possible to build an entirely politically undefined "mass

movement for change".

Significantly, at the People's Assembly launch meeting—at which there was no identifiable Labour Party representative—those from the National Education Union (NEU), University and College Union, Rail, Maritime and Transport union, all spoke in a personal capacity. This is because their own unions have not backed a Zero-Covid policy, let alone taken action to protect their members lives, because it would foul up their relations with the bosses and government.

Louise Regan, ex-President of the NEU and current National Officer for Membership and Equality, for example, spoke to the launch about the importance of workplace reps, and boosted her union's new app to report/advise on COVID outbreaks at schools.

Regan said nothing about the fact that just two days before, on November 12, the NEU national executive of which she is a part overwhelmingly voted down a proposal to ballot for industrial action over unsafe conditions in schools. It is not known how Regan herself voted as information on the vote only leaked out through Facebook.

Against the bankrupt and paralysing perspective of the People's Assembly, the Socialist Equality Parties in Europe and internationally fight for the formation of rank-and-file safety committees in every school, college, university, workplace and neighbourhood.

These independent, genuinely democratic committees are urgently needed in opposition to the trade unions, which everywhere enforce the back-to-work drive. Securing the vital resources needed to protect lives and livelihoods means breaking the monopoly of social and economic life by a homicidal oligarchy. This requires the unification and coordination of workers' struggles across national borders as the framework for a European-wide and international general strike, and the reorganisation of society on a socialist basis.



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