

Media censors British Medical Journal description of pandemic deaths as “social murder”

Robert Stevens
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On February 4, 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 response to this devastating statement by the media and politicians of all stripes in Britain was to ignore and conceal it.

The editorial, “Covid-19: Social murder, they wrote—elected, unaccountable, and unrepentant”, was written by Kamran Abbasi, the executive editor of the journal.

“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?”

But, it argued, “After two million deaths, we must have redress for mishandling the pandemic...”

Abbasi continued, “At the very least, covid-19 might be classified as ‘social murder,’ as recently explained by two professors of criminology. The philosopher Friedrich Engels coined the phrase when describing the political and social power held by the ruling elite over the working classes in 19th century England. His argument was that the conditions created by privileged classes inevitably led to premature and “unnatural” death among the poorest classes.”

The editorial concluded, “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.”

An article on the significance of the BMJ editorial published on the WSWS has been read tens of thousands of times.

The BMJ is the world’s oldest and one of the most prestigious medical periodicals, with a publication history going back to 1840.

Abbasi, a doctor, is a major figure in the medical world. His BMJ biography notes, “In his career as a medical editor, Kamran is a former acting editor and deputy editor of The BMJ, editor of the Bulletin of the World Health Organization, and a consultant editor for *PLOS Medicine*. He is editor of the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* and *JRSM Open*. He

created three major e-learning resources for professional development of doctors, including BMJ Learning and the Royal Society of Medicine’s video lecture service.”

“Kamran has held board level positions and been chief executive of an online learning company. He has consulted for several major organisations including Harvard University, the UK’s NHS, the World Health Organization, and McKinsey & Co. In addition, Kamran is an honorary visiting professor in the department of primary care and public health at Imperial College, London. He is a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh and the Royal College of Physicians of London, patron of the South Asian Health Foundation, and a member of the General Advisory Council of the King’s Fund.”

The *Guardian*, despite its claim to publish the “independent journalism the world needs”, gave the editorial just five paragraphs in its daily “Coronavirus live” roundup during the afternoon of February 4 and no independent article. There was no reference to the BMJ’s editorial in the *Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Independent*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Mail* or *Financial Times*. The BBC state broadcaster said nothing on the BMJ’s piece.

The message from the ruling class and its media echo chamber was clear. There must be no public discussion allowed on a statement pointing out that “the conditions created by privileged classes inevitably led to premature and ‘unnatural’ death among the poorest classes.”

Finely attuned to the threat from below, Britain’s ruling elite wants no public discussion of the issue of social murder as it prepares to end the “last lockdown,” with the virus and its dangerous mutations allowed to rip through the population once again to deadly effect.

Among those giving the BMJ article a wide berth was John McDonnell, the former shadow chancellor of the Labour Party under its then nominally “left” leader Jeremy Corbyn.

In July, 2017, McDonnell told the BBC regarding the June 14 Grenfell Tower fire, which claimed 72 lives, “There’s a long history in this country of the concept of social murder where decisions are made with no regard to consequences of that, and as a result of that people have suffered. That’s what’s

happened here, and I'm angry... I believe social murder has occurred in this instance and I believe people should be accountable."

The WSWS noted in an article on McDonnell's statement, "McDonnell did not say so, but he was citing Friedrich Engels in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845). Engels, the co-founder with Karl Marx of scientific socialism, wrote condemning the British ruling class for the impact of fetid water supplies, cramped housing and disease on the working class:

'When society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an 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.'

Mehring Books, the publishing arm of the Socialist Equality Party (US), is proud to announce the publication in epub format of Volume 1 of *COVID, Capitalism, and Class War: A Social and Political Chronology of the Pandemic*, a compilation of the *World Socialist Web Site's* coverage of this global crisis.

McDonnell was denounced by the ruling Conservatives for his description of Grenfell and by MPs from his own party, including Emma Dent Coad, the newly elected Labour MP for the constituency in which Grenfell is located.

Four years on, amid a pandemic that has taken at least 126,000 lives in the UK, McDonnell has dropped all talk of social murder. In a November 21, 2020 interview, prominent *Guardian* journalist Owen Jones asked McDonnell, "Given we've got the worst death toll" and "You said Grenfell was social murder," how he categorised the pandemic.

McDonnell replied, "On Grenfell when I said social murder, social murder was developed as a concept from Engels onwards. Then you realise that you are using language that people don't fully appreciate." He described the "shock horror condemnation I was getting from a whole range of media outlets as well as individuals who should have known better..." in contrast to "when I met a lot of the Grenfell residents, they were all completely supportive."

He then made clear that he had learned his lesson regarding what can be said. The pandemic could not be described as

social murder he insisted: "I think that what we are seeing now is criminal negligence where advice is being given from experts to government ministers and the government ministers have overridden that advice and as a result of that people have died and others have suffered badly. And its affected whole families and communities. So, I think it is criminal negligence."

The WSWS article cited above noted that McDonnell was correct to describe Grenfell as social murder but that he "should be judged by his actions, not just his words. Having said that the guilty should be punished, workers should demand to know what he is doing about it?"

"McDonnell, Corbyn and any politician who presumes to speak on behalf of the working class has the responsibility to name the guilty and fight nationally and within parliament for them to be brought to justice."

McDonnell would never do this as, "Among those whose political decisions led to the Grenfell inferno are the leadership of the Conservative Party, past and present, and of the Labour Party too—all those who have jointly presided over endless privatisations and savage social cuts that have continued unabated since 1979. The culpable include Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, David Cameron, Theresa May and her likely successors, such as former Mayor of London Boris Johnson, who laid waste to London's fire service."

McDonnell is not just shielding Johnson with his silence on social murder but the Labour Party, which, initially under Corbyn and then his replacement as leader, Sir Keir Starmer, has allied with Johnson in a de facto government of national unity since the start of the pandemic. Last August, when over 40,000 lives had already been lost, McDonnell came forward to endorse Starmer's "constructive opposition" to Johnson. He said, "I think Keir's got this exactly right. He's approached the government in a constructive way—and we've got to get through this crisis together..."

Johnson and Starmer have relied on the trade union bureaucracy who have dedicated their entire energy and huge apparatus to suppressing every struggle of the working class and policing the herding of workers back into unsafe workplaces and schools.

It is this murderous agenda that accounts for why the BMJ's editorial is treated like radioactive material, not just by the Tory party and corporate media but by the entire political spectrum, including Labour's nominal "left-wing" and its trade union backers.



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