

UK People's Assembly talk “Zero Covid” while doing nothing

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6 December 2020

The deadly toll from the COVID-19 pandemic continues to reach record levels, with over 65 million cases worldwide and 1.5 million dead—more than 10,000 fatalities daily.

The catastrophic health consequences are compounded by the immiseration of working people the world over. Some 75 percent of households report a loss of earnings. Worse is to come. David Beasley, Executive Director of the World Food Programme (WFP), told the United Nations General Assembly last week that the number of people “marching towards starvation” doubled from 135 million to 270 million as the pandemic unfolded, and warned, “Famine is literally on the horizon”, with 2021 anticipated to witness the worst humanitarian crisis year since the UN's founding.

Still the stock markets continue to rise as the ruling elite seize advantage of this carnage to carry out an unprecedented transfer of wealth from the working class to the rich. As the WSWS has stressed, “Freeing the productive forces from the constraints of the capitalist for-profit system and expropriating the wealth of the rich are urgent and immediate necessities, required to combat the pandemic and save millions of lives.”

This urgent and immediate necessity found no mention in the “Zero Covid” national conference at the end of November, organised by the People's Assembly, a coalition of the pseudo-left groups, Stalinists, trade union bureaucrats and “left” Labourites.

John Rees from Counterfire (a split from the Socialist Workers Party) said the “left” needed a policy for the pandemic, or people would be left to choose between endangering their health by working or losing their jobs and income.

But how it is that workers have been left facing this

“choice” was not addressed. The homicidal herd immunity policy of Boris Johnson's Conservative government has been supported throughout by the Labour Party. Its de facto coalition with the Tories was in evidence last week, when Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer ordered his party to abstain in the parliamentary vote on the ending of the second limited national lock-down. As for the Trades Union Congress, it is playing the lead role in enforcing the back to work drive, even as the government announced a freeze on public sector wages that will hit more than four million workers.

Silence on this criminal role of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy is fundamental to the purpose of the People's Assembly. Though it presents itself as a “grassroots” movement, it is the construct of pro-capitalist tendencies, hostile to socialism and the working class; a political apparatus in waiting, whose sole purpose is to confuse, divert and suppress any genuine rank-and-file challenge to the existing order in the service of the bureaucracies of which it is an essential part.

That is why its Zero Covid policy has nothing in common with a programme of action to mobilise workers against the moribund profit system that is devastating their lives and livelihoods. Instead, speaker after speaker claimed that what was involved in the fight against the pandemic, which has accelerated the economic and social contradictions of capitalism, is a “battle of ideas”.

Tens of millions, indeed billions, of working people, wrestling with the reality of death, illness, poverty, unemployment, homelessness and even starvation, will wonder at this depiction.

When genuine socialists speak of a “battle of ideas”, it is to politically arm workers in their class struggle

against capitalism. The fight for rank-and-file safety committees to ensure Covid-safe workplaces and educational facilities; the expropriation of the financial oligarchy to pay for decent health care and living standards; the conversion of the banks and corporations into public utilities under the democratic control of the working population; these are the elementary prerequisites of any “Zero Covid” policy worthy of the name.

As the Socialist Equality Party (UK) stated in its congress resolution, “Just as the mass slaughter of the First World War was only ended by the October 1917 revolution in Russia, bringing the current pandemic under control and ending the economic catastrophe it has inflicted on the world’s people demands a revolutionary struggle against capitalism, leading to the conquest of state power, the establishment of democratic control by the working class over the economy, the replacement of the anarchy of the market with scientific planning, the ending of the nation-state system, and the construction of a socialist world.”

There were few mentions of capitalism or socialism in the event, and the People’s Assembly proposed no concrete action. Its “battle for ideas” is sophistry, which frees the Labour and trade union bureaucracy of any practical obligations. Steve Turner, Assistant General Secretary of the Unite union and Fran Heathcote, National President of the Public and Commercial Services Union, pontificated on the need for “Zero Covid”, even as they propose no measures to be taken against the unsafe working conditions of their members, while the conference as a whole substituted “behavioural changes” and individual protest for class mobilisation.

The political function of the People’s Assembly in opposing a struggle against the Labour and trade union bureaucracy was epitomised by the presence of former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn on a public platform for the first time since his suspension from the party on manufactured allegations of anti-Semitism, followed by the withdrawal of the Labour whip. Thousands of members have left Labour in response, and Labour’s right-wing have threatened the expulsion of thousands more as it seeks to prove itself worthy of steering British capitalism through its deepest crisis in almost a century.

Corbyn had nothing to say on this witch-hunt against

himself and thousands of his sympathisers, merely mumbling his appreciation for messages of solidarity, without referencing what had occasioned them.

Diane Abbott and Richard Burgon—both leading members of the Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs—passed over this McCarthyite attack without comment. The only reference to the Labour Party was directed against the thousands of members quitting in disgust with its overtly right-wing course, with Turner criticising those who would “run away” from their party, rather than those who are driving them out!

The “battle of ideas” presented by the People’s Assembly speaks to the upper middle class layers it represents and whose interests it articulates—drawn from the richest top 10 percent of society, of which the Labour and trade union bureaucracy make up a goodly proportion.

Corbyn said that COVID-19 proved the need for a “debate about the economic direction we take.” He described as “bitter sweet” Chancellor Rishi Sunak’s March 11 bailout of the corporations and super-rich—involving £895 billion in quantitative easing measures alone—as a dose of “Keynesianism”.

A political tendency incapable of mounting even the semblance of a fight against the summary expulsion of its sympathisers from the ossified environs of British Labour is incapable of mobilising against an oligarchy profiteering from a deadly pandemic. Indeed, this concern for unity with Labour’s right is itself an expression of their fear, cowardice and desire to appease the ruling elite.

In the parliamentary vote on Johnson’s ending of lockdown, Abbott abstained while Burgon and Corbyn voted against. None of them made any mention of the Zero Covid policy they had endorsed only days before, neither in parliament nor in the social media accounts of their actions posted hours later.



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