

UK Corbynites' Zero Covid campaign: "Zero" in name only

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On Monday, the Zero Covid Coalition held an online meeting, "The virus is not going away. So, neither can we."

The meeting demonstrated that the campaign exists solely to provide a cynical apologia for the refusal of the Labour Party and trade unions to do anything that genuinely opposes the Conservative government's policy of allowing the virus to rip through workplaces and schools, to deadly effect.

Led by the dwindling group of Corbynite MPs, any commitment to a supposed policy of eliminating COVID is purely for show.

The Zero Covid Coalition describes itself as "a broad campaign jointly convened by Diane Abbott MP [formerly Jeremy Corbyn's shadow home secretary] and the *Morning Star* [newspaper of the Stalinist Communist Party] to oppose this government's reckless policies and fight for a Zero Covid strategy."

However, in opening the meeting Abbott said, "Some of our speakers tonight don't agree with the demand for Zero Covid, yet I am delighted that they have nevertheless agreed to speak.

"It's always been the case that some people that support our organisation don't necessarily believe in absolutely Zero Covid. But we have never put a barrier up to prevent people who perhaps only want to speak about improving the situation, or who want to speak about a specific section of society, or who represent a certain body of people. As far as we're concerned. They are all very welcome."

What does this mean in practice? Abbott added, "All around the world there are pressures against campaigners, but also against medical and scientific communities or even pressures on elected governments, to adopt the disastrous policies which are currently in place in the United States and in Britain and which have led to a public health catastrophe. These pressures must be resisted. We cannot and should not learn to live with the virus. This has only led to big death tolls."

But far from resisting these pressures to adapt to a herd immunity agenda, Abbott introduced speakers from the Labour Party and the trade unions dedicated to the proposition that we must indeed learn to live with the virus, while portraying them as allies of those genuinely wanting to fight.

Top billing on the platform was given to Mark Drakeford, the First Minister of Wales's devolved Labour government. He was accompanied by Abbott, Richard Burgon and Bell Ribeiro-Addy, all members of Labour's Corbynite Socialist Campaign Group.

Alongside them were Kevin Courtney, the joint general secretary of the National Education Union (NEU) and Vicky Blake, president of the University and College Union (UCU).

Drakeford was presented as the leader of a sane holdout throughout the pandemic against the maniacal policies of Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government. However, while the Welsh government, like the devolved Scottish National Party-led government at Holyrood, imposed a few more mitigation policies than Westminster, such as a two-week firebreak at one point as cases shot up, both fell in line behind Johnson on ending mitigation measures in July.

Drakeford and Welsh Labour's limited measures have changed nothing fundamentally in terms of infections and lives lost. On October 1, over eight weeks after the July 19 Freedom Day in which the economy was reopened, *Wales Online* reported, "Wales continues to have an infection rate far above any other part of the UK." It noted, "Despite a slight dip early in September, cases in Wales have continued to rise as we head towards October with the rates of Covid in Wales now more than double that of England." In Scotland, cases were also substantially above England's.

On October 5, Wales announced its first death due to COVID of a child under 14. Another child's death has since been recorded in the country. A Welsh teenager over the age of 14 died earlier in the pandemic.

Last week, speaking at a press conference, Drakeford reported on the consequences of his government's policies: "One in 40 people in Wales could have coronavirus [up from one in 45 the previous week]. More than 820 hospital beds across Wales are occupied today by COVID patients".

With cases in Wales then at 656 per 100,000, "Over the past three weeks, coronavirus cases have risen sharply to the highest rates we have seen since the pandemic began and more people are falling so seriously ill that they need hospital treatment." In addition, "We have identified over 2,000 cases of a new and possibly more transmissible form of the Delta variant already here in Wales."

And his response?

Wales would remain at COVID alert level zero. Only isolation guidance would change, with fully vaccinated adults and children aged five to 17 now asked to isolate themselves until they get a negative PCR test if someone in their household has symptoms of the virus or tests positive.

The Welsh government also "intends" to extend the use of the COVID pass proving vaccination to theatres, cinemas and concert halls from November 15.

"If rates continue to rise rather than fall the Cabinet will have to consider introducing further restrictions at the next review," Drakeford added, but "None of us want to see that happen."

To underscore this message, Drakeford ended his press conference by telling everyone he would see them at the Wales-New Zealand rugby match, just two days later, that he would be attending with 70,000 other people.

On schools, Drakeford, like Johnson, insisted they could be opened safely last January. He declared, in opposition to teachers who demanded that face-to-face teaching be suspended, "We reached an agreement with our local education colleagues that in Wales we will have a phased and flexible return to school."

Drakeford played down the severity of the disease and its impact on children at the time declaring, "There is no evidence that young people get the illness more severely as a result of the [Delta] variant." It was only because many teachers refused to work that Wales, like England, was forced to announce that schools and colleges would remain closed to students until after the February half-term.

