

Government 'herd immunity' strategy tipping Britain towards huge death toll

Sunday 15 March 2020, by [HEARSE Phil](#) (Date first published: 14 March 2020).

Phil Hearse argues that the 'herd immunity' strategy is tantamount to a far-right death cult.

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TV journalist Robert Peston has summed up the government's virus strategy as follows:

"The strategy of the British government in minimising the impact of Covid-19 is to allow the virus to pass through the entire population so that we acquire herd immunity, but at a much delayed speed so that those who suffer the most acute symptoms are able to receive the medical support they need, and such that the health service is not overwhelmed and crushed by the sheer number of cases it has to treat at any one time."[1]

In other words, you've all got to get the virus, and then we'll be OK. Except we won't. Jeremy Rossman of Kent University estimates that the herd immunity strategy would require 70% of the population to get the disease, or 47 million people. He says:

"Achieving herd immunity would require well over 47 million people to be infected in the UK. Current estimates are that COVID-19 has a 2.3% case-fatality rate and a 19% rate of severe disease. This means that achieving herd immunity to COVID-19 in the UK could result in the deaths of more a million people with a further eight million severe infections requiring critical care."[2]

This strategy, which the *Financial Times* attributes to Dominic Cummings, is an exercise in brutal eugenics. As Owen Jones argues, poorer people are much more likely to have underlying health conditions and weaker immune systems. He says:

"A decade of austerity, and a social order that deprives millions of citizens of a comfortable existence, will mean many more deaths in the coming weeks and months that could have been avoided. The government's determination to discover a vaccine for coronavirus must be accompanied by a renewed commitment to addressing poverty. Like every crisis, this one is likely to affect working-class and poor people worst. That is not inevitable. It's a choice - and one within our power to stop, if only we had the will to do so."[3]

The Johnson/Cummings strategy is basically to let poor people and old people die. No wonder a *Daily Telegraph* journalist said that the virus might mean 'an economically beneficial cull of over-80s'. [4]

Labour's pitiful performance

In this situation, with a government whose inaction is out of step with other European countries who want to track down and stop the virus, the labour movement and the Left have to take action. There is just one problem: the Labour Party at a parliamentary level is useless – utterly incapable, so far, of offering any serious criticism of government strategy.

The statements of shadow health secretary John Ashworth are cringe-worthy and pathetic, as is the statement by Jeremy Corbyn.

As this article is written (14 March), the government has backed down over mass gatherings, which will be banned from next weekend.

But now the government propose to test only those people who are ill enough to be hospitalised. Others who suspect they have the virus have to stay at home; they are being advised now not to even ring 111, let alone present themselves at a GP surgery or hospital. Not being treated for seven days can be very serious with this disease. It could be a death sentence.

Roy Wilkes, a Labour Party member in Bury, Lancashire, says on Facebook:

"My 5-year-old grandson has come down with a cough and temperature. My daughter and him are self isolating. She said the helpline was useless. Two consequences of the government policy of not testing and tracking: his school will stay open, so if it is coronavirus it will spread like wildfire; secondly, if it isn't coronavirus, they are self isolating unnecessarily, and preventing me from having contact with my grandson, which is important to both of us."

All schools should close NOW as a matter of the utmost urgency. And we urgently need full-scale testing and tracking. The government is an absolute disgrace. But the Labour front bench has been rubbish at holding them to account. Why aren't they hammering them over this, and leading a movement to bring the bastards down?"

Government inaction is premised on the dire state of the NHS, and the suspicion that testing and tracking will stretch resources to breaking point. The government says the NHS will get everything it needs from the government, but the prior experience of such government promises (for example, cash to replace flammable cladding on high-rise buildings) shows they are mainly for political effect, with little relation to reality.

Popular demands

Labour should demand a change of course and a resumption of home testing and tracking. Money must be poured into buying up new testing kits. The production of instant test kits is underway, and with government money could be stepped up.

What can the Left and the labour movement do in this situation? In the first place, the Labour front bench must attack the herd immunity strategy and demand a resumption of tracking and treating.

Unions have to back their members in demanding social distancing and as safe as possible working conditions.

The RS21 website has produced an excellent series of proposals for union branches and workplace groups to take up [\[1\]](#):

- a) Close all non-essential businesses and functions.
- b) Promptly and without bureaucratic barriers provide full average pay for everyone off work as a result of the pandemic, irrespective of employment status, illness, diagnosis, self-isolation, quarantine, closure, lay-offs, reduction in hours, job losses, or other reasons.
- c) Scrap punitive absence management policies – nobody should be disciplined or lose their job as a result of the pandemic.
- d) Allow everyone who can to work from home and provide suitable equipment and services.
- e) End hot-desking (i.e. shared use of desks).
- f) Where possible, allow workers to vary working hours to reduce risk of infection on congested public transport.
- g) Increase cleaning in all workplaces and public spaces, particularly of common touch-points such as doors. Bring all outsourced cleaning staff in house.
- h) Redirect labour, offering training and work to rapidly expand essential services, cover for sickness absence, and address increased workloads.

Crowded transport like the London tube makes social distancing impossible, but the closure of all non-essential business and workplaces will sharply reduce passenger numbers.

Schools will close soon for the Easter holidays: the government should, as an emergency measure, organise plans for child care and meal provision so schools can shut soon, to enable NHS and other front-line staff to continue working. In many places such schemes exist in the school holidays. They need to be brought forward.

The spread of the virus is going to be much more rapid if zero-hours workers go to work because they have to. Sick pay should be from day one for all workers, not just those regularly employed.

Jeremy Corbyn's latest message says that the government must be pressed to explain more clearly the science behind their strategy. Absolutely pathetic. In this life and death emergency, studied caution is hardly the point. And Labour's response fails to understand that 'science' is being used as a cover for a far-right project of authoritarianism and Social Darwinist eugenics.

The Johnson/Cummings Tories have their priorities. They are to protect the rich and big business, to put profit before people, to keep as much of the economy as possible working regardless of the public health risk, and to allow 'surplus people' – the old, the poor, the sick – to die in order to achieve 'herd immunity'.

Labour – and the trade unions – should be defending health workers, working people generally, and the most vulnerable, who are overwhelmingly working class. It should be opposing top-down Tory diktat, increased police power, and the defence of corporate interests. It should be arguing for – indeed, organising for – a bottom-up, community-based, democratically-structured response to the crisis.

Don't trust the Tories. Don't trust the corporations. Don't trust the police. We need popular action to protect ourselves and our families, friends, and colleagues from a global pandemic created by capitalist agribusiness and fostered by decades of neoliberal attacks on the welfare state.

Phil Hearse, 14 March 2020

[1]
<https://www.itv.com/news/2020-03-12/british-government-wants-uk-to-acquire-coronavirus-herd-immunity-writes-robert-peston/>

[2] <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/coronavirus-can-herd-immunity-really-protect-us>

[3]
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/14/coronavirus-outbreak-inequality-austerity-pandemic>

[4]
<https://metro.co.uk/2020/03/11/telegraph-journalist-says-coronavirus-cull-elderly-benefit-economy-12383907/>

P.S.

- <https://www.timetomutiny.org/post/government-strategy-tipping-britain-towards-huge-death-toll>
- Phil Hearse is a veteran revolutionary socialist active in both Mutiny and Socialist Resistance.

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 52432), [Britain: Acting on Covid-19 - A set of actions and demands to campaign](#).