

Covid-19 (Britain and the world): Stop the Third Wave

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Roy Wilkes analyses the ongoing threat from the global pandemic - and the reactionary political forces it is unleashing.

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Covid continues to rage across the globe, with over 400,000 new cases every day. Here in the UK a third wave is now firmly established and growing exponentially, with case numbers now exceeding 7,000 per day, higher than at the end of February. The B.1.617.2 Delta variant (formerly known as the 'Indian' variant) is now dominant in the UK, accounting for over 70% of cases, and doubling every week.

Once again, for the third time now, the UK government hesitates and prevaricates over taking the action needed to keep its citizens safe, although it is increasingly clear that the 'road map' is crumbling. Tourists eagerly anticipating foreign holidays this summer are seeing that prospect vanishing before their eyes, with even Portugal now coming off the 'green list'. Those who were misled into thinking that the Covid crisis is all but over are beginning to realise that nothing could be further from the truth.

Political crisis

Dominic Cummings' explosive evidence to Parliament, coming as it did from the very heart of government, has generated a profound crisis for the establishment, however much Johnson's apologists try to write it off as the ravings of a disgruntled ex-employee. There were no real surprises in his 'revelations', and he shied away from criticising the most outrageous failure of government policy - the privatisation of test and trace - but to have them confirmed so openly came as a severe blow to the Johnson clique.

Campaigners are right to demand a public inquiry into the government's handling of the pandemic, and to call ministers to account for their callous and murderous policies of the past year. But this is not just a matter of historic or academic interest; our priority now must be to stop the third wave, by focusing the growing anger over the Johnson government's handling of the crisis into mass protest action on the streets and in the workplaces, and to continue to demand a UK and global elimination strategy NOW.

The scientists of Independent Sage spell out exactly what that would look like in the current context: full financial and practical support for those who need to self isolate; adequate ventilation and control measures in all indoor venues; reinstating face coverings in schools, and introducing enhanced classroom ventilation; comprehensive border controls with managed quarantine; accelerated vaccine rollout; and adequate resourcing for the global vaccine initiative.

We should actively support and promote the Indy Sage demands – though ‘border controls’ can be misinterpreted as anti-migrant, and a better formulation would be to simply demand Covid-secure borders, which should be achievable with effective and comprehensive public-health screening at all ports of entry, for travellers in both directions, and with full state-funded quarantine where necessary.

Vaccine rollout

Johnson’s only response to the crisis is to point to the vaccine rollout. 60% of the UK population have indeed received their first dose, with 42% fully vaccinated, which is a credit to the NHS. But we now know for certain that the vaccine is no magic bullet.

Data analysed by Public Health England shows that the first dose of both Pfizer and Astra Zeneca gives only 33% protection from the Delta variant, compared with 50% from the formerly dominant Alpha (‘Kent’) variant. Having both doses of the Pfizer gives 88% protection from Delta, compared with 93% for Alpha, whereas Astra Zeneca confers only 60% protection from Delta, compared with 66% for Alpha. This real-world data tells us two things. First, a strategy of relying almost exclusively on vaccine rollout will not stop a deadly third wave. Second, variants are becoming increasingly resistant to the vaccines.

In this context an urgent priority for all activists is to demand certificated safety measures (including adequate ventilation, mask-wearing, social distancing, hygiene practices, etc) in every workplace, and particularly in schools, which continue to be the main source of Covid outbreaks.

The same government that lied about throwing a protective shield around care homes is now suppressing information about the spread of the virus in schools. The establishment’s claim that children are safe from Covid is blatantly false. A recent survey by researchers at UCL found that 5% of children develop symptoms of long Covid, which could prove to be a ticking time-bomb for the NHS. And of course, children who are infected in schools pass the virus on to older and more vulnerable members of their communities.

Anti-lockdown and anti-vax movements

The anti-lockdown movement continues to grow and is merging with a well funded global anti-vaccination movement. The material basis of the anti-lockdown movement is the accelerating destruction of petty capital. Its primary social base is small-business owners, and those who adopt the libertarian free-market perspective of small business, including many non-unionised small-business employees.

Squeezed between finance capital on the one hand, to which it is heavily mortgaged, and which picks over the bones of the carcasses of the enterprises it bankrupts, and organised labour on the other, which demands public health and workplace protections that small businesses regard as unaffordable, the movement rails against both.

But its opposition to those personifications of big capital who are perceived to be the beneficiaries of lockdown – such as Bill Gates – is purely rhetorical. In practice the anti-lockdown movement acts entirely in the interest of capital by resisting the public health and workplace safety measures that would protect workers and working-class communities, but which would interrupt the circulation of capital.

The anti-lockdown movement claims to defend ‘freedom’, but the only freedom it is really defending is the freedom to circulate and accumulate capital, with no regard whatsoever for human life or for social responsibility. We, on the other hand, vigorously defend civil liberties as an aspect of the fight for real freedom – the emancipation of all humanity from the rule of capital.

A logical extension of the anti-lockdown movement is the accelerating growth and mobilisation of the anti-vax movement, which is also a reactionary petty-bourgeois movement. Those who have spent the past year arguing vociferously that Covid is either a hoax or at worst a mild form of the flu, are easy prey to the anti-vax movement launched in the late nineties by the fraudulent (struck-off) British physician Andrew Wakefield.

This movement also rails against big capital, in this case the pharmaceutical corporations, but its real aim is to enrich a growing layer of charlatan snake-oil con artists, with no concern whatsoever for the working-class victims of the pandemic it helps to sustain. This movement continues to pull ever widening layers into its rotten wake, including many black, Asian, and disabled people, who are understandably distrustful of the bourgeois state, but who are being cynically manipulated and exploited by the anti-vaxers.

The problem with big pharma is not that the vaccines it produces are harmful as such (although it does produce many other drugs that actually are harmful); it is that the corporations monopolise the means of producing the vaccines (including the ‘intellectual property rights’ to their production) in order to maximise profits. And the solution to this problem is not to replace the pharmaceutical corporations with snake-oil charlatans, but to socialise their means of production and to smash their intellectual property rights, so that everyone around the globe can benefit from the vaccines.

Both of these movements are of course self-defeating; the small-business sector is bearing a heavy burden not because the state has acted effectively to suppress the virus, but for precisely the opposite reason, because it has failed to do so. But the more it faces ruin at the hands of big capital, which it is powerless to resist, the more callous and enraged will the petty bourgeoisie become as it lashes out at the working class and oppressed. We know all too well, from the experience of the 1930s, where this can lead. The only workable response to the reactionary movements of the petty bourgeoisie is for organised labour to push hard in the opposite direction – for a comprehensive elimination strategy.

International solidarity

International Covid solidarity is not a question of charity but of mutual self-preservation. New variants are springing up all around the world, particularly where the virus is flourishing. There are now Eta, Epsilon, Theta, and Kappa variants, and it will not be long before we run out of Greek letters completely. Even Matt Hancock has been forced to acknowledge that every new variant that arises may threaten to circumvent the vaccines. A new variant could emerge anywhere in the world to wipe out all of the protection that the vaccine rollout was meant to provide.

The only effective zero Covid strategy therefore is a global zero Covid strategy, and that means a radical change of direction, particularly on the part of the rich states of the Global North. Of course,

we must demand vaccine justice and vaccine equity – the abolition of intellectual property rights not only in the vaccines themselves but also in the means of producing the vaccines – but to actually eliminate Covid we need to look far beyond the technical solutions of the vaccination program.

In particular, we need a massive and unconditional redistribution of resources from the Global North to the Global South, to enable the historic victims of imperialism to develop the systems of find, test, trace, isolate, and support they will need to defeat the virus. The \$1.7 trillion per annum currently spent globally on arms, for example, would be more than sufficient to eliminate Covid once and for all; switching that expenditure from the means of destroying humans to the means of destroying the coronavirus would be an appropriate response to this unfolding global emergency, and one that all working people across the globe could support.

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P.S.

- Anti*capitalistresistance. 11 Jun 2021:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/stop-the-third-wave/>
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