

UK government advocates for murderous ‘learning to live with the virus’

Thomas Scripps
11 March 2021

The ending of the Britain’s lockdown is witnessing the most open embrace of “herd immunity” in ruling circles since the pandemic began.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the lifting of restrictions on February 22 while admitting this would mean “more infections, more hospitalisations... more deaths”.

Johnson and scientists close to the government have since spelled out the grisly details.

Speaking to the House of Commons science and technology committee Tuesday, Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty said a new surge of the virus was inevitable:

“All the modelling suggests there is going to be a further surge that will find people either that have not been vaccinated, or where the vaccine has not worked, and some of them will end up in hospital and sadly some of them will go on to die, and that is the reality of where we are.”

The day before, Professor Calum Semple, of the government’s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), told *BBC Breakfast* that the reopening of schools meant it was “inevitable that we will see a rise in cases” of COVID-19.

Johnson himself wrote in the *Daily Telegraph* Wednesday, “We can see the signs of a surge of Covid among some of our European friends, and we remember how we in the UK have tended to follow that upwards curve, if a few weeks later... Monday’s successful return to school will inevitably add to the budget of risk.”

In defence of this criminal policy, the Conservative government and its supporters have launched a relentless propaganda campaign insisting that the population must “learn to live with the virus”. On February 12, Health Secretary Matt Hancock gave an interview to the *Telegraph* titled, “We hope to live with Covid like flu by end of the year”.

This line was endorsed by the BBC’s health

correspondent Nick Triggle who wrote the same day, “This is simply about being realistic. Covid isn’t something that can be eradicated like smallpox was... Thousands will still die in winters to come. But each year this should lessen until it gets near to the levels of mortality we see with flu—something which society readily accepts.”

Triggle followed this comment with an article on February 16, “Why goal is to live with the virus—not fight it”.

Speaking alongside Whitty at the Commons science and technology committee Tuesday, Chief Scientific Officer Sir Patrick Vallance was explicit:

“I do not think that zero Covid is possible. I think there’s nothing to suggest that this virus will go away, at least any time soon. It’s going to be there, circulating. It may be a winter virus that comes back over winters with increasing infection rates during that period.”

SAGE member Andrew Hayward told *Times Radio* Wednesday that the UK would “be talking in the tens of thousands of deaths, and hopefully in the low tens of thousands of deaths. And that sounds terrible. But actually, that’s not so dissimilar to what we put up with every year for flu and other respiratory infections. And so, I think, as a society, we need to really think what trade-offs we’re willing to make in terms of restrictions.”

These ghoulish arguments are an endorsement of another terrible wave of infections and death. By its own admission, the government’s reopening policy means at least multiple tens of thousands more fatalities in the next year. The most cited number in the media is 30,000 by summer 2022. But this is a minimum figure based on “the most optimistic set of assumptions modelled”, according to the researchers involved.

In early February, scientists from Imperial College London, together with the University of Warwick, presented a range of modelled reopening scenarios to

SAGE. The scenario closest to that set out in the government's "roadmap" (the government reopens faster) predicted between 33,200 and 81,200 COVID-19 deaths between February 12 and June 30, 2022.

Much worse can happen, according to the modelling. If infection rates are higher than expected once lockdown measures are lifted—due to ineffective test, trace and isolate systems, for example—then the range of predicted deaths is between 58,900 and 143,400. The coming death toll could exceed the two waves of COVID-19 already suffered. By comparison, flu kills roughly 12,000 people a year in England and Wales on average.

Hundreds of thousands more people will also be struck down with the debilitating effects of long COVID.

Disease will fall overwhelmingly on the poorest sections of society. Infection rates remain higher in more deprived regions, thanks to crowded, sub-standard accommodation, a growing number of people unable to work from home, and lower vaccine take-up rates.

There is nothing inevitable about any of this. A disaster is being prepared even as multiple highly effective vaccines are deployed, creating the potential, in a rationally organised global society, for the suppression of the virus to extremely low levels.

The ruling class does not view vaccines primarily as a tool to save lives, but as a means of enforcing its back-to-work strategy. Johnson hopes that partial vaccination will keep a lid on daily hospital admissions, removing the threat of a complete collapse of the National Health Service, while allowing the infection rate to rise. The deaths along the way of those left unprotected will be written off as the necessary costs of a return to "normality", doing business and accumulating profits.

Under these conditions more dangerous variants of the virus will be allowed to develop. A study published in the *British Medical Journal* Wednesday found that the "UK variant", already dominant, is between 30 and 100 percent more deadly than previous strains. It was already known to be 40 to 70 percent more transmissible.

In addition to the UK variant, the UK is currently monitoring three other "variants of concern"—the South African, Brazilian and Manaus—and four "variants under investigation".

The serious risk is that the virus will develop mutations that helps it evade current vaccines, producing another huge surge of the pandemic. Allowing the number of infections to rise rapidly while placing the virus under selective pressure through vaccination is the perfect recipe for this deadly outcome.

Whitty and Vallance, et al., have made a deal with the devil. When they speak of "trade-offs" they are rationalising the deadly consequences of putting profits before lives. The reopening is taking place so quickly to satisfy the demands of big business and the competitive needs of British capital against its international rivals.

This was the government's intended policy, signed-off on by its advisers, since the beginning of the pandemic. The first comments made by Johnson, Whitty and Vallance last March were about the need to prepare for large numbers of deaths—with Vallance promoting "herd immunity" explicitly. Now the same arguments are made from atop a mountain of corpses.

Only resistance in the working class forced three lockdowns in the last year. In declaring for the "irreversible" end of the "last lockdown," Johnson is seeking to ram the programme of herd immunity down people's throats, rebranded as "learning to live with the virus".

This will provoke widespread opposition in the working class. *Telegraph* columnist Ross Clark asked nervously last month, "Matt Hancock may be ready to 'live with the virus'—but is Britain?", warning that over the last year, "Death has become less tolerable."

Opposing the policy of herd immunity requires a socialist political programme. The basic desire of workers to save lives at the expense of capitalist profits necessitates effective lockdowns until the virus is under control, allowing vaccination programmes to be safely completed. Workers and their families must receive full income and social support, including quality online education, paid for out of the fortunes of the billionaire pandemic profiteers.

The fight for this programme, led by the Socialist Equality Party, demands the formation of rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the trade unions and the Labour Party—who have done nothing but support the government—the unification of workers across Europe and internationally, and the organisation of a political general strike against governments who continue to preside over a preventable bloodbath.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact