Jacobin once again endorses Sweden's "herd immunity" COVID policies

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1 December 2023

On Wednesday, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)-affiliated publication *Jacobin* published an article titled, "A Defense of Sweden's Pandemic Response," which openly embraces the "herd immunity" strategy pioneered by the Swedish government and exported throughout the world.

The article was written by Daniel Johansson, whom *Jacobin* identifies as "a political adviser to the Swedish Minister of Social and Health Affairs from 2019 to 2022," i.e., an individual directly implicated in implementing the Swedish government's policies of mass infection and death during the first three years of the pandemic.

Johansson's arguments, published without criticism by *Jacobin*, are fundamentally indistinguishable from the talking points of right-wing COVID fanatics who have gushed over Sweden's response. Shoulder-to-shoulder with the likes of Donald Trump and Boris Johnson, as well as *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, *Jacobin* insists that comprehensive public health measures to stop the spread of COVID-19 should be avoided due to the imperatives of the capitalist market.

Jacobin's right-wing record on the pandemic

Johansson's article is written in response to a previous piece published last week by *Jacobin*, titled, "The Swedish Left Failed the Vulnerable During the Pandemic." That article, written by two academics, Markus Balázs Göransson and Nicholas Loubere, offered tepid criticisms of the Swedish government and a false assessment of the response of socialists to the pandemic.

While lamenting the support of "left" organizations for Sweden's COVID-19 response, the article by Balázs Göransson and Loubere made no mention of the fact that *Jacobin* was a key voice in supporting "herd immunity" from the beginning.

First, in September 2020 *Jacobin* promoted and interviewed Martin Kulldorf, the Swedish-American academic who co-authored the Great Barrington Declaration that sanctioned mass infection with COVID-19 even before the rollout of vaccines.

In a passage from the interview, approvingly retweeted by *Jacobin* publisher Bhaskar Sunkara, Kulldorff declared, "The lockdown is the worst assault on the working class in half a century."

Soon after his interview with *Jacobin*, Kulldorf held a private meeting with Donald Trump to advise him on his COVID-19 response, which centered on fully reopening schools, discouraging masking and promoting large public gatherings to facilitate the spread of the virus. Also present at the meeting were GBD co-authors Jay Bhattacharya and Sunetra Gupta, as well as Scott Atlas and Joseph Ladapo.

Second, *Jacobin* joined the corrupt American teachers unions in pushing for the full reopening of schools, despite widespread concerns about the lack of measures to stop the spread of COVID in schools.

Third, in December 2022 *Jacobin* published two articles supporting the lifting of Zero-COVID in China, a disastrous policy decision implemented by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under intense pressure from US and European imperialism. After encouraging this anti-public health policy change, *Jacobin* made no mention of the mass infection and death that swept across China, infected virtually the entire population and killing at least 1-2 million people.

Largely, though, *Jacobin* has been silent about the pandemic, writing just a few articles on this world-historical event.

In an exchange on Twitter, Loubere confirmed that he was aware that *Jacobin* promoted the policies they were criticizing but "did not really see the relevance" of including it, showcasing the opportunist politics that pervade in these circles. Despite the thoroughly limited and dishonest criticisms of Sweden's homicidal policies in the piece by Balázs Göransson and Loubere, Johansson felt the need to issue a public reply, which the reactionary editors at *Jacobin* immediately accepted.

"Get back to work!"

The major point Johansson makes in response to criticisms of the Swedish model is that it "ignore[s] the fact that even in a small country like Sweden, millions of people must go to work every day, pandemic or not."

It should give any reader pause that such a statement is promoted by a magazine describing itself as "socialist."

In 2020, the bourgeois press overflowed with screeching pleas that the "cure cannot be worse than the disease." Panic gripped the political establishment as workers walked off the job in major industrial centers, demanding shut-downs until the pandemic could be brought under control.

Fascistic figures like Boris Johnson were caught saying, "no more F***ing lockdowns, let the bodies pile high in their thousands!" Most recently, the official UK COVID Inquiry has revealed that in December 2020 Johnson expressed the belief that COVID was "just nature's way of dealing with old people."

In Sweden, the Social Democratic government, including Johansson, was collaborating with Johnson and implementing the same policies.

While Anders Tegnell, the state epidemiologist of Sweden, did not put it as crudely as Johnson, he stated in a leaked email that his plan was to "keep schools open to reach herd immunity faster." When Tegnell's Finnish counterpart noted that closing schools alone would reduce the spread of COVID among the elderly by at least 10 percent, Tegnell callously replied, "10% might be worth it?"

These are the politics of social murder that *Jacobin* is solidarizing itself with.

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As the *World Socialist Web Site* has documented, "herd immunity" is a eugenicist policy in which the vulnerable in society are sacrificed in the name of the economy and the "healthy."

The Economist calculates that 27.4 million people have likely died due to the COVID-19 pandemic—about four-times the official count. At present, there are still over 5,000 excess deaths each day throughout the world. To excuse this massive death toll as "nature taking its course," or due to the necessity of people having to work, as *Jacobin* now states, is to abandon the most basic principles of public health, let alone a struggle against the capitalist system.

