

Accomplices to social murder

The international pseudo-left and the lifting of Zero-COVID in China: Part 1

Evan Blake
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This is the first part of a two-part article. Part two can be read here.

Since its outbreak more than three years ago, in January 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has killed over 20 million people, disabled tens of millions more with Long COVID, pushed health care systems to the brink of collapse, exacerbated social inequality, and accelerated the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the antechamber to World War III.

For the first time since World War II, life expectancy declined globally in 2020 and 2021. Despite US President Joe Biden's claim that "the pandemic is over," echoed by capitalist politicians throughout the world, this social catastrophe continues. Every week, there are nearly 100,000 excess deaths attributable to the pandemic globally, or roughly 1 million deaths every three months. With the ending of Zero-COVID in China and the worldwide scrapping of all mitigation measures that slow the spread of the coronavirus, it is mutating and evolving into new, potentially more dangerous variants.

For the ruling class, the pandemic was seized upon as an opportunity to enrich itself and deepen its decades-long assault on the living conditions of the international working class. While refusing to implement the necessary public health measures to stop the transmission of the virus, in March 2020 the advanced capitalist governments passed unprecedented financial bailouts. As deaths rose by the millions, the collective fortunes of the corporate-financial pandemic profiteers increased by *trillions*.

The ruling classes, anxious to suppress public health protocols that interfered with the capitalist production process from which surplus value and profit is derived, promoted ignorance, superstition and irrational fears of science, while whipping up far-right forces to agitate against lockdowns, mask-wearing, remote learning, and all other measures necessary to stop the pandemic. Their motto was: Better that several thousand workers in a factory should be infected than suffer one week of lost production time!

For decades, the capitalist governments have viewed the gradual increase in life expectancy with dismay and alarm. The ability of the elderly to obtain subsidized medical care as they made it into their 70s, 80s and even 90s has been seen as a budgetary calamity.

During the pandemic, the capitalist elites have viewed the deaths of "non-productive" elderly workers, as well as declines in life expectancy, as positive outcomes for reducing pension obligations and other social welfare spending. They have revived the eugenicist and Social Darwinist conceptions that dominated in ruling circles during the first half of the 20th century and motivated the Holocaust. The Nazi concept of *lebensunwertes Leben*, or "life unworthy of life," is now applied to elderly and immunocompromised people left to die en masse.

Scientists have warned that climate change and unplanned urbanization are forcing animals to migrate outside their native habitats, bringing with them thousands of pathogens that have the potential to spill over into

human populations, making future pandemics all but inevitable. But there is absolutely no indication that governments are seeking to prevent or prepare for this near-term danger. Just the opposite: to the extent that the ruling elites have drawn any lessons from the catastrophe of the past three years, it is that nature should be left to run its course, that the production process and financial interests of corporations should not be disrupted, and that the accumulation of profits and wealth must not be interfered with. The deaths of millions will be accepted as the "price of doing business" during future pandemics. The infamous words of former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson—"Let the bodies pile high"—will define public policy.

For the working class, the pandemic has been a traumatic shock that has upended social life and revealed the brutality of class relations. It has accelerated and intensified the ongoing radicalization of workers globally, precipitating numerous struggles against the homicidal policies of the ruling elites. In the US, Canada, Italy and other countries, the belated lockdowns in March 2020 were only implemented after the working class mounted wildcat strikes, independent of the pro-capitalist unions, to save lives.

Beginning in China, growing opposition among workers forced several governments to implement comprehensive Zero-COVID policies in the early stages of the pandemic. Grounded in mass working class solidarity, these Zero-COVID policies were highly successful at saving lives. The death toll in China, New Zealand, Vietnam and other countries remained an infinitesimal fraction of that of the US and other imperialist powers. However, confronted with relentless pressure from global finance capital, these governments eventually lifted their Zero-COVID policies in 2021 and 2022, with catastrophic consequences in each country.

Throughout the pandemic, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the *World Socialist Web Site* have articulated the interests of the working class and advocated a global public health strategy to eliminate COVID-19 in every country. The WSWS has published over 5,000 articles on the pandemic during the past three years, analyzing every major scientific and political development related to the pandemic throughout the world.

