

The terrible human toll of “herd immunity”

COVID-19 infections in Sweden surpass 1 million

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One year after Swedish authorities took the decision to let the coronavirus run rampant with the goal of reaching “herd immunity,” infection rates remain among the highest in Europe. Last week, the Scandinavian country, with a population of just 10.3 million people, surpassed the mark of 1 million officially registered cases. To date, over 14,200 deaths have been recorded, with over 5,000 of those occurring since the peak of the second wave in December.

The working class and young people are paying the price for the ruling elite’s policy of mass deaths and infections, which served as the template for governments across Europe and North America to abandon all serious lockdown measures following the spring 2020 first wave. Low-income earners and immigrant communities have been disproportionately affected by unemployment and coronavirus infection, while the current rollout of vaccines is failing to reach immigrant communities.

Throughout April, infection rates in Sweden were the highest of any major country in Europe, with intensive care units full to the brim with sick patients. On April 13, the seven-day rolling average for daily infections was 625 per million inhabitants, behind only tiny San Marino. By late April, the reported infection rate was 800 cases per 100,000 inhabitants within a two-week period, one of the highest rates at any time since the beginning of the pandemic.

The individual publicly identified with Sweden’s “herd immunity” policy is state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell, who infamously noted in an email on March 14, 2020: “One point might speak for keeping schools open in order to reach herd immunity more quickly.” At the time, Swedish authorities refused to impose a lockdown as the first wave spread, kept all primary and lower secondary schools open, and allowed businesses to continue operating normally.

Even as Sweden’s elderly care homes were transformed into killing fields, and infection rates among the general population were among the highest in Europe, Tegnell refused to impose tighter restrictions and even rejected the

wearing of masks as ineffectual. Sweden’s Public Health Agency only issued a “recommendation” to wear masks in December 2020 and only for commuters during rush hour travel.

But Tegnell only expressed in the most unvarnished manner what was in fact the policy of the entire Swedish ruling class and what rapidly became the homicidal agenda of every capitalist government in Europe and North America. His “herd immunity” strategy was embraced by the *New York Times* and the Trump administration in the United States, the Johnson government in Britain, which sought advice from Tegnell, and the political establishment in Germany. This included the Left Party whose only minister president, the head of the state government in Thuringia Bodo Ramelow, declared his support for the “Swedish model.” Indeed, the Swedish approach to COVID-19 has been so widely embraced that Tegnell has, with some justification, pointed out that Sweden has not handled the pandemic all that much differently to other countries.

In Sweden, the “herd immunity” strategy was enforced by the Social Democrat/Green coalition government, which relies in parliament for its majority on the ex-Stalinist Left Party and two small centre-right parties, the Liberals and Centre Party. Both the Centre and Liberal parties belong traditionally to Sweden’s right-wing party bloc, which is led by the Moderates and includes the Christian Democrats.

But in a significant shift to the right following the 2018 election, Social Democratic Prime Minister Stefan Löfven secured a deal with the Liberals and Centre that saw them leave the right-wing bloc known as the Alliance. The latest reports indicate that the Liberals will return to the Alliance for the 2022 election with the aim of establishing a right-wing government that will for the first time rely on support from the far-right Sweden Democrats, which has its roots in Sweden’s neo-Nazi movement.

As criticism of Tegnell and the Public Health Agency

mounted throughout 2020, Löfven increasingly took over public announcements on pandemic policy, but nothing of substance changed. In November, as the second wave gathered pace, Löfven urged people to restrict private gatherings to eight, but no new regulations were brought in to enforce this. Schools and businesses remained open.

The first report by Sweden's coronavirus commission was released in December. It presented a damning indictment of the government's response, as well as sharp criticism of the austerity for health and social services enforced by successive governments of the "left" and "right." The report noted that one of the main factors for the high death rate in care homes was "structural shortcomings" caused by cost cutting and privatisation. "These shortcomings have led to residential care being unprepared and ill-equipped to handle a pandemic. Staff employed in the elderly care sector were largely left by themselves to tackle the crisis," the report added.

In January, a new pandemic law was adopted in parliament. But other than restricting the opening of restaurants and cafes to 8:30 p.m. and imposing limits on the number of guests at a single table, no major restrictions were implemented.

Anger over the government's pandemic response continues to build within the medical community. Last month, *The Lancet* published a piece entitled, "The Swedish COVID-19 strategy revisited," that was a searing condemnation of the authorities' refusal to take the necessary measures to protect human lives.

"In December, 2020, we wrote about the Swedish response to the COVID-19 pandemic," noted the authors, Mariam Claesson and Stefan Hanson. "Our hope was that our comment, together with hundreds of other fact-based articles, would gain the attention of the Swedish Public Health Agency, that they would revisit and change the national strategy that they had designed so that it would be more aligned with global best practices, and that the political decision makers would act on it. They did not."

The authors continued that the Public Health Agency had as of April 19 recorded over 5,600 deaths since their December article. A third wave was raging in the country "without any widespread sense of gravity or urgency," they continued. The Public Health Agency has "doubled down and defended its approach without reconsidering the assumptions on which the failed national strategy is based. It has downplayed the role of asymptomatic spread, aerosol transmission, children as potential source of infection, and the use of face masks."

The Lancet article noted that medical experts have been urging Swedish authorities for over a year to "be strategic, test and trace more, follow the growing evidence base and

recommend the use of face masks, and enforce regulations about physical distancing and ventilation, especially in schools if they are open." The authors continued: "It has been a call for timely implementation of basic principles of pandemic prevention and control to contain the spread and flatten the curves of hospitalisations, deaths, and chronic illness."

Sweden's "herd immunity" policy has disproportionately impacted the most vulnerable sections of the population. During the first wave, infection and death rates were many multiples higher among Stockholm's immigrant communities, many of which are wracked by high jobless and poverty rates, than the national average. People with North African and Middle Eastern backgrounds were seven times more likely to be admitted to hospital due to COVID-19 than native Swedes as of February 2021.

The Social Democrat/Green government also responded to the pandemic, like governments throughout Europe, by providing multibillion krona bailouts to big business and the financial elite. According to business daily *Dagens Industri*, at least 40 new krona billionaires emerged in Sweden during 2020 (1 dollar = 8.5 kronor). The total value of investments owned by 169 individuals and families increased by \$35 billion, equating to almost 40 percent of all private savings in shares and equity funds held by Swedes. In 2020 the government also abolished Sweden's top income tax rate, which imposed a 5 percent surcharge on all incomes over 703,000 kronor (\$74,300). Cuts were also made in the 2021 budget to employers' social security contributions for young workers.

Figures on Sweden's vaccine rollout show that disadvantaged communities are being left behind. According to a report in the *Financial Times*, 91 percent of native-born Swedes over the age of 80 have received at least one vaccine dose. The rate drops to 59 percent for people aged over 80 from North Africa and just 44 percent for those from Sub-Saharan Africa.



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