



GRASSROOTS BLACK LEFT

Labour African, Caribbean and Asian Socialists

Position Paper Black People, Racism and the Covid-19 Pandemic

May 2020

“ We are appalled at how many Black people are dying, including those doing their job caring for the sick and elderly, and will not keep quiet about it. Black political unity is essential to tackling the crisis. ”

Introduction

This Grassroots Black Left position paper sets out published facts about the coronavirus pandemic and how it has hit hardest the Black communities in Britain. It tackles head-on some of the controversies surrounding the issue and makes political demands about what should be done. We use the political term Black that embraces African, Caribbean and Asian people.

Background

African Caribbeans in Britain have been dying from the coronavirus (Covid-19) at a rate that is four times more than white people. And Bangladeshis and Pakistanis are more than 50 per cent more likely to die from the virus as white people - with people of Indian and mixed heritage also more at risk. These shocking facts were revealed by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) this month.

Of the 119 coronavirus deaths of NHS employees last month, an appalling sixty-three per cent were African, Caribbean and Asian, according to an exclusive report in the *Health Service Journal* of April 22.

The Black faces on front pages of newspapers at the beginning of the pandemic said it all, although the racial dimension was not referred to by the media and politicians at the time.

Experts at the UK's recognised national statistical institute say these stark racial differences are partly down to African, Caribbean and Asian people being more likely to live in poor areas of the country and to do public-facing jobs that put them at risk.

African, Caribbean and Asian NHS employees are concentrated in the lowest paid most precarious jobs and most likely to be subjected to disciplinary action by their white bosses.

ONS Head of Health Analysis Nick Stripe, told the BBC: "The risk [of getting Covid-19] is significantly higher for some of those ethnic groupings compared to the white ethnic grouping." (BBC Television, May 7, 2020.)

The ONS warned that Black people were also the hardest hit section of the population because of higher health risk factors like diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease in their communities. But the experts accept: "A remaining part of the difference has not yet been explained."

Putting the figures into more detail, the ONS states: "When taking into account age in the analysis, black males are 4.2 times more likely to die from a Covid-19 related death and black females 4.3 times more likely than white ethnicity males and females."

Inequalities within Black communities are well-documented, including in a report produced by the Runnymede Trust race thinktank in April. Racist abuse has always been a feature in the NHS, with a report in October 2019 showing it had almost tripled.

This coincided with the implementation of the Government's racist "hostile environment" policies that interfered with the very foundations on which the NHS was built: healthcare for all, free at the point of delivery, based on clinical need and not on the ability to pay.

Within Labour, the bombshell leaked report about its handling of antisemitism complaints confirms what many Black members have known for a long time about the institutional racism and hostility to them they have historically faced in the party, of which Africans, Caribbeans and Asians are its most loyal voters. Grassroots Black Left (GBL) will deal with that issue separately.

Hate crime

Black people facing inequalities are much more likely to be affected by the virus, as has been reported. A disturbing under-reported aspect of the pandemic is that it has led to an increase in hate crimes against Asian, particularly Chinese people. They are facing the brunt of Covid-19-linked race hate crimes, as highlighted in an interview last month by the Institute for Race Relations with Monitoring Group director Suresh Grover, a veteran anti-racist campaigner.

Chinese people have been scapegoated and targeted for vicious attacks by racist thugs who ignorantly claim they are responsible for the pandemic. Irresponsible politicians and some media outlets have fanned the flames of this xenophobic China-blaming, which has its contemporary roots in US President Donald Trump seeking to maintain America's position as the only superpower.

We rightly applaud heroic NHS frontliners, but it is important to be reminded of the experiences of Black employees, who make up almost 40 per cent of the workforce – the majority in some hospitals – yet are around 15 percent of the population.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies outlines in a report this month that: "In the short term, ethnic inequalities are likely to manifest from the Covid-19 crisis in two main ways":

- through exposure to infection and health risks, including mortality
- through exposure to loss of income

No wonder former Labour equalities shadow cabinet member for equalities Dawn Butler MP said on Twitter, on May 7: "For those who think I'm fixated on race let me just say this. As an African Caribbean woman, I know the consequences of ignoring race issues and Covid-19 has highlighted to me that I must never be bullied into silence."

Public inquiry

There were calls for urgent government action, as reported in *the Guardian* on April 16, not least because Black people account for 33 per cent of all Covid-19 patients in intensive care. The staggering racial inequality statistics in regard to the killer virus led to the government launching an official inquiry to explain the reasons and come up with answers.

