

The NHS vaccine mandate: Corbyn, pseudo-left and trade unions join Tory and libertarian right

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The Corbynite Labour “left”, the trade union bureaucracy and the pseudo-left groups are opposing mandatory vaccination in the National Health Service (NHS), claiming to defend the democratic rights of health workers.

But the real social interests behind this campaign are made plain by its alignment with the Conservative Party’s right-wing and anti-vax protest leaders, and by the increasing likelihood of its success courtesy of the Johnson government as it moves to end all efforts to control the spread of COVID-19.

The deadline for booking a first vaccination for frontline NHS staff dealing with the public is February 3, but Health Secretary Sajid Javid already said last Wednesday that the policy was “under review” and that the government was “reflecting on this.” The *Telegraph* reports this morning that he will scrap the plans imminently.

Spurred by the Tory backbenches, the government has moved from a vaccine-only strategy, which has collapsed under the pressure of the more transmissible and immune-evasive Omicron variant it helped produce, to a policy of “endemic” COVID-19.

The government has abandoned all anti-COVID public health measures and decided that everyone will at some stage be infected with either Omicron or another variant. Even the requirement to self-isolate after a positive test is due to end no later than March.

None of this has met with any opposition from ex-Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and his allies, the trade unions and groups such as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party (SP). Instead, they have collectively decided to oppose one measure only—compulsory vaccination in the NHS.

The way was pointed by Corbyn’s vote against what are routinely referred to as “vaccine passports” along with mandatory vaccines in the NHS on December 14, joining forces with anti-lockdown, anti-mask Tory backbenchers. There was never in fact a requirement to prove vaccination status to gain entry into bars, clubs and sporting events, as proof of a negative test was also accepted.

On January 18, Corbyn released a YouTube video restating that “something doesn’t fit right with the idea you have to be compulsorily vaccinated.” He did so knowing that Johnson planned to announce the end of all measures to combat the pandemic, including restrictions on entering social venues, which he did the very next day.

An adaptation to the policy of mass infection

Corbyn is backed by the SWP and SP, with the SWP authoring an “open

letter against mandatory vaccines.”

Their stated justifications are, firstly, that the mandate will exacerbate the staffing crisis in the NHS, “plunging the health service into its biggest crisis yet” and tipping “an already overwhelmed service and stretched workforce over the edge”. Secondly, that the government is in “no position to convince workers to get the vaccine”.

This is deeply cynical. The crisis in the NHS and the undermining of the vaccine programme are a product of the government’s “herd immunity” strategy which neither Corbyn nor these organisations ever did anything to oppose.

Corbyn even admitted to sitting through government meetings discussing “herd immunity” in spring 2020, while still Labour leader, and saying nothing for months. He began the de facto coalition with Johnson’s Tory government which current Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer has maintained. The pseudo-left have likewise refused to organise any serious campaign for the closure of unsafe workplaces and the suppression of the virus.

To do so would have brought them into conflict with a trade union bureaucracy, in which they are deeply ensconced and to which they are slavishly oriented. Throughout the pandemic, the unions, led by the Trades Union Congress (TUC), have enforced Johnson’s every effort to keep workers on the job and children in schools in unsafe conditions, in service to corporate profits.

The campaign against the NHS mandate is a deepening of this adaptation to the policy of mass infection. Earlier this month, the TUC issued a statement calling for the mandatory vaccine scheme to be “delay[ed] with immediate effect”. A few weeks later, TUC General Secretary Frances O’Grady wrote that workers must now “learn to live with COVID”. She continued, “At long last a new normal is emerging in workplaces across the UK” as “we enter this new stage of transition from pandemic to endemic”.

Like the Tory right, the union bureaucracy, their spokesperson Corbyn and their backers in the pseudo-left see no sense in requiring vaccination against a disease which they have accepted will be widespread throughout society forever.

A false appeal to democratic rights

Corbyn and the pseudo-left even leap ahead of Johnson by not only warning of the possible consequences of a vaccine mandate but opposing it in principle.

The opening criticism made of the mandate in Corbyn’s January 18

video is telling. “Boris Johnson claims to be a libertarian... he seems to be burying the libertarian bit at the moment,” he states.