A markedly different response arose within substantial sections of the upper-middle class and political parties that express their interests. To a great extent, these social layers were able to isolate or work safely at home throughout 2020, with the pandemic generally viewed as a serious but only temporary disruption. Moreover, small business owners and self-employed professionals who received inadequate support during the initial lockdowns, as well as layers more heavily invested in the stock market, largely embraced the anti-lockdown propaganda pushed by the ruling class. Once vaccinated in early 2021, the affluent middle class was anxious to resume its pre-pandemic mode of wealth accumulation and

amusement and proceed as if nothing too serious had happened.

The social interests and political conceptions of the affluent middle class are articulated by various political parties that comprise what the ICFI has defined as the “pseudo-left.” This term is justified by the fact that these organizations have nothing in common—in terms of their political program, their practice and the social constituency to which they appeal—with what the term “left” has signified since the dawn of the socialist movement in the first half of the 19th century.

Some of these organizations retain—as a result of either a long-past historical association with Marxism and even Trotskyism or, more commonly, the most cynical opportunism—the words “socialism” and “workers” on their political calling cards. But this sort of false advertising does not determine the objective social content of their program and practice. The essential nature of these organization is defined by politics of personal identity, centered on race, ethnicity, nationality, gender and sexual orientation.

The focus of their activities, therefore, is not the class struggle, the development of socialist consciousness and the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism by the working class. Their “leftism” is, instead, aimed at achieving a broader distribution of wealth presently monopolized by the richest 1 or 2 percent of society. The social program of their “leftism” would be satisfied if a somewhat larger share of the money sloshing around at the top would be allowed to trickle down into the less fortunate layers of the wealthiest top 10 percent.

Included among the pseudo-left are the Pabloites of *International Viewpoint*; the Morenoite tendencies, led by Trotskyist Fraction—Fourth International (FT) and International Workers League—Fourth International (IWLfi); the state capitalists, led by International Socialist Tendency (IST); as well as International Marxist Tendency (IMT), Committee for a Workers’ International (CWI), International Socialist Alternative (ISA) and the International Socialist League (ISL). Prominent national pseudo-left groups include Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, the Left Party in Germany, the Socialism and Liberty Party in Brazil and others.

The pseudo-left responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with a collective shrug. After ignoring the early signs of the developing global crisis in January-February 2020, starting in March 2020 they each published a few news articles monthly throughout the first year of the pandemic. Amid the roll-out of vaccines in 2021, they gradually stopped covering the pandemic altogether.

Over the past three years, these parties have collectively written just a few hundred articles on the pandemic. Not a single one has issued a programmatic statement outlining a scientific strategy to eliminate COVID-19 globally. As noted in a recent Twitter thread, they also maintain silence on the catastrophic impacts of Long COVID.

The pseudo-left’s hostility to public health and support for imperialism found its sharpest expression in their demand—echoing that of the Western corporate media and political establishment—that China abandon its Zero-COVID strategy. This reached a climax over the past four months, during which every pseudo-left tendency in the world supported this catastrophic policy shift in China.

This essay will provide a representative sampling of the response of these organizations, ostensibly claiming to be on the left, socialist and even Trotskyist, to this latest manifestation of the greatest health crisis of modern history, in which they became the unabashed advocates of mass infection. It is a political biopsy, which exposes the malignant cells of a deeply sick and politically reactionary social milieu. This can be a laborious process because one is dealing with an alphabet soup of organizations, but there is no way around it. They must be identified and their positions memorialized. Their culpability in this social crime cannot be forgotten.

Who is responsible for the lifting of Zero-COVID in China?

January 23, 2020 marked the beginning of the first Zero-COVID policy in the world, as 13 million people entered a citywide lockdown in Wuhan, China. This was soon expanded to all 15 other cities in Hubei province, affecting 57 million people in total. These lockdowns, unprecedented in world history, were combined with a program of regular mass testing, rigorous contact tracing, the safe isolation of infected patients, and travel restrictions and universal masking—public health measures that mankind had accumulated since the Black Death in the 14th century.

After 76 days of immense self-sacrifice and determination by Chinese workers that led to the elimination of the coronavirus across China, on April 17, 2020, the lockdowns were lifted and daily life for the Chinese population returned to normal.

Public health officials and scientists in other countries who had been skeptical of the ability to eliminate COVID-19, including Dr. Michael Baker in New Zealand, watched what happened in China and decided to replicate this Zero-COVID program. This led to the elimination of the virus in many countries, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. Whenever an outbreak of COVID-19 broke through border management systems, these same measures were able to quickly stop viral transmission.

Over the next two years, the political establishment and corporate media of the imperialist powers, above all the United States, continuously demanded the lifting of Zero-COVID wherever this policy was in place. Themselves guilty of killing millions of their citizens, they could not tolerate the living proof that mass infections and deaths were the unnecessary outcome of their socially criminal policies.

In tandem with the concoction of the Wuhan Lab Lie—which falsely laid blame on China for deliberately or accidentally unleashing COVID-19 on the world—the Western media issued a steady stream of propaganda denouncing Zero-COVID, and, in particular, lockdowns as “authoritarian” and “anti-democratic,” labels later adopted by the pseudo-left.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) maintains an authoritarian regime. But the application of this term to its initial Zero-COVID policy towards the pandemic is false, intended to discredit essential and life-saving public health measures. Throughout the pandemic, the lockdowns were always temporary and targeted, contrary to the myth that cities were permanently shut down and cut off from access to necessary resources.

The inescapable problem of the Chinese response was the impossibility of applying Zero-COVID on a purely national scale. It was not possible to construct and maintain an impenetrable anti-COVID “Great Wall of China” that would prevent the incessant episodes of viral penetration from external sources. To this fundamental problem was the added economic impact upon China’s capitalist economy of imperialist pressure to abandon Zero-COVID.

Last October and November, Wall Street and the world’s major corporations exerted intense economic pressure on the CCP to lift Zero-COVID, with Apple, Google, Samsung, Microsoft and other companies threatening to shift production away from China unless even limited lockdowns and other basic public health measures were abandoned. At the same time, opposition to Zero-COVID mounted in the Chinese bourgeoisie and upper-middle class, whose wealth was increasingly impacted by these same measures. The CCP finally relented on November 11, announcing 20 measures that loosened every aspect of Zero-COVID, under conditions in which official infections were already surging across the country.

On November 24, an apartment fire took place in Ürümqi which tragically claimed the lives of 10 people. Without any evidence, claims were made that the Zero-COVID policy was responsible. In reality, the neighborhood where the fire took place was not under strict lockdown, and residents were not prevented from leaving their apartments and the

building. Barriers that blocked a firetruck from reaching the building were installed before the pandemic, the product of poor city planning, not as part of a lockdown.

Nevertheless, the fire in Ürümqi prompted a series of choreographed anti-Zero-COVID protests at universities and cities across China, involving primarily upper-middle class students and no more than a few thousand protesters out of a population of 1.4 billion. After a veritable tsunami of news reports and editorials in the Western press hailing these protests, on December 7 the CCP scrapped all remaining public health measures.

The abrupt abandonment of Zero-COVID had catastrophic consequences. Over 1 billion people are believed to have fallen ill in the country's first wave of mass infection. While official figures are now entirely inaccurate, the health analytics firm Airfinity estimates that over 1.6 million people have likely died from COVID-19 since December 1, more than the three-year US death toll of over 1.1 million condensed into just four months.

Contrary to the lies of the CCP that this will be a one-time "exit wave" which will return the country to a pre-pandemic "normal," China is in fact now integrated in the global "forever COVID" nightmare of perpetual waves of mass infection, death, and debilitation with Long COVID.

The lifting of Zero-COVID in China amounts to a massive social crime against the Chinese and international working class, which has opened a new stage of the pandemic. The CCP regime, serving as capitalist agents of world imperialism and the nexus between global finance capital and the Chinese working class, clearly bears full responsibility for its actions.

Also deeply implicated in this crime are the Western imperialist powers and their corporate media, which for over two years continuously demanded the lifting of Zero-COVID regardless of the social impacts.

Finally, every pseudo-left political party and publication that agitated against Zero-COVID without regard for the consequences shares in the guilt for this social crime.

The Foxconn and "white paper" protests: Propaganda vs. reality

After the CCP's initial pivot away from Zero-COVID on November 11, official COVID-19 infections in China continued to climb and break new records. Not a single publication outside of the *World Socialist Web Site* advocated for the reimplementing of Zero-COVID, let alone the extension of this elimination strategy throughout the world. Throughout these critical weeks in November, during which it was still possible to contain the growing outbreak, the entire pseudo-left remained silent, giving their tacit endorsement to this policy shift.

On November 22, a major demonstration involving thousands of workers was held at the notorious Foxconn sweatshop in Zhengzhou, the world's largest plant producing Apple iPhones. The workers demanded to be paid the wages and bonuses they had been promised, while opposing the abuse of the "closed-loop system" in which an ongoing COVID outbreak was allowed to spread within the factory and workers were prevented from leaving. The workers were universally masked and did not demand an end to Zero-COVID.

The sentiments expressed by these protesters matched those of the majority of respondents to a poll conducted at the time, which found that 58.5 percent of the Chinese population supported "adjustments on specifics" of the Zero-COVID policy, but not its scrapping. When Zero-COVID was ended by the CCP, only 11.9 percent of the population supported "large-scale adjustment" to the policy.

Ignoring these sentiments, the pseudo-left and bourgeois press soon lumped together the working class protests at Foxconn with the middle

class, anti-Zero-COVID protests that took place following the fire in Ürümqi. Within days of the latter protests in late November, the pseudo-left tendencies broke their silence, universally hailing these "white paper" protests, in which protesters held blank pieces of paper meant to symbolize state censorship by the CCP.

Many of the articles compared the "white paper" protests to the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations, obscuring the class basis and orientation of these protests. The "white paper" protests involved no more than a few thousand youth whipped up in a right-wing, anti-public health frenzy. The Tiananmen Square protests united millions of workers, youth and peasants in rebellion against the pro-capitalist policies pursued by the CCP in the 1980s, and were motivated by socialist political convictions, including calls for the expansion of democratic rights.

One of the first such articles on the "white paper" protests was a November 28 piece written by Alex Callinicos for *Socialist Worker*, the outlet of the Socialist Workers Party (UK), which is the leading section of the IST. Callinicos is the international secretary and main theoretician of the SWP.

In his article, Callinicos presented the scrapping of Zero-COVID as inevitable, claiming that "genuine zero-Covid is impossible to achieve." Justifying the government's policy change, he wrote, "The discontent created by zero-Covid has reached a new level. On Wednesday last week workers at Foxconn's giant assembly plant in Zhengzhou clashed with riot police... Then a fire in Urumqi, capital of Xinjiang province, killed ten people. The city has been in lockdown for three months, and zero-Covid was blamed for the deaths."

Socialist Worker published another brief article on the same day by Yuri Prasad, a longtime SWP member, which praised the "white paper" protests even while acknowledging that "lifting all Covid restrictions immediately in China would lead to 5 million hospitalisations and 1.55 million deaths."

Also on November 28, the first extensive article on the situation in China appeared in *Izquierda Diario*, the publication of the dishonestly named Trotskyist Fraction—Fourth International (FT), one of the main international Morenoite tendencies^[1]. FT is most prevalent in Latin America, and particularly Argentina, where it leads the Frente de Izquierda y de los Trabajadores—Unidad, (FIT-U), which has four seats in the Chamber of Deputies.

The article, titled "China's historic protests against Covid-zero open up new political situation," was written by André Barbieri, a leader of the Brazilian section of FT, Movimento Revolucionário de Trabalhadores (MRT). Barbieri endorsed the protests, which he termed a "powerful show of popular anger" and "demonstrations in repudiation of the Covid-zero authoritarian confinements."

Barbieri continued, "The movement against the Covid-zero policy, the central pillar of the directive advocated by Xi Jinping at the 20th Congress in October, is unprecedented since the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989." Creating an amalgam between the middle-class protests centered on the universities and the Foxconn protests, he wrote, "The strike by Foxconn workers in Zhengzhou... was the undeniable spark of popular anger that spread across China."

