

di Gavin Rae

The global covid-19 pandemic is perhaps the most serious global threat to lives and livelihoods since the Second World War. The public health crisis is also conjoined with an economic crisis that is leading to millions of people around the world losing their jobs, with poverty, insecurity and inequalities deepening.

An often repeated myth is that the health and economic crisis can be separated. The idea that the 'cure is worse than the disease' is based upon the conviction that the lockdowns are an exaggerated response to the pandemic, which will end up hurting more than the virus itself. The left must be clear that this is a false presentation of reality and that it is impossible to solve the economic crisis that we face without dealing with the pandemic itself.

The covid-19 crisis has been allowed to escalate as many governments (not least in Europe and America) did not respond with sufficient speed and rigour to impose a strict lockdown and reduce social contact. The covid-19 virus was identified in China at the end of December and was then contained and suppressed through the Chinese authorities imposing a strict lockdown, which saved hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of lives. This was followed by countries such as Vietnam, South Korea and New Zealand which have managed to suppress the spread of the virus (through a mixture of lockdowns and extensive testing and tracing programmes), managing to keep deaths down to a minimum. In Europe those countries (e.g. Slovakia, Slovenia, Greece) which imposed a lockdown relatively early have managed to keep the death rate far below many other countries. The most neo-liberal right governments in the western capitalist world have prioritised the profits of business above human life. The Trump administration in the USA, Conservative Party government in the UK and the Presidency of Bolsonaro in Brazil have all failed to protect their populations from the virus. In these three countries alone almost 140,000 people have already been killed by covid-19 - a figure that in reality is certainly much higher. Also, the 'social democratic' Swedish government has pursued a similar policy of prioritising the economy over the lockdown resulting, at the time of writing, in 3,643 people being killed, compared to a combined number of 679 people in Norway and Denmark. These governments have essentially promoted the pseudoscientific theory of 'herd immunity' that believes immunity can be gained through allowing the virus to spread widely through society. In reality this is a justification for accepting a huge loss of human life.

The left cannot therefore approach the present situation as if it is a 'normal' economic crisis. It is not clear how long it will be before a cure or vaccine can be developed and it is possible that covid-19 will remain with us for a number of years. The priorities for the left have to therefore be that governments suppress the number of infections through strict programmes of lockdown, supplemented with mass programmes of testing and tracing and providing the health systems and workers with the necessary equipment and resources to treat people. This means that a left economic programme cannot be concentrated at the moment on what will happen once the crisis has ended, but on protecting people from the pandemic whilst it is still going on.

A classic Keynesian programme of government investment to increase effective demand and drive economic growth is completely inappropriate in the current period. Rather what is required are government policies that will allow the vast majority of the population to stay at home for as long as

necessary and socially distance, whilst essential workers are able to work in controlled and safe conditions. It may be the case that governments will have to impose and ease their lockdowns according to how the pandemic develops (e.g. further waves of the virus, possible new mutations, etc). This means that governments have to provide the means for the majority of the population to not be economically active for a period of time, through the provision of benefits for all those who have no income. Also, the government will have to ensure that food and essential products and services are provided, as production and global supply chains are disrupted. Those people that have to continue working (health, delivery, postal, shop workers, etc.) need to be fully protected and rewarded for their labour. The covid-19 pandemic has revealed how it is only labour that creates value and that the economy cannot operate when labour is not deployed in the productive process. It has also uncovered how those workers that produce a real 'use value' for society (e.g. health care) are more needed than those whose primary purpose is to create surplus value for the owners of capital.

The response of capitalism is to push workers back into work as rapidly as possible, regardless of the human cost that this brings. This resonates with sections of the population, which are suffering by not being able to earn a wage and are insufficiently protected by the state. A new movement is growing for the lockdowns to be stopped and the economy opened. These tend to be made up of sections of the petit-bourgeoisie and middle class which have seen their living standards collapse (in Poland for example the anti-lockdown demonstrations are organised as 'entrepreneur strikes'). In the USA these demonstrations have aligned with the Trump administration and have included people carrying heavy weapons. In the UK currently, the government has started to ease the lockdown at a time when infections and deaths are continuing to rise. Their push to open schools in June is being met with resistance from teachers' trade unions (supported by health worker trade unions) that oppose this dangerous step.

The covid-19 virus adversely affects the most vulnerable in society - most directly the elderly and sick. The policy of 'herd immunity' is a modern day equivalent of eugenics, whereby those who are seen to be the weakest in society are allowed to perish. Workers are being forced into the frontline, made to work in unsafe conditions and are most likely to be infected and die from the virus. For example in Poland, whilst the number of deaths remains low, there has been an outbreak amongst miners in Silesia recently, who have been working in unsafe conditions and then spreading the virus into their communities. In the UK, so-called 'low-skilled' workers are 3 times more likely to be killed by the virus than managers and directors of companies. Over 100 British health workers have been killed - often because they have not been given sufficient protective clothing. The death rate amongst the black and ethnic minority community in Britain is two times higher than that of white people.

The left has to stand with workers and protect the most oppressed and vulnerable in society against the covid-19 virus and oppose those that put the interests of business and profits before health and life.

Gavin Rae