“Open letter” demands end to UK pandemic restrictions as official figures confirm COVID-19 is a “poor man's disease”

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An open letter calling on the government to honour its pledge to lift COVID-19 restrictions in June—including ending wearing face masks in schools and community testing—has been given widespread publicity in the right-wing media.

Signed by 22 academics and scientists and published in the right-wing *Sunday Express* under the online edition headline, “End face masks and social distancing on June 21—top scientists demand”, it asserts that “a good society cannot be created by an obsessive focus on a single cause of ill-health” and that the “theoretical risk” of vaccine-immune strains or a new COVID-19 surge should not outweigh the “damage” caused by lockdown.

The letter appeared as it was disclosed that, on October 30, Prime Minister Boris Johnson had thundered in Downing Street “No more f***ing lockdowns, let the bodies pile high in their thousands!”

Johnson's remarks underscore that the UK ruling elite—along with others worldwide—have been following a policy of herd immunity. Having secured a multi-billion pound bailout for the banks and super-rich in March 2020, they were determined to drive workers back into unsafe conditions to recoup profits.

Social opposition meant that the ruling Conservatives were reluctantly forced to make adaptations—via limited national lockdowns and regional Tiered restrictions—but guidelines on face masks, social distancing and the closure of non-essential retail were always a sop while most workplaces and schools remained open. In June, this pretence is to be abandoned as the government ends the “final lockdown”. The open letter is part of these efforts.

Robert Dingwall, Sociology Professor at Nottingham Trent University and co-author of the letter, claimed it is “not the product of any organized group, alliance or coalition.” But 10 of its signatories are also signatories to the Great Barrington Declaration, launched at the right-wing American Institute for Economic Research (AIER) in Massachusetts on October 4 last year, just weeks before Johnson's outburst. Part funded by the billionaire Charles Koch, it presented a pseudo-scientific justification for letting the virus rip that was endorsed by then President Donald Trump.

The WSWS described the Declaration as “A manifesto of death” and a “declaration of war on the working class by the capitalist oligarchy”.

Several signatories are associated with anti-vaccine and COVID-denier groups including the South-African based PANDA (Pandemics Data and Analytics), HART (Health Advisory & Recovery Team) and Collateral Global. They cross over into organisations such as UsforThem, which is demanding an end to the use of facemasks in schools. The alliance between right-wing forces, anti-vaxxers and “libertarians” has been on display at a growing number of anti-lockdown protests held in central London, and elsewhere.

Professor Carl Heneghan and Professor Sunetra Gupta, both University of Oxford, are among those signing the declaration and the open letter. Gupta and Heneghan addressed the Tory cabinet on September 20, 2020 to argue against another lockdown. They were joined by Swedish epidemiologist Anders Tegnell, who pioneered Sweden's disastrous herd immunity policy.

Two of the open letter signatories are government advisers—Dingwall and Professor David Livermore. Throughout the pandemic, Dingwall has authored a stream of articles in the right-wing *Telegraph, Daily Mail* and *Express* whose message is clear from their headlines, “Is 'social distancing’ effective in the fight against Covid?”; “Compulsory masks have NO place in a caring school”; “No one can ensure total safety... We must fight

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pandemic of FEAR"; "Trying to lock down until Covid is eradicated would be dangerous folly," and "Britain must not be sacrificed on the altar of fighting Covid-19".

Dingwall has distanced himself from those arguing COVID-19 is "no worse than bad flu", but says that vaccination "brings the risk posed by Covid down to levels humans have lived with for millennia."

The claim that a UK vaccination programme (just 17 percent of the UK population are fully vaccinated) is sufficient in the face of a global pandemic that is soaring out of control in much of the world is national myopia. The horrendous scenes in India and Brazil show that the worst of the pandemic is by no means over. Questions remain as to vaccine resistance in new and more virulent variants.

And events in Chile confirm the dangers of encouraging any complacency. Despite undertaking one of the fastest vaccine programmes (next to Israel and the UK) with some 40 percent of its population receiving at least one dose of a coronavirus vaccine, the number of daily cases in the country is higher than at any time in the last year.

The use of vaccination to justify reducing social distancing measures played a key role in Chile's outbreak. But it is social inequality that is the major factor. A research study into COVID-19 incidences in Chile's capital, Santiago, for *Science* —the journal for the American Association for the Advancement of Science—records a "strong association between socioeconomic status and both COVID-19 outcomes and public health capacity."

In Chile as elsewhere, the past 40 years has seen an unprecedented redistribution of wealth from workers to the rich. This has been accelerated through the pandemic with the collective wealth of the world's billionaires exploding 60 percent from last year, from $8 trillion to more than $13.1 trillion.

Massive government bailouts are to be paid for through a drastic intensification of the exploitation of the working class. The political and class calculations of the ruling elite dictate that workers must be forced into unsafe workplaces and conditions. If they die or become seriously ill, so be it.

That the virus is a "poor man's disease" is now well established. And it is this that accounts for the ruling elite's homicidal indifference to its spread.

Writing in the *British Medical Journal*, Christina Pagel of Independent SAGE, which has criticised aspects of government coronavirus policy, warned that weekly average case rates in England since September are 50 percent higher in deprived communities, which also "have had more than double the number of intensive care admissions and almost double the risk of dying..."

The major causes, Pagel wrote, are working jobs in factories, transport and social care "associated with higher exposure to catching Covid-19"; living in multioccupancy housing and being "financially unable to isolate." As a result, "there is significantly more covid circulating in deprived communities as we start coming out of lockdown—almost 2.5 times as many cases per head in the last two weeks of March as in the least deprived areas."

This is confirmed by official statistics presented by Labour MP Jon Trickett in Parliament showing that Yorkshire has 9 percent of England's population but 36 percent of all workplace transmissions because many in the region work in manufacturing, warehousing, and care services. Not only have these remained open, but lower pay rates mean people cannot afford to self-isolate. While 70 percent of people in professional occupations are working from home, this falls to 15 percent for those in caring, leisure and other services and 5 percent for process plant machine operatives.

Trickett proposed no action against this, even declining to name a "large warehouse" firm in his Hemsworth constituency whose "workforce... have repeatedly raised… a sense of not feeling safe at work." In response, the firm told him that if the workers "don't feel safe, they can go home, but we won't pay them and we won't furlough them". This was "not acceptable behaviour", Trickett complained, concluding with his "hope" that the "Government and the public authorities" accept that employers *and employees* have a duty and an obligation to *try* to eliminate covid at work and elsewhere." [emphasis added]

Trickett could offer nothing in response as Labour has supported government efforts to end lock-down with leader Sir Keir Starmer demanding of Johnson that schools remain open "no ifs, no buts, no exceptions". The trade unions have acted as enforcers for government and the bosses, working to sabotage opposition to these conditions.

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