GBL agrees an expert probe is clearly needed. But we question the credibility of the "independent" Government inquiry into the disproportionate effect of Covid-19 on Black communities. We note there has been widespread concern raised about the role of the former chair of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, Trevor Phillips, and his private consultancy company, which has been given a contract as part of the government inquiry. In past controversial media interventions, Phillips has made divisive comments about Muslims, for which he has been suspended as a member of the Labour Party, and he has under-played the effects racism has had on Black people in Britain.

GBL thinks Trevor Phillips is unfit to be a part of any inquiry to do with race, especially the one being set up by the Government.

GBL proposes a truly independent inquiry by experts drawn from the Black communities.

That Phillips is involved in the inquiry gives many people in the Black communities, including GBL, the impression it will be a whitewash.

A waste of public money with a predetermined outcome, absolving the Government of any blame and therefore equally, the need for it to invest in urgently needed solutions.

In these circumstances, while we welcome Labour's announcement that it is launching its own independent inquiry, led by Baroness Doreen Lawrence, in order for the Black communities to have confidence in it, we demand the following conditions be met.

That the party's African, Caribbean and Asian Labour membership should be:

1. Consulted in the development of the terms of reference and membership of the inquiry
2. Engaged in leading in the grassroots research required to inform the review
3. Able to guide and give expertise in countering the adverse media coverage and involved in shaping Labour's social media and other media work during the pandemic
4. Asked to collaborate with MPs, and other Labour politicians operating inside the structures of the party, to raise the racial impact of Covid-19 on Black communities.

GBL welcomes NHS management issuing guidance, reported in *The Nursing Times* of April 29, that: "BAME personnel be "risk-assessed" and reassigned to duties that leave them at lesser risk of contracting coronavirus."

Migrants

On another important question, there has been alarm the Conservative Government's discredited anti-migrant, anti-refugees and anti-asylum seekers' "hostile environment" policy will lead these vulnerable groups of people to be "too scared to seek medical help because they live in a country where hostility courses through the veins of our basic services", as academic and author Maya Goodfellow wrote in a *Guardian* article on March 30. We note the Royal College of Physicians, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and the Faculty of Public Health, as well as the Royal College of Nursing have all called for this policy to be scrapped because they say it "threatens to weaken the bonds of trust between doctors and patients".

The Government's current policy means that migrants, refugees and asylum seekers will continue to be disproportionately at risk of catching Covid-19, within and across communities, while also having the least healthcare and employment protection. This is a huge injustice. Government detention centres holding migrants - hotbeds for the spreading of Covid-19 among an extremely vulnerable section of the population - should be immediately shut down.

GBL believes that there should be no barrier to migrant and undocumented people being able to get free healthcare in the UK and work in the NHS. It should be acknowledged, many of them have vital skills that should be used within the stretched-to-breaking-point health and social care sectors.

The Coronavirus Act 2020 was rushed through parliament by the Government on March 25 and has raised serious concerns about people's rights and freedoms. Any human rights clamp-downs are likely to impact disproportionately on Black people. GBL will closely monitor the situation and work with rights organisations and be a part of any fight-back._

It should be kept in mind, Covid-19 is a global pandemic and not confined to a single country, so the battle to defeat it must be international.

Vaccine

GBL recognises the urgent need for a vaccine to defeat Covid-19. But we are shocked by the appalling statement by Dr Jean-Paul Mira, Head of the Intensive Care Unit at the Cochin Hospital in Paris, France, calling for the testing of potential vaccines in Africa. He said, "a little bit like it's been done for certain AIDS studies, where among prostitutes, we try things, because we know they are highly exposed and do not protect themselves?", as reported by *Al Jazeera* on April 4.

Due to a public outcry sparked by the overt racism underpinning his statement, Dr Mira was forced to apologise.

GBL opposes any such studies being done in Africa or anywhere else where the safety of human beings cannot be guaranteed through the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE), adequate public health measures and intensive care facilities.

Schools

On the question of the lockdown and schools, the government's announcement that GCSEs and A-Levels will be replaced by teacher assessments is understandably ringing alarm bells, because studies show that Black Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi boys face systematic under-marking by teachers in the UK.

GBL supports the joint union statement sent to education secretary Gavin Williamson on May 8 by trade unions, including the National Association of Head Teachers and the National Education Union, GMB, Unison and Unite.

They said their more than three million members would not return to work until ministers can guarantee that adequate safety policies are in place. These include requiring employers to assess the risks and come up with measures to deal with them, as reported in the *Observer* on May 10.

African, Caribbean and Asian parents and school governors should be vigilant and oversee real-time monitoring of the situation.

Mental Health

The mental health impact of the virus has been highlighted by many experts, including the World Health Organisation (WHO). "In public mental health terms, the main psychological impact to date is elevated rates of stress or anxiety. But as new measures and impacts are introduced – especially quarantine and its effects on many people's usual activities, routines or livelihoods – levels of loneliness, depression, harmful alcohol and drug use, and self-harm or suicidal behaviour are also expected to rise," WHO says on its website.

Mental health issues have topped a survey of 22,000 workplace activists by the UK and Ireland's largest union, whose results were released on May 11.

It showed that members' concerns about their state of mind have increased dramatically by almost two thirds since the lockdown began. The union calls on employers to take a proactive approach to dealing with employees' mental health challenges immediately as employees return to work and begin to adjust to revised working conditions. It is no surprise that Black people are again likely to be disproportionately affected by the under-reported mental health aspect of the current crisis.

Domestic abuse

Another area of considerable concern in our communities, like other communities under pressure from the economic impact of the crisis, is the disturbing rise in domestic abuse. This has been going on behind closed doors since the pandemic began, as reported by the Metropolitan Police in London, Britain's Covid-19 epicentre. Every effort must be made by the authorities and community to help people subjected to such abuse so they are not forced to suffer in silence.

Grieving

Also troubling are the huge changes to grieving, death and bereavement rituals, particularly funerals, that have been brought in by the government as a result of the current crisis.

We recognise these restrictions are an issue for all faith communities but raise our voices as Black, particularly Muslim people, who have been affected. GBL believes additional support should be given to people who bear the burden of supporting their faith communities through this difficult time.

Labour leadership

The newly-elected Labour leadership can have a big say in leading the national Covid-19 debate and should therefore not shy away from going on the political offensive on behalf of the public to whom the Government have consistently lied. Keir Starmer has an open goal as a result of Boris Johnson's slow response, which has caused thousands of unnecessary deaths.

Every day the government should be attacked for its shocking failures resulting in Britain having the highest numbers of deaths from the disease in Europe and the second highest in the world.

GBL joins other campaigners demanding adequate personal protection equipment and medical resources for health workers and carers, including in much-neglected care homes, where many Black people work. We also support disabled people in their too often forgotten fight for justice.

Lockdown lifting

The Labour leadership should stop pressing the government to publish plans for *lifting the lockdown*. Polls show most members of the public are heavily in favour of the lockdown and comply with it. So, the Labour leadership should demand that it is tightened until all new COVID-19 cases everywhere are reduced to the very low numbers that allow for thorough testing, tracking and tracing to succeed. Employers must ensure that safety measures are implemented for their workers, based on independent risk assessments or risk assessments carried out by employees themselves (if they have that capacity), including union health and safety officers. This should be enforced by the Government and workers should have recourse to appeal the conditions their employers set if there are safety concerns.

Trade unions should play a key role in this regard and we are pleased to see the TUC has set out some really useful proposals on ensuring a safe return to work, available on its website.

Surely, the priority should be to save the lives of members of the public and not the railroading through parliament of a reckless policy of prematurely reopening businesses in order to put private profit before people.

Voluntary sector

Black communities have been forced to rely on themselves and their highly developed voluntary sector of African, Caribbean and Asian-led organisations. However, this is seriously at risk.

Black organisations have cried out to say how worried they are feeling about the state of their voluntary sector services when the lockdown ends.

On its past record, we cannot trust the Labour Party bureaucracy to champion Black issues. It is therefore our responsibility.

We are still awaiting a statement from the Labour leadership decrying the abhorrent racism against Black party members, including MPs Diane Abbott, Dawn Butler and Clive Lewis, revealed by the leaked report about the handling of antisemitism complaints.

Workplace safety

We demand that the party and trade unions champion the cases of any NHS worker or carer within our communities victimised by management for refusing to work without adequate PPE. GBL stands in solidarity with such workers and will defend them by any means necessary.

This applies to transport workers, including cleaners, as well. GBL notes that at least 37 of them have died in London as a result of Covid-19, including 28 bus drivers, according to a report in the *New York Times* of May 2.