The other prominent “allies” of the Corbynite and Stalinist Zero Covid campaign came from education unions that have spent the entire course of the pandemic opposing action by their members and who now insist that schools, colleges and universities must be kept open.

Kevin Courtney of the NEU never bothered to utter the words “Zero Covid” in his remarks. He has rather assumed the position of High Priest of schools staying open at all costs on behalf of the Johnson government.

Courtney presented a revised version of history, claiming that it was his union which led the charge to ensure schools were not reopened at the height of the pandemic in January. “We knew it wasn’t safe and we had an online meeting of 40,000 of our members. We know that 400,000 people watched it over Facebook and we advised our members to send in Section 44 letters and as a result of that most schools didn’t open the next day.”

The action taken by rank-and-file teachers was what forced Johnson to cave in. It was only when it was clear that opposition was becoming overwhelming among educators and parents to the horrifying COVID-19 death rates—which had taken the lives of at least 570 education workers—that the NEU asked its members to refuse to return to work in January by citing Section 44 of the workplace Health and Safety Act. Courtney et al were only attempting to corral popular anger behind a policy of individual protest, while stifling demands for strikes and other forms of collective action.

Within a few weeks, the NEU was insisting that members no longer use Section 44 letters without their strict approval, backing up government preparations for a full reopening in July.

Courtney’s speech at the Zero Covid event could best be described as an extended rant against “education disruption”:

“Cases were going up really fast in schools and that is actually really *disrupting education* as children stay off because they’re positive and we’re not doing enough to control the cases. Or their staff, their teachers, stay off because they’re positive. And some of them have very little symptoms or no symptoms, but they still have to stay off because they’re positive and that’s still *disrupting education* and it’s also *disrupting the education* of the children who have symptoms which go on longer.” [emphasis added]

Courtney made no reference to the nearly 600 known deaths of UK educators from COVID, or the more than 100 children who have died through being knowingly exposed to a deadly disease.

In a particularly brutal comment, Courtney declared, “Whatever the consequences of Long COVID that we don’t know about... one of the consequences is you’re often off school and your *education is being disrupted*. And it’s not just those *in-school disruptions*. We can see from the data that if secondary schools are the group that are going up fastest, then the age group that are 30 years older than them, their parents, they are then starting to pick up as well.”

Courtney’s answer to all this was to assert that the virus could be largely checked if only the Westminster government followed the guidance in Scotland, where “there is still a mask mandate in secondary schools.”

He added, “There’s another difference in Scotland. If your brother or sister test positive you have to stay at home for three days, then get a PCR test. You can only go back to school if you’re negative.”

“That sounds in Scotland like they’re *disrupting children’s education*, that children who have close contacts have to stay off. But actually the net effect is less children off school in Scotland than in England, despite the fact that those very close contacts are being held off.”

Courtney also called for investing in ventilation and filtration and the return of bubbles in schools, adding that this was “not necessarily to send bubbles home, but to stop the virus spreading from one group to another.”

He reassured all concerned that “Most of those steps are no disruption whatsoever to people’s everyday lives or to their education. They reduce *disruption to education* as well as reducing the total amount of virus.”

These limited mitigations did nothing to stop the spread of the virus in Scottish schools or anywhere else.

Scotland’s reopening of schools from August 11 resulted in the virus ripping through classrooms. Figures revealed as a result of Freedom of Information requests to Public Health Scotland (PHS) found that more than half of schools (1,455 or 58 percent) had at least one coronavirus case in the first two weeks of term. The *Scotsman* reported, “PHS data also shows nearly 15% of cases [8,113 positive cases] during the same time period could be linked to an educational setting, a nursery, school, college or university...”

Courtney concluded with the humble suggestion to the Tories: “Vaccination is the way out, but vaccination needs a helping hand and the sorts of measures we’re talking about on this call are that helping hand and our government should be implementing them.”

Behind the occasional rhetoric, the Labour and trade union bureaucracy has no fundamental differences with the Johnson government. They are allied with it in enforcing the insistence of the corporations that there must be no more lockdowns and that, as stated by their own party’s leader Sir Keir Starmer, schools must remain open, “no ifs, no buts”.

Eliminating the virus and stopping the pandemic can only be achieved through the independent struggle of the working class, opposed to the pro-capitalist agenda outlined in the “Zero Covid” event.

Speaking at the global online webinar hosted by the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), WSWS International Editorial Board chairperson David North outlined the basis for a successful fight to end the pandemic:

“The policies pursued by virtually all governments since the outbreak of the pandemic must be repudiated. The subordination of that which should be the unquestioned priority of social policy—the protection of human life—to the interests of corporate profit and private wealth accumulation cannot be allowed to continue.

“The initiative to bring about a decisive turn to a strategy directed toward global elimination must come from a socially conscious movement of millions of people.”



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