

British Medical Journal calls pandemic response “social murder”

Andre Damon
7 February 2021

On Thursday, the BMJ (formerly, *British Medical Journal*) published an editorial accusing the world’s governments of “social murder” in their collective response to the pandemic.

The BMJ is one of the world’s oldest and most prestigious medical periodicals, with a publication history going back to 1840. Its editorial, “Covid-19: Social murder, they wrote—elected, unaccountable, and unrepentant,” is signed by executive editor Kamran Abbasi. It is a devastating indictment of policies implemented over the past year that have led to the deaths of more than two million people.

“Murder,” the editorial begins, “is an emotive word. In law, it requires premeditation. Death must be deemed to be unlawful. How could ‘murder’ apply to failures of a pandemic response?” The BMJ then goes on to argue that the term is entirely appropriate:

When politicians and experts say that they are willing to allow tens of thousands of premature deaths for the sake of population immunity or in the hope of propping up the economy, is that not premeditated and reckless indifference to human life? If policy failures lead to recurrent and mistimed lockdowns, who is responsible for the resulting non-covid excess deaths? When politicians willfully neglect scientific advice, international and historical experience, and their own alarming statistics and modelling because to act goes against their political strategy, is that lawful? Is inaction, action?

“At the very least,” the BMJ writes, “covid-19 might be classified as ‘social murder,’” pointing to the use of the term by the socialist leader Friedrich Engels in “describing the political and social power held by the ruling elite over the working classes in 19th century England.”

The editorial savages the lying justifications of capitalist politicians, who “say they have done all they can or that the pandemic was uncharted territory; there was no playbook.

None of these are true. They are self-serving political lies from the ‘gaslighters in chief’ around the globe.”

The characterization by the BMJ of the response to the pandemic is entirely accurate. Around the world, politicians deliberately and knowingly handicapped government responses to the pandemic, often claiming that the mass infection of the population was desirable—in a policy dubbed “herd immunity.”

“It’s not possible to stop everyone getting it, and it’s also not desirable because you want some immunity in the population,” declared Sir Patrick Vallance, the chief scientific adviser to the Boris Johnson government in the UK. In Sweden, state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell demanded that schools remain open to further spread the disease, declaring, “One point might speak for keeping schools open in order to reach herd immunity more quickly.”

In the United States, US President Donald Trump demanded that his government “slow the testing down,” in order to conceal the scale of the disease from the population throughout 2020. “I wanted to always play it down,” Trump told journalist Bob Woodward in March.

Not only Trump, but members of Congress in both political parties were fully briefed on the massive threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, but they refused to alert the public, encouraging the population to travel, go to restaurants, and send their children to school.

The policies of governments have been dictated by one overriding priority: No measures could be taken to stop the spread of the virus that impinged on the interests of the financial oligarchy. The slogan, “the cure can’t be worse than the disease,” first coined by *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, meant in practice that the necessary measures to stop the virus—including the shutdown of non-essential production, with full income to all workers—were unacceptable to the ruling class.

These social interests dictated not only the initial cover-up of the pandemic, but also the premature reopening of schools and workplaces, which helped fuel a massive resurgence that

has taken the lives of hundreds of thousands of people since the lifting of partial lockdowns in the spring.

In its most damning passage, the BMJ concludes, “The ‘social murder’ of populations is more than a relic of a bygone age. It is very real today, exposed and magnified by covid-19. It cannot be ignored or spun away. Politicians must be held to account by legal and electoral means, indeed by any national and international constitutional means necessary.”

What conclusions follow from the sober assessment provided by the BMJ? The journal argues forcefully for accountability, but how is this accountability to be achieved? The editorial calls for the public to “vote out elected leaders and governments that avoid accountability and remain unrepentant,” adding that “the US showed that a political reckoning is possible.”

This is a reference to the 2020 US political election, in which voters overwhelmingly rejected Donald Trump, the world’s leading advocate of “herd immunity,” handing the Democratic Party not only the White House, but control of both houses of Congress.

But more than two weeks since Inauguration Day, Biden has made clear that his administration will continue the policies of its predecessor. Since Inauguration Day, Michigan, Illinois and New York have all lifted restrictions on indoor dining, and schools are rushing to reopen in every state where they remain remote. The centerpiece of this policy is the drive to force 23,000 Chicago educators back on the job, which is supported by all sections of the political establishment.

The effort by millions of people to repudiate the policy of “social murder” through the ballot box has been a failure. As for the courts, to which the BMJ also appeals, they have repeatedly struck down the most rudimentary measures to contain the pandemic. In other words, none of the institutions of the capitalist state are capable of changing a pandemic policy rooted in the most fundamental social interests of the capitalist class.

Just as the policies of “herd immunity” or, as the BMJ puts it, “social murder,” are rooted in the class interests of the financial elite, so, too, the opposition to these policies must express the interests of another social force, the working class.

As the BMJ notes, the term “social murder” was coined by Engels in his 1845 masterpiece, *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*, one of the early works of Marx and Engels as they formulated the theory of scientific socialism. Engels wrote:

When society places hundreds of proletarians in

such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet; when it deprives thousands of the necessities of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live – forces them, through the strong arm of the law, to remain in such conditions until that death ensues which is the inevitable consequence – knows that these thousands of victims must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual; disguised, malicious murder, murder against which none can defend himself, which does not seem what it is, because no man sees the murderer, because the death of the victim seems a natural one, since the offence is more one of omission than of commission. But murder it remains.

Three years later, Marx and Engels published *the Communist Manifesto*, which formulated the definitive response to the ruling class’s acts of “social murder”: “The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority.” The aim of this movement, they wrote, must be the overthrow of capitalist property relations and the expropriation of the ruling class through socialist revolution.

What was true then is even more true now. The interests of all society—expressed in the demand for emergency measures to contain the pandemic through lockdowns with full economic compensation—are represented nowhere but in the movement of the working class.

The social interests of the working class and the interests of human society as a whole are expressed in the worldwide struggle for socialism. This movement will not only take the necessary measures to save human lives and finally tame the pandemic, but see to it that the politicians and corporate executives guilty of social murder are brought to justice.



To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact