

Online event with leading scientists makes case for “eradication” strategy against COVID-19

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On Sunday, the *World Socialist Web Site* hosted an online discussion with leading scientists, “For a Global Strategy to Stop the Pandemic and Save Lives.” The scientists made a powerful case for a policy of “eradication,” combining aggressive public health measures with vaccination to eliminate the virus completely.

The event, moderated by WSWS International Editorial Board Chairman David North, featured Michael Baker, a public health physician and professor at the University of Otago, Wellington in New Zealand; Dr. Małgorzata Gasperowicz, a developmental biologist and researcher at the University of Calgary and co-founder of the Zero Covid Canada group; and Dr. Yaneer Bar-Yam, founding president of the New England Complex Systems Institute.

The international meeting also heard contributions from a parent in the UK and three teachers from, respectively, Tennessee in the United States, Australia and Brazil. Each described the conditions in their countries as schools are being reopened. Dr. Benjamin Mateus, a writer for the WSWS, introduced the meeting by providing a summary of the current state of the pandemic, which is spreading rapidly throughout the globe.

In introducing the event, North explained that its focus was on providing scientific information for “the great mass of people, working people, who have to deal with the reality of this pandemic,” so that they can develop a strategy to stop the pandemic and save lives.

In his initial comments, Baker criticized the inadequate measures adopted in most countries. “Eighteen months in,” he said, “I would have hoped that the world would have a very systematic way of thinking about the pandemic, describing the strategic choices countries had available and presenting the accumulated evidence about what strategies are most effective. Unfortunately, that is not the case. We have had a lack of global leadership with this pandemic.” “Elimination is a very viable strategy,” he said, noting that several countries with large populations, particularly in East Asia and the Asia Pacific, were able to eliminate COVID-19 for sustained periods, even before the vaccine became available.

Baker noted, however, that most governments decided not to implement policies that would eliminate COVID-19.

By the end of January [2020], there were very good papers appearing in top journals by good epidemiologists saying, this is going to be a global pandemic, this is the infection fatality risk. On the back of an envelope, I did the simple calculation that the proportion of the population infected would be looking like at least two-thirds based on how infectious it was. The infection fatality risk was looking like about one percent. So right away, it’s going to kill 30 plus million people across the globe unless you can stop it. Anyone with even basic public health epidemiological knowledge could do that simple calculation, but for some reason the key agencies we were talking about before did not produce that risk assessment and say, ‘We must stop it.’

Baker said that the World Health Organization had sent a team of international scientists to China in February 2020 to study how China had succeeded in stopping transmission of the virus. “I looked at that and said, ‘Yes, obviously we have to stop this pandemic, we have to switch to an elimination approach,’ and I just assumed that governments around the world would follow that advice ... and they did nothing about it, most countries. We could see the success in the Asia Pacific region, and still the Western world did nothing to contain this pandemic.”

Lisa, a parent in the UK, spoke powerfully about the catastrophic situation in the UK, where the government of Prime Minister Boris Johnson has spearheaded a campaign to remove even the most minimal public health measures to stop the spread of the pandemic. Schools are being reopened, she said, without any protections for students or teachers.

“Children are being affected more than ever,” Lisa said, “and I am terrified basically. I don’t know what to do. It’s a choice

between deregistering my children from school altogether—so they won't see their friends anymore and they've nothing to look forward to, they've nothing to go back to—and sending them in where they will be highly likely to get COVID." She asked the scientists whether parents should be keeping their children at home.

In reply, Dr. Gasperowicz noted that between 3 to 12 percent of children who are infected with COVID-19 develop "long COVID," including potentially debilitating effects on mental health and cognitive development.

On the consequences of reopening the schools, Professor Baker added:

I think the data are pretty clear for the UK. You're going to have essentially several million children and young people infected over the next few months, and even if adverse events are less than we expect in terms of chronic illness, just the sheer number of children and young people being infected means that we're going to have a huge burden of preventable illness in young people, and some of this may be permanent....

The precautionary principle means that you do not allow a population to be exposed to a hazard when you do not know the consequences of that, and when you think that the effects may be severe. A responsible government would not allow that to occur.

Professor Baker added that he has "real concern that the UK government is inflicting this almost barbaric experiment on the British people at this moment."

Dr. Gasperowicz gave a detailed presentation of the scientific data showing that if aggressive and coordinated measures had been taken at the beginning of the pandemic, the virus could have been eliminated in two weeks. With the new, more transmissible Delta variant, it will take more time but could still be accomplished within two months.

Dr. Gasperowicz's presentation demonstrated that vaccination, while critical, cannot stop the pandemic, because the virus can still be transmitted by vaccinated individuals. "Focusing on public health measures is much more important than focusing on vaccination alone," she said. "As an added layer it is important to vaccinate more people. But just by itself, it won't solve the pandemic."

"The Delta variant is our wake-up call," she added. "We need everything we have in our toolbox to stop it, to slow it down."

Dr. Bar-Yam has been a leading advocate from the beginning of the pandemic of aggressive measures to stop the pandemic, including lockdowns, school closures and a shutdown of nonessential production.

"There really are two choices," he said at the meeting, "one of which is the way out of this outbreak, this pandemic, and one

of which is a pathway to tremendous loss and suffering, which we've been experiencing over the last 18 to 19 months... We have to take every step and exercise the strongest action possible."

Asked whether it was necessary to shut down schools, Bar-Yam replied:

It would be appropriate to call, not just for a shutdown of schools, but if you just shut down schools that will not achieve the goal. It's one piece out of an entire strategy... We should also have the goal of eliminating this virus and doing so by taking the maximum precautions in order to achieve a reduction in the number of cases.

In concluding the event, North thanked the scientists for providing "a powerful and overwhelming case for a policy of elimination and eradication" and said they "have a huge role to play."

The public needs to be educated. Unfortunately, the media does not do that. We haven't had anything approaching this discussion on national television, at least not in the United States and I doubt anywhere else, devoting a whole evening to discuss the reality. Knowledge in this case will save lives. I also would say that if this is going to change, there needs to be the intervention of the broad mass of the population, the working people themselves, the working class has to fight for a change of policy.

The *World Socialist Web Site* encourages all its readers to watch the full event and share it widely on social media.



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