

Sweden's "herd immunity" policy produces disaster

Bryan Dyne

14 December 2020

The "herd immunity" policy pursued by the Swedish government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has produced a catastrophe. With Sweden's hospitals overflowing and bodies piling up in morgues, its neighbors Norway and Denmark have offered to step in with emergency aid.

The region of Stockholm, Sweden's largest city, warned that its intensive care units were at 99 percent capacity, rendering the region's medical system unable to cope with new serious cases of COVID-19. Sweden is experiencing the textbook definition of a mass casualty event, with its hospitals totally overwhelmed and unable to deal with an influx of new cases, raising the danger of a massive increase in deaths.

Sweden's response to the pandemic, which involved allowing schools and businesses to stay open while most of the world enacted lockdowns in March, was hailed as a model by all sections of the US and European political establishment. But now the country's policy stands exposed as a recipe for death on a massive scale.

More than 7,500 people have died of COVID-19 in Sweden, a country of just 10 million people. Though Sweden has just two-thirds the combined population of its neighbors Norway and Denmark, it has four times as many deaths. Adjusted for population, Sweden's death rate is nearly five times higher than that of Denmark and nearly 10 times higher than Norway. There are now on average more than 5,000 cases a day reported in the country as a whole, including 1,500 in Stockholm alone.

This disaster is the result of the deliberate policy of allowing the pandemic to spread freely, dubbed "herd immunity" by its proponents, which was pioneered in Sweden and then implemented throughout much of the world.

While the Swedish government has denied that it was deliberately allowing the pandemic to spread, the country's chief epidemiologist, Anders Tegnell, admitted in private emails that an explicit goal of his policy of keeping schools open was to ensure that a broader section of the population

became infected.

Tegnell's predecessor and co-thinker Johan 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?)."

This "Swedish model" was advocated by all three of the leading US newspapers—the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*—as well as much of the international press, and presented a model of how to "balance" the preservation of human life against the needs of the economy.

In March, as Congress was preparing to pass the multi-trillion-dollar bailout of Wall Street in the CARES Act, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman denounced the lockdowns and launched the ruling class offensive to "reopen the economy" in a column declaring that the "cure" must not be "worse than the disease," a slogan that was immediately taken up by Donald Trump. In late April, he demanded that everyone "adapt to the coronavirus—by design—the way Sweden is attempting to do." Stockholm's goal is "herd immunity through exposure," he continued.

The *Washington Post* published an editorial in May suggesting that Sweden made "the right call" by not locking down during its first wave and that it is an "example worth emulating."

Germany's *Der Spiegel* news magazine granted a lengthy interview to Johann Carlson, general director of Sweden's Public Health Agency, to claim that "closing schools is excessive." The following weeks saw an editorial in Britain's *Financial Times*, "Sweden chooses a third way on coronavirus," and an article in the US policy journal *Foreign Affairs*, "Sweden's coronavirus strategy will soon be the world's."

Given the enormous, and almost uniformly positive, coverage of the "Swedish Model" in the US and

international press, this policy was no doubt worked out in collaboration with the United States and other countries.

In other words, Sweden became a test case for the implementation of policies that would soon be rolled out around the world. As a result, hundreds of thousands of people around the world have needlessly lost their lives.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson made clear in March that his government would let families “lose loved ones before their time” as a solution to the coronavirus pandemic. He was joined by US President Donald Trump, who led the campaign, implemented by Democratic and Republican governors throughout the country, to end partial lockdowns and open schools and workplaces.

Such methods are now the norm internationally. In Brazil (6.8 million cases, 181,000 deaths), fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro has dismissed the coronavirus as the “little flu.” In India (9.8 million cases, 143,000 deaths), the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is expecting that half of the country’s population of 1.3 billion will be infected by this coming February. In Mexico (1.2 million cases, 113,000 deaths), President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (known as AMLO) rarely wears masks in public and constantly minimizes the danger of the pandemic.

In the United States (16.6 million cases, 306,000 deaths), President-elect Joe Biden has made clear that schools and businesses will stay open under his administration, no matter how bad the pandemic may become.

The end result has been a year of mass death. There are now more than 72.5 million reported coronavirus cases worldwide and at least 1.61 million deaths. The figures, moreover, are a known underestimate, with “excess death” figures showing death tolls in some regions that are 50 percent higher than official reports.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote last week:

The normalization of death arises from the decision, rooted in class interests, to treat “economic health” and “human life” as comparable phenomena, with the former prioritized over the latter. Once the legitimacy of the comparison and prioritization is accepted—as it is by the political establishment, the oligarchs and the media—mass death is viewed as unavoidable.

It is from this awful calculus that the slogan emerges, “The cure can’t be worse than the disease.”

Such are the calculations of the ruling elite. In the eyes of the billions of people around the world that have had to face the horror of the coronavirus pandemic, however, the ideas

of “herd immunity” are totally discredited.

America’s media establishment claimed that Sweden’s model presented an “alternative” to measures meant to contain the disease, because these measures were deemed unacceptable by the ruling class.

The Socialist Equality Party advances the following demands:

- The immediate shutdown of all production at nonessential workplaces and the closure of schools. While public health experts have warned, correctly, that traveling during the pandemic poses massive risks, the fact is that factories and schools are just as dangerous as airports. And yet the outbreaks at workplaces and schools are systematically covered up and ignored.

- The provision of a monthly income to all families to guarantee a decent standard of living until a return to work is possible. The provision of relief to small businesses, at an amount sufficient to maintain the economic viability of the enterprise and the wages and salaries of its employees until its operations can be resumed.

- The allocation of trillions of dollars to accelerate the production and distribution of vaccines free of charge and to expand the public health infrastructure, including for testing and contact tracing.

The only social force capable of such an effort is the international working class. Workers in Sweden must unite with their class allies in India, Brazil, Mexico, the United States and in every country to stop the senseless and preventable sacrifice of millions of lives and replace the reactionary and murderous capitalist order with socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact