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Covid-19 pandemic

- IV Online magazine - 2021 - IV563 - December 2021 -

Publication date: Sunday 19 December 2021

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Vaccination is a social obligation, not a personal choice.

Twenty-two Labour MPs have just voted with the Tory Right against mandatory Covid vaccination for NHS staff. They reflect the anti-vaxx position of some unions. They have support from some others on the Left. But they are wrong. Here's why.

The anti-vaxx movement is rooted in far-right conspiracy theory. It is supported by many on the Authoritarian Right, like the 61 Tory MPs who also voted against mandatory vaccination. The Tory Right argues the case on the basis of individual liberties. Some especially moronic Tories have likened current pandemic precautions to events in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Gulags.

The anti-vaxx movement is a bridge to fascism. It is fuelled by a torrent of internet bullshit, and is part of a global wave of irrationalism that is facilitating the rise of the Authoritarian Right and, under its umbrella, harder forms of fascism.

More broadly, neoliberalism has created a socially fragmented world of atomised, alienated, anomic people, and, with its relentless emphasis on competition, materialism, and personal advancement, has fostered an epidemic of extreme narcissistic individualism. An ideology of right-wing selfishness – 'libertarianism' – of which anti-vaxx sentiment is one expression – has grown in this seed-bed.

The Left should make no concessions of any kind to this reactionary rubbish. We are a society, we are dependent on each other, and we have obligations of care towards one another.

A duty of care

We are not entitled to endanger the lives of others by speeding or shooting the lights, to sexually abuse women or children or anyone else, or to physically assault people because of their ethnicity or religion. Laws against these things are not reflections of a 'repressive state' or 'capitalist interests', they are not violations of 'individual freedom' or 'civil liberties' – they are the universal protections of a civilised society.

Nor, in the socialist movement, do we recognise a right to refuse to join a trade union in a fully unionised workplace or to cross a picket-line during a strike. Both of these may involve sacrifice (payment of union dues or loss of income). But they are nonetheless, as far as we are concerned, binding moral obligations. We describe those who violate them as 'scabs'.

By the same token, in a pandemic, in the face of a highly contagious and deadly disease, we do not have a right to refuse to be vaccinated and to go around infecting others. We have a duty of care to ourselves (to avoid becoming hospitalised and an additional burden on the NHS), and to others – our families, friends, colleagues, and strangers we meet as we go about our daily business.

The Covid infection rate in Britain has just broken all previous records. That is thanks to the irresponsibility, incompetence, and corruption of the Tory regime. It is thanks to Johnson's greenlighting of virus-spreading

behaviour. And it is thanks to the fascists behind the anti-vaxx conspiracy theories that have conned millions of people. But that does not absolve us – not any of us – of responsibility towards others. It does not entitle us to behave like Tories.

Those in close contact with others, especially vulnerable others, have a particular responsibility. I have been exceptionally dependent on the NHS over the last six months for medical treatment for a life-threatening condition. I am currently immuno-compromised and therefore vulnerable, shielding, and housebound. I would expect everyone coming into contact with me when I visit hospital to be vaccinated. I would be shocked to learn that any had not been.

There are millions of us: people for whom Covid is a potential killer. That means every one of us has a social obligation to maximise the protection we can give to others. Vaccination is not a matter of personal choice. Socialists (and trade unionists) who make concessions to right-wing conspiracy theory and libertarian ideology are wrong.

15 Dec 2021

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