GBL demands:

- A high-level of PPE for all workers but a recognition of the greater risk that workers from Black communities are taking in continuing to work for their country.
- That cash-strapped and marginalised Black voluntary sector organisations are prioritised for access to the promised £750m the chancellor has earmarked for the third sector.
- An immediate end to the government's "hostile environment" policies.

GBL is appalled at how many Black people are dying, including those doing their job caring for the sick and elderly in Britain and will not keep quiet about it.

We believe Black political unity is essential to support how African, Caribbean and Asian people work together across the UK, with statutory, non-statutory, voluntary organisations, charities and grassroots activists to ensure their voices are no longer ignored.

Unity

Black people united can:

- Rally the intellectual, academic and community-based expertise in our communities to tackle the wider institutional and structural racism in all aspects of society, for example in education, housing, employment, health, including mental health, Tory government-imposed austerity that has impacted disproportionately on our communities, resulting in well-documented poor health outcomes.
- Organise a Black-led independent inquiry, whose terms of reference should include how the racism of the government's hostile environment, and its impact on our communities, should be dealt with.

Conclusion

The thrust of this paper is articulated well by Black commentator Nels Abbey, a former *Voice* newspaper columnist, who said in *The Independent* on May 7:

“The shameful Black death rate disparity shows that post Covid, we have to get serious about equality, justice and diversity at all levels of British society.”

He added, powerfully: **“Never again must any British ethnic group be left vulnerable. And never again should any group be dismissed for speaking up.”**

About GBL

Grassroots Black Left is the natural successor to the Labour Party Black Sections. It is unique in having African Caribbean and Asian socialist activists working together throughout Britain, some of whom are councillors and party officers. GBL had its parliamentary launch at the House of Commons in 2018 attended by MPs, including Clive Lewis, who was a Labour frontbencher.

SOME USEFUL LINKS:

Runnymede Trust <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/projects-and-publications/employment-3/the-colour-of-money>

ITV <https://www.itv.com/news/2019-10-31/can-i-have-a-white-doctor-for-the-operation-racist-abuse-against-nhs-staff-almost-triples-itv-news-finds/>

Institute of Race Relations <http://www.irr.org.uk/news/race-hate-crimes-collateral-damage-of-covid-19/>

The Guardian https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/05/nhs-heroes-and-targets-of-racists?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

TUC <https://www.tuc.org.uk/blogs/coronavirus-why-structural-racism-putting-bme-lives-risk>

Institute of Fiscal Studies <https://www.ifs.org.uk/inequality/chapter/are-some-ethnic-groups-more-vulnerable-to-covid-19-than-others/>

The Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/16/inquiry-disproportionate-impact-coronavirus-bame>

The Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/25/leading-muslims-hit-out-at-trevor-phillipss-role-in-covid-19-bame-deaths-inquiry>

The Voice <https://www.voice-online.co.uk/news/coronavirus/2020/04/26/labour-announces-review-of-bame-covid-19-deaths/>

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rxTTlvHLyo&t=1s>

The Morning Star <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/b/socialist-labour-mps-call-government-safeguard-migrants-through-pandemic>

The Guardian theguardian.com/politics/2018/dec/20/medical-colleges-criticise-charging-migrants-for-nhs-care

British Medical Journal <https://www.bmjjournals.org/content/368/bmj.m1320>

Al Jazeera <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/racism-row-french-doctors-suggest-virus-vaccine-test-africa-200404054304466.html>

World Health Organisation <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-technical-guidance/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-outbreak-technical-guidance-europe/mental-health-and-covid-19>

Metropolitan Police <https://www.met.police.uk/advice/advice-and-information/daa/domestic-abuse/>

Huffington Post https://m.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/bame-community-groups-coronavirus_uk_5ea044c7c5b6b2e5b83b0261

Civil Society Futures https://civilsocietyfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2018/12/Civil-Society-Futures-Lets-talk-about-race-_031218.pdf

Change.Org https://www.change.org/p/prime-minister-boris-johnson-and-an-taoiseach-leo-varadkar-access-to-healthcare-housing-and-food-for-all?utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=custom_url&recruited_by_id=7795ce50-71e4-11ea-8057-f5648c0d1ec1

Socialist Health Association

<https://www.sochealth.co.uk/2020/05/04/sha-covid-19-blog-8/>