This is the criticism made of Johnson by the Tory hard right. It appeals not to the working class who have lived under the tyranny of the virus for two years, suffering disproportionate rates of death, illness and financial hardship, but to the most backward sections of the petty-bourgeoisie who find intolerable the restrictions and demands on their lifestyles necessary in a pandemic to safeguard the health and lives of society’s most vulnerable.

The most revolting defence offered for this anti-scientific, anti-socialist position is the patronising invocation of ethnic differences in vaccine take-up. The SWP write in their open letter, “Those who are sceptical of the vaccine are more likely to be black and other minority ethnicities and in the lower grades of NHS staff.” This is presumably also the meaning of the TUC’s claim that a vaccine mandate “may be discriminatory”.

Vaccine mandates target no one based on their ethnicity; the policy is conditioned by the need for society to collectively combat a virulent and deadly disease. Mandatory vaccination for care home and NHS workers is made more urgent still by their duty of care to patients who are most vulnerable to COVID. The real threat to BAME individuals, the majority of whom, as with every ethnicity, have taken up the vaccine, is not the “discrimination” of a mandate but their disproportionate suffering at the hands of the virus against which it protects.

For a multitude of reasons, primarily associated with social inequality, BAME groups are significantly more likely to be killed by the virus. In the second wave, Bangladeshi men were five times more likely than White, Pakistani men 3.1 times, Black African 2.4 times, Indian 2.1 times and Black Caribbean 2 times. The figures are similar, with slightly smaller differences, for women.

The SWP write that “scepticism is not irrational—black people in the US, the UK and in the Global South have historically been subjected to utterly unethical experiments for medical science.”

There is a world of difference between understanding someone’s concern and accepting it as legitimate, let alone a basis for opposing a lifesaving vaccine mandate.

The suggestion that the current vaccines are unsafe has no scientific merit, let alone any suggestion that their use can be compared with an unethical experiment. More than 10.1 billion shots have been given worldwide to people of every ethnic background. The percentage of vaccinations that result in serious side effects is miniscule and, more importantly, significantly less than the risk of the same symptoms if infected with COVID.

The pandemic has claimed around 18 million lives worldwide, the majority in poor countries with immensely restricted access to vaccines. To lend credence to policies and ideologies seeking to restrict vaccine uptake is politically shameful.

Vaccine mandates can create the conditions for overcoming unfounded concerns. Once a deadline is decided, following a serious public information campaign, the opportunity can be given to everyone to raise any worries with a trusted colleague or medical professional and have them dispelled.

There are genuine concerns within the medical profession that the Tories have created conditions in which up to 120,000 workers could be sacked in health and social care services (77,000 in the NHS) already reeling under the combined impact of decades of cuts and the pandemic. But the only legitimate response would be to demand a properly implemented mandate.

It remains the case, moreover, that even vaccine requirements implemented by widely discredited capitalist governments have had a positive impact in encouraging vaccine uptake, so that apocalyptic warnings of mass sackings did not materialise.

Research reported by the *Financial Times* found that “Covid certificates

in France, Germany and Italy increased the vaccination rate in those countries by 13, 6.2 and 9.7 percentage points respectively.” In France, a country with high levels of vaccine hesitancy heading into the pandemic, just 3,000 health workers out of 2.7 million were suspended after the deadline passed for mandatory immunisation last September and many of these were temporary as they had agreed to get the job.

It is not the case that those who refuse to be vaccinated have a “democratic right” to care for clinically vulnerable people. The *World Socialist Web Site* Editorial Board issued a statement last July, “Oppose the right-wing campaign against vaccination!”, which explained, “no individual has the ‘right’ to infect others and endanger their lives.” Vaccine requirements “are protections against death and severe illness, not infringements on ‘personal liberty.’”

Countless laws, especially in the field of health and safety, restrict a person’s actions to protect them and those around them. People must not drive a car without working brake lights, for example, or while drunk. Within the NHS, many workers are already required to be vaccinated against viruses like Hepatitis B and Measles, Mumps and Rubella for precisely the same reasons as the COVID-19 vaccination.

Working-class, socialist versus petty-bourgeois, libertarian politics

These vaccine requirements have been accepted for years. The battle over the COVID vaccine specifically expresses another, more fundamental conflict over which class response to the pandemic will prevail.

