

UK media declares contact-tracing “pingdemic” to distract from raging pandemic

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Headline after headline in the past week has proclaimed the dawn of a “pingdemic”. The story goes that the National Health Service (NHS) test and trace app, which uses Bluetooth to detect when people have been in close contact with an infected person and notifies (“pings”) those who need to self-isolate, is causing havoc by forcing hundreds of thousands to absent themselves from work unnecessarily.

The *Daily Telegraph*, described by Prime Minister Boris Johnson as “my real boss”, has been most prolific, publishing the front-page stories, “Neighbours ‘pinged’ through walls by app”, “Freedom day farce as PM told to end ‘pingdemic’”, “Critical workers given route out of isolation to prevent ‘pingdemic’ laying country low”, “PM urged to expand Covid app exemptions” and “Pingdemic disrupts supermarket food supplies”.

“What kind of state are we in?” and “Now will Boris see sense on Pingdemic?”, asks the *Daily Mail*, as the “Shocking toll of pingdemic is laid bare” and “Top firms demand an end to ping peril”.

The *Times* has published, “Fears over shortages as stores hit by pandemic”; the *Mirror*, “Britain is grinding to a halt”; the *Express*, “Covid chaos as 500,000 ‘pinged’ in one week”.

A Google News search for the term “pingdemic” returns 2,590,000 results, despite its very recent origin.

The substitution of a supposed “pingdemic” for a very real and escalating pandemic is a calculated ploy, designed to create the impression that the biggest danger to the UK population is not COVID-19 but the measures used to contain it. Its purpose is to reinforce the message that we must all “learn to live with the virus.”

The big business mouthpieces in the media are effectively regurgitating former US President Donald Trump’s infamous assertions that test and trace

procedures “create more cases”. In a series of interviews last July, Trump told reporters that testing in the US was “really skew[ing] the numbers” and “in a way, we’re creating trouble”. He demanded of his officials at a campaign rally, “slow the testing down”.

The real responsibility for the huge numbers of people currently required to self-isolate in the UK does not lie with an inaccurate or “oversensitive” app. It lies with Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his Conservative government’s catastrophic herd immunity policy. The spiralling numbers of self-isolations are a reflection of the already rapidly escalating number of infections and an anticipation of more to come.

In the week to July 15, just under 619,000 self-isolation alerts were sent out by the NHS app. In the same week, 240,307 confirmed cases of COVID-19 were reported in England, giving an entirely plausible average of 2.6 close contact alerts per case. According to the Office for National Statistics coronavirus survey, one person in 75 had the virus in the week to July 17, or 832,000 people.

Specific examples paint the same picture. At the Iceland supermarket chain, where 1,000 workers are self-isolating, fully 27 percent have tested positive for the virus. This means 2.3 people isolating for every confirmed case, discounting of course infections they may have been exposed to outside of the workplace.

In any scientifically based pandemic response, a test and trace system would not have to deal with such large numbers of contacts. Cases of the virus would be brought to a sufficiently low level, by lockdowns as required, and kept there with the necessary measures such as mask wearing, adequate ventilation, social distancing and ultimately vaccines, so that only small, isolated outbreaks would have to be traced.

Johnson, however, is not using contact tracing to control

the virus. The test and trace system has been maintained to apply the veneer of a public health response to the thoroughly anti-scientific policy of “allowing the virus to let rip throughout the nation,” in the recent words of the British Medical Association.

For the same reason, next to nothing is in place to support those asked to self-isolate, as has remained the case throughout the pandemic. If workers’ employers do not grant sick pay, they are left on an unliveable £96.35 a week, with a miserly £500 grant nominally available to those on low incomes.

Business leaders are pushing for Johnson to dispense with the charade altogether and bring forward the August 16 date for ending all self-isolation requirements so that profit-making can resume unimpeded. Tony Danker, the director general of the Confederation of British Industry, said Britain risked “grinding to a halt”, complaining, “The current approach to self-isolation is closing down the economy rather than opening it up.”

Their demands will soon be enacted. Speaking to *Times Radio* on Tuesday, business minister Paul Scully said whether to self-isolate or not after being alerted by the app was “up to individuals and employers”.

The government distanced itself from these remarks but announced yesterday that double-vaccinated workers in 16 key sectors would no longer have to self-isolate if alerted by the app or contacted by NHS test and trace. Instead, they will have to prove negative on a PCR test and take daily lateral flow tests for the next 10 days. These steps are a precursor to the scrapping of self-isolation more broadly, and ultimately of all serious test and trace procedures.

As over 1,200 scientists and doctors have warned, the breakneck removal of public health restrictions will leave millions of people vulnerable to unacceptable levels of risk. The millions of infections registered in the next months will lead to thousands of deaths, multiple times more cases of debilitating illness, and severe strain on the NHS. They will also give the virus ample opportunity to develop new and possibly more dangerous variants. On Friday it was confirmed by Public Health England that a new coronavirus variant, known as B.1.621, is under investigation. Sixteen confirmed cases of B.1.621 have been identified across Britain.

The homicidal “pingdemic” narrative, that all of this suffering should be allowed to take place without the added inconvenience and financial hardship of self-isolation, can only gain traction thanks to the complicity of the Labour Party and the trade unions. They have

responded to the “pingdemic” not by denouncing the policy of mass infection but by demanding the Tory government find a way to end the disruption.

Unite Assistant General Secretary Steve Turner, touted by sections of the pseudo-left milieu as a possible “left” leader of the union in ongoing elections, said, “The reports Unite is receiving from our members and their employers are extremely worrying. It is not an exaggeration to say factories are on the verge of shutting and that at some sites hundreds of staff are off work...”

“The government absolutely must not wait until August 16 to come up with a solution to significantly reduce the amount of people self-isolating unnecessarily.”

At the Nissan car plant in Sunderland, where some 900 workers are self-isolating, the Unite union praised management for having “done brilliantly” in preventing production lines shutting down.

Workers must reject the choice offered by the ruling class between herd immunity and mass self-isolation, or unmitigated herd immunity. The wealth and scientific knowledge exists in abundance to permanently suppress and, in time, end the pandemic. But it is monopolised by the major corporations who will accept no more public health measures cutting into profits.

A scientific policy must be implemented by the working class, organised in rank-and-file committees independent of the unions, through a socialist struggle to expropriate the obscene fortunes and productive forces held by the oligarchy and turn them towards pressing social needs.



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