Throughout the past year in particular, the FT and *Izquierda Diario* have been among the most vocal pseudo-left tendencies denouncing China's Zero-COVID public health program.

On December 2, the FT's section in France, *Révolution Permanente* (RP), published a separate piece on the protests in China by Irène Karalis, titled, "In China, deeply political protests open a crisis for the regime."

Denouncing lockdowns, mass testing and the isolation of infected patients, Karalis wrote incoherently, "Today, after a period when the pandemic was thought to have disappeared, the [Zero-COVID] restrictions continue to be in force [in China] to counter the wave caused by the Omicron variant and the inhabitants must be tested every two days."

Only someone completely detached from the experience of the international working class, in particular health care workers who continue to be inundated by recurring waves of COVID-19 patients, could write that “the pandemic was thought to have disappeared.”

Karalis falsely claimed that the fire in Ürümqi “was a result of the health restrictions in place, including the closing of the building’s doors, which prevented the inhabitants from escaping.” Contradicting her previous claim that the pandemic was over, Karalis acknowledged that the lifting of Zero-COVID would result in mass death. She cited *The Economist*, whose models indicated at the time that “infections would peak at 45 million a day. About 680,000 people would die, even if the vaccines remained strong and all these people received care.”

This outcome did not cause Karalis any qualms. “There is no guarantee, therefore, that the health situation is about to improve, quite the contrary. However, the health situation, in addition to affecting the political and social situation of the country, also affects the economic situation.” In this scenario, Karalis prioritized the “economic situation” over the mass infection and death of hundreds of thousands of people in China.

Significantly, Left Voice, the American section of FT, has not published a single statement on the lifting of Zero-COVID in China, simply reposting articles published in *Izquierda Diario*.

The other dominant Morenoite tendency, International Workers League—Fourth International (IWLfi), also endorsed the late November protests in China, publishing two articles on November 30, followed by four more in December.

The more extensive article published on November 30, “China experiences turbulent days of government defiance,” was written by Marcos Margarido. In 2016, Margarido ran for mayor of Campinas as a member of Partido Socialista dos Trabalhadores Unificado (PSTU), the largest Morenoite group in Brazil.

Margarido deepened the lies of Barbieri and Karalis, writing, “After nearly three years of restrictions, the experience of being quarantined at home with doors locked, or even welded shut, and building emergency exits blocked, is common for many Chinese across the country.” In the initial months of the pandemic, there were a handful of isolated instances in which people were locked in their homes during quarantines, but to say that this was ever “common” is a gross distortion.

Margarido went on to warn that “if the restrictions continue... the accumulated anger against the bureaucratic and dictatorial policy of combating COVID... may give rise to new and wider demonstrations.” After recognizing that lifting Zero-COVID would cause “a dizzying increase in cases,” as well as mass death dwarfing the horrors suffered under Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Margarido nevertheless supported this homicidal policy, with the cynical justification that “even the most entrenched dictatorship... cannot tame the cyclical crises of the capitalist system.”

The only statement published by the Committee for a Workers International (CWI) on the lifting of Zero-COVID in China was published on November 29. Denouncing China’s “harsh ‘zero Covid’ policies” and “often brutal reliance on crude lockdowns,” they endorsed the anti-Zero-COVID protests, which they portrayed as “a slow-burning resentment against the still draconian lock-down rules that exploded at the weekend.”

The International Socialist League (ISL) has issued no international statements on the lifting of Zero-COVID in China over the past four months. The only article published by a national affiliate of the ISL was a December 7 piece by Verónica O’Kelly of Alternativa Socialista-PSOL in Brazil. It began by praising the protests against Zero-COVID, which she characterized as “nothing more than extreme social control based on persecution and repression.”

After falsifying the character of the Foxconn and “blank paper” protests, O’Kelly wrote that Xi Jinping “was forced to give in and relax the measures of isolation and social distancing.” She concluded the piece by

stating, “The revolutionaries of the world have the task of supporting and standing in solidarity with the brave Chinese people who are rising up. From LIS we are at the service of this important task.”

Numerous similar articles advancing the same denunciations of Zero-COVID and falsifications of what transpired in China in November were published in virtually every outlet of the international pseudo-left.