Responding to journalist Glenn Greenwald’s endorsement of Corbyn’s position last December, *World Socialist Web Site* International Editorial Board Chairman David North wrote :

“Corbyn’s opposition to vaccine mandates—a necessary public health measure in a pandemic—is not a ‘defiant and courageous stance on principle,’ as it is called by Greenwald. It is, rather, a capitulation to the fascist right.

“Greenwald legitimizes his rightwing trajectory by claiming that opposition to vaccination is based on ‘long-standing left-wing values of bodily autonomy and anti-authoritarianism...’ This is rubbish. He is spouting the ‘anti-authoritarianism’ of petty-bourgeois anarchism.

“All of Greenwald’s arguments can be found in Bakunin’s 1871 tract, ‘What is Authority’, which specifically argues against individual subordination to laws developed on the basis of science—which include all laws and regulations that protect public health.

“Friedrich Engels replied to Bakunin in his 1872 essay, ‘On Authority’. Engels explained that the complexity of modern production ‘displaces independent action by individuals.’ Organization implies collective and collaborative activity, and, thus, the exercise of authority.

“‘Hence it is absurd to speak of the principle of authority as being absolutely evil, and of the principle of autonomy as being absolutely good. Authority and autonomy are relative things whose spheres vary with the various phases of the development of society.’

“Greenwald’s anarchistic principle of ‘bodily autonomy’ ignores not only the reality of modern social organization. It is oblivious to the reality of the class struggle. A strike is a form of collective action that involves the exercise of authority and disciplined action.

“The traditional purpose of a picket line is to enforce the shutdown of a plant. This involves, to the extent that the strike is conducted with the intention of winning, dissuading individuals from entering the plant, by force if necessary.

“Thus, a picket line is an extreme exercise of authority, involving a direct and physical infringement on the ‘bodily autonomy’ of the would

be strikebreaker. The greater the mass action, the greater the restrictions imposed on 'bodily autonomy.'

"Engels wrote: 'A revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is...' One part of the population imposes its will on another part.

"Confronted with a virus that is infecting and killing thousands of people every day, public health takes precedent over individual interests—and especially when the individuals are undermining the fight to suppress the pandemic.

"Moreover, the fight for vaccinations combined with absolutely essential public health measures like school closings and lockdowns—measures opposed by Greenwald—involves a struggle against corporate-financial interests, backed by the capitalist state.

"Spouting reactionary anarchistic nonsense, Greenwald's petty-bourgeois anti-authoritarianism is a fraud that serves the interests of the ruling class."

The task of socialists in the pandemic is to help the working class enforce a scientific policy that protects the lives, health, livelihoods and liberties of the population against the policy of social murder enacted and ferociously defended by the ruling class. To do otherwise is to cede everything to the anti-vax positions of the right-wing libertarians, the far right, and innumerable conspiracy theorists.

Endorsing their insistence on "bodily autonomy" regarding vaccination cannot be separated from claims that lockdowns, enforced social distancing, mask wearing, and test-and-trace measures are also an unacceptable infringement on individual liberties. Corbyn says so explicitly in his YouTube video, drawing a line between COVID passports, "compulsory identification when you go to vote" and "a massive data bank of all our information", in terms virtually identical to his brother, Piers, one of the leading lights of the anti-vax protests.

Within a few days of announcing their open letter against the NHS vaccine mandate, the SWP were forced to acknowledge anti-vax demonstrations the previous weekend, attended by a handful of health workers, where "the trajectory was to the right... Far from a fringe element, those pushing 'harder' conspiratorial ideas, often rooted in antisemitism, are at the core."

The NHS 100k group in attendance "casts doubt on the effectiveness of the vaccine and promotes false anti-mask 'research'," and encouraged "its supporters to join the right wing English Workers Union, which is run by the leader of the far right English Democrats party."

The SWP's answer to this malignant development it encouraged was to double-down on calls for the trade unions to lead anti-mandate protests.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supports all necessary measures to control, suppress and eliminate SARS-CoV-2, including universal vaccination, but as part of a global strategy to be implemented by the working class in struggle against all capitalist governments and their political allies, including the self-proclaimed "left" apologists for herd immunity.



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