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Covid-19 pandemic

For a European strategy against the pandemic. Let's support the initiative from science!

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On 19 December, scientists launched an international appeal for the containment of the Covid-19 pandemic throughout Europe. [1] Trade unions, liberation movements and socialist organisations should unreservedly support this call and enrich it with a socio-ecological programme of demands. On this basis and inspired by the campaign #ZeroCovid recently launched in England, Wales, and Scotland they should launch mass campaigns throughout Europe.

The authors of the appeal note that European governments have so far failed to formulate a common vision for dealing with the pandemic. However, in order to fight the pandemic effectively, a common European strategy is urgently needed. This is the only way to keep the borders open. The vaccines will take some time to get the pandemic under control, probably not before the end of 2021. The authors formulate a clear and immediate societal goal: every single SARS-CoV-2 infection in Europe must be traceable. To achieve this goal, the authors call for the implementation of a three-step strategy.

1. *Firstly*, reduce infections to a maximum of 10 Covid-19 cases per million people per day. This requires decisive action and in-depth interventions. To avoid a ping-pong effect between countries and regions, the measures to reduce the number of cases must be enforced in all European countries as quickly and as synchronised as possible.
2. *Secondly*, once this first step has been achieved, the restrictions can be gradually relaxed. The low case numbers must be maintained in the long term with a control strategy - at least 300 tests per million inhabitants per day. Local outbreaks must be contained immediately and vigorously, if necessary through regional lockdowns.
3. *Thirdly*, a common long-term vision must be developed. Context-specific regional and national action plans should be developed based on European targets. These include screening and vaccination strategies, protection of at-risk groups and support for people who are particularly affected by the pandemic.

This goal and the strategy of this appeal are to be fully supported from an ecosocialist and emancipatory perspective. Why does such a massive containment of the pandemic to only a very few infections make sense? Five arguments:

" As the spread of a virus increases, so does the frequency of its mutation. Only with the lowest possible number of infections can mutations of the virus be kept so low that their unexpected consequences can be adequately controlled by society.

" The ideology of herd immunity is inhuman and reactionary. The scientific evidence is overwhelming that such a strategy would lead to a social catastrophe with SARS-CoV-2. The vaccination campaigns will only achieve their effect after a significant delay towards the end of 2021. The vaccinations will take place very unevenly, geographically and socially, reflecting imperialist relations and the lack of social justice on a global scale.

" The much-vaunted protection of at-risk groups is an illusion. In European countries, about a quarter of people belong to a high-risk group or are in close contact with people at risk (a high proportion of people over 65, workers in health and social care, family members, friends, etc.). So many people cannot be specially protected or even shielded. The course of the pandemic and the helplessness of the authorities reveal this very brutally. Moreover, it would be neither acting on the principles of solidarity nor socially appropriate, but rather extremely selective to simply isolate the sick and elderly for months or even years and exclude them from social life.

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" Only a containment of the pandemic to a very few cases would make it possible to prevent the burdens and consequential costs from being disproportionately borne by workers, the most exploited and the poor, and especially women. The radical containment of the pandemic must be a central concern of the organisations of the workers', women's and anti-racist movements. The pandemic is exposing class relations, gender relations and racism more starkly than ever.

" Imperialist countries can contain the spread of the virus through technical and social means, with lockdowns, closures, and targeted restrictions. This requires social and political will. In the emerging and poor countries, especially in the huge urban agglomerations and megacities, such a radical containment strategy is almost impossible because of poverty, living conditions and lack of infrastructure. That is why imperialist countries also have a global responsibility.

It is obvious that the balance of power at this moment is not sufficient to enforce this orientation towards near eradication of the virus. Nevertheless, these arguments must be raised. An ecosocialist orientation consists precisely in overcoming the apparent economic constraints and making what seems socially unrealistic conceivable and realisable. Large sections of the left denounce the authoritarian tendencies of governments' pandemic policies. This is of course correct. But this democratic argumentation only makes sense if one recognises the fundamental challenge of the pandemic for people's health and at the same time defines and supports the goal of radically containing the spread of the SARS-Cov-2 virus. To insist only on individual liberties is tantamount to reactionary libertarianism.

With the above-mentioned appeal, numerous natural and medical scientists are actively intervening in a central social debate. They are thus acting more directly politically than many trade unions and left-wing parties, which, after almost a year of the Covid-19 pandemic, have still not managed to define a clear policy about the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. In order to develop joint health policy initiatives, it is useful to start a dialogue with these researchers. In Germany, some of them have already spoken out, in April and September, with valuable opinions about how to combat the pandemic. [2]

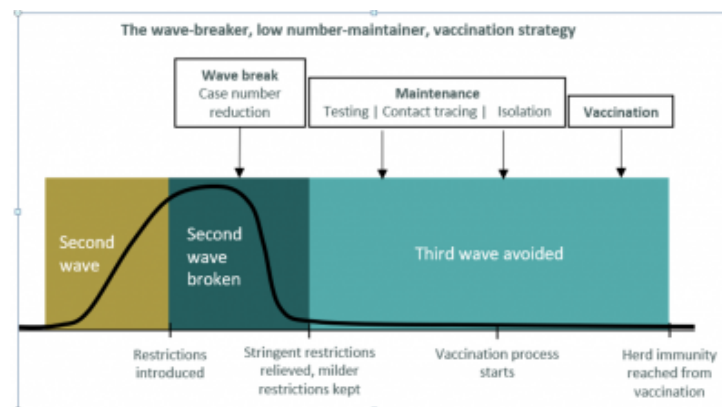


Figure 1: Graphical representation of the progression of infections achieved through the required measures (this work by Ewa Szczurek is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

However, this appeal leaves out key social and economic concerns that need to be raised in order to make this strategy one based on solidarity and to convince working-class people of the necessary measures. Governments are expanding their repressive apparatus, forcing people to restrict their social life and at the same time doing everything to satisfy the interests of capital. The pandemic affects people extremely unequally, globally and in every society. The restrictive measures taken by governments are exacerbating social inequality and social discrimination.