Moreover, the pandemic has unleashed a global wave of mass debilitation with Long COVID, potentially impacting hundreds of millions of people. With every reinfection of this constantly mutating virus, the risk builds for a host of medical problems associated with Long COVID, including cardiovascular disease, brain damage, chronic fatigue, kidney disease, and various forms of organ damage. New research from *Nature* demonstrates the ability of COVID-19 to persist in the body long after the acute stage of an infection.

This horrific reality of ongoing mass death and disability is completely covered up by Johansson and *Jacobin*, who could not care less about the suffering caused by the policies they promote.

Lying through omission

What is most remarkable about Johansson's defense of the Swedish pandemic response is what he leaves out. He champions statistics showing that Sweden had, over the last three years, a lower excess mortality rate compared to other countries, except the Nordic countries most similar to Sweden. This is true, but completely beside the point.

Since the emergence of the Omicron variant in late 2021, every country around the world has adopted the "herd immunity" policy pioneered in Sweden, abandoning their populations to a deadly novel pathogen in a manner without historical precedent. This has led to widespread death and disability throughout the world, equalizing overall excess death rates in most countries.

For Western countries that had "lockdowns," they were largely haphazard affairs lasting a few weeks that were poorly coordinated and quickly ended. Disconnected from a broader elimination strategy that utilized mass testing, rigorous contact tracing and the renovation of ventilation systems, these lockdowns were incapable of stopping viral transmission.

Thus, the differences in excess mortality that now exist between countries largely reflect the pre-pandemic state of their health care systems, as well as structural differences around housing and lifestyle patterns. Sweden, for example, has one of the highest rates of single occupancy housing—a sharp contrast to widespread multi-generational housing in Southern Europe and many other parts of the world.

The issue at stake is not the national comparison of this or that model of trying to solve the pandemic—there is and remains no national solution to the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather, the policies advocated early on in the pandemic by Sweden were championed by the ruling class in most other countries, and soon imposed on a global scale.

Sweden is not special. It was just an early adopter of a global policy of capitalism sacrificing lives, and the long-term well-being of the population, for profit.

Several other criticisms of the article should be made:

•Though a doctor advising the Swedish government, the author parrots the false conception that washing hands was a major way to stop the spread of COVID-19. Almost four years into the pandemic, it is well-understood that COVID-19 is an airborne virus, and that air filtration and ventilation, not hand washing, stops its spread. The myth of hand washing was fanned by the World Health Organization and others to justify returning to work with a pretense of safety.

•The author makes no mention of the demonization of masks in Sweden, despite significant evidence that properly worn N-95 masks significantly protect wearers and reduce viral transmission. To this day, Sweden remains an almost maskless society, even during COVID-19 surges.

• The basic conception behind the Swedish model was that "herd immunity" would be quickly reached, but there is no "herd immunity" to COVID-19. This very concept, derived from animal husbandry, is fallacious, as SARS-CoV-2 has continually mutated and there is no long-term, permanent protection given by either antibodies from the vaccines or catching COVID-19.

•While referring to the pandemic in the past tense, the author omits the current surge of COVID-19 infections in Sweden, which has led to an increase in hospitalization. Cases have increased an average of 30-50 percent each week during October and November, according to the Swedish government. But because systematic testing for the virus has been abandoned, with wastewater surveillance now the only available means to track viral transmission, these numbers may downplay the real situation. (See figure below)

Fighting a pandemic that has not ended

The *World Socialist Website* has insisted, since the beginning of the pandemic, that emergency international measures must be implemented to stop the spread of a virus that could kill millions and become permanently active in human society, leading to a mass, ongoing assault on people's health and well-being.

On October 24, 2021 the *WSWS* held an international webinar, "How to End the Pandemic," featuring leading scientific experts, doctors, and anti-COVID advocates. The event demonstrated that eliminating the virus was not fantasy, but a goal that could be achieved on the basis of an international policy fighting for public health over profit.

In this context, the statement posted in *Jacobin* by Göransson and Loubere that "leftists elsewhere failed to take Swedish leftists to task for their support for a neoliberal pandemic response that became the poster child for right-wing attempts to torpedo infection control in other countries," is simply false. Among the several thousand articles that the WSWS has written on the pandemic are dozens directly dealing with Sweden's herd immunity policies, including the role of the Swedish Social Democrats and Left Party in promoting it.

The fact that *Jacobin* so quickly issued a right-wing rebuttal to these limited criticisms of Sweden's "herd immunity" policy is a testament to the fact that the murderous, complacent, upper-middle class response embodied in the Swedish pseudo-left, is not a distinctly Swedish phenomenon, but rather a class one.

These forces, whether *Jacobin*, Vänsterpartiet (the Left Party), the Swedish Social Democrats, the DSA, or various other pseudo-left groups around the world, do not represent the working class and are not socialists. Their leadership is stock full of middle-class careerists for whom the pandemic has largely been seen as an unfortunate accident, an annoyance, perhaps a tragedy, but all-together something in the past and unavoidable.

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