Socialist Alternative protests against Zero-COVID alongside “a conservative pro-capitalist organization”

The most unhinged and openly reactionary response to the lifting of Zero-COVID in China came from International Socialist Alternative (ISA)^[2]. It enthusiastically welcomed a policy of mass death in China, publishing multiple articles and even staging demonstrations in support of the anti-lockdown protests in China.

The ISA’s first article was written by Vincent Kolo and Li Yong and published on November 29. Headlined, “China’s Mass Revolt – Where Now?,” it denounced Zero-COVID “insanity,” declaring, “After three years of suffocating and unspeakably brutal ‘Zero Covid’ controls and lockdowns, people have reached breaking point.”

Kolo and Yong continued, “Demands for democratic rights and an end to dictatorship have combined with outrage against the dictatorship’s insanely unscientific insistence at any cost of killing off an unkillable virus.”

On November 30, Socialist Alternative member Mick Barry gave a speech in the Irish Parliament (Dáil Éireann), stating in part:

I want to express my solidarity and the solidarity of International Socialist Alternative with the young protesters in China... They are demanding freedom of speech, an end to a rigid and extreme COVID policy and for democratic rights.

On December 3, the Socialist Alternative branch in New York City issued the tweet below announcing a protest they were organizing the following day.

This tweet and protest were roundly denounced, with many commenting that it was clearly coordinated with the US State Department. Among those listed as a “Co-organizer” was “Students for a Free Tibet,” which is publicly listed as receiving nine grants from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) since 2016, totaling \$480,810. The NED is known as the “second CIA” due to its deep connections to the US intelligence agencies.

Despite widespread criticism of the tweet announcing the protest, Socialist Alternative leader Kshama Sawant nevertheless shared it with her followers, thereby encouraging them to attend. Since sharing this tweet, Sawant has kept silent on the catastrophe that has unfolded in China and on the pandemic more broadly.

On December 7, the ISA posted a report on their rally in New York City, as well as similar rallies they organized in London and Taipei, titled, “Protests (Mostly) Suppressed In China But Crucially, Continue Outside.” Author Elan Axelbank, a member of the ISA section in England, Wales and Scotland, wrote:

Our branch in New York City reports that many attendees had some degree of support for capitalism, as well as US and western imperialism. One of the sponsoring organizations was the

Democratic Party of China, a conservative pro-capitalist organization of Chinese people living in the US but with no base inside China.

Axelbank acknowledged that lifting Zero-COVID would kill masses of people, yet doubled down on ISA's support for this homicidal policy, writing:

... it is entirely possible that China could be hit by a major wave of Covid deaths in the winter months like Hong Kong earlier this year. Scientists and Covid experts estimate if zero-Covid is lifted, between 1.5 and 2 million people could die across the country, and some say more.

But in the new period opened up by the recent protests, full and long-lasting lockdowns like in Urumqi, lasting over 100 days, will be more and more difficult for the state to enforce... This is why the China/Hong Kong/Taiwan section of International Socialist Alternative has called for, beyond just ending zero-Covid, massive resources to build up and equip the healthcare system, stepping up the vaccination program, especially among the elderly, and immediately ending the ban on foreign mRNA vaccines.

The ISA's call for the CCP to expand health care and purchase mRNA vaccines, a line advanced by the entire Western media and many other pseudo-left tendencies, was an attempt to provide cover for their promotion of the ending of Zero-COVID. But the rapidity with which mass infections and deaths ripped through China was both foreseeable and foreseen, and the implementation of these limited demands would have done nothing to prevent this catastrophe.

To be continued.

[1] FT was founded in 1998 after a series of splits following the death of the Argentine Revolution. In 1987, more parties saw Argentina and their international affiliates, and his successors have carried this mantle forward.

[2] ISA was formed in February 2020 as the result of a split from CWI centered on identity politics. Its most prominent national section is in the United States, whose member Kshama Sawant has been on the Seattle City Council since 2014. In the winter of 2020-21, Socialist Alternative sent a significant section of its membership, including Sawant, into the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which operates directly within the imperialist Democratic Party



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