The pandemic reveals the social misery of our societies.

The foremost aim of governments' measures so far is to defend competitiveness and thus the profitability of companies in the sectors of the economy they consider important. Covertly, most European governments have in mind the hazy goal of a slowed down herd immunity. In doing so, governments are complicit in the deaths of several hundred thousand people in Europe. Economic interests come first. Some liberal representatives of capital openly express this "balancing of interests".

Governments have allowed and continue to allow the spread of infection until the health system is on the verge of collapse. In doing so, they deliberately plan for the physical and psychological exhaustion of health workers. They are counting on a massive vaccination campaign to end the pandemic. But this will take time and many people are sceptical about the hasty vaccination campaign. Moreover, the vaccines currently being approved have only been tested for giving immunity. It is not yet known to what extent they also prevent someone from being a carrier.

Verena Kreilinger, Winfried Wolf and I have already described in detail in our book *Corona, Krise, Kapital. Plädoyer für eine solidarische Alternative in den Zeiten der Pandemie* (Corona, Crisis, Capital: A plea for an alternative based on solidarity in times of pandemic) [3] the failure of the EU in the fight against the pandemic and called for a joint response based on solidarity. There has never been a European pandemic strategy. This is logical because the EU is not a community of solidarity but an institution for intensifying competition. Therefore, no solidarity-based impulses can be expected from the EU in the future.

What is serious, however, is the failure of the trade unions and socialist parties, which have never even proposed the rudiments of a solidarity-based European pandemic strategy. Worse still, neither The Left Party in Germany nor any other socialist or left party in Europe of any weight have been able to set a clear goal for combating the pandemic in its own country. Why don't the Left Party in Germany and similar political forces in other European countries demand clearly and simply that infections must immediately be reduced to a level so that every single infection can be traced?

This is necessary to ensure the health of the population. Why is the workers movement unable to stand up unconditionally for the health of wage earners? Is it because the trade unions subordinate themselves to the economic interests of big companies or certain sections of the economy and fear that they cannot effectively defend workers against corporate blackmail and layoffs?

The huge health disaster is now leading a growing number of people in England, Wales, and Scotland to bring a radical perspective to the social debate. Trade unionists, social health activists and activists from various movements, as well as ecosocialists, launched a campaign in November under the slogan Zero Covid to eradicate the spread of the virus as far as possible. Socialists in Ireland also support this position. Whether this will broaden into a mass campaign remains to be seen. In any case, it makes sense for socialist organisations in other countries to take up these issues. The pan-European call by academics now offers the chance to broaden this discussion.

Trade unions, liberation movements, and socialist organisations must unreservedly support the international initiative presented here and set out a socio-ecological programme of demands. These include:

" Lockdowns, closures, and measures to contain the pandemic must involve all areas of society - production, transport, consumption, and leisure - based on the principles of solidarity. Areas of the economy that are not immediately necessary for society should be temporarily restricted or shut down if necessary if the restrictions help to quickly contain the spread of the virus. This is especially true for meat factories, large warehouses and all businesses where employees have to work in close proximity to each other.

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" The entire health and care sector must be expanded immediately and sustainably and strengthened with an expansion of the workforce. Wages must be raised significantly.

" All privatisation in the health and care sector must be stopped immediately. Hospital financing based on the number of cases must be replaced by a system based on solidarity and needs.

" There must be no rescue packages for companies that help to maintain sectors that are socially and ecologically nonsensical (e.g. the aviation and automotive industries). Instead, a socio-ecological restructuring fund should be set up to co-finance industrial conversion and decommissioning

" Workers must be protected against unemployment. Unemployment benefits should be increased. Cultural workers and micro-enterprises must be directly supported.

" The measures to contain the spread of the virus hit the already disadvantaged the hardest. This discrimination must be countered with appropriate measures (smaller groups in nurseries and schools, opening vacant hotels for families in overcrowded flats and for refugees, etc., see also Kreiling, Wolf, Zeller 2020).

" The measures to contain the pandemic must be financed by society through a solidarity levy on inheritances, large incomes and corporate profits and assets.

" Vaccines must be a global public good for all humanity. Therefore, patents must be abolished. People in poor countries must have the same right to vaccination as people in imperialist countries.

The trade unions should immediately initiate an open discussion process with workers in workplaces in compliance with the pandemic precautionary measures to design and implement joint steps "from below" against the pandemic in workplaces, in public transport, and at home. In dialogue with the feminist movement, refugee solidarity groups, the tenants' movement, and the climate movement, as well as the scientific community, an effective programme to fight the pandemic based on solidarity can be developed and realised. Governments will not protect the people; the people need to protect each other both against the pandemic and against the unjust measures of governments.

23 December 2020

This article originally appeared in [German](#) and has been kindly translated by the author Christian Zeller with further editing by Terry Conway.

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[1] Contain COVID-19. A joint statement of scientists from all across Europe, 19 Decembers 2020 "[Calling for Pan-European commitment for rapid and sustained reduction in SARS-CoV-2 infections](#)".

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[3] Kreilinger, Verena; Wolf, Winfried und Zeller, Christian (2020): *Corona, Krise, Kapital. Plädoyer für eine solidarische Alternative in Zeiten der Pandemie*. Köln: Papyrossa, 277 S.